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## **To Reprioritize, or not to Reprioritize? The Bureaucratic Dilemma of Goal Prioritization in Dutch Local Governments**

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## **Master Thesis**

### **Title:**

To Reprioritize, or not to Reprioritize?

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The Bureaucratic Dilemma of Goal Prioritization in Dutch Local Governments

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### **Date:**

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**Universiteit  
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Master Thesis Public Administration  
Specialization International and European Governance

***Title: To Reprioritize, or not to Reprioritize?***

***The Bureaucratic Dilemma of Goal Prioritization in Dutch Local  
Governments***

***Student:*** Olsi Sokolli

***Supervisor:*** Dr. Amandine Lerusse

***Date:*** January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024

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## **Abstract**

The figure of the neutral bureaucrat is endangered by the new challenges of New Public Management. The heightened attention on performance information and goal prioritization characterizing NPM collides with political preferences and aspirations. The dissertation explores how political interferences influence the prioritization of goals in Dutch local governments. The research expects that the presence of conflicting goals will foster reprioritization considerations during bureaucratic performance evaluation. Through an experimental approach, combining Experimental Vignette Method and semi-structured interviews, the research finds that political interference leads to goal reprioritization. The employment of thematic coding and subsequent analysis detects guiding explanations cascading from political interference, reinforcing the institutional constraints within the bureaucratic domain. Finally, the dissertation identifies theoretical and methodological limitations and provides practical implications for policymaking and suggestions for the reduction of institutional constraints in bureaucratic evaluation.

**Key words:** Bureaucratic neutrality; performance evaluation; political interference; goal (re) prioritization; local government; institutional constraints.

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## **List of abbreviations**

**COR** – Committee of the Regions

**EVM** - Experimental Vignette Method

**NPM** - New Public Management

**VNG** - Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten

**WRR** - Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

In the complex world of governance and public administration, the figure of the neutral bureaucrat has long been an idealized concept, representing an individual or group of individuals who, theoretically, should issue and execute policies devoid of personal biases, political interference, or external pressures (Yuwono, 2017). With the advent of renewed methods engrained in New Public Management (Van der Meer, 2007), there is heightened attention to performance information and goal prioritization (Buschor, 2013)

The NPM “wave” reached various administrative structures. Recent administrative trends promote evidence-based management to drive efficient and effective solutions to challenges and debates emerging from dynamic political and bureaucratic environments (Head, 2008). Performance-oriented decisions, key target building and prioritization chains peculiar to NPM (Verbeeten & Speklé, 2015) imply that performance information and goal prioritization increasingly occupy pivotal positions within administrative strategies.

Recent cases related to bureaucratic decision-making suggest that information can be incorrectly evaluated, and neutrality can be subjected to breaches. The childcare benefit scandal in the Netherlands is a prime example. The Dutch Tax and Customs administration employed algorithms in which foreign-sounding names and dual nationality were branded as high risk for fraud (European Parliament, 2022). As a result, low and middle-income families with a migration background have been unjustly scrutinized and penalized based on the algorithms employed (European Parliament, 2022). The practical implication of wrong evaluations has shaken public opinion and confidence in the political class: according to minutes publicly disclosed, it is plausible that the government willingly hid information on their wrongdoing to protect political figures (Trouw, 2021). Hence, the

issue of childcare benefit in the Netherlands confirmed that incorrect data evaluation can lead to disastrous outcomes (Peeters & Widlak, 2023). Moreover, it shows that political figures can interfere in bureaucratic decisions.

The recent case of the Spanish bank "Bankia" during the economic world crisis further confirms the political ability to interfere with data evaluation. The transition from a Socialist government to a Conservative one in 2011 resulted in the implementation of altered evaluations systems for Spanish banks (Giner & Mora, 2018, p.3). These changes included the use of private stress tests, which were designed to under report the state of Spanish bank accounts, intending to provide a justification for establishing the European Stability Mechanism (Giner & Mora, 2018, pp. 2-3). Other interfering tools entail budgetary pressures, as exemplified in the U.S. Congress-NASA case: US senators exerted budgetary pressure on NASA to alter measurements and under-report data warning on the melting of ice caps. This was done to water down the urgency and destructive impact of climate change (Hansen, 2007, pp. 6-7). The cases of Netherlands, Spain, and the USA demonstrate that political interference has the capacity to shape bureaucratic neutrality. As bureaucrats strive to detach from political plays to avoid unwanted intrusions (West, 2005, pp. 147-149), it is therefore relevant to research the extent to which political interference influences bureaucratic work.

The dissertation contributes to this puzzle by investigating the role of political interference in shaping performance evaluation and eventually, goal prioritization as an institutional outcome. Through an experimental approach, the dissertation provides a deeper understanding of how bureaucratic impartiality can often collide with the realities of political structures and ultimately, affect the independence of public administrations.

## **1.2 Research question**

The dissertation explores the influence of political interference in the field of bureaucratic goal prioritization, by shaping performance evaluations. It strives to explore how political interference shapes bureaucratic evaluations and whether these shape goal prioritizations. Therefore, I provide the following research question: **How do political interferences influence the prioritization of goals in Dutch local governments?**

To address the research question, the dissertation employs an experimental, qualitative research, collecting relevant data with the Experimental Vignette Method (EVM) and semi-structured interviews. The Dutch case study selection provides relevant insights into performance evaluation and goal prioritization in neutral bureaucratic environment. Dutch administrations anchor their bureaucratic modus operandi on three expectations: bureaucrats are expected to handle a series of periodical reports containing performance information to facilitate advising (Jansen, 2007) in objective and neutral manners (Hendriks & Tops, 2003), whilst actively promoting clear priority-setting as symbol of good governance (WRR, 2001). In other words, Dutch civil servants operate in administrative environments that expect them to utilize performance information and goal prioritization, while ensuring a high degree of impartiality. The next section emphasizes the societal and theoretical relevance of the proposed research.

## **1.3 Societal and Theoretical relevance**

The dissertation contributes to a series of relevant societal dilemmas. Bureaucrats are consistently confronted with numerous choices, diverse preferences, and a range of opinions as they provide advice on tasks relevant to the lives of citizens. Local government employees serve the interest of local communities and therefore, citizens (Jones & Stewart, 2012) and are accountable for the implementation and delivery of basic sets of services. These entail the appointment and construction of social housing, water and sewage management, energy

infrastructure maintenance and public transport, among a rich variety of other services (Montin, 2016, p. 89). In many cases, local government employees weight off services through criteria that include economic, social, or political metrics and ultimately, provide advice and opinions on issues related to their local service delivery (Hefetz & Warner, 2012). To this end, performance information is instrumental. Evidence from healthcare management policies underline that performance reporting and measurements impact policymakers' responsiveness to efficiency problems in primary care structures (Langton et al., 2016, pp. 35-42). The beneficial correlation between reporting and policymaking has been observed as well in the example of the annual UN Level Political Forum, whereby countries with more focus on performance information have led to more precise attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (Bexell & Jönsson, 2019, pp. 415-416). This subjects local government employees to high pressures to evaluate, in an efficient and impartial manner, a series of information.

Notwithstanding this commitment, civil servants in local sectors can be influenced by external interferences. In this vein, the presence of political figures is a constant variable in their bureaucratic duties. Hodder (2009) underlines that in the case of Philippines' agency environment, civil servants are targeted by politicians with the aim of influencing spending patterns, office appointments, and promotion processes (p. 771). These are pressured through coercive measures comprising targeted agency investigations and agency defunding among other techniques (Hodder, 2009, pp. 770-771). The Slovenian civil service environment demonstrates political figures' ability to interfere with the bureaucratic sector. In the recruitment process, due to legal loopholes, political officials are allowed to replace the chosen candidate within one year of office work without any underlying reason (Nahtigal & Haček, 2013, p.117). Further evidence from the American and Swedish highly politicized civil service appointment structures (Matheson et al., 2007, pp. 15-16) indicate vulnerability

of civil service towards political interference. As bureaucrats attempt to provide high-quality administration through performance information, the dissertation contributes to extract compelling details on preferences and goal priorities in tight bureaucracy-politics realities.

From a theoretical perspective, the dissertation contributes to various aspects retrievable in public administration studies. The study explores how political interferences shape goal prioritization in local governments. Academic efforts on bureaucracies reflect neutrality as an ideal value crucial to ensure loyal, competent, and fair bureaucrats (Caiden, 2005). According to the Weberian model (2009), the ideal bureaucrat shall perform duties in well-established, hierarchical, and impartial administrative structures (Sager & Rosser, 2009). Through objectivity and detachment from political plays, bureaucrats are expected to avoid unwanted intrusions into their administrative bodies (West, 2005) and provide impartial service to governments (Hood & Lodge, 2006). Further models of bureaucratic behaviour strengthen these qualities: the ideal bureaucrat performs duties on a “rule-of-law and neutral” basis, to ensure independent judgement and bureaucratic autonomy (Dasandi & Esteve, 2017, p. 236).

Positive approaches to the latter note that bureaucrats are undeniably entwined with political developments and dynamics at both high and low levels (Overeem, 2005, p. 314). The presence of political interferences is framed as constructive when undertaken to foster engagement and ensure that the preferences of the constituency are respected (Mol, 2022). Other theoretical approaches frame political interference as negative. Accordingly, the presence of political actors meddling with bureaucracies is believed to diminish autonomy of action and impose preferences that are not an accurate reflection of citizens’ preferences (Jones & Stewart, 2012, p. 354). This theoretical duality enhances the relevance of political interference in relation to bureaucratic neutrality.

Finally, the dissertation provides relevant theoretical insights into goal prioritization.

Prioritization systems have been steadily employed in public administrations to encourage improved organizational structures and foster a tangible sense of achievement in public administrations (Staniok, 2017). Particularly, public administrators that have been encouraged to break down tasks and set clear objectives show a higher drive to improve performance and positive feedback, as demonstrated by observing Chinese public administrations (Ma, 2016). The attention to goal prioritization in the dissertation can be beneficial to concretize the effects of political interference on civil servant's tasks and test their neutrality. Hence, the second chapter tackles the theoretical framework: it begins with the collection of theoretical evidence on performance information, and the internal and external factors shaping bureaucratic evaluations. The Chapter proceeds with a section linking political interference with performance information evaluation and the detection of research gaps; the last sections include theories of goal prioritization, ambiguity, and goal reprioritization. The third chapter focuses on the methodological approach. Section 3.1 contextualizes the dissertation to Dutch local administrations and highlights the peculiarities and governance structure of their system. Moreover, it offers an overview of the employed experimental research design, the data collection methods, the sample selection, the data analysis methods and reflections on validity and reliability. Chapter 4 showcases the collected results, while Chapter 5 concludes the dissertation with a discussion, accompanied by a reflection on limitations and practical implications of the research findings.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical Framework**

Chapter 2 offers a theoretical framework for the proposed research on how political interferences influence the prioritization of goals in Dutch local governments. The first section sheds light on performance information evaluation within public administrations. This includes a reflection on potential internal and external factors shaping the evaluation process of performance data. The second section introduces the theme of political interference and contextualizes it to performance information evaluation. After the identification of academic gaps, the Chapter concludes with goal-setting theory, ambiguity, and goal reprioritization theory.

#### **2.1 Performance information evaluation**

Public administrations have been invested by a series of societal pressures calling for renewed approaches to ensure efficiency, accountability, and flexibility of the governance structures (Van de Meer, 2007). To this end, the transition to New Public Management (NPM) determined a revolutionary administration style. The new paradigm placed “explicit performance metrics, disaggregation of units in the public sector, higher competition, and greater discipline in resource use (Hood, 1991, pp. 4-5) as core elements.

