

# The Effect of Ministerial Instability on Government's Mandate Fulfilment: Evidence from the Portuguese Case

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## Abstract

Research on the fulfilment of electoral promises has been particularly fruitful over the past decades. Most of it focused on examining pledge fulfilment at the cabinet level, and little emphasis was placed on the reasons underlying the level of compliance. As a consequence, core factors in explaining pledge fulfilment have not yet been explored. One such factor might be instability in a government's internal functioning. We argue that ministerial instability is relevant for explaining a government's broken promises, and that its importance increases at the junior minister level and among the most salient ministries. Relying on data on the fulfilment of electoral promises and ministerial instability in Portugal between 1995 and 2019, backed by interviews with former ministers and junior ministers, we provide evidence that the fulfilment of electoral promises is significantly influenced by portfolio volatility, particularly at the junior ministerial level and in the most important ministries.

## Zusammenfassung

Die Forschung über die Einhaltung von Wahlversprechen ist in den letzten Jahrzehnten besonders produktiv gewesen. Die meisten Untersuchungen konzentrierten sich auf die Umsetzung auf Kabinettssebene, allerdings wurde den Gründen für diese Umsetzung weniger Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet. Infolgedessen sind die wichtigsten Faktoren zur Erklärung der Umsetzung von Wahlversprechen noch nicht erforscht worden. Ein solcher Faktor könnte die Instabilität der internen Funktionsweise einer Regierung sein. Wir argumentieren, dass die Instabilität der Ministerien eine mögliche Erklärung für nicht eingehaltene Versprechen einer Regierung ist und dass ihre Bedeutung auf der Ebene der Staatssekretäre und der wichtigsten Ministerien zunimmt. Auf der Grundlage von

Daten über die Einhaltung von Wahlversprechen und Instabilität der portugiesischen Ministerien zwischen 1995 und 2019, sowie Interviews mit ehemaligen MinisterInnen und StaatssekretärInnen, weisen wir nach, dass die Umsetzung von Wahlversprechen erheblich von der Volatilität der Ressorts beeinflusst wird, insbesondere auf der Ebene der Staatssekretäre und der wichtigsten Ministerien.

### Résumé

Les recherches sur les promesses électorales ont été particulièrement fructueuses au cours des dernières décennies. La plupart se sont concentrées sur la mesure de la réalisation des promesses par les gouvernements, et peu d'accent a été mis sur les raisons sous-jacentes du niveau de réalisation. Par conséquent, les facteurs qui expliquent la tenue des promesses sont encore peu explorés. Nous soutenons que l'instabilité ministérielle est un facteur pertinent, et que son importance augmente au niveau des secrétaires d'État et parmi les ministères les plus saillants. En nous appuyant sur des données sur la réalisation des promesses électorales et l'instabilité ministérielle au Portugal entre 1995 et 2019, et des entretiens avec d'anciens ministres et secrétaires d'État, nous concluons que la réalisation des promesses électorales est influencée par la volatilité des portefeuilles, en particulier au niveau des secrétaires d'État et dans les ministères les plus saillants.

### KEYWORDS

government policymaking, ministerial instability, ministry salience, party pledges, Portugal

## INTRODUCTION

To what extent does the instability in the functioning of ministries explain governments' failure to fulfil their electoral promises? The prolific research on the fulfilment of electoral promises in recent decades has largely relied on the assessment of the government's level of mandate accomplishment. In spite of substantial variation across countries and executives, governments tend to fulfil their election pledges to a large extent (e.g. Artés, 2011; Håkansson & Naurin, 2016; Moury & Fernandes, 2018; Thomson et al., 2017). In research exploring the reasons underlying mandate fulfilment, emphasis has been placed on a limited number of factors, especially (although not exclusively) on the opposition between minority and majority governments (e.g. Klingemann et al., 1994; Moury & Fernandes, 2018; Thomson et al., 2017). At the same time, this research has not yet gauged the importance of the government's internal functioning and, specifically, of ministerial stability as an explanatory factor for the accomplishment of electoral pledges.

Ministerial instability has been usually considered important for government performance. Yet, it has mainly been treated as an outcome, and not as an explanatory factor (Saalfeld, 2008). More recently, the implications of instability regarding ministerial policymaking and individual behaviour have been emphasized (Tosun, 2018; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). As in pledges research, this literature has not addressed if and how ministerial instability could undermine government parties' compliance with the electoral programmes. We aim to move one step forward in this direction.

We argue that the conditions under which the executive governs, and the level of ministerial instability in particular – that is, the level of replacement of ministers and junior ministers during the mandate, as well as structural changes in portfolios – are key to understanding the executive's

performance. Although leadership and structural changes represent very different theoretical strands, both are important when we consider ministerial instability, since both are likely disruptive factors in government compliance with mandates. We approach ministerial instability as a factor of government performance based on this dual perspective. We focus on Portugal as a case study, based on data of both government pledge fulfilment and ministerial instability from 1995 to 2019, as well as on interviews with former ministers and junior ministers.

The article first systematizes the main contributions in the literature on pledge fulfilment and ministerial instability and elaborates the hypotheses. Subsequently, we present the Portuguese case. Then, the data and methods used in this research are reported. Finally, we present and discuss the findings before concluding with the main remarks and the implications of our findings.

## LITERATURE ON PLEDGE FULFILMENT AND MINISTERIAL INSTABILITY

The programme-to-policy linkage is central in a representative democracy (Mansbridge, 2003), being a core mechanism of democratic accountability (Schedler, 1998, p. 197). Electoral programmes materialize ‘authoritative’ and ‘representative’ statements of party stances at a particular moment (Budge et al., 1987). According to the party mandate model (e.g., Klingemann et al., 1994), such stances are expected to correspond to the policies implemented by governments during the mandate, since governments strive for re-election. Substantial correspondence is thus expected between campaign promises in party manifestos and policies during mandate. Governments are expected to govern according to their programs, and, for that purpose, sufficient internal stability is required. Although this mandate perspective of representation is disputed, its normative premises have guided most of the research hitherto done on electoral promises. This is also our case, as our purpose is to assess the extent to which ministerial stability affects the fulfilment of the mandate.

