

Intervening Factors in the Prioritization of Rival Public Values in Brazilian Digital Government Initiatives

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1 INTRODUCTION

Constant societal changes have been challenging governments worldwide to adapt and transform their relationship with citizens. Citizens are more frequently using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in their day-by-day routine, demanding that public services also be transformed (Webster and Leleux, 2018; Mergel *et al.*, 2019) due to citizens' expectations regarding digital government are continuously growing (Gupta and Suri, 2017). Although digital government solutions have been expanded considerably (Mellouli *et al.*, 2020), and it is understood to be in a more mature phase (Busch and Henriksen, 2018), their real impacts are being questioned (Pedersen, 2018). In practice, there is a paradox since, despite the high investments (Liang *et al.*, 2017), the real benefits are not yet impacting citizens as intended (Scholta *et al.*, 2019). Results still vary in terms of positive impact on citizens' lives (Pedersen, 2018), and, somehow, there are discussions that the use of public financial resources does not have an extensive return, at the same time citizens' confidence in governments is not increasing (Sundberg, 2016). Digital government is understood in this research in its broad view defined by Janowski, which encompasses digitization, or technology adoption and implementation, transformation, or internal institutional change, engagement, or changes in the relationships among stakeholders, and contextualization, i.e., increased specialization and orientation towards public policy (Janowski, 2015).

This scenario is repeated in Brazil: despite being among the 20 countries with the widest array of digital public services (UNPAD, 2020), the country still has a long way to go in developing the supply and use of digital government services. Just 74% of citizens living in urban areas access the Internet, almost half of them just through 3G/4G networks, which means an expensive and not-so-good connection, indicating extensive digital inequality (CGI.br, 2018). The situation turns worse when dealing with connections by citizens living in rural areas. On the government side, while 89% of governments have a website, only 25% offer their most demanded public service entirely over the internet. The reasons most often given by state agencies for this are the impossibility of performing the service entirely over the Internet (59%) and legal restrictions (39%) (CGI.br, 2018), which certainly play a role but probably do not explain the whole situation. With the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, the digital government has been crucial in ensuring that governments have been able to continue to deliver services despite the restrictions on the traditional functioning of organizations.

Several reasons have been presented to explain that the results of digital government are not yet plenty, such as the intensive use of repertoires from private companies borrowed from the New Public Management (NPM) (Cordella and Bonina, 2012); a focus on efficiency that can lead to ineffective government (Rose *et al.*, 2015a); the fragmentation in government agencies arising from by the silos, which enlarge hierarchical and bureaucratic structures (Sundberg, 2016); a techno-centered vision (Savoldelli *et al.*, 2014); and the prioritization of the automation of rational objects (Busch and Henriksen, 2018). However, the purpose of transformation in the public sector is not merely to provide digital services, but to ensure public value (Sundberg, 2016; Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2019), understood as the “*value created through government actions that produce a net benefit for society*” (Stoker, 2006). The considerable investment of public resources has been returning not enough public value (Anwer *et al.*, 2016; Soe and Drechsler, 2018). Moreover, technology is not free of value: implementing ICT requires decision-makers to prioritize sometimes conflicting values (Bannister and Connolly, 2014). The moral imperative for government is to act based on the public interest, representing multiple stakeholder groups, in accordance with Moore's paradigm of public value (1995). However, defining the public interest is difficult and notoriously controversial (Xanthopoulou, 2020).

The normative core of the public sector - what it must do and how it should do it - cannot be taken for granted (Rose *et al.*, 2018). Thus, in practice, the strategies, investments, design, and implementation of digital government are influenced by three main value positions, namely administrative efficiency, service improvement, and citizen engagement, which are deeply rooted in the discourse and actions of public managers, and in turn depend on the traditions of public management (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). Public value position is seen as the “general objective, motivation and goals shared by the group of stakeholders that form part of the digital government project, which may also represent the primary criterion for the perception or failure of initiatives.” (Rose *et al.*, 2018, p. 364). Therefore, these value positions deserve to be studied because they connect to a particular form of implementing digital government. Exploring the value positions reflected in digital government initiatives offers insights into the motivations and purposes adjacent to the field and is deeply rooted in project objectives (Persson and Goldkuhl, 2010). On the other hand, although value positions expresses general purpose - the motivation and common objectives are largely coherent and synergistic – there may be rivalry between the different value positions, understood as a competition to reach each position, being the incompatibility between values or positions the most important reason for this rivalry. Conceptually speaking, all values are equally important, but rivalry can arise during the decision-making process of which initiative will be privileged over others. If public managers interpret efficiency as cost reduction, this may be incompatible with the value of providing better services to citizens (Rose *et al.*, 2015a), due to better services may be costly. This is the theoretical gap this research is addressing, discussing not just values that should be addressed but why they are addressed or not.