A relevant development stemming from NPM is the heightened emphasis on performance management. The latter is a management style that bases decisions on output and outcome constructed via performance indicators and measurements (Buschor, 2013). This suggests that performance information has steadily increased its salience in bureaucratic discourse. By performance information, one intends the “intra-organizational registrations produced with the purpose of serving administrations and managers” (Høybye-Mortensen, 2016, p. 487). In simple terms, it refers to the collection of data employed by bureaucrats to

conduct performance management in public administrations. The use of performance information is multifaceted. It can be used to “evaluate, motivate, promote, or improve” among many other functions (in Dooren & Van de Walle, 2008, p. 3). Moreover, it is often seen as a “necessary prerequisite to having the system spur any service improvement” (Shachter, 2010, p. 554) as it keeps track of any evidence-based development in the performance of an administration or service (Ter Bogt, 2004). Managers, politicians, or citizens are end users of performance information, through which they can execute operational decisions, influence policy making or justifying positions (Van de Walle & Dooren, 2008). These functions require the use and evaluation of the proposed performance information. By evaluating, bureaucrats offer a judgement, determining “the merit, the worth and value of things” (Scriven, 1991, p. 139). The judgments are core duties in bureaucrats’ work paths and therefore will be thoroughly analyzed in this dissertation. As noted by Van de Walle and Van Dooren (2010), the complexity of issues tackled by bureaucrats encourages not only an “evidence-based management style” but also a more comprehensive set of situational considerations (p. 34). This suggests that bureaucrats strive to evaluate performance information with broad thinking and flexibility.

While the use of performance information is essential for the functioning of bureaucracies, there are potential factors that influence bureaucratic evaluations. These can be in many directions influenced by internal and external factors. The next two subparagraphs inquire into these factors.

### **2.1.1 Internal dynamics shaping performance evaluation**

Initial studies on evaluation in public administrations show that performance information evaluation is often influenced by personal characteristics, attitudes, and internal pressures (Judge and Ferris, 1993, pp. 80-84). Specifically, behavioural analyses consistently emphasize that cognitive processes such as pre-decisional information distortion frequently

result in biased interpretation of performance outcomes, as shown by Wilhelms and Reyna (2014) and Bond et al. (2007). Such a phenomenon impairs performance evaluation, as individuals are subconsciously tempted to interpret and evaluate data having in mind prior alternatives that are already deemed as more "appealing" (Russo, 2015, p. 95) (Hammes et al., 2021). This suggests a potential effect of alternatives on subsequent choices. With regards to the utilization of performance information, the presence of pre-decisional information distortion might negatively impact the evaluation of performance data as bureaucrats insert a subjective perspective into a process that should function by objectivity.

Further academic efforts analyzed behavioural traits while performing evaluations. Belle et al. (2017) inquired into the role of the halo effect on public sector employees. They define the "halo effect" as the tendency to evaluate "consistently, across different dimension, regardless of available information" to "maintain consistent and explanatory narratives" (p. 282). In other words, evaluation can be primed to reinforce previous conceptions and preferences. The survey proposed by Belle et al. (2017) tested the theory. Survey participants positively looked at employees who were previously assigned by the researchers in the high prior anchor rating group and conversely, held a negative outlook on the low anchor group ratings (pp. 280-285). This suggests an influence of prior considerations on later evaluation patterns. The replication survey proposed by Nagtegaal et al. (2020) confirms that initial biases, albeit to different extents, influence evaluations in various institutional settings (p. 565). These experiments confirm that the presence of previous assumptions can bias performance evaluation. Thus, pre-decisional information distortion and halo effect play a role in bureaucrats' evaluation of performance information.

Crucial to note is that preference-led biases do not always reinforce the selection of a specific set of options or data. Chaxel et al. (2013) suggest that evaluators tendentially collect a set of positive and negative information and draw a balance to perform more accurate

decisions (pp. 566-569). Webeck and Nicholson-Crotty (2019) support Chaxel et al. (2013) perspective, as their research demonstrates that public employees consider historical comparisons, but these do not determine a switch in their preferences in decision-making (pp. 814-817). Hence, while pre-decisional information distortion might occur, it does not always lead to predefined decisions in the evaluator. This imbalance creates general uncertainty since it impairs predictions on bureaucratic behaviour in the evaluation stage.

### **2.1.2 External dynamics shaping performance evaluation**

Beyond internal variables, recent scholarship concentrated on the impact of external variables in the evaluation processes. Civil servants are embedded in administrations that demand simultaneously respect for normative and organizational constraints (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018) while performing bureaucratic tasks. Accordingly, bureaucrats need to balance the directives and orders anchored in organizational structures while ensuring that legality, professionalism, and neutrality are upheld (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018). Static organizational structures and expectations might shape how performance information is examined. As bureaucrats are restricted by their employment in well-established administrations with organizational goals and metrics to be followed (Meyer, 2013, p. 15), these might show a tendency to prime their evaluation to conform with institutional structures.

The presence of organizational structures (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018) might promote a sense of proximity between bureaucrats and political figures. On this matter, Andersen and Jakobsen (2017) find that communication patterns and political cues can shape the way bureaucrats perceive information, as these can be more sympathetic or hostile to certain policy based on the framing of the discourse (pp. 59-62). This implies that the way policy is presented to the bureaucrats, with story-framing highlighting advantages or disadvantages based on political interest, can impact the perception that these have on the

policy and therefore, the evaluation of the policy itself.

In contrast with Andersen and Jakobsen (2017), Raaphorst and Van de Walle (2017) claim a more moderate influence of framing cues on bureaucratic analysis. As public employees might utilize interpretative frameworks, they are able to decide whether information is trustworthy and when it is appropriate to follow or ignore cues (pp. 1374-1377). Selective perception, as discussed by Fink and Ruffing (2018), is crucial for the stability and productivity of bureaucratic apparatuses due to the large amount of information that civil servants are subjected to, from politicians, interest groups, and citizens (pp. 233-236). Through selective perceptions, evaluators might be able to categorize cues and decide whether to employ them for their judgments.

The performance evaluation process goes beyond a mere examination of reports and metrics. It involves a nuanced interaction between internal mechanisms and external influences. On the one hand, behavioural elements can enhance subjectivity in evaluations that require a certain degree of objectivity to deliver appropriate decisions. On the other hand, external variables such as cues, advice and public consultations might influence performance information evaluation, despite the objective judgment of bureaucratic evaluation. Hence, the next section tackles political interference as a mechanism that can deflect impartial evaluation of performance information.

## **2.2 Political interferences shaping performance information evaluation**

Political interference in the bureaucratic realm is a recurring issue within administrations. Political interference refers to the politically motivated suppression or endangerment of an administration's capacity to perform its functions (Prewitt, 2010, p. 228). Within advisory positions, bureaucrats are required to balance out a series of preferences (Pepinsky et al., 2017) and accurately select services and policies that benefit the social interest (Taponen, 2017). This commitment should force bureaucratic employees to

attentively evaluate performance-related data.

Empirical observations find that political interference can shape the bureaucratic performance information evaluation. Van de Walle and Roberts (2008) claimed that data can act as an "anchor offering predictability and illusion of control" (pp. 14-15). Especially in ambiguous and complex political environments, where trust in politicians steadily declines (Citrin & Stoker, 2018), evaluations can be convenient tools to demonstrate that the political establishment is satisfying prior expectations (Covaleski et al., 1995, p. 161). More recent academic efforts confirm the closeness between bureaucrats and political interference. Bjørnholt and Larsen (2014) contributed to Van de Walle and Roberts' (2008) discourse and claimed that performance evaluation is an integral part of policymaking, as it is a fundamental step to solving issue raised by the political class (p. 405). Both political actors and bureaucrats have stakes in providing accurate evaluations based on performance information data.

As performance evaluation reflects achievements and promises, politicians often push bureaucrats to manipulate performance evaluations to either diminish or exaggerate reports to align with politically favorable outcomes (Prewitt, 2010, p. 228). Similar patterns have been observed in local municipalities, in which political parties interfere with the allocation process of primary services such as water and waste management through budgetary pressures (Mngomezulu, 2020, p. 42). These cases underline how politicians engage in shaping bureaucratic performance information evaluation.

Nonetheless, interference can occur in even more subtle manners. In practice, political declarations and advising can also shape data evaluation. By employing issue framing, political figures can attempt to influence issue perceptions and prime opinion towards their preferences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Such influence attempt builds upon emotional appeals and data manipulation, to highlight or omit particularities to gain support for own

causes with the aim of persuading (Gross, 2008). Hence, specific political declarations and tailored advice can also elicit changes in data evaluation. These few examples allude to a tight relationship between politics and bureaucratic administrations, suggesting that bureaucratic data evaluation is susceptible to political infiltration in various manners and exert influence in the bureaucratic *modus operandi*.

### **2.2.2 Research gap**

Performance evaluations have been often framed as key to improve organizational outcomes (Grafton et al., 2010) and to measure an organization's attainment to missions and objectives (Shahmehri et al., 2014). Further studies inquired into the relationship between politics and information evaluation: these often reinforce the idea that political voices frame the evaluation of arguments and topics (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and impact opinion building (Bayes & Druckman, 2021). Furthermore, the study produced by Harris (2023) suggests that bureaucratic evaluations are "void" if not coupled with broader political considerations. This is due to performance metrics and subsequent evaluations not having a separate value without political and socially constructed interpretation (p. 157). Yet, few researchers inquired into bureaucratic evaluation and goal prioritization as the interplay of internal and external pressures.

Although numerous studies have focussed on the influence of political components with regards to data evaluation, a significant gap remains in understanding how these influences affect a bureaucratic duty deeply intertwined with political interest. As such, goal and priority-establishment are recurring responsibilities that bureaucrats must address as part of their job. Goal prioritization refers to the "strategic ordering of goals according to their relative perceived importance" (Forestier & Kim, 2020, p. 1270). The establishment of priorities is a recurring bureaucratic responsibility. Political figures, by influencing bureaucratic performance evaluation, could cause shifting goal prioritization. Bjørnholt and

Larsen, (2014) examined the impact of performance evaluations on goal prioritization and inferred that data is often utilized by policymakers to build priorities and set goals that will be guiding their political vision and eventually, shape their agenda-setting (p. 405). Further studies connected internal cognitive elements with external components to draw empirical associations in elected officials prioritizing education goals (Christensen et al., 2018) and public service provision (Lerusse & Van de Walle, 2022). Despite the compelling results, future research is suggested to enhance empirical associations between bureaucratic evaluation and political interference in different settings (Christensen et al., 2018, p.208; Lerusse & Van de Walle, 2022, p. 20). Therefore, the dissertation provides a different angle to previous research on the subject, by examining the role of political interference on Dutch local government employees. Hence the next sections proceed with a theoretical overview of goal prioritization, goal ambiguity, and goal prioritization.

### **2.3 Goal setting and prioritization**

Goal setting refers to the construction of a chain of objectives aimed at maximizing the performance of an organization, increasing efficiency, and ameliorating employees' motivation to perform their tasks (Rainey, 2009, p. 135). National and local administrations often attempt to induce goal-setting practices as integral organization tools to foster a climate of positive competition, motivation, and recognition of the performed work (Latham et al., 2008). In other words, public employees are rooted in a system of goals to be achieved and followed. At the same time, these are confronted with "multiple issues and several dimensions which performance can be evaluated, leaving room for judgments on the importance of each goal" (Jakobsen & Petersen, 2021, p. 887). Therefore, the multiplicity of goals creates a multidimensional aspect of goal setting, with each goal carrying a different weight within an administration.

Studies on agenda-setting indicate that goals can be prioritized differently based on



their significance in relation to the organization. The theory of goal prioritization concretizes such assumption. Goal prioritization refers to the “strategic ordering of goals according to their relative perceived importance” (Forestier & Kim, 2020, p. 1270). Accordingly, objectives can be prioritized because deemed relevant to the mission or the mandate of the administration (Minkoff & Powell, 2006, p. 595). Mission-related goals carry a more value-based significance, such as promoting societal values pillarized by the organization (p. 593). Mandate-related goals revolve around agreed objectives and practical points that serve the functioning of the bureaucracy itself (pp. 593-595). Such distinction can be relevant to understanding prioritization preferences. When bureaucrats face goals that combine features that reconnect to the identity of the organization and on "the achievement of agency mandate objectives", the tendency is to grant higher priority (Bundy et al., 2013, p. 361). This suggests that which goal is prioritized can rely upon whether mission or mandate is more relevant for the evaluator. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of goals can cause conflicts and ambiguity in how prioritizations occur: variables such as short-term and long-term visions and imbalanced attention on one goal over another can set goal prioritization to conflict (Rainey, 2009, p. 131) and exacerbate ambiguity in goal prioritization. Hence, ambiguity seems to play a central role in prioritizing goals. The next section illustrates the ambiguity of goal prioritization and the potential effects on performance evaluation.

