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Experiences of Administrative Burden in Context: Exploring Differences Across Countries, Policy Domains, and Socio-Demography

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ABSTRACT

Administrative burden research finds that citizens frequently experience burdens when interacting with government. However, evidence is based predominantly on studies of Western countries and social policies. We collect survey data ($N \approx 10{,}000$) in the USA, UK, Mexico, South Korea, and Denmark, using nationally representative samples sourced via online survey panels, to explore similarities and differences in experiences of administrative burden across countries and policy domains. Participants in the USA and Mexico report spending considerably more time interacting with government than participants in our three other case countries. Surprisingly, we find that our respondents associate administrative tasks with more positive than negative affect. This is particularly the case for health and care-related tasks. Overall, the findings suggest that burden experiences vary considerably across contexts, but that policy domains and socio-demography are of similar importance to burden experiences across countries. This calls for further theorizing of how context matters to experiences of administrative burden.

1 | Introduction

The idea that administrative burdens are ubiquitous when people interact with the state has received widespread attention among both practitioners (US White House 2023; OECD 2025) and scholars (e.g., Halling and Baekgaard 2024; Herd and Moynihan 2018). Research largely supports this idea. A vast number of studies demonstrate that citizens and residents experience burdens when they apply for services (Bhargava and Manoli 2015; Nisar 2018) or seek to live up to compliance demands to maintain eligibility for services (Baekgaard et al. 2021; Baekgaard and Madsen 2024; Hattke et al. 2020; Heinrich 2016). Importantly, empirical research also finds that the sick, the elderly, and those with less education or fewer financial opportunities experience burdens to a greater extent than others (Bell et al. 2023; Madsen et al. 2023; Martin et al. 2023; but see Vogel et al. 2025 for a contradictory finding), leading to the suggestion that burdens are felt more strongly among less resourceful individuals (Christensen et al. 2020; Masood and Nisar 2021).

While prior studies have significantly advanced theory and empirical evidence about administrative burdens and their distribution across socio-demographic groups, there is less cross-context evidence on administrative burdens: To what extent does the experience of burdens vary across policy domains and countries? With a substantial over-representation of studies from Western countries such as the USA, Western Europe, and Australia, and most studies conducted in the domain of social policies (Halling and Baekgaard 2024; Vogel et al. 2025), it is unclear whether empirical research paints a

picture of more general relevance. Thus, the question remains whether burdens are as ubiquitous as one might think from extant research. Obtaining knowledge across countries and policy domains would offer insights into the extent to which experiences of burdens are shaped by contextual factors and thus be a stepping-stone in terms of better understanding the antecedents of administrative burden.

In this study, we examine whether experiences of administrative burdens vary across countries and policy areas, and to what extent socio-demographic patterns in experiences of burdens are similar or different across countries. To allow us to observe experiences across geographical regions and welfare systems, we collected online survey data using representative samples of 2000 people each from Denmark, Mexico, South Korea, the UK, and the USA. In line with some other research (Martin et al. 2024) and recent arguments that time spent on administrative tasks constitutes an important indicator of administrative burden (Daigneault 2024), our survey measures the "time tax" across policy areas by asking how long participants recently spent completing various administrative tasks[1] related to healthcare, welfare benefits, taxes, and care work. We also measure how participants felt while dealing with these tasks. We explore how experiences vary across socio-demographic characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, immigrant background, health, income, and subjective financial well-being. To our knowledge, this is the first multi-country study examining experiences of administrative burdens in all these dimensions.

We find that experiences of administrative burdens differ considerably across countries and policy domains. For example, participants from the USA and Mexico report spending considerably more time on interacting with government than those from our three other case countries. Most notably, people experience burdens in the domain of social welfare benefits. As we would expect, the extent of burdens differs considerably across socio-demographic groups, and experiences of burdens are often most pronounced in vulnerable groups. However, socio-demography is of similar importance to burden experiences across countries and policy domains. Somewhat surprisingly, we also find that although the performance of administrative tasks is related to negative emotions, people in all five countries also experience positive emotions during citizen-state encounters. We conclude by discussing the results and their implications for future research.

2 | Administrative Burdens in Context

Following Burden et al. (2012, 441), administrative burden is often conceptualized as people's experiences of policy implementation as onerous. Administrative burden research often distinguishes between three broad categories of burdensome experiences (Moynihan et al. 2015; see Daigneault 2024 for a reconceptualization of the original concept). While each of the burdens or costs is important, they in practice tend to overlap (Baekgaard and Tankink 2021). Learning costs are the burdens that people experience when they need to know about their rights and opportunities, and how to, for instance, apply for services or benefits (Barnes and Riel 2022; Tarshish and Holler 2023). Compliance costs instead have to do with the hassle of complying with state rules. This category of burdens includes, for instance, monetary and time costs (Baekgaard et al. 2021; Stenderup and Pedersen 2024). Finally, psychological costs refer to the mental discomfort of citizen-state interactions. This category includes a variety of affective responses such as stress, anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty (Hattke et al. 2020). Administrative burdens have been called a "time tax" (Lowrey 2021; US White House 2023) that influences people's emotions and well-being (Baekgaard et al. 2021; Hattke et al. 2020) and hinders the take-up of government programmes (Bhargava and Manoli 2015; Linos et al. 2022). A sprawling research agenda has documented the presence of administrative burdens and their negative consequences for people's lives (Halling and Baekgaard 2024) and has begun focusing on strategies for reducing administrative burden (Benish et al. 2024).

It is a core proposition of the administrative burden framework that burdens are experienced more among some socio-demographic groups than others—so-called distributive effects (Christensen et al. 2020; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Vogel et al. 2025). Empirical research supports this proposition, as for instance the less well educated (Döring and Madsen 2022), the less wealthy (Heinrich et al. 2022), those experiencing more financial strain (Madsen et al. 2023), those of older age (Martin et al. 2024), and those with health issues or disabilities (Bell et al. 2023; Collie et al. 2021) have been found to experience burdens to a higher extent than others. One argument for such differences is that people with less resources may be less able to cope with demands due to less administrative literacy or capital (Christensen et al. 2020; Döring 2021; Masood and Nisar 2021). Likewise, those with more financial capital may experience less burden because they are able to pay for third-party services or for help with taking part in complicated processes, or, in some contexts even because they have the resources to bribe public officials to circumvent or avoid cumbersome procedures (Herd and Moynihan 2018, 7; Yang and Ying 2025). Burdens may also be gendered (Herd and Moynihan 2025; Martin 2024), falling harder on women in particular in areas such as care work in families where women have traditionally been doing the lion's share of the work, and they may be racialized, with greater impacts on ethnic minorities and immigrants (Bell et al. 2024; Compton et al. 2023; Ray et al. 2023). However, there are still substantial gaps in our knowledge about the extent to which the presence and distributive effects of burdensome experiences vary across contexts (Baekgaard and Tankink 2021).

