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Institutional Legacies and Governance Models: A Comparative Study of Broadband State Aid in Europe

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how historical legacies and institutional configurations impact the governance models used in implementing State aid policies for broadband in France, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The analysis is based on historical institutionalism, focusing on path dependence, critical junctures, and gradual institutional change. A comparative historical approach shows different governance models evolving due to administrative traditions and political factors. France and the United Kingdom have evolved toward decentralized models, which capitalize on institutional flexibility and strategic reforms. Conversely, Portugal and Spain face limitations from centralized structures and institutional inertia. This study elucidates the relationship between institutional structures and policy outcomes, providing policymakers with insights for addressing digital access disparities. These findings contribute to the public administration literature, emphasizing the role of timing, sequencing, and coordination in the design of effective governance frameworks and preparing for emerging challenges (such as 5G deployment) where State aid will be needed.

Related Articles:

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RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo los legados históricos y las configuraciones institucionales impactan en los modelos de gobernanza utilizados en la implementación de políticas de ayudas estatales a la banda ancha en Francia, Portugal, España y el Reino Unido.

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El análisis se basa en el institucionalismo histórico, centrándose en la dependencia de la trayectoria, las coyunturas críticas y el cambio institucional gradual. Un enfoque histórico comparativo muestra la evolución de diferentes modelos de gobernanza debido a las tradiciones administrativas y factores políticos. Francia y el Reino Unido han evolucionado hacia modelos descentralizados que aprovechan la flexibilidad institucional y las reformas estratégicas. Por el contrario, Portugal y España se enfrentan a limitaciones derivadas de las estructuras centralizadas y la inercia institucional. Este estudio dilucida la relación entre las estructuras institucionales y los resultados de las políticas, proporcionando a los responsables políticos perspectivas para abordar las disparidades en el acceso digital. Estos hallazgos contribuyen a la literatura sobre administración pública, enfatizando el papel de la sincronización, la secuenciación y la coordinación en el diseño de marcos de gobernanza eficaces y la preparación para los desafíos emergentes (como el despliegue del 5G) que requerirán ayudas estatales.

摘要

本文探讨了历史遗产和制度配置如何影响法国、葡萄牙、西班牙和英国在实施宽带国家援助政策时所使用的治理模式。分析基于历史制度主义，重点关注路径依赖、关键节点和渐进式制度变迁。比较历史研究方法表明，不同的治理模式会因行政传统和政治因素而演变。法国和英国已发展成为分散式模式，这种模式充分利用了制度灵活性和战略性改革。相反，葡萄牙和西班牙则面临着集中式结构和制度惯性的限制。本研究阐明了制度结构与政策结果之间的关系，为政策制定者提供了解决数字接入差距的洞见。这些研究结果丰富了公共行政文献，强调了时机、顺序和协调在设计有效治理框架中的作用，并为应对需要国家援助的新挑战(例如 5G 部署)做好准备。

1 | Introduction

In an era where digital connectivity is fundamental to economic and social inclusion, significant disparities in broadband infrastructure persist across Europe, particularly in rural and underserved regions. Tackling these disparities stands at the core of the European Union's (EU) Digital Decade strategy, which seeks to ensure universal access to high-speed connectivity (European Commission 2021). To bridge these connectivity gaps, the European Commission has encouraged the use of State aid to facilitate the development of broadband networks and has been providing funding for this purpose to Member States through various financial support instruments since 2007 (Bourreau et al. 2020). Consequently, specific State aid programs, using EU funds or national budgets, have been pursued by national governments. These State aid programs or policies have become essential tools, targeting areas where market-driven investments are insufficient, with Member State governments investing collectively billions of euros in broadband projects (Bourreau et al. 2020). Broadband is also a fundamental component of the European Union's Recovery and Resilience Facility, designed to respond to the pandemic's effects while reinforcing territorial cohesion (Neto et al. 2023).

The design of State policies for broadband deployment is not merely a technical issue but a governance challenge. Different governance models—the structures and mechanisms through which State aid is managed and implemented, typically through centralized or decentralized models—have been adopted by each EU Member State, reflecting the historical legacies, administrative traditions, and political dynamics unique to each country. Centralized governance approaches emphasize national oversight, uniformity, and economies of scale, enabling strategic coordination at the national level. In contrast, decentralized models empower regional and local authorities to tailor policies to local contexts, fostering community engagement and potentially enhancing equity. While extensive research has explored the economic and technical dimensions of State aid policies for broadband deployment in general (e.g., Bourreau et al. 2023; Briglauer and Grajek 2023; Gerli et al. 2023), there is a dearth of knowledge regarding the

institutional dynamics that led to the different governance models in different Member States (Manica et al. 2024).

This study addresses this gap by examining the emergence of the governance models of broadband State aid in four European countries. France and the United Kingdom (UK) have evolved toward decentralized implementation models, whereas Portugal and Spain have retained centralized models. By focusing on these contrasting cases, the study aims to uncover how historical legacies and institutional configurations influence the ways public authorities design and implement State aid for broadband deployment. The central research question guiding this study is: How have historical legacies and institutional configurations shaped the governance models of broadband State aid in these countries?

To answer this question, the study employs historical institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996) as its analytical lens. By exploring the temporal dimensions of institutional development, focusing on mechanisms such as path dependence, critical junctures, and gradual change, the research sheds light on why France and the UK have adopted more adaptive, decentralized governance frameworks, while Spain and Portugal remain constrained by centralized models. Understanding these institutional trajectories is critical not only for scholars of public policy and administration but also for policymakers, who need to grasp how existing governance structures might resist or facilitate new approaches to funding high-tech infrastructure deployment.

Although many State aid measures for broadband deployment have already been notified to the European Commission, this study remains relevant for the following main reasons. First, EU Member States still need to invest heavily in broadband to achieve the goal of universal coverage by 2030. Second, State aid is already being extended to other networks and technologies, including 5G, meaning the design of these State aid policies—including the governance model—will remain on the political agenda in the coming years. The lessons from broadband may thus inform future policy domains like 5G. Third, the findings of this study can be used in other countries outside the European

Union, where the level of broadband network development is lower.

The present study contributes to the public administration literature in three ways. First, it advances the understanding of governance models in broadband State aid by explicitly linking institutional legacies to current policy designs. Unlike prior studies that focus on economic or technical aspects, this study emphasizes the institutional dimensions, shedding light on the governance mechanisms that mediate State aid implementation. Second, it demonstrates the critical role of timing and sequencing in institutional reform, offering insights into how governance models evolve in response to changing policy demands. Third, the study provides recommendations for policymakers, addressing challenges related to multilevel coordination, regional disparities, and administrative capacity.

By combining a specific theoretical perspective with original empirical evidence, this study not only deepens the understanding of broadband governance but also offers practical lessons for designing effective governance frameworks in other policy domains. The findings have broader implications for public administration, particularly in addressing the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary policy challenges.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical foundation of the study, drawing on historical institutionalism. The methodology section then describes the research strategy and case selection. This is followed by the empirical findings (comparative case analyses of the four countries). The final sections discuss the findings in a broader context and conclude with implications for policy and theory.

