



NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE (NGT)¹

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Abstract. *The paper presents the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) as a participatory method used in public administration research for identifying, clarifying and prioritising participants' opinions. It analyses the epistemological and methodological foundations of the method, the main stages of its application, examples of its use in European and Romanian public administration, as well as its limits and advantages. The paper also highlights the usefulness of integrating NGT into doctoral research, as an instrument for grounding decisions and for analysing complex administrative phenomena.*

Keywords: *Nominal Group Technique, Public administration, Participatory research, Decision-making process, Doctoral research.*

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, public administration has evolved into an increasingly complex field, characterized by the diversity of actors involved, the expansion of institutional responsibilities, and the growing demand for effective outcomes. In this context, participatory research methods have gained heightened importance, as they facilitate the understanding of administrative phenomena from the perspective of those directly involved in decision. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is among these methods, being recognized for its capacity to combine the active participation of group members with a structured process aimed at the generation, clarification, and prioritization of ideas.

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is among these methods, being recognized for its capacity to combine the active participation of group members with a structured process aimed at the generation, clarification, and prioritization of ideas (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975, pp. 7-15).

The reason for selecting this technique for the present paper is closely linked to its particular relevance within the context of public administration. By its very nature, public administration constitutes a domain of collaboration and consultation, in which policy formulation and decision-making cannot occur without a thorough understanding of the perceptions, interests, and experiences of the actors involved. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) provides a structured framework for identifying not only group opinions but also their genuine priorities, through a process that minimizes domination, discussion hierarchies, and conformity effects.

Within doctoral research, NGT has a dual significance. On the one hand, it facilitates the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in an efficient, rapid, and reproducible manner. On the other hand, it represents an excellent instrument for the exploratory phases of a dissertation, where it is essential to identify factors perceived as relevant within a specific administrative domain, such as policy implementation, the digitalization of public services, employee performance, or citizen interaction. According to the approach outlined by Yang and Miller (2008), the method falls within a mixed epistemological framework, situated between the interpretative tradition which emphasizes experiences, meanings and the positivist tradition, which underscores procedural rigor and the systematic analysis of data (Yang and Miller, 2008, pp. 117-130).

This paper aims to highlight the epistemological and methodological foundations of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT), the internal logic underlying its use, examples of its

application within European and Romanian public administration, as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with its integration into a doctoral research project.

2. Epistemological and methodological foundations

Citizen involvement constitutes a crucial element for the democratic functioning of local authorities, extending beyond the mere exercise of voting and encompassing sustained collaboration between the population and public institutions. According to the guide on citizen participation in the decision-making process, democracy requires a continuous flow of information between public authorities and the community, as well as the establishment of mechanisms through which citizens can exert a genuine influence on decisions. Informing and consulting the public are regarded as fundamental pillars of participation, contributing to enhanced transparency, strengthened trust in state institutions, and the adoption of decisions that are better aligned with the authentic needs of the local community.

The implementation of community participation at the local level requires the application of clear methods of information and consultation, such as public meetings, hearings, debates, opinion surveys, or the establishment of citizen-based consultative committees. The manual emphasizes that these instruments support two-way communication between the administration and citizens, thereby enabling the incorporation of community concerns, needs, and values into the decision-making process. Although citizen involvement entails certain administrative and logistical costs, the benefits are substantial, including increased legitimacy of public decisions, improved public services, and the development of a durable collaborative relationship between the population and local authorities (Matei, 2002).

Citizen participation does not constitute a merely formal act, but rather an ongoing process of communication and cooperation between local public administration and the community, aimed at integrating citizens' interests into the decision-making process (Dincă, 2002).

The methodological and epistemological grounding of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is essential for understanding how this participatory approach is integrated into research on public administration. According to the framework articulated by Yang and Miller (2008), studies in public administration are profoundly diverse, being shaped by multiple epistemological paradigms that coexist and overlap in various ways. Consequently, no method can be meaningfully understood in isolation, but only within the context of how it generates knowledge about administrative reality. NGT is distinguished by its combination of elements

specific to interpretative research with features characteristic of positivist approaches, positioning it within a hybrid methodological space that renders it particularly valuable for the analysis of complex administrative phenomena (Yang and Miller, 2008, pp. 30-45).

