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Dual Leadership and Local Policy Implementation: A Case Study of E-Government Implementation in Vietnam

Abstract

This study investigates how dual local leadership—embodied by the Provincial Party Secretary and the Chairman of the Provincial People’s Committee—shapes divergent policy implementation strategies within Vietnam’s party-state governance model. Focusing on the politically sensitive and institutionally novel domain of e-government, this study explores how local cadres adapt implementation strategies over time in response to varying levels of policy clarity and political consensus. Employing a qualitative comparative case study of three provinces—Hue, Dak Lak, and Ben Tre—characterized by different e-government development trajectories and strategic choices, the analysis reveals that interactions between the Party and administrative apparatuses generate distinct degrees of political consensus, which, in turn, influence implementation outcomes. The study identifies four emergent implementation types—Symbolic, Self-Directed, Disjointed, and Sustainable—and introduces the ambiguity–Consensus Matrix, a conceptual framework for understanding implementation dynamics in one-party regimes. By illuminating subnational political dynamics and the contingent role of dual leadership, this study contributes to the broader public policy literature on policy implementation in centralized authoritarian systems.

Keywords:

implementation strategy; local cadre; party-state model; policy ambiguity; political consensus

Introduction

The complexity of public policy implementation has long posed a fundamental challenge to both scholars and practitioners (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Winter 2012). While policy formulation often garners concentrated political and administrative focus, it is ultimately the implementation process—and the persistent gap between formal policy objectives and actual outcomes—that determines the success or failure of reform efforts (Bardach, 1977; Hill and Hupe, 2002;

Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1979). Vietnam presents a particularly compelling context for examining this implementation gap. As a one-party state governed by a hierarchical Party-State model, Vietnam mandates the top-down execution of centrally designed policies by subordinate local authorities (London & London, 2014). However, in practice, policy outcomes often diverge considerably from expectations.

This central–local implementation tension is further complicated by the dual leadership structure at the provincial level, in which power is shared between two key actors: the Chairman of the Provincial People’s Committee, who heads the administrative apparatus and exercises de facto authority over policy execution, and the Provincial Party Secretary, who holds legally defined supreme political authority. The extent to which these two actors align in their interpretation and prioritization of policy directives significantly influences the degree of attention and resources a policy receives at the ground level. Their coordination—or lack thereof—shapes the degree of political consensus, which in turn determines how implementation strategies are chosen and enacted.

This study uses e-government policy as a critical case to investigate how local cadres shape implementation under the party-state governance model. E-government, defined as the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to improve public service delivery, administrative efficiency, and governance transparency (Bekkers, 2012), has been a cornerstone of Vietnam’s modernization strategy. Despite its central importance, e-government policy carries inherent risks and institutional uncertainties, particularly at the local level, where technological capacity and administrative readiness vary widely. The high cost of failure and technological complexity of such initiatives (Heeks, 2003) demand a deliberate cost–benefit assessment by local cadres, rendering e-government a particularly revealing lens through which to observe local implementation dynamics.

Although Vietnam’s e-government policy was formulated as a standardized, centrally mandated reform, its local-level implementation has demonstrated considerable variation across provinces. Understanding the roots of this divergence remains an unresolved question in the literature on policy

implementation. Prior studies have highlighted the pivotal role of local cadres in interpreting and enacting national directives in one-party systems (Malesky et al., 2011; Painter, 2013), as well as their motivations and strategic responses to central mandates in the Vietnamese Party-State context (Fritzen, 2006; Gainsborough et al., 2009). However, existing research has yet to offer a structural explanation for why particular implementation strategies emerge in different locales or how political dynamics—especially the interaction between administrative and Party leadership—shape these strategic choices. This study addresses this gap by analyzing subnational variations in e-government implementation strategies and introducing a conceptual framework that links policy ambiguity with political consensus. In doing so, it illuminates how cadres operating under dual leadership structures make context-sensitive decisions amid uncertainty, thereby advancing our understanding of policy implementation in hierarchical single-party regimes.

The Complexity of Policy Implementation

Policy implementation—the process through which political decisions are translated into concrete programs and observable outcomes—constitutes one of the most critical and persistently challenging phases of the policy cycle. Since the foundational work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), scholars have consistently emphasized that implementation is not mechanical but a contested, multi-actor, and context-dependent process shaped by negotiation, adaptation, and often, failure. In response to this complexity, the literature has evolved along multiple theoretical lines, including top-down models (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980), bottom-up approaches (Lipsky, 1983), and hybrid or synthesized frameworks, such as the Ambiguity-Conflict Model (Matland, 1995), comprehensive implementation frameworks (Winter, 2012), and network theories (Callon, 2001; O’Toole Jr, 2000).

Despite these theoretical advancements, the persistent divergence between policy goals and real-world outcomes—commonly referred to as the “implementation gap” (McConnell, 2010). This gap is shaped by factors across three interrelated

domains. First, policy design may contain internal inconsistencies or ambiguities regarding goals and instruments (Bardach, 1977; Matland, 1995), reflect weak causal theories (Moe, 1989), or face significant disjunctures between design and operational reality, as is often the case in e-government reforms (Heeks, 2003). Second, the complexity of inter-organizational action presents further barriers, particularly in contexts where multiple actors must coordinate across fragmented institutional environments. Classic challenges include the ‘complexity of joint action’ (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973), coordination failures, and diverging interests (Hill & Hupe, 2002). Finally, individual-level discretion plays a non-trivial role, as implementers often reinterpret or selectively apply policies based on local constraints or preferences (Lipsky, 1983; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1979).

E-government exemplifies many of these challenges in the following ways. While its promise lies in fostering transparency, efficiency, and participatory governance, e-government implementation often entails substantial technological, institutional, and organizational transformation. At the macro level, studies have emphasized the role of social norms and structures (Evans & Yen, 2005; Ho, 2002), political environments (Bigdeli et al., 2013; Bolivar, 2017), and economic development (Yoon & Chae, 2009). At the meso level, implementation success is often tied to leadership commitment (Bannister & Connolly, 2012; Gil-García & Pardo, 2005; Ndou, 2004), institutional capacity (Chen et al., 2006; Ho, 2002), technology readiness (Urciuoli et al., 2013), and financial and infrastructural resources (Bigdeli et al., 2013; Gallego-Álvarez et al., 2010; Yoon & Chae, 2009). Consequently, the “design–reality gap” (Heeks, 2003) remains particularly pronounced in digital governance initiatives.

