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No money, no funny? An analysis of public officials' reasoning behind issue prioritization decisions in the presence and absence of budget constraints

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No money, no funny?

**An analysis of public officials' reasoning behind issue prioritization
decisions in the presence and absence of budget constraints.**

C.A. Mantas

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ABSTRACT

The behavioral theory of the firm lacks a comprehensive understanding of issue prioritization, particularly when multiple issues are performing below aspiration levels, or resources are limited. This study investigates the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives, considering budget constraints and the emphasis on historical versus social aspiration levels. Two theoretical expectations were developed: 1) the prioritization of historical versus social aspiration levels, and 2) the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives under budget constraints. Semi-structured interviews with 9 public officials from the Directorate-General for Economic Activities in Portugal were conducted to assess the expectations. The thematic analysis revealed that public officials do not change the priorities of eGovernment initiatives based on budget constraints and predominantly prioritize social aspirations over historical ones. This study highlights the importance of pragmatism driven by necessity alongside creativity. The findings have implications for issue prioritization, performance feedback, cutback management, and public administration literature in general. Future research should expand the study to include coercive aspiration levels, less salient issues, different countries, and different public organizations. Additionally, preferences and public sector motivation can be included as moderators, and employing a mixed-methods approach could be beneficial.

Key words: Issue Prioritization, Budget constraints, Aspiration levels, Digitalization, Public officials.

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List of Abbreviations

AMA: Administrative Modernization Agency

DGAE: Directorate-General for Economic Activities

EU: European Union

EVM: Experimental Vignette Methodology

QUAR: Assessment and Accountability Framework

MEM: Ministry of the Economy and Maritime Affairs

NPM: New Public Management

PI: Performance Information

PSE: Public Sector Employment

PSM: Public Sector Motivation

SIADAP: Integrated Evaluation System for Public Administration

UTAO: Parliamentary Technical Support Unit

Chapter 1: Introduction

Management scholars have been puzzling over how priorities are established in public organizations in light of different performance aspiration levels and organizational realities. Central to behavioral theory, aspiration levels are reference points used to evaluate performance, providing thresholds ascribing success or failure to an organization (Greve, 2003). Some scholars have gone further to propose that aspiration levels can be utilized not only as reference points but also as criteria to establish priorities and create a hierarchy of goals (Holm, 2017; Nielsen, 2014). This mechanism is particularly relevant in the public sector as public organizations often pursue multiple competing goals and must establish priority criteria (Nielsen, 2014). This phenomenon, referred to as issue prioritization, can be conceptualized as the act of utilizing performance information to identify and rank the components within a policy area that require attention and action (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). Behavioral theory has remained considerably silent on the realm of issue prioritization, which represents a significant omission (Nielsen, 2014).

While nowadays scholars generally agree that aspiration levels can be utilized as priority criteria, this puzzle is further complicated by the mixed findings regarding the specific prioritization of issues in light of aspiration levels. Some authors argue that historical aspiration levels are prioritized over social ones (see, for example, Holm, 2017), whereas others posit that social aspiration levels are given priority over historical ones (see, for example, Audia & Brion, 2007). The role of coercive aspiration levels in this prioritization game is theoretically omitted to a great extent, with some scholars recently suspecting that these would actually take precedence over the other two (Salge, 2011; van der Voet & Lems, 2022).

Priority decisions, however, do not happen in a vacuum. Similar to the strategic behaviors of risk-taking, strategic choice, organization change or search (Shinkle, 2012), the process of prioritization is likely to be shaped by internal organizational aspects, such as systems and structures, compensation systems or slack resources (Shinkle, 2012). The organizational reality of public institutions is often characterized by cutback and decline, with such institutions being frequently required to operate with limited resources (Jick & Murray, 1982).

Recognizing this, public administration scholars have extensively studied cutback management theory. Yet the focus has primarily been on the impact of budget cuts and fiscal restraints on search behaviors (van der Voet & Lems, 2022), with the specific mechanism of prioritization being widely sidelined. Few scholars have attempted to address this theoretical gap by proposing that organizations facing financial constraints prioritize issues differently (Greve, 2008). Nonetheless, even with the current body of literature, debates persist on the extent to which budget constraints shape issue prioritization, as well as *why* such mechanism does or does not occur.

A key innovation process that is heavily influenced by budgets is that of digitalization, including eGovernment initiatives (Febiri & Hub, 2021). These can be considered a technological process innovation, a subset of process innovations that aim to improve internal administrative processes within an organization (de Vries et al., 2015). Such organizational benefits add to the salience of digitalization. In fact, digitalization holds the potential for sweeping social transformation, bringing with it cultural (Kasavina, 2019) and governance challenges, particularly concerning privacy and ethics (Bao & Xiang, 2006; Weber, 2015). This, in turn, adds to the urgency of reflecting upon the implications of digitalization across multiple aspects of contemporary reality.

Nowadays, most public sector organizations are already on the path towards becoming more digital, as they recognize the salience and importance of digitalization. Nonetheless, issues related to prioritization of investments due to limited funding persist (Febiri & Hub, 2021). As scholars explore the role of budgets in innovation adoption in the public sector, they recognize that innovation adoption is influenced by various external and internal factors (Naranjo-Gil, 2009). Even so, the fact that budget constraints can have a negative impact on innovation in the public sector is well-established in the literature (Walker & Chaiken, 1982). Allocating organizational resources influences innovation adoption (Kimberly & Evanisko, 1981) and shapes the success of numerous innovations, including eGovernment initiatives. In other words, the development and adoption of these initiatives, on which this dissertation delves upon, substantially relies on the availability of financial resources (Rogers, 2003).

Therefore, it is crucial to explore how the organizational-level variable of budget constraints shapes the prioritization given to eGovernment initiatives and assess the reasons underpinning this mechanism. Equally crucial is to contribute to the debate on the role of information-level variables of aspiration levels in shaping these prioritization decisions by unravelling why public officials may attribute more relevance to a certain aspiration level over other.

1.1. Research gaps & Theoretical Relevance

Further research is essential to gain a thorough understanding of the motives shaping issue prioritization decisions of public officials. Specifically, there is a notable research gap concerning the underlying reasons that drive these choices. Although previous studies have explored the use of aspiration levels as criteria for issue prioritization, ongoing debates persist regarding the specific mechanisms and conditions

that lead to the selection of one aspiration level over others (Audia & Greve, 2006; Greve, 1998; Holm, 2017; Joseph & Gaba, 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2014). Such existing body of research predominantly adopts a quantitative approach in investigating this subject. However, an exploration of the motivations behind these choices necessitates a qualitative approach, which has been consistently lacking in the literature. To address this gap, the present dissertation aims to collect qualitative data by engaging a sample of public officials in Portugal. By adopting a qualitative methodology, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the reasons that shape issue prioritization decisions. This is a significant contribution to the existing literature.

Moreover, most research on performance information use and aspiration levels largely focuses on a few contexts, such as Northern European and Anglo-Saxon countries (Andersen, 2008; Andrews & Brewer, 2013; Askim et al., 2008; Kelman & Friedman, 2009; van der Voet, 2019). To address this gap, this study extends this analysis to the Southern European context, as examining understudied settings can enhance scholarly understanding of specific mechanisms and theories (Avellaneda et al., 2023).

Additionally, the existing literature on budget constraints has predominantly focused on local governments rather than direct organisms of state administration (Perez-Lopez et al., 2015). As a result, there is a research gap in the understanding of how budget constraints shape issue prioritization in direct organisms of state administration. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how budget constraints shape issue prioritization in Directorate-General for Economic Activities (DGAE), an organism within the Portuguese Ministry of the Economy and Maritime Affairs (MEM). This contributes to expanding scholarly knowledge of how resource scarcity impacts public sector decision-making, as such organisms have different organizational characteristics and functions from those of local governments. Direct organisms of state administration currently

represent an understudied setting that could potentially lead to different results from those found in the context of local government, thereby adding to the current bulk of knowledge.

Furthermore, and most importantly, this dissertation intends to offer a theoretical contribution to public administration literature in general and cutback management literature in particular (see, for example, van der Voet, 2019) by endeavoring to enhance the scholarly understanding of the role of budget constraints on issue prioritization decisions within public organizations. It seeks to address the existing gap in empirical research by shedding light on the reasoning and motives, i.e., the *why* driving public officials to take budget constraints into account when making prioritization decisions. By delving into these factors, a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms of this relationship can be established, ultimately contributing to the future development of more complete causal maps. This is made possible by gathering qualitative as opposed to quantitative insights. The latter unravels relationships between variables but falls short in explaining the underlying drivers of such relationships. Indeed, while quantitative methods are valuable for producing factual and generalizable results, they lack the ability to provide in-depth and detailed ‘process data’. In other words, whereas quantitative studies reveal outcomes, only qualitative ones shed light on the underlying processes involved (Rahman, 2016; Steckler et al., 1992). Thus, by employing qualitative methods, researchers can gain profound insights and a more thorough and complete understanding of issue prioritization decisions.

Finally, as innovation adoption and especially that related to digitalization, such as eGovernment initiatives, relates in a complex way to budget constraints (de Vries et al., 2015), the literature could unquestionably gain from a study that contributes to

unraveling the concrete role of financial resources on digitalization initiatives of the public sector.

1.2. Research questions

This dissertation aims to fill existing gaps in the literature by attempting to establish the reasons which motivate public officials' prioritization decisions in terms of historical and social aspiration levels and budget constraints. Hence, this dissertation research questions are the following: *“How do budget constraints shape public officials' decisions to prioritize eGovernment initiatives that are performing below aspiration levels, and what motives drive officials to prioritize such initiatives based on historical versus social aspirations?”*

This dissertation proposes two theoretical expectations. Firstly, it suggests that public officials tend to prioritize eGovernment initiatives when these are performing below *historical* rather than social aspiration levels, based on several motives. This is because historical aspiration levels relate to an organization's own capabilities and resources and therefore it may be more objective to take action so as to restore performance based on this reference point (Greve, 2003). On the contrary, social aspiration levels imply learning from outside parties' experiences which is usually not straightforward (Baum & Ingram, 2002).

Secondly, this dissertation anticipates that when there are budget constraints, public officials tend not to provide reasons to support the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels. That is because public officials are expected to attend to performance below aspiration levels, in line with behavioral theory (Cyert & March, 1992). However, the literature demonstrates that financial constraints

change the prioritization attributed to certain issues (Rowley et al., 2017). As eGovernment initiatives are a specific type of issue, it is expected that eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels will be attended to but prioritized differently under budget constraints.

To investigate the research questions, this dissertation carries out interviews with public officials working at DGAE. Qualitative data is collected to investigate prioritization decisions based on aspiration levels and budget constraints. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather insights from participants, allowing them to elaborate on their responses. Additionally, Experimental Vignette Methodology (EVM) was employed during the second part of the interviews. Original primary data was obtained through online interviews with public officials from DGAE, occupying different positions within the organization and with different tenures. Data is analyzed by means of a thematic analysis.

1.3. Societal Relevance

This dissertation holds significant implications for society, notably by shedding light on how public officials make decisions when faced with limited resources. By providing insights into this decision-making process, this study can help optimizing policymaking across different resource realities (Thesari et al., 2019). This is especially relevant in the context of digitalization issues, as citizens and politicians both expect public institutions to digitize their processes in the near future (Febiri & Hub, 2021), so to enhance the efficiency of service provision.

Furthermore, this research can contribute to greater transparency in decision-making processes, which is critical in a time when citizens are increasingly distrustful of

governing institutions (van Prooijen et al., 2022). eGovernment initiatives, in particular, are known to increase the accessibility of government information to citizens, thereby building transparent relationships between governments and society (Carter & Bélanger, 2005). Therefore, understanding how issue prioritization works in direct organisms of the state administration is unquestionably important considering the societal benefits arising from the implementation of such initiatives. Moreover, helping citizens comprehend why certain issues may not be receiving attention can in itself promote greater accountability and responsiveness in the public sector (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2021), subsequently enhancing trust in public institutions.

Additionally, grasping the dynamics of aspiration levels in performance information can help stakeholders present information in a way that prioritizes urgent issues and prevents them from being overlooked (Ballard, 2019; Brown et al., 2019). Actors seeking to foster digitalization initiatives in government institutions, as they recognize the benefits stemming from doing so (de Vries et al., 2015), may find valuable insights from this dissertation. By examining the reasons that influence the adoption and diffusion of eGovernment initiatives in the public sector, this research offers practical implications and recommendations for effectively implementing and promoting digital transformation. The findings of this dissertation can inform decision-makers and stakeholders involved in driving digitalization efforts, providing them with evidence-based insights into the reasons that facilitate successful adoption and diffusion of digital initiatives. By leveraging the knowledge gained from this study, actors can enhance their strategies and approaches to accelerate the digital transformation of government institutions, ultimately leading to improved public service delivery and greater citizen satisfaction (de Vries et al., 2015).

1.4. Thesis outline

The remainder of this dissertation is structured as follows: after this introduction, comprising the research gaps, research questions, and the contributions of this study, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework, including reviews on behavioral theory, aspiration levels, budget constraints and their relationship with issue prioritization. Subsequently, Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology. The results of this dissertation are presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results, implications, limitations of the study and suggestions for further research. This dissertation ends with Chapter 6, which corresponds to the conclusion.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

The following Chapter is dedicated to presenting the theoretical framework that underpins the research. It discusses behavioral theory and the role of issue prioritization in performance information. Additionally, it delves into the information-level and organization-level factors that shape issue prioritization, including aspiration levels of performance information and budget constraints.

2.1. Behavioral theory and issue prioritization in performance information

The behavioral theory of the firm, as developed by Cyert & March (1992), portrays attention as a key cognitive mechanism in organizational decision-making and change. The optimal maximization of goals is often impeded by cognitive constraints, leading to attention being drawn to dimensions in which performance falls below an aspiration level (Nielsen, 2014). As such, processes of organizational improvement are habitually triggered by the need to enhance goal achievement when performance is perceived as negative (Joseph & Gaba, 2015).

The behavioral theory of the firm has been widely employed in public administration scholarship (Holm, 2017, 2018; Nielsen, 2014; Rutherford & Meier, 2015; Salge, 2011; van der Voet & Lems, 2022) and stands in contrast to the threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al., 1981). The latter posits that decision-makers rely on well-learned or dominant responses when faced with threatening situations resulting from performance below aspiration levels. This results mostly from a cognitive impairment in information processing and constriction of control (Staw et al., 1981). Therefore, according to the threat-rigidity theory, when individuals or organizations perceive a threat, their responses

become less adaptable and more rigid. This can lead to a narrowing of focus and resistance to change, as individuals and organizations fixate on the perceived threat and concentrate on reducing or eliminating it (Staw et al., 1981). It should be acknowledged, nonetheless, that the perceived severity of a threat may affect response rigidity. When the threat level is relatively low, individuals and organizations may be more receptive to alternative strategies and solutions (Staw et al., 1981). In high-threat situations, individuals and organizations may become much more resistant to change and less willing to consider alternative solutions (Staw et al., 1981). The behavioral theory, on the contrary, holds that decision-makers engage in ‘problemistic search’ to find new or innovative solutions when performance is negative. This theory of ‘problemistic search’ has been used to explain various mechanisms (Kim et al., 2015).

The present dissertation adopts the lenses of the behavioral theory since it has been employed in an attempt to decipher decision-makers’ behavioral responses to performance below historical and social aspiration levels, including those of prioritization (Holm, 2018; Nielsen, 2014). Prioritization of goals has been shown to lead to performance improvements, for example in Danish public schools (Holm, 2018).

Some factors are known to influence issue prioritization decisions, both at the organizational and individual level. The ‘organizational structure’ of bureaucratic agencies, for example, has a profound impact on their functioning. This structure is regarded as a form of ‘political control’ as it institutionalizes the issues that necessitate the agency’s attention. The ‘organizational structure’ is thus a pivotal factor in determining bureaucratic agendas and priorities (Bark & Bell, 2019). In the same fashion, the influence of individual characteristics cannot be disregarded, as decision-makers can considerably influence issue prioritization within institutions and significantly impact on policy implementation (Bark & Bell, 2019).

Nonetheless, it is useful and necessary to further studying how information-level factors, notably the aspiration levels of performance information, shape issue prioritization decisions.

2.2. Information-level factors shaping issue prioritization

2.2.1. Aspiration levels of performance information

Central to behavioral theory is the concept of aspiration level. Aspiration levels provide thresholds ascribing success or failure to an organization. Greve (2003) distinguishes between two types of aspiration levels, notably historical and social. Historical aspiration levels use an organization's past performance to assess its current standing. Social aspiration levels make use of performance of peers, the so-called 'reference groups', to then evaluate the performance of a given organization by means of comparisons against the appropriate reference group (Greve, 2003). This can be a similar peer or the highest achiever, based on criteria of geographical or strategic proximity, for example (Baum & Lant, 2003). Besides historical and social aspiration levels, coercive aspirations, such as political targets, are also crucial to consider in the public sector (Salge, 2011).