2 | Theoretical Foundations of State Aid Governance: Historical Institutionalism in Focus

2.1 | Reasons for Adopting the Historical Institutionalism Framework

Governance structures influence public policy outcomes, particularly in complex and multilevel policy areas such as broadband State aid, as Gerli et al. (2023) found. These scholars noted that a shared governance model can improve aid effectiveness, but obstacles such as political factors and legal powers assigned to subnational authorities can complicate decentralization. Their work was based on current multilevel governance structures to implement State aid for broadband deployment. However, multilevel governance approaches are static, overlooking the dynamics of the temporal and historical dimensions that shape these governance structures. Our study complements the work of Gerli et al. (2023) by examining how the current governance models of broadband State aid were shaped by historical legacies and institutional configurations.

The present study draws on the original dataset built by Manica et al. (2024), who categorized all State aid measures for broadband deployment used by EU Member States as either centralized or decentralized. Their work suggests factors that may influence the adoption of a governance model, including state structures, constitutional powers, involvement of the telecommunications

sector, policy diffusion, and regional development. They argue that historical legacies and institutional configurations influence State aid governance models, emphasizing the importance of historical institutionalism in understanding these decisions.

Our study aligns with these insights by conducting a systematic analysis of the historical factors that have guided different nations in adopting their respective governance models for the implementation of broadband State aid.

Historical institutionalism offers an analytical framework for examining the impact of institutional contexts and historical legacies on policy dynamics (Schmidt 2006, 98). This framework provides a dynamic perspective on institutional structures and policy evolution through the use of key concepts, including path dependence and critical junctures. It is particularly relevant in analyzing governance models, as it integrates temporal dimensions into the study of policy and institutional change.

2.2 | The Three Core Mechanisms of Historical Institutionalism

Path dependence explains how early decisions and institutional arrangements create self-reinforcing mechanisms, locking governance systems into specific trajectories (Pierson 2000a). These mechanisms include increasing returns (Arthur 1994), whereby institutions become more entrenched over time, and positive feedback loops, which amplify the costs of deviating from established practices. For instance, centralized governance frameworks often persist due to the institutional inertia created by administrative hierarchies, norms, and vested interests. Path dependence emphasizes the importance of sequence and timing in the entrenchment of particular institutional arrangements (Pierson 2000b; Rueschemeyer and Stephens 1997). The empirical analysis in this study explores how such early institutional arrangements have shaped contemporary governance frameworks for broadband State aid.

Critical junctures are periods of significant institutional change during which existing constraints are temporarily relaxed, allowing for new trajectories to emerge (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Decisions made during these critical junctures have the potential to set institutions on new developmental paths, often leading to enduring institutional changes that are difficult to reverse (Mahoney 2000). As Mahoney (2001, 113) points out, “not all choice points represent critical junctures; only those choice points that close off important future outcomes should be treated as critical junctures.” These moments often coincide with political, economic, or technological shifts, such as the liberalization of telecommunications markets or the introduction of EU State aid guidelines. Whereas some researchers focus on explaining the path-dependent pattern of institutional development that develops after critical junctures, others put the spotlight on what happens during critical junctures themselves (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Hogan 2019). To understand the processes occurring during critical junctures, one must also look at the antecedent conditions preceding the juncture (Mahoney 2001, 112–113; Slater and Simmons 2010). Critical antecedent conditions are “factors or conditions preceding a critical juncture that combine in a causal sequence with factors operating during that juncture

TABLE 1 | Operationalization of core concepts regarding institutional change.

Concept	Description	Operationalization in this study
Path dependence	Self-reinforcing mechanisms that entrench specific institutional trajectories	Tracing the historical development of governance structures to identify self-reinforcing decisions and increasing-returns processes
Critical junctures	Time-bound periods of significant change enabling new institutional trajectories	Identifying key reform moments or decisions that disrupted existing governance frameworks and opened a new path
Gradual institutional change	Incremental adjustments via layering, drift, conversion, or displacement	Examining how governance models evolved through slow-moving changes in rules or their interpretation, in the absence of abrupt breaks

Source: Authors' elaboration based on the sources cited in the text.

TABLE 2 | Modes of change in relation to characteristics of political context and targeted institution.

	Characteristics of targeted institution	
	Low discretion (strict interpretation/ enforcement)	Flexible interpretation/ enforcement
<i>Characteristics of the political context</i>		
Strong veto possibilities	Layering	Drift
Weak veto possibilities	Displacement	Conversion

Source: Adapted from Mahoney and Thelen (2010a, 19).

to produce a divergent outcome” (Slater and Simmons 2010, 886). Rather than focusing heavily on the decision-making phase within the critical juncture itself, our study primarily focuses on the “reproductive” phase—that is, the path-dependent process launched after a critical juncture sets a new trajectory in motion. In doing so, we acknowledge that antecedent conditions (e.g., prior institutional strength or weakness, existing power distributions) bound what is possible during a juncture.

While critical junctures focus on abrupt shifts, gradual institutional change occurs incrementally through mechanisms such as layering (adding new rules to old ones), drift (the effect of rules changing because the environment shifts and the rules stay the same), conversion (reinterpreting or redeploying existing rules for new purposes), and displacement (removal and replacement of old rules) (Streeck and Thelen 2005).¹ These mechanisms are essential for understanding how governance models can adapt without significant disruption (i.e., in the absence of a clear critical juncture).

In our analysis, these theoretical concepts are systematically applied to the case studies to uncover the institutional mechanisms shaping governance models. We remain cognizant that in practice these mechanisms may overlap and evolve over time.² Table 1 summarizes how each concept is operationalized in our study.

Mahoney and Thelen (2010a, 18–22) provide a useful framework by linking each of these modes of gradual institutional change to a typical combination of characteristics of the political context and the targeted institution. In their formulation, the political context is defined in terms of veto possibilities (strong or weak), and the characteristics of the targeted institution refer to the level of discretion in the interpretation or enforcement of that institution's rules (low or high). Table 2 reproduces their schema.

The relationship between radical and incremental change is central to the historical institutionalist approach. While critical junctures create windows of opportunity for abrupt institutional shifts, often triggered by exogenous shocks or major political reforms, these moments are rare and temporally bounded. In contrast, the majority of institutional evolution occurs incrementally, through mechanisms that gradually reshape existing structures (Streeck and Thelen 2005). Importantly, these two types of change are not mutually exclusive; rather, they interact dynamically. Critical junctures may initiate new trajectories, but the consolidation and further development of those paths often depend on subsequent incremental adjustments (Mahoney and Thelen 2010b, xi). Likewise, gradual change can prepare the ground for more radical breaks by weakening existing institutions or norms, thereby lowering resistance to transformative reforms (Hogan and Doyle 2007). Understanding this interplay is essential for analyzing the evolution of governance models in broadband State aid, as it allows us to identify both punctuated shifts and long-term adjustments that cumulatively reshape institutional configurations.

These theoretical foundations form the basis for the comparative analysis in subsequent sections, providing an understanding of the origins of the governance models for broadband State aid in the four countries. Our analysis focuses on both the path-dependent patterns that develop after critical junctures and the mechanisms of gradual change in periods without such junctures.

3 | Methodology

This study employs a comparative historical methodology combined with multiple descriptive case studies to systematically analyze the phenomena under investigation (Venesson 2008). The approach integrates historical institutionalism with process

tracing, enabling the reconstruction of policy trajectories by identifying causal mechanisms and key turning points in each case.