## **2.4 Goal ambiguity and performance evaluation**

Various academic efforts (Jung, 2014), (Barely et al., 2012) explained that the determination of clear goals is beneficial for the performance of a public administration. Bureaucracies structured around goal prioritization and well-defined key performance indicators, translated into improved healthcare administration management (Calciolari et al., 2011, pp. 170-171). The interpretation of ambiguous goals can pose a threat to understanding bureaucratic performance evaluation and goal prioritization. The presence of

multidimensional indicators and criteria increase the ambiguity of performance information and bureaucratic evaluation (Jung, 2011). By goal ambiguity, one refers to “the extent to which an organizational goal or set of goals allows leeway for interpretation” (Chun & Rainey, 2005, p. 83). On the subject, Christensen et al. (2018) assert that the presence of various measures creates a conflict of performance interpretation, thus allowing for discretion and personal preferences whilst evaluating (p. 199). Put differently, the presence of various evaluation criteria and measurements paves the way to free interpretation and ultimately, can lead to blurred and unpredictable bureaucratic evaluations.

In decision-making settings, decisions are crucial to solving tasks and reaching goals. However, the multiplicity of alternatives to solve tasks and the difficulty of choosing best performing alternative creates dissonances in the evaluation process (Dhanda, 2020, p. 49). Even when provided with unambiguous pieces of information, bureaucrats might resent the weight of prior beliefs, and prime the evaluation process (Baekgaard & Serritzlew, 2016). Reprioritization, framed as an easing strategy, permit us to “acknowledge the existence of inconvenient information” and to “leverage the ambiguity of information environment to come up with reasonable arguments to support desired conclusions” (Christensen et al., 2018, pp. 200-201). The strategy adapts prior beliefs and biases to dynamic environments. As ambiguity and conflicting goals allow for a wide set of interpretations (Christensen et al., 2018) (Chun & Rainey, 2005), bureaucrats might reprioritize goals to adapt prior beliefs in presence of political interference. The theory of goal reprioritization can contribute to understanding how bureaucrats prioritize in ambiguous situations. The dissertation proceeds with the explanation of the goal reprioritization theory.

## **2.5 Goal reprioritization**

Conflicting goals and indicators leave ample space for the bureaucrats to interpret and evaluate performance data. Christensen et al. (2018) explored such association by

investigating prioritization patterns of elected officials: questioned to choose between two conflicting policy goals on school education, they reprioritized according to their preferences, using performance information to justify their decisions (p. 197). The collected evidence suggested that to navigate conflicting goals, bureaucrats might reconsider their goal prioritization and accordingly, modify their preferences. Hence, conflicting goals give room for goal reprioritization. The theory, developed by Christensen et al. (2018), refers to the reconsideration of the importance of goals in the priority scale (p. 200). Specifically, goal reprioritization allows for “opportunistic adjustment of the weight-assigned evidence conditional on its conformity” to desired conclusions (Kahan, 2015, p. 1). Put differently, bureaucrats can reshuffle goals based on their importance or preference. The theory originates from a prior theoretical effort anchored in political sciences: issue reprioritization. Whilst issue reprioritization involves the re-examination of entire policy domains (Christensen et al., 2018; Bark & Bell, 2019), the theory of goal reprioritization narrows down its focus on reweighting more specific objectives raising from broader issue domains (Christensen et al., 2018, p. 201). Since local governments are in certain ways related to political spheres, they contain "multiple issues and several dimensions which performance can be evaluated, leaving room for judgments on the importance of each goal" (Jakobsen & Petersen, 2021, p. 887). This suggests that goals are often prone to be re-evaluated and if needed, reprioritized.

Bureaucratic employees can review and classify goals based on systematic preferences, determined by political or interest-tainted preferences (Rutherford & Meier, 2015). Crucial to note is that these preferences are not static: they are prone to change due to motivation shifts, dynamics of adaptation, and at times, personal beliefs (Bao et al., 2015, p. 293). Being subjected to broader societal developments, civil servants often comply with required modifications (Bourgon, 2009, p. 309) and engage in goal reprioritization. The latter

allows bureaucrats to maintain a flexible approach to prioritization and deviate from initial categorization and thus, re-prioritize (Christensen et al., 2018, p. 200). Hence, bureaucrats have the capacity to re-prioritize goals when necessary and prioritize goals by following a set of preferences. The possibility of motivation shifts, adaptation, and personal belief suggests that there might be less straightforward components determining priority setting.

As demonstrated, political interferences can skew evaluation methods. With the proposed theoretical conception of goal prioritization influenced by ambiguity, it is timely to analyze whether political interferences shape goal prioritization in performance evaluation. The next Chapter proceeds with the methodological framework, to explore how political interferences can influence goal prioritization in Dutch local governments.

## Chapter 3

### Methodological Approach

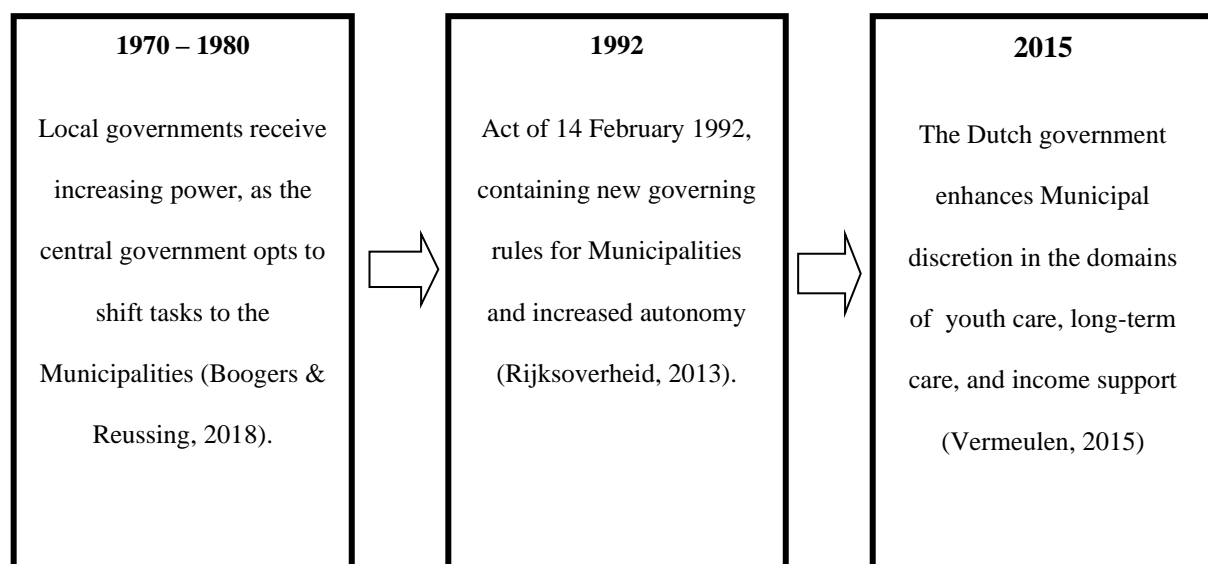
Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach of this qualitative dissertation. The first section describes the research setting of the selected case study, by providing an overview of the traditions and governance structures of Dutch Municipalities. The second section focuses on clarifying the employed experimental research structures and provides an operationalization of the key concepts of performance information evaluation, ambiguity, goal prioritization and reprioritization. The Chapter proceeds with two sections, illustrating the data collection methods and describing the collected sample. Finally, the Chapter concludes by explaining the employed method of data analysis, followed by reflections on validity and reliability of the employed research design.

#### 3.1 Research setting: Dutch local administrations

The bureaucratic structure in local Dutch administrations provides a compelling case study. Since 1848, the Netherlands has been a decentralized unitary state, in which decision-making is subdivided within a range of administrative entities (Toonen, 1987). The fragmentation of power determines a patchwork of Provinces and Municipalities that deal with the execution of primary services and implementation of national regulation within their administrative bodies (Art.124 Dutch Constitution, 2008). The Municipalities Act, a binding legislative document, further pillarizes the relationship between the central government and local administration in the Netherlands (Rijksoverheid, 2013a). As stated in Section 117 of the Municipalities Act (2013), the Minister “promotes decentralization for the benefit of the Municipalities” and encourages “decisions and measures to be dealt primarily by municipal authorities to ensure efficiency and effectiveness” (Rijksoverheid, 2013a, p. 63). To satisfy subsidiarity requirements, the Dutch central government allows for a high degree of

autonomy and discretion for the regional and local administrations to “bring decision-making as close as possible to the population” (COR, n.d., p. 1). In other words, through the core principle of subsidiarity enshrined in Dutch Municipal legislation, the central government allows for enhanced autonomy for local administrations, with the objective of holding decision-making as close as possible to the citizens. Since 2015, the Dutch government has undertaken a process of decentralizing substantial tasks and services to the competency of Municipalities, with the aim of promoting strong service-oriented form of government (OECD, n.d.).

**Figure 1: Decentralization timeline in the Dutch administrative layers**



Despite enhanced autonomy and discretion, local administrations are inherently connected to the central government via democratically elected figures. The composition of Dutch local administrations includes a Council, appointed via Municipal elections of local political parties, specific Committees dealing with various portfolios, *Wethouders* (Aldermen hereinafter) in charge of monitoring and reporting to the Committees on their assigned portfolio, and eventually, public servants (VNG, 2015, p. 33). Employees within Municipalities provide recommendations, advice, and consultations on the Municipal daily

tasks and most importantly, are not tied to any political colour (VNG, 2015, p. 35). In accordance with their advising role, civil servants within Municipalities should perform their tasks and issue advice in an impartial manner to avoid any conflict of interest and potential damage to the public sphere (OverheidNL, 2009). Next to impartiality, the Dutch Municipal culture promotes a consensus-based approach, in which decision-making and opinion-building is subjected to a broad scale of actors, which privileges middle common solutions (Van der Meer et al., 2019). Such feature confirms the difficult position of Dutch Municipal employees. While striving for impartial advice, they are remarkably in proximity of political figures, retrievable in the above-mentioned Municipal structures. The involvement of Aldermen, Committees, and eventually politically appointed Council members can introduce political interference into the responsibilities of bureaucrats. Hence, by investigating the role of ideally impartial bureaucrats embedded within a network of politically driven actors, I research bureaucratic mechanisms in a highly political environment.

This case study has been selected due to several core features present within Dutch governmental structures. First, the decentralisation trends increasingly allocate tasks to Municipalities at local level as the central government strive to respect the principle of subsidiarity. This increases the relevance of local administrations when compared to wider governmental architectures. Second, employees within Dutch local administrations are required to maintain an impartial and balanced approach whilst performing tasks, and favour a consensus-based approach to decision-making. Owing to these variables, employees within Dutch local administrations account for a compelling case study, as their position can add depth and unpredictability to the research. In the next section, I proceed with the elaboration of the research design and the methods employed to gather evidence on the subject.