In attempting to understand the logic behind choosing among rival public values, this study aims to identify the factors that play a role in prioritizing rival value positions and understand how they emerge in governmental decision-making. After that, a conceptual model encompassing these factors and their relationship will be developed. In order to reach these results, three focus group sessions were performed with the participation of 27 Brazilian civil servants from 13 Brazilian states.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of public value has figured large in the literature on public management (Bryson *et al.*, 2017), being used especially to distinguish value studies from other disciplines such as marketing and economics. It seeks to distinguish the public from the private sector by attributing it to a different set of values or a distinct ethos. For example, the profit motive that is common in business is usually replaced by ideas such as serving the public interest and efficient use of resources (Rose *et al.*, 2018).

In the context of digital government, public value has been considered the primary goal in the application of ICTs in government (Sundberg, 2016; Panagiotopoulos *et al.*, 2019). However, the concept of public value has been understood to be ambiguous and vague (Soe and Drechsler, 2018). In part this may be due to the use of different categorization schemes, mapping different values based on different theoretical interpretations as well as poor their validation (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). If we want to understand not only what is happening, but what is driving and influencing what is happening, it is important to examine the aspects of competition between the value positions incorporated in the traditions of public management and, consequently, in digital government initiatives. Thus, in the next section, first we present the value positions in the context of digital government, then we consider how competition between the value positions affects decisions regarding the implementation of digital government initiatives.

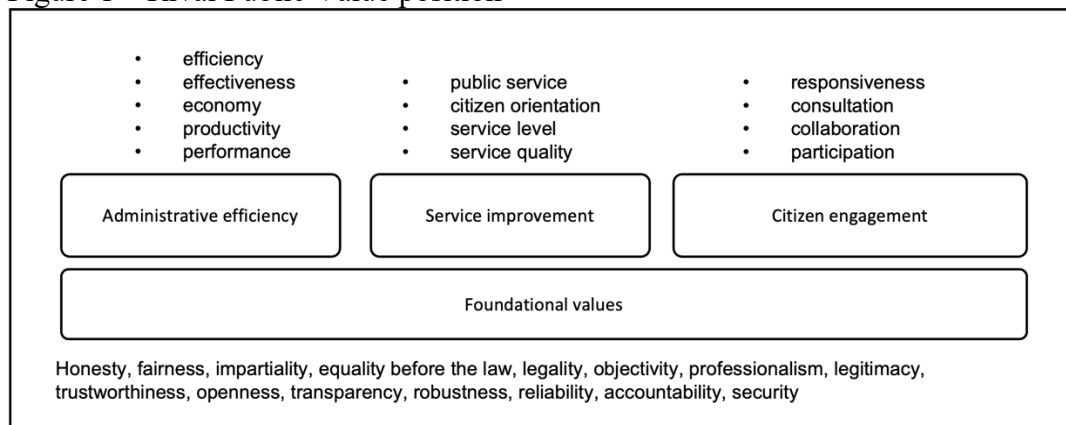
This study is based on the theory of public value and the framing of public value positions in relation to digital government considered by Rose *et al.*, 2015b, theory, type 1

(Gregor, 2006) since it provides a lens to see or explain the world and to understand from the point of view of those who live.

2.1 The three public value positions in the context of digital government

The three public value positions in digital government we consider here are administrative efficiency, service improvement, and citizen engagement. Digital management is a specialized form of public management involving the formulation of policy regarding the development, implementation, and administration of ICT solutions. To perform these tasks, public managers assume public value positions associated with the purposes of the ICT initiatives that can often be used to assess the success or failure of the initiative (Rose *et al.*, 2018). While the three value positions are the drivers behind most new digital government initiatives, they are dependent on the maintenance of other common values associated with the Weberian Bureaucracy (Rose *et al.*, 2015a), here called the fundamental values. Rose *et al.* (2015a), represent fundamental values as the basis for the public value positions since they are consistent with the other traditions of public management/administration (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Rival Public Value position



Source: Rose *et al.*, 2015a

The fundamental values motivate the backbone of the government, which in its everyday functioning depends heavily on ICT systems (Rose *et al.*, 2015b) to provide a robust consistent system of administration, governed by the rule of law/a law-based rule system, resulting in the public record that is the basis for accountability. Thus, the role of digital government is seen as being to provide support to standardized administrative procedures (Rose *et al.*, 2018). The administrative procedures reflect the values of traditional bureaucracy, such as honesty, fairness, impartiality, equality before the law, legality, objectivity, professionalism, legitimacy, reliability, robustness, reliability, accountability, and security (Rose *et al.*, 2015b).

In digital government, administrative efficiency is the value position that addresses the effects of automation in government. The values included within this position are efficiency, effectiveness, economy, productivity, and performance (Rose *et al.*, 2015b). Although they are not incompatible with the values of traditional bureaucracy, these values also reflect the lasting impact of the values of efficiency and productivity, which are at the core of the NPM. They also incorporate aspects related to market orientation, competition, and enhanced performance that are at the center of the NPM (Rose *et al.*, 2015b). Efficiency is the central idea behind attempts to rationalize, simplify and transform government (Rose *et al.*, 2018).