3.1 | The Dependent Variable

The concept of governance is multifaceted and has been defined in a variety of ways, with different interpretations emerging in different academic fields and contexts. One overarching definition asserts that governance is “all processes of governing” (Bevir 2013, 1). In this study, governance is defined as the power relationships between central and local authorities in public policy. In practice, it materializes in the structures and mechanisms through which State aid is managed and implemented and can be categorized into two types: centralized and decentralized models. In the context of centralized models, State aid is managed by the central state apparatus, a practice exemplified by Portugal and Spain. In contrast, decentralized models—as exemplified by the approaches in France and the UK—entrust significant authority to local or regional authorities in managing these processes (Manica et al. 2024). In essence, the dependent variable is the governance model for broadband State aid, which in each country is treated as either centralized or decentralized.

3.2 | Rationale for Country Selection

The selection of France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK as case studies was driven by their diversity of institutional configurations, administrative traditions, and governance outcomes in the context of broadband State aid. Drawing on classic principles of comparative analysis (Gerring 2007; Landman 2008), these countries collectively provide a useful cross-section of European governance models, enabling an in-depth exploration of how historical, political, and institutional factors shape policy approaches to broadband State aid deployment.

Substantively, Portugal and Spain both illustrate centralized State aid governance models, while France and the UK exemplify decentralized approaches. Despite sharing certain geographical or cultural contexts (e.g., Portugal and Spain together form the Iberian Peninsula), the pairs diverge markedly in critical dimensions like administrative capacity and regional autonomy. For instance, Portugal remains a traditionally unitary, top-down system with limited regional prerogatives (Tavares and Camões 2010), whereas Spain operates a quasi-federal system wherein significant autonomy is devolved to the regions (Colino 2009). France, historically known for its dirigiste (central guiding) tradition, has incrementally adopted a hybrid model through controlled decentralization reforms since the 1980s (Cole 2006). The UK, conversely, moved toward devolution in the late 1990s, granting Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland substantial policy discretion (Bogdanor 1999). These varying degrees of central-local power distribution allow for a rich comparative analysis of governance outcomes.

Methodologically, this design aligns with a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) (Anckar 2020; Przeworski and Teune 1970). The four countries differ considerably in size, state structure, and political history, yet they face a similar policy challenge (broadband gaps and the use of State aid to address

them) and have, in broad terms, arrived at one of two outcomes (centralized or decentralized governance). The puzzle lies in how countries with vastly different starting conditions and institutional legacies sometimes converge on similar governance arrangements for broadband State aid (or diverge as expected). This design allows us to examine whether common mechanisms (path dependence, critical junctures, gradual changes) operate across very different contexts and to identify unique factors that might explain why one country differs from another.

We acknowledge that these four cases do not exhaust the universe of possibilities—for example, federal countries like Germany or very small states are not included—and we do not claim full representativeness of “Europe” as a whole. Instead, our aim is analytical: by maximizing variation on many background factors and observing outcomes, we can better isolate the influence of historical institutional factors. In sum, the selected cases are justified by (a) their contrasting administrative traditions (from historically centralized structures in Portugal and, to an extent, France, to highly devolved structures in Spain and the UK), and (b) their ability to illustrate both ends of the outcome spectrum (centralized vs. decentralized models of broadband State aid). By capturing a wide range of institutional variation within a coherent substantive domain, these case studies help reveal how different historical pathways can lead to specific governance models.

Table 3 provides a summary of key characteristics of each case, highlighting these points of comparison.

3.3 | Temporal Scope: 1975–2012

The analysis spans from the mid-1970s to 2012. The starting point (1975) marks the transition to democracy in Portugal and Spain, which triggered debates on regional autonomy and decentralization in those countries. It is prior to the major shifts in telecommunications policy (the liberalization and privatization wave beginning in the early 1980s) and prior to the first steps toward decentralization in France and the UK. Starting in the 1970s allows us to capture the antecedent conditions leading into the broadband era. The timeframe concludes around 2012, by which time all four countries had launched national broadband plans aligned with the EU’s Digital Agenda targets, providing a natural endpoint for observing the evolution of governance models. Notably, after 2012, there were no drastic governance overhauls in our cases; the models in place largely continued through the 2010s (even as new funding rounds came). Thus, our temporal window is sufficient to observe the establishment and consolidation of each governance model.

3.4 | Data Collection and Analysis

The research draws upon a comprehensive desk review, including primary sources such as legislation, policy documents, and government communications and secondary sources such as academic literature, consultancy reports, and contemporaneous analyses (e.g., audit reports, speeches). We triangulate these sources to construct each country’s narrative and to cross-verify key events and interpretations. The analytical approach is to apply process

TABLE 3 | Summary of case selection and contextual variables.

Country	Democratic consolidation	Subnational authority structure	RAI	Broadband State aid governance model
France	Long-established democracy	Multiple tiers (regions, départements, communes). Strong central state tradition but partial devolution since 1980s	21.85	Decentralized
UK	Long-established democracy	Devolution implemented (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland have assemblies; England largely centralized)	9.59	Decentralized
Portugal	Democratic transition in 1974	Limited regional autonomy (autonomous regions for islands; no mainland regions). Municipal level with moderate powers; highly unitary state	9.51	Centralized
Spain	Democratic transition in late 1970s	Quasi-federal with 17 Autonomous Communities. Significant autonomy in many policy areas, though some national frameworks prevail	35.60	Centralized

Note: RAI measures the degree of political, administrative, and fiscal autonomy of subnational regions within a country. It captures both self-rule (internal authority) and shared rule (influence on national decision-making).

Abbreviation: RAI, regional authority index.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on sources cited in text (Hooghe et al. 2021).

tracing within each case to identify critical junctures and gradual changes, followed by a cross-case comparison to draw broader insights (Collier and Munck 2017; George and Bennett 2005).

Throughout the analysis, we use the theoretical concepts outlined to interpret events: for example, identifying a reform as a possible critical juncture, or labelling a policy adjustment as layering or conversion. This theoretically guided narrative approach allows us to remain consistent and avoid ad hoc explanations. In the next section, we present empirical evidence for each country in turn, before engaging in comparative discussion.

4 | Governance Models in Action: Empirical Evidence From France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK

4.1 | France: Decentralization Through Institutional Layering

Historically characterized by strong centralization, France began to decentralize during the 1980s with the Defferre Law of 1982, which marked a critical juncture in regional policy. This landmark reform established elected regional councils and expanded decision-making powers for departmental councils and larger communes (Cole 2012). At the same time, the audiovisual and telecommunications sectors were liberalized. In 1982, Law no. 82-652 enabled local semi-public commercial cable companies—majority owned by local authorities—to operate cable networks.³ In that same year, the French government also introduced the Plan Câble (Cable Plan), delegating network operation to these local companies (Payen 1987, 84–85). These reforms shifted power to local authorities, who were given the ability to influence the deployment of cable television and early broadband networks. Local authorities initiated the cabling process with national financing and support from the Directorate

General of Telecommunications (DGT), later known as France Télécom (Thatcher 1999, 243). In essence, the Cable Plan was the instrument that transferred initial telecommunications infrastructure responsibilities to French local authorities, taking advantage of the window of opportunity opened by the decentralization policy.

The legislation enacted in 1982 also gave local governments greater powers over industrial planning, enabling them to provide financial support for regional projects (Mazey 1994, 159). The Cable Plan was devised as part of a strategy to elevate the telecommunications sector (then a state-run monopoly) as a driver of economic development (Thatcher 1999, 242). One antecedent condition that led up to the Cable Plan was France's broader economic policy at the time. The government was pursuing *dirigisme décentralisé* ('decentralized dirigisme'), a variant of state-directed development which entailed central coordination of industrial policy while pushing some implementation to localities (Schmidt 1988, 53). This policy context—characterized by central planning, nationalizations, and support for large projects—set the stage for an ambitious telecom infrastructure push. The architects of the Cable Plan deliberately aligned it with the decentralization agenda by granting substantial power to local authorities in its implementation, thereby increasing its political acceptability to the Council of Ministers (it tied into a popular political reform).