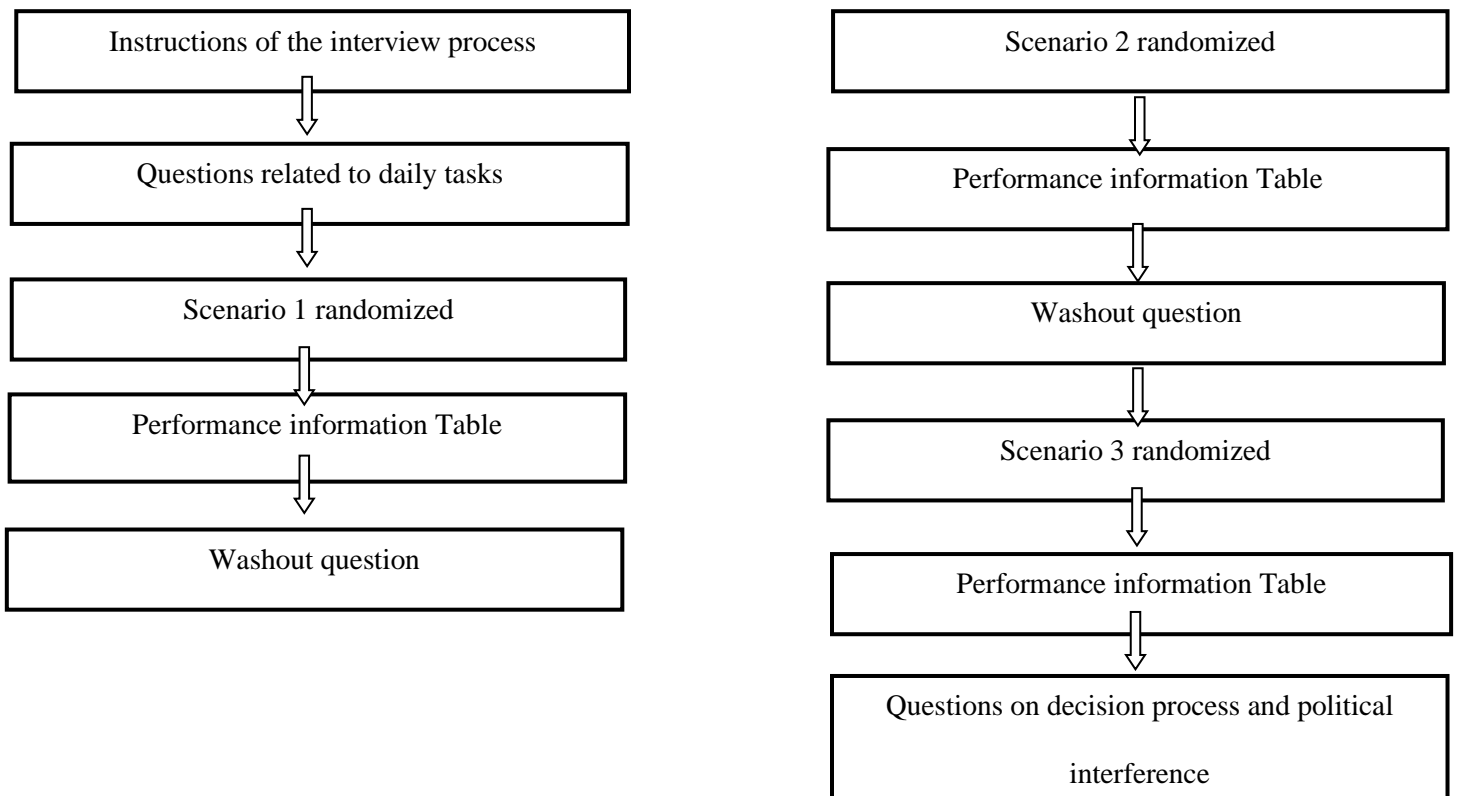
### **3.2 Experimental research design**

The dissertation tackles the research with an experimental qualitative research design, utilizing a case study. The experimental method is pivotal for the research as it builds empirical associations between direct and indirect variables (Berger et al., 2018) and makes deliberate interventions in neutral setting to account for changes (Toshkov, 2016). Moreover, the concentration on a case study provides “an intensive study of a single unit with the aim to generalize across larger sets of units” (Gerring, 2004, pp. 341-343). To concretize the association between political influence and bureaucratic goal prioritization, the dissertation employs experimental within-person vignettes, complemented with semi-structured interviews. The Experimental Vignette Method (EVM) allows to “introduce experimentally controlled variations” (Harrits & Møller, 2021, p. 526). Within-person vignettes, as employed in Van der Hoek et al. (2021), enabled to “analyze how contextual variations elicit different choices by the same participants” (p. 394). Through such method, the study inserts the collected bureaucrats in fictitious scenarios, to account for behaviours, attitudes, and choices (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014).

The coupling of experimental vignettes with semi-structured interviews is expected to unveil more details on the relationship between political interference and bureaucratic prioritization. The open-ended questions characterizing semi-structure interviews provide more material for the analysis and leave the Interviewee the liberty to express additional considerations and therefore, collect more discursive material (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). By allowing space to provide responses free of any range limit, I expect to gain more elaborate replies that contain more nuances and cognitive processes that explain bureaucratic choices and behaviours. Figure 2 illustrates the structure of the proposed experimental research.



**Figure 2: *Experimental research and semi-structured interview flowchart***



The Interview process follows the proposed flowchart. First, I collected a written and verbal informed consent from the Interviewee (Appendix B) and subsequently, introduced the Interviewees to the research, by explaining the instructions. Second, I proceeded with questions related to their daily tasks and whether these relate to evaluating performance information, followed by the Interviewee’s presentation of the first within person experimental vignettes. To avoid consequential thinking and biased prioritization, I randomized the presentation order through the add-in Excel function AbleBits and inserted washout questions in between each experimental vignette. The scenario randomization has been applied also to each presented Power Point, consultable on Appendix C.

The experimental vignettes focus on service provision, a task recurrent in performance management-based administrations. The control scenario is distinguished by the absence of any political cues, unlike the treatment vignettes. One treatment scenario emphasizes the

environmental goals of the ruling Green Party. Their stance on reducing CO2 emissions and willingness to reach A-class in environmental commitment should place pressure on the bureaucrat to lean towards their goal. The other treatment scenario emphasizes the financial goals of the ruling Social-Democratic party: the latter warns the evaluator of the financial implications of an expensive energy provider for society. Figures 3 and 4 display the control and treatment within-person experimental vignettes showed in the interview stage.

**Figure 3: Control scenario – neutral setting**

**Please imagine the following fictive scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider.

The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

**Figure 4: Treatment scenarios - political interference**

**Environmental goal**

**Please imagine the following scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider. The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer.

In last week's City Council meeting, the current majority formed by the Green party representative emphasized that the Municipality needs to firmly curb emissions. Referring to their party manifesto, the representative underscored that they are fully committed to achieve their objective of sensibly reducing CO2 emissions in the Municipality and brand the city as A-class in environmental commitment. Such label is assigned solely to Municipality that abide to the Climate goals set in accordance with all the Municipalities in 2019. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

**Financial goal**

**Please imagine the following scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider. The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer.

In last week's City Council meeting, the ruling Social Democratic majority vehemently opposed raising any costs. The representative underlined that the party objective will always be to diminish living costs and ensure financial security for most fragile individuals. According to their financial review, the two competing energy providers can represent a considerable financial burden for the treasury. The adoption of an expensive energy provider sensibly decreases the budget available for the distribution of energy subsidy and thus can worsen the financial situation of low-income families that are struggling with high energy bills. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

The dissertation focuses on environmental and financial goals to place the bureaucrats under pressure in the evaluation and prioritization stage. As previously mentioned, administrations strategically “order goals according to their relative perceived importance” (Forestier & Kim, 2020, p. 1270), to improve efficiency, competition and provide concrete operational, step-by-step systems (Latham et al., 2008; Rainey, 2009). These qualities and prioritization efforts are applicable to Dutch Municipalities (WRR, 2001).

In a hypothetical selection of a new energy provider, environmental and financial objectives are instrumental for well-informed decision. From a societal perspective, attention to environment has been a salient issue in Municipal policymaking (Bai, 2007), with Dutch administrations striving to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and comply with national guidelines (Biesbroek et al., 2010). The financial aspect of service provision is likewise instrumental when opting for a new energy provider, as Municipalities operate with a budget and monetary expectations (VNG, n.d.). Both goals are pertinent to the competence of Municipal employees, while at the same time, placing considerable weight on preference and decision-making. Table 1 contains performance information on both companies and how these indicators perform in relation to environmental and financial objectives. The environmental goal is operationalized as “reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions”, whilst financial goal as “expenditure for service provision”. To ensure ambiguous and conflicting goals, Provider 1 (Ecopulse) performs better in environmental goal whilst Provider 2 (Steamia) outperforms Ecopulse on the financial goal.

**Table 1: Energy providers performance information**

	<b>Service provider 1</b>	<b>Service provider 2</b>
	<b>Ecopulse</b>	<b>Steamia</b>
<b>Environmental goal:</b> Indicator: reduction of CO2 emission	Opts for mixed approach to energy, by involving hydrogen to the energy provision. By blending hydrogen with natural gas, they can reduce CO2 emissions by 11% per year	Implements Carbon Capture and Storage technology. By capturing emissions at source, they can reduce CO2 emissions by 8% each year.
<b>Financial goal</b> Indicator: expenditure for service provision	€3.2mln	€2.6mln

Based on the proposed control and treatment vignettes and Table 1, replicated in each scenario without any modifications, the Interviewees have been asked to select their best performer. Through such evaluation, the dissertation strives to detect prioritization patterns. Thus, goal prioritization is operationalized as the bureaucratic choice between environmental or financial goal, whilst goal reprioritization as the changing of previous prioritizations.

Through the insertion of political interference, I expect that the treatment variable will influence performance evaluation and prioritization behaviors. The avoidance of a clear higher performer will complicate bureaucratic evaluation. Furthermore, the creation of within-person vignettes containing high political pressures and conflicting goals, is expected to place the Interviewees in ambiguous and conflicting situation, in which political interferences can lead to potential reprioritizations. For consultation, Appendix C provides the PowerPoint containing the interview questions and tasks. In the next section, I elucidate the data collection methods.

### **3.3 Data Collection**

The first data collection step entails the target group identification: I grouped potential interview candidates into an Excel file tracker (Appendix A) and proceeded to retrieve contact information. Due to the unavailability in public domains of e-mail addresses and phone numbers of the candidates, I executed the contact process through the social media platform LinkedIn. Through the InMail function, I drafted invitation messages and sent these to the candidates without establishing prior social media connections.

The subsequent step entailed the scheduling of Microsoft Teams meetings and the collection of availabilities for the interview. After agreeing to a time and date with the candidate, I created a Microsoft Teams meeting link and attached, a consent form (Appendix B) to notify the Interviewees of details and applicable rights (duration, process, how anonymity, confidentiality are ensured, and recording permission).

As previously mentioned, the research employs semi-structured interview style with questions, experimental vignettes accompanied by an evaluation exercise through performance tables and washout questions in between. The questions and Tasks could be visualized by the Interviewee via a PowerPoint presentation, showed through the share screen function. Via the Microsoft Teams integrated option “Record and Transcribe”, I elaborated the final transcriptions and eliminated strictly confidential information due to privacy reasons. The next section tackles the sample selection criteria utilized to gather candidates.

### **3.4 Sample selection**

The selected sample contains 12 Municipal employees of various genders, years of experience, academic background, and administrative sections. The collected bureaucrats predominantly perform advisory roles that require impartial evaluations and do not cover any political role within their administration. The absence of political engagement is crucial for the research, as I investigate how the insertion of political interference shapes bureaucratic

tasks. The range of participants has been further restricted through key requirements. The sampled pool contains bureaucrats currently employed in a mid to large size Municipality within the Netherlands. The selection of candidates based on the Municipalities' size is aimed at increasing the generalizability of the study to apply potential findings to other relevant complex urban contexts outside of the Dutch case.

To assess eligibility for the interviews, I employed the scale provided by Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG, n.d.). Their size of the Municipalities is determined by the number of inhabitants residing within the administrative entity. The sampled pool contains civil servants employed in a city that is a member of the M50 network (comprising Municipalities with populations ranging from 30,000 to 80,000 inhabitants), the G40 network encompassing Municipalities with populations exceeding 100,000 inhabitants, and employees working in G4 Municipalities, which are the most populous in the Netherlands (VNG, n.d.). Table 2 shows a schematization of the criteria that describe the candidate pool.

**Table 2: Interview candidate selection criteria**

<b>Administration selection</b>	<b>Employee selection</b>
<p><b>Overarching Administration:</b> Kingdom of the Netherlands</p>	<p>Employed within the Kingdom of the Netherlands</p>
<p><b>Administrative entity:</b> <i>Gemeente</i> (Municipality) –size measured in inhabitants.</p>	<p>Eligible if employed in the following Municipalities:</p> <p><b>M50 network member:</b> 30.000 – 80.0000 inhabitants</p> <p><b>G40 network member:</b> &gt; 100.000 inhabitants</p> <p><b>G4 network member:</b> Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht</p>
<p><b>Role-based variables</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) No political affiliation in official function.</li> <li>b) Related to public services as result of official function.</li> <li>c) Prior experience in tendering process and service provision decision-making not required.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Neglected variables</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Years of service / experience</li> <li>b) Ethnicity and gender</li> <li>c) Education and social background</li> </ul>



### **3.5 Method of Data Analysis**

The collected interviews are analyzed through a thematic analysis. This qualitative method involves the detection of recurring discourse (referred as themes) in a data set (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016, p. 33). The employment of thematic analysis is advantageous for a qualitative analysis: it allows for a “rich, detailed, yet complex account of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5) and provides a well-structured subdivision of arguments with the use of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Such a combination can facilitate the analysis of wide range of information contained within the collect material. The thematic analysis is performed on the collected Microsoft Teams interview transcriptions. The data analysis is based on a verbatim overview of the interviewee responses. The latter allows for a “word-for-word reproduction of verbal data, where the written words are an exact replication of the audio recorded words” (Poland, 1995, p. 39). Due to the interest in content-based information, non-verbal variables, such as posture, tone of voice, and emotions have not been considered.