As a value position, service improvement focuses on the use of ICT to enhance the citizen's experience by expanding access to information and services, facilitating accessibility and usability through digital services, reducing response time, cutting costs for the citizen, automating payments, supporting minorities and providing specialized services for the disabled

(Rose *et al.*, 2018). The values underlying this position, namely public service, citizen orientation, level of service, and quality of service, originating from the ideas put forward in the New Public Service by Denhardt and Denhardt (2000), the client-centricity seen in the NPM, and the work of Bannister and Connolly (2014). The internet, mobile technologies, and so-called emerging technologies, such as *blockchain*, *big data*, and the Internet of Things (Cordella and Paletti, 2018) among others, provide opportunities to improve public services.

Citizen engagement seeks to engage with civil society to facilitate the development of policies under liberal democratic principles, thus articulating the public good (Rose *et al.*, 2018). This value position uses ICTs to connect government with citizens. It includes the public values of democracy, responsiveness, consultation, collaboration, and participation. These values originate from the citizen-centricity empowerment of the NPM society and the ideals of Weberian bureaucracy. Engagement should not be confused with the delivery of information, feedback, and transparency; while engagement depends on the determination of management to be guided by the public interest and act accordingly (Rose *et al.*, 2015b).

2.2 Rivalry between public value positions in digital government

One commonly made assumption is that public values are congruent and form a unified, coherent, and synergistic platform. However, more recent contributions to the literature on public management/administration suggest values may be plural, ambiguous, hybrid, and overlaid (Van Der Wal and Van Hout, 2009), or competing, conflicting, and contradictory (Rutgers, 2008). Moreover, the values defended must be distinguished from the values in use (Schein, 2004) - which makes empirical proof difficult (Table 1), adapted from Rose *et al.* 2015a, summarizes the findings from the literature review and highlights the key rival values in the different traditions of public management.

Table 1 - Rivalry between public values in the traditions of public management

Public Value Position	Public management traditions	The rival public values in the public management traditions
Foundational Values	Weberian Bureaucracy	Non-litigation: accepted by the three value positions
Administrative efficiency	New Public Management	Litigation: accepted by the Weberian Bureaucracy, prioritized by the NPM, minimized by New Public Service (however, in the implementation of public policies efficiency is non-litigation in all traditions).
Service improvement	Public Value Management	Litigation: only partially recognized by the Weberian Bureaucracy, given the market orientation of the New Public Management prioritized by the New Public Service.
Citizen engagement	New Public Service	Litigation: not recognized by Weberian bureaucracy and by New Public Management (except in terms of response to customer market preferences) and prioritized by New Public Service

Source: Based on Rose *et al.*, 2015a

Prioritizing one position implies reducing the focus and/or resources that would be dedicated to another (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). The three groups of public value positions reflect the rivalry between the public administration/management traditions, while the core values are less contentious. It is important to highlight that litigation, when it occurs, is shown among the public value positions rather than among the values grouped in each value position. This is because each value position groups a set of congruent representative values.

Based on the historical development of public management practices, Rose *et al.*, (2015) identify four traditions: (i) Weberian Bureaucracy, (ii) New Public Administration, New Public Management (NPM), (iii) Public Value Management (PVM), and (iv) New Public Service

(NPS). The process of reform in public administration is analogous to geological sedimentation: with layers overlapping the previous ones (Politt and Bouckaert, 2017). Each layer incorporates a set of value positions, which can lead to competition and conflict (Steinbach and Sub, 2018) and also hinder the articulation of litigation caused by rival public values (Rose *et al.*, 2015a).

In Weberian bureaucracy, it is rationality that makes the state apparatus a professionalized machine. Bureaucracy offers unparalleled objectivity, with a focus on working according to rules, laws, and regulations - without taking the individual into account - based on a logic of promoting equity before the law (Rose *et al.*, 2015b). Weberian Bureaucracy gradually became discredited in the 1980s and 1990s, being affected by the practices favored in the New Public Management (NPM). The old public administration practices came to be seen as wasteful, static, and unresponsive with excess staff (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). The introduction of the methods of the market and competition is seen as the way to deliver more efficient and effective public services to customers and non-citizens, while public managers should focus on results.

In the PVM tradition, public services respond to a higher call to serve the public interest and create public value. Governments should not be run as a business but should function as a democracy (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2007). In addition, the borrowing of elements/repertoire from the private sector by the NPM, with regard to the treatment of citizens (Cordella and Bonina, 2012) is seen to risk undermining democratic and social values (Soe and Drechsler, 2018). Finally, in contrast to NPM, the principle of public value is focused on ends and pragmatic to the means (Soe and Drechsler, 2018). In the New Public Service tradition, service is redefined in its democratic context: serving the public interest. Logic is associated with liberal democracy, where government creates a deliberative atmosphere of negotiation with society. The dialogue between citizens, politicians, and civil servants is what defines and redefines the public interest. Citizen engagement is based on the values of NPM citizen centricity and PVM political engagement (ROSE *et al.*, 2015b). Citizens are judges and arbitrators of public value and often change their importance. Thus, each social problem represents an opportunity to create public value through public deliberation (MOORE, 2014). In this tradition, citizenship implies more than consuming services, it also implies the ability to influence decision-making and the formulation of public policies (ROSE *et al.*, 2015a).