In the following decades, the new institutional arrangements introduced in the early 1980s were expanded through layering, gradually altering their function and impact. The process of decentralization in the French telecom sector did not come all at once, but rather built up step-by-step. In 1996, the Postal and Electronic Communications Code was amended to permit local authorities to offer telecommunications services through the cable networks they had built. In 1999, Article L.1511-6 of

the Code Général des Collectivités Territoriales (CGCT) allowed local authorities to fund public electronic communications networks where there was a public need and no private initiative—effectively giving localities a mandate to fill broadband gaps. By 2004, local authorities could deploy and operate any type of telecommunications network (no longer limited to cable).⁴ Between 2004 and 2008, France notified the European Commission of multiple local broadband support projects as State aid measures; by 2008, French local authorities had invested approximately €1.4 billion in network deployment on their territories (Cour des Comptes 2017, 35). Many of these local projects were ultimately approved by the Commission as compatible aid or as not constituting aid at all (given the public purpose and open access conditions). This self-reinforcing trend of local initiative culminated in the inevitable involvement of subnational authorities in the implementation of the national broadband plan France Très Haut Débit, approved in 2010. Under that plan (updated in 2014), while the central government set strategic goals (e.g., aiming to extend optical fiber coverage to 80% of the country by 2022, requiring an estimated €13.3 billion in public investment), subnational authorities co-financed projects and participated actively in its implementation. A national task force (Mission Très Haut Débit) coordinated with local authorities to evaluate, supervise, and approve projects and grants.

France exemplifies how institutional layering enabled a decentralized governance model for broadband while still retaining central oversight. The central state provided vision, regulatory frameworks, and funding, but local governments became essential partners with their own resources and decision-making powers. Over time, what began as an overlay (layer) of local responsibility in the 1980s transformed into an expectation that local entities would be co-drivers of broadband deployment. This balance between national coherence and local adaptability has been generally maintained. Importantly, France's decentralized approach is credited with mobilizing significant additional resources and tailoring solutions to local needs—by 2020, for example, France's rural fiber rollout (largely overseen by local consortiums) was one of the most extensive in Europe, though it required strong central-local coordination.

4.2 | The UK: Flexibility Through Institutional Conversion

The UK and France have had different approaches to decentralization and local government involvement in telecommunications. In the UK, devolution of power has been a more recent (and uneven) process. Northern Ireland had a form of devolved government in the 1920s, but devolution was suspended in the early 1970s due to conflict (Bogdanor 1999). In the late 1970s, the Labour government attempted devolution for Scotland and Wales, but these efforts failed in 1979 referendums (Trench 2007, 31). This failure contributed to the downfall of the Callaghan government, and, with the election of Margaret Thatcher, devolution was shelved as an agenda (Bogdanor 1999).

During the 1980s, the UK's political-economic orientation under Thatcher's Conservative Party was strongly market-driven. This neoliberal ideology led to the privatization of British Telecom (BT) and encouragement of new cable television networks by

the early 1980s (Dutton and Blumler 1988, 284). Local authorities, however, were largely excluded from this telecommunications market revolution (Graham 1995, 374). In fact, central government reforms in the 1980s often bypassed or diminished traditional local government roles, establishing new agencies and authorities for urban policy (e.g., Urban Development Corporations) that took over some local functions (Reiter et al. 2010, 175). This can be seen as an instance of displacement—where the central government replaced local government's role in certain policy domains with centrally controlled bodies.

Nearly two decades later, the political context shifted. The late 1990s brought a Labour government under Tony Blair, which was committed to a constitutional reform agenda including devolution. In 1997, referendums in Scotland and Wales (and a separate peace process referendum in Northern Ireland) were successful, providing a mandate for devolution. The backdrop of a long period of Conservative rule (1979–1997) and Labour's own historical attempts likely served as critical antecedents creating pressure for change. Devolution was also formalized through the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement in 1998 for Northern Ireland (John et al. 2007, 117). The UK Parliament passed three Devolution Acts in 1998, transforming the UK into a quasi-federal structure (Masterman 2022).

Alongside national-level devolution, the Labour Party's domestic agenda included a “new localism” or regionalism in England. This led to the creation of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in England under the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998. The RDAs were intended to bridge central government objectives with regional priorities, promoting economic development, investment, and competitiveness in their regions (Pearce and Ayres 2009, 537; Ward et al. 2003, 203). The Local Government Act 2000 also granted more powers to local authorities, though these powers could still be checked by central government (Chandler 2007, 295). In summary, by the early 2000s, the UK had introduced new governance layers: devolved administrations in three of its four nations, and regional economic bodies (RDAs) within England, plus some general empowerment of municipalities.

Crucially, even though telecommunications remained formally a reserved (central) competence, these subnational entities found ways to engage in broadband initiatives under the auspices of economic development and regeneration.⁵ Devolved governments (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) and RDAs in England began implementing State aid measures for broadband deployment using their broad powers to foster economic development. For example, in 2003, the Northwest Development Agency (an English RDA) notified the European Commission of a broadband State aid project to serve rural areas (Chirico and Gaál 2014). It was among the first of several regional broadband schemes (others followed in Yorkshire, East of England, etc.). Here we see institutional conversion in action: existing institutions (RDAs, local councils, devolved administrations) took their general mandates (economic development, reducing regional disparities) and interpreted them to include broadband infrastructure, a task not explicitly given to them by law but also not forbidden. Essentially, they repurposed their capacity to intervene in the economy to

justify investing in broadband as a means to an end (improving regional competitiveness, tackling market failures in rural connectivity).

To address regional economic disparities, the UK central government even channeled funding through RDAs for broadband. For instance, the East of England and South-West RDAs invested in broadband pilot projects in the early 2000s (Ward et al. 2001, 6). This again indicates conversion—central funds meant for regional development were used for broadband when appropriate. The involvement of local authorities varied; some municipalities also partnered in these projects, while others did not.

By 2010–2012, the UK government sought to consolidate and streamline these efforts under a national umbrella, launching the National Broadband Scheme for the UK (NBS-UK) in 2012, managed by a central unit called Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK). The NBS-UK essentially provided a common framework and funding pot for broadband State aid projects, but crucially, it still relied on local bodies (county councils, devolved governments) to lead implementation in their areas. BDUK's approach was to simplify the process and reduce the administrative burden for smaller authorities, enabling them to tailor projects to local needs while ensuring consistency with EU State aid rules. In practice, local authorities or devolved governments designed broadband rollout projects, co-funded by central grants via BDUK and often matched by their own funds or private partner investments.

The UK's approach demonstrates the potential of institutional conversion, where existing rules and structures are reinterpreted to facilitate a form of decentralized governance without a formal transfer of legal competence. Telecommunications policy remained centrally governed *de jure*, but *de facto*, subnational actors became deeply involved in implementation. This happened within the flexible constitutional setup emerging after 1998, and through the ingenuity of linking broadband to local economic mandates.