Within public administration research, the positivist paradigm emphasizes that social reality can be observed, measured, and assessed from an objective standpoint. Quantitative studies, regression analyses, and statistical research originate within this paradigm. By contrast, the interpretative paradigm is grounded in the belief that administrative reality is a social construction, shaped by the perceptions, experiences, and interactions of institutional participants. For this reason, methods such as interviews, content analysis, and participant observation are preferred within this tradition. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) succeeds in integrating significant elements from both paradigms: it elicits and clarifies participants' perceptions. A process typical of interpretative inquiry while simultaneously transforming these perceptions into orderable, quantifiable, and replicable data, a feature characteristic of positivist approaches.

From an epistemological perspective, NGT is grounded in the idea that administrative reality is not an objective given that can be captured through simple measurement, but rather a domain of meanings that emerges through the interactions of organizational actors. The problems identified by civil servants, the perceived causes of dysfunctions, the solutions proposed, or the priorities for action reflect the manner in which reality is interpreted by individuals within specific institutional contexts. By incorporating a stage of individual idea generation, the method enables the capture of this subjective reality in its most unmediated form. Participants are not influenced by the position, status, or expressive style of other group members, which confers a distinct epistemic value on the data obtained, as they reflect participants' genuine convictions rather than opinions that are "negotiated" or "imposed" during group discussion.

The validity of NGT rests on its procedural structure, which constrains the typical biases associated with group interactions. Through the use of anonymous voting, the technique reduces pressure to conform to the views of the majority or of formal and informal leaders. The clarification stage eliminates ambiguities, facilitating a shared understanding of the terms and concepts employed. Finally, the numerical aggregation of scores provides a transparent and replicable mechanism for identifying priorities, thereby rendering the technique comparable to quantitative methods in terms of methodological rigor (Dincă, 2010).

Thus, although it generates data based on subjective perceptions, the manner in which these data are processed and organized confers stability and coherence upon the results obtained.

With regard to causality, NGT does not seek to identify objective causal relationships in the manner of statistical techniques or experimental designs, but rather focuses on what may be termed “perceived causality.” In the public sector, the way in which actors perceive the causes of a problem is often as critical as the objective mechanisms that generate it. Perceptions shape choices, behaviors, the acceptance of reforms, and the implementation of public policies. Consequently, NGT provides a meaningful form of knowledge by highlighting the factors that participants directly involved in administrative processes consider relevant. Such data may serve as a foundation for the formulation of operational hypotheses or may assist in the selection of variables within an advanced research design.

The interpretation of results obtained through NGT has a dual dimension. On the one hand, the quantitative analysis of scores offers a clear picture of the level of group agreement, while the ordering of ideas reflects the perceived importance and urgency of the issues identified. On the other hand, the observations and discussions generated during the clarification stage provide an essential qualitative background for understanding the nuances, contextual elements, and reasoning of the actors involved. In this way, the method simultaneously produces both qualitative and quantitative data, positioning itself within the framework of mixed methods, which are highly valued in contemporary public administration research.

Overall, the epistemological and methodological foundations of NGT demonstrate that this approach is not merely a participatory tool, but a coherent system for generating knowledge about administrative phenomena. It provides access to the manner in which actors define institutional reality, to their decision-making logic, and to the priorities that shape organizational behavior. By combining procedural simplicity with analytical rigor, NGT emerges as a particularly valuable method for doctoral research in public administration, especially in the exploratory phases and in the participatory validation of research hypotheses.

3. Presentation of the method

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) constitutes a structured participatory method designed to generate and rank ideas in a manner that minimizes hierarchical influences and the control dynamics characteristic of unstructured discussions. This method was developed in the 1960's by Andrew H. Van de Ven and André L. Delbecq, at a time when research in organizational

studies was seeking instruments capable of ensuring equitable participation among group members. NGT was rapidly adopted within the public sector, as it provides a balance between individual freedom of expression and the rigor of collective decision-making processes, and is regarded as particularly effective in contexts that require the structuring of opinions and the identification of consensus (Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson, 1975, pp. 3-18).

Fundamentally, the method is organized around a rigorous procedural process that begins with the individual generation of ideas. This preliminary stage serves to capture authentic perspectives before participants are exposed to the influence of group discussion. Within public administration, where power relations and status hierarchies are particularly salient, this individualized approach ensures the elimination of hierarchical pressures and facilitates balanced participation among all members. Subsequently, the ideas are collected and presented sequentially through a transparent process in which each participant contributes an equal number of items, thereby preventing the domination of discussions by particular individuals.

The subsequent clarification stage is crucial for transforming the preliminary list of ideas into a coherent set of options that are interpreted consistently by all participants. At this stage, no evaluative judgments are made; rather, each idea is explained in order to eliminate ambiguities. This aspect is especially important in public administration, where concepts such as “performance,” “administrative barriers,” or “service quality” may carry different meanings for different actors. Clarifying these concepts ensures that the subsequent vote accurately reflects participants genuine preferences.