Rivalry occurs when resources for the implementation of value positions become scarce or because incompatibilities between public values are perceived. The initial cost of deploying digital services is high and there may be competition for resources required for internal administrative efficiency. Moreover, automating a service does not necessarily mean improving the service for the citizen. Digital services themselves are low efficiency if citizens do not engage in them. Citizen engagement is also expensive to implement, so it can easily compete with the values of administrative efficiency (ROSE *et al.*, 2015b).

3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Based on a positivist epistemological position, this exploratory study adopts a qualitative cross-sectional approach, due to the study describes situations and characteristics manifested by the phenomenon under study. The focus group method was the methodological approach, enrolling civil servants from state governments as respondents. The decision to investigate from the view of public managers has felt because of the role of government as the guarantor of the creation of public value (Sundberg, 2016). Empirical validation is anchored in the rhetoric of the public managers' discourses in counterpoint to their practical actions when it comes to decisions regarding the prioritization of public value positions in digital government initiatives.

Three focus group sessions were performed from November 2019 and June 2020, two face-to-face and one online provided the social distancing measures taken due to the Covid-19

pandemic. Each session lasted two hours, on average. When selecting the profile of the focus group participants, three criteria were defined to meet the scope of this investigation, namely: (i) being a civil servant in state governments for at least five years; (ii) having worked in digital government programs in the last 24 months, and (iii) being from a state with different levels of maturity in digital government implementation. The first criterion is related to the importance of leadership in decision-making, whereby public value positions are assumed (Rose *et al.*, 2015a) when prioritizing digital government initiatives, provided public managers are appointed as a stakeholder with great command, represented by power, legitimacy, and urgency (Rose *et al.*, 2018) and are fundamental for creating public value (Moore, 1995).

A total of 27 state government civil servants working on digital government projects participated in the focus group sessions. Of these 27, 22 are more related to ICT departments (modeling digital government solutions) and five to more strategic areas, interacting with the political agents. These civil servants work in 13 states from the five Brazilian geographic regions, namely: Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, and Paraná, from the South region; Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, from the Southeast Region; Alagoas, Pernambuco, Bahia, and Ceará, from the Northeast Region; Tocantins and Amapá, from the Northern region; and Goiás and the Federal District, from the Center-West region. These civil servants are considered by their pairs as experts in Digital Government, provided their years of experience. They are part of a civil servant professional network called Working Group for Digital Transformation in the State Governments (GTD.Gov), supported by an association of state officers on strategy and ICT. The fact the participants represented all the Brazilian geographic regions allowed access to different levels of capacity for digital government.

Related to educational level, 1 are graduated, 13 have an MBA, and 13 have a master's degree. Related to years of experience, 13 participants have between six and 15 years of experience as civil servants, eight have between 16 and 25 years of experience, and six have more than 26 years of experience working as civil servants. It shows these focus group participants are suitable for the goals of this research and that all the three criteria to select participants were attended.

The focus group design facilitated a mediated debate between the managers (Flick, 2009) with each participant having the opportunity to express their views (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Four steps were defined:

Step 1 - Leveling of concepts

Presentation of the general rules (consent for recording, warm-up discussing practical experiences), and presentation of the concept of digital government adopted in the research.

Step 2 - Individual map

The participants were asked to classify the degree of importance of the public value positions prioritized in the digital government initiatives in which they had participated in the previous 12 months. This period was chosen because it covered the first year in office of the Brazilian new state governments. To this do so, each participant received 13 cards, each one naming one of the 13 public values listed by Rose *et al* (2015a) and presented here in Figure 1, in the bullets. Foundational values were not considered since, according to Rose *et al* (2015a), they do not generate rivalry with the other positions.

Figure 2 shows an example of a map completed by one of the focus group participants. All the discussions were performed in Portuguese, and it is the reason some pictures of the sessions are in this language.

Figure 2 - A completed individual map

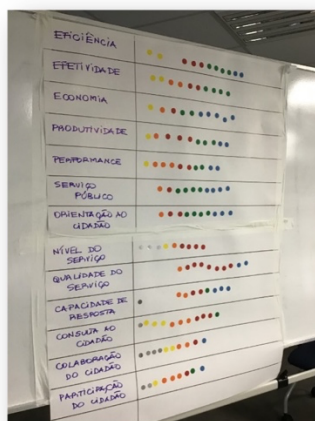


In order to reduce bias, neither the concept of public value nor the associations with value positions were presented to participants. Researchers informed the participants that each of the 13 cards represented an expected goal or result in the context of digital government initiatives. Then, each participant was asked, based on their practical experience, to classify the 13 cards according to their degree of importance to the government (1 – less important to 5 – most important; and no important – in cases where that value was not considered). Researchers emphasized that the participants should classify the cards according to their perception related to the government’s stated objective and their experience in implementing digital government initiatives rather than according to their opinion of how they should be prioritized.