While the global literature offers a rich toolbox for diagnosing implementation challenges, particularly in the e-government field, many mainstream frameworks are insufficiently attuned to the institutional particularities of hybrid political regimes. In Party-State systems, such as Vietnam’s, the fusion of political and administrative authority and the central role of local cadres in shaping implementation processes are often marginalized in dominant models.

The Party-State Model in Vietnam and Dual Leadership

Vietnam’s political system is grounded in a party-state model, where the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) maintains authority not only over policymaking but also over its execution (Croissant, 2022). At the subnational level, this model is operationalized through a dual leadership structure in which political and administrative lines of authority converge. While the central government retains a monopoly on political direction, it must rely on provincial and local cadres to implement national policies in diverse and decentralized contexts (Gainsborough, 2017). This arrangement, as discussed in the broader literature on authoritarian governance (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988; Mertha, 2009), creates a fragmented system in which authority is centralized in principle but is dispersed in practice.

This fragmentation is particularly evident in Vietnam’s implementation architecture, where vertical chains of command intersect with horizontal coordination between the Party and State bodies at each level (Fritzen, 2006). Policies are transmitted through formal hierarchies while also being filtered through political structures, making implementation a process of both top-down delegation and intra-level negotiations. Schubert and Alpermann (2019) conceptualize this mechanism as “political steering,” which captures the dynamic interplay between ideological control and administrative execution. As policies are carried out across provinces and districts, the logic of centralized design often gives way to localized adaptation, creating room for divergence, improvisation, and, at times, resistance (Gainsborough 2017). Central authorities must depend on local officials to execute policies faithfully, despite the fact that these agents often face different incentives and pressures, particularly when tasked with balancing political stability and development goals (O’ Brien & Li, 2017). In this context, cadres occupying dual roles as both Party functionaries and government administrators become pivotal actors. Their responsibilities range from interpreting policy directives to coordinating departments, mobilizing resources, and engaging with the public. Simultaneously, they are embedded in local political and social networks, which

influence how policies are adapted to meet specific local conditions (Gainsborough, 2010; Malesky & London, 2014; Painter, 2003). The dual identity of local cadres—as both agents of the Party and actors embedded in local social structures—creates a complex incentive environment. Performance-based rewards tied to economic growth and service delivery can foster innovation and proactive implementation. However, such incentives may encourage data manipulation, overemphasize quantifiable targets, or neglect more diffuse policy goals (Edin, 2003).

While existing scholarship highlights the pivotal role of local cadres in interpreting and adapting national policies, it often treats them as a monolithic group with uniform motivations and capacities. However, local cadres occupy distinct institutional roles with diverging responsibilities, authority, and incentives (Croissant, 2022; Gainsborough, 2010). This internal heterogeneity makes political consensus among local leadership teams a critical determinant of implementation outcomes, particularly within the Party-State governance model, where dual leadership is institutionalized.

Policy Ambiguity and Political Consensus

In Vietnam, at the provincial level, two core leadership figures operate with overlapping yet functionally distinct mandates: The Chairman of the People's Committee, who heads the local administrative apparatus, is primarily responsible for managing socioeconomic development, executing national policies, and overseeing public service delivery (Painter, 2013). The Chairman's authority is largely procedural and technocratic, focusing on budget allocation, project management, and implementation logistics. Although often more publicly visible, especially in relation to development initiatives and administrative reforms, the Chairman's autonomy is ultimately constrained by the political oversight and informal approval of the Provincial Party Secretary (Gainsborough, 2010). Because of their subordinate position in the political hierarchy, administrative cadres tend to be more responsive to performance-based incentives (Gainsborough 2017). This often translates into a greater willingness to adopt policy initiatives that carry higher risks but offer visibility

and potential for career advancement, such as e-government implementation, digital transformation, or infrastructure modernization. In contrast, the Party Secretary, who leads the provincial branch of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), holds formal control over political orientation, cadre evaluation and ideological consistency (Croissant, 2022; Peace, 2024). As the de facto agenda setter, the Party Secretary exercises significant influence over personnel decisions and internal Party assessments (Thayer, 2009). Given their responsibility for maintaining political stability and party legitimacy, party cadres tend to be more risk-averse, favoring gradual, consensus-driven reforms that do not jeopardize institutional coherence or ideological alignment.

The interaction between these two local leaders illustrates the dual leadership mechanism characteristic of the party-state model. The effectiveness of policy implementation at the provincial level depends greatly on the extent of alignment—or political consensus—between these two roles. A cooperative relationship allows for synchronized planning, coherent communication across departments, and efficient use of resources. This collaborative dynamic is supported by a cadre system in which many mid-level officials simultaneously hold positions in both party and state institutions, fostering cohesion and streamlined policy execution. While the Chairman relies on political backing to legitimize action, the Party Secretary depends on administrative machinery to realize strategic visions, creating a relationship of mutual dependence and functional interdependence between the two.

In this context, political consensus plays a decisive role. Unlike its interpretation in pluralist democratic systems, where consensus typically involves negotiation among multiple stakeholders (Habermas, 1984; Lijphart, 2022; Rawls, 1993), in Vietnam's one-party regime, consensus refers to internal agreement within a vertically integrated political apparatus. High levels of consensus are typically expressed through mechanisms such as joint directives, coordinated task forces and unified communication strategies. When such alignment is achieved, it tends to result in policy coherence, smoother inter-agency cooperation, and greater flexibility for local innovation. However,

low consensus can lead to fragmented execution, competing priorities, and diminished political will for reform.

Complementing political consensus, policy ambiguity is a central variable in this study. Policy ambiguity refers to the lack of specificity in a policy's objectives, implementation methods, or expected results (Rainey, 1993). Matland (1995) further categorizes ambiguity into two types: ambiguity in goals (what to achieve) and ambiguity in means (how to achieve one's goals). The latter includes both technological uncertainty, such as the appropriateness or feasibility of specific tools, and administrative uncertainty, relating to unclear responsibilities or coordination mechanisms. Vietnam's early e-government policies illustrate all three dimensions. Although national documents emphasize goals such as improved governance capacity and better public service delivery, they often lack measurable benchmarks or performance indicators (Government, 2015). Technological ambiguity was especially acute during the early 2010s, when inadequate digital infrastructure and limited technical capacity posed significant obstacles. Administrative ambiguity remains a persistent issue driven by overlapping mandates and unclear institutional divisions at the provincial and district levels. In practice, this has led to variations in how local actors interpret and apply central directives, adapting them to match local capacities, political climates, or development agendas.