4.3 | Spain: Decentralized Autonomy Within a Centralized Framework

The Spanish Constitution of 1978 marked the transition to democracy after General Franco's dictatorship, creating 17 autonomous communities with significant domestic policy control (Heywood 1995, 6, 48). The Francoist authoritarian regime that preceded this transition was strongly centralizing, with few powers given to the periphery. The Constitution introduced a model often described as the *Estado de las Autonomías* (State of Autonomies), which defines different categories of competences: exclusive state competences, exclusive regional competences, and shared competences. It also set up mechanisms (including the Constitutional Court) to arbitrate conflicts between the central government and regions, aiming to balance state integrity with regional self-government (Heywood 1995, 147; Ruano 2017, 81).

Notably, under the Spanish Constitution, telecommunications (and more broadly, “communications”) was reserved as an exclusive competence of the central state. This is a fundamental

design choice: despite the broad decentralization in many areas, telecom remained under Madrid's control. However, the regions (autonomous communities) have found ways to involve themselves in the sector by leveraging other powers. For instance, regions have exclusive powers over “economic development” and shared powers in areas like scientific and technical research and, later, aspects of the “information society.” These adjacent competencies provided entry points for regions to act in telecommunications indirectly. An important Constitutional Court decision in 1992 (STC 90/1992) delineated that while telecoms are state competence, regions can undertake initiatives related to the information society and infrastructure insofar as they tie into their own competencies (like education, economic development) as long as there is general coordination by the state.

In practice, in the 1990s, when national initiatives to promote the Information Society were lacking or slow, some autonomous communities started taking their own steps. For example, the regions of Murcia and Extremadura developed regional digital plans in 1996–1997 to advance information society goals (Jordana et al. 2005, 345). The central government reacted by trying to unify policies: in 1999, it set up an Interministerial Commission for the Information Society, leading to the Info XXI Action Plan (2001–2003) (Sebastián et al. 2001, 56–57). This was a national plan to coordinate efforts in ICT adoption and infrastructure. However, local authority involvement in these e-government and infrastructure efforts remained limited. Subsequent programs (e.g., España.es launched in 2003 to boost local e-government) faced criticism for lacking sufficient consensus and regional involvement (Criado Grande 2006, 64–65).

By the mid-2000s, Spain introduced the Plan Avanza (2005), a comprehensive strategy to develop the information society. A key component of the plan was the Programa de Extensión de la Banda Ancha (PEBA), an initiative to extend broadband to underserved areas. While Plan Avanza was ostensibly collaborative, several regional governments criticized the central government for limited participation in the design of PEBA. Indeed, some regions stopped sharing their own telecom action plans with the central government after feeling sidelined (Gerli and Whalley 2020, 12). The lack of alignment between national and regional plans caused tensions: some autonomous communities went ahead with their strategies parallel to the national plans (Feijóo et al. 2014, 261–262). For instance, Catalonia and the Basque Country each developed distinctive broadband programs; Catalonia's government invested in an open-access fiber network (Xarxa Oberta) independently.

Similar center-region tensions were evident in the context of cable TV network deployment. Spain was one of the last European countries to allow competition in cable. A Constitutional Court decision in 1994 invalidated the state's monopoly over cable services, prompting legislation to liberalize cable TV (Málaga 1999, 53). Immediately after this opening, about 50 city councils, mostly controlled by the opposition Partido Popular (PP), issued tenders for local cable TV networks. The PP also threatened to challenge the constitutionality of the liberalization law if the Socialist government in power at the time tried to block those local tenders (Gil 2001, 64–65; Montes Fernández 2016, 565–566). When the PP came to national power in 1996, it launched 43 cable franchise tenders via Royal Decree 2066/1996 and Law

12/1997 (Ponce 2001, 106).⁶ Regional interests also came to play: for example, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), which was vital in supporting the minority PP government, advocated consolidating Basque telecom infrastructure under a regional operator, Euskaltel (Heller 2002, 677). Consequently, Euskaltel (partly owned by the Basque government) was established as the cable provider in the Basque Country. Similarly, other regions like Navarre and La Rioja set up their own regional cable operators (Gerrand 2006).

What these episodes illustrate is that even in a formally centralized policy area like telecom, the political reality of Spain's decentralization has forced a degree of de facto regionalization. Regional governments have leveraged political negotiations (as with Euskaltel) or used their powers in related domains to influence telecom outcomes. However, Spain still lacks a coherent multi-level governance framework in telecom. The central state's insistence on retaining formal control has often led to uncoordinated efforts, duplicated infrastructure, or delayed projects when consensus is not reached. Spain's case highlights the challenges of decentralized governance when constitutional constraints and central authority limit effective coordination in a key policy area.

In summary, Spain operates within a centralized framework for telecom (as per law), but within that, regional actors have significant autonomy in tangential areas and have pushed the envelope. The outcome for broadband State aid governance is that Spain remained a centralized model (all major broadband plans like PEBA were national, and these national projects have centralized governance). Spain's struggles underscore how institutional lock-in (the constitutional allocation of telecom to the center) has stifled potentially more effective decentralized collaboration. As Wigger and Buch-Hansen (2013) note in other contexts, regulatory inertia during periods of change can prevent significant shifts—in Spain's case, even as the need for regional involvement in broadband became evident (a change in environment), the rigid institutional arrangement (legal centralization of telecom) stifled any major reconfiguration. Despite efforts by some autonomous communities to innovate or fill gaps, the central government has consistently reasserted its authority in telecommunications, minimizing regional involvement in broadband policy.

4.4 | Portugal: Persistent Centralization and Institutional Inertia

Portugal's transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1974 led to the adoption of a new Constitution in 1976, which introduced elements of decentralization: it created two autonomous regions (Azores and Madeira), reinforced local government (municipalities and parishes), and envisaged administrative regions on the mainland (a concept known as regionalization). However, unlike Spain, Portugal did not have directly elected regional authorities on the mainland in the aftermath of the Constitution due to political party divisions, resulting in a highly centralized state (Magone 2010; Oliveira and Breda-Vázquez 2012).

Indeed, despite an official focus on decentralization in rhetoric after 1974, what occurred was arguably the opposite: the state

reinforced its presence via Regional Planning Committees (later upgraded to Regional Coordination Commissions, CCRs). These bodies were deconcentrated arms of the central government in each region (not autonomous governments), coordinating planning and implementation of national policies regionally (Nanetti et al. 2004). So rather than empowering new elected regional bodies, Portugal created a layer of central government administration in the regions. This can be seen as a form of layering that actually bolstered central control, an interesting inversion of the usual layering that adds autonomy.

In the mid-1990s, a political shift occurred: after a decade of center-right (social democrat) governments, the Socialist Party won the 1995 elections. The new government made creating eight administrative regions a priority, aiming for a more decentralized decision-making process (Magone 2000). This push led to a national referendum on regionalization in 1998. The referendum, however, resulted in a majority “No” vote. This failure effectively halted the drive for regionalization. In its wake, the government did implement some compensatory measures: cooperation among municipalities was encouraged, and the CCRs (now renamed CCDRs—Regional Coordination and Development Commissions) were somewhat strengthened to coordinate regional development in absence of elected regions (Magone 2000). However, the CCDRs remained state bodies, with limited capacity to address regional issues beyond their central mandates (OECD 2020, 7–8). Unlike the UK's RDAs, Portugal's CCDRs did not have independent authority or substantial budgets to implement regional development policies; they largely executed national operational programs for EU funds and provided technical assistance to municipalities.

The failure to establish robust subnational governance structures on the mainland reinforced the dominance of central authorities in virtually all policy areas, including infrastructure development. Administrative reform stagnated, leading to what Magone (2011) describes as persistent centralized decision-making and even neo-patrimonial tendencies in resource allocation. In terms of path dependence, Portugal's political system remained locked into a pattern where any attempt to change (like 1998's potential critical juncture) was deflected, resulting in continuity of central control.