Our analysis crosses two bodies of the literature, that – although they deal with interconnected issues – have not yet been properly related: party pledges and ministerial instability. Regarding the former, research has so far mostly examined aggregate overall rates of government pledge fulfilment, generally focusing on a limited set of aspects to explain compliance, such as the type of government or other institutional settings; the type of pledge; the policy issue; and jurisdiction and material resources. At the institutional level, findings essentially suggest that single-party executives have the best performance regarding mandate fulfilment, whether in majority or not (Artés, 2011, p. 144–145; Klingemann et al., 1994; Moury & Fernandes, 2018; Royed, 1996; Thomson et al., 2017). Term duration has also been acknowledged as promoting the accomplishment of government party electoral programmes (Håkansson & Naurin, 2016; Thomson et al., 2017). Regarding the type of pledge, promises aiming at maintaining ‘status quo’ of policies have been demonstrated to be easier to fulfil as compared to ‘change’ pledges (i.e. that aim to introduce change in a policy), as they are less demanding regarding party efforts (Duval & Pétry, 2019; Pétry et al., 2018; Praprotnik, 2017). Finally, the resources available to the government also affect its performance. It is well established in the literature that economic conditions may affect policy outputs (Huber & Stephens, 2001) and pledge fulfilment in particular (Pétry et al., 2018; Praprotnik, 2017; Thomson et al., 2017). A context of economic growth gives governments more leeway to fulfil their programmes, especially when it implies an increase in expenditure. Resources can also relate to the jurisdiction over political affairs: governments may be less able to fulfil a promise if it requires a joint effort with non-governmental actors (Praprotnik, 2017).

If literature on pledge fulfilment has been quite prolific, literature on ministerial instability has been a lot scarcer, particularly on the political consequences of such instability. On the one hand, prior research mainly focused on instability as a factor of government survival, using the government as unit of analysis (Laver & Schofield, 1990; Warwick, 1994; for a survey, see Saalfeld, 2008). Although internal instability can be of relevance regarding government's performance even when it reaches the

end of the term, research has disregarded this approach, mainly looking at the conditions affecting why and when ministers are sacked. The usual explanatory variables include ministers' individual socio-demographic and socio-political features (Berlinski et al., 2012; Dowding & Dumont, 2009; Seixas & Costa, 2021; Søyland, 2016), institutional conditions (Bucur, 2017; Budge & Keman, 1990; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008), and prime ministers' strategic considerations concerning the political and economic contexts (Dewan & Dowding, 2005; Camerlo & Pérez-Liñán, 2015; Kam & Indriðason, 2005).

On the other hand, even when dealing with instability at the ministerial level, the literature tends to focus on structural change and to treat instability as the dependent variable. In this context, Sieberer et al. (2021) reveal the importance of the arrival of new parties or prime ministers to explain ministerial portfolios changes after general elections, and Fleischer et al. (2022) demonstrate the relevance of the cabinet's ideological viewpoints to structural changes in the inner branches of ministerial departments. Because they are the consequence of the political will to adjust their policies as well as to signal policy changes to their constituencies (Moe & Caldwell, 1994), changes in portfolio and bureaucracy reflect substantive policy options (Yesilkagit et al., 2022). These changes can also be made as an adaptation to the political context while the executive is in office, such as reshuffles, policy scandals or major reforms (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015).

Within the scope of previous literature, the effect of ministerial instability on the ministry's capacity to accomplish the electoral programme has not yet been studied. In fact, the political impact of ministerial instability has been researched only sporadically and with different results. First, the literature recognized the effect of instability on administrative reforms (Cohen, 2022; Mele & Ongaro, 2014), the level of clientelism and patronage (O'Dwyer, 2006), and the efficiency in the absorption of EU funds (Hagemann, 2019). But, more important to our argument, it has also revealed the impact on the daily life of the ministry, affecting policymaking and individual behaviour (Tosun, 2018; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). As Sieberer et al. (2021) pointed out, policy-making should be affected by changes in portfolio design, particularly when jurisdictions are reallocated from one ministry to another.

Second, some works indicate that instability could be positive in particular circumstances – not only allowing innovation, renewal, accountability, and coping with conflicting relationships (Alderman, 1995; Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008), but also reducing agency costs by dealing with moral hazard (Indriðason & Kam, 2008). Concerning this last argument, prime-ministers use reshuffles to “undercut ministers' incentives to engage in self-interested behaviour” (Indriðason & Kam, 2008, p. 624). However, this claim does not hold in our case study, as only 22 per cent of the Portuguese ministers and a residual number of junior ministers were dismissed for performance reasons (Costa Pinto & Tavares de Almeida, 2009; Silveira, 2021).

Finally, on the contrary, some literature has considered stability an important factor for efficient policymaking (Thompson, 2020). Firstly, stable tenures let ministers gain credibility within the department and effective control of the bureaucratic machine (Abuelafia et al., 2009; Suleiman, 1974). Secondly, stability contributes to the accumulation of policy expertise and experience, enabling newcomers to avoid the learning process while permitting the creation of relatively long-term relationships, namely with other ministers (Huber, 1998, p. 579; Stepan & Skach, 1993). Thirdly, longer tenures facilitate the creation of coherent and durable policies as well as reforms (Corrales, 2004; Martinez-Gallardo, 2010, p. 138). Inferring from this literature, stability is also likely to be related to conditions conducive to electoral compliance.

## HYPOTHESES

The replacement of a minister (or a junior minister) implies that the corresponding portfolio passes from the hands of the previous (junior) minister to those of the new (junior) minister. Regardless of the cause of the dismissal or the new selection, this transfer has a likely disruptive effect on the regular functioning of the ministry, as the integration of the newcomer in the matters concerning the ministry requires adaptation. Decision-making for policy implementation is harder and may be time-delayed,

due to the need of the new (junior) minister to be informed about the portfolio, or even suspended, if he/she does not share the predecessor's opinion on specific policies. On the contrary, the continuity of the (junior) minister in office throughout the term increases the likelihood of making the necessary policy decisions to fulfil the mandate (Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008, p. 169).

For similar reasons, changes in the portfolio structure are also expected to have a disruptive effect on the ability to deliver in the mandate. Since ministerial departments are the most prominent policy-making units (Smith et al., 1995, p. 51), changes, such as their creation or extinction during the term, reduce the time available to develop and implement public policies. As Huber (1998, p. 581) stressed: 'the addition of new ministers creates relationships where none previously existed, and the elimination of cabinet posts leads to jurisdictional changes for the remaining ministers (and thus to new relationships between them and civil servants).' In any case, the adaptation to the new institutional reality competes in time with the demand placed on the government to implement its programme.

