

Where Does Discretion Go When Transfers Go Digital?

Curtailment, Relocation, and Reconstitution in Punjab's Teacher E-Transfer System

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Abstract

Scholarship on digital discretion offers three rival accounts of what automation does to administrative judgment: it curtails discretion, relocates it, or reconstitutes it in new forms. The evidence behind all three comes overwhelmingly from Northern welfare bureaucracies, where discretion means professional judgment over clients. This article examines a different class of case, which it terms politically saturated allocation: mass allocation systems whose outcomes were historically governed by patronage. Punjab's teacher e-transfer system, introduced in 2019 to remove political and clerical influence from the posting of the province's public school teachers, is treated as a crucial case for the curtailment thesis. Drawing on a four-month research internship with the Punjab Information Technology Board, interviews with system architects and teachers, and analysis of policy instruments, the article uses congruence analysis to adjudicate among the three expectations. It finds a configuration rather than a winner. Curtailment holds, but only in the routine allocation core. Relocation dominates: discretion migrates to the three functions no rule engine can perform for itself, namely specifying the rules, establishing the facts, and granting exceptions. Reconstitution appears where digitization removed the friction that once disciplined applicants. The department's 2024 return of hardship cases to manual adjudication, against the implementer's advice, reveals a further dynamic, discretion reclamation, in which principals deliberately de-automate. The article contributes a scope condition, a mechanism-based account of where relocated discretion settles, and four propositions for comparative testing.

Keywords: digital discretion; street-level bureaucracy; e-government; patronage; teacher transfers; automation; Pakistan

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1. Introduction

When a human-administered allocation process is replaced by a rule-based digital system, what happens to the judgment that previously determined outcomes? For two decades, public administration scholarship has answered this question in three competing ways. One answer holds that automation curtails discretion, converting street-level bureaucracies into system-level ones in which outcomes are computed rather than decided (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002). A second holds that discretion is conserved and relocated,

surfacing at new points in the organization rather than disappearing (Buffat, 2015; Busch & Henriksen, 2018). A third, emerging from work on algorithmic governance, holds that digitization reconstitutes discretion, generating new forms of judgment and strategic behavior with no counterpart in the paper-based world (Bullock et al., 2020; Zouridis et al., 2020).

This debate rests on a narrow empirical base. Its cases come overwhelmingly from Northern European and North American welfare, tax, and inspection agencies, where discretion is understood as professional judgment exercised over clients and where the pre-digital state was already rule-governed and comparatively insulated from partisan interference. Whether the debate's conclusions travel to administrative systems in which discretion functioned primarily as a channel for political patronage is an open question, and an important one. Digital reform in much of the Global South is justified precisely as a means of removing that channel (Bussell, 2012; Heeks, 2002).

This article addresses that gap through a study of Punjab's teacher e-transfer system. Transfers and postings in South Asian bureaucracies have long been documented as currencies of political control and rent extraction (Iyer & Mani, 2012; Wade, 1985). In 2019 Punjab's School Education Department (SED), working with the Punjab Information Technology Board (PITB), replaced a paper-based transfer process with a points-based online system explicitly intended to make postings transparent and merit-based. If automation curtails discretion anywhere, it should do so here: the system was designed for that purpose, applies to a large and relatively homogeneous workforce, and allocates a good, a school posting, that can be scored against codified criteria. The case is therefore a crucial case for the curtailment thesis (Eckstein, 1975). Evidence that discretion survives in such a system weighs heavily against curtailment as a general expectation.

Using congruence analysis (Blatter & Haverland, 2012), the article confronts the three expectations with evidence from a four-month research internship with PITB, semi-structured interviews with system architects and teachers, and analysis of the policy instruments governing the system. The central finding is a configuration verdict. Curtailment holds in the routine allocation core. Relocation is the dominant pattern, with discretion migrating to criteria design, data verification, and hardship certification. Reconstitution appears in two digitally native forms: non-actualization gaming and strategic timing at the data layer.

The article makes three contributions. First, it introduces *politically saturated allocation* as a scope condition that specifies when, and how, the digital-discretion framework must be modified to travel. Second, it moves beyond description of where discretion goes to an explanation of why it goes there: relocated discretion settles at the three functions that any rule-based allocation system cannot perform for itself, namely specifying rules, establishing facts, and granting exceptions. Third, it identifies two mechanisms the existing framework does not name. *Discretion reclamation* describes principals deliberately de-automating a category to recover control, as the SED did with hardship cases in 2024. *Friction loss* describes how digitization, by collapsing the compliance costs of participation, removes a behavioral discipline that paper processes supplied incidentally, and so creates space for new strategic behavior.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the three expectations and the literature on patronage and digital reform in South Asia. Section 3 sets out the analytical framework. Section 4 describes the case, and Section 5 the research design. Section 6 presents the findings, Section 7 develops the configuration verdict and its mechanisms into testable propositions, and Section 8 discusses implications and limitations before Section 9 concludes.