Turning specifically to telecommunications and broadband: throughout the 1980s and 1990s, telecommunications policy and investments in Portugal were centrally managed (initially by the state monopoly, then by the state even after liberalization in late 1990s). In 1991, a law was passed allowing the establishment of cable networks by public or private companies in specific areas, but only with government authorization—again, a very top-down, permission-based system. This meant local governments could not independently launch telecom initiatives without central approval.

It was not until 2006 that an initiative specifically targeting broadband gaps emerged: the government launched a tender for “broadband community networks” projects. The idea was to provide broadband access to regions with market failures. These community network projects were somewhat analogous to pilots where inter-municipal associations or communities could get funding to build networks. To qualify for subsidies, the network

infrastructure had to be owned by a public entity (like a municipality or a municipal association), though private entities could manage the operations. A central agency, UMIC (Agency for the Knowledge Society), established a technical assistance commission to oversee the projects' implementation—again, central oversight was built in.

Four projects were approved under this community networks scheme, including partnerships between intermunicipal consortia and private companies. The aim was to showcase these projects as models for nationwide broadband deployment.

By 2009, facing economic crisis and recognizing the need to boost investment, the Portuguese government designed a nationwide broadband initiative using State aid. In 2010, it notified the European Commission of a national broadband program (with five regional lots) to extend broadband to underserved areas, funded by EU structural funds. The goal was to improve connectivity in 139 municipalities (out of a total of 308) by achieving 50% fiber coverage in each by 2013. These were sizable projects, and separate competitive tenders were organized by the central government for each region, with technical assistance from the National Regulatory Authority (ANACOM). Municipalities were allowed to participate (e.g., by forming consortia or co-investing) in the program, but tellingly, none chose to do so. In other words, even when invited into the process, local authorities largely stayed out, likely due to lack of resources or the complexity of involvement—leaving it to central agencies and winning private bidders to handle. The contracts were ultimately between the central State and the telecom operators.

This outcome underscores Portugal's institutional inertia. Despite policy innovation in using State aid for broadband, the model remained centralized in execution, and local actors were either unable or unwilling to assert themselves. The governance model in Portugal thus reflects strong lock-in: central decision-making has continued to limit multilevel coordination and local innovation. Consequently, even though infrastructure was rolled out, the approach may have missed opportunities for leveraging local knowledge or initiatives. For example, some of the networks built under the 2010 program later faced challenges with utilization and integration into local development strategies—something that might have been mitigated with more local stakeholder involvement.

In summary, Portugal's case is one of path-dependent centralization. A potential critical juncture (the 1974 democratic revolution) set the stage for decentralization, but the country's political trajectory quickly reverted to a centralized path. Another potential juncture (1998 regionalization referendum) was a missed opportunity that reinforced the existing path. In terms of gradual change mechanisms, one could say Portugal experienced drift in that the world changed (e.g., EU membership and technology needs) but its institutions (centralized governance) did not adapt sufficiently—requiring stopgap measures like community network pilots and a one-off central scheme in 2010. One could also argue layering occurred but in a paradoxical way: instead of layering decentralized elements onto a centralized system, Portugal layered more central coordinating bodies (CCRs/CCDRs) onto itself, which only served to further entrench the dominant path.

5 | From Institutional Legacies to Policy Outcomes: Unpacking Governance Dynamics

The comparative analysis of France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK provides an in-depth understanding of how historical institutionalism mechanisms intersect with public administration practices in broadband infrastructure deployment. The findings reveal critical insights into the institutional mechanisms that shape public policy implementation, highlighting the dynamic relationship between governance structures, administrative traditions, and political contexts.

5.1 | Institutional Configurations and Path Dependency

The findings confirm the long-term impact of institutional configurations on governance outcomes, in line with the path dependency literature. The cases of Portugal and Spain illustrate the challenges associated with overcoming the inertia of established institutions. In Portugal, the centralized model reflects a post-revolutionary focus on national unity and administrative control, which has hindered attempts to decentralize decision-making. Although Portugal is less structurally constrained by formal constitutional limits on decentralization than Spain, the Portuguese case mirrors scenarios where a lack of institutional support or political will hampers regional initiatives (like the UK's difficulties in sustaining regional policy efforts post-2008). This situation reflects Skocpol's (1985) arguments about state capacity: when power is heavily centralized, the state's ability to implement effective regional development policies can be limited. Magone (2011) also highlights the enduring influence of centralized decision-making and inefficient resource allocation in Portugal, findings consistent with our observation of institutional inertia in Portuguese broadband governance. In practical terms, this inertia has impeded Portugal's ability to effectively engage local actors in broadband deployment.

Similarly, constitutional rigidity in Spain constrained the ability of regional governments to influence telecommunications policy. Despite Spain's quasi-federal structure and considerable autonomy in many policy spheres, the 1978 Constitution explicitly centralizes authority over telecommunications. This arrangement, exacerbated by strong influence from national business elites (e.g., the historically powerful Telefónica), restricted regional authority and limited the effectiveness of decentralized broadband initiatives. This is in line with Poulantzas' (1978) concept of state power and how it can reflect dominant class interests: one could argue that dominant economic elites in Spain have had an interest in maintaining a centralized telecom framework, thus hindering meaningful decentralization and policy innovation that might arise from regional experimentation. These cases (Portugal and Spain) demonstrate the tendency of institutional frameworks to become entrenched, where initial decisions (like Spain's constitutional design, or Portugal's choice not to regionalize) can limit future flexibility even under new external pressures or policy failures. In both countries, when external pressures mounted (EU digital agendas, technological change), their path-dependent governance structures impeded swift or adaptive changes in approach.

However, path dependence is not deterministic or irreversible. The experiences of France and the UK illustrate that even deeply entrenched institutions can evolve under the right conditions. In France, the dirigiste tradition (central economic planning) evolved into a more decentralized form through deliberate institutional layering over time. French local authorities became integrated into broadband deployment strategies while the central state retained strategic oversight, effectively blending central direction with local initiative. This resonates with the framework proposed by Amable and Palombarini (2023) which emphasizes the role of diverse social groups with conflicting interests, where dominant coalitions emerge to support institutional change. In France, a coalition of interests (national policymakers, local governments, industrial stakeholders) coalesced around the idea that involving local authorities in telecom infrastructure (e.g., the Cable Plan, later rural broadband) would serve both national and local interests. The Defferre Law of 1982 created a conducive institutional environment for such coalitions by empowering local governments, and subsequent reforms (like the telecom laws of 1996 and 1999) entrenched decentralization processes within the state's institutional fabric. These reforms were implemented during periods of strong political will (early 1980s under a Socialist government committed to decentralization, and again in the late 1990s under a left government emphasizing regional equality), creating opportunities for institutional innovation that ultimately shaped long-term governance outcomes. In effect, France managed to “re-route” its path dependence: rather than continuing solely on a centralized path, it introduced new path dependencies in favor of decentralization (e.g., local governments now expect to be involved in digital infrastructure, creating a new status quo).

In the UK, while path dependence had long kept governance centralized, especially for economic policy, a combination of political change (New Labour's reforms) and accumulated pressures (the devolution debates, regional disparities) triggered a break. The UK's case shows that even a country with a unitary tradition can adopt federal-like features when political actors choose to reinterpret existing institutional arrangements (conversion of institutions like RDAs, as well as displacement via devolution). Once devolution and regional structures were in place, they created new policy pathways, allowing local input in broadband projects. Over time, this has led to enduring changes: today it is normal in the UK for, say, the Scottish Government or a county council to be a direct stakeholder in broadband initiatives—a scenario hard to imagine before the late 1990s.