To better understand the distinctions between historical and social aspiration levels, an illustrative hypothetical example can provide valuable insights. Let us consider a direct organism of state administration, hereby agency A, that aims to evaluate its performance in digitalization processes. To this end, agency A may use two distinct reference points. On the one hand, agency A can assess its performance based on its own past achievements in digitalization. To achieve this aim, it may compare the percentage

of digitalized public services in 2023 to its own performance in 2019 in the same indicator. If the current performance falls below that achieved in 2019, this indicates that the agency is performing below historical aspiration levels in digitalization processes.

On the other hand, the agency can benchmark its performance against similar peers, such as the direct organism of state administration B, hereinafter agency B, also engaged in digitalization initiatives. For this purpose, it may compare the percentage of digitalized public services in 2023 with the performance of agency B in the same indicator. If the performance of agency A is lower than that of agency B, agency A can ascertain that it is performing below social aspiration levels in digitalization processes.

The relationship between these different types of aspiration levels, and whether certain aspirations take precedence over others in the allocation of attention to specific goals, remains a matter of debate. Scholars have proposed various perspectives regarding the role of aspiration levels in performance evaluation. While some argue that aspiration levels are allocated to each performance dimension, resulting in a singular aspiration level that encompasses all aspects of performance (Greve, 1998; Joseph & Gaba, 2015), others posit that social and historical aspirations exert distinct influences on behavior (Audia & Greve, 2006; Joseph & Gaba, 2015).

In the private sector, a number of scholars have argued that social aspirations should take precedence over historical ones, as they provide a benchmark against which an organization's performance can be evaluated against peers (Audia & Brion, 2007). Olsen (2017) investigated the influence of social and historical reference points on citizens' evaluations of public sector services and concluded that social reference points have a greater impact than historical ones. Similarly, Webeck & Nicholson-Crotty (2019) research on professional managers' performance evaluations demonstrates the greater influence of social comparisons over historical ones.

Other authors contend that the impact of different aspirations may depend on the context within which those are evaluated. Kim et al. (2015) recognize the value of incorporating historical and social aspiration levels into performance evaluations. Social and historical aspirations may work in tandem to offer additional feedback to performance evaluation. While social aspirations allow for benchmarking, they often rely on subjective information (Baum & Ingram, 2002). Additionally, interpreting performance through social aspirations can be challenging due to the manifold characteristics of firms in a reference group (Kim et al., 2015). Also, learning from the experiences of others is more challenging than learning from one's own experiences, making the interpretation of social aspirations more complex (Baum & Ingram, 2002). In contrast, historical aspirations are a reflection of a firm's past performance, resources, and capabilities and provide managers with an occasion to reevaluate their effectiveness (Greve, 2003).

In the realm of public sector management, it is theorized that when multiple goals fall below aspiration levels public officials develop, in principle, priority mechanisms. There are several ideas in the literature as to how these may be formed. One example is provided by Cyert & March (1992), who explain that decision-makers prioritize goals by allocating attention to them in a sequential manner, with progress to the next goal contingent on whether performance on the previous goal meets aspirations (Shinkle, 2012). As a result, a hierarchy of goals is established, which can act as a "quasi-resolution" of 'goal conflicts' (Greve, 2008). The process of evaluating performance can be understood as a means of determining which goals to prioritize (Nielsen, 2014).

Holm (2017) posits that when performance information falls below historical aspiration levels, it is given priority. On the other hand, Nielsen (2014) contends that performance information that falls below historical or social aspiration levels is emphasized more.

In light of such findings, illustrating that historical aspiration levels may be a more objective approach to address performance issues as opposed to social aspiration levels, this dissertation expects that the first take precedence over the latter in prioritization decisions. Therefore, this dissertation formulates the following theoretical expectation:

Expectation 1: Public officials tend to prioritize eGovernment initiatives when these are performing below *historical* rather than social aspiration levels, based on several motives.

2.3. Internal organization-level factors shaping issue prioritization

As previously illustrated, differences and similarities between historical and social aspiration levels in the prioritization of issues are still subject to much debate. Nonetheless, this information-level variables are only relevant when analyzed within the organizational contexts in which they operate to shape decisions. As such, more research is equally required on the organizational-level factors impacting issue prioritization decisions. Little is known with regards to whether and, most importantly, *why* the existence or absence of budget constraints change the priority attributed to certain initiatives. Particularly, there are two notable omissions that need to be addressed. First, few studies explicitly research the impact of budget constraints on the prioritization of technological process innovations, particularly eGovernment initiatives, which have received significant attention in public administration literature compared to other types of innovation. Second, research on budget constraints in organizational contexts beyond those of local governments is necessary.

2.3.1. Budget constraints

Writing on cutback management, van der Voet (2019) concludes that the ability of public organizations to innovate during periods of decline is shaped by their adoption of cutback management strategies, which is further influenced by the context of the organization. This research as well as other studies on cutback management make valuable scholarly contributions, but it is essential to form a connection between existing organizational resources within a specific organizational context and other decision-making processes, such as issue prioritization. Recognizing this gap, researchers have examined the behavioral responses of public officials to various internal resource restrictions, particularly budget constraints, and have found that public officials react to these constraints in diverse ways.

Based on behavioral theory, firms and public organizations tend to attend to performance that fails to meet their aspirations when it comes to financial aspects. Budgets are critical in determining managerial reactions to underperformance on financial goals in the private sector. For example, as noted by Greve (2008), shareholders typically prioritize achieving a satisfactory level of financial performance before other issues are addressed. When performance is below aspiration levels on financial goals, organizations may adopt innovative strategies, modify their strategic positioning, or engage in acquisitions (Kim et al., 2015). Research in the private sector also shows that financial goals, typically operationalized as profitability, are more important than any other organizational goals, notably because of their universally accepted characteristics (Shinkle, 2011).

In the public sector, the focus on performance and accountability has been on the rise, in line with New Public Management (NPM) proposals. NPM put public spending on the forefront of performance measures, highlighting both the need to comply with

public spending metrics and the costs and sanctions of failing to do so (van der Voet & Lems, 2022). This is true for both national and local government organizations, wherein managers are encouraged to timely attend to budget targets. Indeed, several governmental organizations have adopted business-oriented techniques such as output budgeting and responsibility accounting (van Helden, 2000) and local governments place a strong emphasis on sound financial management and measurement (Hendriks & Tops, 2003)

Flink & Molina (2021) explore how public officials handle budget constraints and draw on prior research indicating that cost reductions necessitate distinct organizational strategies. The authors cite Meier and O'Toole's (2009), which found that managers make strategic decisions when facing budget cuts, notably prioritizing core programs and reducing spending on non-essential ones. This approach helps organizations maintain the core services they provide while reducing costs elsewhere.

According to Lassey et al. (1986), budget reductions have a significant impact on county public services. The study suggests that budget cutbacks lead to a shift in service priorities, with environmental activities, pollution control, and natural resources receiving the greatest cuts, while judicial, law enforcement, and corrections experience relatively few cutbacks.

Other authors find that, when faced with budget deficits, states with 'strict fiscal institutions' tend to respond with tax increases and spending cuts. Also, political factors can influence how quickly states respond to unexpected deficits, which in turn impacts issue prioritization decisions of public officials (Poterba, 1994). Similar to these findings, Grembi et al. (2012) observe that political incentives play a crucial role in local government responses to imposed fiscal constraints. The study shows that political economy factors are important in the process of fiscal adjustment, particularly in cities with political failures. These results imply that budget constraints have a considerable

impact on public officials' decision-making, especially concerning issue prioritization. The study asserts that officials may prioritize policies that benefit their political careers, even if other performance dimensions are negative.

According to Shi (2019), during fiscal crises, state governments tend to opt for budget solutions that are less visible to the public, less disruptive to operations and financing, and easier to implement. As a result, public sector employment (PSE) reduction is often chosen as a way to manage budget shortfalls, as it is a relatively easy and less visible option.

Finally, in their study, Warner et al. (2021) examine how local governments cope with budget constraints and highlight the challenges unique to their "publicness" that restrict their response options. The authors introduce the term "pragmatic municipalism" to describe the practice of prioritizing the maintenance of services in response to financial difficulties. The authors observe that local governments strike a balance between the pressure of fiscal stress and community needs and tend to preserve public services by utilizing alternative service delivery and revenue tools.

Innovation processes in the public sector, including innovation adoption and diffusion, are known to be especially influenced by the availability of financial resources (de Vries et al., 2015). Particularly in the context of eGovernment initiatives, financial resources assume a critical role (Bhatti et al., 2011).

Based on these findings, as well as the earlier insights regarding the influence of aspiration levels and budget constraints on issue prioritization decisions, this dissertation proposes that the existence of budget constraints will reduce the inclination of public officials to prioritize eGovernment initiatives. In other words, this study suggests that limited financial resources may lead public officials to perceive eGovernment initiatives as less deserving of prioritization. Indeed, according to behavioral theory (Cyert & March,

1992), public officials would address underperformance, but financial constraints can alter the prioritization of certain issues (Rowley et al., 2017). Since eGovernment initiatives fall into this issue category, it is anticipated that those performing below desired levels will still be addressed but prioritized differently when budget constraints are present.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the impact of social or historical aspiration levels on this mechanism is not expected to differ. What matters is the presence of negative performance, i.e., falling below a desired level, rather than the specific reference point used in the case of budget constraints and prioritization of underperformance. Therefore, this dissertation formulates the following theoretical expectation:

Expectation 2: In the presence of budget constraints, public officials tend *not* to provide reasons to support the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels.

The next chapter presents the methodology utilized in this dissertation to explore and examine the research questions and theoretical expectations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following Chapter presents the research methodology employed in this study. It provides details on the research setting and research design, including the sample selection and operationalization process. Furthermore, the chapter outlines the data collection process, including the invitation to participate, data collection methods, and the collected data. Finally, the method of data analysis, validity and reliability are discussed in this chapter.

3.1. Research setting: Innovation Processes and eGovernment in the public sector

In the public sector, innovation processes can be understood as those involving the implementation of new ideas or practices in an organization (de Vries et al., 2015). These processes encompass the development, acceptance, and dissemination of innovations among organizational members (de Vries et al., 2015).

The process of innovation generation entails the creation of novel ideas or practices that are unique to the organization. It requires exploring and developing innovative solutions to address specific challenges. On the other hand, innovation adoption refers to the decision-making process within an organization that determines the acceptance or rejection of a new idea or practice. This process includes an evaluation of the potential benefits and drawbacks associated with the innovation, considering its compatibility with the organizational context (de Vries et al., 2015). Innovation adoption is a complex process (Rogers, 2003), that offers several benefits to public organizations.

Firstly, innovation can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of public services, leading to improved outcomes for citizens. Secondly, it can foster citizen engagement and

satisfaction by introducing new approaches that cater to their needs. Moreover, embracing innovation can contribute to enhanced organizational performance and competitiveness, allowing public organizations to adapt to evolving demands. Lastly, it can enhance the legitimacy and reputation of the public organizations, fostering trust and confidence among stakeholders (de Vries et al., 2015).

This dissertation specifically focuses on technology innovation processes within the public sector, which involve the integration of new technologies to enhance organizational operations. Technological process innovations can be defined as a subset of process innovations that aim to improve internal administrative processes within an organization (de Vries et al., 2015). Notable examples of technology innovation processes in the public sector include eGovernment initiatives (de Vries et al., 2015).

eGovernment initiatives play a vital role in improving citizen access to government services and information. They offer increased convenience and accessibility for citizens while potentially enhancing the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of public services. Additionally, eGovernment initiatives contribute to citizen engagement and satisfaction, ultimately benefiting both citizens and the government. Modernizing and streamlining government operations through eGovernment initiatives can enhance the government's reputation and legitimacy (de Vries et al., 2015).

Examples of eGovernment initiatives include the United Kingdom's Government Digital Service (GDS), designed to simplify and digitize government services, resulting in user-friendly interfaces (Government Digital Service, n.d.). In Estonia, the e-Residency program provides individuals with a secure digital identity, granting them access to various government services and facilitating e-business activities (Government of Estonia, n.d.). The MyGov mobile app in India, on the other hand, allows citizens to

access government services, receive updates, and provide feedback, enhancing citizen-government communication (Government of India, n.d.).

3.2. Research setting: Portugal

3.2.1. The Portuguese economy

In the 1970s, Portugal faced an economic decline, but made a comeback in the mid-1980s after joining the European Economic Community. The country outperformed the EU average in terms of economic growth during the 1990s (Melo & Mota, 2020). However, the late 1990s brought economic challenges, which were further intensified by the 2008 economic crisis (Melo & Mota, 2020). This resulted in a situation of high unemployment and mass emigration. As a response, Portugal sought financial assistance through the Economic Adjustment Program in collaboration with the Troika consortium in 2011 (Melo & Mota, 2020). The negative economic effects of this action still linger on the Portuguese economy until this day.

3.2.2. The Portuguese budget process

Portugal follows a semi-presidential system with presidential elections held every five years. Taking center stage, the Prime Minister, chosen from the majority party or coalition, assumes leadership in the '230-seat parliament' (OECD, 2016). By October 15th, the Prime Minister presents the budget proposal, awaiting the parliament's approval before the beginning of December (OECD, 2016). The Budget and Finance Committee conducts discussions and welcomes public hearings, while the Parliamentary Technical

Support Unit (UTAO) lends its analytical expertise (OECD, 2016). Although the parliament holds the power to amend the budget, few amendments find their way through. In 2012, recognizing UTAO's contributions, the parliament not only decided to retain its role but also expanded its team from a duo to a sextet (OECD, 2016).

3.2.3. Performance information in the Portuguese administrative system

The administrative system in Portugal reflects elements of the 'Napoleonic' model, including a centralized state, legalistic administrative culture, politicized relationships between ministers and top public managers, and a seniority-based approach to human resources management (Melo & Mota, 2020). In line with the principles of NPM, the Portuguese public sector implemented reforms that emphasize performance management tools. These include objective-based management, strategic and business plans, and performance appraisal (Melo & Mota, 2020). Examples of these efforts comprise the creation of 'Activity Plans and Reports' in 1987 and the establishment of the 'Integrated Evaluation System for Public Administration' (SIADAP) in 2004 (Melo & Mota, 2020). Nonetheless, there is limited integration of performance information within the sector, with measurement and reporting driven more by regulatory requirements than genuine policymaking or management objectives (Melo & Mota, 2020). The minimal integration of performance measurements into policy information suggests a lack of comprehensive performance management practices (Melo & Mota, 2020). Performance information is primarily used for monitoring the performance of top managers and subordinates and for internal accountability purposes, rather than promoting learning and problem identification. This restricted utilization of performance management practices may partly explain the limited progress in the achievement of desired policy outcomes (Melo & Mota, 2020).

3.2.4. Justification for the Selection of Portugal

Portugal was selected specifically because studies on cutback management, including budget constraints, are typically conducted in countries that are not often in a position of acute financial vulnerability, notably Northern European countries (see, for example, van der Voet, 2019). However, the vulnerability of southern European countries, including Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain, makes them interesting cases for studying how public management decisions are shaped by extreme fiscal austerity (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2014). Indeed, research has shown that in such countries, fiscal austerity has hindered the ability to ‘bridge the gap’ between cutback management and modernization reforms (Di Mascio & Natalini, 2014). It is possible that issue prioritization, similar to reform decisions, is also influenced by this particular fiscal context.

Furthermore, the administrative landscape in Portugal, characterized by a centralized state, politicized relationships, and inadequate utilization of performance information, differs from the administrative realities of Northern European countries and others where performance management practices are more widespread (see, for example, van der Voet & Lems, 2022). The particular Portuguese administrative reality may lead to different drivers of prioritization for eGovernment initiatives compared to such Northern European countries more often studied in public administration literature. Therefore, studying Portugal can contribute significantly to the field.

3.2.5. Directorate-General for Economic Activities

Directorate-General for Economic Activities (DGAE) is a central, direct organism of the state administration that operates under the MEM. It has administrative autonomy for routine management acts only, but not full financial autonomy (Assembleia da

República, 2004). DGAE follows a hierarchical structure led by a Director General and supported by a Deputy Director General, both high-ranking officials. The organization's structure was determined by Order-in-Council 316/2015, issued on September 30, which established the maximum number of flexible units and the powers of their respective nuclear organic units. Additionally, Order-in-Council 11218/2015, published on October 7, created 13 flexible organic units, and established their respective powers (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-c).

DGAE's mission is to support the development of a more competitive and innovative institutional environment. DGAE achieves this by promoting, designing, implementing, disseminating, and evaluating trade and services policies. Additionally, DGAE is responsible for coordinating bilateral, European, and international relations within the MEM (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-c).

In the Portuguese central administration, of which DGAE is part of, 64.5% of the 741,127 job positions were held by workers aged 45 and above, as of June 30, 2022. In the same period, more than half of the public administration workforce held higher education qualifications, while 26.5% had completed secondary education and 18.3% had only completed basic education. Approximately 12.1% had educational attainment beyond a bachelor's degree (8.9% with a master's degree and 3.2% with a doctoral degree) (Direção-Geral da Administração e do Emprego Público, 2022).