2. Digital Discretion: Three Expectations and a Missing Case

2.1 Curtailment

Lipsky (1980/2010) located the practical making of public policy in the discretionary choices of frontline workers operating under resource scarcity and ambiguous goals. Early scholarship on the information age anticipated that computerization would narrow this space (Snellen, 1998). Bovens and Zouridis (2002) gave the argument its canonical form. In large executive agencies, they argued, information technology had moved decision-making from the street level to the screen level and, ultimately, to the system level, where decisions are produced by software designed by legal and technical specialists. Discretion does not vanish in this account, but it leaves the frontline and becomes embedded in system design. Buffat (2015) named this position the curtailment thesis. Its enduring appeal lies in its fit with the stated goals of digital reform: consistency, speed, and the elimination of arbitrary or corrupt individual judgment (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

2.2 Relocation and Enablement

Subsequent research complicated this picture. Buffat (2015) set an enablement thesis against curtailment, showing that technology can supply frontline actors with new informational resources and room for manoeuvre. Evans and Harris (2004) had earlier warned against exaggerating the death of discretion under managerial control, and the same caution has been applied to digital control. In their systematic review, Busch and Henriksen (2018) found the effects of information technology on discretion to be mixed and contingent, and a companion study showed that public service workers accept digitized practices when these support professional norms but continue to regard discretion as essential for complex tasks (Busch et al., 2018). Survey evidence from Dutch inspectors finds that automation lowers perceived discretion without producing the behavioral effects curtailment predicts (de Boer & Raaphorst, 2023). Across this work, a common thread is that discretion is conserved and displaced: upward to system designers who translate policy into code (Zouridis et al., 2020), sideways to those who handle cases the system cannot process, and into the human-algorithm interactions through which automated outputs are interpreted and applied (Peeters, 2020).

2.3 Reconstitution

A third line of work suggests that digitization can transform discretion rather than merely curtail or move it. Young et al. (2019) argue that the suitability of tasks for automated discretion varies with task specificity and environmental complexity, implying that automation redraws the boundary between codifiable and non-codifiable judgment rather than simply shrinking the latter. Bullock et al. (2020) show that technology's effect on discretion is neither linear nor monotonic. Ethnographic studies reveal that self-service systems generate new forms of invisible work, as citizens and officials learn to navigate digital procedures and informally repair their gaps (Pors, 2015; Star & Strauss, 1999). A related literature on performance regimes demonstrates that actors respond strategically to rule systems, gaming them in ways their designers did not anticipate (Bevan & Hood, 2006). Taken together, this work points to an expectation that digital systems create new sites and forms of judgment, including strategic behavior by the people the system governs, that have no pre-digital analogue.

2.4 Patronage, Transfers, and Digital Reform in South Asia

The three expectations were developed in settings where the pre-digital discretion at stake was professional. In South Asian bureaucracies, discretion over postings has a different character. Wade's (1985) study of irrigation administration in India documented a market for public office in which transfers were

bought and sold and served as instruments of political rent extraction. Iyer and Mani (2012) showed that Indian politicians use bureaucratic transfers systematically as a tool of control. In Pakistan, fragmented and factionalized party competition has been linked to incentives for politicians to favor targeted benefits over service delivery improvements (Hasnain, 2008), and public-sector postings are among the most valuable of those benefits.

Digital reform in these settings is often framed as an anti-patronage technology. Evidence from India shows that well-designed digital infrastructure can reduce leakage in public programs (Muralidharan et al., 2016). Yet the politics of adoption matter. Bussell (2012) argues that politicians' support for technology-enabled service reforms is shaped by their own rent-seeking interests, and that reforms curbing petty corruption among lower-level officials may coexist with the preservation of higher-level opportunities. Heeks (2002) similarly shows that digital systems in developing countries are shaped by gaps between design assumptions and local institutional realities, which actors bridge through improvisation. This literature suggests that digitization in patronage-saturated systems will reorganize, rather than simply remove, the political uses of discretion. It has not, however, been connected systematically to the digital-discretion framework, and the latter has not been tested on a case of this kind. This article brings the two together.