First, little is known about country differences in experiences of administrative burden. In a review of the literature, Halling and Baekgaard (2024) found only three studies using data from more than one country. The review also found that 82% of empirical studies used data from the USA, Western Europe, or Australia. This highlights a significant need for expanding geographical diversity and for being able to assess experiences across contexts, given the worldwide interest in understanding and reducing administrative burdens among policy practitioners (e.g., OECD 2025). Country differences in experiences of administrative burdens and how they are distributed across socio-demographic groups are likely for a variety of reasons. Differences in how people feel about the state, how much trust

they have in the administration and elected politicians, and how satisfied they are with services may feed into their experiences of burdens. In support of these expectations, Baekgaard et al. (2025) found that those who have more trust in government are more accepting of burdens in general. We may reasonably expect similar results at the country level with populations having more trust in their politicians and government also being less vulnerable to burdens.

Furthermore, historical trajectories of different welfare regimes have led to important differences in how the state approaches citizens (Esping-Andersen 1990; Vogel et al. 2025). For instance, we would expect that people experience less burden from interacting with the state in more expanded welfare state regimes such as the Scandinavian countries in Northern Europe, characterized by a universalistic approach to social rights and an inclusion of the middle class in social programs, than in liberal ones like the USA. In extension, we may also expect that socio-demographic differences in experiences of burdens are less pronounced in universalistic than liberal welfare state regimes due to the focus on easy access for all to benefits and services in more universalistic regimes.

Likewise, cross-national differences in administrative traditions—and in particular the extent to which the state is organized to be a key player in delivering services in line with citizens' needs—is likely to be important (Jugl 2025). We would thus expect fewer experiences of burden and fewer socio-demographic differences in said experiences in countries scoring high on this dimension. Also of potential importance at the country level is the degree to which citizen-state interactions in various countries are digitalized. While digitalization and automatization—as alternatives to contacts requiring physical presence—may ease encounters between citizens and the state in many cases and hence lead to fewer experiences of burden on average in more digitalized societies (Compton et al. 2023), research on digital divides (Norris 2001; Van Dijk 2020) suggests that digitalization may leave some groups behind and hence increase inequality between socio-demographic groups. This is for instance the case for the elderly, who may not always possess the necessary skills to navigate e-government solutions (Vainieri et al. 2023) and hence may experience administrative burdens from having to use digital solutions to a larger degree than others. Thus, higher degrees of public sector digitalization may increase differences between older and younger people's experiences of administrative burdens. On the other hand, a high degree of digitalization may reduce the resources needed to interact with government, and therefore level out differences in administrative burden experiences based on factors such as health or education level.

Moreover, societal factors such as corruption may matter at the country level. While corruption in a given society may be associated with administrative burden due to among others the uncertainties and financial costs incurred on citizens, bribery "can also be a tactic to avoid a burdensome procedure" (Peeters 2020, 578). Thus, widespread corruption may not only lead to increased experiences of administrative burden but also entail larger differences in the extent to which such burdens are felt among the finally well off and the financially poor (Yang and Ying 2025).

Second, most empirical studies of administrative burden focus on a single policy area, making it difficult to compare people's experiences across policy areas or to obtain an understanding of the overall "landscape" of burdens that people face in their daily life (Halling and Baekgaard 2024). However, there are likely substantial differences in the extent to which burdens are experienced in various policy domains (Vogel et al. 2025). Some policy domains may be associated with more burdensome experiences because they require more frequent interaction between citizens and the state or because the outcome of the interaction is more crucial to the individual than outcomes in other domains (Martin et al. 2024). For instance, administrative decisions about providing financial support (government benefits) or getting access to public health are likely to be crucial for many people and arguably more salient than the hassles associated with getting a driver's license or a travel passport.

The extent to which a given policy area is associated with burdens may vary substantially across countries, highlighting the relevance of studying both cross-country and cross-policy domain variation in experiences of burden. For instance, we would expect the burdens of seeking out information and applying for government benefits to be higher in liberal welfare states with many means-tested government benefits, where access is restricted, than in universal welfare systems with general access to said benefits. This is because access to means-tested benefits typically is associated with stricter requirements in terms of demonstrating eligibility and re-certifying, and because such benefits also in many cases may be associated with shame or stigma (Moynihan et al. 2015, 48f).

3 | Design and Data Collection

To study experiences of administrative burdens across various countries, policy domains, and socio-demographic groups, our study uses original survey data on people's experiences accessing essential services and interacting with the government. It collects data in five countries: the UK, the USA, South Korea, Mexico, and Denmark. These countries span across three continents and differ in the design of their welfare institutions. The UK and the US are liberal welfare regimes, though spending as a percent of GDP on, in particular, families and employment has typically been substantially higher in the UK than in the USA, indicating an important difference in the approach to public welfare in the two countries (Yang 2013, 458). Denmark is a core example of a comprehensive universalistic and egalitarian welfare system, while Mexico and South Korea are examples of emerging but restricted welfare states, where social spending is low compared to OECD countries, though it has been increasing over time (Hannan et al. 2021; Yang 2013). According to a recent analysis by Jugl (2025), Mexico deviates from the other four case countries by having a state being substantially less organized to be a key factor in delivering services in accordance with citizens' needs. The countries vary considerably in terms of the expansion of their welfare states, measured as a share of GDP. Mexico and South Korea are relatively small welfare states, spending about 29% and 26% of their GDP on government services, respectively. The USA spends 36%, while Denmark and the UK operate more comprehensive welfare regimes, spending 44% and 47%, respectively (IMF 2025).

TABLE 1 | Sample demographics.

	Means (standard deviation in parentheses)				
	UK	**US**	**Denmark**	**South Korea**	**Mexico**
Age (years)	48.9 (16.85)	48.7 (16.93)	50.5 (17.78)	43.5 (13.17)	39.3 (13.09)
Female	0.53 (0.50)	0.52 (0.50)	0.51 (0.50)	0.46 (0.50)	0.54 (0.50)
Ethnic minority	0.10 (0.30)	0.17 (0.38)	0.03 (0.16)	0.01 (0.08)	0.07 (0.26)
Immigrant	0.16 (0.37)	0.09 (0.29)	0.08 (0.28)	0.01 (0.08)	0.05 (0.22)
Degree	0.38 (0.49)	0.42 (0.49)	0.56 (0.50)	0.76 (0.43)	0.55 (0.50)
Full-time job	0.40 (0.49)	0.42 (0.49)	0.45 (0.50)	0.68 (0.47)	0.65 (0.48)
Low income	0.30 (0.46)	0.18 (0.38)	0.13 (0.34)	0.12 (0.32)	0.16 (0.37)
Children	0.52 (0.89)	0.71 (1.06)	0.44 (0.83)	0.52 (0.82)	1.19 (1.02)
Live-in partner	0.59 (0.49)	0.61 (0.49)	0.64 (0.48)	0.55 (0.50)	0.68 (0.47)
Average health	3.7 (0.84)	4.0 (0.78)	3.7 (0.82)	3.4 (0.81)	4.1 (0.65)
Financial wellbeing	51.7 (15.27)	51.5 (16.36)	58.5 (15.05)	52.3 (11.09)	51.7 (10.70)
Observations	2030	2013	2012	2017	2034

Note: Age is in years. *Female* is a binary variable (1 if yes); 0.24% of the sample identified as another gender than man or woman or did not disclose their gender. *Ethnic minority* is a binary variable (1 if yes), computed based on country-specific categorical ethnicity questions (participants are an ethnic minority if they are not white in the UK or the USA, if they are not or not fully ethnically Danish or Korean, or if they belong to an indigenous group in Mexico). *Immigrant* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the participant, their father, or their mother was born abroad. *Degree* is a binary variable and refers to having a university degree (1 if yes). *Full-time job* is a binary variable (1 if yes, includes full-time work in both formal and informal sectors). *Low income* is binary (1 if yes) and refers to being in the lowest income category for each country (GBP 20,000 or less for UK, USD 20,000 or less for US, DKK 200,000 or less for Denmark, KRW 20,000,000 or less for South Korea, and MXN 10,000 or less for Mexico). *Children* refers to the number of children living in the household. *Live-in partner* is a binary variable (1 if yes) and refers to a marital status of married, cohabiting, or in a civil partnership. *Average health* is the average of physical and mental health, each rated from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good). *Financial wellbeing* is a score between 0 (worst) and 100 (best), computed from a 5-item questionnaire (US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau 2017).