3.2.6. Justification for the Selection of DGAE

Directorate-General for Economic Activities (DGAE) was chosen as the case-study for several reasons. Firstly, DGAE was chosen because it was previously responsible for overseeing digitalization activities and specifically those related to the economy before Prime Minister António Costa placed Digitalization under his

supervision (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-a). DGAE has numerous responsibilities, including contributing to the definition, coordination, and promotion of sectoral policies related to trade and services; monitoring and evaluating the implementation of resulting measures; monitoring and evaluating the execution of measures derived from public policies aimed at economic activities; promoting and participating in the development of legislative and regulatory frameworks; proposing measures to create economic value; promoting the adoption of policies and regulations aimed at administrative simplification and reducing or eliminating contextual costs for economic agents; ensuring national intervention in the adoption of international and European Union measures in the field of economic public policies, including the transposition of directives and the application of regulations; among others (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-d). As a result, DGAE must oftentimes prioritize tasks. This implies that public officials at DGAE possess decision-making abilities to evaluate the presented issue prioritization scenarios, and the questions and answers provided will approximate real scenarios due to the necessity of making choices, thereby contributing to ecological validity (Kihlstrom, 2021).

Additionally, given the nature of DGAE as a direct organism of the State administration, it lacks financial autonomy. Consequently, the inclusion of hypothetical budget constraints in the scenarios could reflect realistic situations. This aspect further enhances the ecological validity of the study.

Finally, the selection of DGAE is motivated by the fact that most literature focuses on local governments. Therefore, studying an organism of the direct state administration is crucial to determine whether the drivers and mechanisms shaping issue prioritization decisions are consistent across both local governments and other entities with distinct characteristics. This contributes to building a more complete theory of issue prioritization.

3.2.7. Digitalization and eGovernment in Portugal

Introduced on March 5, 2020, 'The Action Plan for Digital Transition', approved through Council of Ministers Resolution No. 30/2020 of April 21 (Diário da República, 2020), reflects the defined strategy for digital transition and encompasses the government's vision in this domain (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-b). With 12 measures, the plan is structured around three main pillars, notably digital empowerment of people, the digital transformation of companies and the digitalization of the State (Direção-Geral das Atividades Económicas, n.d.-b; ePortugal, 2020a).

On the digitalization of the State, several measures have been proposed, including the e-Residency Program, the Digitalization of the 25 most frequently used public services, the Enhancement of digital services for internationalization on the ePortugal portal, a Cloud Strategy for Public Administration, and the Simplification of the hiring of information and communication technology services by the Public Administration (ePortugal, 2020a).

Furthermore, the 'Strategy for Innovation and Modernization of the State and Public Administration 2020-2023', approved by the Portuguese government, seeks to enhance administrative modernization with the goal of improving services for citizens and businesses. The strategy encompasses four main areas, notably investment in human resources, development of management capabilities, leveraging technology, and enhancing citizen engagement. It comprises 14 strategic objectives aligned with each area (ePortugal, 2020b).

3.2.8. Justification for the Selection of eGovernment

The choice to focus on eGovernment as an issue stems from its popularity as a public administration practice, driven by the numerous benefits it offers, such as increased access to services and transparency of procedures (de Vries et al., 2015). These benefits underscore the importance of implementing eGovernment initiatives and, therefore, the significance of studying their prioritization. It is essential to ensure that these initiatives do not go unnoticed and to understand the reasons behind any lack of attention they receive.

3.3. Research design

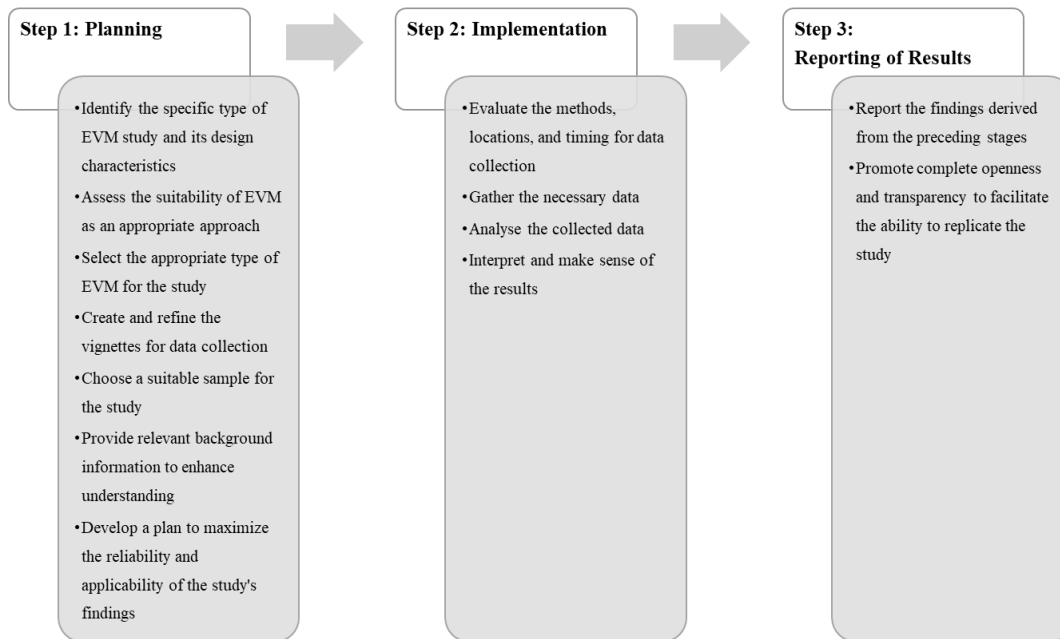
This research follows that employed by Di Teodoro (2022). Accordingly, the research design for this study includes the use of semi-structured interviews and Experimental Vignette Methodology (EVM).

Semi-structured interviews are a method that utilizes an interview guide with flexible questions to address the research objectives. Unlike rigidly scripted interviews, semi-structured interviews provide the interviewer with the freedom to explore relevant ideas that arise during the conversation, while still maintaining a focused approach (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This facilitates a richer understanding of the topic being assessed. One key advantage of semi-structured interviews is their ability to collect rich, in-depth qualitative data that can possibly complement quantitative data, providing a comprehensive perspective (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The semi-structured interviews of this dissertation are conducted to collect qualitative data on the experiences and perceptions of participants related to their issue prioritization decisions. Qualitative

data analysis involves the process of deriving meaning from various data sources such as conversational data, images, observations, and interviews. It includes coding field notes, identifying relationships, patterns, and themes (Lester et al., 2020). The benefits of qualitative data encompass flexibility, contextualization, capturing participant perspectives, iterative refinement, theory development, and enhancing validity (Lester et al., 2020). This dissertation gathers original, primary data stemming from the online semi-structured interviews conducted with public officials at DGAE.

This dissertation also incorporates EVM-based questions in the semi-structured interviews. EVM is a research approach employed to investigate decision-making and judgments by exposing participants to hypothetical scenarios that manipulate key variables. EVM is widely applied in management and related fields, specifically for exploring decision-making within organizational contexts (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). To establish the EVM framework in this dissertation, the process outlined by the Aguinis & Bradley (2014) is adopted and implemented. An overview of this process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. *Implementation process of EVM*



Source: Aguinis & Bradley (2014). Slightly adapted by the dissertation's author.

In this dissertation, participants are presented with four hypothetical scenarios comprising information on historical and social aspiration levels of eGovernment initiatives and budget constraints, resembling a within-person design. This type of design enables within-participant comparisons and fosters a comprehensive understanding of individual decision-making processes (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

This study employs one variant of EVM, known as 'paper people studies', which focuses on participants' explicit responses to hypothetical scenarios, collected as qualitative data. This type of studies is particularly valuable for evaluating specific and exact processes and outcomes, as participants have the knowledge to and ability for the provision of information regarding their decision-making (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

Incorporating EVM into the semi-structured interviews was chosen due to the numerous advantages of the method. EVM grants researchers control over independent

variables, allowing for the inclusion of relevant factors. This control facilitates the testing of causal mechanisms that may otherwise pose challenges. Moreover, EVM enables the ethical examination of sensitive topics by designing tailored hypothetical scenarios to address such issues (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Additionally, EVM is well-suited for studying implicit processes and outcomes, which is adequate for the research objective of this dissertation as it aims to gain an understanding of underlying reasons and motives. Finally, EVM facilitates the analysis of individual decision-making processes even with small participant groups (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

3.3.1. Sample selection

The sample of 8 Senior Technicians and 1 Head of Unit used in this study was selected based on convenience¹. Convenience sampling refers to sampling methods in research where a sample is selected from a conveniently accessible source rather than through random selection from the target population (Andrade, 2020). Convenience samples offer benefits such as easy and quick acquisition, cost-effectiveness, suitability for exploratory research, and access to hard-to-reach populations. However, there are drawbacks associated with convenience sampling, including potential lack of representativeness, biases towards specific characteristics or groups, limited diversity, and restricted external validity (Andrade, 2020).

¹ The author of the dissertation, Catarina Mantas, had previously interned at DGAE for approximately one year.

3.3.2. Operationalization

In this study, the operationalization of eGovernment focuses on a specific indicator defined by the European Commission. The Commission has selected a range of indicators grouped thematically to capture key dimensions of the European information society. These indicators encompass various aspects such as the telecom sector, broadband, mobile, internet usage, internet services, eGovernment, eCommerce, eBusiness, ICT skills, and research and development (European Commission, n.d.). These indicators serve as a basis for comparing progress across European countries and over time. One particular indicator within the eGovernment dimension is “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months – All individuals aged 16-74 (in % of internet users)” (European Commission, n.d.). This indicator measures the percentage of internet users who have used the internet in the past year to interact with public authorities. This interaction includes activities such as “obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms” as stated in the European Commission’ official website.

The operationalization of historical and social aspiration levels in this dissertation adheres to the conceptualization found in the literature. It also aligns with how eGovernment is operationalized in this study. In this regard, hypothetical values are assigned to the indicator used in this dissertation to represent eGovernment. These values demonstrate negative performance, indicating a performance below aspiration levels. For historical aspiration levels, the comparison is made with one’s own past performance, while for social aspiration levels, the comparison is made with peers’ performance.

Budget constraints can be operationalized through staff reductions, as shown in previous literature on how budget constraints impact staffing changes in organizations (Rutherford & van der Voet, 2019). This is relevant to the current study as it highlights

the potential for budget constraints to affect an organization’s workforce composition, and therefore its ability to prioritize certain issues based on staffing needs. The example of the state of Rio de Janeiro also demonstrates how administrative resources, besides personnel, can be cut during times of economic crisis, leading to reductions in essential services and programs (Zanini et al., 2021). Hence, this dissertation operationalizes budget constraints as a reduction in administrative resources more generally. An overview of the operationalization of the main concepts used in this dissertation is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Operationalization of dissertation’s concepts*

Concept		Indicator
Aspiration levels	Historical	In 2023, Portugal’s percentage for the indicator “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months” is 47%, down from 63% in 2016.
	Social	In 2023, Portugal ranks 21 out of 27 EU countries in the indicator “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months”, placing it approx. in the bottom 20%.
Budget	Without budget constraints	Today, your organization can hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work
	With budget constraints	Today, your organization cannot hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work
Issue	eGovernment	The percentage of internet users aged 16-74 who have used the internet to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months. Includes obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms.

3.4. Data collection

3.4.1. Invitation to participate in the study

Before undertaking the interviews for this research project, public officials working at DGAE were personally invited to participate on the April 28, 2023. In total, 11 public officials at DGAE expressed interest in participating and were provided with a formal invitation via email accompanied by an informed consent form on May 2, 2023 (please refer to Appendix A for the formal invitation). The invitation provided further details about the interview procedure, including background information and anticipated interview duration. Those interested were reassured that their confidentiality would be safeguarded and that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. In addition, future participants were informed that no risk was involved in participating in the study, no compensation was guaranteed, and the data collected was going to be utilized solely for research purposes and thus not shared with any third parties (please refer to Appendix B for the informed consent form). Permission to record the interviews was also requested.

Ethical considerations were taken into account, particularly in relation to data protection, participant anonymity, and voluntary participation. This dissertation safeguards data through secure storage and anonymization to maintain confidentiality and privacy. Anonymity safeguards participants by removing identifying information from research findings, preventing potential harm. The collected qualitative data is presented in the dissertation in a way that respects the privacy of the interviewees, using pseudonyms “Interviewee 1”, “Interviewee 2”, etc. Respect for autonomy entails obtaining informed consent, clarifying the study’s purpose, risks, benefits, and data usage, while allowing participants to withdraw freely. Upholding these ethical principles ensures the rights and well-being of participants.

From all the 11 public officials who received the formal invitation and agreed to be interviewed, only 9 public officials from DGAE took part in the interviews. Due to unforeseen professional and personal circumstances, the participation of the remaining 2 public officials in the interview process was no longer possible at the last minute. Table 2 summarizes the contacts made and provides a descriptive overview of actual and prospective participants.

Table 2. *Descriptive overview of actual and prospective participants*

Interviewee	Status	Functional Title
1	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
2	Conducted in MS Teams	Head of Unit
3	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
4	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
5	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
6	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
7	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
8	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
9	Conducted in MS Teams	Senior Technician
10	Accepted, then declined	Head of Unit
11	Accepted, then declined	IT Specialist

3.4.2. Data Collection Process

The qualitative data collection process started on May 3, 2023, and finished on May 12, 2023. The interviews had an approximate average duration of 40 minutes, with a minimum duration of 30 minutes and a maximum of 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams and recorded for transcription purposes.

Following the study of Di Teodoro (2022), this dissertation divides the interviews into several parts. Firstly, participants are asked general questions about performance,

prioritization, and their organization's budget, as well as whether they are familiar with the concept of eGovernment.

Secondly, employing EVM, participants are randomly presented with the first two hypothetical scenarios (each corresponding to a PowerPoint slide in the presentation used during the online interview in Microsoft Teams. The slides can be found in Appendix C of this dissertation). Randomization was conducted in Microsoft Excel using the RAND function. Each scenario presented information on negative eGovernment performance as given by one indicator, that varied in terms of the aspiration levels tied to it - historical or social. The scenarios have either budget constraints or no budget constraints. Participants are asked whether they would prioritize eGovernment initiatives if they were in the position of a hypothetical colleague and had to write a policy recommendation. Interviewees have to present reasons justifying their choices and are given time to expand on their answers. After the first two scenarios, the single block of washout questions, comprising several questions randomly distributed through Microsoft Excel, is presented. Next, the last two randomly distributed remaining scenarios are displayed.

Thirdly, participants are presented with one table (corresponding to a PowerPoint slide), displaying two aspiration levels – historical and social – tied to the eGovernment indicator. Participants are instructed to indicate their preference for one of these options and must provide justifications to strengthen the case for prioritizing eGovernment initiatives.

Finally, participants are given a few minutes to discuss any other additional matters deemed pertinent. The interview flow can be found in Appendix D, and a complete overview of the interview questions can be found in Appendix E of this dissertation.

The interviews were conducted in Portuguese. Therefore, the data was collected in Portuguese on a first stage and subsequently translated to English by the author, Catarina Mantas, a native Portuguese speaker.

3.4.3. Collected Data

High-quality qualitative data was collected through the semi-structured interviews. The interviews involved participants responding to four scenarios. The total number of observations for this study was 36, with a sample size of 9 participants. All participants are public officials at DGAE. In this study, public officials are understood as individuals who establish an employment relationship with a public employer in the public administration. This relationship is formed through a bilateral act between the public employer entity, acting on behalf of the State, and the individual. Public officials work in a subordinate capacity and receive remuneration for their services. The employment contract can be of an indefinite-term or fixed-term nature, with both definite and indefinite durations being possible. In this dissertation, this definition includes the careers of Senior Technician, IT Specialist, Technical Assistant, Intermediate-level Technician, Administrative Staff, Head of Unit, Intermediate-level Manager and Senior Manager (Direção-Geral da Administração e do Emprego Público, 2014).

Due to privacy and ethical concerns, the transcripts of the interviews are not shared. However, relevant insights and significant quotes are included to test the two expectations developed in this dissertation.

3.5. Method of Data Analysis

The analysis of data follows a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a widely employed qualitative approach (Lester et al., 2020). This inductive process is specifically designed to identify and analyze patterns of meaning in data by deriving codes and themes from the data based on identifiable relationships (Lester et al., 2020). Thematic analysis aims to explore participants' experiences and perspectives comprehensively, generating detailed descriptions of social phenomena (Lester et al., 2020).

To prepare data for the thematic analysis, this dissertation follows the approach given in Lester et al. (2020) which includes organizing data by gathering interviews' recordings and converting them into observational notes. This dissertation creates such notes using Microsoft Word. As mentioned by the authors Lester et al. (2020), a structured naming protocol is used for each file in order to create a data catalog that includes details such as data source, storage location, creator, and collection date. This phase allows for the establishment of the data corpus, facilitating the integration of the data set into MAXQDA 2022 (14-days free-trial version), the qualitative data analysis software employed (Lester et al., 2020). To establish the themes and codes, this dissertation adopts the six-step methodology outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Further details regarding the specific themes and codes can be found in Appendix F, Thematic Map and Appendix G, Codebook.