Anonymous voting constitutes a central feature of NGT, as it effectively transforms the qualitative process into a semi-quantitative one, enabling the aggregation of individual preferences and the identification of a clear hierarchy. Participants assign scores to each idea, which are then aggregated to produce a final ranking. Anonymity plays a fundamental role by eliminating pressure to conform to the views of the majority or of actors holding superior status. Consequently, the results of NGT are regarded as valid from both a methodological and an ethical standpoint, as they accurately reflect the actual distribution of preferences within the group (Dincă, 2010).

Nevertheless, the application of the method entails certain conditions. NGT functions most effectively in small to medium-sized groups, typically comprising between six and twelve participants. A number that ensures a sufficiently focused process to maintain coherence while remaining diverse enough to generate a broad range of perspectives. Moreover, the method is

particularly suitable for situations in which the primary objective is the identification of perceived problems or solutions, rather than the analysis of causal relationships or the evaluation of objective outcomes. Within the public sector, this method is especially appropriate for consultation sessions, needs assessments, strategic planning, the identification of perceived barriers in policy implementation, and the participatory evaluation of public services.

The types of data produced through NGT are diverse and highly valuable for doctoral studies. The approach yields both qualitative data, reflected in the concepts and explanations provided by participants, and quantitative data, expressed through the scores assigned and the resulting rankings. This dual nature renders NGT an ideal method for mixed-methods research, where the analysis of administrative phenomena requires both an understanding of meanings and their systematic organization within analytical frameworks (Dincă, 2010).

4. Applications in European public administration

The application of the Nominal Group Technique within the European public administration sector has experienced steady expansion in recent decades, driven by the promotion of participatory governance and by the need to involve experts and stakeholders in decision-making processes (OECD, 2017-2023). Across several Member States of the European Union, NGT has evolved into an essential operational instrument for needs assessment, public programme planning, the analysis of population perceptions, and the development of sectoral strategies. The characteristics of this method, such as a balanced participation, a clearly defined procedural structure, and the capacity to establish priorities have led to its adoption in multiple institutional contexts, ranging from the local level to the central and European levels.

A particularly notable example of implementation can be found in the United Kingdom, where the National Health Service (NHS) has incorporated this method into processes for evaluating the quality of healthcare services and identifying the professional needs of staff. NGT is applied in hospitals to identify the most pressing issues faced by patients and healthcare personnel, to rank measures required for service improvement, and to establish intervention priorities within local strategies. Owing to its participatory structure, the method has proven effective in complex organizations, where perspectives may differ significantly depending on individual roles and professional specializations.

In the Netherlands, local administrations employ NGT in the development of urban planning documents, particularly in projects concerning mobility, community development, and the reconfiguration of public spaces. The method is used in consultations with citizens, local experts, and representatives of non-governmental organizations in order to identify major community challenges and to determine priority actions. Given the Dutch tradition of public participation, NGT has become a key instrument for building consensus between administrations and communities, contributing to transparent decision-making that is broadly accepted at the local level.

Denmark makes use of NGT in the context of updating and digitalizing administrative services. As part of reforms focused on digital services and smart governance, Danish institutions have adopted this technique to examine the main barriers perceived by civil servants and service users, as well as to identify viable solutions. Within an increasingly digital administrative landscape, consultations structured through NGT have proven beneficial in minimizing misunderstandings and highlighting the essential factors affecting the success of institutional transformation.

In Ireland, the method is frequently employed in community development projects and in programmes financed through the European Structural Funds. Local authorities implement NGT to engage citizens in identifying community needs, setting investment priorities, and monitoring the implementation of public projects. The clearly defined structure of the method facilitates the rapid achievement of consensus, rendering it particularly valuable in administrative processes subject to strict reporting deadlines.

In Romania, the Nominal Group Technique is increasingly utilized in a variety of local administrative processes and across different sectors. Within strategic planning for local community development, Local Action Groups apply this method to identify key challenges facing rural areas and to rank priorities for projects eligible for funding under European LEADER programmes. In the field of education, County School Inspectorates have adopted NGT in consultations concerning curricular reforms, in the assessment of deficiencies within educational institutions, and in the establishment of priorities for professional training. Furthermore, in the area of digitalization, cities such as Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Brașov have implemented NGT in consultations on the modernization of electronic public services, enabling the collection of feedback from civil servants, IT experts, and representatives of the business sector.