The thematic analysis is performed on the collected Microsoft Teams interview transcriptions. To detect themes, I employed a step-by-step guide to coding based on thematic code book, consultable in the Appendix section (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through MXQDA, a computer-based tool, I created themes and subthemes, through which I constructed conceptual linkages. Based on Maguire and Delahunt (2017) code guide, I created a table (Appendix D) which detects 4 relevant themes detectable in the interviews: alignment with political stand, cost consideration, environmental consideration, and public opinion. The themes have been collected from the interview transcript as recurrent patterns in the answers. For each theme, I provide leading subjects, measured through the implementation of indicators (Appendix D). The next section reflects on the validity and reliability of the study.

### **3.6 Validity and Reliability**

The internal validity of the study refers to the extent to which a study demonstrates the association between the treatment and the observed outcome (Slack & Draugalis, 2001). In relation to the proposed research, the employment of the experimental vignette method and the construction of three scenarios solidifies the internal validity of the study. EVM is correlated with high internal validity: the method “allows the research to manipulate and control independent variables to understand empirical associations” (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014, p. 352). The insertion of an independent variable (political interference) in 2 out of 3 scenarios aims to explain the association between goal prioritization and political interference. The use of open-ended questions on political influence, bureaucratic neutrality, and decision-making contributes to understanding the association between the dependent and independent variables, contributing to high internal validity. To produce reliable data and strengthen empirical associations, the dissertation subjects the Interviewees to randomized scenarios. Accordingly, randomization “limits the effects of nuisance variables that might confound the interpretation of collected results” (Corrigan & Salzer, 2003, p. 109). Thus, the employment of randomized, experimental vignettes confers high internal validity to the findings.

External validity refers to the “extent to which inferences drawn from a given study sample apply to a broader population or other target populations” (Findley et al., 2021, p. 365). Specifically, whether the experiment results are generalizable to the interest group (Toshkov, 2016, p. 173). The dissertation analyzed bureaucratic behaviour on a selected sample of Municipal employees based on criteria such as Municipal size, absence of political functions, and type of employment. Despite broad selective criteria, the study remains quite specific as the study focusses on the Dutch case. The selection of a single case study impairs the generalizability of the study: the investigation of a single, focused case might not account

for variations typical of “non-homogenous” research fields (Toshkov, 2016, p. 304). The focus on the Dutch case study might collect findings that can be solely observed in countries featuring administrative structures akin to the Dutch case. However, empirical results might not be generalized to other countries with different administrative structures and bureaucratic traditions. The low generalizability of the proposed case study with other administrations diminishes the external validity of the study.

The sample size further threatens the external validity of the study. Unpredictable variables, such as low response rate, rejections, and willingness to participate to a recorded interview impacted the sample size. Small samples can greatly “overestimate small or non-existent effects” (Gelman, 2009): with 12 Interviewees, the dissertation strives to make inferences on a wide portion of community by collecting information from a small group (Tipton et al., 2017). In other words, results stemming from the selected sample might not be generalizable to broader groups, contributing to the low external validity of the study.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

Chapter 4 presents the results of the collected interviews. The interviews have been performed on 12 individuals: 7 male and 5 female non-politically involved employees from mid to big-size Municipalities that cover advisory roles in various administrative departments. Chapter 4 presents these results in the following order: Section 4.1 provides an overview of the prioritization patterns displayed by the Interviewee in the control scenario. Subsequently, Sections 4.2 and 4.3 reflect on the prioritization patterns resulting from the imposed treatments. Respectively, environmental, and financial political interference. Finally, Section 4.4 sheds light on the detected reprioritizations: through complementing Subsections, the last Section illustrates thematically analyzed explanations cascading from the insertion of political interferences.

#### **4.1 Prioritization in control scenario**

The sample containing 7 male and 5 female non-politically involved Municipal employees majorly prioritized environmental goals. Table 3 schematizes the observed bureaucratic prioritization with no political interference: 10 out of 12 Interviewees highlighted the centrality of the environmental cause in their prioritization. The remaining 2 respondents prioritized financial goals.

**Table 3: Selection of service providers (SP) in randomized control scenario**

Control: no political interference	
Evaluation: best performer in energy provision	
SP1: Environmental goal prior. / SP2: Financial goal prior.	
Interviewee	Neutral scenario
1	SP1
2	SP1
3	SP1
4	SP1
5	SP1
6	SP1
7	SP1
8	SP2
9	SP1
10	SP1
11	SP1
12	SP2

In the control scenario, most Interviewees prioritized goals according to personal preferences. Most interviewees (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11) agree on tackling climate change by selecting a provider that promises a higher CO2 emission reduction. Interviewee 1 highlighted that *“Ecopulse promises higher climate action by reducing 3% more CO2 if compared to Steamia”* (Interviewee 1). Similarly, Interviewee 3 affirms that *“if there is enough budget available, why not opting for the best performer and the provider that reduces the most CO2 emissions?”* (Interviewee 3). The long-term vision is further emphasized by Interviewee 9 prioritization. The latter is anchored in the opinion that *“hydrogen is the way to the future; it is a more long-term solution than Carbon Capture Storage Technology”* (Interviewee 9). These clarifications underline a strong preference for prioritizing environmental goals, because of personal preferences and commitment to climate action.

Two respondents (8 and 12) prioritized financial goal over environmental. Interviewee 8 considered Steamia due to its convenient price and the ability to still reduce CO2 emissions (Interviewee 8). Interviewee 12 justified the selection of Steamia for its financial attractiveness in relation to Municipal spending. They reported that: *“Steamia*

allows to spend finances in a more spread out and even way for more long-run emission reduction” (Interviewee 12). Both Interviewees prioritize financial goals in the control scenario.

The goal prioritization in the control scenario reflected personal preferences. Interviewees prioritized environmental or financial goals depending on their considerations. With the insertion of political interferences, prioritization might be prone to shift. The next section analyzes the goal prioritization patterns after the insertion of politically backed environmental discourse.

#### 4.2 Prioritization in Treatment Scenario – Environmental goal

The insertion of political interference advancing environmental goals accounted for replicated environmental prioritizations and one reprioritization. Table 4 illustrates that 11 out of 12 respondent retained their goal priorities, whilst only 1 respondent reprioritized. Interviewees that initially opted for environmental goal see the Green party’s interference as reconfirming their priorities (1, 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 11).

**Table 4: Selection of service providers (SP) in randomized Green party treatment scenario**

	Control: no political interference	Treatment: political interference
<b>Evaluation: best performer in energy provision</b>		
<i>SP1: Environmental goal prior. / SP2: Financial goal prior.</i>		
Interviewee	Neutral scenario	Environmental goal scenario
1	SP1	SP1
2	SP1	SP1
3	SP1	SP1
4	SP1	SP1
5	SP1	SP1
6	SP1	SP1
7	SP1	SP1
8	SP2	SP1
9	SP1	SP1
10	SP1	SP1
11	SP1	SP1
12	SP2	SP2

Green Party's interference reinforces environmental prioritization, as deductible from the Interviewees reconfirmation of Ecopulse as best performer. Interviewees 5 and 9 explained that political interference should not lead to reprioritization; they note that by advising, the evaluator provides balanced considerations, taking as well into account personal preferences (Interviewee 5), whilst simultaneously striving for a "*pragmatic and long-term leaning when advice needs to be provided*" (Interviewee 9). Interviewee 1 reinforced this conception by stating that:

*In my role of policy advisor, I should perform cost benefit analysis before advising for the best service provider; there are always political reasons to do something or not of course, but that's the decision for the politicians and not for us as policy advisors* (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 12, which prioritized financial goals in the control scenario, retained such priority in the environmental goal treatment. Questioned on the choice, Interviewee 12 states that:

*I do not feel like political interference impacted my choices. I usually have fixed goals, to which I stick for four years. Yes, maybe we can shift priorities little to the left or the right depending on what the individuals, what the citizens find, because that's what the goals are based on, not what the political parties want* (Interviewee 12)

Interviewee 12 acknowledges that political interferences impact to a certain extent the progress of projects. Nonetheless, they do not see it as an excuse to reshuffle and reinvent goals, considering that goals are usually set in advance regardless.

Interviewee 8, in a neutral scenario, prioritized financial goal over environmental by selecting service provider 2. However, the presence of the Green party interference shifted consideration and choices. The respondent asserts that:

*There is a gap in CO2 emissions between service provider 1 and 2. Albeit 3% difference is not a significant reduction, it might become so if we look on a long-term basis. Perhaps Ecopulse might be a better choice in this case, provided we have enough funds (Interviewee 8).*

To summarize, 11 out of 12 Interviewees retained priorities regardless of political interferences, and 1 reprioritized. The Green party's interference reinforced environmental goal prioritization in those respondents that opted for environmental goals in the control scenario: this occurred as Green party's prioritization aligned with the bureaucrats' personal preferences. For Interviewee 8, Green party's interferences led them to reprioritize from financial to environmental goal. The next section proceeds with the insertion of the Social-Democratic political interference, backing up financial goal prioritization.

#### **4.3 Prioritization in Treatment Scenario – Financial goal**

The insertion of political interference advancing financial goals accounted for contrasting prioritizations. 8 out of 12 respondents reprioritized whilst the remaining 4 retained their goal priorities. Table 5 provides an overview of bureaucratic goal prioritization with the insertion of Social-Democratics' financial goals and a comparison with the previous prioritizations.



**Table 5: Selection of service providers (SP) in randomized Social-Dem. treatment scenario**

	Control: no political interference	Treatment: political interference	
	Evaluation: best performer in energy provision <i>SP1: Environmental goal prior. / SP2: Financial goal prior.</i>		
Interviewee	Neutral scenario	Environmental goal scenario	Financial goal scenario
1	SP1	SP1	SP1
2	SP1	SP1	SP2
3	SP1	SP1	SP2
4	SP1	SP1	SP2
5	SP1	SP1	SP1
6	SP1	SP1	SP2
7	SP1	SP1	SP2
8	SP2	SP1	SP2
9	SP1	SP1	SP1
10	SP1	SP1	SP2
11	SP1	SP1	SP2
12	SP2	SP2	SP2

Interviewee 3, which prioritized environmental goals in the control scenario, selected Steamia with the proposed treatment, on the assumption that *“it is simply the cheapest service provider. In this scenario, we need to keep costs into considerations when providing advice, so I cannot ignore it”* (Interviewee 3). This reasoning is observable as well in Interviewee 4, which considers that:

*Unlike the other scenario, I would go for the other energy provider. Yes, if I choose Steamia it would be a more immediate advice. I would say right now people have economic difficulties and as the Social-Dem majority highlighted, we should make sure that citizens are able to pay their energy bills* (Interviewee 4).

Interviewee 6 reprioritizes from environmental to financial goal due to the responsibility to support low-income families (Interviewee 6). This pattern is observed in Interviewee 7, 10 and 11 considerations. Interviewee 10 claimed that:

*The assumption that these two providers will increase costs, they say that the more we*

*spend, the less money there will be for energy subsidy for low-income families. Because it is the cheapest, Steamia would be the best choice* (Interviewee 10).

As demonstrated by these responses, the Social-democratic interference shifted service providers selection and increased discourse on financial aspects of energy provision. One respondent (Interviewee 8), who prioritized financial goals in the control scenario, reconfirmed their preference for Steamia. They assert that choosing Steamia is a “*quite logical and convenient selection for me as the Social-democratic interference reinforces my personal preference*” (Interviewee 8). The Interviewee prioritizes the financial goal without any hesitation, due to the Social-democratic priorities aligning with their personal preference. Such result confirms the previous findings extrapolated from the environmental goal interference.