Another key institutional indicator at the country level is the level of e-government development, where Denmark, South Korea, and the UK are ranked 1st, 4th, and 7th, respectively, with the USA at 19th and Mexico at 65th (UN 2024). Rankings on corruption show a similar spread: Denmark ranks 1st, South Korea 3rd, the UK 20th, the USA 28th, and Mexico 140th (Transparency International 2025).

Comparing general trust in the federal or national government in the five countries, research from large-scale OECD surveys (OECD 2024) shows that 37% of Koreans reported high or moderately high trust. This figure was 54% among Mexicans, 44% among Danes, and only 27% among UK citizens. In the US, the number was even lower, at just 22% (Pew Research Center 2025). OECD surveys from 2023 also show that Danish citizens are generally satisfied with public services: healthcare (65%), education (74%), and administrative services (72%). In Mexico, these figures are somewhat lower—53%, 64%, and 67%, respectively—but all still above the OECD average. In South Korea, satisfaction varies considerably by sector: healthcare (72%) and administrative services (76%) receive relatively high ratings, while satisfaction with the education system is notably lower at 45%. In the United Kingdom, satisfaction with healthcare (50%) and education (54%) is below OECD averages, while satisfaction with administrative services is higher at 74%. Although we do not have directly comparable results from the USA, Gallup data (Gallup 2024a) suggests that 44% of U.S. adults rate healthcare services as either "excellent" (11%) or "good" (33%). This is a decline from 62% in 2012. Regarding education, 43% of Americans are satisfied with the quality of K–12 education (Gallup 2024b), while satisfaction with federal government services stands at 70% (ACSI 2024).

Overall, these indicators demonstrate substantial variation across countries in terms of institutions, citizen perceptions of government and services, and levels of corruption. Our motivation for examining administrative burdens in a multi-country study is to explore whether, despite the many contextual differences, there are common patterns in how such burdens are experienced by citizens across different countries and policy domains. The survey data was collected online in November and December 2022, following a pilot study.[2] The Danish survey company Wilke administered the survey and recruited participants from existing panels in all five countries.[3] The sample includes 10,106 participants, with more than 2000 participants from each of the five countries. Each country sample was recruited with the aim of being nationally representative on age, gender, and location of residence for the population above 18 years of age, though some groups may be under- or over-represented.[4] Table 1 summarizes sample demographics by country. The youngest sample is Mexican (average age 39), while the oldest is Danish (average age 51). All countries are within four percentage points of being gender balanced. The UK and the US have the highest proportion of participants who are an ethnic minority or from an immigrant background (9% to 17%), while South Korea has only 1%, reflecting underlying population trends. South Korea has the highest proportion of participants with a university degree, and of participants working full-time jobs. Proportions of participants who are low income are roughly comparable across countries (12%

to 18%), except for the UK (30%), though this is influenced by survey methodology (see notes for Table 1). Mexican participants have the most children, and it is the only country with more than one child currently living in the household on average, though this may be due to their younger average age. The proportion of participants living with a spouse or partner is comparable across countries (between 55% and 68%). Health is comparable across countries; it is lowest in South Korea and highest in Mexico, though it is important to note that it is self-reported and that survey response biases may vary systematically by country and influence health and financial well-being differences between countries. Financial well-being scores span from 51 to 59 on a 0–100 scale. They are the highest in Denmark and the lowest in the US.

4 | Survey Design

The study uses five versions of the questionnaire, one for each country. Each questionnaire was translated by professional translators and reviewed by public administration experts from the same country for subject matter, relevance, and accuracy. Minor differences between questionnaires include tailoring categorical questions such as education, ethnicity, and income, as well as using different examples of benefits when asking participants to remember how much time they spent doing tasks related to such benefits (a list included in the Supplementary Appendix).[5] Ethics approval was granted by Aarhus University prior to data collection (approval no. 2022-063). Below, we discuss the content of the questionnaire in detail.

4.1 | Demographics

The first section of the questionnaire collects basic demographic information about participants. As noted in the discussion of distributive effects, prior research suggests that burdens may be experienced particularly by the elderly, females, people with ethnic and immigrant backgrounds, people with low income and less education, and people who perceive their financial resources to be scarce or are in poor health (Bell et al. 2023; Cook 2021; Christensen et al. 2020; Madsen et al. 2023). Accordingly, we collect information on these characteristics along with a series of other standard demographics such as employment status, household composition (how many children and adults live in the household), and marital status. Health variables are collected by asking participants to rate their physical and mental health on five-point scales from "very good" to "very bad", while financial well-being is measured using the US Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's (2017) five-item scale, which asks participants to rate the following statements: "Because of my money situation, I feel like I will never have the things I want in life"; "I am just getting by financially"; "I am concerned that the money I have or will save won't last"; "I have money left over at the end of the month"; and "My finances control my life".

4.2 | Experiences

The second section of the survey questionnaire asks participants to report their recent experiences interacting with government or providers to access essential services and benefits and to comply with government requirements. The design of these survey measures is broadly based on Martin et al.'s (2023, 2024) survey of everyday administrative burdens in the UK, and more generally on the evaluated time-use methodology (e.g., Kahneman et al. 2004; Kahneman and Krueger 2006). The survey focuses on four domains: health, government benefits, care work (caring for children, adult loved ones, or relatives), and tax. These domains were selected for several reasons. First, the outcomes of administrative tasks in these domains significantly impact people's lives; for example, accessing healthcare improves people's well-being while receiving benefits helps their finances. Second, there is evidence that these health, government benefits, and taxes involve substantial administrative burden (e.g., see Finkelstein and Notowidigo 2019 and Fox et al. 2023 for benefits, Linos et al. 2022 for taxes, Fox et al. 2020 for healthcare, and Halling and Baekgaard's 2024 review). There is less evidence on administrative burdens in care work in the public administration literature, but separate streams of literature demonstrating burdens among caregivers in other disciplines such as nursing and social care (e.g., Camack 2015; Egan and Dalton 2019). An added benefit of including care work is that burdens in this area may be experienced particularly differently across genders (Herd and Moynihan 2025, 51). Third, we expect frequent interactions between citizens and the state in all four domains (taxes is likely the least frequent but still occurs at least yearly). In our selection, we exclude domains where burdens likely occur but where interactions are infrequent (such as applying for college financial aid or registering to vote), as this would likely result in many "0 time-use" observations while increasing survey length. Finally, we expect the chosen domains to be relevant across the population, rather than only to specific groups, which is important given the study's aim to compare different groups' experiences. For example, most people pay taxes and use healthcare, whereas immigration burdens would only apply to a subgroup of the population.