Vietnam's e-government policy serves as an ideal case study to explore these dynamics. On the one hand, e-government initiatives promise improved bureaucratic efficiency and cost reduction, which align with the ambitions of performance-oriented cadres. However, their technical complexity, institutional novelty, and ambiguous implementation pathways create hesitation among politically cautious actors concerned with avoiding failure. This study seeks to explain how specific implementation strategies emerge under a nationally uniform e-government policy framework. It posits that two foundational conditions—policy ambiguity and political consensus among local cadres—jointly determine variations in local implementation outcomes. Together, political

consensus and policy ambiguity form the conceptual foundation for this study. By examining their interaction, this study aims to explain why local implementation strategies diverge under a shared national framework and how these differences shape the success or failure of complex governance reforms, such as e-government.

Methods

Case Selection Strategy

This study investigates how local policy implementation strategies emerge from the dynamic interaction between two key institutional variables: policy ambiguity and political consensus. Given the exploratory and context-sensitive nature of this inquiry, a qualitative research design is especially well-suited to uncover the underlying mechanisms driving variations in local governance outcomes. Vietnam comprises 63 provincial governments, each with distinct socio-political characteristics and administrative capacity. Conducting a comprehensive nationwide analysis of all provinces during the study period (2011–2021) would be analytically diffuse and logistically infeasible. Accordingly, this study adopts a comparative case study approach to enable an in-depth, context-specific examination of governance processes while ensuring analytical tractability. The case study method is particularly effective in dissecting complex institutional interactions and generating insights that are both theoretically grounded and empirically rich.

The case selection strategy was designed to ensure internal validity and cross-case comparability. Provinces were chosen based on their shared baseline conditions in 2011—namely, similar socioeconomic profiles and comparable levels of e-government development—but diverging policy trajectories over the subsequent decade. By 2021, these provinces had produced markedly different outcomes in terms of e-government reform despite starting from similar points. To enhance the analytical generalizability of the findings, the study deliberately excluded outlier provinces, such as those with exceptionally high growth rates or unusually distinctive socio-political environments, that might distort cross-

case comparisons. The case selection process was conducted in two stages. First, a cluster analysis was conducted using two key indicators: the e-Government Achievement Rate and per capita income. This enabled the classification of provinces into three broad groups, ensuring variation in the development trajectories while maintaining structural comparability. Second, one representative province was selected from each cluster to reflect regional diversity without compromising the study's logic. The final cases, Hue, Dak Lak, and Ben Tre, were selected based on this design. Hue represents a proactive and innovation-driven approach to digital governance, characterized by early investments and coordinated leadership. Dak Lak, exemplifies an ambivalent trajectory marked by intermittent reform efforts and uneven commitment. Ben Tre, despite sharing a comparable starting point, illustrates a case of policy stagnation. Together, these three provinces allow for a systematic comparison of implementation strategies under shared national policy conditions, shedding light on the institutional factors that shape local governance variation in Vietnam's party-state system.

Data Collection

This study employed two primary methods of data collection: archival analysis and semi-structured interviews with participants. Archival analysis was conducted to develop a comprehensive understanding of Vietnam's national e-government policy framework and trace the evolution of local implementation trajectories in the selected provinces. This method also informed the analytical assessment of policy ambiguity

and political consensus, providing critical background on the institutional context, legislative timelines, and strategic directives that shaped the subnational policy choices.

However, the core empirical material was generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews, which offered detailed insights into how local cadres and institutions navigated the challenges of the e-government implementation. Interviews facilitated a deeper understanding of the motivations, organizational strategies, and contextual constraints shaping ground-level implementation. A total of 27 participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the coverage of key institutional actors involved in e-government design, coordination, and execution. These included representatives from the Provincial People's Committee, Department of Information and Communications, Public Service Centers, and a range of sectoral departments. The sample reflected the multilayered and cross-functional nature of Vietnam's local governance systems.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of the authors' university. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and the participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. To protect the identities of the interviewees, no specific departmental affiliations, provincial locations, or interview dates were disclosed. Interview data were anonymized during transcription and securely stored according to university data protection protocols.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristic

Participant	Description	No.
Senior manager	Director of Provincial People's Committee Office / Director of Department of Information and Communications	6
E-government project manager	Head of ICT Division, Department of Information and Communications	3
Middle manager	Head of Division /Chief of the Department Office	6
Civil servant	Officials conduct public service at the department	3
Frontline workers	Street-level Bureaucrat at Public Service Center	6
E-System administrator	Civil servants in charge of e-government system administration at department and provincial levels	3

Source: Author

Results and Discussion

E-government in Vietnam: Concept and Evolution

The concept of e-government in Vietnam has evolved alongside the country's broader digital transformation agenda, particularly in efforts to modernize public administration through the application of information and communication technologies (ICT). The initial steps toward digitization began in the early 2000s, with the government launching multiple initiatives to integrate ICT into state functions (Prime_Minister, 2001). However, it was not until 2015 that Vietnam formally defined e-government as the application of information technology to digitize internal state processes and provide public services online via digital platforms (Government, 2015). This definition aligns with the global understanding of "e-government 1.0," which emphasizes administrative automation and the online delivery of services (Janowski, 2015).

Vietnam's trajectory of e-government development can be delineated into three distinct phases: preliminary (2001–2010), decentralized implementation (2011–2015), and centralized coordination (2015–2021). The preliminary phase was initiated with Project 112 in 2001 (Prime_Minister, 2001), which aimed to establish a foundational ICT infrastructure across central and local governments. Despite substantial investments in hardware, the project ultimately failed because of its limited focus on physical infrastructure and neglect of institutional reform, human resource development, and software integration (Nguyen, 2010). In response to this failure, in the first implementation phase (2011–2015), Vietnam adopted a decentralized model in which provincial governments were given significant autonomy over e-government development. Responsibilities such as infrastructure building, procurement, inter-agency coordination, system administration, and platform design were largely devolved to local authorities (Prime Minister, 2010). Meanwhile, the central government played a minimal role, setting general targets and timelines without offering standardized technical guidance or implementation support. This fragmentation has led to uneven progress across provinces, characterized by

disjointed systems, inadequate interoperability and limited scalability. The absence of a unified national framework has contributed to policy ambiguity and resource inefficiency. Recognizing the limitations of decentralization, the second phase (2015–2021) marked a pivotal shift toward centralized planning and oversight. Under the strategic guidance of the Central Party Politburo (Politburo, 2014) and codified in subsequent government directives (Government, 2015), e-government has been elevated to a national policy priority. This period saw the introduction of clearer targets for digital service delivery and the launch of the E-Government Architecture Framework 1.0 (MIC, 2015), which offered detailed technical and institutional guidance for both central and local implementations. A key institutional reform was the establishment of the National Committee on E-Government in 2018, chaired by the Prime Minister and replicated at the provincial level to ensure vertical coordination (Prime_Minister, 2018). By 2021, most provincial governments had met the foundational criteria for e-government 1.0, as outlined by the central authorities.