As ministerial changes require time for adaptation, we expect that their prevalence is disruptive to the functioning of ministries, as less time will be left over to accomplish the mandate.

*H1. The level of fulfilment of electoral promises decreases when the portfolios to which the policy issue belongs are instable.*

Second, we claim that the effect of ministerial instability on pledge accomplishment is not the same across portfolios. According to the saliency theory of party competition, parties do not attribute the same importance to all policy areas. Instead, they selectively put more emphasis on certain areas to the detriment of others. Consequently, parties tend to behave strategically, as they have strong incentives to prioritize salient areas (Budge, 2015). Examples of this prioritization are the prime minister's tendency to carefully select the ministers representing salient portfolios (Hansen et al., 2013), or the importance of issue saliency for portfolio allocation in coalition governments (Druckman & Warwick, 2005; Greene & Jensen, 2018).

Paradoxically, from the perspective of fulfilling electoral promises, there is no evidence that governments accomplish more promises when the issue is salient (Vodová, 2021). Governments seem to consistently give similar importance across different policy issues in terms of keeping promises (Belchior & Teixeira, 2021). Thus, although there is more at stake in salient portfolios due to the higher public scrutiny to which they are subject and to their centrality in electoral competition (Greene et al., 2020), governments' strategy does not seem to involve prioritizing the fulfilment of promises in the most salient policy areas. If we add to this that salient issues are more often present in electoral programmes than others (Greene et al., 2020), then the governments' ability to successfully implement policies in salient portfolios is likely smaller than in non-salient ones. As parties tend to make more promises in their most salient policy areas, the demand on governments to comply with the program in these policy areas is expectedly higher compared to non-salient areas. In this way, the emergence of instability will be likely more disturbing in salient portfolios, since there are more promises to keep, without it seeming that governments benefit these portfolios in terms of prioritizing pledge fulfilment. For these reasons, we expect that instability has a higher negative effect on more salient ministries.

*H2. The negative effect of ministerial instability on the level of fulfilment of electoral promises is higher for more salient ministerial portfolios.*

Third, we expect that the level at which instability is felt – minister or junior minister - will have a bearing on the government's ability to fulfil its mandate. Even if the literature has pointed out the instrumental role of junior ministers (Giannetti & Laver, 2005; Manow & Zorn, 2004; Mershon, 2001; Thies, 2001), more comprehensive studies have emphasized their capacity to influence daily ministry life, including policymaking (Durrant & Lloyd, 2019; Haddon et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2011; Silveira, 2021). As Giannetti & Laver (2005, p. 98) state:

Junior ministers typically sit in offices and run sub-departments with precise areas of delegated responsibility. In effect, parts of the cabinet minister's jurisdiction are often



delegated to a JM, who does in fact have important informational and proposal advantages vis-à-vis the minister within his or her sub-jurisdiction.

That is, while ministers tend to assume a wide range of tasks (Headey, 1974), junior ministers appear to be more focused on the policy process, including the fundamental relationship with the ministerial bureaucracy (Theakston et al., 2014). In many countries, including Portugal, the latter are critical in the policy cycle and tend to enjoy considerable autonomy in those tasks (Silveira, 2021). The importance of junior ministers' policy role is also revealed by their high expertise, particularly as compared with ministerial expertise (Real-Dato & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016; Silveira, 2016).

Therefore, the instability effect at the junior ministerial level is likely more relevant than at the ministerial level due to their autonomy and closeness to policy implementation (Silveira, 2021, p. 187–196). For this reason, we expect that instability at the junior ministerial level is more relevant in terms of non-compliance with the mandate than at the level of ministers. Furthermore, and recovering the previous argument about the salience of the ministries, this instability at the junior ministerial level is likely to have a greater impact when it comes to the most salient ministries. Our final hypotheses are:

*H3. The negative effect of ministerial instability on the level of fulfilment of electoral promises is higher when instability affects the junior ministers' level.*

*H4. The negative effect of junior ministerial instability on the level of fulfilment of electoral promises is higher among more salient ministerial portfolios.*

## THE PORTUGUESE CASE: POLITICAL SYSTEM AND GOVERNMENT

The 1974 Portuguese Carnation Revolution started the democratic transition and inaugurated the third democratic wave. In 1976, a new Constitution was approved. It established a semi-presidential regime with the government being accountable not only to parliament but also to the president. However, the 1982 constitutional reform curtailed presidential power, consolidating the government as the central political actor.

Since democratization, government competition in Portugal essentially occurs between the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Socialist Party (PS), one of whom has led almost all constitutional governments (sometimes in coalition with the conservatives, the Popular Party - CDS/PP). Since the mid-1980s, governments tended to complete their mandate. Indeed, the party system became more majoritarian after 1987, creating single-party parliamentary majorities and coalition pluralities, although as well some minority single-party governments. More recently, these two parties faced an electoral decline, but this has not meant an increase in executive instability (Costa Pinto, 2020). In general, Portuguese parties have weak social and territorial linkages and are fundamentally dominated by their leaders (Jalali & Lisi, 2009), generating difficulties in ensuring policy accountability and continuity. For these reasons, it is likely that the instability in the Portuguese ministries will be of importance in explaining the fulfilment of electoral programs by governments.

In terms of governance structure, the Constitution stipulates three main government echelons: Prime minister; minister; and junior minister (art. 183, 2). The Council of Ministers is recognized as a deliberative forum, but the essential powers of organization, direction, and representation of the executive pertain to the Prime minister. He should direct government policy as well as coordinate and supervise the ministers' actions (art. 201, 1 a) and b)). In turn, ministers should execute government policy in a specific portfolio (art. 201, 2, a)). They are the head of the department and enjoy policy autonomy, but are subject to the control of the Prime minister, especially through the centre of government, which has been reinforced in the last decades (Lobo, 2005; Silveira & Silva, 2022).

The junior ministers' (*secretários de Estado*) competences are not stipulated in the Constitution. They perform the same functions as their ministers in a specific junior ministerial portfolio within a

department presided by the minister. Although the latter is formally responsible for the entire department, this sectorial responsibility of junior ministers makes them in practice the governing incumbent of that policy area. This is different from other countries, such as Italy (*sottosegretario*) or the USA (*deputy secretary*), where junior ministers do not formally have their own sub-area, and is similar to countries like Spain (*secretario de Estado*), Chile (*subsecretarios*) or France (*secrétaire d'État*).