Participants were asked to report their experiences with five individual tasks (six for tax) in each domain, including "any other administrative tasks" in each domain to account for relevant tasks not captured in the questionnaire. The individual tasks used in the survey, are listed in Table 2.

The survey collects measures of time use and emotional affect in each of the four domains. These constitute our main indicators of administrative burden. Compared to other survey-based attempts to measure administrative burden in large-scale surveys (e.g., Baekgaard and Madsen 2024; Döring and Madsen 2022; Jilke et al. 2024), our approach prioritizes measuring how much time people spent on administrative tasks rather than their attitudes or their recollections of how burdensome they experienced the task to be. Time-use constitutes a quantifiable and comparable measure of burden (Daigneault 2024), which we can use regardless of the type of task, policy area, or country and hence is particularly well-suited for studying burdens across countries and policy domains (Martin et al. 2024). However, a downside of the time-use approach is that we do not tap directly into the various categories of learning and compliance costs like prior

TABLE 2 | Tasks surveyed in each domain.

Domain	Tasks shown to participants
Health	Finding a doctor or medical specialist; Scheduling appointments or waiting for appointments at the hospital/doctor's office; Communicating with health professionals or health insurance companies; Filling out health paperwork (e.g., health insurance or medical forms); Any other administrative task relating to health (e.g., paperwork, research, communications).
Benefits	(Note: Participants are shown examples of relevant country-specific benefits such as low-income benefits, unemployment benefits, government pension, disability or health-related benefits, and housing, bills, or food-related benefits). Researching government benefits; Applying for government benefits/preparing supporting documentation; Contacting a government office about benefits; Traveling to a government office/waiting at a government office to claim benefits; Any other administrative tasks relating to benefits (e.g., paperwork, research, communications).
Care work	Doing paperwork for a child or adult relative; Scheduling appointments for a child or adult relative; Helping with managing a child or a relative's healthcare or government benefits paperwork; Researching services or applying for assistance for an adult relative; Any other administrative tasks relating to caring for children or relatives (e.g., paperwork, research, communications).
Tax	Filing a tax return/declaring income and paying tax; Claiming tax credits; Resolving tax issues; Contacting tax authorities; Traveling to/waiting at a government office to deal with tax issues; Any other administrative tasks relating to tax (e.g., paperwork, research, communications).

research but rather obtain a measure which may be related to both learning and compliance costs and in principle may be experienced both as something positive and something negative.

To measure time-use in the health, government benefits, and care work domains, participants were asked how many times over the past month (30 days) they did each individual task, and how long they typically spent on each of the tasks. We asked about the "past month" to keep it relatively recent and minimize recall bias. For the tax domain, participants were asked about "this year (in 2022)" instead, given the lower frequency of tax-related tasks. Time-use (in minutes) was then computed for each domain by multiplying the number of instances of each task by their typical length and adding up all tasks in the given domain.

In addition to the time-use measure, we collected responses on emotional affect as an indicator of psychological costs experienced by our respondents. Prior research on administrative burden has been criticized for often neglecting potential positive effects of government interactions (Baekgaard and Tankink 2021, 21). In response to this critique, we rely on an approach that allows us to identify both positive and negative affect and hence also whether some interactions overall are more positive than negative. To measure emotional affect for each domain where participants reported doing administrative tasks, they were asked to rate how they felt while doing tasks in this domain on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much) across seven emotions: happy, confident, hopeful, frustrated, ashamed, stressed, and worried. This allows us to compute measures of positive affect (average of happy, confident, and hopeful), negative affect (average of frustrated, ashamed, stressed, and worried), and net affect (positive minus negative affect) for each domain.

Finally, the survey measures self-assessed capability for each domain by asking participants how experienced or capable they feel with tasks in this domain (on a scale from 1 "not at all experienced/capable" to 5 "extremely experienced/capable"). This measure is used to control for self-efficacy and administrative literacy in the analysis models in a concise manner.

5 | Results: Administrative Activity and Time-Use

Participants in each country reported doing tasks in between one and three policy domains on average. Table 3 shows the percentage of participants who were "active" in each domain, that is, those who spent any time doing tasks in that domain (first column for each country). Activity is therefore a binary variable (participants are either active in a domain or not), unlike time use. Health and tax are the two domains with the greatest likelihood of activity, with more than half of participants in all countries doing tasks in these domains, except in the UK, where health and care work are the two domains with the greatest likelihood of activity. Mexico has the highest likelihood of activity overall, with at least 68% of participants reporting activity in each domain, followed by the USA. We note that the survey instrument does not allow us to quantify systematic survey response biases that may vary by country, and thus cross-country findings here and elsewhere in the paper should be interpreted with this caveat in mind. In terms of time use, participants across the full sample spent an average of 7.6 h per month in total on administrative tasks.

Table 3 moreover shows how many hours per month participants who were active in a domain spent on that domain, that is, excluding those with zero time-use in that domain (second column for each country). In all five countries, the most time-consuming domains are government benefits and care work. Tax has by far the lowest (pro-rated) time-use. Some of the

TABLE 3 | Administrative activity and monthly time-use.

	Proportion of active participants and their time-use (hours per month)									
	UK		USA		Denmark		South Korea		Mexico	
	%	Time	%	Time	%	Time	%	Time	%	Time
Health	57	3.9	69	5.0	57	2.9	65	2.7	84	4.7
Benefits	34	4.9	48	7.3	36	3.9	24	2.9	74	5.7
Care work	39	5.0	45	7.0	36	4.6	34	3.0	79	5.1
Tax	32	0.6	70	0.6	70	0.3	51	0.3	68	0.6
Total		8.0		11.8		5.7		4.5		13.0

Note: Tax is pro-rated, meaning that all time-use numbers are hours per month (tax is likely under-estimated given recall bias when asking about the "past year"). The table shows average time-use per domain by country, as well as the number of participants who were active in each domain and their average time-use (i.e., excluding those with zero time-use in the domain). For example, Danish respondents spent an average of 1.6 h on health-related burdens, but among the 1138 Danish respondents who reported non-zero time-use in this domain, average time-use was 2.9 h. The bottom row shows average total time-use, over the full sample and among those who were active in at least one domain, for each country.

difference in time-use between the tax domain and the other domains may be ascribed to recall bias, as participants are asked to remember tasks across a much longer timescale (past year instead of past month). Total average monthly time-use among participants who were active in at least one domain spans from 4.5 h per month in the country with the lowest time-use, South Korea, to 13 h per month in the country with the highest time-use, Mexico.

We examine time-use differences between demographic groups, focusing on the following groups of particular interest given the literature on administrative burdens and inequality: women, older people (aged 65 or older), those with low income or low subjective financial well-being, people in minority ethnic groups or with an immigration background (self or parent born abroad), and those in poor health ("bad" or "very bad" self-reported physical or mental health). Looking at total administrative time-use (using a linear regression of total time-use on groups, controlling for country, self-assessed capability, and demographic variables), older people and those with an immigration background report lower total time-use, while ethnic minorities and people with poor health, low income, and low subjective financial well-being report higher total time-use. (see Table A1 in the supplementary appendix).

