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Weaknesses in Motivation and in Establishing a Meritocratic System: A Portrait of the Portuguese Public Administration

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ABSTRACT

The complexities of Public Administration have gained the growing attention of scholars around the world, mainly due to the impacts of the reforms implemented under the doctrine of New Public Management (which aims to apply concepts and practices of private management in public management) on civil servants. The aim of this study is to find out how Portuguese citizens evaluate the Portuguese Public Administration under the aspects of bureaucracy, organisation of human resources, innovation, skills and attitudes of civil servants, its motivation and recognition; and to verify if there are differences of opinion between respondents working in public sector and respondents from other sectors. This study follows a quali-quantitative approach, and data were collected through an online survey in the period from June to December 2020. The survey was answered by 1119 citizens from all districts of Portugal. The main findings reveal a still high level of bureaucracy in the Portuguese Public Administration; weaknesses in the management of human resources, namely regarding the motivation and recognition of civil servants; and difficulties in the establishment of a meritocratic system of recruitment and performance evaluation of civil servants. Statistically significant evaluation differences (chi-square test and non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests, involving five hypotheses) were found between the public sector and other sectors, except for the motivation variable.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Public Administration (PA) presents an increasing complexity throughout its evolution as a science worldwide. Governance models have been transforming through history, especially in the contemporary era, as a response to profound social, economic, cultural and political changes in countries (Wright1997;Lane1995). The advent of economic globalisation generated the need for PA modernisation, guided by an essentially bureaucratic model until the 1980s. Principles of New Public Management (NPM), a new management model based on paradigms and practices of private management, were widely disseminated in the Western democracies (Gruening2001;Hood1994), leading states to implement reforms in their public administrations at the central and local levels.

Portugal is no exception to the rule (Santinha et al.2021;Corte-Real2008;Madureira and Ferraz2010) and, particularly after joining the European Union (EU), in 1986, has experienced, over the course of successive constitutional governments, the implementation of reform measures based on NPM, aimed at streamlining the state's administrative apparatus, reducing public expenditure and removing bureaucracy from processes, gains in efficiency and effectiveness in the provision of public services, among other objectives of a more operational nature (Madureira and Ferraz2010;Rocha and Araújo2006).

The rationalisation, modernisation and empowerment of the PA is one of the strategic objectives of the Portugal 2020 Partnership Agreement, in line with the Europe 2020 Strategy and the National Reform Programme, established by the XXI Constitutional Government (the Portuguese Republic 2018). The Support System for the Modernisation and Capacitation of the Public Administration (SAMA 2020), managed by the Agency for Administrative Modernisation (AMA), has received a financial allocation of EUR 362 million in EU funds to support qualification and motivation actions for civil servants (AMA 2021), and since its implementation in 2014, more than 300 qualification and motivation projects for civil servants have been funded with Portugal 2020 resources. Despite these investments, the Economic and Social Council of Portugal (CES) has warned about the need for an enhancement of human resources in the PA in all its dimensions: careers, professional training, working conditions and salaries (CES 2019).

It is noteworthy that the EU Recovery and Resilience Plan (known as “bazooka”) provides a budget allocation of EUR 578 million for capacity building, digitalisation, interoperability and cybersecurity actions of the Portuguese PA (Expresso 2021), in line with the axis Exploiting technology of the Strategy for Innovation and Modernisation of the State and Public Administration 2020–2023, approved by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers No. 55/2020, of 31 July 2020 (Diário da República Eletrónico 2021). Table 1 summarises the Strategy.

Table 1. Strategy for Innovation and Modernisation of the State and Public Administration 2020–2023.

Axes		Strategic objectives		
Strategy for Innovation and Modernisation of the State and Public Administration 2020–2023	1. Investing in people	1.1	develop and renew leadership	
		1.2	mobilising and empowering workers	
		1.3	involving workers in cultural change	
	2. Developing management	2		
		2.1	strengthen performance management to improve the quality of public services	
		2.2	planning human resources in an integrated way	
		2.3	investing in administrative simplification	
	3. Exploring technology	2.4	promoting innovation in public management	
		3		
		3.1	strengthening global governance of technology	
		3.2	improving interoperability and integration of services	
	4. Strengthening proximity	3.3	managing the data ecosystem with security and transparency	
		4		
		4.1	promote integration and inclusion in public care	
		4.2	encouraging citizens' participation	
		4.3	deepening the decentralisation of powers to local authorities	
	4.4	strengthen local public services through deconcentration to the regional level		

Source: Own elaboration (data from the Resolution of the Council of Ministers N° 55/2020).

As we have seen, in addition to the idiosyncrasies of a management model that is particularly normative, the Portuguese PA still faces added difficulties in the management of its human resources, such as the recurring reforms that froze salaries and benefits, shortcomings in the organisation of personnel, the use of a performance assessment system (SIADAP) that is criticised by scholars and civil servants for not being fair and meritocratic, the lack of prestige and recognition of employees by society, and low opportunities of functional progression (Rosa 2020; Madureira and Rodrigues 2015; Rato 2015; Pedro 2015; Fraga 2014; Lopes 2012).

All the complexity involved in the PA has demanded a broad approach to studies that allow for a better understanding of its particularities and challenges over time. In this context, it is particularly important to know the opinion of citizens about the PA and the management of its human resources since citizens are important stakeholders in the PA, presenting themselves as “customers” of its services (Mintzberg 1996).

This study presents a theoretical–empirical approach and aims to know how Portuguese citizens evaluate the Portuguese PA in the following aspects:

- 1) The level of the bureaucracy of the PA bodies;
- 2) Organisation and distribution of human resources;
- 3) Efficiency and quality of public services;
- 4) Skills and attitudes of civil servants;
- 5) Recognition of civil servants;
- 6) Innovation in the PA.

The structure of this article is divided into six sections: the introduction (the current section); a brief literature review, focused on PA models and the NPM, motivation in public service and innovation; the methods used in the research; the presentation and discussion of results; and the conclusions, where the limitations of the study and perspectives for future research are also presented.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Portuguese Public Administration, Reform and New Public Management

To contextualise contemporary PA, it is necessary to recall the administration models that made it evolve over time. According to Violin(2007, p. 225), before the PA evolved into a bureaucratic model, the state apparatus was patrimonialist, “in which public and private property were confused, and there was nepotism, patronage and corruption”. The beginnings of a patrimonialist bureaucracy in Portugal arose from a merchant bourgeoisie (Buarque de Holanda1987).

According to Chiavenato(2009), in the patrimonialist model reigned a corrupt administration, in which public positions were donated to people chosen by the court, having as a characteristic a high remuneration in exchange for little work. Trigo(2009, p. 194) states that the stigma was created of privileged civil servants in contemporary society who “receive much and work little”. In order to combat nepotism and corruption in force, the bureaucratic model of PA arose (Chiavenato2009), which was introduced in Europe in the late 19th century (Violin2007). The precepts of the bureaucratic model are attributed to the philosopher Max Weber (Weber2000), for whom the purest type of rational–legal domination of the state is exercised by the bureaucratic administrative apparatus, consisting of rigid and hierarchical controls that guarantee the sovereign power of the State (Chiavenato2009). According to Ferraz(2020), Weber’s contribution essentially focused on the status of bureaucracy as an organised means for legal, economic and technical rationality.