This dissertation's author, Catarina Mantas, generated the transcripts herself. Such practice is useful as it allows researchers to familiarize with the data and gain a deeper understanding of participant perspectives, thereby facilitating subsequent analysis (Lester et al., 2020). The method for transcription utilized is *Verbatim*. *Verbatim* transcripts serve a critical role in thematic analysis by providing a detailed and accurate record of conversations, enabling the identification of patterns, relationships, and themes, capturing

participants' utterances in their entirety, including fillers, pauses, and nonverbal cues (Lester et al., 2020). This ensures that the nuances of participants' experiences are captured, promoting accurate interpretation and analysis (Lester et al., 2020).

This approach is deemed appropriate for evaluating interview transcripts and uncovering the causal mechanisms behind public officials' decisions on issue prioritization.

3.6. Validity and Reliability

In scientific research, both internal and external validity are pivotal in ensuring the quality and generalizability of study findings. In this study, internal validity plays a crucial role in establishing a relationship between budget constraints and aspiration levels, on the one hand, and issue prioritization, on the other. The use of semi-structured interviews, including the EVM method, aims to accurately capture this intended relationship between variables (Andrade, 2020).

The ecological validity aspect of internal validity is important to consider. Ecological validity evaluates how well a study captures real-life behaviors (Kihlstrom, 2021). Lack of ecological validity compromises results' generalizability, reducing their value for decision-making. Since the experimental conditions of the four EVM scenarios resemble reality, the internal validity of the study is high, as the scenarios adequately represent the real-world situation being investigated (Kihlstrom, 2021).

On the other hand, external validity focuses on the generalizability of study findings beyond the specific sample to other populations, settings, or variables (Andrade, 2020). The convenience sample used in this study can provide valuable insights and maintain high internal validity, considering the trustworthiness of the findings. Yet it is

necessary to recognize the limitations in terms of external validity (Andrade, 2020). The convenience sample may not fully represent populations with different characteristics, making generalization of the results beyond the sample challenging (Andrade, 2020). Therefore, there are limitations in generalizing the findings to broader contexts (Andrade, 2020). Indeed, the generalizability of findings obtained from convenience sampling is limited to the specific population that was conveniently accessible (Andrade, 2020). Nonetheless, EVM's has the capacity to reach diverse samples outside conventional laboratory settings which can moderately contribute to addressing external validity concerns (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Still, overall, this dissertation has low external validity.

The following section presents the findings and analysis derived from the study, shedding light on the outcomes and interpretations of the research.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

The following Chapter presents the results and analysis that aim to uncover the motives and reasons underlying the prioritization choices of aspiration levels and eGovernment initiatives in the presence or absence of budget constraints. The analysis adopts a thematic approach, focusing on the identification and interpretation of key themes to gain a thorough understanding of issue prioritization decisions.

4.1. Thematic Analysis

This dissertation seeks to address two research questions, notably “How do budget constraints shape public officials’ decisions to prioritize eGovernment initiatives that are performing below aspiration levels, and what motives drive officials to prioritize such initiatives based on historical versus social aspirations?”. To achieve this, two theoretical expectations were formulated. Expectation 1 reads that “Public officials tend to prioritize eGovernment initiatives when these are performing below *historical* rather than social aspiration levels, based on several motives.”. Expectation 2 states that “In the presence of budget constraints, public officials tend *not* to provide reasons to support the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels.”.

To assess and evaluate these theoretical expectations, a thorough thematic analysis was conducted, resulting in the identification of four major themes, each encompassing several categories. The four identified themes, along with their corresponding categories, offer valuable insights into various aspects related to the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives and aspiration levels. The findings provide a thorough understanding of the reasons influencing issue prioritization decisions, contributing to existing knowledge in the field.

Theme 3 contributes to addressing the first research question and aligns with theoretical expectation 2. It delves into the reasons underpinning how and why public officials prioritize eGovernment initiatives under budget constraints. Theme 4, on the other hand, primarily focuses on answering the second research question and corresponds to theoretical expectation 1. It explores the motives underlying the prioritization of one aspiration level over the other. Themes 1 and 2 do not directly address the research questions but offer important contextual and background knowledge. Such knowledge serves to situate the study within the organizational context and the perspectives of the public officials, thus acting as a foundation for their reasoning and decision-making processes in terms of issue prioritization decisions and the choice of aspiration levels. Themes 1 and 2 were developed based on the first, general questions of the semi-structured interviews. Themes 3 and 4 were developed based on the scenarios established through EVM. A thematic map illustrating the relationship between the themes and categories is given in Appendix F. Additionally, a representation of the relationship between themes, research questions and theoretical expectations is provided for in Table 3. For a comprehensive overview of the identified themes and categories, please refer to Appendix G comprising the codebook used for the purposes of this dissertation.

Table 3. *Relationship between themes, research questions and expectations*

Themes	Research Question	Theoretical Expectation
3	How do budget constraints shape public officials' decisions to prioritize eGovernment initiatives that are performing below aspiration levels?	In the presence of budget constraints, public officials tend <i>not</i> to provide reasons to support the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels.
4	What motives drive officials to prioritize such initiatives based on historical versus social aspirations?	Public officials tend to prioritize eGovernment initiatives when these are performing below <i>historical</i> rather than social aspiration levels, based on several motives.

4.1.1. Theme 1 Budget Constraints and Decision-Making

The thematic analysis uncovered that budget constraints impact decision-making with different magnitudes for different participants. Budget constraints translate into different resource constraints as perceived by the respondents, notably in the key domains of education activities and personnel.

4.1.1.1. Magnitude of Impact on Decision-Making

The analysis revealed diverse perspectives among the respondents regarding the magnitude of impact of budget constraints on decision-making. The majority of participants (Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 9) acknowledged that budget constraints have a *high impact* on decision-making. They

expressed that their everyday work or tasks are greatly influenced by limitations in budgetary resources. Interviewee 8, for instance, provided insights into the challenges faced in direct public administration, stating:

“I’ve had experience both in direct and indirect public administration. In this case, we are talking about direct public administration where there is a great constraint in the general directorates. The planning and the tasks that are intended to be allocated to the service sometimes depend very much on the budget and are very limited due to the budget, no doubt. It’s because we don’t have our own funds.” (Interviewee 8)

In contrast, a smaller number of respondents (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 6) perceived budget constraints as having a *moderate impact* on decision-making. They indicated that adjustments in response to resource limitations are necessary but not significantly disruptive. Interviewee 1, for example, stated that budget limitations do not have a negative impact on work on a regular basis in the current role at DGAE. *“In light of my current work at DGAE, it [budget] doesn’t negatively impact my work on a regular basis”* (Interviewee 1, parentheses by the thesis author). Interviewee 2 also emphasized that the availability of resources, particularly human resources, is more influenced by the national public administration’s recruitment policy rather than the budget: *“The resources we have here, in the case of human resources, are not so much to do with the budget but more to do with the national public administration’s policy of recruitment. But for other issues it influences”* (Interviewee 2).

Interestingly, only one respondent, Interviewee 7, argued that budget constraints have *no impact* on decision-making in their current functions. However, Interviewee 7

acknowledged that having larger budgets could bring benefits to the exercise of their duties. Nevertheless, the limited impact of budget constraints in their International Services functions was attributed to difficulties in recruitment within the public administration, in line with the views of Interviewee 2, rather than budgetary factors:

“No, it [budget] doesn't, it doesn't apply in this case in our International Services functions. Of course, if we had more resources... and we needed to have more resources and I have already reported this, and the Directors are aware of this lack of resources. But the issue is that it has not been possible to recruit in the public administration. It is complicated, it is not a question of the budget” (Interviewee 7, parentheses added by the thesis author).

4.1.1.2. Key Domains of Budget Constraints

The analysis highlighted how budget constraints translate into different resource constraints, notably in the key domains of *education activities* and *personnel*. *Education activities* were identified as a domain heavily influenced by budgetary limitations, as expressed by several participants (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 9). The discussion on *education activities* highlighted how budget constraints translate into limitations in training initiatives and professional development opportunities. Interviewee 3 provided valuable insights into the consequences of budget restrictions on logistics training and the formulation of legislation:

“There was a training program that we really wanted to have in logistics. And for budgetary reasons, unfortunately, it won't be possible. It is an area that is very important for us, the issue of construction legislation and the transposition of directives and how all this is formulated, it is very important that we have solid bases. There are matters that we need to be refreshing, consolidating, getting to know better and that sometimes it's not possible due to budgetary issues. And that would help us a lot in the functions that we were going to perform. And then there is also the issue, for example, of traveling, attending meetings, attending conferences, etc. Sometimes it is important for us to have direct contact with the subjects” (Interviewee 3).

Likewise, Interviewee 6 emphasized how budget constraints limit the possibility of participating in training and international events:

“It can influence in the sense of being able to participate in trainings or participate in some conferences... Not having such a large budget for travel... The ability to pay to participate in trainings or events of a more international nature” (Interviewee 6).

The analysis also revealed the significance of *personnel* in the context of budget constraints, as highlighted by various respondents (Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 9). The discussions of *personnel* centered around staffing constraints and skills shortages. Interviewee 5 emphasized the need for budget availability

to address equipment and human resource requirements, including career reviews and bonuses:

“We need budget availability for equipment, for human resources. Even for career reviews and bonuses now that careers are unfrozen again. And it makes a difference, for example, to see central public administration and public administration with financial independence, for example, which are much more able to attract human resources because of this financial independence” (Interviewee 5).

Interviewee 9 pointed out the influence of budget limitations on the size of the legal staff, noting, *“At this moment, the legal staff is good, but in the past, it was already influenced by the fact that I was the only legal staff member”* (Interviewee 9). Interviewee 9 likewise noted that the public sector oftentimes has difficulties in attracting the right talent, stating, *“The big problem of public administration is to hire the right personnel”* (Interviewee 9).

Overall, the findings highlight that budget constraints significantly impact decision-making, and that budget constraints often translate into limitations in the key domains of education activities and personnel.

4.1.2. Theme 2 Recognition of eGovernment Importance

The thematic analysis revealed that participants recognize the importance of eGovernment, highlighting its benefits and salience. The acknowledgement of such benefits and salience is also grounded on respondents' individual characteristics, notably their personal preferences for digitalization and public service motivation.

4.1.2.1. Benefits of Digitalization

Efficiency gains were recognized by several participants (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 8) who emphasized the potential for facilitating tasks, saving time, and improving processes. Interviewee 8 expressed the need for effective facilitation and speeding up tasks that often involve physical travel:

“[...] time is money and if we can effectively facilitate or speed up certain types of tasks that often involve physical travel to certain types of places, then I think something should be done at this level” (Interviewee 8, parentheses added by the thesis author).

User satisfaction emerged as another benefit of eGovernment, as mentioned by multiple participants (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 9). Respondents emphasized the importance of a more agile connection between citizens and the government as well as the simplicity, speed, and accessibility of digital processes. Interviewee 3 noted that *“Things work more and more in a way that is simple and fast and understandable and accessible to most people”*, and Interviewee 7 pointed out *“The citizen-government connection in a more agile way”*.

4.1.2.2. Salience of Digitalization

Participants highlighted the salience of digitalization in three main aspects, notably *unbureaucratic procedures*, *increased access to services* and *expectations for digital services*. *Unbureaucratic procedures* were emphasized by several participants (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 4) who associated eGovernment with a more unbureaucratic public administration. Interviewee 4 mentioned that “*The networking within the public administration in a digital, unbureaucratic way... that's the idea I have of eGovernment*”.

Increased access to services was recognized as a salient feature of digitalization by multiple participants (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 8). Respondents emphasized the importance of eGovernment in providing access to government structures and in having several services available on a single platform. Interviewee 3 stated that “*eGovernment is a way for citizens, workers, everybody to access the structure of the government*”, while Interviewee 1 noted that:

“After all, progress increasingly in the digital area is not just promoting dematerialization but promoting the proximity of public services to the citizen. The ease of access that we were talking about earlier, having several services on the same platform”.

Expectations for digital services was also an important factor highlighted in several interventions. Participants expressed high expectations for digital services, viewing digitalization as a national and European necessity (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 9). They emphasized the essential role of digitalization in the growth, modernization, and improvement of public services.

Interviewee 1 highlighted that *“All of this is in fact essential and is part of the growth and modernization of economies and, in particular, of public services”* and Interviewee 8 recognised that:

“Digitalization is a very big need, both in public administration and in society. In general, it is a big bet at the national level and at the European level, because it is a necessity”.

4.1.2.3. Individual Characteristics

Public service motivation and a *preference for digitalization* emerged as key individual characteristics related to eGovernment. *Public service motivation* was only highlighted by Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 8. However, both contributions were interesting for the purposes of this dissertation, as they shed light on the role of the public interest and commitment to service in recognizing the importance of providing certain government services, notably eGovernment. Interviewee 8 expressed firm belief in the primacy of the public interest and the commitment to excellent performance:

“Sometimes people don’t have that perception and I understand this very firmly, because I have always been taught since I was 24 years old, when I started working in public administration, that above all else is the public interest, and the public interest is measured by this, by our commitment to service, by our concern to have a good performance, both inside and outside the institution. I usually say, it’s not just a question of remuneration, it’s not just the money we receive at the end of the month,

it's, above all, our way of being and standing before a public service.”

(Interviewee 8)

Interviewee 3 discussed the need for a global vision and working together towards a common goal:

“[...] we are all pieces of a whole and people sometimes look too much at the individual or there are people who look too much at the unit or the service directorate or the general directorate and don't look at everything. And the biggest difficulty at the moment that I feel is people's lack of a global vision. And what I think is most important is that we are all working towards a common goal” (Interviewee 3, parentheses added by the thesis author).

Preference for Digitalization was mentioned by Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 5, and Interviewee 8. Respondents expressed their willingness to embrace new technologies and their belief on digitalization. Interviewee 5 mentioned that *“I advocate for digitalization, and I advocate for e-government.”* Interviewee 2 stated that *“I am completely in favor of these new technologies. So, I would always try to move towards something like this”* and Interviewee 1 mentioned that *“In fact, in recent years I have only dealt with the digital portfolio, so I always think it is to move forward on this.”*

The findings highlight that the recognition of digitalization benefits, the salience of digitalization as a topic, and individual characteristics such as public sector motivation

and preference for digitalization may influence the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives.

4.1.3. Theme 3 eGovernment Prioritization under Budget Constraints

The thematic analysis revealed variations in how participants prioritize eGovernment initiatives under budget constraints. While individual approaches differ, the majority of respondents maintain a consistent priority for these initiatives, even when faced with budget constraints. Participants consider various dimensions when strategizing and addressing eGovernment delivery. Organizational approaches are commonly mentioned, along with the need to comply with political targets. Additionally, participants employ different cognitive strategies in tackling the challenge of prioritizing eGovernment initiatives, leading to diverse solutions.

4.1.3.1. Change in Priorities

The findings of the analysis revealed different degrees of change in priorities for eGovernment initiatives under budget constraints. The majority of participants (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 9) reported *no change* in their priorities in several instances, despite budget constraints. Interviewee 7 expressed the viewpoint that “*the recommendation is always in the positive sense of using eGovernment and even of boosting and developing it further,*” emphasizing the potential benefits for public administration. Interviewee 3 highlighted the importance of addressing the issue regardless of resource availability, stating, “*you can’t deny that there is an issue here that*

has to be addressed". Moreover, Interviewee 8 emphasized that eGovernment remains a constant priority, stating, *"It's always a priority, it's always present."*

However, in some instances, participants (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 5) reported a *moderate change* in priorities under budget constraints. Interviewee 1 captured the complexity of the situation and Interviewee 2 mentioned that the attribution of priority should be conditional on the provision of the service afterwards.

"In fact, it's complicated, because we're talking about a public administration that lives off the State budget and that's how it is. If the area of digitalization, of eGovernment in this case, is assigned political priority, there must be a slice of the State budget for this purpose in order to be able to propose a set of physical investments, human resources, etc." (Interviewee 1)

"My point is that the solutions to have the eGovernment are expensive and costly solutions which are highly technical, and for which specialized resources are needed. So, I would recommend again as long as there was a guarantee that after there would be the service provision" (Interviewee 2)

In contrast, in other instances, participants (Interviewee 9, Interviewee 2) reported a *high change* in priorities under budget constraints, emphasizing the critical role of funds in implementing eGovernment initiatives. Interviewee 5 succinctly captured the impact of budget constraints, stating, *"No money, no funny."* Interviewee 2 reinforced this sentiment, stating, *"Without funds, nothing can be done."*

These diverse perspectives highlight the varying degrees of change in priorities for eGovernment initiatives under budget constraints, with some participants maintaining consistent priorities, and other shifting them in light of financial conditions.

4.1.3.2. Organizational approaches

Participants discussed various organizational approaches in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives. These approaches encompassed *interagency collaboration*, *resource sharing*, and *operational considerations*. *Interagency collaboration* emerged as an important aspect, with respondents emphasizing the need for coordination and cooperation among different government entities (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 mentioned the collaborative efforts with the Administrative Modernization Agency (AMA) in developing digital platforms for education purposes, stating, “*When we developed... and we didn’t have many means ...we developed together with AMA that accompanied us in the process and in the evaluations done by the European Union*”.