Since group differences in total time use (or lack thereof) may hide policy domain-specific patterns, we examine time use differences between groups by policy domain. We use linear regressions of time use in each policy domain on the groups of interest. We run these regressions for each country as well as on the pooled sample (controlling for country). The results are shown in Figure 1 (regression coefficients appear in Table A2 in the supplementary appendix). For example, the triangles in the UK panel are coefficients from regressing care work time use on demographic groups in the UK sample. Several findings emerge from the results. First, older participants tend to spend less time on administrative tasks than younger participants regardless of the policy area and country. As we might have expected, those with health issues spend more time than others on health-related tasks and those with low financial well-being tend to spend more time than others on tasks in all policy areas, especially benefits. Women and those on low incomes tend to spend less time handling taxes than others, while those with an immigration background spend less time than others on all tasks in general. Finally, ethnic minorities may spend more time on tasks relating to benefits, but this is not consistent. Adding self-assessed capability and demographic controls to the models does not significantly impact these results, except that the relationship between being low income and spending less time on taxes disappears (see Figure A1 in the supplementary appendix).

6 | Results: Emotions

Overall, participants report more positive than negative emotions during administrative tasks. As shown in the descriptive statistics in Table 4, average duration-weighted net affect (positive minus negative emotions, averaged across domains, weighing each domain by its share of the participant's total time-use) is positive in all countries, as positive emotions average at or above 3, the middle point on the scale, while negative emotions average near or below this point.

Further analysis (using simple *t*-tests) confirms that duration-weighted net affect is significant different from zero for all countries (p-values =0.000 in all countries). It is highest in the USA (1.2 on a scale from −6 to 6) and lowest in South Korea (0.33), though this may reflect country differences in baseline well-being, survey interpretation, or response bias. Net affect seems highest during tasks relating to care work and lowest during tasks relating to benefits or tax (depending on the country), but within-person models are required to confirm this pattern, as the descriptive statistics in Table 4 may reflect selection bias, if participants are more likely to do tasks in domains that they derive more positive (or less negative) emotions from.

Figure 2 shows the results of within-person fixed-effects models (regressions appear in the supplementary appendix Table A3) that show the association between different domains and standardized net affect for a given person. In all four countries, participants experience the highest and second highest net affect during tasks relating to care work and health, respectively. Net affect is lowest during tasks relating to benefits for the UK, US, and Denmark, and second lowest during tasks relating to tax

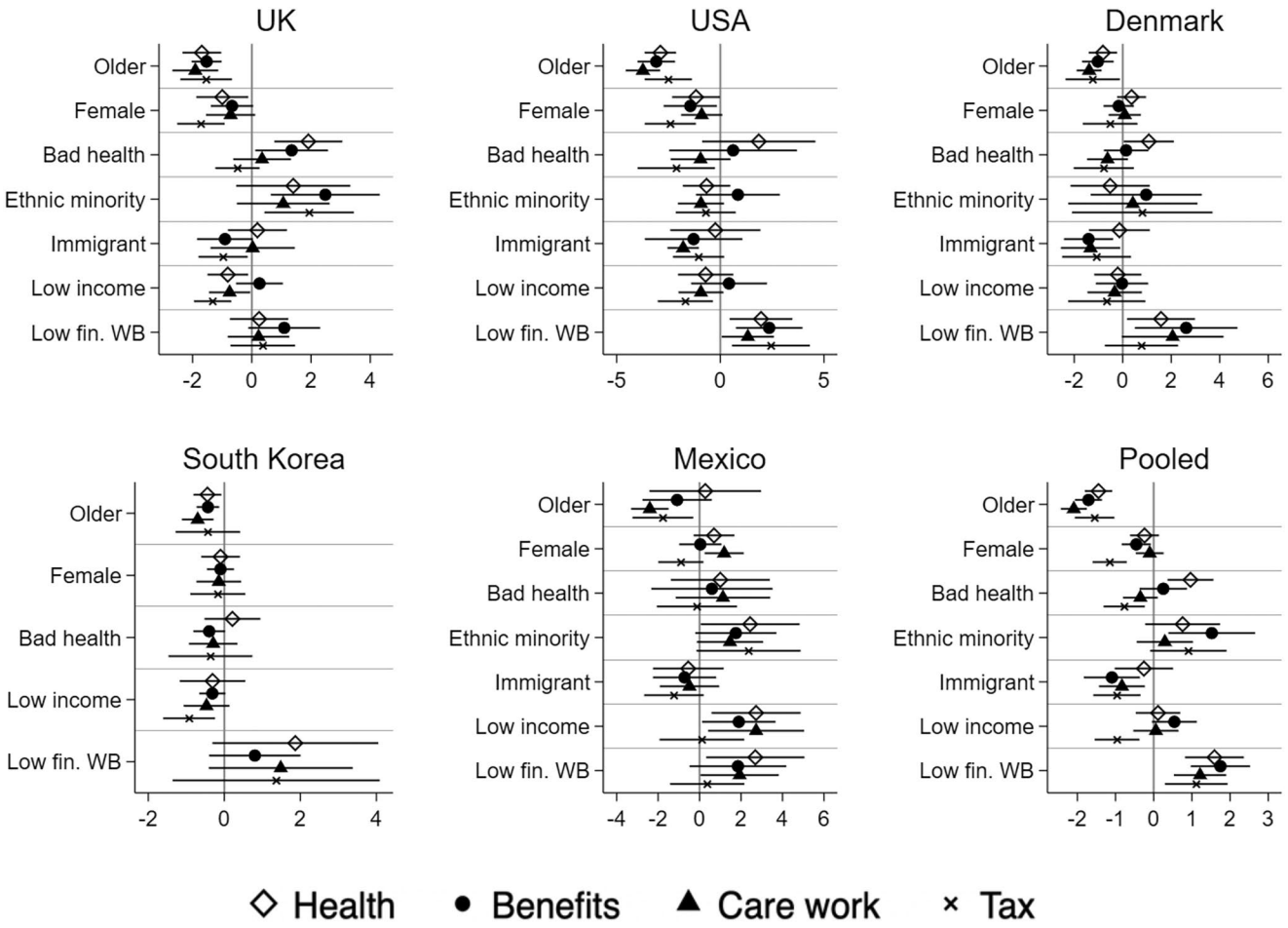

FIGURE 1 | Group differences in time-use by policy domain. Coefficients from linear regressions of time use (in hours, past month, except tax which is for 2022) on demographic groups of interest for each policy domain and for each country as well as pooled across countries (controlling for country), with 95% confidence intervals. Participants are "older" if aged 65 or older. Health is bad if the participant rated their mental or physical health as bad or very bad (1 or 2 on a 5-point scale). Ethnic minority is based on country-specific questions (participants are a minority if they are not white in the UK or the US, not ethnically Danish or Korean, or belong to an indigenous group in Mexico). Immigrant background is 1 if a participant or their parent(s) are born abroad. South Korea only has 1% of ethnic minority or immigrant background participants; hence, these variables are not included. Income is low if the participant is in the lowest income category (GBP 20,000 or less for UK, USD 20,000 or less for USA, DKK 200,000 or less for Denmark, KRW 20,000,000 or less for South Korea, and MXN 10,000 or less for Mexico). Financial well-being is low if the participant scored 37 or below on a0 to 1000 index, as per US CFPB guidelines (2017).