Jamil(1998) states that an essential PA characteristic is its relationship with politics and its positioning in a broader political system. These elements configure mechanisms to control how politics directs the administration, the internal functioning of the administration and its relationship with society and citizens. According to the author, a normative concept of the relationship between politics and administration that emerged in Europe from the 17th century onwards suggests a hierarchical structure between ends and means. In this system, the bureaucracy is expected to be loyal to all governments and regimes that assume power without losing its impersonal character. In Europe, the Weberian system, based on a system of vertical hierarchies, permanent careers, impersonal treatment and promotions on the basis of merit, served this purpose (Jamil1998).

Due to globalisation and the pressures of a new world order, the need arose for a new model of PA—the NPM, based on administrative decentralisation, flexibility, autonomy and the flattening of hierarchies, principles that were already advocated in the context of the private sector becoming more business-like (Wright1997). Consequently, the administrative reforms emerged as a package of measures aimed at the modernisation and debureaucratisation of the state, replacing the “administrative state” with the “managerial state” (Lane1995).

The term New Public Management was first used by Hood(1991) with the article “A Public Management for All Seasons?”, in which he debates the assumption that NPM offers a multipurpose key to better public service delivery. Hood(1991, p. 4, and following) firstly has referenced seven components of change in the NPM doctrines:

- 1) Hands-on professional management;
- 2) Explicit standards and measures of performance;
- 3) Greater emphasis on output controls;
- 4) Shift to disaggregation of units;
- 5) Shift to greater competition;
- 6) Stress on private-sector styles of management practice;
- 7) Stress on greater discipline and parsimony in resource use.

According to the author, not all of these seven components are equally present in the reform policies adopted by the OECD countries over the 1980s.

RodríguezRodríguez Bolívar et al.(2015) address that the public sector reforms undertaken by governments around the world under NPM have been achieved in different ways, and these differences are apparently caused mainly by the different administrative cultures existing among Western-style democracies (Table2).

Table 2. Characteristics of Public Administration in Western-style states.

Anglo-Saxon Countries	Countries in Scandinavia and The Netherlands	Continental Europe Countries
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emphasise accountability, efficiency, effectiveness and value for money - more likely to introduce market mechanisms and notions of competitiveness - envisage the citizen primarily as a client 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - considered a mixture of Anglo-Saxon and Continental Europe models - reforms concerned with citizens' needs, who are encouraged to participate in public policy evaluation and in management - more pragmatic version of managerial reforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - prominence of the written constitution and the need to translate principles into law - show a legal framework of great detail for budgetary disclosures' requirements - seek to accomplish legal requirements, more than transparency

Source: Own elaboration (Rodríguez Bolívar et al. 2015).

According to Hood(1991), NPM has most often been criticised in terms of an alleged contradiction between the values of “equity” and “efficiency”, but any criticism of NPM doctrines needs to be grounded in terms of possible conflicts between administrative values, which varies according to factors such as whether or not it is an Anglo-Saxon country (as seen above with Rodríguez Bolívar et al. 2015), party politics, government size and macroeconomic performance. For instance, concerning the political factor, Portugal is reported by Hood(1994) as a Centre country and has adopted a medium NPM emphasis on reform policies.

Bilhim et al.(2015) address that reform models cannot be applied uncritically in countries with such distinct administrative paradigms (legal-normative model X managerial model). They exemplify this with the fact that civil servants, after thirty years of rhetoric about reforms in Portugal, prefer the values of equity (the normative aspect of the State) to those of efficiency (prevailing in the private administration).

Magone(2011) refers to “Neo-patrimonialism” applied to the case of the Portuguese PA, meaning that, despite the growing importance of a democratic culture of accountability and transparency over time, sustained through continuous pressures from the OECD and the Europeanisation processes, old patterns of behaviour remain as obstacles in the reform processes.

Carvalho(2008, p. 259) states that there is an ambiguity between the models applied in administrative reform and the empirical reality, making administrative science close to a kind of fiction, whose theories do not clarify what exists, but only indicate what should exist, and “administrative reform is often a victim of this fiction”.

As we have seen above, NPM has been debated and criticised by PA scholars around the world in several domains. Gruening(2001, p. 21), in a study on the theoretical basis of New Public Management, states that there will be new waves of reform that will remodel NPM-oriented structures, and the question of whether NPM is adequate or effective is less relevant. According to the author, “it makes no sense to argue NPM by saying: ‘Look, it is made of different parts that are based on incommensurable theories. Therefore, we should reject it”.

The “prescription” with the precepts of New Public Management, with the exaltation of management models originating from the business sector, is also criticised by Ongaro(2015, p. 71) , for whom “a set of x or y prescriptions on how to organise the public sector cannot be applied regardless of context: x or y will work or not work—and have different effects”.

Just to name a few additional studies on the impacts of NPM applied in Portugal, Madureira et al.(2021) discuss the negative impacts of the reforms from the point of view of SIADAP, a performance evaluation system considered unfair by the majority (75%) of public servants surveyed. On the other hand, Melo et al.(2020) find positive results in an administrative model guided by the Post-NPM (also known as the Neo-Weberian model) in the innovation processes in a teaching hospital in Portugal. Cardoso et al.(2019) analyse the NPM impacts on higher education in Portugal from the perspective of teaching staff and find a contradiction. The results point to a deterioration of working conditions, but academics maintain a positive view regarding the academic profession. Santinha et al.(2021) state that the adaptation of the private sector management style to public administration has had a crucial impact in the field of human resources, the most representative being the loss of historically attractive characteristics in the public sector, such as the guarantee of job security and predictability in promotions.

Reform Measures and Overview of Civil Servant Employment in Portugal

In Portugal, the structural changes in PA were concentrated in the post-revolutionary period, with the return to democratic rules in 1974 and entry into the European Community in 1986 (Corte-Real2008;OECD1995). At that time, the critical points that worked in the administrative reform were the improvement of the public service image and the recovery of its prestige, qualification of civil servants,

behavioural change of leaderships, approximation of the administration to citizens (highlighting transparency), simplification of rules and decentralisation of authority (Madureira2015;OECD1995).

In the early 1990s, the main measures of reform adopted with the Administrative Procedure Code (Law nº 442/91) were the establishment of a legal instrument empowering citizens to request public services provided in an efficient and fair way and the creation of the Lojas do Cidadão (Citizen’s Shops), which allowed access to several public services in one physical location (Madureira and Ferraz2010).

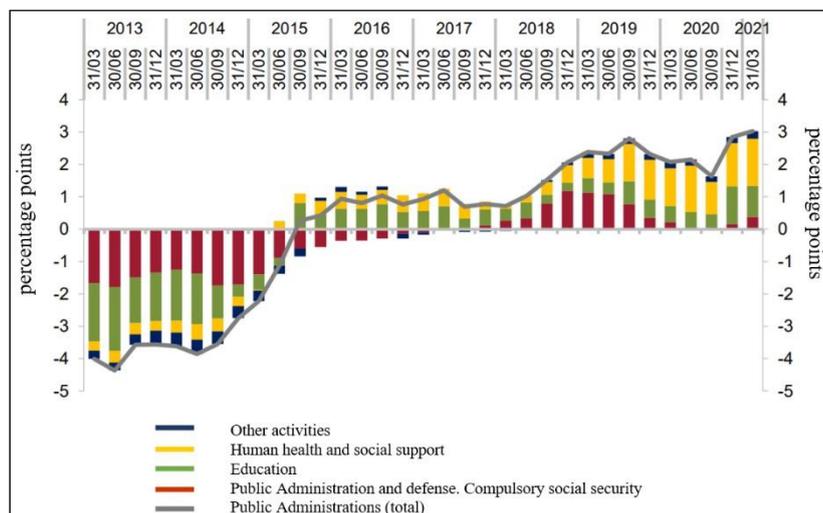
In the 2000s, performance evaluation with more objective criteria and new statutory rules for civil servants were among the main novelties in public management. Among the instruments of reform, the Restructuring Programme for the State’s Central Administration (PRACE) stands out. Some of the measures taken were reduction from 518 to 187 administrative structures (64%), reduction of 25% of the number of managerial positions, promotion of the mobility of civil servants between public organisms, implementation of an integrated system of performance assessment (SIADAP), convergence of some civil servants’ rights with those of private sector employees and transformation of 1725 careers into three general careers (Madureira and Ferraz2010;Rocha and Araújo2006;Araújo2005).