The Social-democratic interference did not lead to reprioritization in 4 cases. Interviewees 1, 5, 9 and 12 retained their priorities, as they reselect Ecopulse and prioritize environmental goals despite political interference. Interviewee 1 states that “*despite Ecopulse is a more expensive option, the extra €600,000 is worth it in the long run when looking at the well-being of our citizens and the Municipal climate goals*” (Interviewee 1). Similarly, Interviewee 5 explains that “*low environmental action is more expensive in the long term than having to pay €600k now for a more expensive provider. The cost-benefit consideration here clearly advantages again Ecopulse* (Interviewee 5). The reflection is shared by Interviewee 9 too. Interviewees 1, 5, 9 rather look at the broader perspective and consider the long-term impact of their advice. This prompted them to retain their prioritization with the inference of the Social-Democratic vision.

Interviewee 12, which prioritized financial goals in the control and environmental treatment, retains their prioritization by selecting Steamia. The justification follows Interviewee’s 8 logic: the Interviewee reports this scenario as simple, due to the alignment of

the Social-democratic goal prioritization with their personal preferences (Interviewee 12). Thus, the proposed political interference conducted most bureaucrats to reprioritize to financial goals. Personal preferences, long-term and cost-benefit based considerations, led to retain their prioritization patterns.

The collected responses and service provider selections indicate that reprioritization occurs when performance information is evaluated with the insertion of political interferences. The Interviewees inferred various explanations when selecting providers and prioritizing their goals. The next section investigates the observed reprioritizations and expands on the explanations that emerged.

#### **4.4 Goal reprioritization: Thematic analysis**

The respondent's prioritization patterns have been influenced by what type of interferences the scenario contained. They provided explanations and relevant considerations while weighing reprioritization: these explanations flowed with the insertion of political interferences in the scenarios. The Code matrix below shows the numerical presence of explanations within the Interviews and a subsequent coded thematic classification of each explanation. The classification is performed in function of the thematic indicators, consultable on Appendix D. In the following sections, I proceed to analyze each thematic explanation originating with the insertion of political interference.

**Table 6: Code matrix, theme presence within interviews**

	PUB_OP	ENV_CO	AL_PO	COS_CO
Interviewee 1 No RP	1	2	7	4
Interviewee 2 RP	2	0	5	0
Interviewee 3 RP	2	0	1	2
Interviewee 4 RP	4	0	0	1
Interviewee 5 No RP	2	3	4	0
Interviewee 6 RP	1	1	1	4
Interviewee 7 RP	0	2	0	0
Interviewee 8 RP	1	3	0	3
Interviewee 9 No RP	0	5	3	0
Interviewee 10 RP	2	0	2	1
Interviewee 11 RP	0	0	0	3
Interviewee 12 No RP	2	1	4	4

#### 4.4.1 Explanation 1: Alignment with political stand

The respondents that reprioritized their goals showed increased support for the political stand on energy provision. Alignment with political stand is a recurrent theme cascading from political interference. The code employed to classify the theme, AL\_PO, contains explanations that underline the need to comply with Municipal Council objectives, and allusions to following Municipal Council opinions due to the Majority preference and need to adjust objectives based on Municipal advice.

With the insertion of political interference in the treatment scenarios, one can observe a rise of importance of the political theme in the discourse. When Interviewee 2 is asked to clarify what led to their reprioritization, they responded that:

*For me, the most important factor was which party was the largest and their objectives. The party asked for more cutting down costs, therefore I needed to take this into account when advising. After all, in each scenario, the ruling parties had a majority. How can we ignore this?*

Similarly, Interviewee 11 justifies their reprioritization as follows “*in this case, I think it would be a no brainer to definitely go for Ecopulse: this provider performs better in the domain highlighted by the ruling Green Party*” (Interviewee 11). Likewise, Interviewee 4 displays increased political alignment when political interference appears. Accordingly, Interviewees 2, 4 and 11 explicitly state that the preferences of the majority have impacted their way of choosing and prioritizing goals.

In contrast to the previous declarations, Interviewee 6, 7 and 8 display alignment with political stand in a different perspective. They consider political figures capable of shaping their work and initial goals, if urgently needed. Interviewee 6 states that “*regardless of the political position - of course depending on the different municipalities and governance culture- if these figures want something, then it is immediately on a priority list, taking into account their preferences*” (Interviewee 6). In addition, Interviewee 11 claims that in their daily project management, they strive to construct projects with a fixed term, to allow more goal stability and less political influence whenever there are new Municipal Council elections (Interviewee 11). When questioned whether the method is successful, the respondent noted that “*regardless of well-established strategies, we will still most probably have to shift in what kind of goals and what projects we will prioritize or not*” (Interviewee 11). This perspective is shared as well by Interviewee 8 and 10 claiming the inevitable political influence in their evaluation of services. The answers of Interviewees 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 display many examples of alignment with political stand.

The AL\_PO theme exposed recurrent explanations highlighting the role of managerial influence and compliance with Municipal majority in bureaucratic goal reprioritization. The consistency of the theme across the discourse suggests that political interferences enhance the institutional need to align with political stand. The next section proceeds with the second detect explanation thread.

#### 4.4.2 Explanation 2: Cost consideration

Besides pure alignment with political stands, the respondents employed cost consideration (coded COS\_CO) to explain their goal reprioritization. These considerations have been consistently detected throughout the collected interviews. Indicators of cost consideration entail reflection on energy service costs, and economic impact on Municipal budget. Interviewee 3 reflects on the potential costs to change energy provider and explains that:

*We are heavily impacted by Municipal budget distribution. Always important to think that if budget distribution changes, we must revisit our goals. For instance, in the Social-Democratic majority Council, I shifted my choice because I was reminded of the importance of costs while selecting providers. (Interviewee 3)*

Therefore, Interviewee 3 implies that the Social-Democratic interference reminded them of the financial perspective while evaluating performance information. Interviewee's initial preference, leaning toward the best performer in the environmental goal when confronted with a neutral scenario, was offset, and shaped by the inferred political opinion. Interviewee 4 does not explicitly state that costs have been the most impactful factor in evaluating the two providers. Nevertheless, further enquiries reveal a similar position to Interviewee 3. The latter affirms that:

*The CO2 emission reduction percentage between the two providers is not that much of a difference, only 3%, I think. But the amount of money, that there is a big difference. You can do a lot with that money for the people in the city (Interviewee 4)*

Albeit in a more subtle manner, Interviewee 4 implies also that costs have played a role in shaping goal preference, when faced with political preferences favouring financial goals over environmental ones.

In contrast to the previous examples, Interviewees 6, 7 and 11 displayed a more moderate impact of costs reflections. Interviewee 6 suggests that *“costs become relevant only if we have extremely limited budget for certain projects. Since in this scenario you inferred that the Social-Democratic majority implies limited budget, then I take this into account when evaluating which provider to choose”* (Interviewee 6). Similar implication has been advanced by Interviewee 7, claiming that *“usually decisions are made through cost-benefit analysis: if the latter is not entirely possible due to lacking funds, then goals and preferences will be needed to be tailored accordingly”* (Interviewee 7). In this direction, Interviewee 11 sees it understandable that *“if the lack of money leads to deteriorating a fragile social layer, it might be just complicated not to select the cheapest provider, as you would not be able to convince policymakers of the importance of environmental goals”* (Interviewee 11).

Interviewees 3 and 4 explicitly referred to costs as major drivers in their decision-making patterns. Their responses revealed a high influence of costs, described as *“heavily impactful”* (Interviewee 3) and *“important”* (Interviewee 4) when evaluating providers. This denotes high influence of costs on their reprioritization when subjected to political interference. Interviewees 6, 7 and 11 agreed with Interviewees 3 and 4 on the importance of budget considerations. However, they alluded to budget-related reflections in a more balanced way, recognizing that costs are determining in their goal prioritization only when there is limited budget available. Therefore, cost-considerations carry a medium to high influence on goal reprioritization. The next section proceeds with the environmental code theme.

#### **4.4.3 Explanation 3: Environmental consideration**

The Interviewees that displayed reprioritizations have referred to environmental considerations when evaluating the proposed tables with performance information. Through the code ENV\_CO, the analysis has classified and label environmental reflections such as

carbon footprint reduction, use of green technology and importance of climate as further potential explanations stemming from political interference.

Interviewee 8 was the sole respondent among the Interviewee pool who reprioritized goals and ultimately, switched from financial to environmental goal when confronted with Green party's political interference. The screening of responses shows that environmental considerations are not prevalent in explaining reprioritizations. 7 out of 8 Interviewees that displayed goal reprioritization have indicated Ecopulse as best provider due to its virtuous performance in relation to the environmental goal.

The ENV\_CO theme presence is notably prevalent in the control setting, observed in 7 out of 8 Interviewees reprioritizing. The theme consistently emerges in the scenario containing Green party's influence (Interviewee 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11), as respondents reconfirm their preference towards Ecopulse as best performer. Such correlation is strengthened with the Green party's interference. For instance, Interviewee 1 considers in the control scenario *"a reduction of 11% as opposed to 8% is much greater"* (Interviewee 1). In the treatment scenario containing Green party's interference, Interviewee 1 utilizes ENV\_CO as points out that:

*Now I must consider A class commitment and climate goal set in accordance with all municipalities... probably then my advice would be the same and I would refer to the to the labels that you mentioned in in the previous slide, because this case only strengthened my preference. So, we're contributing to those targets* (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 4 applied a similar reasoning, showing environmental considerations in the neutral scenario and subsequently, explaining that the interference of the Green party *"only strengthened what I previously said in the neutral case"* (Interviewee 4). Interviewee 7 and 11 displayed the same considerations, whilst Interviewee 6 added a reflection on Carbon



Capture Storage technology and hydrogen usage when stating environmental considerations (Interviewee 6).

These examples show that environmental considerations were present in the discourse of the Interviewees' sample that reprioritized goals. However, the theme concentrated on the control and treatment environmental scenario for most cases, except for Interviewee 7. In other words, environmental considerations carried a low impact for bureaucrats in explaining their reprioritization.

#### **4.4.4 Explanation 4: Public Opinion**

The fourth theme detected conceives the role of public opinion as prioritization driver, labelled under PUB\_OP code. Most interviewees that reprioritized goals (2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11) have considered the impact of their choice vis-à-vis public interest. Interviewee 3 states that Municipal Council preferences have impacted their provider selection, and goal prioritization due to their democratic representation (Interviewee 3). Asked to provide more context to the answer, the respondent claimed that *“the parties are chosen by the people who live in the Municipality. This impacted my way of evaluating the given information, but I cannot say it impacted my personal opinions on the subject”* (Interviewee 3). Similarly, when questioned on the factors leading to their reprioritization, Interviewee 10 shares that *“political parties should be listened too, since those are the representatives of the citizens. This has impacted my decisions”* (Interviewee 10). Both respondents attribute reprioritization to the need to align to a democratically elected body, as it reflects citizen preferences. Interviewee 4, in justification of their reprioritization towards financial goal, implies that:

*When I was confronted with this scenario, it was more difficult to take a decision. For me, it is relevant to know what the citizens think and what is in their best interests. There are many citizens who struggle to make ends meet. We should not forget this. That is why I chose Steamia* (Interviewee 4).

According to this statement, the Interviewee suggests that public opinion played a role in their choice. Therefore, Interviewees 4 and 10 consider citizen satisfaction and opinion as one of the drivers leading to them reprioritizing their decisions. The employed explanations show that PUB\_OP significantly impacted how bureaucrats evaluated the proposed performance information.

Interviewees 7 and 11 have shown a more moderate impact of PUB\_OP in their explanations. Interviewee 7 shows that *“it is important to show that the Municipality commits to the climate agreements and being A-class in climate action is relevant. But also, economic fragility of lower income families should be looked at in the decision”* (Interviewee 7). Interviewee 11, which reprioritized towards financial goal when confronted with the Social-Democratic interferences, claims that *“lower income households might be disadvantaged by more expensive energy provider. However, studies teach that these are hit the worse in terms of health quality in presence of higher CO2 emissions. We should consider this too”* (Interviewee 11). Both respondents show that public opinion is considered when evaluating performance information. Interviewees 3, 4, 7, 10, 11 have all expressed that citizen satisfaction and representation, sensitivity to economic hardship and perception of the Municipality to public eyes have been to a certain extent impactful in relation to how they processed information. PUB\_OP theme exerted a significant influence on goal setting among Interviewees who opted to reprioritize. The dissertation collects the analyzed empirical findings and proceed with the discussion of the results.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Chapter 5 explores the results retrieved after issuing a thematic analysis on the collected interviews. Specifically, the first section provides a discussion on the collected results in relation to the theoretical framework and clarifies the findings, by employing additional sources. The second section proceeds with a reflection on the practical implications of the findings, the limitations of the research and ultimately, conclusive remarks on the research.