Overall, the evolution of e-government in Vietnam reflects a trajectory of increasing institutional clarity and policy refinement. The early 2000s were marked by ambitious but under-planned investments in ICT infrastructure. The subsequent period, from 2010 to 2015, focused on institutional experimentation but was characterized by policy ambiguities and fragmented implementations. The final phase brought coherence through centralized leadership, a clearer policy design, and the formalization of implementation mechanisms. The issuance of the E-Government Architecture Framework 1.0 marked a turning point by reducing ambiguity in both objectives and means, setting the stage for a more structured and effective digital transformation in Vietnam's public sector.

Case analysis

While national regulations, resolutions, and development strategies for e-government provide a coherent and unified policy framework, their successful translation into practice depends not only on the quality of central policy design but also on the commitment, capacity, and strategic orientation of the

local governments. In Vietnam, localities vary widely in their approach to centrally mandated reforms. Implementation strategies range from proactive and innovative engagement to passive, compliance-based approaches, with many provinces adopting moderate or hybrid positions along this spectrum.

Ben Tre: Reactive Policy Implementation

Ben Tre, a middle-income province located in the Mekong Delta, exemplifies a reactive and stagnative approach to e-government implementation. Despite its socioeconomic potential and average development indicators, Ben Tre has consistently ranked low on national e-government and digital transformation indices. The province's strategy is characterized by delayed adoption, minimal adaptation, and limited institutional initiatives. Ben Tre did not begin implementing key central directives, such as national digital transformation resolutions, until 2017, well after their issuance, and only formally introduced its provincial digital transformation plan following broader national momentum (BenTre, 2017). Field interviews with provincial officials revealed that prior to 2018, e-government was not perceived as a strategic priority by local leadership. One mid-level official involved in digital governance recalled the following:

“The disparity in e-government progress in Ben Tre between the pre-and post-2018 periods comes from the change in awareness of local leaders, especially the Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee and the Provincial Party Secretary. Before 2018, e-government was not prioritized or allocated sufficient resources for local development.” (Interviewee B14)

This lack of political prioritization has far-reaching consequences. While the province benefited from latecomer advantages, such as learning from earlier adopters and accessing more mature, lower-risk technological solutions, its passive approach also exposed fundamental weaknesses in leadership commitment, institutional coordination, and technical capacity. Responsibility for e-government was often seen as limited to the Department of Information and Communications (DIC) rather than being shared

across government agencies. As one interviewee noted:

“Most local agency leaders and middle-level managers in sectoral departments believe that e-government development is not their task, but the responsibility of the Department of Information and Communications.” (Interviewee B11)

This narrow institutional framing contributed to the fragmented implementation and weak ownership among sectoral departments. Compounding these issues was a shortage of qualified IT personnel within provincial agencies, leading to a heavy reliance on outsourcing technological services to external providers. Consequently, critical functions such as system integration, data management, and platform maintenance often depended on third-party vendors, limiting the province's autonomy and long-term digital capacity. Although recent years have seen incremental improvements—notably with the formation of a Digital Transformation Steering Committee in 2021 (BenTre, 2021) and initial steps toward system interoperability—Ben Tre continues to face significant challenges

Hue: Pioneer - Comprehensive Autonomy Model

Hue Province is one of Vietnam's most advanced localities in e-government development, having pursued a proactive and autonomous implementation strategy. Its policy trajectory can be divided into three progressive phases: early experimentation (2007–2010), foundational system building (2011–2015), and institutional consolidation (2016 onward). This evolution reflects deliberate strategic choices made by provincial leaders, underpinned by their political commitment, technical capacity, and institutional foresight.

A defining feature of Hue's approach was the early adoption of a centralized e-government model, which sharply contrasted with the more common decentralized and outsourced approaches in other provinces. The establishment of the Administrative Informatics Center in 2005 marked a pivotal moment, enabling the province to develop and manage its

software and digital infrastructure. This decision also allowed for the effective utilization of central government resources, particularly those allocated under Project 112 (Prime Minister, 2001). As one provincial official reflected:

“The vision of local cadres in the early stages of building e-government is an important factor in Hue’s success today. From the outset of Project 112, provincial leaders chose a centralized e-government model, optimizing the hardware system funded by the central budget under Project 112.” (Interviewee A21).

Rather than depending on external vendors, Hue prioritized technological self-sufficiency by ensuring system compatibility and responsiveness to local conditions. This long-term investment in internal capacity reduces the need for costly system overhauls and enables continuous, context-specific innovation. One official who had overseen data systems since 2006 highlighted the following:

“Hue has advocated the self-development of software using existing hardware, enabling the province to achieve e-government goals cheaply. This approach also ensures that software meets the actual needs of local agencies, reducing communication gaps between users (civil servants) and service providers.” (Interviewee B22)

This technological autonomy was reinforced by a strong political consensus among Hue’s leadership. Early policy support included the issuance of provincial regulations in 2011 (Hue, 2010) and the formation of dedicated steering committees at critical junctures. These began with the IT Steering Committee (Hue, 2012), followed by the E-Government Steering Committee (Hue, 2018), and most recently, the Digital Transformation Steering Committee (Hue, 2024). Implementation was further enhanced by performance-based mandates and real-time user feedback mechanisms that encouraged responsiveness and continuous improvement. By 2016, Hue had fulfilled the central government’s foundational requirements for e-government 1.0, positioning itself as a national model of locally driven digital governance within the Party-State framework. Hue’s experience illustrates how early strategic vision, internal capacity building, and political cohesion can combine to produce a sustainable and scalable model of digital transformation.