At this time, Portugal was already undergoing a fiscal adjustment policy to reduce its public deficit, with the Stability and Growth Programme being established in 2005. However, the severe international financial crisis of 2008 contributed to Portugal’s deficit reduction targets not being met, leading to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Portuguese government and the troika in 2011. Through the Central Administration Reduction and Improvement Plan (PREMAC), a variety of measures was implemented to promote an immediate cut in public spending costs, among which were limitations on staff hiring (decrease of 1–2% per year), freezing of salaries and limitation of promotions, reduction of the state’s contribution to the healthcare system for civil servants, reduction of managerial positions and central administration services by at least 15%, and closure of some foundations (Madureira2015;Madureira et al.2013).

According to the data collected in the Directorate General for Administration and Public Employment (DGAEP2021) on 31 March 2021, Portugal had 725,777 civil servants in the public administrations, of which 13,513 occupied upper or middle management positions (INE2021). In total, 75.7% of the civil servants were employed in central government entities, 17.3% in local government, 5.5% in regional government (2.8% in the Regional Government of Madeira and 2.7% in the Regional Government of Azores) and 1.5% in social security funds. Employment in the general government sector represented 7.1% of the total population of Portugal (administration ratio), 14.4% of the labour force and 15.5% of the employed population.

Figure 1 represents the variation of jobs by economic activity, referring to the interval from 2013 to the first quarter of 2021, where a notable negative variation is observed in the period from 2013 to 2015, because of the financial austerity implemented with the troika, which among other measures, promoted early retirements to reduce jobs (Rosa2020). It should be noted that according to a study conducted by the European Commission(2020a) on the evolution of the percentage of civil servants over total employment in the period from 2000 to 2018, Portugal remained one of the countries that had the lowest percentage of the EU members, at 14%, with the EU-27 average being 17%. The highest proportions were achieved by the Scandinavian countries (e.g., Sweden (29%), Denmark (28%), and Finland (24%)), and the lowest by Germany (11%).

Figure 1. Variation of employment in general government by economic activity in Portugal. Source: DGAEP/DIOEP (position on 31 March 2021).



As for the salaries paid in the Portuguese PA, Rosa(2020) states that the average net monthly remuneration of civil servants was, in 2019, EUR 1095 in the Central Government and EUR 767 in the Local Government, and that, compared to 2010, there was a decrease in purchasing power of 12.3% for Central Government employees and 8.1% for Local Government employees.

2.2. *People Management in Public Administration: Behavioural Aspects and Motivation*

Behavioural aspects in the work context have been widely studied for almost a hundred years, since the need for greater humanisation and democratisation of work became urgent, in contrast to the Taylorist and Fordist systems of industrial production, in force since the first and second decade of the twentieth century, respectively. Motivation is represented by a decision-making process that leads the individual to employ his best efforts and competencies to carry out his tasks, with obvious reflexes on productivity and on the performance of companies in any sector of activity.

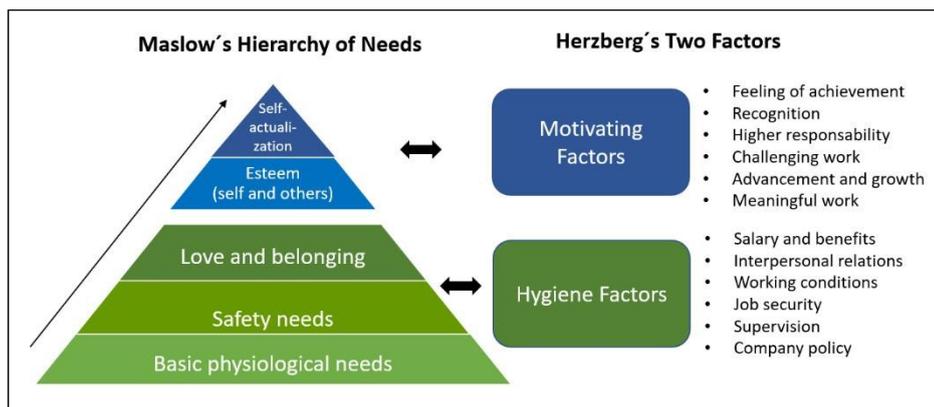
The first scientific concerns about the influence of the physical conditions of the work environment in industrial productivity emerged in the 1920s in the United States, with the landmark experience of Hawthorne in 1927, in which Mayo(1959) studied the effects of lighting on worker productivity. The greatest contribution of Mayo’s work, which gave rise to Human Relations Theory, is the finding that the salary is not the only decisive factor in worker satisfaction and that human beings are motivated by social, symbolic and non-material rewards (Mayo1959).

Later, in the 1950s, the Behavioural Theory arises, focusing on the study of human motivation. The greatest exponents of this theory are Maslow and Herzberg. It is Maslow’s Theory of the Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow1954), whose representation through a pyramid is quite classic and widespread even today. According to this theory, there are five categories of human needs, which follow a hierarchy of importance: physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation needs. The primary needs, such as physiological and security, occupy the base of the pyramid, and the other needs are tapering down to the top of the pyramid, consisting of self-actualisation in the maximisation of skills and human potential. As the individual is endowed with an innate propensity to seek self-realisation, it can be inferred from this theory that the satisfaction of one or more needs generates a behavioural impulse to satisfy another need in the hierarchical scale (Maslow1954).

Maslow’s work influenced the development of other motivational theories, such as Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory, which constituted an important legacy for studies on job satisfaction. According to Herzberg(1987), the factors that produce satisfaction at work are distinct from those that produce dissatisfaction. The factors capable of producing dissatisfaction are extrinsic and were called hygienic. They comprise company policy and management, interpersonal relations, supervision, working conditions, salary and benefits, status and safety at work. The factors which produce satisfaction are intrinsic and were called motivating—they comprise achievement and recognition, the work itself, the challenge and responsibility, as well as the progress registered or subsequent development attained. According to this theory, the absence of hygienic factors causes demotivation, but their presence is not a motivating element. Only the presence of motivating factors causes job satisfaction (Herzberg1987).

Although there are differences between the Hierarchy of Needs Theory and the Two-Factor Theory (the main one being that Maslow considers human needs within various spheres of life, whereas Herzberg focuses on the organisational context), it is possible to establish a parallel between the theories, in which Herzberg’s hygienic factors correspond to the most basic needs of Maslow’s pyramid, and the motivational factors correspond to the needs at the top of the pyramid, as shown in Figure2.

Figure 2. Comparison of Maslow’s and Herzberg’s theories of motivation. Source: Own elaboration. Adapted from Maslow’s and Herzberg’s theories.