#### **5.1 Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how political interferences influence goal prioritization in Dutch local governments. The findings highlight multi-faceted bureaucratic reactions to political interference. Among the Interviewees, 4 out of 12 retained their prioritization throughout the interview and replicated their choices. The remaining 8 shifted goal priorities when subjected to political interferences.

The results show that personal preferences have a role in bureaucratic performance evaluation and goal prioritization. In each scenario, personal preference shaped goal prioritization. The providers' selections in control vignettes suggest that goals are primarily prioritized based on personal attitudes towards environment and finances. The consistent environmental goal prioritization in the control setting indicates strong personal preference for the climate cause, confirming the increasing issue salience within Municipal policymaking, detected by Bai (2007) and Biesbroek et al. (2010). With the insertion of political interference, personal preferences are more blurred. Evidence from the treatment scenarios showed that bureaucrats effortlessly prioritized political goals if these coincided with personal preferences, while evaluated performance more carefully when goals did not align with their personal preference. The observed pattern is consistent with previous

literature: Taber & Lodge (2006) found that evaluators counter-argue arguments that are in contradiction with their political beliefs even in the presence of strong factual-based information, whilst "unconditionally support arguments in favour of their political convictions", showing no criticism whatsoever (p. 755). Previous research suggests that general ambiguous and conflicting goals characterizing public organizations (Lee et al., 2010; Botti & Monda, 2019), allow for a wide set of interpretations and ultimately, lead to blurred and unpredictable bureaucratic evaluations (Christensen et al., 2018). Hence, the presence of two ambiguous and diverging goals permits a strategic interpretation of performance information and allows the bureaucrat to accentuate specific performance information and tailor the narrative to align with their preferred representation.

The insertion of political interference shaped bureaucratic goal prioritization. The Green and Social-Democratic majority interferences guided the bureaucrats to reconsider their initial preferences and reprioritize towards their political goals. The thematic analysis detected explanations cascading from the insertion of political cues; the high impact explanations coded under "alignment with political stand" suggest a general pressure to conform. Such correlation, previously advanced by Christensen and Opstrup (2018), explains that civil servants are deeply influenced by the organizational structures of their job: in particular, civil servants closely working with political figures are more prone to follow legal constraints imposed by the system they serve in, eventually influencing their behaviour and role of advisers (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018). In other words, bureaucrats feel the pressure to conform to political leaders' goals, even when it will lead to reconsider their prioritization. The need to align with the Municipal Council's position is consistently stressed in statements of the interviewees, highlighting such a prevailing pressure. The observation confirms prior academic evidence on the subject: established institutional hierarchies can act as constraint mechanisms that control and shape bureaucrat's ability to perform choices (Thoenig, 2012;

West, 2015). As public organizations are characterized by well-established bureaucratic organizational structures (Van der Voet, 2014), they limit individual decision making and therefore, restrict bureaucrats in their goal prioritization. This tendency, coupled with Dutch Municipal employees' proximity to Aldermen and Municipal Council (VNG, 2015) account for a high consideration of political stands when evaluating performance information. Therefore, political interference appears to strengthen bureaucrats' awareness of institutional constraints and the resulting pressure to conform.

Beside alignment with political stand, the thematic analysis detected cost considerations as explanation stemming from political interference. The collected evidence suggests that budget restraints have shaped goal prioritization. The Social-Democratic call to consider the potential budgetary implication of expensive service providers convinced a wide range of Interviewees to reprioritize from environmental to financial goal. The relevance of costs in bureaucratic discourse can be attributed to the fact that bureaucrats operate with a fixed budget approved by the Municipal Council (VNG, 2016) and thus, are heavily reliant on their political deliberations. The budget restraints and the bureaucratic hierarchical structure confirm previous academic efforts looking at bureaucrats as pressured to comply with structural demands and missions of the administration they work for (Lipsky, 2010; Christensen & Opstrup, 2018).

Institutional constraints are enhanced by public opinion, as further concretized by the consistent presence of the PUB\_OP theme. To explain goal reprioritization, a consistent number of bureaucrats highlighted that their aim is to serve the citizens and advise for their benefit. They underscored that, as Municipal councillors are elected directly by citizens, they represent the constituency. Hence, they comply with Municipal Council's majority to respect citizens preferences. The observed empirical findings are consistent with the claim that bureaucrats strive for public responsiveness, intended as correspondence and satisfaction of

community preferences in the policy-making process (Liao, 2018). Framed to the Dutch case, the findings align with Blijleven's (2023) work. The author noted that civil servants are expected to "act according to formal rules, procedures and work with pre-set budgets" while at the same engage with the public (pp. 845-848). This highlights that Dutch local governments are deeply embedded in institutional restraints.

The inference of a ruling political party with clear environmental goals (Green) and financial goals (Social-Democratic) influenced and encouraged Municipal bureaucrats to shape their evaluations and accordingly, switch goal priorities based on the political context in which they have been immersed in. Additional explanations stemming from political interferences demonstrated a general pressure and bureaucratic attention to abide by institutional constraints. Political interferences enact specific reflections and mechanisms in the evaluation stage that lead bureaucrats to reconsider their preferences and accordingly, reprioritize. Therefore, political interferences shape Dutch local government employees by amplifying the institutional constraints that these must manage.

## **5.2 Practical implications of the research findings**

The dissertation provides compelling implications for practice. As highlighted in the societal relevance section, political figures can interfere and impair bureaucratic neutrality (Matheson et al., 2007; Hodder, 2009; Nahtigal & Haček, 2013). The findings suggested that in the absence of political interference, bureaucrats strongly favoured environmental goals over financial ones. The bureaucratic explanations pointed out that Municipalities have a strong societal burden to improve CO2 reduction, while considering the finances of their citizens. The strong linkage between environmental and financial goal teaches that the two objectives are not mutually exclusive in policymaking: Municipalities can prioritize environmental goals to commit with national aspirations, and ensure a high quality of life, without ignoring the financial aspect of their measures. The implementation of sustainable

options, through a sequential utilization of cost-benefit analyses could provide policymakers balanced and long-term solutions to the challenges posed by poverty and climate change.

The insertion of political interference shaped performance information evaluation and goal prioritization in Dutch local governments. Political interference created goal reprioritization and a series of explanations that reinforced the presence of institutional constraints that shape bureaucratic evaluation.

The influence of politics into neutral bureaucratic advising requires new methods to insulate civil servants from political interference. This can be achieved in various manners. First, by strengthening reporting mechanisms, the bureaucrat might be able to anonymously flag political pressure. With the insertion of institutional guidelines categorizing the various form of political interference, bureaucrats are facilitated in detecting malevolent and irregular political meddling attempts in bureaucratic work. Second, to improve impartiality, bureaucratic evaluations should be solely carried out in teams. A team-based approach is optimal as it permits to tame the effects of personal preferences and to cross-check opinions, reducing the intensity of political interference. Due to the consolidated organizational structures of public administrations (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018), institutional restraints will likely influence performance evaluation and therefore, goal prioritization. Team evaluations and prioritizations could classify whether institutional restraints effectively represent a hurdle in a specific evaluation or rather stem from a consideration anchored in personal opinions.

The enlisted practical considerations suggests that the bureaucratic realm should actively promote multidimensional advising. Team-based advising would encourage bureaucrats to express their preferences and considerations, whilst simultaneously taming the effect of political interference and institutional restraints in the evaluation and prioritization process.

### **5.3 Reflection on limitations and future research**

The dissertation contains theoretical and methodological limitations. The first limitation relates to the low external validity caused by employing a single case study. The research focussed on Dutch Municipalities. The high autonomy conferred to local governments in the Dutch system (Boogers & Reussing, 2018) allows bureaucrats to exercise independent judgement when applicable. Such characteristics, peculiar to the Dutch systems, cannot be generalized for other cases: each state displays different administration structures, managerial styles, and traditions to civil service (Dahlström et al., 2012). These differences suggest that the Dutch case might not be entirely representative of bureaucratic behaviour vis-à-vis political interference and goal prioritization. The focus on a specific case study, featuring its own administrative traditions, can restrict empirical findings on political interference and goal prioritization to only specific bureaucracies and therefore, hamper the generalizability of the study. Future research should opt for a comparative approach: comparing the Dutch case with other bureaucracies with different administrative traditions might tame the low generalizability. Studies in this direction could unveil strong, generalizable evidence on broader bureaucratic behaviour in relation with political interference, independent from administrative structures and traditions.

The second limitation reflects on candidate sampling criteria. Gender, years of experience, and departmental specialization have been ignored in the sampling process. The ignored variables might have influenced expectations, attitudes, and decision-making styles in relation to performance evaluation and goal prioritization. Later academic endeavours should account for the overlooked qualities: through ad-hoc questions within semi-structured interviews, the researchers should test whether the ignored variables influence personal preferences, bureaucratic explanations, and goal prioritization. A potential study comprising these variables would increase the internal validity of the study, as it would provide



multifaceted and rich explanations to the association between dependent and independent variable.

The third limitation is anchored in vignette ordering and the number of goals proposed. Regardless of the employed randomization methods, Interviewees might have engaged in consequential evaluation (Sen, 2000) based on the newly randomized order of control and treatment vignettes. Due to the role of cognitive components in data evaluation (Tummers et al., 2016), such bias might have shaped the relevance of each goal and accordingly, skewed goal prioritizations. To tackle the effects of consequential thinking and the theoretical limitation, future research should consider a broader pool of Interviewees, evaluating a larger number of goals. The expansion of goals and experimental vignettes, combined with a larger number of Interviewees, might cancel the effects of consequential thinking, and provide more generalizable results on goal prioritization patterns, benefitting the external validity of the study.

The fourth limitation regards the theoretical correlation of conflicting goals with reprioritization. The theoretical framework considered goal reprioritization as strategy to navigate conflicting goals and the ambiguity that these create. Nonetheless, there is no theoretical alternative proposed to goal reprioritization. Bureaucrats might employ different strategies to reach a consensus between personal and political preferences. They might engage in incremental adjustments in conflicting situation to grant a balanced situation (Aberbach et al., 2009, p. 99) and muddle through political pressures with constant readjustments (Zhou et al., 2013) rather than opting for clear cut reprioritizations. In other words, the incremental approach allows the bureaucrat to negotiate points and broadly align with political preferences without ignoring their preferences in the evaluation and prioritization process. Future research could tackle the detected limitation. The research could test a set of available strategies to manage conflicting goals in bureaucracies, rather than

solely considering goal reprioritization. The findings of the research could provide compelling evidence on when incremental approaches or immediate reprioritization are preferred and thus, contribute to a broader understanding of bureaucratic behaviour and decision making. The next section provides conclusive remarks of the dissertation.

#### **5.4 Concluding remarks**

The dissertation examined how political interferences influence goal prioritization in Dutch local governments. Through a qualitative and experimental method, I demonstrated that political interferences shape performance evaluation and goal prioritization at local level. The theoretical framework highlighted that performance management and goal prioritization increased salience, as local bureaucracies steadily shift towards New Public Management methods. Furthermore, the dissertation underscored how the multidimensionality of performance measurement and conflicting goals render performance evaluation ambiguous. In function of the latter, the theoretical framework expected that conflicting goals and performance evaluation, coupled with cognitive biases, could give the bureaucrats ample manoeuvre for interpretation and reprioritization.

With the employment of semi-structured interview questions, I gathered data on bureaucratic independence and clarifications relating to performance information, service provision, and political interference. The Experimental Vignette Method entailed the use of one control and two treatment scenarios. The control scenario proposed a neutral setting while the two treatment scenarios contained political interference, emphasizing respectively environmental and financial goal. These have been operationalized as reduction of CO<sub>2</sub> and cost for the service provision. To test goal prioritization, each scenario has been coupled with a performance information table, showing one service provider with a clear better performance in CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction, while the other performing better in estimated costs.