Dak Lak: A Hybrid Model

Dak Lak Province presents a case of hybrid e-government implementation, characterized by a transition from early decentralized experimentation to a more centralized and coordinated governance model. During 2012–2015, the province pursued a

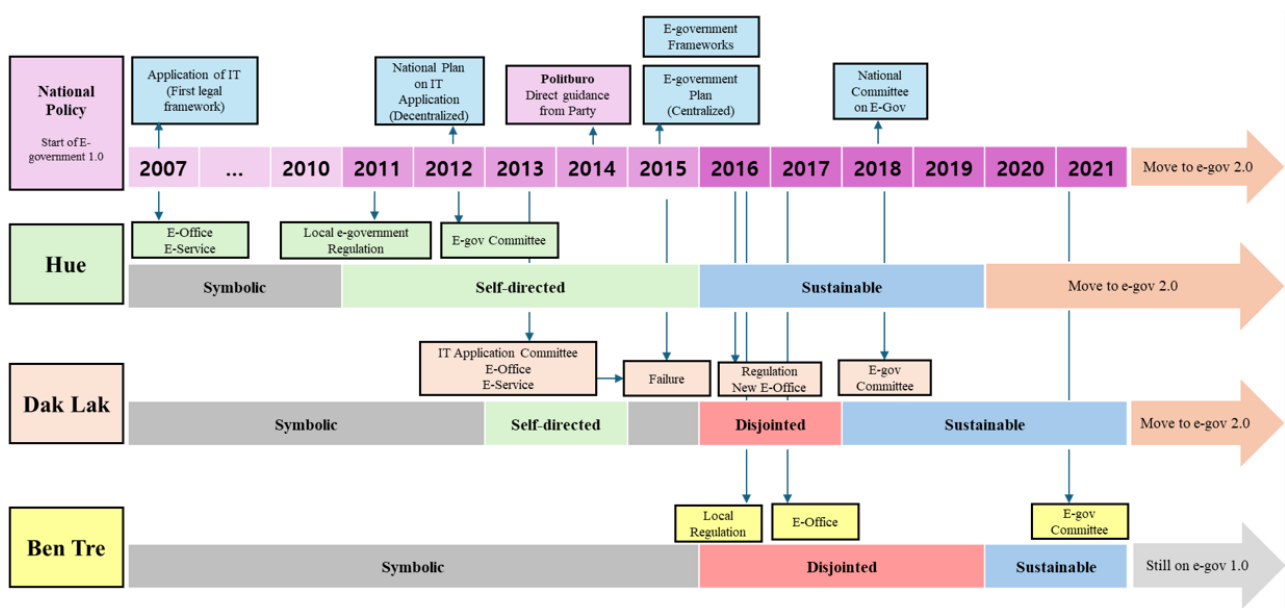


Figure 1. Summary of E-government development in three cases
Source: Author

decentralized approach in the absence of a standardized national framework. This early phase was largely shaped by external technical support, particularly through the Danish-funded GOPA program, which enabled pilot initiatives such as VNPT's Electronic Operation and Management System (OMS) (DakLak, 2014). As one official explained:

“The absence of a standardized national model prompted Dak Lak to adopt a policy experimentation approach. This involved the local selection of software platforms, implementation methods, and allocating responsibilities to local agencies.” (Interviewee B4)

While this approach fostered local discretion and innovation, it also led to fragmentation, capacity constraints, and poor interdepartmental coordination. These challenges undermined early initiatives and contributed to the breakdown of political consensus on digital governance priorities. A notable strategic pivot occurred after 2015, following the issuance of clearer national guidelines and the central government's promotion of a unified E-government architecture. In response to these developments, Dak Lak centralized its e-government responsibilities under the Department of Information and Communications (DIC). This institutional shift was described by one participant as follows:

“After 2016, e-government development tasks were centralized under the Department of Information and Communications, replacing the previous decentralized approach where responsibilities were distributed among various departments.” (Interviewee B8)

The new centralized model consolidated the oversight authority and formalized the technical management processes. While software development was largely outsourced to external providers, the province retained control over its data center infrastructure to ensure cybersecurity and data sovereignty. In parallel with these administrative reforms, political commitment to e-government was gradually re-established. Key institutional milestones included the establishment of the Steering Committee for E-Government Development in 2018 (DakLak, 2018), followed by its elevation to the Digital Transformation

Steering Committee in 2021 (Dak Lak, 2021). That same year, a resolution issued by the Provincial Party Committee formally declared digital transformation a strategic provincial priority—an important signal of high-level support and long-term institutionalization. Dak Lak's experience reflects the adaptive nature of subnational implementation in Vietnam's Party-State system. Its shift from a fragmented, decentralized model to a more integrated and centrally coordinated system demonstrates both the challenges and possibilities of reform under conditions of institutional ambiguity and uneven capacity in the health system.

Cross-Case Analysis: Commonalities and Differences

Despite their geographic, economic, and administrative differences, Hue, Dak Lak, and Ben Tre share several critical commonalities in their experiences with e-government implementation, reflecting the broader institutional dynamics inherent in Vietnam's party-state system. First, all three provinces began developing e-government initiatives in the early 2010s under conditions of significant policy and technological ambiguity. At this early stage, there was an absence of clear implementation pathways, standardized platforms, and technical guidelines. As a result, local authorities largely engaged in symbolic compliance with central directives, lacking the strategic guidance or institutional incentives necessary for substantive transformation. Political engagement remains limited, and early outcomes are minimal. This implementation gap between formal policy adoption and actual administrative reform was a defining feature across all three cases. Importantly, these early challenges were later addressed through the central government's introduction of the National E-Government Architecture Framework and related action plans after 2015. The previous challenges were resolved in all three provinces, as these reforms provided much-needed technical clarity and a standardized set of objectives. This development significantly reduced the burden on local governments to design their own models, enabling better alignment between provincial initiatives and national expectations of the program. Second, the emergence of a political consensus among provincial leaders served

as a consistent turning point in each case. Although consensus was achieved at different moments—Hue in 2011, Dak Lak in stages between 2013 and 2016, and Ben Tre as late as 2017—it reliably marked a transition from symbolic adoption to strategic prioritization of the program. Once established, the consensus facilitated resource mobilization, strengthened interdepartmental coordination, and elevated e-government to a leadership-level priority, thereby accelerating implementation efforts. Finally, all three provinces faced structural constraints that hampered their implementation. Common barriers included limited financial autonomy, underfunded Departments of Information and Communications (DICs), shortages of qualified ICT personnel, and fragmented administrative mandates. These constraints were compounded by early stage policy ambiguity and a lack of coordination mechanisms, revealing persistent systemic challenges in Vietnam’s subnational digital governance system.