McGregor(1960) analysed human behaviour at work, inspired by Mayo's studies and the ideas related to the individual work of Taylor's Scientific Administration, Fayol's Classical Theory and Weber's Theory of Bureaucracy, such as the focus on method and production, the imprisonment of creativity and the limitation of individual initiative (Pérez-Ramos1990; Rodrigues1994).McGregor(1960) is the author of the antagonistic Theories X and Y. According to these theories, the work based on scientific management meets the basic needs of the individual but offers little opportunity for satisfaction of individual needs, such as self-esteem and recognition. With these premises, he established Theory X, in which human beings have an aversion to work and are lazy, needing to be coerced, controlled and threatened with punishment to make them strive to achieve the organisation's goals. On the contrary, Theory Y assumes that people want and need to work, aiming at goals to which they commit themselves, and these goals depend on rewards associated with the execution of work.

Another legacy of Maslow in the motivational field is the Acquired Needs Theory by McClelland(1972), who identified the existence of three factors of professional motivation: the need for achievement, the need for affiliation and the need for power. According to this theory, all people are motivated, to a lesser or greater extent, by these three needs, which vary according to personality characteristics, cultural factors and life experience.

The Expectancy Theory byVroom(1964) is also important for the studies of job satisfaction. According to this theory, which follows a procedural approach, people are motivated for good performance at work if they believe they will be rewarded. The basic parameters in the motivational cycle of employees are expectancy (effort improves performance), instrumentality (performance brings rewards) and valence (rewards are valuable).

The issue of motivation is nowadays widely studied by scholars in the fields of Administration and People Management, who are devoted to conceptualising and measuring the construct of Public Service Motivation (PSM) (Bellé and Ongaro2014;Ritz2011;Wright and Grant2010;Kim2009;Pandey et al.2008;Houston2006;Brewer and Selden1998;Alonso and Lewis2001;Crewson1997;Perry1996). In the public sector, particularly, motivation is at the core of the debates on behaviour and performance since it is quite challenging to maintain a level of motivation and satisfaction in public employees, who, as a rule, do not have access to the attractions and rewards of the private sector.

On the other hand, bringing public management closer to private management, as has been done since the 1990s with reform measures, does not always generate the desired effects in terms of staff motivation.Bell é and Ongaro(2014) pointed to the decrease in the motivation of civil servants and the loss of the significance of work for a common good following the austere NPM measures implemented in the Italian PA.

In 2015,Madureira and Rodrigues(2015) applied a survey to civil servants of the Portuguese Central PA on a large scale (11,295 respondents) to assess levels and factors of motivation. The data collected revealed a high degree of educational attainment (70% of respondents with at least a graduate degree). Regarding motivational aspects, only 44% of the respondents were satisfied with their work, and the level of motivation was even lower (36% of the respondents felt motivated). As for performance evaluation, 88% of the respondents disagreed with the current evaluation system—SIADAP. Regarding the mission for the common good, 83% of the workers believed that they had a duty to be accountable to citizens, and 78% felt good about themselves for performing a public function. Conversely, 80% of the workers did not feel prestigious or valued by citizens.

Among the factors considered most important for the satisfaction of public workers, which obtained more than 95% of the choices, were, in descending order: self-satisfaction, salary, possibility of developing stimulating work, transparency in performance evaluations, conviction of working for the common good and autonomy (Madureira and Rodrigues2015).

In turn, in studies that assessed the motivation and satisfaction of civil servants at the local level, lower levels of educational qualifications were found in the municipalities, ranging from 24.2% to 51.8% of employees who have only up to the 9th grade of basic education (Pedro2015;Lopes2012).Pedro(2015) found that employees were more satisfied with the dimensions of interpersonal relationships and work content and less satisfied with the performance appraisal system (SIADAP) and changes in the staff structure. Similarly, Lopes(2012) identified greater importance given to companionship and teamwork, and the variables that obtained the lowest evaluation were the salary, rewards, SIADAP, training actions and computer resources.

In a study conducted with civil servants of a regional laboratory in the Azores about the troika's austerity policy,Fraga(2014) identified the work content, interpersonal relationships and recognition as the most motivating factors. In turn, the most criticised practices were salary reduction, increase in working hours, limitation of career progression and implementation of SIADAP.

2.3. Innovation in Public Administration

In the public sector, innovation can be perceived as the successful creation and implementation of new processes, products, services and working methods that result in significant improvements in the results, efficiency, effectiveness and quality of the services provided to the population (Albury2005).

According to Bekkers et al.(2013), innovation is a concept that inspires people and policy because it offers the promise of radical change. As such, the desire to innovate in the public sector has a history linked to reform programmes aimed at meeting budget reductions, introducing new management and governance ideologies (such as the aforementioned NPM) or adopting new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as e-Government.

Castro and Guimarães(2019) argue that for the innovation process in the public sector, leadership and entrepreneurial actions performed by employees are essential. Additionally, organisational characteristics also contribute to support entrepreneurial behaviour, which is a requirement for innovation. In turn, public organisations operate within organisational networks that can increase the possibilities of developing and applying innovations (Gieske et al.2016).

According to Borins(2002), the emergence of innovation prizes in the public sector has stimulated the development and dissemination of innovations and good management practices. The Ministry of the Presidency and Administrative Modernisation, AMA and INA have encouraged measures to promote innovation and entrepreneurship in the Central Administration and at the local authority level, with emphasis on the Laboratory of

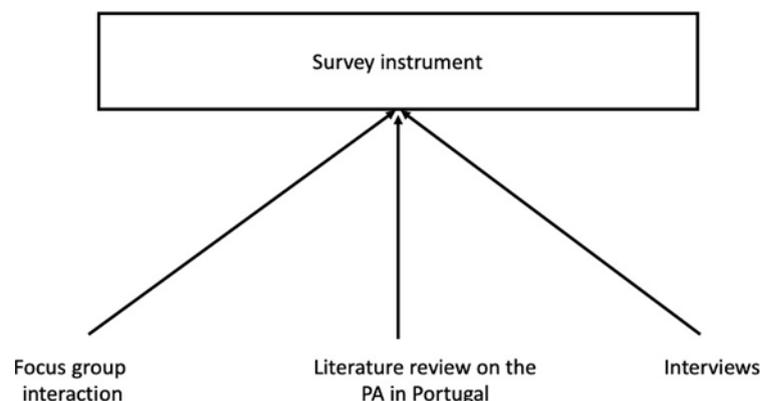
Experimentation for Innovation in the Public Administration—LabX(2021), involved in the development of innovative projects, such as Balcão Único do Emprego (Single Employment Desk), Balcão do Empreendedor (Entrepreneur’s Desk) and Lojas do Cidadão (Citizen’s Shops).

3. METHOD

3.1. Procedure

This research was carried out by means of an electronic questionnaire survey, which was made available on the Forms UA platform after approval by the Data Protection Authority of the University of Aveiro. A total of 1119 citizens, residents in Mainland Portugal and in the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira, participated in this study. The survey sampling was non-probabilistic, convenient, intentional and of snowball typology (Trochim2000;Bryman and Bell2015). In order to reach a representative sample of citizens, an effort was made to disseminate the survey at the national level. A total of 8041 people accessed the questionnaire in the period from 8 June to 9 December 2020, and 1119 complete answers were obtained. For an infinite population ($n > 100,000$), the sample obtained with the survey ($n = 1119$) is representative with a 3% margin of error, considering a 95% confidence level (Gil2017).

Figure 3. The development of the survey instrument. Source: Own elaboration.