The number of junior ministers and corresponding portfolios depends on the government structure decided by the prime-minister (each ministerial portfolio usually has between one and three junior ministers). Ministers usually select and deselect their junior ministers, but the Prime minister should approve and can interfere in the process (Silveira, 2021).

We selected the Portuguese case for three main reasons. First, between 1995 and 2019, the main independent variable – ministerial instability – as well as the dependent variable – pledge fulfilment – have shown significant variance between governments as well as within governments, i.e., across ministries. These variances meet an essential requirement to conduct the analysis. Second, Portugal constitutes a good example of a consolidated third wave democracy, experiencing a high degree of institutionalization, namely concerning government and party system. Both party system and government stability exert an important control over the relationship we intend to test. Third, the Portuguese case has an exceptionally large database on the fulfilment of electoral promises, which provides unusual conditions to respond to our research goal. By studying this case, we aim to demonstrate that ministerial instability affects pledge fulfilment among governments and party systems where stability prevails.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Data sources

This research relies on the Portuguese Party Pledges Project (Belchior et al., 2015)<sup>1</sup> and on data collected on ministerial instability, covering the period between 1995 and 2019. The former identified manifesto pledges and analysed their fulfilment. The total amount of observations from which we depart is 1943 manifesto pledges. Of the pledges in our sample, 1207 were proposed by PS (Socialist Party), 432 by PSD (Social-Democratic Party), and 304 by CDS-PP (Popular Party). As our goal is to assess whether instability in each portfolio affects the level of promise accomplishment accommodated in that portfolio, a necessary step in preparing our dataset was to identify the junior and ministerial portfolios responsible for the fulfilment of each pledge. Therefore, from the total pledges between 1995 and 2019, we only selected the pledges for which it was possible to identify the corresponding ministerial portfolio. Each promise in the database was assigned values corresponding to the number of ministers and junior ministers dismissed (if any), as well as the number of structural changes in this portfolio (if any), according to the ministry responsible for their fulfilment. This procedure decreased the original number of observations (i.e., the sample used in the descriptive analysis) in order to assess the effect of ministerial instability on promise fulfilment (i.e., regression analysis). The sample entails 1346 observations for the latter.

Ministerial instability data was collected from the official Portuguese government website ([www.portugal.gov.pt](http://www.portugal.gov.pt)), considering each portfolio, minister, and junior minister in office, between 1995 and 2019. Using this source, as well as the official gazette (*Diário da República*) for verification, we could identify any creation or extinction of portfolios as well as any replacement of political actors, allowing us to capture any structural or individual change in each government.

Finally, we used 15 face-to-face in-depth interviews with former ministers and junior ministers, conducted in 2016–2017. The interviewees were chosen considering different portfolios and government experiences and allowed to record the interviews (the average duration was 57 minutes) under anonymity. They were asked about the internal dynamics of the government and their portfolios, as well as the impact of instability (namely: “What was your role in the policymaking process?”; “How much autonomy did you have as minister/junior minister?”; and “Was the change of minister/junior minister/

portfolio relevant in any way?’). Thus, after the transcription, the interviews were analysed using the software MAXQDA. In order to increase validity and reliability, questions, probe questions and codification rules were defined in advance. In addition, two codifications were made in different periods, and the discrepancies were later specifically addressed. Whenever possible, the data was triangulated through other interviews, news in the press or other sources (such as biographies and autobiographies).

## Party pledges and ministerial instability measurements

The methodology used to identify the pledges and assess their fulfilment is that initially conceived by Royed (1996), later developed by Royed et al. (2019). We rely on Royed's definition of ‘pledge’ as ‘the commitment to carry out some action or produce some outcome, where an objective estimation can be made as to whether or not the action was indeed taken or the outcome produced’ (Royed, 1996, p. 79). This method consists of identifying precise and objectively testable pledge statements in manifestos (non-testable vague commitments were withdrawn from the analysis) and verifying their fulfilment by searching in diverse sources (such as legislation, ministerial decrees, official websites, or direct contacts with public departments).

Only party commitments related to testable actions or outcomes were included as ‘pledges’. Pledges such as ‘To continue to support women so that they can reconcile their work and family life’ were not included as they are not verifiable. Pledges such as the following were included in the study: ‘To enact a new legal regime for soil policy’; or the ‘Creation of a National Solidarity Fund’. They were classified as ‘fully fulfilled’ (if evidence among the search sources demonstrates that the promise was completely accomplished), ‘partially fulfilled’ (if party efforts only led to a partial delivery of what was promised) and ‘not fulfilled’ (if there is no evidence at all indicating that the party fulfilled the pledge).

In order to guarantee the reliability of the identification and codification of promises, and subsequent assessment of their fulfilment, simple tests of cross-validation were routinely run for each document. The tests were supported by the random selection of a sample of manifesto pages/pledges and their identification, codification, and assessment done by a different coder. The process was repeated until a consistency level between 80 and 90 per cent was reached.

Ministerial instability is estimated using the *total portfolio volatility*, based on Huber (1998). It measures volatility as ‘the sum during one year of (1) the number of changes in the individuals controlling portfolios, (2) the number of portfolios added, and (3) the number of portfolios eliminated’ (Huber, 1998, p. 580–581). However, we adapted this measure to our particular objective. On the one hand, we took into account the complete duration of the term because we are interested in the overall instability concerning each promise. On the other hand, we included junior ministers as well as ministers, since both control portfolios and can differently affect pledge fulfilment. The formula is:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{Total portfolio volatility} &= \text{ministers and junior ministers deselected} \\
 &+ \text{ministerial and junior ministerial portfolios added} \\
 &+ \text{ministerial and junior ministerial portfolios eliminated}
 \end{aligned}$$

This measure has an open upper limit, ranging, in our case, between 0 for no instability and 12 for maximum instability. In order to make the reading of the data easier and to enhance the comparison across variables, this measure was then dichotomized, with 0 corresponding to the absence of instability (meaning that there were zero changes in the portfolio) and 1 to instability (meaning that there were one or more changes). The original distribution of the measure highly concentrates on 0 changes (473 cases) or on a small number of changes (one change in 208 cases, two changes in 262 cases, three changes in 130 cases, four changes in 127 cases, and then the number of cases decreases significantly, in the order of or substantially below 50 cases). The results of the analysis largely hold when we dichotomize this measure.