(for South Korea and Mexico, they are in the opposite order). This confirms the pattern identified in Table 4: while participants experience more positive than negative emotions, there is a clear hierarchy between domains—a hierarchy that appears to be remarkably stable across countries.

Different demographic groups may have different experiences with administrative tasks, for example if they are disadvantaged (Christensen et al. 2020). We test group differences in net affect, focusing on several groups of interest: women, older people (65+), those with low income or low financial well-being, and those in poor health ("bad" or "very bad" physical or mental health). We do this using linear regressions of average duration-weighted net affect on these groups (one regression per country). Patterns in average duration-weighted net affect are consistent across countries (see Table A4 in the supplementary appendix). Older participants have systematically higher net affect than other participants do, while women and those in poor health report systematically lower net affect than others. Those on low incomes do not differ from others, while those with low financial well-being have systematically lower net affect. There are no clear differences in affect based on ethnic minority status or immigrant background.

Group differences in average net emotional affect may to some degree reflect underlying baseline differences in subjective well-being, such as the well-documented gender well-being gap (Blanchflower and Bryson 2022). Therefore, comparing group differences in net affect *by domain* can provide further insights about the relationship between administrative tasks and net affect. Figure 3 shows the results of these comparisons, using linear regressions of net affect in each domain on the demographic group variables (one regression per country and domain, underlying coefficients in Table A5 in the supplementary appendix). Again, older people have higher net affect than others do in all domains and all countries, while women, those in poor health, and those with low financial well-being have lower net affect than others in all domains. In the UK, the USA, and Denmark, those in poor health have especially negative experiences with health-related tasks, and

TABLE 4 | Average emotional affect (standard deviations in parentheses).

		UK	US	Denmark	South Korea	Mexico
Positive affect (0–6)	Health	3.3 (1.4)	3.7 (1.4)	3.3 (1.3)	3.0 (1.2)	4.0 (1.4)
	Benefits	3.1 (1.5)	3.6 (1.5)	3.2 (1.4)	3.2 (1.2)	3.7 (1.6)
	Care work	3.6 (1.3)	4.1 (1.4)	3.6 (1.3)	3.3 (1.2)	4.1 (1.5)
	Tax	3.3 (1.4)	3.6 (1.5)	3.0 (1.4)	2.8 (1.3)	3.5 (1.7)
Negative affect (0–6)	Health	2.5 (1.6)	2.4 (1.7)	2.0 (1.6)	2.6 (1.2)	2.6 (1.6)
	Benefits	3.1 (1.7)	2.9 (1.7)	2.6 (1.7)	2.9 (1.3)	2.9 (1.6)
	Care work	2.6 (1.6)	2.7 (1.7)	2.3 (1.6)	2.8 (1.3)	2.6 (1.6)
	Tax	2.6 (1.6)	2.3 (1.7)	1.8 (1.5)	2.6 (1.3)	2.7 (1.7)
Net affect: ((−6)–(+6))	Health	0.79 (2.3)	1.3 (2.3)	1.2 (2.2)	0.41 (1.6)	1.4 (2.3)
	Benefits	−0.12 (2.4)	0.69 (2.5)	0.53 (2.3)	0.35 (1.8)	0.84 (2.5)
	Care work	0.90 (2.1)	1.4 (2.3)	1.3 (2.2)	0.48 (1.8)	1.4 (2.4)
	Tax	0.70 (2.3)	1.2 (2.4)	1.2 (2.2)	0.17 (1.8)	0.82 (2.6)
Average duration-weighted net affect		0.65	1.2	1.1	0.33	1.1

Note: Positive affect is the average of happy, confident, and hopeful. Negative affect is the average of frustrated, ashamed, stressed, and worried. Each emotion is rated from 0 not at all to 6 very much. Net affect is average positive minus average negative affect. Average duration-weighted net affect is the average net affect across domains, weighing each domain by its share of total reported time use. Emotions are only reported for domains participants were active in; hence, the number of observations varies.

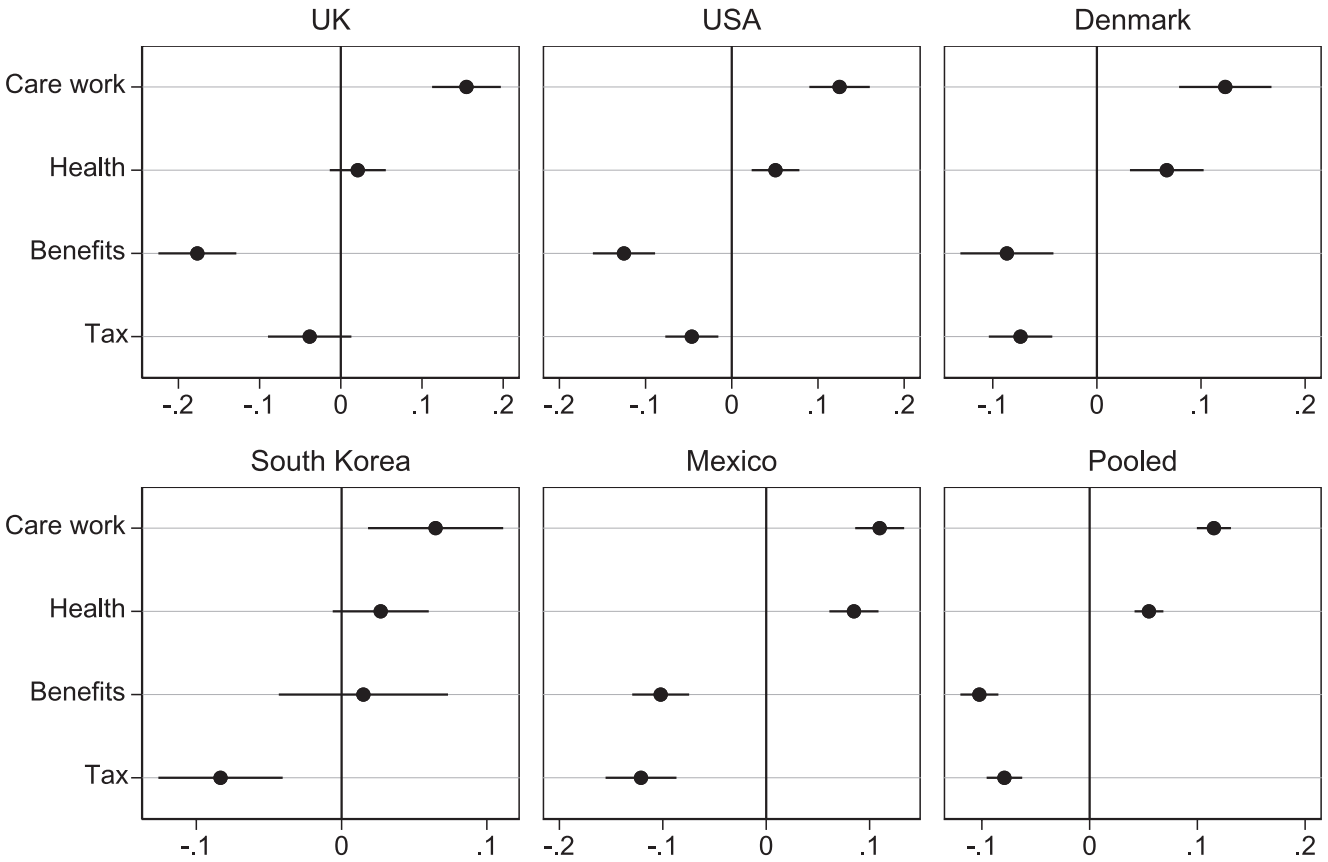

FIGURE 2 | Within-person effects of tasks on standardized net emotional affect. Linear predictions (margins) from within-person fixed effects models of net affect with 95% confidence intervals. Models use standardized net affect (z-scores) by country (mean 0, SD 1).