The analysis has shown that most of bureaucrats expressed personal preference-based

prioritizations in control scenarios. With the insertion of political interferences, a broad majority reprioritized towards political goal priorities or confirmed the political choice if this aligned with personal preferences. A minority of Interviewees retained their initial goal prioritization regardless of political interference. This pattern displayed the strength of political interference on bureaucratic prioritization and created a series of valuable explanations that cascaded from political interference.

To further investigate the explanations, the dissertation employed a thematic analysis, which coded discourses based on thematic areas. The investigation detected a high impact of “alignment with political stand”, “cost considerations” and “public opinion” in the reprioritization discourses, while a low impact for “environmental considerations”. By coupling the findings with previous research on the field, the dissertation found that political interference enacted specific explanations that accentuate institutional constraints in bureaucratic goal prioritization. Respectively, organizational structures, proximity to political figures, budget restraints dictated by the Municipal Council and responsiveness to public has contributed to bureaucrats’ goal reprioritization. This signifies that in the Dutch case, political interferences shaped goal prioritization by strengthening bureaucrats’ perception of institutional restraints.

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## **Thematic analysis coding guide**

### **1. Familiarising with data**

Transcribing data, reading, and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.

### **2. Generating initial codes**

Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.

### **3. Searching for themes**

Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

### **4. Reviewing themes**

Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic map.

### **5. Defining and naming themes**

Ongoing analysis for refining the specifics of each theme and the overall story that the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

### **6. Producing the report**

The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a report of the analysis.

(Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87).

## **Additional information retrieved from:**

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a Thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 9(3).

## Appendix A: Interviewees' status tracker

Contacted Candidates ▾	Municipality ▾	Role ▾	Status ▾
Interviewee 1	The Hague	Policy Advisor	Accepted
Candidate	Delft	Policy Advisor	No response
Candidate	Amsterdam	Statistician and Researcher	No response
Candidate	Maastricht	Project Manager	Rejected
Candidate	Leiden	Project Employee	No response
Interviewee 2	The Hague	Policy Officer	Accepted
Candidate	Utrecht	Data Advisor	No response
Candidate	Amsterdam	Data Researcher	No response
Candidate	Nijmegen	Advisor	No response
Candidate	Amsterdam	Junior Researcher	No response
Interviewee 3	Lingerwaard	Quality Advisor	Accepted
Candidate	Amsterdam	Project Manager	No response
Candidate	Heerlen	Policy Officer	Replied but no follow-up
Candidate	Nijmegen	Policy Advisor	Rejected
Interviewee 4	Amsterdam	Policy Advisor	Accepted
Candidate	Rotterdam	Department Director	No response
Candidate	Utrecht	Planning Advisor	No response
Interviewee 5	The Hague	Policy Advisor	Accepted
Candidate	Utrecht	Project Secretary	Replied but no follow-up
Candidate	Breda	Project Secretary	No response
Candidate	Roermond	Policy Advisor	No response
Interviewee 6	Echt-Susteren	Policy Officer	Accepted
Candidate	Haarlem	Junior Advisor	No response
Candidate	Eindhoven	Policy Advisor	No response
Candidate	Gouda	Project Manager	Replied but no follow-up
Candidate	Amsterdam	Senior Researcher	No response
Interviewee 7	The Hague	Head Manager	Accepted
Candidate	Almere	Policy Officer	No response
Candidate	Breda	Municipal Functionaire	No response
Interviewee 8	The Hague	Policy Advisor	Accepted
Candidate	Groningen	Policy Advisor	No response
Candidate	Almere	Policy Advisor	No response
Candidate	Groningen	Policy Advisor	No response
Candidate	Heerlen	Policy Officer	Replied but no follow-up
Candidate	Groningen	Assistant Program Manager	No response
Candidate	Heemskerk	Project Employee	No response
Interviewee 9	Utrecht	Project Employee	Accepted
Candidate	Echt-Susteren	Policy Officer	No response
Candidate	Amsterdam	Advisory Commission	No response
Interviewee 10	Rotterdam	Project Secretary	Accepted
Candidate	Groningen	Municipal Functionaire	No response
Candidate	Vlaardingen	Project Leader	No response
Candidate	Breda	Quality Advisor	No response
Interviewee 11	Dordrecht	Project Manager	Accepted
Candidate	Arnhem	Municipal Functionaire	No response
Candidate	Maastricht	Municipal Functionaire	Replied but no follow-up
Candidate	Eindhoven	Quantitative Researcher	No response
Candidate	Gouda	Project Manager	Replied but no follow-up
Interviewee 12	Scheveningen	Program Officer	Accepted
Candidate	Amersfoort	Policy Advisor	No response

## Appendix B: Interview Consent Form



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### Master's Thesis Interview Consent Form

Researcher: Olsi Sokolli [s3515079@vuw.leidenuniv.nl]

Affiliation: Leiden University, Department of Public Administration - International and European governance

I, *Olsi Sokolli*, Master's student in Public Administration at Leiden University, am conducting a research study as part of my Master's thesis. The purpose of this study is to gather insights into how employees within Municipalities elaborate datasets, particularly in the context of priority setting and evaluation of service performance.

#### Interview Details

Estimated Duration: Approximately 30 minutes, with a possibility of extension to 40 minutes if needed. **No breaks are planned during the interview.**

The interview will consist of:

1. Addressing questions related to day-to-day work.
2. Responding to hypothetical questions and making choices within a fictitious scenario

#### Anonymity and Privacy:

- a) Your participation in the interview will be completely anonymous.
- b) The information gathered will only be accessible to me, the interviewer. The data will be presented in the Master's thesis in a manner that respects your privacy. Pseudonyms (e.g., "Interviewee 1," "Interviewee 2") will be used to prevent identification by third parties.
- c) The meeting will be recorded to facilitate later transcription. The recording will solely be used for research purposes and will not be disclosed to anyone other than me, the interviewer. The recording will be erased after the conclusion of the research.

I, the undersigned, understand the nature and purpose of the interview as described above. I am aware of the estimated duration, structure, and the recording purposes. Moreover, I recognize that the case study is solely based on fictitious information.

Signature Interviewer:

Date: 18/11/2023

Signature Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Interview PowerPoint Slides

### Question 1-2-3

1. To what extent are your tasks at the Municipality related to public policy?
2. Do you have to evaluate data that contains performance indicators related to public services?
3. Do you have to take decisions about the performance of service providers at your municipality? If yes, how are performance evaluations decisions usually taken?

### Task 1

**Please imagine the following fictive scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider.

The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

### Performance evaluation

	Service provider 1 <i>Ecopulse</i>	Service provider 2 <i>Steamia</i>
<b>Environmental goal: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions</b>	Opts for mixed approach to energy, by involving hydrogen to the energy provision. BY blending hydrogen with natural gas, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 11% per year	Implements Carbon Capture and Storage technology – by capturing emissions at source, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 8% each year.
<b>Financial goal: expenditure for service provision</b>	€3.2mln	€2.6mln

Based on the content of the table about the environmental and financial performance of the two service providers, which service provider would you evaluate as generally best performing? Please explain your choice and what led to such a decision. You are allowed to see the scenario again if needed.

## Question 4

4. Did you ever work on policies that are related to social security and economic protection of low-income families?

## Task 2

**Please imagine the following scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider.

The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer.

In last week's City Council meeting, the current majority formed by the Green party representative emphasized that the Municipality needs to firmly curb down emissions. Referring to their party manifesto, the representative underscored that they are fully committed to achieve their objective of sensibly reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in the Municipality and brand the city as A-class in environmental commitment. Such label is assigned solely to Municipality that abide to the Climate goals set in accordance with all the Municipalities in 2019. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

## Performance evaluation

	Service provider 1 <i>Ecopulse</i>	Service provider 2 <i>Steamia</i>
<b>Environmental goal: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions</b>	Opts for mixed approach to energy, by involving hydrogen to the energy provision. BY blending hydrogen with natural gas, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 11% per year	Implements Carbon Capture and Storage technology – by capturing emissions at source, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 8% each year.
<b>Financial goal: expenditure for service provision</b>	€3.2mln	€2.6mln

Based on the content of the table about the environmental and financial performance of the two service providers, which service provider would you evaluate as generally best performing? Please explain your choice and what led to such a decision. You are allowed to see the scenario again if needed.



# Question 5

5. Do you think the Carbon Capture Storage technology will soon spread to other providers?

## Task 3

**Please imagine the following scenario:**

Your Municipality has been contending with insufficient service quality from its current energy providers in the recent few years. Issues have arisen, such as inadequate heating in municipal swimming pools, retirement homes and in general, inefficient thermo-regulation in Municipal owned buildings. In response to numerous complaints, the City Council concluded a tendering competition to change provider.

The tendering process has selected two service providers, Ecopulse and Steamia as most appropriate. However, the Municipality can adjudicate the tender to only one provider. In your role of policy advisor, you have been assigned the task of looking at the two providers' performance and select the best performer.

In last week's City Council meeting, the ruling Social Democratic majority vehemently opposed to raising any costs. The representative underlined that the party objective will always be to diminish living costs and ensure financial security for most fragile individuals. According to their financial review, the two competing energy providers can represent a considerable financial burden for the treasury. The adoption of an expensive energy provider sensibly decreases the budget available for the distribution of energy subsidy and thus, can worsen the financial situation of low-income families that are struggling with high energy bills. The table below shows relevant performance information of the two competing energy providers. Please look at the proposed data and make an evaluation.

## Performance evaluation

	Service provider 1 <i>Ecopulse</i>	Service provider 2 <i>Steamia</i>
<b>Environmental goal: CO<sub>2</sub> emissions</b>	Opts for mixed approach to energy, by involving hydrogen to the energy provision. BY blending hydrogen with natural gas, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 11% per year	Implements Carbon Capture and Storage technology - by capturing emissions at source, they can reduce CO <sub>2</sub> emissions by 8% each year.
<b>Financial goal: expenditure for service provision</b>	€3.2mln	€2.6mln

Based on the content of the table about the environmental and financial performance of the two service providers, which service provider would you evaluate as generally best performing? Please explain your choice and what led to such a decision. You are allowed to see the scenario again if needed.

## Question 6-7-8

6. What type of data on performance information do you assess in your role, and how do you determine the relevance and reliability of such data?

7. How do you ensure that your decisions remain impartial and in line with your initial objectives, regardless of external interferences?

8. What factors influenced your decision-making process, and what considerations played a significant role in shaping the way you made choices between providers?

## Question 9-10-11

9. When it arises, how do you deal with political interference in your job?

10. Do you think that the proposed political interferences had an impact on the way you processed performance information and ultimately, your choices?

11. To what extent do you believe that political cues can influence your approach to goal-setting and prioritizing preferences?

## Appendix D: Thematic analysis Code Table

Theme number	Theme	Code	Subjects	Indicators	Definition
1	<i>Alignment with political stand</i>	AL_PO	Managerial influence	Propensity to tailor decision to Alderman preference	The interviewee underscores the importance of adhering to the managerial structures (Alderman and Municipal Council decisions)
			Ruling majority influence	Respect for Municipal Council position	Allusion to following the Municipal Council voice and tailor it in the decision.
2	<i>Cost-related consideration</i>	COS_CO	Cost of energy services	Energy provider's cost	The interviewee bases their decisions solely on a thorough reflection of costs.
			Cost-benefit analysis	Short and long-term analysis of costs vs emissions	The interviewee contemplates the short-term and long-term ramifications of selecting a particular provider.
3	<i>Environmental consideration</i>	ENV_CO	Carbon footprint	CO2 emission reduction	The interviewee indicates provider based on performance in reducing CO2 emission.
			Green technology Employed	Carbon Capture Storage technology and Hydrogen mix	The interviewee selects a provider based on the technology utilized by that provider.
4	<i>Public opinion</i>	PUB_OP	Perception of environmental responsibility	A-Class label city branding	The interviewee is attentive to how the Municipality is branded, particularly in terms of its performance in CO2 reduction.
			Sensitivity to economic hardship	Impact of high costs for energy provision on low-income families	The interviewee acknowledges the economic struggles of low-income families, highlighting the Municipality's duty to protect the most vulnerable members of the community.
			Citizen satisfaction	Municipality objective to serve citizen's best interest	The interviewee underscores the citizen-oriented approach in decision-making, highlighting that the choice is based on selecting the service that serves the citizens the best.

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