Step 3 - Collective maps

Using the information from the individual maps, researchers compiled a collective map in which the prioritizations were represented in terms of frequency, objectives, and motivations with the degree of importance or absence of importance. Figure 3 shows an example of it.

Figure 3 - Collective Maps



Step 4 - Group debate

During this stage, researchers asked the focus group participants to, based on their experience, make their analyses, regarding the explanation for the overall result of the map. The objective was to shed light on any tensions, pressures, and possible contradictions existing in the prioritization decisions. This debate gave rise to numerous exchanges and dialogues, especially regarding their perceptions in practical experiences since they work in the implementation of digital government initiatives in the Brazilian states.

3.3 Data analysis

Content analysis was used to identify the data categories and frequencies. The analysis identified repeated themes related to the three value positions and categorized them using a coding system developed from the literature review. The subcategories represented the group of public values pertaining to each category. In the first stage, content analysis was performed by frequency from the statements made by the focus group participants. In the second stage, the tensions and contradictions between the value positions were evaluated and identified. The analysis of the categorical data took place at various times during the study, specifically during: (i) the focus groups sessions, undertaken by the researcher herself; (ii) transcription of the participants' statements; (iii) exploration of the material through the full reading of the statements; (iv) classification and coding according to predefined categories; (v) creation of new categories, based on new data from the collection and (vi) data analysis. The transcription process generated 78 pages of textual content and the three-step encoding, using NVivo Software, resulted in 17 nodes and 30 sub-nodes.

4 RESULTS ANALYSIS

4.1 The political factor is predominant in/for the current map of digital government in Brazilian states

Policymakers cannot understand the impact of technology: "policymakers do not recognize IT as the driving force behind change" (E9). The "lack of a digital mindset" (E14) and the "lack of comprehension of the merger of ICT with business" (E12) were identified as relevant aspects for the current implementation framework of digital government in Brazilian states. In addition, policymakers do not focus on the preferences and needs of citizens when prioritizing digital government initiatives: "they feel legitimized by the vote" (E11) and "do not recognize technology as a factor driving voting" (E27). In most cases, the protagonist is the business manager/manager of the business. Technical managers feel pressured to give a social response, however, the strategic level does not lead the initiatives or focuses only on the depletion of the public machine.

4.2 The administrative efficiency imperative

Table 2 shows the frequency analysis obtained from the classification made by the focus group participants, based on their perception of the degree of importance of public values in the implementation of digital government in their states in the previous 12 months.

Table 2 - Public value positions frequency analysis according to their degree of importance

Public Value Position	No important	Low importance	Medium Importance	High importance
Administrative efficiency	6	33	30	79
Service improvement	6	17	35	57
Citizen engagement	21	39	25	24

Administrative Efficiency appears as the dominant value position, followed by Service Improvement. The lowest frequency was attributed to Citizen Engagement and was the value position most frequently reported as being not important, which means it was not considered or prioritized in the digital government initiatives in which the participants took part. When asked about the reasons why the Administrative Efficiency position was attributed of such importance, the participants reported the focus "*within the government*" (E13), where "*ICT is*

seen as a lever of performance” (E1), within the logic of rationalization of government. One possible explanation reported by the participants is the “*low maturity in digital government*” (E22). Even service improvement or the migration to digital channels is understood by the participants as an institutional pressure for rationalization and administrative simplification. The internal structure of governments is reported to be under pressure, especially due to the lack of staff, which forces the reduction *of the backlog* of care. An example is the record number of digital occurrences that were prioritized due to the lack of police officers in police stations.

4.3 The economic criterion is the focus of the administrative efficiency

Within the Administrative Efficiency position, the public value economy was highlighted in the digital initiatives, being prioritized 16 times. Several examples of implemented projects, mentioned by the participants, focused on cost reduction.

The main cause pointed out is the phenomenon of the fiscal crisis: “the fiscal crisis forces the economy and the reduction of costs” (E5). The size and cost of the Brazilian administration are no longer compatible with state revenues. The desired path and one of the points to be worked on is the efficiency of the public machine, with the improvement of public management and cost reduction. “Even in cases where digital government projects intended to improve the provision of services, for the government, the goal is still to economize/still the economy” (E15). The ideology of the party in government was seen as a reason for the focus on savings: “in my state, the current political party currently in power has a philosophy that prioritizes efficiency, cost reduction, and economy”(E6).