These cases illustrate that NGT is a highly adaptable and flexible technique across diverse administrative contexts. Whether applied to strategic planning, public policy evaluation, stakeholder consultation, or organizational development, the method offers a rare combination of inclusiveness, procedural rigor, and analytical capacity. Within European public administration, its semi-quantitative character makes it particularly suitable for situations in which not only the collection of opinions is required, but also their ranking according to relevance or urgency. This ability to produce clear, prioritized, and easily interpretable outcomes explains why NGT remains widely employed by institutions seeking evidence-based decision-making and transparent governance.

5. Limitations, risks and methodological challenges

Although the technique known as the Nominal Group Technique is widely regarded as one of the most effective participatory methods in the public sector, it nonetheless presents a number of limitations and methodological challenges. Awareness of these aspects is essential both for the proper application of the technique and for the accurate interpretation of the data obtained. One major limitation of NGT lies in the fact that the method is most effective when applied to small groups. While this feature facilitates moderation and balanced participation, it simultaneously limits the representativeness of the results. In the context of public administration, where the issues addressed are often relevant to a wide range of actors, a group comprising 8 to 12 participants may capture only a portion of the diversity of perceptions, thereby requiring caution in the generalization of conclusions.

Another significant limitation concerns the fact that NGT captures perceptions and representations rather than objective realities or demonstrable causal relationships. As such, the proposals formulated reflect the personal experiences of participants and are influenced by the organizational contexts from which they originate. In public administration research, a focus on “perceived reality” is valuable, but it cannot substitute methods grounded in objective empirical data, such as statistical analyses or document-based research. For this reason, NGT is frequently employed as a complementary method, integrated within a broader research framework (Androniceanu, 2017, pp. 143-155).

With regard to the risks involved, group dynamics remain an aspect requiring careful management, even though the method incorporates mechanisms designed to reduce individual influence. During the clarification phase, participants may introduce subtle evaluations or suggestions that can shape how others perceive particular ideas. The facilitator plays a crucial

role in maintaining neutrality, and any failure to exercise this function adequately may adversely affect the quality of the process. In the field of public administration, where institutional tensions and power hierarchies are common, the risks of indirect influence cannot be entirely eliminated, even though anonymous voting mitigates the effects of social pressure.

Participant selection also constitutes a methodological challenge. If the group is predominantly composed of individuals with similar experiences or from the same professional fields, the results may reflect a limited perspective. Conversely, highly diverse groups may encounter difficulties in clarifying ideas and achieving consensus. Striking a balance between diversity and coherence is complex and represents one of the fundamental methodological decisions facing the researcher.

A major challenge lies in integrating NGT results into a well-structured academic analysis. Although the scoring process provides a clear ranking of concepts, the absence of contextual discussion may lead to superficial conclusions. Conversely, an excessive focus on qualitative arguments may diminish the significance of the method's semi-quantitative dimension. In the context of doctoral research, the difficulty consists in establishing an appropriate degree of triangulation with other approaches, so that the data generated through NGT are both valid and relevant to the argumentation of the dissertation.

Moreover, NGT requires rigorous logistical and methodological preparation. Defining the research question, planning the session, facilitating the process, and analyzing the data are stages that demand careful attention and experience. Any shortcomings in these stages may affect the consistency of the results. In the public sector, where time is often a limited resource and participants are frequently overburdened, organizing an NGT session can itself become a significant challenge.

NGT is a valuable and adaptable method; however, its use must be accompanied by particular attention to the methodological limitations and risks involved. Awareness of these aspects enables the researcher to apply the method responsibly, to interpret the results with due caution, and to integrate it effectively into a complex research design specific to the field of public administration.

6. Integration of the method into the doctoral project

The integration of the Nominal Group Technique into a doctoral project in the field of public administration constitutes a significant opportunity for the researcher, as the methodology

enables both the early exploration of administrative phenomena and the participatory validation of previously formulated hypotheses. The application of NGT in the doctoral context is justified by the method's ability to capture the perceptions, experiences, and evaluations of institutional actors directly involved in administrative processes. This participatory dimension represents a major advantage in public administration research, given that the phenomena under study are often complex, multi-layered, and profoundly influenced by the behaviors and perceptions of the individuals involved (Androniceanu, 2017, pp. 52-68).