Resource sharing was another significant aspect, focusing on the sharing of personnel and expertise among government entities (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 7). Interviewee 6 highlighted the potential for support from other services, stating, “*We can't hire, but there are others, maybe from the Government, that can help.*” Interviewee 7 pointed out the underutilization of resources in certain areas that could be allocated to other areas.

“Leaders tend to say that they lack resources, everybody says they do, but the truth is that sometimes there are too many in certain areas and they are not being used and could perfectly well be allocated to other areas.”

Operational considerations were also discussed in relation to the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives. Participants highlighted factors such as project dimension and project horizon (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3). Interviewee 1 emphasized that, in terms of project dimension, *“We may be talking about projects of various dimensions. But assuming it’s a large project, you can actually phase out the project.”* Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 2 focused on the operational considerations of project horizon. Interviewee 3 mentioned the potential of signaling priority to allocate funds in the future, stating, *“You can say that it is a priority situation because eventually, at that moment, there is no answer to be given, but later on, or maybe by signaling this priority, it will be possible in some way to allocate funds in the future.”* Interviewee 2 likewise discussed the possibility of acquiring future funds, stating, *“Now, if the policy recommendation is that the government allocate funds in this area or if this is contemplated, then that’s the way to do it. The possibility of having future funds is what I mean.”*

These organizational approaches, including interagency collaboration, resource sharing, and operational considerations, provide insights into the strategies and considerations employed by participants in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives.

4.1.3.3. Cognitive Strategies

The analysis revealed that participants employed various cognitive strategies in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives. These strategies encompassed *pragmatism*, *creativity*, and *altering thresholds for aspirations*. *Pragmatism* played a significant role, with respondents emphasizing practical considerations, cost-effectiveness, and feasibility in the prioritization process (Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 8). Interviewee 5 highlighted the need to override or eliminate unnecessary procedures, stating, “*It seems to me that the 21st position is very, very low out of 27. But I do not think it is something very difficult to solve. Sometimes it’s a matter of overriding or eliminating unnecessary procedures and so on.*” Interviewee 7 emphasized better operationalization and allocation of functions, noting, “*Sometimes it is a matter of having a better operationalization of functions and a better allocation of functions, a greater efficiency.*” (Interviewee 7). And Interviewee 8 explained how implementing solutions is possible using only existing resources:

“Even if we cannot have the necessary resources, something has to be done. And there are things that can be done with existing resources. It’s really a matter of being aware and knowing how to do the proper planning for what needs to be done, because something has to be done. I think that in terms of digitalization and eGovernment, there is a lot that has been done, but it probably isn’t the right thing or the most adequate thing.” (Interviewee 8)

Creativity emerged as another cognitive strategy, with respondents' contributions presenting innovative ideas, out-of-the-box thinking, and novel solutions in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 9). Interviewee 5 highlighted the possibility of being imaginative. *"We can also be more imaginative."* Interviewee 9 suggested using professional social networks such as LinkedIn to publicize information and proposed appealing websites and intranets.

"Maybe use another kind of strategy. We could even use LinkedIn to publicize more things from DGAE. And maybe this eGovernment issue could be worked out using a more professional social network. And the Intranet itself, but also the site... it is fundamental that they are appealing so that they can be used." (Interviewee 9)

Interviewee 1 mentioned the possibility of merging platforms, stating:

"Certainly merging activities that can be merged, for example in the case of different platforms in different places that perhaps, after an analysis, it is found that may be merged and optimized in one place with the same readiness and response capacity. There are several things that can be thought of here." (Interviewee 1)

Moreover, *Altering Thresholds for Aspirations* involved redefining expectations and revising benchmarks in the prioritization process (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 6). Interviewee 6 acknowledged the need for adaptation and adjustment of hopes, stating:

“I mean, it doesn’t look so good, it doesn’t reach the objectives... the site maybe doesn’t look the best, maybe it’s not possible to do the forms or other things that require more advanced tools, but some things are possible. Even if it is in Word ...even if it is to make a guide in Word format.” (Interviewee 6).

Interviewee 3 stressed the significance of indicating everything necessary to reach objectives while acknowledging the need to adjust to the reality of public administration:

“Obviously there is always an adaptation, unfortunately. There always has to be. But I think that you always have to indicate everything that is necessary to reach that objective and to respond to that problem, and then, obviously, those of us who know the universe of public administration know that we will never achieve the ideal. So, then it’s always about adapting to reality.” (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 1 discussed the limitations imposed by budget constraints, stating, *“But we had to limit our desire, our expectation and so on for many years, knowing that more could be done, but we had to limit it according to the budget we had, the means we had, etc.”*

The employment of these cognitive strategies, such as pragmatism, creativity, and reevaluating aspirations, shed light on the mindset and approaches embraced by participants when prioritizing eGovernment initiatives.

4.1.3.4. Compliance Concerns

Compliance concerns in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives revolve around alignment with *political targets* and adhering to *enforcement mechanisms*. Alignment with *political targets* entails ensuring that eGovernment initiatives support the goals determined by the government and the European Union (EU) (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 9). Interviewee 1 points out that digitalization is a clear government goal currently, noting, “*We are committed to the major goals in the area of digitalization, of eGovernment, and so on. These are clear commitments. This is clearly a commitment that we know, that is always assumed.*” (Interviewee 1). Interviewee 9 highlights formal performance indicators such as the Assessment and Accountability Framework (QUAR) in ensuring compliance with government objectives, stating:

“It is important not to fall, because this is always something that then has a weight for the services themselves in public administration. This is something you have to be careful about, because then there are indicators of QUAR and so on that are indicators of achieving the goals set by the government itself”(Interviewee 9).

Interviewee 9 moreover notes that digitalization is also a goal of the EU, mentioning, *“This digital transformation is, in fact, one of the light motives, let’s say, one of the key words of the European Union that Ursula von der Leyen defined.”*

Furthermore, *Enforcement Mechanisms* are discussed in relation to sanctions and infractions as means to ensure compliance with established standards (Interviewee 8, Interviewee 9). Interviewee 8 mentions infringement procedures in place to ensure that EU Member-States comply with digital strategies, stating:

“I am currently working within the scope of an infringement procedure in which the issue has much to do with digitalization. Portugal and the vast majority of European Union countries were subject to an infringement procedure for failure to comply with a set of requirements in the scope of digitalization of State services.” (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 9, in the same fashion, mentions the role of monetary sanctions in pushing for the alignment with and implementation of political targets, mentioning:

“The fact that Portugal is on 21 of 27is there any sanction of non-compliance... for bad performance of the country? Because that way, when the infraction involves monetary payment by a country, then we’re great at complying and we’ll do what we can.” (Interviewee 9)

The analysis underscores the importance of compliance considerations in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives. The participants place strong emphasis on aligning these initiatives with government goals, encompassing strategic objectives and

specific targets set at both national and EU levels. The commitment to achieving these goals emerges as a critical factor in the prioritization process. Moreover, the participants acknowledge the presence of enforcement mechanisms, such as sanctions and infringement procedures, which serve as instruments to ensure adherence to established standards. The potential consequences of sanctions and their impact on the country's performance act as drivers for compliance. These findings emphasize the significant role of political targets and enforcement mechanisms in shaping the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives.

4.1.4. Theme 4 Prioritization of Aspiration Levels

The thematic analysis revealed notable variations among participants in the prioritization of aspiration levels, with the majority of respondents favoring situation 2, linked to social aspiration levels, over situation 1, tied to historical aspiration levels. This preference is influenced by several factors, including a preference for objective indicators, the influence of indicators on decision-making, and considerations related to the evaluation of measurement methods. Additionally, reputational concerns were signaled as a meaningful consideration in the prioritization of aspiration levels.

4.1.4.1. Assessment of Performance Information

The assessment of performance information in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives encompasses three key aspects, notably *preferences for objective indicators*, *the indicators' influence on decision-making*, and *the evaluation of measurement methods*. *Preferences for Objective Indicators* highlights participants' inclination towards

clear and objective ways of assessing indicators when choosing aspiration levels (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 8). There is a preference for information that provides a clearer understanding of Portugal's performance and its evolution (Interviewee 7), enabling more direct and targeted actions (Interviewee 3). Specifically, Interviewee 7 mentioned that "*Information given by situation 1 would be clearer in terms of Portugal's performance... in terms of its cycle and its evolution than situation 2.*". Interviewee 1, on the other hand, argues that clarity of indicators is best achieved by means of peer comparisons. "*It seems more obvious the peer comparison*". Interviewee 3 added that:

"I think for me situation 1 is easier to argue and to look at and more importantly it is our reality, and it is something that we can address in a much more direct and much quicker and eventually more targeted and effective way" (Interviewee 3).

Indicators' Influence on Decision-making is a key consideration in the discussions. Participants recognize the influence of indicators on decision-making processes by government authorities and policymakers (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 9). The second situation, which involves comparing Portugal's performance with other member states, is seen as more politically impactful, as governments often prioritize comparisons over individual access issues:

“So, in political terms, I think that situation 2 would work better because there is a greater concern of governments to compare themselves with other member states than to worry about why people are not accessing or are accessing.” (Interviewee 2).

The European perspective provided by indicators is deemed important in shaping priorities:

“I think that the second situation is perhaps more complete, or better enables this colleague here to convince the Government to give priority to this initiative. Why? Because it is not only Portugal’s position itself, but it is in the European scenario, and that is how we put ourselves, in perspective” (Interviewee 9)

Evaluation of Measurement Methods delves into the assessment of measurement techniques in the prioritization of aspiration levels. Participants discuss the reliability, validity, standardized benchmarks, and appropriateness of methodologies (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 8). Participants caution against simplistic readings of indicators and question the reliability of certain methods:

“In the first someone can invoke, for example, that the lack of interaction of individuals with public authorities online is not due to the issue of digital, because the digital platform exists, but it’s because, for example, there is a lack of skills of these individuals. And then, for example, if you

want you can no longer refer to the issue of digitalization itself, but you can refer to the issue of schools and the very bad school programs where individuals didn't have access to digital skills from an early age.”

(Interviewee 1)

“In situation 2, for me, this also depends a lot on the indicators that are measured and that may not always reflect the real reality of the country, so we have to be very careful when reading the indicators themselves.”

(Interviewee 4)

The significance of rankings and benchmarks, especially at the European level, is acknowledged:

“Maybe situation 2, because everything is measured in rankings, and at the European level it is all very much a function of ranking. I've been attending meetings at the European Commission for a long time, and everything is very much based on this.” (Interviewee 8)

Furthermore, concerns are raised regarding the suitability of benchmarks and their potential bias towards certain member states:

“The benchmarks perhaps make more sense for Spain and France than they do for Portugal, right? That is, because even the way ... it's not worth looking at this in a naive way... and even the way these benchmarks are

often chosen, right? They are chosen in such a way that they show the best of some member states and not all.” (Interviewee 3)

The analysis highlights the participants’ preferences for objective indicators, the influence of indicators on decision-making, and the evaluation of measurement methods. These factors shape the assessment of performance information and play a crucial role in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives.

4.1.4.2. Reputational Concerns

Reputational concerns are relevant in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives, encompassing both *image* and *peers’ perception*. Participants expressed concerns with *Image*, notably the negative impact on reputation and credibility associated with poor performance in eGovernment initiatives (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 9). The image of the country and its perceived efficiency and credibility were highlighted as crucial factors:

“And at the level of these major goals and commitments, namely this indicator of online interaction with public authorities in the last 12 months, we are in the bottom 20%. I think it’s terrible, isn’t it? In terms of image, credibility, not to mention the lack of efficiency and all of that which this naturally conveys.” (Interviewee 1)

Respondents emphasized the desire to avoid being ranked among the lowest performers, as it reflects negatively on the country’s image and reputation:

“Because, that is, Portugal is in 21st place... obviously it’s a comparative situation. And it has to do with the image... we never want to be among the last, right?” (Interviewee 3)

Furthermore, *Peers’ Perception* through the comparison with other countries was mentioned and served as a driver and motivator for compliance and improvement. The awareness of being compared to peers creates pressure and a strong incentive to enhance performance in eGovernment initiatives (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 8).

“Who attends these meetings knows there is always that comparison of who is better and who is worse. And nobody really likes to be bad and we, when we feel this pressure among our peers, it also ends up having a driver, a motivator.” (Interviewee 8)

4.2. Summary of the Findings and Assessment of Expectations

The findings derived from the analysis of the four themes demonstrate that, in general, public officials at DGAE employ a considerable range of strategies to curtail the effects of budgets constraints on the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives. While budget constraints exert different impacts across participants, it is evident that most respondents are concerned about deploying eGovernment services regardless of resource realities. Public officials at DGAE also exhibit different considerations in their choices of aspiration levels. Nonetheless, those center around the same aspects, notably preferences for indicators that are clearly assessed and objectively transmit performance information, the influence of the framing of information on the decision-making of government

authorities, the type of methods used in designing a given indicator or comparison, and concerns over reputation. Table 4 provides a visual overview of the findings and their relationship to the themes developed.

Table 4. *Overview of findings per Theme*

Number	Theme Title	Summary of Findings
1	Budget Constraints and Decision-Making	Most respondents recognize the negative impact of budget constraints on task performance and adjust their decisions accordingly. Budget constraints translate into resource constraints in personnel and education activities.
2	Recognition of eGovernment Importance	Respondents recognize the benefits arising from digitalization, notably efficiency gains and user satisfaction. Digitalization is a salient matter due to considerations of increased access, unbureaucratic procedures as well as social and political expectations for digital services.
3	eGovernment prioritization under Budget constraints	Most respondents prioritize eGovernment initiatives whatever the budget. To ensure the provision of these initiatives with or without budget allocated to them, participants adopt pragmatic and creative solutions or, to a lesser extent, adjust their ambitions. The priority given to eGovernment initiatives also takes into account operational considerations and compliance with digitalization targets.
4	Prioritization of Aspiration Levels	Most participants favor social over historical aspiration levels. This is due to an assessment of performance information that takes into consideration the objectiveness of targets, their impact on decision-makers and the methods employed to develop the indicators. Concerns over reputation in terms of image and peers' perception are also important in the prioritization of aspiration levels.

Regarding the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives, a significant majority of respondents did not change their priorities as a function of budget constraints. This behavior can be attributed to the various factors previously discussed, such as a recognition of the benefits of digitalization and its salience and also, in some extents, a personal preference for digitalization and eGovernment and a high degree of Public Sector Motivation (PSM) that translates into seeing the provision of services beneficial to citizens and society, such as eGovernment, as a duty. While most respondents acknowledge the limitations on their task performance arising from budget constraints, and adjust their work decisions accordingly, participants still use various organizational approaches to make the provision of eGovernment services possible with or without a budget available for this purpose. Most respondents are pragmatic or strive to implement creative solutions to avoid budget constraints. A number of respondents also changes their ambitions for eGovernment initiatives depending on the available budget. These cognitive strategies are also related to operational considerations, namely project size and horizon, as well as concerns about meeting political goals stipulated for digitalization.

In summary, although there is an acknowledgement of the constraints imposed by budgetary restrictions, in most cases the priority assigned to eGovernment initiatives does not change depending on the presence or absence of such constraints. Theoretical expectation 2, therefore, is not fully substantiated. Detailed information on the frequencies supporting this conclusion is provided in Appendix H.

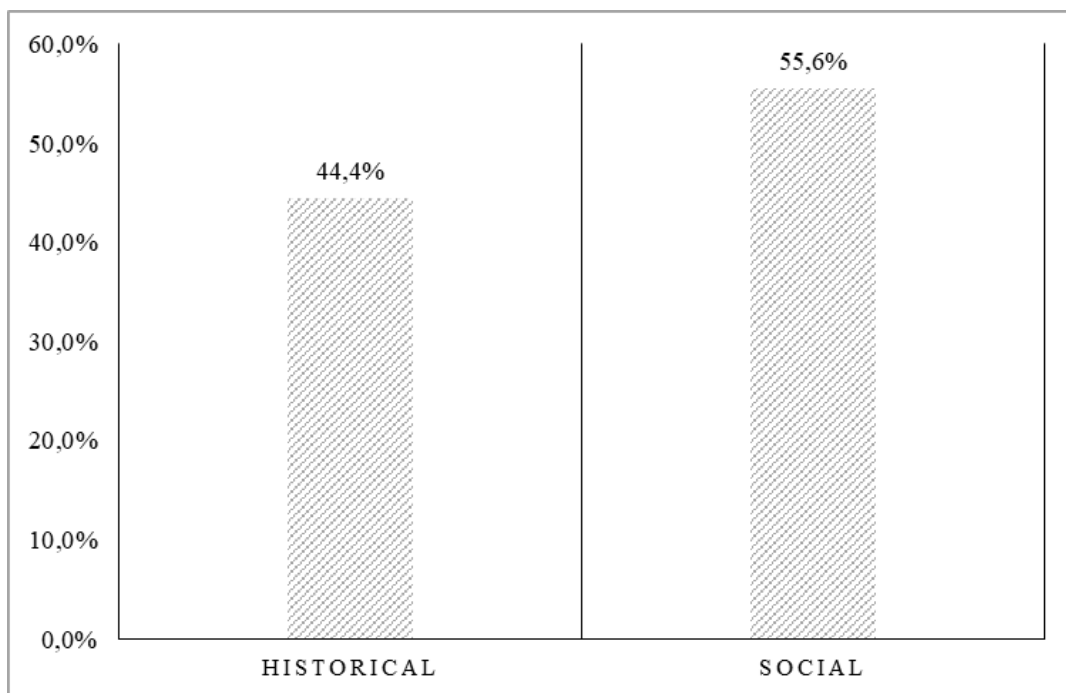
Furthermore, the majority of participants favored situation 2, indicating a preference for prioritizing social aspiration levels over historical ones when interpreting performance information. This choice aligns with previously mentioned factors, namely an assessment of performance information and reputational concerns. Theoretical expectation 1, therefore, is not fully substantiated. The discrete choices observed

contribute to this conclusion. Detailed information on these can be found in Table 5 below. A visual representation of the frequencies (in percentages) of these discrete choices is given in Figure 2 below.