While these commonalities highlight shared institutional pressures, the differences across the three cases underscore the central role of local political dynamics, leadership alignment, and strategic adaptation in shaping divergent outcomes under a uniform national policy, as summarized in Figure 1. The most critical differentiator was the timing and coherence of the political consensus. Hue achieved early alignment between its Provincial Party Secretary and Chairman of the People’s Committee in 2011. This allowed the province to adopt a centralized model that emphasizes strategic coordination, internal capacity building, and technological autonomy. Consequently, Hue emerged as a national frontrunner in digital governance. In contrast, Dak Lak’s leadership remained fragmented during much of the initial implementation phase. Although some momentum emerged in 2013, it was undermined by failed pilot programs, incompatible systems and weak departmental alignment. Only after 2018, with the re-establishment of political consensus and the creation of a Digital Transformation Steering Committee, did the province begin to consolidate its efforts. Ben Tre represents the most delayed case: political consensus was not reached until 2021, when the Provincial Party Secretary initiated a broader vision for digital

transformation, engaging Party institutions and formalizing cross-sectoral coordination.

Beyond leadership alignment, the provinces varied in their responses to ambiguous national directives. Hue proactively institutionalized a centralized e-government model, which enabled effective interagency coordination and minimized redundancies. In contrast, Dak Lak’s initial decentralized strategy resulted in fragmented systems and inconsistent departmental responses to the pandemic. Ben Tre, adopting a more passive stance, delayed implementation altogether, reacting only once national momentum and political pressure intensified. These strategic differences directly affected resource mobilization and institutional resilience. Hue’s early political support facilitated sustained investment in digital infrastructure, internal software development, and personnel training. This investment builds long-term adaptability and institutional learning. In comparison, both Dak Lak and Ben Tre struggled with limited early stage capacity and over-reliance on outsourced technical solutions, restricting their ability to respond flexibly to evolving digital governance demands. In summary, while all three provinces operated under a unified national framework, their implementation strategies reflected localized interpretations of policy ambiguity and varied levels of political cohesion. These findings reaffirm that even within highly centralized systems, subnational political dynamics and leadership alignment are decisive in shaping policy outcomes, particularly in complex, technology-driven domains such as the e-government.

Implementation Strategy Typology: Ambiguity – Consensus Matrix

The case study analysis findings indicate that local governments’ e-government implementation strategies are shaped primarily by two interrelated variables: policy ambiguity and political consensus. Policy ambiguity refers to the clarity (or lack thereof) of a policy’s objectives, instruments, and expected outcomes, whereas political consensus captures the degree of alignment and shared commitment among local cadres—particularly between the Provincial Party Secretary and the Chairman of the People’s Committee—during the implementation process. The

interaction of these two factors significantly influences how local actors interpret central directives, coordinate across departments and respond to national steering mechanisms.

To conceptualize this relationship, the ambiguity–Consensus Matrix (Figure 2) categorizes implementation strategies into four distinct types, each situated within a quadrant formed by the intersection of high versus low policy ambiguity and high versus low political consensus. This typology provides a concise yet flexible framework for analyzing variations in implementation dynamics under Vietnam’s party-state system. Each strategy type corresponds to a specific combination of the two dimensions and reflects different preferences for steering instruments, coordination mechanisms, and implementation tactics. These include the roles of key local cadres, policy transmission through the administrative hierarchy, and the degree of discretion afforded to implementing agencies.

Importantly, these implementation strategy types are dynamic. Although the matrix presents them as discrete categories for analytical clarity, both policy ambiguity and political consensus are continuous variables subject to change over time.

Shifts in leadership, political priorities, or institutional capacity may lead to the evolution of a province’s implementation strategy from symbolic compliance to more sustainable forms. Consequently, the matrix can also be interpreted as capturing the stages of implementation maturity, with symbolic approaches often serving as entry points before evolving into more coordinated and innovative practices. Table 2 provides a comparative summary of the four strategy types, outlining the defining features of each quadrant in terms of policy interpretation, actor alignment, and institutional responses. Together with Figure 2, this typology offers a theoretically grounded and empirically informed tool for analyzing subnational policy implementation under single-party regimes.

Symbolic Implementation: High Policy Ambiguity and Low Political Consensus

Symbolic implementation occurs when policy ambiguity is high and political consensus is weak, creating institutional conditions under which meaningful execution becomes unlikely. This pattern is frequently observed in the early stages of policy implementation, when goals are vaguely defined, expected outcomes remain uncertain, and local leadership lacks

Table 2. Summarization of four implementation strategies

Strategy	Symbolic	Self-Directed	Disjointed	Sustainable
Matrix	Low consensus High Ambiguity	High consensus High Ambiguity	Low consensus Low Ambiguity	High consensus Low ambiguity
Key characteristics	Superficial compliance, minimal policy impact, lack of commitment	Experimentation, policy innovation, flexibility, local autonomy	Fragmented implementation, inconsistency, lack of coordination	Standardization, top-down enforcement, efficiency, uniform policy execution
Interaction	Lack of steering from the Party bodies	Flexible steering in the ‘shadow of hierarchy’	Self-steering in administrative bodies	Firm steering in the ‘shadow of hierarchy’
Authority relation	Non-hierarchical (No guidance)	Semi-hierarchical (Barrier-breaking)	Administrative guidance	Hierarchical (vertical domination)
Decision-making	Discursive	Innovative	Regulative	Coercive
Preferred Steering instruments (of Local cadres)	Mobilization via campaigns	Policy Experiment Signal Politics	Decentralization Delegation Performance evaluation	Command & Control Cadre evaluation Resolution
Steering tactics (of implementers)	Shirking Policy bunding	Proacting Counter-steering	Self-implementing	Coping Supporting

Source: Author

clear direction. In such settings, local cadres adopt a risk-averse posture, hesitant to invest political capital or institutional effort in the absence of strategic clarity and direction. Without alignment among key leaders or a shared sense of urgency, policies are deprioritized, leading to implementation delays, reactive decision-making and weak administrative momentum.

In these circumstances, coordination between the two key provincial actors—the Party Secretary and the Chairman of the People’s Committee—is often limited. While Party leaders lack the political incentive to advance policies with uncertain outcomes, administrative leaders tend to delay action amid ambiguity surrounding both technological requirements and administrative procedures. As a result, hierarchical authority is inconsistently exercised or absent altogether, leaving lower-level officials with broad discretion and minimal oversight to act. Rather than mobilizing resources or initiating substantive reforms, local authorities often engage in compliance. Implementation becomes procedural and ceremonial, characterized by discursive adherence and superficial activities rather than meaningful changes. High ambiguity allows for wide interpretation, offering flexibility but ultimately fostering inaction because of the absence of operational guidance. Simultaneously, low political consensus—particularly between the Party Secretary and the Chairman—erodes the policy’s institutional traction. Without coordinated leadership or unified strategic priorities, implementation becomes fragmented, symbolic and institutionally hollow.