Within a doctoral project, the methodology may be introduced either during the exploratory phase, with the aim of identifying relevant issues within a specific administrative domain, or during the concrete empirical stage, in order to classify the factors that affect policy implementation or the functioning of a public service. The formulation of the research question for NGT is closely linked to the subject of the dissertation and may, for example, seek to identify the main perceived obstacles in the digitalization of public administration, human resources management, or the delivery of local public services. The outcome produced by the method, a clarified and prioritized list of ideas, contributes to strengthening the empirical argumentation of the dissertation and to structuring its hypotheses or conclusions (Văcărel, 2008, pp. 121-135).

The effective implementation of the method within doctoral research involves several stages that require detailed planning. In the initial phase, the researcher must establish the group of participants, as the selection process is crucial to the relevance of the results. Depending on the subject of the dissertation, the group may include civil servants, institutional managers, experts, representatives of civil society, or members of the academic community. The diversity of the group must be carefully calibrated in order to provide as comprehensive a perspective as possible on the phenomenon under study, without compromising the coherence of the process. Organizing the sessions entails the creation of a neutral environment, either physical or virtual, that allows participants to interact without institutional influences.

During the actual conduct of the NGT, the researcher, acting as facilitator, must adhere to the standard procedure: individual idea generation, collection and listing of ideas, group clarification, and anonymous voting. Each of these stages generates data that will subsequently be analyzed. Individual idea generation enables the collection of a wide range of perspectives; the clarification stage contributes to a shared understanding of concepts; and anonymous voting provides an objective ranking of the factors deemed significant. This sequential process ensures

the production of robust empirical material, suitable for the development of an empirical chapter within a doctoral dissertation (Dincă, 2010).

The analysis of data resulting from the application of NGT encompasses both the interpretation of scores and the narrative exploration of the justifications provided during the clarification stage. From a doctoral perspective, this dual approach is essential, as the scores reflect the degree of group consensus, while participants' explanations provide the necessary context for a deeper understanding of administrative phenomena. Within a doctoral dissertation, the results may be presented in the form of tables, prioritization charts, or descriptive sections that analyze the meanings attributed to the identified issues. These findings may support working hypotheses, guide the formulation of public policy recommendations, and contribute to the theoretical discussion concerning organizational dynamics or institutional behavior.

Another significant dimension of incorporating NGT into doctoral research is triangulation. The researcher may integrate this technique with interviews, document analysis, or quantitative methods in order to enhance the external credibility of the conclusions. For example, where NGT identifies certain obstacles perceived by officials, interviews may be used to explore the underlying reasons for these barriers in greater depth, while statistical analysis may determine their effects in quantifiable terms. In this manner, NGT becomes a fundamental component of a clear and well-structured methodological design.

7. Conclusions

The Nominal Group Technique constitutes a particularly important methodological instrument for the study of public administration, due to its capacity to combine procedural rigor with the active participation of institutional actors. In a sector characterized by complexity, interdependence, and organizational variability, methods that facilitate the integration of diverse perspectives become essential for understanding administrative phenomena. NGT provides a setting in which each individual's opinion may be expressed free from hierarchical constraints, while the final outcome reflects, in an organized manner, the group's preferences and priorities.

Findings from specialized research suggest that this method is effective in identifying problems, defining courses of action, and assessing participant's perceptions across a wide range of administrative processes. Its application in European and Romanian contexts demonstrates its flexibility and relevance in diverse areas, including strategic planning, public health, education,

administrative digitalization, and community development. This breadth of application indicates that NGT is not an isolated technique, but rather an adaptable instrument capable of being integrated into a variety of institutional processes.

For doctoral-level research, the significance of NGT lies in its ability to facilitate access to participatory knowledge, which is essential for analyzing perceptions, challenges encountered by actors, and the solutions they deem relevant. Moreover, the method generates both qualitative and quantitative data, enabling an integrated, coherent, and in-depth analysis. This mixed character strengthens the scientific rigor required of a doctoral dissertation, as it allows for data triangulation and the reinforcement of conclusions.

At the same time, the method also presents a series of challenges, primarily related to participant selection, the role of the facilitator, and the interpretation of results. Nevertheless, these limitations can be addressed through appropriate methodological structuring and by combining NGT with other research methods. When applied responsibly and adapted to the specificities of the context, NGT can make significant contributions to both the theoretical development and practical advancement of public administration.

Overall, the Nominal Group Technique represents a robust, adaptable, and valuable method that facilitates a deep understanding of organizational dynamics and decision-making processes. By incorporating this technique into doctoral research, the doctoral candidate can obtain a comprehensive and balanced view of administrative phenomena, thereby contributing to the formulation of well-grounded, meaningful, and practically relevant conclusions for both the academic community and public administration practice.

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