Suitable alternatives in the literature include Martinez-Gallardo's (2012) instability ratio, assessing instability supported on cabinet changes in political actors' leadership. However, Huber's total portfolio volatility adds to leadership changes those concerning portfolio structure. We chose to Huber's measure as it captures instability in a more comprehensive way; that is, reconciling the instability of leadership with that of ministerial structures.

## Dependent variable

Pledge fulfilment is measured by a dummy variable where the pledges that were 'fully fulfilled' or 'partially fulfilled' were coded as 1, and the pledges that were not fulfilled were coded as 0. This codification was done for all the usable pledges (i.e., that could be matched with a portfolio) in the seven governments in our sample.

## Independent variable

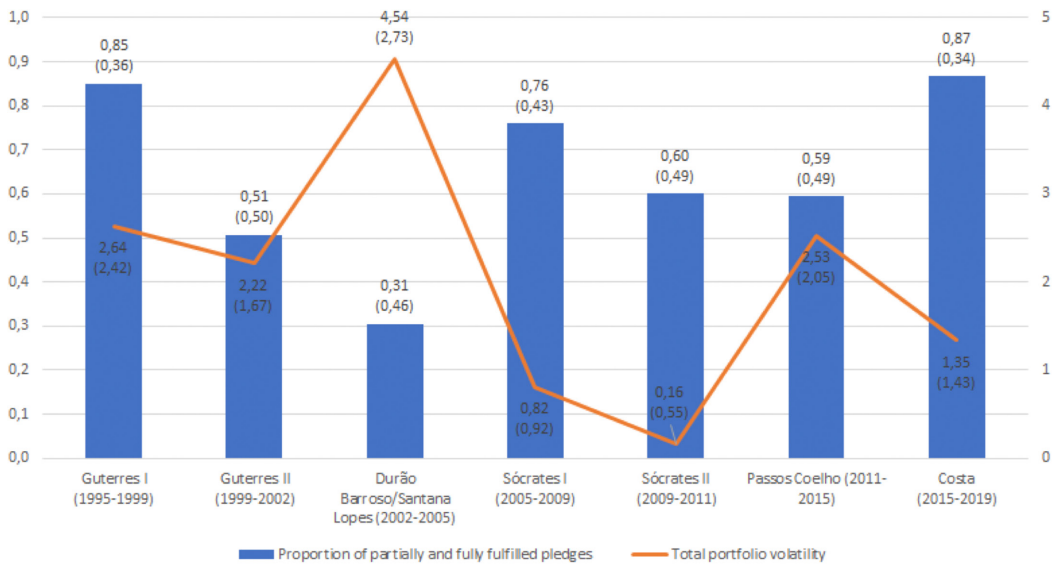
We support our analysis on the effect of ministerial instability, measured by the *total portfolio volatility*, computed as shown above. This measure was computed for each ministerial portfolio, at the ministry and the junior ministry's levels, for the seven governments in our sample. Considering data source limitations, we disregard the causes of ministerial and junior ministerial dismissal (including firings and resignations), as well as of structural change.

To identify the salient portfolios, we rely on the number of promises by policy area in government party electoral programmes (similarly to Greene et al., 2020, p. 5). In order to reach a valid sample of the most salient portfolios we define as criteria the selection of about one third of the portfolios (we selected seven, out of a total of 20 ministerial portfolios), that included 70 or more electoral promises (this was considered a valid cut-off point as the number of promises decreases significantly below this number) in the whole set of governments under analysis (a single overall estimate was calculated, as done by Druckman and Warwick (2005)). To identify the salient ministries, we only took into account the pledges that had a single ministry responsible for their accomplishment, and rejected the ones that were under two or more ministries. The portfolios identified as the most salient were: interior, education, finance, justice, health, foreign affairs and labour. This selection is highly consistent with the set of ministries that the literature has previously identified as the most salient ones in Portugal (Druckman & Warwick, 2005, p. 41). In this literature, only defence and social policy are classified as more salient than justice and employment. As in Portugal the former traditionally have associated a low number of promises, they were not considered among the most salient.

## Control variables

We use as controls the set of variables that previous studies identified as being among the most relevant ones in explaining mandate accomplishment, as before discussed: government type and duration, type of pledge and the economic context. Each government was coded as 'minority' (1) when the prime-minister party did not have most of the seats in parliament and as 'majority' (0) when it did.<sup>2</sup> The duration of the government is measured in months. Finally, each pledge was coded as 'status quo' (1) if it focused on continuing the previous policies, and as 'change' (0) if it focused on changing a policy already established. To assess the economic context we used the average GDP growth per capita.

<sup>2</sup>We did not include coalition *versus* single party cabinets because, for the Portuguese case in this timeframe, single party cabinets are almost equivalent to minority cabinet. There is only one majority government that is formed by a single party –Sócrates, 2005–2011.



**FIGURE 1** Ministerial instability and pledges fulfilment in Portugal, 1995–2019 (mean ratios).

*Notes:* Values are mean ratios of pledges fulfilment and mean ministerial instability by policy area. The total portfolio volatility ranges between 0, for no instability, and 12, for maximum instability. The government of Durão Barroso (2002–04) and that of Santana Lopes (2004–05) had exactly the same party support and no elections between them, being for that reason considered as a single executive. Standard deviation is in parentheses.  $N = 1943$ . Source: Portuguese Party Pledges Project and data collected regarding ministerial instability at [www.portugal.gov.pt](http://www.portugal.gov.pt) and [www.dre.pt](http://www.dre.pt).

## MINISTERIAL INSTABILITY AND PLEDGE FULFILMENT IN PORTUGAL OVER TIME

We start the analysis by descriptively looking at how pledge fulfilment and ministerial instability correlate. Figure 1 depicts the evolution of the percentage of pledge fulfilment and the *total portfolio volatility* over 24 years, and Figure 2 breaks down this representation by policy issue<sup>3</sup> for the same period.