3.2. Survey Instrument

Figure 3 shows how the survey instrument was developed as a part of a more global doctoral project, led by the first author of this study, which involves the research of three related subjects: the application of European funds, PA and e-Government in Portugal. A focus group, interviews with experts in the field and a literature review led to the development of the survey questions. The literature review on the PA in Portugal involved public sector reforms as well as innovation [or change for the better], motivation and the image of the PA; bureaucracy in the PA; and the “Loja do Cidadão” (Citizens’ shop) since it is an institution that

concentrates a variety of public services. Portuguese PA has not been the object of much previous research, leaving a gap in the literature that we wish to fill. In order to illustrate this, we have carried out a search in the Scopus database on 8 August 2021, using Boolean operators: “public administration” and “Portugal” and “government”, which resulted in 62 documents. We then reapplied the same search, replacing Portugal with Germany and Spain, which resulted in 144 documents and 198 documents, respectively.

The survey instrument was composed of 30 questions in its entirety, six of which were related to socio-demographic data. For this study, we worked with a set of eight questions specific to Portuguese PA (among which seven closed questions and one semi-structured optional question). This set of questions, approached for the first time, is displayed in Appendix A, Table A1.

3.3. Research Hypotheses

The survey was answered by 1119 citizens, of whom 329 are civil servants (among occupants of technical and administrative functions and management positions). In view of the significant percentage of these workers (29.4%) in the sample, we were able to ascertain whether there are differences in the evaluation of PA aspects under study between two groups: respondents who are civil servants and respondents from other sectors (61.6%). Then, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). The sector of activity (public or other sectors) has a significant effect on the perception of the existence of bureaucracy in PA, and this perception is expected to be higher in other sectors of activity than in the public sector.

Hypothesis 2 (H2). The opinion on the number of civil servants in public administration is not independent of the sector of activity (public or other sectors) to which the participant belongs, and it is expected that participants who carry out their activity in other sectors have a higher perception of excess civil servants in PA than those who are in the public sector.

Hypothesis 3 (H3). The activity sector (public or gold sector) has a significant effect on the perceived efficiency, qualification, commitment, ethics and motivation of public administration employees, and it is expected that this perception is higher in participants who work in the public sector.

Hypothesis 4 (H4). The sector of activity (public or other sectors) has a significant effect on whether the participant is in favour of the recognition of PA employees, with participants with activity in the public sector expected to be more favourable with regard to the existence of this recognition.

Hypothesis 5 (H5). The sector of activity (public or other sectors) has a significant effect on the evaluation of quality in customer service in the Loja do Cidadão [Citizens' Shop], and it is expected that, among the participants who have been in a citizen shop, the participants who perform functions in the public sector evaluate the service better than the other participants.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

After collecting the data electronically, the IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software was used for the descriptive statistical analyses, as well as for the application of the chi-square test and the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U tests. The semi-structured question “What would you change in Public Administration if you could?” was dealt with using MAXQDA Analytics Pro20 software.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Participants' Profile

All study participants were aged 18 years or over, with 129 (11.5%) aged 18–22 years, 127 (11.3%) aged 23–29 years, 106 (9.5%) aged 30–36 years, 211 (18.9%) aged 37–43 years, 230 (20.6%) aged 44–50 years, 173 (15.5%) aged 51–57 years, 101 (9%) aged 58–64 years, 31 (2.8%) aged 65–70 years and 11 (1%) being older than 70 years.

With regard to gender, 585 (52.3%) participants belonged to the female gender, 529 (47.3%) to the male gender and 5 (0.4%) to another gender.

In terms of nationality, 1080 (96.5%) participants were of Portuguese nationality and 39 (3.5%) of other nationalities. For the latter, the most representative nationality was Brazilian (46.2%), followed by Spanish (7.7%). There were participants living in all the districts of mainland Portugal and the Autonomous Regions of Madeira and Azores, with the largest percentage living in the districts of Aveiro (17.2%), Lisbon (13.7%) and Porto (11.2%).

Regarding completed educational qualifications, 9 (0.8%) of the participants had up to the third cycle of basic education, 136 (12.2%) had secondary education, 88 (7.9%) university attendance, 293 (26.2%) a graduation degree, 316 (28.2%) the postgraduate or master degree, 219 (19.6%) the doctoral degree, 31

(2.8%) a post-doctorate, 23 (2.1%) a habilitation qualification and 4 (0.4%) fell into another level of education.

In terms of profession, 209 (18.7%) were students, 289 (25.9%) were teachers, 58 (5.2%) were researchers, 329 (29.4%) were civil servants (including technical, administrative and managerial positions), 140 (12.5%) were employees in the private sector, 38 (3.4%) were self-employed, 11 (1%) were unemployed, 20 (1.8%) were retired, and 25 (2.2%) had another profession.

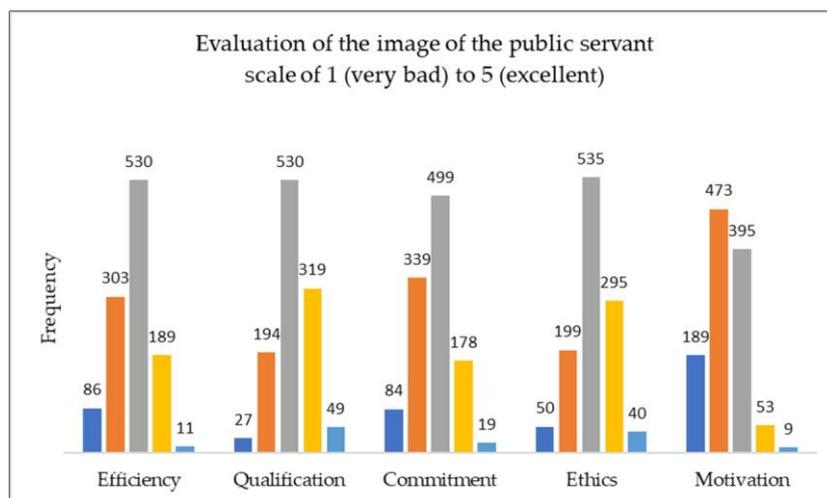
4.2. Descriptive Statistics

The first question asked to the participants was “how bureaucratic do you think the Portuguese Public Administration is?”, to which one (0.1%) participant answered not at all bureaucratic, 23 (2.1%) answered a little bureaucratic, 222 (19.8%) answered moderately bureaucratic, 538 (48.1%) answered quite bureaucratic and 335 (29.9%) answered very bureaucratic.

Next, the participants were asked, “what is your opinion on the number of civil servants in the PA Bodies?” In total, 146 (13%) participants considered that there were too few civil servants, 64 (5.7%) thought that the number of civil servants was adequate, 99 (8.8%) considered that there were too many civil servants, 725 (64.8%) perceived that the number of civil servants was not well distributed and that there were both shortages and excesses in different areas. In total, 85 (7.6%) participants had no opinion on the matter.

The following question was “On a scale of 1 (very bad) to 5 (excellent), how do you evaluate the image of the civil servant, in relation to: efficiency; qualification; commitment; ethics; and motivation”. According to Scheme1, it can be observed that the variable that received the worst evaluation was motivation, with 59.2% of the participants evaluating it as very bad or bad.

Scheme 1. Evaluation of the image of the civil servant. Source: Own elaboration.



The other variables obtained a mostly average assessment (47.4% for efficiency and qualification, 44.6% for commitment and 47.8% for ethics). The variable qualification was the one that received the best positive evaluation (32.9% considered it good or excellent), followed by ethics (30% of good or excellent evaluation).

Asked whether “they are in favour of recognising the work of the individual in the civil service (which includes monetary awards and merit diplomas, among others)”, 71 (6.3%) participants did not agree at all, 158 (14.1%) agreed in part, 230 (20.6%) agreed moderately, 331 (29.6%) agreed quite a lot and 329 (29.4%) strongly agreed.