Table 5. *Discrete choices of aspiration levels based on the interview scenarios*

Situation 1	Situation 2
Interviewee 5, Interviewee 7, Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4	Interviewee 9, Interviewee 8, Interviewee 6, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 1

Figure 2. *Discrete choices of aspiration levels of 9 respondents, in percentages*



Source: Interview data.

In conclusion, both theoretical expectations are not substantiated as they align primarily with quantitative studies and findings from the private sector, which represent the majority of research conducted in issue prioritization decisions. Consequently, they overlook the main reasons, motivations, and strategies that public officials may adopt to mitigate the negative consequences arising from budget constraints. Additionally, they neglect to account for the underlying motives that drive the selection of aspiration levels.

The next section presents a detailed discussion of the results, providing for a comprehensive understanding and contextualization of these findings within the existing literature. By situating the findings within the broader scholarly context, the following section aims to contribute to issue prioritization literature.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The following Chapter discusses and interprets the findings of the study, drawing connections with the broader literature. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the limitations of this study and explores the implications of the study's findings with regards to the issue prioritization of eGovernment initiatives and aspiration levels. The chapter ends with suggestions for further research.

5.1. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute significantly to the literature on issue prioritization, cutback management and performance feedback in particular, as well as public administration and management in general. These contributions are discussed in detail below.

First, this study unveils the diverse organizational and cognitive strategies employed by public officials in organisms of direct state administration to prioritize eGovernment initiatives despite the resource realities of their organizations. These findings align with assertions from behavioral theory, which posit that performance below aspirations fosters the search for new solutions (Cyert & March, 1992). In contrast, they challenge the assumptions of threat-rigidity theory, which expects individuals to freeze and refrain from seeking new approaches when faced with threatening situations (Staw et al., 1981). While the mechanisms outlined in these theories primarily focus on the process of search, issue prioritization has remained largely unexplored. Existing attempts to map out this particular mechanism have predominantly employed quantitative methods (see, for example, Audia & Greve, 2006; Greve, 1998; Holm, 2017; Joseph & Gaba, 2015; Kim et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2014). Notably, studies on budget constraints suggest a

negative impact on the prioritization of issues performing below aspiration levels, with individuals prioritizing fewer such issues in the presence of financial restrictions (see, for example, Greve (2008)). However, the qualitative findings of this dissertation cast some doubt on these quantitative assertions. They contribute to the literature by unraveling the strategies and motives underlying public officials' reasoning in issue prioritization, which cannot be fully captured through quantitative studies alone. The study reveals that public officials prioritize eGovernment initiatives, even in the presence of budget constraints, when they are deemed beneficial and salient. Most strategies employed in this prioritization process predominantly involve pragmatism, including considerations of practicality, cost-effectiveness, and feasibility. These findings resonate with research on "pragmatic municipalism", highlighting local authorities' efforts to find alternative paths for service delivery in financially adverse situations (Warner et al., 2021). Thus, the significance of the concept of pragmatism extends beyond local governments to various public organisms.

Furthermore, the study reveals that several public officials employ creative solutions to deliver eGovernment initiatives when no specific budget is allocated for that purpose. These solutions, which deviate from conventional approaches, were unique to individual participants.

Additionally, some public officials adjust their aspiration levels, which serve as benchmarks for evaluating the success of service deployment or initiative development. This adjustment reflects the modification of ambitions and expectations to align with the available resources, a phenomenon observed in the literature, particularly in the education sector (see, for example, Dupriez et al., 2012). Individuals from lower sociocultural backgrounds tend to lower their educational prospects' expectations and adjust their ambitions based on the resources at their disposal (Dupriez et al., 2012).

In general, the qualitative findings challenge the quantitative notion that “necessity is the mother of rigidity” (Lems, 2020). They support the opposite conclusion that “necessity is the mother of creativity”. Moreover, they suggest that public officials may also find middle-ground, complex solutions that do not fit neatly into either the rigidity or creativity frameworks. The findings indicate that, besides being the “mother of creativity”, necessity is also the mother of pragmatism, as issues are mostly addressed in a way that allows for finding feasible solutions without exacerbating other budgetary or organizational challenges.

Second, this dissertation demonstrates that the majority of respondents prioritize social aspiration levels over historical ones. This contributes to the ongoing debates in performance feedback literature on the prioritization of aspiration levels, particularly in establishing a hierarchy of goals (Holm, 2017; Nielsen, 2014). Furthermore, it sheds light on the motives guiding the decision to prioritize one aspiration level over another, which quantitative studies fail to fully capture. The evaluation of performance information, including a preference for objective indicators, differs from findings from other studies suggesting that public officials may prefer subjective information (see, for example, Simonova & Skopeckova, 2010). Interestingly, despite this preference for objective indicators, most participants prioritize social aspiration levels, which tend to be more subjective than historical ones. That is mostly because public officials can manipulate the reference group associated with social aspiration levels, thereby altering the feedback on performance. On the other hand, negative performance based on historical aspiration levels is harder to manipulate as it often involves discrediting internal sources of information, such as the organization or company itself. Literature on self-enhancement (Jordan & Audia, 2012) illustrates this point, and provides evidence that individuals focused on self-enhancement tend to change their reference groups to improve

performance without addressing the underlying causes of poor performance. They achieve this by selecting less similar and lower-performing organizations for comparison (Audia et al., 2015). Also, research indicates that managers may choose to change their reference groups instead of engaging in search or risk-taking behaviors when their performance falls below social aspiration levels (Lee et al., 2020). This phenomenon is also evident at the individual-level, as supported by the downward comparison theory, where individuals lower their comparison standards after performing poorly (Gibbons et al., 2002).

The impact of information on the decision-making process of public officials and the assessment of measurement methods, particularly concerns over credibility, reliability, and suitability of indicators, also influence the prioritization of aspiration levels. These findings align with studies on rankings as a comparative measure of performance, where concerns of validity and credibility play a crucial role in attributing attention to performance below aspiration levels (Martins, 2005). Moreover, this dissertation reveals that reputation concerns are also influential in prioritizing aspiration levels. This finding is in tune with studies on reputational concerns in the private sector, where companies and organizations attach value and meaning to their reputation and strive to restore it when necessary (Rowley et al., 2017).

Last, this dissertation emphasizes the significance of studying under mapped contexts, such as Portugal, and direct organisms of the state administration, notably the Directorate-General for Economic Activities (DGAE), in order to build comprehensive causal maps and theories. By conducting interviews with public officials in this context, this dissertation demonstrates that the availability of financial resources may not hold as much importance in the promotion of digital and technological innovations, insofar as

individuals within an organization acknowledge the significance and relevance of these innovations beyond the constraints of available resources.

5.2. Limitations

This dissertation, like any other study, is subject to certain limitations. Firstly, it focuses solely on historical and social aspiration levels, neglecting the relevance of coercive aspiration levels in the public sector as indicated by previous studies (Salge, 2011; van der Voet & Lems, 2022). The decision to exclude coercive aspiration levels was driven by the need to keep the scenarios presented in the semi-structured interviews as concise as possible. The time constraints faced by public officials at DGAE meant interviews could not last longer than one hour. Furthermore, social and historical aspiration levels have received significant research attention, possibly because Cyert & March (1992) proposed that a single theory of organizational decision-making and behavior can apply to both private firms and political organizations. Yet coercive aspiration levels are specific to political organizations where there is oversight from political actors (van der Voet, 2023). Therefore, while it is logical for private sector and business management researchers not to expand their research to include coercive aspiration levels and focus exclusively on social and historical aspiration levels, such expansion may hold significant importance in the realm of public management research.

Secondly, in order to maintain practicality and efficiency, the scenarios related to the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives developed using EVM methodology only varied in terms of treatment, not context (please refer to Appendix E, Interview guide). This approach may have led some participants to understand the aim of the study and the treatment being included, potentially impacting the internal validity of the study. To

mitigate this, the scenarios and washout questions were randomized for each participant, as outlined in Chapter 3 Methodology. Consequently, the order of scenarios and washout questions differed for each respondent, ensuring that no participant answered the questions in the same order as others.

Thirdly, as discussed in Chapter 3 Methodology, the use of a convenience sample in this study provides valuable insights and maintains high internal validity. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations in terms of external validity (Andrade, 2020). The convenience sample may not fully represent populations with different characteristics, making generalization of the results beyond the sample challenging. Although employing EVM in the semi-structured interviews helps to partially address external validity concerns by reaching diverse samples outside of traditional laboratory settings (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014), the overall external validity of this dissertation remains limited. The findings are influenced by the specific context of the study. Therefore, while the results can be generalized to other public officials in organisms of the direct state administration within the MEM, they cannot be automatically generalized to all public officials in the public sector (Leseman, 2022).

Lastly, it is important to recognize the possibility of transcription and translation bias. The author of this thesis conducted the transcription and translation of the interviews, introducing a certain degree of subjectivity inherent in qualitative research. Involving multiple researchers in the interpretation of transcripts could potentially mitigate this bias (Leseman, 2022). However, due to confidentiality and privacy stipulations, the answers of the respondents could not be shared with other researchers besides the thesis author.

Despite these limitations, this dissertation provides valuable insights into issue prioritization decisions in the field of public administration. The findings contribute to

the existing knowledge base and offer important implications for practice and further research.

5.3. Implications for Practice

This study has several implications for practice, aligning with the societal relevance emphasized in Chapter 1. Firstly, stakeholders and citizens can leverage the findings of this study to effectively advocate for the prioritization of specific initiatives, especially digital ones. By emphasizing the benefits and salience of the issues tied to these initiatives, interested parties can engage public officials and encourage the pursuit of strategies to address them. In other words, increasing awareness among public officials regarding the benefits and salience of certain issues may positively influence the attention allocated to these issues.

Secondly, interested parties should strive to present performance information in a way that aligns with the prioritization criteria of public officials. This includes utilizing objective indicators, reliable and valid benchmarks, and highlighting comparisons among peers to identify areas in need of improvement. Providing such information and comparisons can foster the prioritization of relevant issues.

Lastly, politicians seeking to advocate for a particular issue, especially in hierarchical and centralized public administration contexts, should endeavor to connect those issues to overarching government targets. This linkage increases the likelihood of prioritization by public officials. Moreover, understanding that public officials prioritize eGovernment initiatives regardless of budget constraints suggests that budgetary considerations alone should not be the sole focus in promoting issue prioritization.

Instead, politicians should also emphasize long-term benefits and operational feasibility to increase the chances of initiatives being prioritized.

By considering these implications for practice, stakeholders, citizens, and politicians can better navigate issue prioritization decisions and encourage the awarding of attention to important issues.

5.4. Suggestions for Further Research

To further expand the understanding of issue prioritization in the public sector, management and public administration scholars could explore the following avenues for future research.

First, building on the literature that highlights the relevance of coercive aspiration levels in the public sector context (Salge, 2011; van der Voet & Lems, 2022), future studies should consider including these levels in their analysis. The qualitative findings of this study indicate that public officials often consider political targets, compliance with government and EU guidelines, alignment with political expectations, and the influence of indicators on decision-making authorities, even when the information provided pertained only to social and historical aspiration levels. The findings of Hong (2020) support this notion, indicating that the sole presence of oversight affects the response to performance information. Therefore, replicating this research design with scenarios involving coercive aspiration levels or employing survey experiments could further illuminate the decision-making processes across these three aspiration levels. The choice of research design (within-subjects or between-subjects) would depend on the available sample size.

Second, it would be valuable to extend the study to other contexts and public authorities. The relevance of the research question suggests its applicability in diverse settings. Replication of the study in familiar contexts such as Anglo-Saxon and Northern European countries, as well as exploration in under mapped contexts of Eastern Europe or Latin America, for example, could shed light on the mechanisms of issue prioritization in different countries. Similarly, while local governments have received the most attention in studies of issue prioritization (Perez-Lopez et al., 2015), it would be intriguing to examine the mechanisms behind issue prioritization decisions within other public authorities. Understanding whether the mechanisms uncovered in this dissertation hold true across various contexts would contribute to a more universal understanding of issue prioritization but also aid in unraveling the role of context in allocating attention to specific issues. This line of inquiry aligns with the field of sociology's exploration of "attentional communities" and their impact on issue prioritization (Zerubavel, 2015). However, public administration scholarship has yet to fully grasp this concept due to a lack of comparative studies stemming from difficulties in drawing meaningful comparisons across different objects of interest while maintaining all other factors equal (Kuhlmann & Seyfried, 2020).

Third, this study highlights to some extent the importance of considering individual characteristics, particularly preferences and public sector motivation (PSM). Further research could quantitatively examine these factors as moderators in issue prioritization decisions. Preferences, an increasingly employed concept in public administration and management scholarship, are shown to influence decision-making processes in recent studies (Lerusse & Van de Walle, 2022). On the other hand, PSM, a widely studied concept, is known to impact various aspects of public sector behavior

(Pierre & Peters, 2017). By incorporating these factors as moderators in a quantitative study, a deeper understanding of their influence on issue prioritization can be gained.

Fourth, future studies should explore issue prioritization decisions in the presence or absence of budget constraints using less salient issues. The current focus on the salient issue of digitalization, which is advocated by government and political authorities and brings significant societal benefits, may influence the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives despite resource limitations within organizations. Alternatively, investigating the role of ‘issue salience’ as a potential moderator in this relationship could also provide insights into how attention to issues that differ in terms of salience is allocated under budget constraints.

Last, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of issue prioritization, researchers should consider employing mixed methods approaches. The qualitative results of this dissertation differ from quantitative ones (for example, Greve (2008)), particularly regarding the finding that public officials do not alter prioritization for salient issues even in the face of financial constraints. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently would offer a more nuanced and comprehensive picture, enabling a deeper exploration of issue prioritization processes.

By pursuing these avenues for further research, scholars can advance the understanding of issue prioritization in public administration.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study aimed to enhance the understanding of issue prioritization decisions made by public officials in the public sector. Specifically, it focused on the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the presence or absence of budget constraints and examined the motives guiding officials' prioritization based on historical and social aspiration levels. The study made significant contributions by exploring the reasons and motives underlying such decisions, which cannot be adequately captured using quantitative methods alone.

To address the research questions “How do budget constraints shape public officials' decisions to prioritize eGovernment initiatives that are performing below aspiration levels, and what motives drive officials to prioritize such initiatives based on historical versus social aspirations?”, two theoretical expectations were developed. The first expectation suggested that public officials prioritize eGovernment initiatives when these are performing below *historical* rather than social aspiration levels, based on several motives. The second expectation proposed that public officials tend *not* to provide reasons to support the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives performing below aspiration levels when facing budget constraints.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, comprising scenarios developed using EVM methodology, with nine public officials at Directorate-General for Economic Activities (DGAE) within the Ministry of the Economy and Maritime Affairs (MEM) in Portugal. However, the thematic analysis conducted in MAXQDA (2022) did not find evidence to substantiate either theoretical expectation.

Regarding the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the presence or absence of budget constraints, the research revealed that a majority of public officials prioritize these initiatives regardless of such constraints. This is attributed to the salience of the

digitalization issue and the perceived benefits associated with eGovernment initiatives. Public officials take several factors into account during the prioritization process, including compliance with political goals and organizational considerations. The results also indicate that preferences for digitalization and public sector motivation might play a role in issue prioritization decisions. The cognitive strategies employed by public officials in prioritizing eGovernment initiatives can be categorized as pragmatism, creativity, and to a lesser extent, altering aspiration levels so to adjust ambitions to resource realities. Such strategies are tied to the organizational reality. These findings suggest that necessity is not only the mother of creativity but also of pragmatism.

In terms of prioritizing aspiration levels, the study found that public officials tend to prioritize social over historical aspiration levels. This may stem from a preference for objectivity as well as reliable and valid measurement methods, besides considerations on the impact of aspiration levels on decision-making authorities and concerns about reputation.

In general, these findings make valuable contributions to the literature on issue prioritization, cutback management, performance feedback, and the broader fields of public administration and management.

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Appendix A: Invitation for participation

Dear Sirs and Madams,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Catarina Mantas, and I am currently a master's student in Public Administration at Leiden University, specializing in Public Management and Leadership.

I hereby formalize my invitation to participate in the round of interviews that I will be conducting for my master's thesis. The aim of this round of interviews is to gather knowledge about performance and decision-making in the public sector, particularly with regard to how priorities are set in day-to-day work.