4.4 Service Improvement is a political marketing tool

Asked why they perceive improving services as being of importance, the participants point to a strong discourse regarding citizen-oriented goals from the politicians/political agents. However, they do not see those goals as driving the practice “there is only discourse and little practice” (E12). One explanation for this situation is that politicians do not associate the vote they receive with the voice of the citizen, since for them their permanence in power is linked to the vote of the citizen and not to the delivery of digital services. Moreover, disbelief in government generates little social pressure for digital services, “The government delivers very bad services, generating a feeling among citizens that there is nothing else to do, that the government does not work” (E24) and, further, “... society does not connect innovative actions with the government. The government is still synonymous with paper” (E13). In some cases, where there is social pressure, political agents apply place less importance, which means little priority is given to implementing public services for the citizen.

On the other hand, the government feels under pressure to enter the digital age. According to the participating managers, politicians incorporate the idea of digital government into their discourses as a form of marketing, being more concerned with appearance than practice. One of the participants suggests the enactment of Federal Law 13,460, of 2017, known as the public service users’ defense code, which provides for the participation, protection, and defense of the rights of public service users has led Brazilian governments to attribute greater value to citizen-orientation. However, he does not realize, in fact, concrete actions only some implementations of public ombudsman channels. He adds that the law has an internal chapter with the 15 guidelines for the level of service. Another participant reported that “the government does not meet service levels because it suffers no sanction” (E14) and the government “lacks the maturity to establish and measure service level” (E4).

4.5 Media is the only external factor to exert relevant pressure

The media emerges as a relevant intervening factor that pressures services improvement through digital government, “the media interferes a lot, especially with the

young/new digital-age reporters, which provokes and pressures the government” (E23). However, while the media might play a more effective role in instigating digital initiatives than political will, it is largely reactive in nature rather than proactive. And, in addition, “the focus of the media has been the availability of the service and not the participation of the citizen, since the media’s interest does not always represent the collective interest” (E19). This observation is consistent with Tangi et al., 2019, who pointed out that transformation is not driven by internal organizational needs, but by external pressures that, according to the authors, are the main driver of transformation in governments.

4.6 Citizen Engagement is low priority

The participants reported their perceptions, based on their practical experiences, in relation to the relative lack of importance of citizen engagement. One of the factors pointed out concerns how politicians interpret the legitimacy of the vote: “politicians see themselves as self-sufficient and magnanimous since they are validated by the vote” (E18). The representativeness of the vote leads politicians to believe they already know the citizens’ needs and therefore no longer need to listen to them. Moreover, in cases where public consultation, it is largely a matter of political marketing, to generate a citizen-oriented discourse, as a way of figuring as a participatory government: “citizens are not seen as stakeholders. Their opinions are not considered during decision making” (E4). Governments’ lack of structure, preparation, and knowledge were also suggested as reasons for the lack of importance attributed to the values related to citizen engagement.

The cultural and political aspects of the government that for years make and decide alone the prioritization: “for 30 years I have worked with ICT in the government and it has always been and continues so, it digitizes services without asking the citizen anything” (E7). In the same vein, society does not organize itself to express its interests and needs and, still has discredit that society with the government and its lack of perception about the power of its voice. It was also suggested governments might fear amplifying negative criticism within society and drawing attention to historical deficit regarding its failure to deliver digital services. And then the government understands that only the fact of delivering in digital media or making available in new channels is already delivering value to the citizen.

A lack of staff knowledge to engage citizen were also pointed out as interfering factors, “I think the technical staff itself does not know how to do it” (E15) and another participant (E26) argued, “the State is not organized to meet the demand, so there is no point in opening for consultation because if it opens will not give a return”.

5 RESULTS DISCUSSION

This study aims to investigate the factors that interfere in the prioritization and choice of rival public value positions in digital initiatives in Brazilian states. Rivalry exists. The fiscal crisis in Brazilian state governments requires that Administrative Efficiency be given top priority according to the digital government literature that indicates a concentration of resources on internal government initiatives (Mergel *et al.*, 2020). The conflict between media pressure, the lack of personnel, internal and external cultural issues, the discourse for orientation to the citizen without effective practice, and the need for fiscal adjustment generate incompatibilities between values and public value positions. Increased skepticism among the population regarding government tends to reduce social pressure (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2017). This is because the real benefits do not impact citizens (Gupta and Suri, 2017) and the results of digital government are limited (Pedersen, 2018), generating distrust in the government. Without external pressure from citizens, the sense of legitimacy and representativeness of the vote is strengthened among politicians, which results in digital initiatives that focus on Citizen Engagement are not prioritized.