In summary, France and the UK highlight that permissive conditions (windows of opportunity, shifting political ideologies) can be exploited to alter path-dependent trajectories. In contrast, Spain and Portugal underscore how reproductive sequences after a critical moment can cement a particular model, making later divergence difficult. Together, these cases underline the importance of timing, sequences, and initial institutional decisions on long-term governance models.

5.2 | Timing, Sequencing, and Critical Junctures

The importance of timing and sequencing in governance reform emerges as a consistent theme. Both France and the UK

implemented key decentralization initiatives during broader institutional shifts, leveraging policy layering or conversion to adapt their governance models. In France, the Defferre Law (1982) provided momentum for further policy developments like the Plan Câble shortly thereafter—the early 1980s became a sequence of reforms feeding into one another. In the UK, devolution initiatives around 1997–1999 allowed regional authorities to later engage more directly with telecommunications infrastructure, as we saw with RDAs in the early 2000s. These junctures occurred synchronously with broader political transitions (left-wing governments coming to power with decentralization mandates).

Even in the UK, where local authorities had been viewed with suspicion by previous Conservative governments, new institutional frameworks eventually supported decentralized cooperation in what were historically low-trust center-local relations (Gartzou-Katsouyanni 2024). Essentially, the combination of policy layering (adding new layers like RDAs) and flexible interpretation of existing powers from below (conversion) justified the provision of State aid for broadband by subnational entities. This interpretive flexibility, aligning with the Labour Party's ideological shift toward regionalism and localism in the late 1990s (Deas and Ward 2000; Evans et al. 2013), enabled regional authorities to leverage their powers for broadband deployment. It was the sequencing—devolution acts then regional economic policy reform then broadband projects—that made this possible.

Unlike conventional critical junctures triggered by exogenous shocks (wars, economic crises), the significant changes in France and the UK were endogenously driven, reflecting broader internal trends toward decentralization and state reform. Considering the largely endogenous nature of these transitions (no sudden external shock forced France to decentralize in 1982 or the UK in 1997; these were political choices), the pattern of change observed is consistent with what Haydu (1998) calls a process sequencing model. That is, the policy changes in our cases place greater emphasis on endogenous sources of political change—domestic political realignments, ideological evolution, learning from past attempts—rather than purely exogenous shocks that characterize the classic path-dependent model (Broschek 2010). In France, decentralization was part of a larger political project of the left in the 1980s; in the UK, devolution was a response to domestic constitutional debates maturing over decades. So, these changes, while momentous, were not random shocks but rather the culmination of building pressures and ideas.

Conversely, Portugal and Spain missed similar windows of opportunity, leading to more constrained governance structures for broadband State aid. Portugal's 1998 referendum failure represents a critical lost moment—a juncture where a decentralizing reform was on the table but was rejected. The reasons are complex (political divisions, public skepticism), but the effect was clear: it closed the door on a major shift, reinforcing the existing centralized path. In the aftermath, rather than trying incremental decentralization, Portugal doubled down on central coordination (strengthening CCRs). In Spain, the transition to democracy (1975–1978) itself can be seen as a critical juncture that did produce a dramatic decentralization (creation of Autonomous Communities). However, the constitutional

framework that emerged explicitly centralized certain powers (like telecoms). The rationale for centralizing telecommunications at the time is not fully transparent—the constitutional drafting process on such details is not well-documented publicly, and it likely involved trade-offs and prevailing attitudes that national infrastructure should remain unified. But once set, this constitutional rigidity resulted in an institutional lock-in, stifling further decentralization in that sector and foreclosing collaborative multilevel governance in telecom.

As Wigger and Buch-Hansen (2013) demonstrate in another context (EU competition policy), regulatory inertia in times of crisis can prevent significant shifts; similarly, Spain's centralized constitutional provisions have shown inertia even as technology and governance norms evolved. When faced with the challenge of broadband expansion—a challenge that might have benefited from regional cooperation—Spain's rigid institutional arrangement prevented a coordinated multi-level approach. Instead, attempts by regions to assert themselves (e.g., the Basque Country's telecom initiatives, Catalonia's projects) were handled in an ad hoc, politically bargained manner, rather than through an institutionalized cooperative framework. This echoes Schmidt's (2006) concept of discursive institutionalism, which posits that the ability of actors to reshape institutions is constrained by prevailing political discourse. In Spain's case, the discourse and political consensus around the unity of the market and state control over infrastructure prevailed through the transition, embedding a narrative that central control of telecommunications was necessary. Despite some regional discourse pushing for more say (especially in regions with strong identities), that did not translate into formal change. Thus, even when autonomous communities tried to engage in telecom via their economic competencies, the central state consistently reasserted authority, minimizing regional involvement in broadband policy.

In summary, timing and sequencing mattered enormously: France and the UK acted during periods when decentralization aligned with political currents, and thus reaped long-term changes; Spain and Portugal either failed to act or were structured in a way that prevented adaptation, leaving them with centralized outcomes even when those might not have been most effective for broadband deployment.

5.3 | Gradual Change

Streeck and Thelen's (2005) conceptualization of gradual institutional change is evident in these cases, particularly in France, where incremental changes accumulated over time to lead to significant transformations in the governance model. The process in France was characterized by incremental, endogenous change after the decentralization period. Over roughly three decades, small legal changes (layering) and evolving practices led to a situation in 2010 very different from 1975 regarding local roles in infrastructure. This demonstrates how institutional empowerment can develop through the repeated application of existing rules over time (Thelen 1999). French local governments continuously gained new competencies or funding avenues, each one perhaps modest alone, but together producing a substantial shift. It is worth noting that the precise definition of “layering” can be somewhat ambiguous (Capano 2019; Duit 2007), but in

the French case, it effectively captures the cumulative nature of these adjustments. Our empirical data on France show that the new path regarding subnational authority in the telecom sector was characterized by marginal reinforcements—adding new layers of responsibility and nuance rather than any single radical change. There was no one moment where France said “local authorities are now in charge of broadband,” instead, policy by policy, their role expanded.

The UK's approach highlights the role of agency in institutional change. UK actors repurposed and reinterpreted frameworks (conversion) to enable local contributions to broadband. Additionally, the spread of ideas and best practices across English regions—a form of policy learning—played a role in how conversion took shape (Moodysson et al. 2017). The early successes or at least initiatives of some RDAs in broadband likely motivated others and showed central government that devolved approach could work. Compared to France's top-down approach, the UK saw more bottom-up influence, with local impulses (like regional advocacy for broadband to address the digital divide) shaping change.

5.4 | Administrative Traditions and Adaptive Capacity

Administrative traditions also influence adaptive capacity. There is a known dichotomy between hierarchical vs. networked administrative systems (Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Olsen 2006). France and the UK, despite very different traditions (Napoleonic hierarchy in France, versus the UK's mix of local self-government and recent devolution), both demonstrated the capacity to adapt their governance frameworks to meet new challenges. France's hierarchical system evolved by consciously building in networked elements (e.g., partnerships with local authorities). The UK's emphasis on regional empowerment in the 2000s reflected a broader shift toward collaborative governance, aligning with theories stressing flexibility and responsiveness (Hill and Hupe 2002). Meanwhile, Portugal and Spain's more rigid administrative setups limited adaptation. Portugal's centralized bureaucracy prioritizes stability and uniformity (Olsen 2006) often at the expense of innovation, matching how we described its governance inertia. Spain's complex but siloed system grants autonomy but without integration, illustrating that simply having multiple levels does not ensure adaptation if the coordination mechanisms are weak or if the culture favors independent action over cooperation.