The interviews will take place between May 3 and May 12, with an estimated duration of 40 minutes. Given the estimated duration, no breaks are scheduled during the interview, which will consist of a first part, where questions related to day-to-day work will be addressed, followed by a second part, where hypothetical questions about a fictitious scenario will be asked.

I would like to inform you that participation in the interview is voluntary, and full anonymity of the answers provided is guaranteed. The information collected will not be shared with any entity other than myself as interviewer and will be presented in the master thesis in a way that respects the privacy of the interviewees, and they will be given pseudonyms (e.g., "Interviewee 1", "Interviewee 2"), which will prevent their identification by third parties.

For the purposes of transcribing the responses, a recording of the interview will be made, and this recording, as well as the personal data of the interviewees, will not be shared under any circumstances. Interested parties who agree to participate in this round

of interviews are requested to complete the consent form, which is attached to this communication.

Finally, please inform me in reply to this email (through the link: <https://doodle.com/bp/catarinamantas/entrevistas-para-dissertao-de-mestrado-administracao-publica>) what is the best time for the interview, so that I can later send you the link to Microsoft Teams, the online platform where the interview will take place. In case it is not possible to schedule the interview at the time initially proposed, please indicate so that we can analyze the possibility of holding the interview at another date and time.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this invitation, and I remain at your disposal for any further clarification that may be necessary, through this email address.

Cordially,

Catarina Mantas

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Title of study: Impact of performance information on decision-making processes in the public sector.

Purpose of study: You are invited to participate in a research study examining the impact of performance information on decision-making processes in the public sector. You must be at least 18 years old and hold a position in the Directorate General of Economic Activities.

Procedures: If you choose to participate, you will answer some questions about a hypothetical scenario and general questions about decision making. The interview is expected to take about 40 minutes.

Potential risks and benefits: It is unlikely that you will experience any risks or discomfort beyond what you would experience in everyday life by participating. There are no specific benefits associated with participation.

Compensation: There is no compensation.

Confidentiality: The data collected in this study is completely anonymous. No personally identifiable information will be collected in the interview and the information you choose to provide in this study cannot be associated with you. The results of this study will be used in a master's thesis, specifically in the Master of Public Administration, with a specialization in Public Management and Leadership, at Leiden University. Anonymous data will not be shared.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to participate.

Questions or concerns: If you have any questions or comments about this study, you may contact the student: Catarina Antunes Mantas, s3550486@vuw.leidenuniv.nl.

I declare that I have read and consent to the above,

X

Appendix C: Interview Slides

Figure C1: Interview Slide of One out of Four Hypothetical Scenarios (in Portuguese)

Considere a seguinte situação hipotética:

Um colega que trabalha numa agência governamental em Portugal foi incumbido de redigir uma recomendação política sobre 'e-governo', o qual é crucial para os governos de todo o mundo, mas exige mudanças organizacionais e investimentos.

A Comissão Europeia utiliza indicadores para comparar o progresso digital entre os países europeus e ao longo do tempo, incluindo a dimensão-chave do 'e-governo'. Um indicador desta dimensão é a "interação das pessoas com as autoridades públicas em linha", que mede a percentagem de utilizadores da Internet, com idades compreendidas entre os 16 e os 74 anos, que utilizaram a Internet para interagir com as autoridades públicas nos últimos 12 meses. Este indicador inclui a obtenção de informações nos sítios Web das autoridades públicas, o download de formulários oficiais, ou o envio de formulários preenchidos.

Em 2023, Portugal ocupa a **21ª posição entre os 27 países da UE** neste indicador, o que o coloca aproximadamente nos 20% mais baixos.

A agência administrativa do Estado onde o colega trabalha **não pode** contratar o pessoal, os serviços (por exemplo, programas de formação) ou os recursos necessários para realizar o seu trabalho.

Tendo em conta esta informação, **o colega deve avaliar na sua recomendação política se deve ser dada prioridade à adoção de iniciativas de 'e-governo'**.

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Figure C2: Interview Slide of Discrete Choice of Aspiration Levels (in Portuguese)

Situação 1	Situação 2
Em 2023, a percentagem de Portugal no indicador "Indivíduos que interagiram em linha com as autoridades públicas, nos últimos 12 meses" é de 47%, contra 63% em 2016 .	Em 2023, Portugal ocupa o 21.º lugar entre os 27 países da UE no indicador "Indivíduos que interagiram em linha com as autoridades públicas, nos últimos 12 meses", o que o coloca aproximadamente nos últimos 20%.

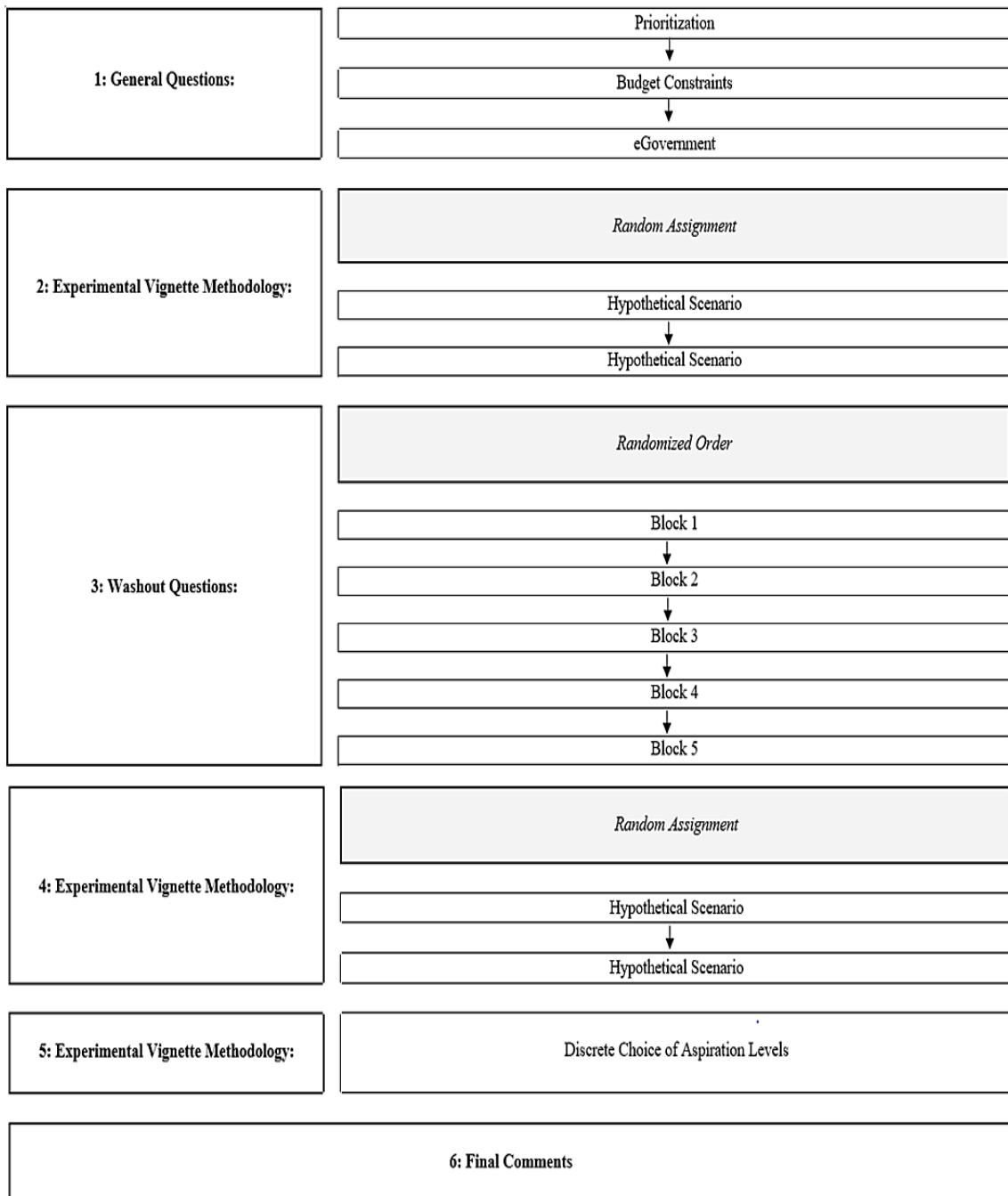
Se estivesse no lugar do colega, **qual destas duas situações** o/a levaria a argumentar mais fortemente a favor de dar prioridade às iniciativas e-governo na recomendação política? **Porquê?**

- Situação 1
- Situação 2

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Appendix D: Interview Flow

Figure D 1: Interview Flow of Each Semi-Structured Interview



Appendix E: Interview guide

Note. The following interview guide is for illustration purposes only and does not show the specific randomization of questions that was conducted from one participant to the other.

Opening

Introduction of the interviewer and the interviewee.

Explanation of the objectives of the study.

Explanation of anonymity of results.

Question 1

What do you understand by establishing priorities in your work?

Question 2

Do you have to prioritize amongst several issues in your job?

Question 3

Do your organization's budget influence your decisions at work?

Question 4

What do you understand by positive and negative performance in your work? And do you rely on information to assess the difference between the two?

Question 5

What do you understand by eGovernment?

Question 6 [random assignment]

Imagine the following situation:

A colleague working at a state government agency in Portugal was tasked with writing a policy recommendation on eGovernment, which is crucial for governments worldwide but requires organizational changes and investments.

The European Commission uses indicators to compare digital progress across European countries and over time, including the key dimension of eGovernment. One indicator of this dimension is ‘individuals interacting with public authorities online’, measuring the percentage of internet users aged 16-74 who have used the internet to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months. This indicator includes obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms.

In 2023, Portugal’s percentage for this indicator is **47%, down from 63% in 2016**.

The agency where the colleague works **can** hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work.

Given this information, the colleague must evaluate in their policy recommendation whether the adoption of eGovernment initiatives should be prioritized.

If you were this colleague, would you make the case for the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the policy recommendation? Why?

Question 7 [random assignment]

Imagine the following situation:

A colleague working at a state government agency in Portugal was tasked with writing a policy recommendation on eGovernment, which is crucial for governments worldwide but requires organizational changes and investments.

The European Commission uses indicators to compare digital progress across European countries and over time, including the key dimension of eGovernment. One indicator of this dimension is ‘individuals interacting with public authorities online’, measuring the percentage of internet users aged 16-74 who have used the internet to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months. This indicator includes obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms.

In 2023, Portugal ranks **21 out of 27 EU countries** in this indicator, placing it approx. in the **bottom 20%**.

The agency where the colleague works **can** hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work.

Given this information, the colleague must evaluate in their policy recommendation whether the adoption of eGovernment initiatives should be prioritized.

If you were this colleague, would you make the case for the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the policy recommendation? Why?

0. Washout questions [randomized order]

Question 8 [random assignment]

Imagine the following situation:

A colleague working at a state government agency in Portugal was tasked with writing a policy recommendation on eGovernment, which is crucial for governments worldwide but requires organizational changes and investments.

The European Commission uses indicators to compare digital progress across European countries and over time, including the key dimension of eGovernment. One indicator of this dimension is ‘individuals interacting with public authorities online’, measuring the percentage of internet users aged 16-74 who have used the internet to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months. This indicator includes obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms.

In 2023, Portugal’s percentage for this indicator is **47%, down from 63% in 2016**.

The agency where the colleague works **cannot** hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work.

Given this information, the colleague must evaluate in their policy recommendation whether the adoption of eGovernment initiatives should be prioritized.

If you were this colleague, would you make the case for the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the policy recommendation? Why?

Question 9 [random assignment]

Imagine the following situation:

A colleague working at a state government agency in Portugal was tasked with writing a policy recommendation on eGovernment, which is crucial for governments worldwide but requires organizational changes and investments.

The European Commission uses indicators to compare digital progress across European countries and over time, including the key dimension of eGovernment. One indicator of this dimension is ‘individuals interacting with public authorities online’, measuring the percentage of internet users aged 16-74 who have used the internet to interact with public authorities in the last 12 months. This indicator includes obtaining information from public authorities’ websites, downloading official forms, or sending filled-in forms.

In 2023, Portugal ranks **21 out of 27 EU countries** in this indicator, placing it approx. in the **bottom 20%**.

The agency where the colleague works **cannot** hire the necessary staff, services (i.e., training programs), or resources to conduct its work.

Given this information, the colleague must evaluate in their policy recommendation whether the adoption of eGovernment initiatives should be prioritized.

If you were this colleague, would you make the case for the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives in the policy recommendation? Why?

Question 10

Situation 1	Situation 2
In 2023, Portugal’s percentage for the indicator “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months” is 47%, down from 63% in 2016.	In 2023, Portugal ranks 21 out of 27 EU countries in the indicator “Individuals interacting online with public authorities, last 12 months”, placing it approx. in the bottom 20%.

If you were this colleague, which of these two situations would prompt you to make a stronger argument for prioritizing eGovernment initiatives in the policy recommendation?

- Situation 1
- Situation 2

Why?

Question 11

Are there any other relevant points that were not covered, and you would like to address?

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Closure</u></p> <p>Thank you for the interview.</p> <p>Explanation of follow-up process.</p>
--

Washout questions

[randomized blocks]

Washout questions block 1

Question 1.1.

What words come to mind when you think about ‘Digital Transformation’?

Question 1.2.

The following is an example of a ‘Digital Transformation’ world cloud. Would you add any words, or does it look complete?

Image. Digital transformation world cloud (PowerPoint slide)



Source: Shutterstock. (2021). Digital transformation cloud word [Stock photo]. Shutterstock.

<https://www.shutterstock.com/pt/search/digital-transformation-cloud-word>. Copyright 2021 by Shutterstock.

Washout questions block 2

Question 2.1

Do you know what “blockchain” is?

Washout questions block 3

Question 3.1

Do you use data in your daily life? And in your work? [in what way]

Washout questions block 4

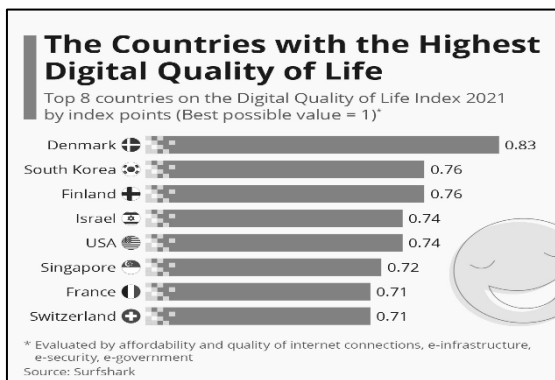
Question 4.1

Do you know what “digital quality of life” is? If so, could you guess which country in the world ranks the highest in “digital quality of life” index (in 2021)?

Question 4.2

Break (1 min): explaining what “digital quality of life” AND/OR showing the ranking table.

Image. Digital quality of Life ranking in 2021, with top 8 countries (PowerPoint slide)



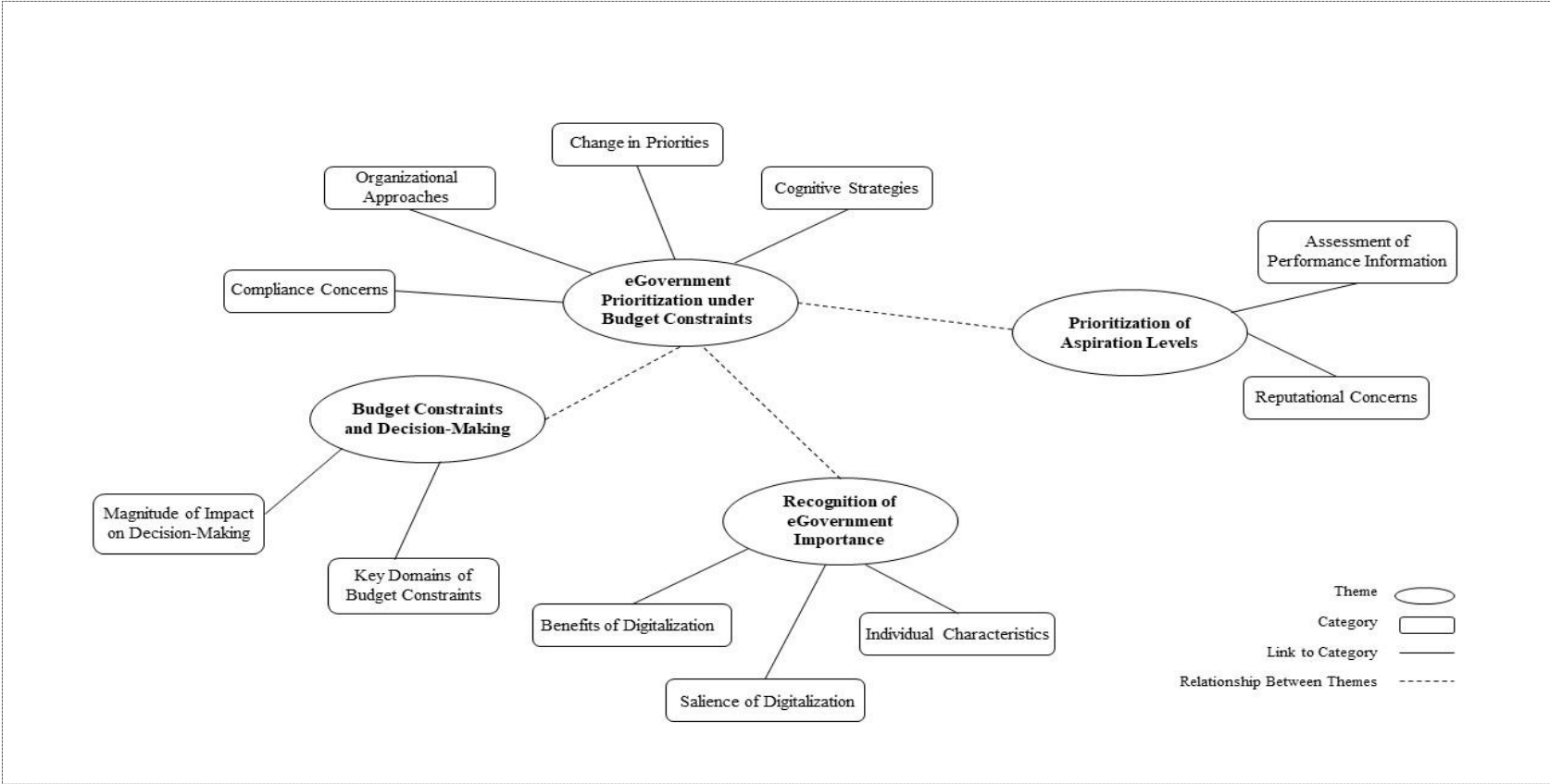
Source: World Economic Forum. (2022, August 15). Countries ranked by digital quality of life [Infographic]. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/08/countries-ranked-digital-quality-of-life/>. Copyright 2022 by World Economic Forum.