A study in the Danish government found that public managers resolve the rivalry by prioritizing administrative efficiency (57%). Its commitment to improving services is the second most important (30%), and while citizen engagement is recognized as important (13%), it is not prioritized (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). The present study obtained similar results: Administrative Efficiency with 49%, followed by Service Improvement with 36%, and Citizen Engagement with 15%. In both studies, Administrative Efficiency is found to be a preponderant factor even in initiatives where the declared focus is to provide services to citizens (Rose *et al.*, 2015a). The context in Brazil is very different from that of Denmark where the government is a parliamentary monarchy with a strong focus on promoting social welfare, the society is more equitable and there is a high degree of digitization of public services. This generates greater confidence in the government among its citizens and fewer social demands, which reduces the need for collection for government openness and citizen participation. Thus, what seems to explain the similarity of the results is the role of leadership. Leadership plays an important role in this process: public managers must respond to a wide variety of objectives and challenges, expressed by multiple stakeholders.

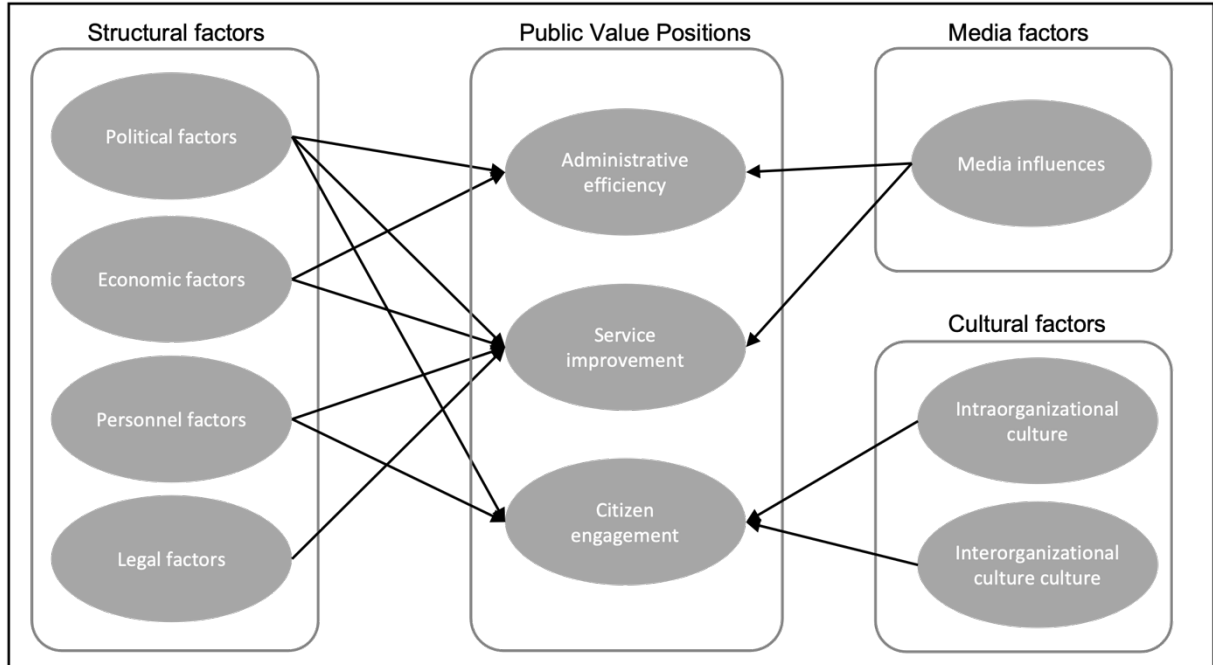
Clearly, the values adopted are not the same as those defended in the discourse. Often the tensions between positions are resolved by political actors. The importance attributed to improving services was seen as a response to media pressure or the trend towards digital transformation rather than as a result of the political will to provide better public services for the citizens. The analysis of the research corpus identified the factors that influence the priorities adopted in the use of ICTs in public management at the state level in Brazil. Table 3 represents the consolidation of the intervening aspects resulting from the research.

Table 3 – Factors influencing the prioritization of rival public value positions

Public Value Position	Actors/factors	Source	Statements from focus group participants
Administrative efficiency	Politicians	Internal	"Digital government has been an old way of doing new things. The goal come from the political focus" (E13).
	Economic	Internal	"Digital initiatives predominantly focus on financial variables and cost reduction" (E1).
	Media	External	"Media pressure directs government processes" (E23)
Service improvement	Politicians	Internal	"There is a lack of real appreciation of the citizens' working day and experience. We are only improving, without innovating in fact" (E8).
	Economic	Internal	"The government is digitizing services as a way of reducing costs" (E17)
	Staff	Internal	"Teams are reduced ... and has many services to be done" E14).
	Legal	Internal	"The new legislation has led to trend towards addressing the citizen" (E12)
	Media	External	"The media is one of the few actors in the world that has the ability to change social reality. With its power, it has directed the processes and actions of the government" (E3).
Citizen engagement	Politicians	Internal	"There is no political will to listen to the citizen" (E4).
	Staff	Internal	"There is a lack of knowledge, experience, and methodology of how citizens engagement can be done" (E25)
	Cultural	Internal and External	"Lack of internal culture to value or seek the best experience for citizens" (E4)

Figure 7 shows the conceptual model built using the study findings. The elements are described below.