This implementation pattern was notably evident during Vietnam’s initial phase of e-government development (2001–2010). During this period, the e-government policy lacked a coherent strategic framework, the digital infrastructure remained underdeveloped, and the responsibilities for implementation were not clearly defined. As a result, political commitment among local leadership was weak, and consensus on digital transformation goals was slow to emerge. In provinces such as Dak Lak (prior to 2012) and Ben Tre (prior to 2016), these conditions were particularly evident. Local cadres and Party institutions demonstrated minimal engagement, policy directives were treated as administrative formalities,

and substantive investments in digital capacity were absent. In these cases, symbolic implementation prevailed: policies were acknowledged publicly but not integrated into local development strategies or institutionalized through resource commitments.

Disjointed Implementation: Low Policy Ambiguity and Low Political Consensus

Disjointed implementation occurs in contexts where policy objectives are clearly articulated and operational tools are in place, but political alignment among local leadership is lacking. In such settings, administrative institutions—rather than Party organs—take the lead in implementing policy, often in the absence of a coordinated strategic direction from political authorities. When policy ambiguity is low, goals, procedures, and technological frameworks are well-defined, leaving little room for divergent interpretations. Thus, administrative actors are equipped with the information and tools necessary to implement the policy. However, without strong political backing or cohesive leadership from the party apparatus, implementation has become largely decentralized. Chairs of the Provincial People’s Committees and their bureaucracies rely on mechanisms such as internal delegation, performance metrics, and localized decision-making to navigate the implementation process. Consequently, the strategies employed tend to be adaptive and self-directed rather than strictly aligned with top-down directives.

This lack of political coordination often leads to fragmented interpretations of a policy’s intent across different sectors or agencies. Therefore, the degree of implementation success varies depending on the specific capacities and motivations of individual administrative units. Some departments may adapt the policy effectively, while others may falter due to limited resources, institutional inertia, or competing understandings of implementation priorities. Such a pattern is most commonly observed in the mature phase of policy development, when the technical aspects of implementation are relatively stable, but political engagement has waned. A case in point is Ben Tre during the 2015–2019 period. By this time, Vietnam’s national e-government policy had achieved a high degree of clarity and relevant technical standards

had been codified. However, political commitment from local party institutions remains insufficient. Consequently, the province's implementation was largely driven by administrative bodies operating in silos, resulting in inconsistencies between departments and districts.

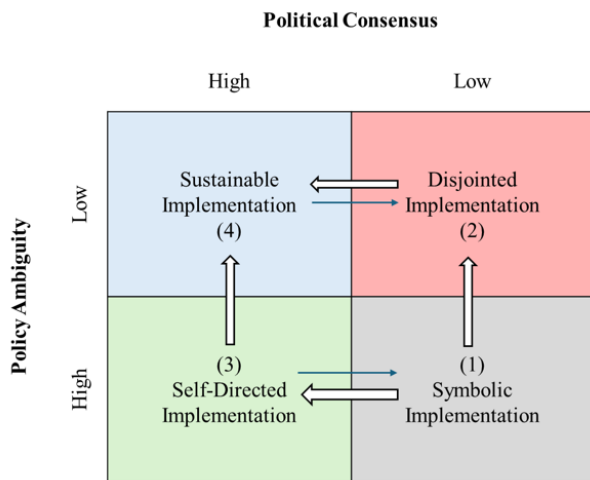


Figure 2. The Ambiguity - Consensus Matrix
Source: Author

Self-directed Implementation: High Policy Ambiguity and High Political Consensus

Self-directed implementation arises when a high degree of policy ambiguity coincides with strong political consensus among local leaders. Under these conditions, local governments are empowered to address unclear policy goals and methods through institutional experimentation, backed by the political will necessary to support trial and error. Although the absence of detailed central guidelines presents practical challenges, consensus among key political and administrative actors enables local cadres to prioritize the development of e-government and pursue adaptive strategies tailored to their contexts.

In this environment, experimentation is a core implementation mechanism. Politically committed provincial leaders initiate pilot programs and innovative practices designed to meet the evolving demands of digital governance in China. Unlike systems driven by market competition, Vietnam's party-state governance enables localized innovation through discretionary authority and tacit support from central agencies. These experimental efforts serve two functions: they address concrete governance issues and signal political competence. By embracing

uncertainty and proposing solutions, local leaders can demonstrate both administrative initiative and political acumen, which are crucial for career advancement within the party hierarchy. This implementation model is characterized by semi-hierarchical relations, wherein formal oversight coexists with significant local discretion. Cadres often extend beyond existing regulatory frameworks, encouraged by implicit central tolerance in exchange for innovative results. While this flexibility fosters institutional creativity and proactive governance, it also poses considerable risks. The pressure to produce visible results under ambiguous conditions may incentivize expedient decisions, reinforcing an iterative process of testing and adjustment often referred to in Vietnamese policymaking as 'crossing the river by feeling the stones.'

Hue Province's experience from 2011 to 2015 illustrates a successful case of self-directed implementation of the program. In the context of substantial ambiguity, the strong alignment between the Provincial Party Secretary and the Chairman of the People's Committee enabled strategic experimentation with digital platforms. These initiatives gradually reduced uncertainty, improved cross-departmental integration, and enhanced the institutional capacity. In contrast, Dak Lak's early efforts between 2013 and 2014, although politically supported, faced persistent institutional fragmentation and technological incompatibility. The resulting lack of sustainable models limited the province's ability to resolve ambiguity, necessitating a shift toward more directive and centrally coordinated strategies after 2016. This contrast underscores a central insight: while strong political consensus is a prerequisite for successful self-directed implementation, it is not sufficient alone. The effectiveness of this strategy ultimately hinges on local institutional capacity, leadership vision, and the ability to translate experimentation into institutionalized reforms.

Sustainable Implementation: Low Policy Ambiguity and High Political Consensus

Sustainable implementation characterizes the most mature phase of policy execution and emerges when policy objectives are clearly defined

and political consensus is firmly established. In this context, policy directives are no longer contested or ambiguous, and the unified commitment of key political and administrative actors facilitates their uniform implementation across local institutions. This combination of clarity and alignment enables a high degree of institutional coherence, reducing uncertainty and ensuring that policies are both feasible and enforceable.