First, data suggest that instability tends to be prevalent among the Portuguese governments, despite being typically low (mean total portfolio volatility (ranging between 0 and 12) = 2,19, s.d. = 2,43). It also shows some variance across executives and policy issues. The prevalence of instability justifies studying it as an explanatory factor of government performance. Second, the level of pledge fulfilment in Portugal is usually high, with a mean compliance rate across policy areas of 61 per cent in our sample. The exceptions to this high performance tend to be among the governments with higher ministerial instability, such as the case of the government of Durão Barroso/Santana Lopes (2000–05). This government generally shows the highest level of ministerial instability and the lowest level of pledges' compliance of all cabinets in our sample. Third, government accomplishment of the electoral mandate by policy area seems to relate to the level of instability in the minister responsible for that area. Most often than not, higher levels of pledge fulfilment seem to go hand in hand with lower levels of portfolio volatility in the ministry to which such pledges belong, and vice-versa. A first assessment of the statistical relevance of the correlation between both variables shows that it is statistically significant and negative, although not very robust (Person coefficient =  $-0,13$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ).

<sup>3</sup>Four policy areas are not depicted due to their very low number of pledges: environment (43 pledges regarding the whole period), energy (23), natural resources (20), and foreign trade (13).



FIGURE 2 Legend on next page

**FIGURE 2** Ministerial instability and pledges fulfilment in Portugal, by policy area (ratios)

Source: Portuguese Party Pledges Project and data collected regarding ministerial instability at [www.portugal.gov.pt](http://www.portugal.gov.pt) and [www.dre.pt](http://www.dre.pt).

Notes: Values are ratios of pledges fulfilment and mean ministerial instability by policy area. The total portfolio volatility ranges between 0, for no instability, and 12, for maximum instability. Sample sizes regarding each policy issue range between 52 and 355 for the entire period.

## EXPLAINING PLEDGES FULFILMENT WITH MINISTERIAL INSTABILITY

The descriptive analysis suggests a relationship between compliance and stability, but does not allow us to test our hypotheses. In order to do so we run binary logistic regression models. Given the clustered structure of the data, we rely on generalized linear mixed models (GLMM), with robust standard errors. Then, we rely on 15 interviews with Portuguese former ministers and junior ministers to interpret and consolidate the results from a qualitative perspective.

### To what extent does ministerial instability explain pledge fulfilment?

Table 1 first considers the main independent variable – the *total portfolio volatility* – as a whole and decomposed at the minister and junior minister levels (models 1 and 2). Then it introduces the interaction terms of these variables with the salience of ministries (models 3 and 4). Converging with our expectations, the results suggest that the level of fulfilment of promises tends to decrease when there is instability in the ministry responsible for the portfolio to which the policy issue belongs, especially concerning the most prominent portfolios and regarding junior ministerial instability. The possibility that the causality is reversed – that is, that the poor performance in the fulfilment of pledges is triggering instability in the ministry – must be ruled out in the Portuguese case given that only 22 per cent of ministers and a residual number of junior ministers were dismissed for performance reasons (Costa Pinto & Tavares de Almeida, 2009; Silveira, 2021).

Model 1 shows that when there is instability in the portfolios to which the policy issue belongs, the chances of a government fulfilling their electoral pledges decrease by 38 per cent, thus supporting H1. This result converges with previous research demonstrating that instability in partisan composition of cabinets creates difficulties in implementing policies (Huber, 1998).

The data also support the expectation that the negative effect of ministerial instability on the level of fulfilment of electoral promises is higher when instability occurs at the junior minister level, as posited by H3. Model 2 shows that the effect of volatility at the junior minister level is significant (if we accept reducing the requirement to statistical significance, as the *p* value is 0.08, this way only slightly exceeding 0.05) and negative (it is non-significant at the minister level), explaining a decrease in the chances of pledge fulfilment of 38 per cent. It appears, therefore, to be at this level that instability creates more difficulties in fulfilling promises.

Consistent with H2, the *total portfolio volatility* evidences a significant and negative effect on the fulfilment of promises when it comes to the more salient ministries (model 3). Instability in these ministries decreases the chances of fulfilment by 62 per cent. Thus, the negative effect of ministerial instability on pledge fulfilment seems to be stronger for the most salient ministries. The salience of the ministries alone does not help to explain the delivery of promises by governments.

Finally, in model 4, when interacting portfolio volatility at the minister and junior minister levels with the salience of ministries, we find evidence to support H4. That is, the negative effect of instability at the junior ministerial level on pledge fulfilment is higher among the most salient portfolios. Instability at this level in salient ministries leads to a 77 per cent reduction in the chances of delivering on promises. Figure 3 plots this interaction showing that the probability of a government accomplishing their electoral promises in salient

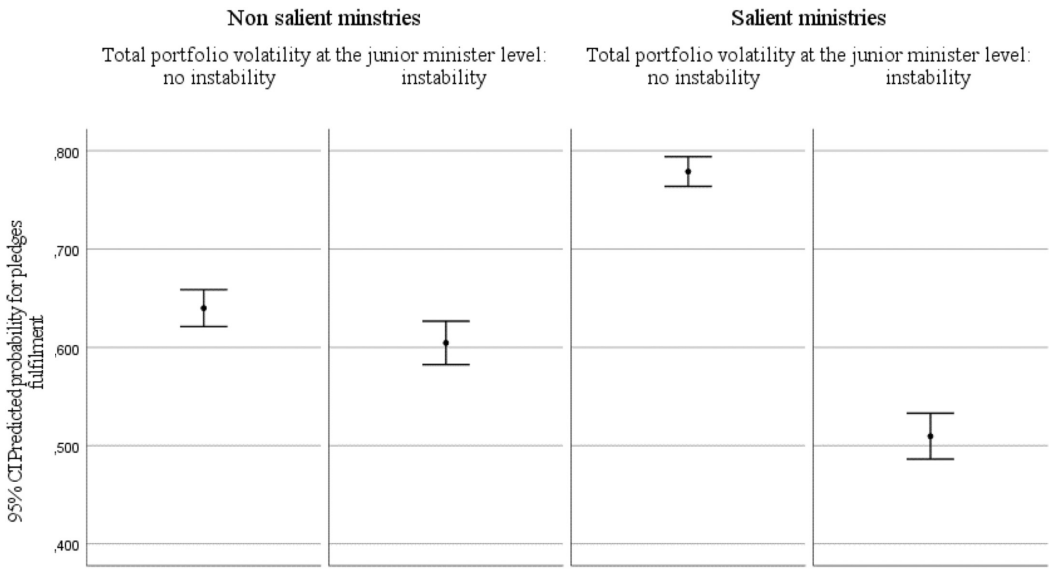
TABLE 1 The effect of total portfolio volatility on Portuguese government's pledges fulfilment