The vast majority of participants (87%) have already been in a Loja do Cidadão (Citizen’s Shop). These participants (n = 974) were then asked about “the quality of service provided in the Citizen’s Shop”. Eight participants evaluated it as very bad (0.9%), 93 as bad (9.5%), 406 as reasonable (41.7%), 430 as good (44.1%) and 37 as excellent (3.8%).

The question “do you believe it is possible to innovate in the Public Administration?” obtained 1041 affirmative answers (corresponding to 93% of the sample). Moreover, 32 negative answers (2.9% of the sample) were received, and 46 (4.1% of the sample) were not sure.

Table3consolidates the results of the descriptive statistics for the survey questions presented in this subsection.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the survey questions on Portuguese PA.

Questions	Answers	Frequency	Percentage	
How bureaucratic do you believe the Public Administration is?	Not at all bureaucratic	1	0.1%	
	A little bureaucratic	23	2.1%	
	Moderately bureaucratic	222	19.8%	
	Extremely bureaucratic	538	48.1%	
	Very bureaucratic	335	29.9%	
What is your opinion on the number of civil servants in Public Administration Bodies?	I don't have a fixed opinion	85	7.6%	
	There are few employees	146	13.0%	
	The number of employees is adequate	64	5.7%	
	There are too many employees	99	8.8%	
	It is not well distributed and there are both shortages and excesses in different areas	725	64.8%	
On a scale of 1 (very bad) to 5 (excellent), how do you evaluate the image of the civil servant, in relation to:	Efficiency	Very Bad	86	7.7%
		Bad	303	27.1%
		Fair	530	47.4%
		Good	189	16.9%
		Excellent	11	1.0%
	Qualification	Very Bad	27	2.4%
		Bad	194	17.3%
		Fair	530	47.4%
		Good	319	28.5%
		Excellent	49	4.4%
	Motivation	Very Bad	189	16.9%
		Bad	473	42.3%
		Fair	395	35.3%
		Good	53	4.7%
		Excellent	9	0.8%
	Commitment	Very Bad	84	7.5%
		Bad	339	30.3%
		Fair	499	44.6%
		Good	178	15.9%
		Excellent	19	1.7%
Ethics	Very Bad	50	4.5%	
	Bad	199	17.8%	
	Fair	535	47.8%	
	Good	295	26.4%	
	Excellent	40	3.6%	
Are you in favour of recognising the work of the individual in the civil service (monetary awards and diplomas of merit, etc)?	Do not agree at all	71	6.3%	
	Agree in part	158	14.1%	
	Moderately agree	230	20.6%	
	Agree quite a lot	331	29.6%	
	Strongly agree	329	29.4%	
Have you ever been to a Loja do Cidadão? (Citizens' Shop)	Yes	974	87%	
	No	145	13%	
How do you rate the quality of the service you sought in the Citizens' Shop?	Very bad	8	0.8%	
	Bad	93	9.5%	
	Reasonable	406	41.7%	
	Good	430	44.1%	
	Excellent	37	3.8%	

Source: Own elaboration. Data from SPSS.

4.3. Hypotheses Validation

In order to inspect whether there are differences of opinion between the public sector and other sectors regarding the degree of the bureaucracy of the Portuguese PA, Hypothesis 1 was tested by the Mann-Whitney non-parametric test, since the dependent variable is ordinal (from 1 “Not at all bureaucratic” to 5 “Very bureaucratic”).

The results indicate that the activity sector has a significant effect on the perception of the existence of bureaucracy in public administration ($Z = 2.56$; $p = 0.010$), with participants from other sectors revealing a higher perception of the existence of bureaucracy than participants from the public sector (Table 4). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed.

Table 4. Effect of sector on the perception of the existence of bureaucracy in the Public Administration.

Mann-Whitney U	Standardised Test Statistic	p	Mean Rank	
			Other Sectors (n = 790)	Public Sector (n = 329)
118,302.00	-2.56	0.010	574.75	524.58

Source: Own elaboration.

To elucidate whether there are differences of opinion between the public sector and other sectors regarding the number of civil servants in the Portuguese PA, Hypothesis 2 was tested by a chi-square test.

The opinion about the number of civil servants in PA is not independent of the sector of activity (public or other sectors) ($\chi^2(4) = 41.18$; $p < 0.001$). The perception that there are too many civil servants in PA is higher among the participants who work in other sectors, but regarding the poor distribution of the number of civil servants across areas, the perception of the participants who work in the public sector is higher than that of those who work in other sectors (Table 5). Consequently, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed.

Table 5. What is your opinion on the number of civil servants in PA Bodies? Professional Sector Crosstabulation.

	Professional Sector		Total
	Other Sectors	Public Sector	
I don't have a fixed opinion	75 9.5%	10 3.0%	85 7.6%
There are few employees	108 13.7%	38 11.6%	146 13.0%
The number of employees is adequate	48 6.1%	16 4.9%	64 5.7%
There are too many employees	88 11.1%	11 3.3%	99 8.8%
It is not well distributed, and there is both a shortage and excess in different areas	471 59.6%	254 77.2%	725 64.8%
Total	790 100.0%	329 100.0%	1119 100.0%

Source: Own elaboration.

In order to ascertain whether there are different perceptions between the public sector and other sectors about the skills and attitudes under analysis, Hypothesis 3 was tested, through five non-parametric Mann-Whitney tests, since the dependent variable is ordinal (from 1 "Very bad" to 5 "Excellent").

The results indicate that the activity sector has a significant effect on the perception of efficiency ($Z = 4.44$; $p < 0.001$), qualification ($Z = 3.61$; $p < 0.001$), commitment ($Z = 4.28$; $p < 0.001$) and ethics ($Z = 3.98$; $p < 0.001$), with participants who work in the public sector having a higher perception than participants who work in other sectors (Table 6). With regards to the perception of motivation ($Z = 1.69$; $p = 0.092$), no statistically significant differences were found between participants from both sectors. Hypothesis 3 was hence validated, except for the variable motivation.

Table 6. Effect of activity sector on the perception of skills and attitudes of civil service employees.

Dependent Variable	Mann-Whitney U	Standardised Test Statistic	p	Mean Rank	
				Other Sectors (n = 790)	Public Sector (n = 329)
Efficiency	150,349.00	4.44 ***	<0.001	534.18	621.99
Qualification	146,495.50	3.61 ***	<0.001	539.06	610.28
Commitment	149,701.50	4.28 ***	<0.001	535.00	620.02
Ethics	148,185.00	3.98 ***	<0.001	536.92	615.41
Motivation	137,721.00	1.69	0.092	550.17	583.60

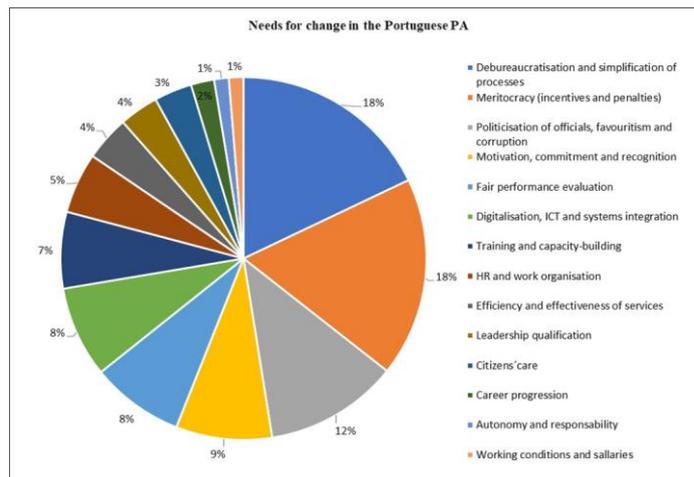
Note: *** $p < 0.001$. Source: Own elaboration.