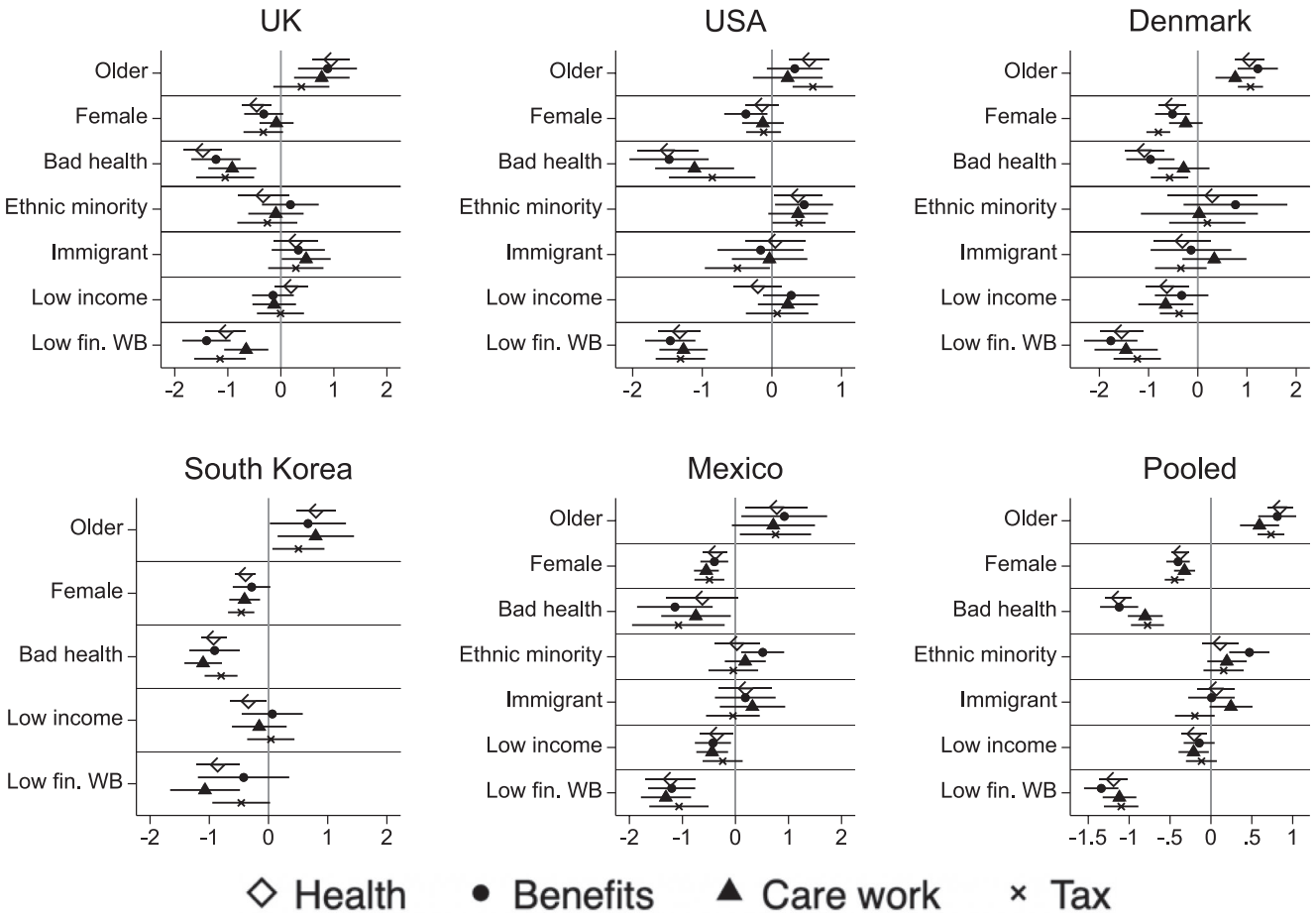

FIGURE 3 | Group differences in net affect by domain. Coefficients from linear regressions of net affect (from −6 most negative to 6 most positive) on group variables with 95% confidence intervals, by country and pooled (with country control). See Figure 1 for notes about measurement.

those with low financial well-being have especially negative experiences with benefits-related tasks. These patterns are consistent when adding further demographic controls (see Figure A2 in the supplementary appendix). However, there is no consistent pattern for income, ethnicity, or immigration background, although in the pooled model coefficients are negative for low income and positive for ethnic minorities. Summing up on contextual differences and similarities, the findings offer evidence of both stability and variation in net emotional affect across countries. Net emotional affect, on the one hand, varies considerably across both countries and policy domains, and there is cross-country variability in the coefficients for income, ethnicity, and immigration status. On the other hand, socio-demographic patterns are stable across policy domains, and across countries, we also obtain rather similar findings for socio-demographics such as gender, age, and health, suggesting that findings on distributive effects for these characteristics are likely to replicate across various domains and countries.

7 | Limitations

By far the most research on administrative burden is based on single-country data, evidence from a single policy domain, and typically on data from a specific target group (Halling and Baekgaard 2024). Our study offers evidence on everyday experiences of administrative burden from five very different countries, across four large policy domains, a wide range of administrative tasks, and a range of different subgroups of the population. In doing so, our findings offer unprecedented evidence on how context matters for administrative burdens: we uncover substantial differences and similarities in experiences of burden both across countries, policy domains, and subgroups of the population. However, our approach also comes with some limitations.

First, our data is based on self-reports of time use and emotional affect. While we have sought to limit bias in reporting by asking about factual time use within a relatively limited time span (30 days), it is still possible that survey accounts of time use to some extent are under-reported due to recall bias (Martin et al. 2024). While this should be acknowledged as a potential threat to the general accounts of time use, and especially the cross-country comparisons where bias may vary systematically, it is arguably less of a concern in the analyses where we focus on differences between subgroups. Second, a related limitation concerns the selection of policy domains. We chose to examine four broad domains to ensure comparability across countries, but the selection obviously does not cover all domains where citizens interact with the state and may experience burden. Still, our findings provide evidence that burdens vary across policy domains. Future research may further explore the underlying causes of these differences and examine burden variation across other policy domains as well.