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	exp(b)	b(s.e.)	sig.	exp(b)	b(s.e.)	sig.	exp(b)	b(s.e.)	sig.	exp(b)	b(s.e.)	sig.
Total portfolio volatility	0,62	-0,47 (0,12)	0,00				1,11	0,10 (0,15)	0,51			
Total portfolio volatility – minister				1,21	0,19 (0,28)	0,51				0,79	-0,24 (0,29)	0,40
Total portfolio volatility – junior minister				0,62	-0,49 (0,28)	0,08				1,49	0,40 (0,26)	0,12
Salient ministries * Total Portfolio volatility							0,38	-0,97 (0,22)	0,00			
Salient ministries * Total Portfolio volatility – ministers										1,79	0,58 (0,35)	0,10
Salient ministries * Total Portfolio volatility – junior ministers										0,23	-1,46 (0,19)	0,00
Salient ministries (=1)	0,81	-0,21 (0,14)	0,12	0,86	-0,15 (0,14)	0,29	1,53	0,43 (0,21)	0,05	1,50	0,40 (0,21)	0,06
Status quo pledges (=1)	14,95	2,70 (0,37)	0,00	14,83	2,70 (0,37)	0,00	14,11	2,65 (0,38)	0,00	14,00	2,64 (0,37)	0,00
Minority governments (=1)	7,59	2,02 (0,37)	0,00	8,49	2,14 (0,38)	0,00	8,73	2,17 (0,33)	0,00	9,61	2,26 (0,32)	0,00
Government duration (months)	1,10	0,09 (0,01)	0,00	1,10	0,09 (0,01)	0,00	1,10	0,09 (0,01)	0,00	1,10	0,09 (0,01)	0,00
GDP	0,87	-0,14 (0,09)	0,12	0,85	-0,17 (0,08)	0,04	0,84	-0,17 (0,08)	0,04	0,84	-0,18 (0,07)	0,01
Intercept	0,03	-3,66 (0,64)	0,00	0,02	-3,83 (0,62)	0,00	0,02	-4,06 (0,60)	0,00	0,02	-4,17 (0,51)	0,00
Akaike corrected	6202,025			6213,913			6230,223			6240,723		
Bayesian	6207,222			6219,109			6235,418			6245,917		

Sources: Portuguese Party Pledges Project and data collected regarding ministerial instability at [www.portugal.gov.pt](http://www.portugal.gov.pt) and [www.dre.pt](http://www.dre.pt).

Notes: Generalized linear logistic regression models with dependent variable 1 = fulfilled + partially fulfilled; 0 = unfulfilled. Probability distribution: binomial. Link function: logit. Subject effect: election year/party. N = 1346.





**FIGURE 3** Predicted probabilities of pledges fulfillment by total portfolio volatility at the junior minister's level and ministries salience.  
*Note:* The estimates are from Models 4 in Table 1. Mean 95% confidence intervals that pledges are at least partially fulfilled.

ministries severely decreases when instability occurs at the junior ministers' level. When the ministries are not salient, such instability decreases government performance very slightly.

An additional note to model 4 is due to the interaction coefficient for the ministerial level, as it is close to being significant. The positive sign of the coefficient suggests that instability at the ministerial level may refer to a different dynamic on performance than that of instability at the junior minister level. To disentangle the effect of instability at the minister level over government performance we have also plotted this interaction (see Figure A1 in the online appendix). It shows that it is indeed negative, although the effect is smaller than that of junior ministers.

When compared to the control variables, the effect of ministerial instability can only be considered modest. Holding all other predictors in the model constant, status quo pledges increase the chances of pledge fulfilment about 15 times compared to pledges implying a policy change, and minority governments by about 8 times compared to majority governments. Concerning government duration, each additional month in cabinet duration increases the chances of fulfilling its campaign promises by 10 per cent. The average growth of GDP per capita shows either a non-significant coefficient or one of a negative sign.

In order to test the robustness of the results, we explored other analysis options. First, as the choice on the operationalization of the dependent variable may affect the results, the analysis in Table 1 was re-run using as dependent variable only the fulfilled promises (=1) as opposed to the unfulfilled promises (=0). The results are quite similar to those achieved in the main analysis (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). Second, because the measure of instability that we used encompasses two dimensions that can act in opposite ways – structure and leadership – we also explored the individual effect of both on the dependent variable. The results are also broadly consistent with our previous results, reiterating the central role of junior ministers in explaining the effect of instability on the fulfilment of promises, especially when it comes to salient ministries (see Table A2 and A3 in the Online Appendix). In particular, structural instability at the junior minister level has a significant negative effect on the fulfilment of promises, which is higher when it comes to salient ministries (at the level of ministers, the effect is not statistically significant). With regard to leadership instability, the (negative) coefficient is close to significance at the junior minister level in salient ministries, being clearly non-significant when we consider all ministries equally. Moreover, either for structural or leadership instability, if we jointly consider ministers and junior ministers, the effect of instability

on pledges compliance is significant, negative and robust, reiterating that instability matters when it comes to the accomplishment of the electoral program. These results generally validate the use of the *total portfolio validity* as a measure of ministerial instability in our main analysis.<sup>4</sup>

## Exploring the reasons why ministerial instability matters

Interviews with former ministers and junior ministers suggest that instability underlies numerous constraints concerning the portfolio leadership and structural changes, allowing to consolidate our previous results.

First, we find evidence that ministerial instability entails time for learning and that such requirement conditions the ability of governments to execute their programs. According to a former junior minister: 'There is always a learning process. I needed some time, some months... (...) I entered in the middle of the term, so I definitely needed to get used to the issues.' (Interview 8, but also 9). Instability also entails policy adjustment, stopping some policies and initiating others. This reorientation is explained as follows by a former minister: 'When I arrived I wanted to re-evaluate the options and to correct some things. I did that in every area, but especially in infrastructure policy' (Interview 10, but also 11 and 12). Ultimately instability entails the empowerment of the bureaucracy. If the politicians do not remain in office for much time, the space can be occupied by powerful bureaucrats (Interview 3, 13 and 14). Finally, instability entails the incapacity to build a stable and productive policymaking environment that promotes pledge fulfilment. As a former minister admitted:

'Every time you need to replace a junior minister you consider whether the portfolio needs some adjustments and if it will suit the newcomer. If I want someone but he is not comfortable with some policy areas of the [junior ministerial] portfolio I'll try to rearrange it. If I realize that it's possible to gain or get rid of some areas vis-à-vis other ministries, I'll definitely do it as soon as possible. (...) But when you change a lot, you lose a lot.' (Interview 15).