Aiming to ascertain whether the sector of activity (public or other) is interlinked with a greater appreciation of recognition of civil servants, Hypothesis 4 was tested, by five non-parametric Mann-Whitney tests, since the dependent variable is ordinal (from 1 "I do not agree at all" to 5 "I strongly agree").

The most frequent comments relate to the need to reduce the existing bureaucracy in the PA, the institution of a meritocratic system that encourages the most productive employees, and the implementation of a new performance assessment system that is more transparent and effective than the current SIADAP. The need for continuous training and capacity building of employees and managers is also highlighted. The importance given to the current party politicisation in the nomination of management positions, as well as the influences of the social environment, such as friendships, exchange of favours, etc., should be highlighted. Finally, the need to improve the motivation, commitment and prestige of the staff is also quite recurrent.

In order to illustrate the content of the answers about the needs for change in the Public Administration, the 52 most frequent comments were grouped into 14 areas, as shown in Scheme 2. Standing out, tied, are the needs for debureaucratisation and simplification of processes, and implementation of a meritocratic system, which rewards or penalises employees according to their effort and performance.

Scheme 2. Needs for change in the Portuguese PA by categories.



5. DISCUSSION—ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE—THE PUBLIC SECTOR VS. THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The results of the study allow us to state that the Portuguese PA presents high levels of bureaucracy (78% of the respondents considered the PA to be quite or very bureaucratic). This result is corroborated by the most recurrent comment in the spontaneous answers regarding the semi-structured question “what would change in the PA”: reducing bureaucracy (n = 83). In fact, despite the movements to bring public management closer to private management, advocated by the NPM in recent decades, the Portuguese PA still seems to be structured very much on Weberian concepts of rationality and control (Weber2000). Curiously (given that according to Ferraz(2020), the bureaucratic model rewards merit), the comments of the respondents highlight the lack of a meritocratic culture in the selection of management positions and in the performance evaluation of civil servants, prevailing partisan appointments, exchanges of favours, the culture of “jobs for the boys”—a practice rooted in the State apparatus to compensate partisan loyalties with appointments of positions and to thus guarantee the control of the State machine (EcoSapo2021).

In this regard, of a strong component of politicisation of management positions found in the study, in addition to the hiring based on the culture of relationships, which sometimes deviate from the principles of meritocracy in the choice of leaders (namely when they do not have the expected competencies for the position), our findings do not converge with the study of Ferraz(2020), which investigated the factors that influenced the selection of top and middle managers of the Portuguese Central PA (n = 964) during the period from 2004 to 2011. Although the study confirmed the inexistence of factors guided exclusively by merit, the factors associated with the professional component (such as area of specialisation and similar functions performed previously in the PA) outweighed the political factors (including political ideology and party affiliation) in the selection of leaders.

With regard to the corruption in the PA, commented on by some respondents, the latest assessment by Transparency International Transparency International Portugal (2021) maintains Portugal in 30th position in a ranking of 180 countries. The score goes from 0 (country perceived as very corrupt) to 100 (very transparent country). Portugal obtained 62 points, two points less than in the previous evaluation, and four points below the EU average. In the first position are Denmark and New Zealand, tied with 87 points. According to the data of the Global Corruption Barometer 2021, also released by Transparency International Transparency

International Portugal(2021), 88% of the Portuguese believe that there is corruption within the government itself, and 41% think that it has increased in the last year. Regarding the PA, 63% of the Portuguese believe that the central and local administration is captured by corporate and private interests.

Concerning the digitalisation of services and ICT improvements, this seems to be the dimension where the Portuguese PA has advanced the most in its modernisation and technological innovation strategy. Conversely, as mentioned in the comments (n = 17), problems of interoperability and integration between systems still persist, hindering the flow of procedures and information. Some studies attribute fundamental importance to the development of interoperability for the consolidation of e-Government in Portugal (Nishimura and Au-Yong-Oliveira2021; European Commission2020b;Dias2016;Marques 2016;Pol ónia et al.2014;Gouveia2009).

Regarding the quantity of existing human resources in public administrations, the opinion that they are not well distributed prevails (64.8% of the respondents), with both a shortage and an excess in different areas. This perception was greater among respondents who are civil servants (77.2%) and is corroborated by the comments that there is no equitable distribution of human resources according to needs (n = 14), overloading some sectors. On the other hand, the appreciation that there are too many civil servants was 3.5 times higher among respondents from other sectors.

As for the evaluation of the image of the civil servants, it was predominantly at a medium point for the variables of efficiency, qualification (both with 47.4%) and ethics (47.8%). Commitment and motivation seem to be the key points of weakness in the public sector, especially motivation. Commitment was perceived as very bad or bad by 37.8% of the respondents, just below reasonable (44.6%). Motivation was perceived as very bad or bad by 59.2% of the respondents. Only 5.5% considered the motivation of civil servants as good or excellent.

According toAlves et al.(2020), affective commitment is driven by positive feelings towards the organisation, and if the employee feels comfortable and confident in an organisation as if it was his family, this creates a personal meaning and a sense of belonging. When this happens, the employee will be more enthusiastic about his work and performance. Due to the low levels of motivation and commitment of civil servants found in our study, one question remains: do civil servants find in the Portuguese Public Administration a welcoming environment, conducive to the development of their potential?

The issue of the wage gap seems to be central to the loss of motivation of public employees and promotes a stampede of professionals to the private sector, and even abroad, in search of better salaries and career progression. As recently reported in the media (Executive Digest Sapo2021;RTP2021), Portugal has lost 800 doctors of the National Health Service since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to other health professionals, such as nurses and radiology technicians. According toRosa(2020), it was precisely the category of doctors that suffered the greatest fall in purchasing power in relation to net remuneration between 2011 and 2020.

Surprisingly, 59% of the respondents were in favour of recognising civil servants by means of monetary prizes, diplomas of merit or other awards (this appreciation being higher among civil servants). This finding is in line with the spontaneous comments, which ask for the institution of a meritocratic system with the attribution of awards to the best employees; and the implementation of measures to improve personal satisfaction.

Furthermore, the respondents' appreciation of the services provided at the Loja do Cidadão was surprisingly positive. A total of 47.9% evaluated it as good or excellent, a higher percentage than those who evaluated it as reasonable (41.7%). Only 10.4% of the respondents rated the service as very bad or bad. Even so, the spontaneous comments pointed to the need to increase the efficiency and quality of the services provided and to treat citizens in a more polite and friendly way.

It seems to be consensual that it is possible to innovate in the PA (93% of the respondents consider that it is), which may be in line with the policies adopted by the Government for innovation in the public sector (Borins2002;LabX2021).

It is strange, but perhaps understandable, that people in the private sector perceive that the public sector is "over-crowded", with too many human resources for the tasks which need to be performed, making it thus inefficient; the public sector is also perceived as being very bureaucratic and providing a poor service, by those not in the public sector. On the other hand, the public sector perceives itself as being more efficient and as providing a better service to its service users and citizens (public service is perceived as being better by those who work in the public sector). Furthermore, the public sector perhaps perceives the private sector as having too much freedom and financial resources, which they use to corrupt people and (public) institutions in their favour and for business purposes.