Third, one should be careful about how to interpret the cross-country coefficients. For instance, a country may have low time

use on tax due to a very efficient administrative system that does not create burdens for citizens. However, it is also possible that low time use for taxes is due to a country having an underdeveloped administrative system with very little interaction between citizens and the state in this domain. Likewise, a country may exhibit high general emotional well-being due to a high population happiness baseline, social desirability bias in survey response, or due to a policy that does not create burdens for citizens. Despite these caveats, our approach allows us to describe what burden experiences look like, in what policy areas and demographic groups they are concentrated, and how these patterns vary across countries.

Fourth, our measures of burdens do not tap directly into the learning and compliance cost dimensions (Moynihan et al. 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018). This arguably reduces the comparability with other administrative burden research (e.g., Jilke et al. 2024) and reduces the fit with theoretical categories. Of particular relevance in this respect, comparable administrative procedures in terms of duration may be experienced very differently (Hattke et al. 2020). On the other hand, the fact that we measure time use also comes with benefits as it allows us to get a less subjective indicator of people's administrative activities and to study how it relates to emotional affect.

Overall, while our approach by no means is without limitations, our findings demonstrate the benefits of collecting time use data to study the impact of contextual factors for experiences of administrative burdens and of collecting data on both positive and negative emotions to allow for more nuanced conclusions about how people experience citizen-state interactions and policy implementation.

8 | Discussion and Conclusion

Research on administrative burdens emphasizes the experiences of burdens but seldom accounts explicitly for contextual factors in the form of country and policy area differences (Halling and Baekgaard 2024; Vogel et al. 2025). We offer one of the first cross-national studies of administrative burden to provide evidence on exactly this. Our data is descriptive in nature but offers a set of interesting findings of how citizens' experiences of administrative burdens in some respects vary by context and in others not. Both time costs and emotional affect vary considerably across countries. For instance, we observe substantially higher time use on administrative tasks in the USA and Mexico than in the UK, Denmark, and South Korea. Likewise, time use varies across policy domains within countries. We find that more time is spent on care work and benefits than on health and taxes. Interestingly, this hierarchy between policy domains is remarkably stable across countries, despite institutional differences and differences in administrative traditions and welfare state models, suggesting that similar findings in Martin et al. (2024) from the UK replicate in the same and other contexts. Looking at emotional affect, a clear pattern similarly emerges across contexts where health and care tasks generally are associated with relatively more positive affect. On the other hand, government benefit tasks and tax tasks are associated with relatively more negative affect. We speculate that time-consuming tasks are generally associated with relatively more positive affect the more citizens *voluntarily* take part in the interaction (see Brown 2007 for a related argument). In extension, such hassles may not have as much negative impact on the motivation to co-produce services as a volunteer or relative as some research suggests (Thomsen et al. 2020).

While experiences of administrative burden thus appear to be present to considerably different degrees across countries and policy domains, we find a more mixed picture for distributive effects across contexts. As suggested by other research (Christensen et al. 2020; Madsen et al. 2023; Moynihan et al. 2015), and consistent with prior empirical findings (Martin et al. 2024), we find that time costs are substantially more pronounced among those with low financial well-being. This result, which is consistent across countries and policy domains though not statistically significant in all cases, is worth emphasizing, as our cross-country evidence underscores the importance of studying administrative burdens among vulnerable groups, and of developing interventions or policies that could reduce the unequal distribution of burdens.

Differences in experiences of burden between socio-demographic groups are even more pronounced when looking at emotional affect, thus supporting the general view in the literature that vulnerable people experience administrative burden to a greater extent than others (Christensen et al. 2020; Halling and Baekgaard 2024). In particular, low financial well-being and health problems are associated with less positive emotional affect during administrative activity, thus supporting the findings in Bell et al. 2023 and Madsen et al. 2022. Likewise, females systematically report less positive emotional affect during administrative activity, thus supporting the notion that burdens are often gendered (Martin 2024; Herd and Moynihan 2025). The fact that findings also here are largely similar across both policy domains and countries suggests that findings on distributive effects for these factors (financial well-being, health, and gender) depend on context only to a limited degree, and that findings from single-case studies therefore are likely to replicate across both domains and countries.

However, for other socio-demographic factors, findings are less consistent with prior research. Interestingly, and in contrast to predictions of prior research (Christensen et al. 2020), we find that older people experience more positive affect during administrative activity than younger people. We speculate that there may be a generational explanation for this finding, according to which the current older generation has lesser expectations than the younger generations and hence experiences less negative affect. Alternatively, there may be a life-cycle explanation for this finding. For instance, younger people may be busy with establishing careers and families and, in that process, be short of time and energy to deal with administrative matters; something that extant literature largely neglects in the discussion of age-related differences in experiences of administrative burden and an area where administrative burden research may benefit from studies of caregivers (e.g., Camack 2015; Egan and Dalton 2019). Future research may benefit from looking further into the differences between different age groups by, for instance, using a more qualitative approach.

Interestingly, we also find country variation in findings for ethnic minority status, immigrant status, and income, suggesting that the relevance of these factors depends more on context than on financial well-being, health, and gender, despite the strong expectation in the literature that immigrants and ethnic minorities experience administrative burdens to a greater extent than others (Bell et al. 2024; Compton et al. 2023).

Intriguingly, our results also show that administrative tasks are not necessarily perceived as a burden even though they may require substantial time use from citizens. Quite on the contrary, we find evidence that our respondents overall associate some administrative tasks in citizen-state interactions with positive emotions, and indeed those countries where time use is highest (the USA and Mexico) are also those countries where people report the most positive affect during administrative activities. Our findings deviate from previous administrative burden research which conceptualizes people's experiences in terms of "costs" (Christensen et al. 2020; Moynihan et al. 2015; Herd and Moynihan 2018) and suggest that future research assessing state interactions could benefit from measuring people's experiences in terms of both costs and benefits (such as positive emotions). This could help not only to better understand experiences but also to explore possible second-order effects. For example, previous research shows that negative state interactions can reduce trust in government (Ali and Altaf 2021), but it may also be the case that positive interactions could improve trust, or other outcomes of interest. Here, a particularly interesting outcome could be self-efficacy regarding future interactions as this may also influence future take-up of services and benefits.

Ethics Statement

Ethics approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at Aarhus University prior to data collection (approval no. 2022-063).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Replication material for this study is freely available at https://osf.io/c7fxj/files/osfstorage.

Endnotes

[1] We use "administrative tasks" as a general term to refer to a list of activities that people may need to participate in as part of policy implementation processes and that may cause them to experience administrative burdens. Examples include navigating the healthcare system, contacting tax authorities, or helping a relative apply for government benefits (see Table 2 for a full list).

[2] The data collection is part of a larger project in which data on experiences of burden are used in other papers also. This is the only paper focusing specifically on variations in burden experiences. Another paper studies how experiences of burden relate to burden tolerance, while a third focuses on burdens and civic outcomes.

[3] The Danish Wilke panel consists of more than 50,000 members who on a frequent basis are invited to take part in online surveys in return for a small monetary compensation. The panel is based on voluntary opt-in and panel members are recruited through online advertising. Members of similar panels from Wilke partners were invited in the other four case countries. In each country, a subsample of the full panel was invited to take part in the survey.

[4] The study does not use weights as the analyses either control for or compare different demographic groups.

[5] The pre-registration is available at the Open Science Framework (see Martin et al. 2022). Study materials can be found at https://osf.io/c7fxj/files/osfstorage.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** Supporting Information.