Second, as previously argued, the robust effect of instability at the junior minister level seems to be related to their autonomy and closeness to the implementation of policies (Silveira, 2021, p. 187–196). As a former minister explained: 'The policies were developed and implemented by the junior ministers; I was only approving and supervising the major developments' (Interview 1). In the same vein, a junior minister revealed that, although the intervention of the minister was crucial, in practice, she was the main person responsible for the important policies in the sector (Interview 2 but also 3, 4 and 5). If the minister is the top leader in the ministry, whose functions are essentially related to policy decision-making, the junior ministers are 'closer to the policy ground' (Interview 5) and the 'ministerial policy workers' (Interview 6). They constitute the ultimate political link with the bureaucracy and their portfolios are the effective 'main stages of policymaking' (Interview 7): 'Junior ministers were responsible for the [bureaucratic] services, holding meeting with general directors, management of policy groups, etc – that was their responsibility' (Interview 5). In other words, the implementation of the policies decided at the top will significantly depend on the abilities of the junior ministers and of the corresponding organic structures. This justifies why they are so important in delivering on promises and why instability affects their performance more.

Lastly, regarding the salience of ministries, a former coordination minister admitted that: "There was tight and systematic control of the government programme's execution [by the center of government], mainly in the most important ministries" (Interview 7). This centrality entails greater tension, since more is at stake, making the process of adapting to changes inherent to insta-

<sup>4</sup>For the two coalition governments, we also tested if the party that made the promise fulfils more when the relevant portfolio is allocated to that party. We chose not to include it in the model as it substantially decreases the sample size and its empirical contribution is limited.

bility likely more demanding in these ministries, thus affecting mandate fulfilment (Interview 15). These data on the functioning of these ministries help explain why instability has more impact on their performance.

## CONCLUSION

Bridging two different sets of literature, this article introduced ministerial instability as a new variable to understand the capacity of executives to fulfil their pledges. Our main goal was to assess the effect of instability as a disruptive factor in government compliance with their electoral programme, focusing on Portugal as a case study. We argued that portfolio volatility (i.e., replacing ministers and junior ministers and the creation and/or extinction of portfolios during the term) impacts pledge fulfilment, especially at the junior minister level and among the most salient ministries.

We found ample evidence to support our expectations. First, fulfilment tends to decrease when there is instability in the ministry responsible for the portfolio to which the policy issue belongs. This effect becomes particularly important at the junior minister level and in salient ministries. Interviews with former ministers and junior ministers consistently suggest that such a disruptive effect likely exists. It is recognized that instability has an underlying time-consuming cost which likely affects a government's policymaking capacity. Each member of the executive needs time to learn the job, control the bureaucratic machine and effectively develop the policies, as well as each portfolio needs time and stable relations with the bureaucracy to execute the policy programme.

Second, a significant negative effect of instability on pledges fulfilment was found at the junior ministerial level, especially when taking into account the most salient portfolios. Junior ministers are more decisive concerning policymaking as they are the government's actors closest to policy implementation. Therefore, removing them from office or changing their portfolios potentially harms the ability to fulfil the pledges under that ministry. Our evidence suggests that this is the case especially regarding salient portfolio. The ministries' centrality ends up functioning as a drawback in a context of instability; that is, it makes it more difficult for them to restore their normal functioning, penalizing compliance with the electoral programme. Such constraints are enhanced by the proximity of the junior ministers to the implementation of policies, as evidenced by the interviews.

Overall, our findings contribute to the literature by revealing how pledge fulfilment is contingent on internal government dynamics. However, at this point, we should point out some limitations of these conclusions. First, the use of a single case limits the generalization of these findings. Second, pledge fulfilment was measured concerning policy adoption, disregarding policy implementation or impact. Third, it only considers pledges with one ministry responsible for the fulfilment, excluding relevant interministerial policies. Fourth, the operationalization of ministerial instability does not take into account the moment of the term at which instability occurs. Finally, this research does not also take into account either the causes of individual dismissal and structural change, nor does it deepen the isolated effect of structural versus leadership instability on government performance. These are aspects that future research may concentrate on.

Considering that the literature on electoral pledges tended to emphasize broad institutional and contextual factors, this study aimed to add a new perspective, revealing the importance of the government's internal functioning. Focusing on ministerial instability contributes to drawing attention to how volatility at the ministerial level can impact the fulfilment of electoral pledges in advanced democracies. Therefore, we believe similar results could be found in other countries with influential policymakers at the junior ministerial level and distinctive salient ministries. However, other case studies and comparisons should be undertaken to validate and expand the scope of these conclusions.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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## INTERVIEWS

- Interview 1 (2017), Minister (Ministry of Education), Lisbon, 5 May (61 minutes)
- Interview 2 (2017), Junior Minister (Ministry of Health), Lisbon, 16 March (101 minutes)
- Interview 3 (2016), Junior Minister and Minister (Ministry of Labour), Lisbon, 15 January (55 minutes)
- Interview 4 (2017), Minister (Ministry of Agriculture), Lisbon, 11 July (28 minutes)
- Interview 5 (2016), Minister (Minister of Health), Lisbon, 21 June (86 minutes)
- Interview 6 (2016), Junior Minister (Ministry of Agriculture), Lisbon, 2 December (23 minutes)
- Interview 7 (2016), Minister (Ministry of Presidency), Lisbon, 7 April (55 minutes)
- Interview 8 (2017), Junior Minister (Ministry of Education), Lisbon, 12 June (48 minutes)
- Interview 9 (2017), Junior Minister (Ministry of Economy), Lisbon, 13 January (52 minutes)
- Interview 10 (2017), Minister (Ministry of Economy), Lisbon, 13 October (27 minutes)
- Interview 11 (2017), Junior Minister (under the Prime-minister) and Minister (Ministry of Presidency), Lisbon, 12 April (63 minutes)
- Interview 12 (2016), Junior Minister (Ministry of Environment), Lisbon, 6 January (75 minutes)
- Interview 13 (2017), Junior Minister (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Lisbon, 26 June (67 minutes)
- Interview 14 (2017), Junior Minister (Ministry of Environment), Lisbon, 16 June (52 minutes)
- Interview 15 (2017), Minister (Ministry of Finance), Lisbon, 12 April (62 minutes)