These findings reinforce the importance of aligning governance reforms with underlying administrative culture. Misaligned reforms (e.g., imposing a decentralized program in a highly centralized administrative culture, as in Portugal's broadband tenders) can result in inefficiencies or conflicts. Conversely, reforms that work with the grain of administrative traditions (like France leveraging its competent local governments which had experience in public utilities, or the UK leveraging its tradition of local government pragmatism under a new multi-level structure) are more likely to succeed and persist.

Finally, our comparative analysis suggests a need to clearly highlight the cross-case patterns. To that end, we summarize

TABLE 4 | Core concepts regarding institutional change in France and the UK.

Concepts	France	UK
Path dependence	Stable self-reinforcing path following the general decentralization policies from the early 1980s, marked by a critical period and subsequent layering of local authority powers	Disruption of a previously centralized path due to late-1990s devolution and the creation of RDAs, leading to immediate involvement of subnational bodies in broadband projects
Critical juncture(s)	1980–1984: Decentralization reforms (Defferre Law) and telecom liberalization opened space for local action (Plan Câble)	1997–2000: Devolution referendums (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) and legislation created new institutions
Mechanism of gradual change	Layering: Over decades, new competences added to local governments (e.g., 1996, 1999 laws), incrementally expanding their role in telecom without a single overhaul. This accumulation changed the governance model significantly	Conversion: Existing institutions (RDAs, local councils) reinterpreted their economic development mandates to include broadband initiatives. Over time, bottom-up innovation became institutionalized in the model

Source: Authors' elaboration.

TABLE 5 | Core concepts regarding institutional continuity in Portugal and Spain.

Concepts	Portugal	Spain
Path dependence	Strong centralizing tradition reinforced after 1974; no robust regional authorities established, leading to a persistent centralized model. Self-reinforcing mechanisms (political and administrative) lock in central control	Highly path-dependent centralized governance due to 1978 constitutional design concentrating telecom authority at the national level. Institutional inertia maintains central control despite a federal political structure
Critical juncture(s) (or lack thereof)	1974–1976: Transition to democracy (new Constitution) envisioned decentralization, but mainland regionalization was not implemented 1998: Referendum on regionalization failed—a missed juncture for change, leaving the centralized model intact. (<i>Opportunities for decentralization existed but were not realized, thus no effective critical juncture occurred to shift the trajectory.</i>)	1975–1978: Transition to democracy created Autonomous Communities (a significant decentralization in many areas), but telecoms remained a central State competence in the 1978 Constitution (<i>Thus, while democratization was a critical juncture for general decentralization, it explicitly excluded telecom, preventing change in that sector. Subsequent shifts like 1990s telecom liberalization did not decentralize governance due to this constitutional lock-in.</i>)
Mechanism of gradual change (or continuity)	Drift/Layering: Central government retained control and added only deconcentrated layers (CCRs/CCDRs) rather than empowering local/regional authorities—thus adapting superficially without changing core structures. Later broadband initiatives were managed top-down; local entities were largely passive, evidencing institutional inertia rather than adaptation	Conversion (limited): Some Autonomous Communities attempted to use their powers (e.g., economic development) to engage in broadband and telecom (a form of conversion), but central oversight and constitutional limits curtailed their impact. Essentially, incremental adaptations occurred (regions finding loopholes to act), but the fundamental centralized framework remained unaltered

Source: Authors' elaboration.

the core institutional drivers of path dependence and change for each country in a comparative format in Tables 4 and 5.

6 | Conclusion

The comparative analysis of France, Portugal, Spain, and the UK highlights that broadband State aid deployment governance models are shaped by each country's historical and institutional context. Although deeply entrenched institutional

rules and norms may obstruct decentralization, in France and the UK, institutional layering and the gradual empowerment of subnational authorities and conversion have resulted in more flexible and adaptive governance models, allowing regional actors to play an active role in broadband deployment. In contrast, Spain and Portugal faced challenges due to more centralized governance structures and constitutional constraints, which limited the ability of subnational authorities to engage in broadband development, creating institutional inertia.

The findings offer several practical implications for scholars and practitioners. First, the importance of aligning governance models with institutional history, as suggested by historical institutionalism, cannot be overstated. Policymakers should leverage these insights to design governance structures that build on existing capacities while introducing incremental reforms to address emerging challenges. Second, mechanisms of institutional change are not abstract—they manifest in policy decisions such as France's incremental laws empowering localities (layering) or the UK's repurposing of RDAs for broadband (conversion). Recognizing these mechanisms in action can help analysts pinpoint how change is occurring (or not occurring). For example, if a reform simply creates new bodies but leaves old power relations intact (as in Portugal's CCDRs), one might predict limited impact (drift without real change). Third, there is a tendency in comparative politics to focus on big bang moments; our analysis shows that gradual, often low-visibility changes can be equally important. Policymakers should be aware that slow, persistent reforms can succeed where abrupt change is politically impossible—and conversely, that a dramatic reform on paper (like Spain's democratization) does not automatically translate into all-sector change. Finally, while each country's story is unique, our comparative approach allows some cautious generalizations. First, historical institutionalism proves a useful lens for explaining variation in policy outcomes even in a relatively narrow domain (broadband State aid) among countries facing similar external conditions (EU digital agenda, technological change). The differences in governance models and outcomes (like extent of rural broadband coverage achieved by local vs. central efforts) are not random but can be traced to institutional factors.

Future research topics may include governance models for emerging technologies like 5G (Mendonça et al. 2022), and digital technologies at large (Mendonça et al. 2024; Cardoso et al. 2025), as well as whether lessons from broadband governance can be applied to other technological sectors, for example, in the context of Important Projects of Common European Interest. Additionally, expanding the comparative analysis beyond the EU to include non-EU countries could provide insights on how different contexts influence governance frameworks (e.g., see Freitas et al. 2024). Moreover, research into the role of political agency and actor behavior in shaping governance outcomes could deepen understanding of institutional change dynamics. Last, investigating rural–urban disparities in broadband deployment and how governance models can be tailored to bridge these gaps is essential for promoting inclusive growth through infrastructure investments.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data sets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Endnotes

- ¹ Streeck and Thelen (2005, 31) also included exhaustion as the process of gradual breakdown or decay of institutions over time.
- ² There is also some ambiguity of the boundaries of the various mechanisms (see, e.g., Duit 2007). The case study builds on the “gradual institutional change” taxonomy, while pointing to the potential benefits of using different modes of change in combination.
- ³ In 1977, Decree no. 77-1098 regulated the operation of cable networks, limiting them to broadcasting television channels in areas without terrestrial coverage, with implementation assigned to Télédiffusion de France (TDF).
- ⁴ Through Law no. 2004-575 which replaced article L.1511-6 CGCT with article L.1425-1.
- ⁵ It is important to note that regional and local authorities in the UK can only carry out tasks assigned to them by parliamentary legislation, unlike the Continental European presumption of general competence.
- ⁶ It was also this government that approved Royal Decree Law 6/1996, of June 7, on the Liberalization of Telecommunications, which was immediately converted into Law 12/1997, of April 24.

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