Washout questions block 5

Question 5.1.

Do you consider you take the necessary safety precautions when using the Internet?

Appendix F: Thematic Map



Appendix G: Codebook

Guidelines for using the Codebook.

1. When analyzing participants' responses, it is important to appropriately apply the corresponding code. Carefully identify and utilize the code that aligns with the specific aspects outlined in the code definitions. Refer to the provided definitions for each code to determine the most suitable match. Ensure that each statement is coded with the most accurate applicable code or subcode based on the information presented by the participant. If a statement pertains to multiple codes or subcodes, assign the appropriate codes accordingly to maintain accuracy.
2. Take into account the intended focus of the theme, category, or code when assigning codes to participants' statements. Consider the research objectives and analyze the participants' discussions within the context of the code's purpose. This will help ensure that the assigned codes accurately reflect the intended emphasis and contribute to the integrity of the research.
3. Evaluate participants' responses comprehensively by analyzing both the context and content they provide. Interpret their statements based on their meaning within the broader conversation and their intended message. This holistic approach will enhance the understanding and validity of the analysis.
4. Code each statement with precision by selecting the most suitable applicable code or subcode based on the information shared by the participant. If a statement relates to multiple codes or subcodes, assign all the relevant codes that capture the various aspects

appropriately. Being specific in coding will contribute to the accuracy and originality of the analysis.

5. In cases where multiple participants mention a specific code variable relevant to the research question(s), it is crucial to ensure consistent coding across all participants. By comparing and contrasting their responses, patterns and similarities can be identified, thereby improving the validity and reliability of the analysis.

Note: Always consult the code definitions, category descriptions, and any supplementary guidelines provided in the codebook to ensure precise and consistent coding practices.

Theme Number	Theme	Category	Code Label	Variable	Definition	Description	Anchor samples
1	Budget Constraints and Decision-Making	Magnitude of Impact on Decision-Making MID	High Impact	MID_HI	Emphasizing a high impact of budget constraints on decision-making processes	Expressed as alterations in performing work tasks due to budget limitations	“The planning and the tasks that are intended to be allocated to the service sometimes depend very much on the budget and are very limited due to the budget” (Interviewee 8)
			Moderate Impact	MID_MI	Emphasizing a moderate impact of budget constraints on decision-making processes	Expressed as moderate adjustments in performing work tasks due to budget limitations	“it doesn’t negatively impact my work on a regular basis” (Interviewee 1)
			No Impact	MID_NI	Suggesting that budget constraints have no impact on decision-making processes	Expressed as discussions where budget limitations are deemed insignificant in performing work tasks	“it doesn’t apply in this case in our International Services functions” (Interviewee 7)
		Key Domains of Budget Constraints DBC	Education Activities	DBC_EA	Translating budget constraints into resource constraints in education activities	Can be views on training or professional development	“There was a training program that we really wanted to have in logistics. And for budgetary reasons, unfortunately, it won’t be possible.” (Interviewee 3)
			Personnel	DBC_PE	Translating budget constraints into resource constraints in personnel	Can be views on staffing constraints or skills shortages	“We need budget availability for equipment, for human resources. Even for career reviews and bonuses now that careers are unfrozen again.” (Interviewee 5)

2	Recognition of eGovernment Importance	Benefits of Digitalization	Efficiency Gains	BFD_EG	Emphasizing efficiency gains resulting from digitalization	Can be discussions on facilitating tasks, saving time, or improving processes	“if we can effectively facilitate or speed up certain types of tasks that often involve physical travel to certain types of places, then I think something should be done at this level” (Interviewee 8)
		BFD	User Satisfaction	BFD_US	Emphasizing user satisfaction resulting from digitalization	Can be discussions on agility, simplicity, speed, or accessibility of digital services for various user groups	“Things work more and more in a way that is simple and fast and understandable and accessible to most people” (Interviewee 3)
		Salience of Digitalization	Unbureaucratic Procedures	SLD_UP	Emphasizing the role of digitalization in reducing bureaucracy	Includes discussions on simplifying administrative processes, reducing paperwork, or eliminating unnecessary steps	“The networking within the public administration in a digital, unbureaucratic way...” (Interviewee 4)
			Increased Access to Services	SLD_AS	Highlighting the improved access to services facilitated by digitalization	Can be discussions on online service delivery, digital platforms, or expanded reach of government services	“After all, progress increasingly in the digital area is not just promoting dematerialization but promoting the proximity of public services to the citizen.” (Interviewee 1)
			Expectations for Digital Services	SLD_ED	Emphasizing expectations for digital services	Includes discussions on meeting the needs or demands of users or government through digital platforms and services	“Digitalization is a very big need, both in public administration and in society. In general, it is a big bet at the national level and at the European level, because it is a necessity.” (Interviewee 8)
		Individual Characteristics	Public Service Motivation	INC_SM	Showing a significant degree of public service motivation	Includes discussions on the intrinsic motivation to serve the public interest or contribute to society that can	“I usually say, it’s not just a question of remuneration, it’s not just the money we receive at the end of the month, it’s, above all,

		INC				enhance the recognition of the importance of providing eGovernment services	our way of being and standing before a public service.” (Interviewee 8)
			Preference for Digitalization	INC_PD	Emphasizing personal preferences for digitalization	Includes discussions on personal inclinations towards digital solutions or willingness to embrace digital transformation	“I advocate for digitalization, and I advocate for e-government.” (Interviewee 5)
3	eGovernment Prioritization under Budget Constraints	Change in Priorities CIP	No Change	CIP_NC	Reporting no changes in priorities	Any time participants indicate that the order of importance or emphasis on eGovernment initiatives remains largely unaffected in the presence or absence of budget constraints	“the recommendation is always in the positive sense of using eGovernment and even of boosting and developing it further,” (Interviewee 7)
			Moderate Change	CIP_MC	Reporting moderate changes in priorities	Any time participants suggest some adjustments or reevaluation of priorities for eGovernment initiatives without significant shifts in the overall order of importance in the presence or absence of budget constraints	“So, I would recommend again as long as there was a guarantee that after there would be the service provision” (Interviewee 2)
			High Change	CIP_HC	Reporting high changes in priorities	Any time participants express a notable shift or reordering of priorities for eGovernment initiatives in the presence or absence of budget constraints	“Without funds, nothing can be done.” (Interviewee 2)

		Organizational approaches OAC	Interagency Collaboration	OAP_IC	Emphasizing interagency collaboration as a strategy for prioritizing eGovernment initiatives	Includes discussions on coordination or cooperation among different government entities	“...we developed together with AMA that accompanied us in the process and in the evaluations done by the European Union.” (Interviewee 6)
			Resource Sharing	OAP_RS	Highlighting resource sharing as a strategy for prioritizing eGovernment initiatives	Includes discussions on sharing personnel or expertise among government entities	“Leaders tend to say that they lack resources, everybody says they do, but the truth is that sometimes there are too many in certain areas and they are not being used and could perfectly well be allocated to other areas.” (Interviewee 7)
			Operational Considerations	OAP_OC	Focusing on the operational considerations involved in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives	Includes discussions on the factors of project dimension or project horizon	“We may be talking about projects of various dimensions. But assuming it’s a large project, you can actually phase out the project.” (Interviewee 1) “The possibility of having future funds is what I mean.” (Interviewee 2)
		Cognitive Strategies CSC	Pragmatism	CGS_PG	Emphasizing the use of pragmatic strategies in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives	Includes discussions on practical considerations, cost-effectiveness, or feasibility	“But I do not think it is something very difficult to solve. Sometimes it’s a matter of overriding or eliminating unnecessary procedures and so on.” (Interviewee 5)
			Creativity	CGS_CT	Emphasizing the use of creative approaches in prioritizing	Can be expressed as innovative ideas, out-of-the-	“Maybe use another kind of strategy. We could even use LinkedIn to publicize more things from DGAE. And maybe this

					eGovernment initiatives	box thinking, or novel solutions	eGovernment issue could be worked out using a more professional social network.” (Interviewee 9)
			Altering Thresholds for Aspirations	CGS_AT	Redefining expectations or revising benchmarks in the prioritization of eGovernment initiatives	Includes discussions on adjusting to reality, setting less ambitious goals, or using other measures for success	“Obviously there is always an adaptation, unfortunately. There always has to be.” (Interviewee 3)
		Compliance Concerns	Political Targets	CPC_PT	Discussing the alignment of eGovernment initiatives with political targets	Includes formal or informal objectives, guidelines or goals set by the government or the European Union	“We are committed to the major goals in the area of digitalization, of eGovernment, and so on. These are clear commitments.” (Interviewee 1) “This digital transformation is, in fact, one of the light motives, let’s say, one of the key words of the European Union that Ursula von der Leyen defined.” (Interviewee 9)
		CPC	Enforcement Mechanisms	CPC_EM	Discussing compliance with established digitalization standards	Can be expressed as sanctions or infractions	“I am currently working within the scope of an infringement procedure in which the issue has much to do with digitalization.” (Interviewee 8)
4	Prioritization of Aspiration Levels	Assessment of Performance Information	Preferences for Objective Indicators	API_PO	Highlighting a preference for clear and objective ways of assessing indicators in		“Information given by situation 1 would be clearer in terms of Portugal’s performance... in terms of its cycle and its evolution than situation 2.” (Interviewee 7)

					the prioritization of aspiration levels		
		API	Indicators' Influence on Decision-making	API_ID	Recognizing indicators' influence on decision-making processes by government authorities and policymakers in the prioritization of aspiration levels		“So in political terms, I think that situation 2 would work better because there is a greater concern of governments to compare themselves with other member states than to worry about why people are not accessing or are accessing.” (Interviewee 2)
			Evaluation of Measurement Methods	API_MM	Highlighting the evaluation of measurement methods in the prioritization of aspiration levels	Includes discussions on the reliability, validity, standardized benchmarks, or appropriateness of methodologies	“Maybe situation 2, because everything is measured in rankings, and at the European level it is all very much a function of ranking.” (Interviewee 8)
		Reputational Concerns	Image	RTC_IM	Expressing concerns with image in the prioritization of aspiration levels	Includes discussions on the negative impact on reputation or credibility associated with poor performance in eGovernment initiatives	“Because, that is, Portugal is in 21st place... obviously it's a comparative situation. And it has to do with the image... we never want to be among the last, right?” (Interviewee 3)
		RTC	Peers' Perception	RTC_PP	Expressing concerns with peers' perception in the prioritization of aspiration levels	Includes discussions on how compliance with eGovernment initiatives is perceived by peers when performance information on eGovernment initiatives is negative	“Who attends these meetings knows there is always that comparison of who is better and who is worse. And nobody really likes to be bad and we, when we feel this pressure among our peers, it also ends up having a driver, a motivator.” (Interviewee 8)

Appendix H: Coding Frequency Tables

Table H1. Code coverage (Characters of the coded segments)

Code List	Interviewee 1	Interviewee 2	Interviewee 3	Interviewee 4	Interviewee 5	Interviewee 6	Interviewee 7	Interviewee 8	Interviewee 9	TOTAL
Education Activities	6%		15%	3%		7%		2%	13%	7%
Personnel			9%	3%	16%				7%	3%
No Impact							20%			1%
Moderate Impact	1%	12%				3%				1%
High Impact			0%	1%	1%			8%	1%	2%
Peers' Perception	2%					6%		9%		2%
Image	3%		2%			4%			4%	2%
Evaluation of Measurement Methods	4%	8%	14%	38%		5%		3%		6%
Indicators' Influence on Decision-making		7%				4%			7%	1%
Preference for Objective Indicators	0%	4%	5%		23%		10%	3%		4%
Preference for Digitalization	1%	9%			8%			4%		2%
Public Service Motivation			10%					7%		3%

Expectations for Digital Services	11%		2%	7%	8%			6%	7%	6%
Unbureaucratic Procedures		3%		10%	10%					1%
Increased Access to Services	2%	10%	1%			7%		12%		4%
User satisfaction	5%		3%			6%	10%		1%	3%
Efficiency Gains		6%				3%	16%	5%		2%
High change		16%			4%				14%	3%
No change	1%	0%	8%	5%		1%	13%	2%	5%	3%
Moderate change	4%	11%			14%					3%
Operational Considerations	14%	18%	3%							6%
Resource sharing		2%				14%	25%			2%
Interagency collaboration	13%					8%				4%
Creativity	11%		12%	14%	1%				27%	8%
Altering thresholds for aspirations	25%		10%			16%				10%
Pragmatism			8%	19%	22%	16%	6%	35%		11%
Enforcement Mechanisms								5%	9%	2%
Political Targets	2%								18%	2%

NOT CODED	14 242,00	6588	11 541,00	4790	7549	7413	8849	10 570,00	10 182,00	81 724,00
CODED	100% (13 204)	100% (3391)	100% (7919)	100% (1436)	100% (3001)	100% (3200)	100% (2078)	100% (8194)	100% (4494)	100% (46 917)
ALL TEXT	27 446,00	9979	19 460,00	6226	10 550,00	10 613,00	10 927,00	18 764,00	14 676,00	128 641,00

Table H2. *Coded documents*

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Education Activities	6	66,67	66,67
Personnel	4	44,44	44,44
No Impact	1	11,11	11,11
Moderate Impact	3	33,33	33,33
High Impact	5	55,56	55,56
Peers' Perception	3	33,33	33,33
Image	4	44,44	44,44
Evaluation of Measurement Methods	6	66,67	66,67
Indicators' Influence on Decision-making	3	33,33	33,33
Preference for Objective Indicators	6	66,67	66,67
Preference for Digitalization	4	44,44	44,44
Public Service Motivation	2	22,22	22,22
Expectations for Digital Services	6	66,67	66,67
Unbureaucratic Procedures	3	33,33	33,33
Increased Access to Services	5	55,56	55,56
User satisfaction	5	55,56	55,56
Efficiency Gains	4	44,44	44,44
Enforcement Mechanisms	2	22,22	22,22
Political Targets	2	22,22	22,22
High change	3	33,33	33,33
No change	8	88,89	88,89
Moderate change	3	33,33	33,33
Creativity	5	55,56	55,56
Altering thresholds for aspirations	3	33,33	33,33
Pragmatism	6	66,67	66,67
Resource sharing	3	33,33	33,33
Interagency collaboration	2	22,22	22,22
Operational Considerations	3	33,33	33,33
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	9	100,00	100,00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	0	0,00	-
DOCUMENTS ANALISED	9	100,00	-

Table H3. *Segments with code*

	Frequency	Percentage
Education Activities	9	4,79
Personnel	5	2,66
No Impact	1	0,53
Moderate Impact	4	2,13
High Impact	5	2,66
Peers' Perception	3	1,60
Image	5	2,66
Evaluation of Measurement Methods	9	4,79
Indicators' Influence on Decision-making	3	1,60
Preference for Objective Indicators	10	5,32
Preference for Digitalization	7	3,72
Public Service Motivation	4	2,13
Expectations for Digital Services	11	5,85
Unbureaucratic Procedures	3	1,60
Increased Access to Services	8	4,26
User satisfaction	7	3,72
Efficiency Gains	7	3,72
Enforcement Mechanisms	3	1,60
Political Targets	3	1,60
High change	7	3,72
No change	16	8,51
Moderate change	6	3,19
Creativity	12	6,38
Altering thresholds for aspirations	9	4,79
Pragmatism	13	6,91
Resource sharing	6	3,19
Interagency collaboration	3	1,60
Operational Considerations	9	4,79
TOTAL	188	100,00

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