Figure 7 - Proposed conceptual model



Regarding Administrative Efficiency, the high priority attributed to this position is largely the result of internal issues within the government. Political aspects, derived from the ideology of the party in power and the perceived legitimacy afforded by the electoral process/high representativeness understood from the vote, lead to a greater focus on public values typical of this position, such as simplification and rationalization. Allied to this are economic factors, such as the need for fiscal adjustment due to previous administrations having increased spending, particularly on staff, beyond the capacity to collect revenue. This situation is understood to cause a shortage of resources that impedes the provision of better services to citizens. Among the external factors, the media is seen to pressure for more productivity and better government performance.

In relation to Improving Services, this position is also affected by internal political factors. Digitization is undertaken mainly out of political convenience and less by the orientation for the de facto citizen. The lack of staff and the economic issue are variables that interfere by assuming influence for the implementations of improvement of services through digital means. Cultural and legal factors also appear as intervening variables in the decision-making process. Citizens discredit the government and no longer charge services, which results in a lack of external interference that ends up influencing the reduction of services in digital media. The enactment of Law 13,460 suggests there is a movement towards citizen-centricity. However, an external factor, the media causes great interference as negative criticism, forcing the government to digitize public services. And finally, from external factors, the media reinforces the pattern of society and the digital world, which pressure governments to transform. In the case of the Brazilian states, this tends to generate more political discourse than effective practical transformation.

Concerning the Citizen Engagement position, practicing popular consultation, collaboration, and participation through ICTs would require a suitable culture and internal structure for readiness for an open government. Among political agents, there is no culture of

listening to citizens and no political will to do so, largely because they feel their position is legitimized by the vote. The historical relationship of the State with decision-making power over prioritization also composes, the political variable that interferes in the low or nonexistent listening in relation to the desires and needs of the citizen. On the other hand, the external cultural factors of society appear as an intervener since there is low social pressure. When values associated with citizen engagement appear they are only present with the rhetoric of political discourse and less practical application as a digital government initiative.

In order to categorize the intervening aspects into factors, a form used to identify barriers to the digital government was adopted. According to Meijer (2015) and Tangi *et al.* (2019), such barriers can be classified as structural and/or cultural. In the conceptual model proposed here, structural factors encompass government aspects related to political, economic, personnel, and legal issues. The cultural factors include aspects related to the internal culture of government and the culture of society. Finally, the media factors refer to aspects related to all types of media external to the government.

6 FINAL REMARKS

This study aimed to identify factors that interfere in the prioritization of rival public values in the Brazilian state government and propose a conceptual model comprised of the intervening factors and their relations with public value positions. To do so, 27 civil servants from 13 Brazilian states, representing all the Brazilian geographical/demographic regions, took part in the focus group sessions.

Data analysis showed political issues to be the main variable influencing digital government decisions. The political factor is predominant in the three public value positions. Thus, political leadership can be said to be the decisive factor driving the choices made regarding digital initiatives. And despite the different contexts, this may explain the similarity between the results of the present study and those from Denmark. It may also indicate why the values adopted are different from those defended by political agents and explain the imperative of efficiency since political decision-making interferes with internal factors. As an external factor, only the media can affect political decisions by balancing the power of political representation. Because of this, it can be understood as a threat to political agents.

This research contributes to the understanding of the factors and variables that influence decision-making regarding digital government projects in Brazilian states, building on the original studies from Rose *et al.* (2015b); Rose *et al.* (2015a), and Rose *et al.* (2018). The proposed conceptual model provides a relevant theoretical contribution by showing the dynamics of prioritization of rival public value positions. It also put a light on the complexity of the digital government scenario in Brazil, offering a less technocentric perspective that has rarely been explored in the literature on digital government. Given Brazil's status as a developing country, the findings might be of interest to countries in similar contexts. It also provides insights into the day-to-day concerns of government at the state level in Brazil. As a social contribution, it provides an overview of the purposes of digital government initiatives, especially the attitudes/values/priorities underlying the use of public resources.

This research has three limitations. The first concerns the opinions heard, which are those of only one group of stakeholders involved in digital government projects: the technical managers, the business areas, and ICT. The second refers to the importance of quantitative validation when constructing a theoretical empirical model, which allows statistical analyses of the variables. Thirdly, the comparison with the study in the Danish government should be further explored to allow new findings and deeper insights into the differences arising from the distinct contexts in the two countries. Regarding further studies, comparisons with cultural contexts and political and social arrangements like Brazil would also be of great value in this

area. It would also be important to broaden the data collection to include other stakeholders such as political agents, media representatives, citizens, and social organizations, as a way to enhance the triangulation of data. Finally, this study could be replicated in a post-Covid scenario to assess the extent to which the pandemic has digital government initiatives and the challenges faced by governments because of the digital solutions generated to cope with the pandemic.

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