This implementation mode is defined by standardized and coordinated action, underpinned by directive leadership from both the Party and administrative cadres. With ambiguity minimized, local agencies follow consistent procedures, and the scope for discretionary interpretation is significantly reduced. Political consensus ensures that the party-state apparatus operates in a coordinated manner, enabling close supervision and reducing policy fragmentation. The steering capacity of local leaders is instrumental in maintaining fidelity to central objectives and enforcing compliance across subordinate units. Operationally, sustainable implementation resembles a bureaucratic production line. Each institution performs designated tasks based on well-specified guidelines, resulting in a streamlined process in which emphasis is placed on procedural execution rather than strategic experimentation. The reduced need for policy interpretation allows agencies to focus on the delivery. Prior experience and institutional learning further enhance coordination, as past lessons and best practices inform the efficient allocation of roles and responsibilities of the team members. Technological uncertainty is also significantly diminished in this phase, as standardized digital platforms facilitate policy replication and promote interoperability across administrative units.

Robust oversight mechanisms are central to this type of implementation. The dual presence of low ambiguity and strong political alignment empowers local cadres to closely monitor progress and employ corrective actions when necessary. Compliance is often reinforced through coercive instruments or performance-based evaluations, particularly for initiatives with high political significance. This model is especially appealing to party-state leaders seeking rapid, measurable outcomes, as it favors predictability,

administrative discipline, and efficient execution over local innovation or adaptation.

Hue Province's experience between 2016 and 2019 provides a compelling example of sustainable project implementation. Having previously relied on self-directed experimentation (2011–2015), Hue capitalized on subsequent improvements in the national e-government policy, which offered clearer frameworks and guidance. With continued political consensus and reduced ambiguity, the province institutionalized its digital governance practices. E-government systems and platforms were fully integrated into routine administrative functions, and departments adhered to codified procedures to enable uniform service delivery. This transition signaled Hue's consolidation of e-government as a standardized institutional practice, marking the successful culmination of its implementation.

Implementation Strategy Transitions and Their Characteristics

Policy implementation strategies are inherently dynamic, evolving over time as both the policy environment and local governance context change. Typically, this evolution begins with symbolic implementation and, under conducive conditions, progresses toward sustainable implementation. The transition often proceeds through one of two intermediary stages: self-directed or disjointed.

Symbolic implementation is often the initial response to new policy initiatives, particularly in contexts characterized by high policy ambiguity and weak political consensus. In such scenarios, local cadres tend to adopt a cautious stance and engage in minimal or performative compliance. However, as policy design improves—clarifying objectives and reducing ambiguity in both goals and instruments—symbolic implementation tends to give way to more proactive approaches. This maturation process also enhances political understanding and support, gradually fostering a stronger consensus among local leadership. When both policy clarity and political alignment converge, sustainable implementation becomes feasible and preferable, facilitating more effective and standardized policy execution.

Importantly, these transitions are not always linear or unidirectional in nature. While policy ambiguity generally diminishes over time, driven by iterative policy design, improved technological infrastructure, and more precise institutional mandates, such clarity, once achieved, is rarely reversed. Consequently, the typical direction of transition follows a mostly forward trajectory, moving from symbolic to disjointed or from self-directed to sustainable implementation, reflecting the stages of policy institutionalization. In contrast, political consensus is volatile and susceptible to disruption. Shifts in local leadership, emergent political priorities, or external shocks can alter consensus levels, potentially prompting reversals or shifts in the implementation strategy.

Moreover, transitions tend to unfold incrementally, rather than abruptly. As both policy ambiguity and political consensus evolve, they reshape the administrative landscape, altering inter-agency coordination, resource allocation, and the behavior of implementing actors. These factors interact over time, producing a gradual path-dependent process of implementation change rather than sudden discrete transformations. Direct transitions between non-adjacent types, such as from symbolic to sustainable implementation, are uncommon and typically unviable without intermediate phases. Intermediary strategies, whether self-directed or disjointed, serve critical functions by bridging capability gaps, aligning institutional structures, and cultivating the political and technical foundations necessary for enduring reforms. These stages enable local governments to build implementation capacity and institutional coherence incrementally, ultimately supporting more effective and sustainable outcomes in the development of e-government.

Conclusion

This study explores how e-government policies are implemented at the subnational level within Vietnam's party-state system, highlighting the decisive role of local political dynamics. Through comparative analysis of Hue, Dak Lak, and Ben Tre, the research reveals that political consensus among key local cadres—particularly between the

Provincial Party Secretary and the Chairman of the People's Committee is not a precondition but rather a consequence of iterative interaction, negotiation, and shared commitment over time. These cadre interactions shape how policy signals are interpreted, institutional priorities are formed, and implementation strategies are selected and adjusted. This political consensus, together with policy ambiguity, ultimately determines whether policy implementation remains symbolic or transitions toward sustainable implementation.

This study offers both empirical and theoretical contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates that in party-state governance, despite uniform national directives, local political dynamics—particularly alignment among key cadres—play a decisive role in shaping how policies are executed at the ground level. The findings show that political consensus among provincial leaders serves as a catalyst for proactive implementation, whereas weak consensus results in fragmented, reactive, or symbolic approaches. Theoretically, this study introduces the ambiguity–Consensus Matrix as a novel framework for analyzing policy implementation in hierarchical party-state regimes. By classifying implementation strategies across levels of policy ambiguity and political consensus, the matrix provides a structured lens for interpreting dynamic transitions between symbolic, disjointed, self-directed, and sustainable forms of policy implementation. This framework not only captures the institutional variation observed across Vietnam's provinces but also offers broader applicability to other authoritarian or hybrid regimes in which central mandates interact with decentralized discretion.

Ultimately, the study underscores that e-government development in Vietnam—and similar contexts—cannot be fully understood without reference to political relationships at the local level. The experiences of Hue, Dak Lak, and Ben Tre demonstrate that while a strong consensus can enable innovation and drive success, it must be accompanied by clear policy guidance and effective local capacity to translate consensus into consistent, high-quality outcomes. It also highlights the pivotal role of local cadres not as passive policy recipients but as active agents who mediate, reinterpret, and reshape national policies in response to local contexts.

Future research could deepen and extend these insights by applying the ambiguity–consensus framework to other policy domains, such as environmental regulation, public health, or education, where policy ambiguity and political alignment also shape implementation dynamics. Further exploration of how shifts in party leadership, ongoing institutional reforms, or external shocks—such as economic crises or international commitments—reconfigure local implementation strategies over time would offer valuable contributions to the literature. Moreover, comparative studies across different single-party or dominant-party regimes could assess the framework’s broader applicability, enhancing our theoretical and empirical understanding of policy implementation in authoritarian and hybrid governance systems. Ultimately, unpacking the micro-politics of local-level implementation is essential for designing policies that bridge the persistent gap between national ambitions and local realities.

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