According to the definition of culture—which people in a group must and will share (House et al.2004)—so as to be able to work together and understand each other as if using a common "language" made up of

beliefs, values and artefacts, we see two large and specific groups co-existing in society (public sector and non-public sector), and both may be right, in their own way. Hence, “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede2001, p. 9) is very evident in our study. The notion and importance of culture come again to the forefront, much as was the case in the 1990s, albeit with the knowledge since popularised that changing culture (and mindsets) is extremely difficult and takes a long time—50–100 years in terms of national culture change (Hofstede2001) and perhaps 25 years to change the culture of an organisation (Schein1992). To bring these two groups closer together (public and non-public sector) for greater and more harmonic understandings, much communication will have to be done from both sides. However, there is no guarantee that such an initiative would be successful. The success could be measured as having salaries on a more equal basis (currently lower in the public sector) and with work hours as being more similar (currently higher in the private sector). Therefore, as the status quo currently stands, the public sector is seen to work shorter hours (their main benefit), and the non-public sector as having higher salaries (their “perk”, so to speak).

A greater balance is needed in order to bring the two sectors closer, and specifically to improve the motivation felt by the public sector, which is low, even in the eyes of the civil servants themselves. As financial bonuses are not possible in the public sector, other methods are necessary to motivate employees. Methods such as giving recognition, involving in decision making, keeping them close and listening to their views and suggestions are ways that senior leadership may motivate civil servants. Perhaps leadership roles require further training in order to eliminate the motivation problem in the public sector. Albeit, without career progression, the public sector may perhaps not be able to eliminate the lack of motivation currently felt amongst its members. Improved job design, as opposed to Taylorism—namely, “pay is the sole motivator for otherwise lazy and unmotivated workers” (King and Lawley2016, p. 326)—may be a solution for the public sector. As we have seen with Herzberg(1987), job factors that lead to extreme satisfaction include growth, advancement, responsibility, work itself, recognition and achievement. Perhaps the Portuguese public sector has much to learn from older models, which remain relevant, even today.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We perceive that our study has reached the proposed objectives, and its findings add to the corollary of contributions from theoretical and experimental research on such an instigating and complex theme as PA and motivation in public service. The most evident findings of our study are concerned with:

- a) A still high level of bureaucracy in the Portuguese PA, which can be reduced with a greater regulatory and procedural simplification and with the digitalisation of services (and many efforts have already been made in this direction, some quite innovative such as SIMPLEX);
- b) A weakness in the motivation of civil servants, generated by several intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as low salaries, little career progression elasticity, a performance evaluation system that does not reward the efforts of employees, lack of recognition and prestige of civil servants by society, among others;
- c) Politicisation rooted in the appointment of board positions, whether of a partisan nature or a culture of “cronyism”, with some undesirable developments (not in line with a meritocracy), for example, leaders who are not qualified for the position, less scrutiny in the fight against corruption, favouritism in SIADAP progression quotas.

Additionally, worthy of mention was the high evaluation found of the services provided in the Lojas do Cidadão (Citizens’ Shops), which in the face of the other variables that had a negative evaluation surprised us positively, corroborating, in some way, the understanding that civil servants are motivated by carrying out a mission for the common good, defended by Crewson(1997). Conversely:

“Although working in public entities has been related to ‘a sense of duty and morality’, literature reports that motivation and sense of self-worth among public officials have been declining for many years, which in turn can endanger their performance, [and] diminish their willingness to attend to civic affairs” (Santinha et al.2021, p. 1).

It follows that less motivated public officials will be less committed to their organisations, including in Portugal, even after the changes put into effect after the 1980s (Santinha et al.2021). The literature (Santinha et al.2021) suggests that the objective of attaining job stability may perhaps not be a fulfilling career choice. Our research is in line with these findings.

Regarding the public’s perception of bureaucracy, Kennedy(2018) notes that the term is usually used in a pejorative sense to signal organisational inefficiency and ineffectiveness, and public support is critical to the proper functioning of public institutions and the State. From this perspective, could the high degree of

perception of bureaucracy found in our study be “contaminated” by common sense that bureaucracy is a weed for society?

A timely reflection on the study is that it was answered in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic after a prolonged period of confinement that required the PA to make great efforts to combat the resulting health and economic crises. In addition to the unconditional commitment of the professionals of the National Health Service, there was a lot of commitment to make online services available for the attendance of citizens and companies, for remote processing of judicial processes and for distance learning at all levels of education. In a scenario of overcoming adversity, it would be expected that civil servants would enjoy greater recognition and prestige among the Portuguese (which our findings did not actually indicate).

Although this study has thrown some insights into the ongoing debate on the Portuguese PA, it has some limitations. One of them (and perhaps the most important) is the high level of educational qualifications found among the respondents, which may have caused some bias in the results. The study was widely disseminated in universities, polytechnics, schools, companies and trade associations, parish councils in all districts of Portugal, in addition to some social media channels. The academic environment, due to its final activity of teaching and research, is supposed to be more inclined to collaborate with research projects and respond to surveys. Moreover (and unfortunately), not all segments of society have access to electronic means to respond to surveys.

Consequently, the sample obtained with the study could be considered representative in quantitative terms if we took into account the population in general, but not in qualitative terms (despite the effort made to contemplate all segments of society, this has not materialised). Another aspect to be raised regarding the sample is that our study intended to compare the differences of opinion between the public sector and other sectors of activity. In this context, the sample, separately, could be considered as not representative of these sectors.

We hope that this study may instigate new investigations and developments. Suggestions for future research include the application of the questionnaire exclusively to public sector workers, to occupants of management positions or to specific sectors of the PA, such as health professionals, in comparative studies or not. We consider that the variables used are of universal character and may be applied in other cultures and contexts.

Additionally, Portugal has an ageing population that may feel estranged from the digital revolution, which has occurred due to COVID-19 (only 1% of the survey respondents were over 70 years of age). Future studies might intend to study this section of the Portuguese population, which is hard to reach in an online survey.

Public organisations must always be focused on citizens (alternatively understood as users or customers), on the way they deliver their services and on the results of the application of these services in society (Falcão et al.2014). Even when knowing that perceptions of Portuguese public service may also vary from region to region, including when the distance covered is a mere 48 km or just over half an hour by car (Falcão et al.2014) , PA is not an easy task and requires a motivated workforce with a vision for their efforts.

Appendix A

Table A1. Survey questions on the Portuguese PA.

Questions	Typology of Responses
How bureaucratic do you believe the Portuguese Public Administration to be?	Likert Scale Not at all bureaucratic A little bureaucratic Moderately bureaucratic Quite bureaucratic Very bureaucratic
What is your opinion on the number of civil servants in Public Administration Bodies?	Multiple choice There are few employees The number of employees is adequate There are too many employees It is not well distributed, and there is both a shortage and excess in different areas I don't have a fixed opinion
On a scale of 1 (very bad) to 5 (excellent), how do you rate the image of the civil servant in relation to:	Matrix with Likert scale Efficiency Qualification Commitment Ethics Motivation

Table A1. Cont.

Questions	Typology of Responses
Are you in favour of recognising the work of the individual in the civil service (monetary prizes and diplomas of merit, etc.)?	Likert Scale I do not agree at all I agree in part I moderately agree I agree very much I strongly agree
Do you believe it is possible to innovate in Public Administration?	Multiple choice Yes No I'm not sure
Have you ever been to a Loja do Cidadão? (Citizens' Shop)?	Multiple choice Yes No
How do you rate the quality of the service you sought in the Loja do Cidadão? (Citizens' Shop?)	Likert Scale Very bad Bad Reasonable Good Excellent
What would you change in the Public Administration if you could?	Semi-structured and optional question, no character limit for answer

Source: Own elaboration.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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