3. Analytical Framework

3.1 Rival Expectations and Observable Implications

The article treats curtailment (E1), relocation (E2), and reconstitution (E3) as rival expectations, each with distinct observable implications. Table 1 specifies what evidence would support each expectation and, equally important for congruence analysis, what evidence would count against it. The expectations are not mutually exclusive. A configuration in which different expectations govern different parts of a system is a substantive finding, provided the analysis specifies which part each governs.

Table 1. Rival expectations, observable implications, and disconfirming evidence

Expectation	Core claim	Supporting evidence	Disconfirming evidence
E1 Curtailment (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002)	Rule-based automation closes the spaces in which political and personal influence operated.	Former discretion points fully automated; no identifiable decision-maker at the point of allocation; outcomes determined by merit rank.	Judgment over outcomes persists or reappears elsewhere in the process; influence attempts redirected rather than abandoned.
E2 Relocation (Buffat, 2015; Busch & Henriksen, 2018)	Discretion is conserved and displaced upward and sideways, to designers, verifiers, certifiers, and adjudicators.	Consequential judgment concentrated at criteria-setting, data verification, exception handling, or appeals.	No consequential judgment at these sites; or discretion at these sites identical in form and holder to the pre-digital system.
E3 Reconstitution (Bullock et al., 2020; Pors, 2015)	Digitization creates new forms of judgment and strategic behavior that did not previously exist.	Practices that depend on system mechanics and have no pre-digital analogue.	All observed strategic behavior has a clear equivalent in the paper-based system.

3.2 Scope Condition: Politically Saturated Allocation

The article defines *politically saturated allocation* as a mass public allocation system, such as postings, transfers, admissions, or licensing, in which outcomes were historically shaped by partisan or personal

intervention as a routine, semi-institutionalized practice rather than as occasional deviation. Three features distinguish such systems from the welfare-agency cases on which the digital-discretion literature was built. First, the discretion targeted by digitization belongs primarily to political and administrative intermediaries rather than to professionals. Second, that discretion has a political value to those who hold it, so its removal generates incentives to recover it. Third, the allocated good is typically scarce and positional, so that applicants compete with one another, and the system's rules shape strategic behavior among them as well as among officials.

In Punjab's education bureaucracy, discretion over transfers was exercised through recommendations from politicians and other influential intermediaries, commonly referred to as *sifarish*, and through control over vacancy information at school and district levels. The scope condition implies a specific prediction that can be evaluated against the case. Where discretion has political value, curtailment at one point in a system should be accompanied by pressure to recover discretion at points the system does not automate. Digitization should therefore change the location of political access more than its existence.

3.3 Levels of Analysis and Definitions

Following Giest and Grimmelikhuijsen (2020), discretion is examined at three interconnected levels. At the macro level, policy instruments define the boundaries of automation. At the meso level, organizational routines and system architecture translate those instruments into scoring rules and workflows. At the micro level, teachers and district officials act within, and on, the resulting system.

Discretion means the latitude of any actor to influence a transfer outcome beyond mechanical rule application. A *discretion site* is any stage or role at which such latitude exists. The *pre-digital baseline* is the distribution of discretion sites before the e-transfer system. *Curtailment evidence* is a former discretion site now fully automated with no observable replacement. *Relocation evidence* is discretion now exercised at a different stage, or by a different actor, than before. *Reconstitution evidence* is a discretion form with no pre-digital analogue.

4. The Case: Teacher Transfers in Punjab

4.1 Transfers Before Digitization

Before 2019, teacher transfers in Punjab were governed by a transfer policy issued in 2013 and administered through paper files (SED, 2024a). Accounts from PITB officials, triangulated with the documentary record, describe a process with many small gatekeeping points. A teacher seeking a transfer had to identify vacancies that were not systematically advertised, often by visiting schools in person, and then move a file through several administrative tiers. School heads and district clerks controlled vacancy information, which gave them leverage over applicants and encouraged reliance on intermediaries. According to PITB officials, a single transfer cycle could take eight to nine months. Access to favorable outcomes depended substantially on personal and political connections.

4.2 The E-Transfer System

In April 2019 the SED introduced an e-transfer system developed with PITB and built on the School Information System (SIS), the province's database of schools, teachers, and enrolment (SED, 2019). Teachers apply online, vacancies are listed on the portal, and applicants are ranked by points computed from criteria set out in the transfer policy. Tentative merit lists are published, objections can be lodged, and final merit lists are issued through the portal (SED, 2024a). District Education Authorities verify the documents and records on which scores depend, and the portal itself states that finalization of any transfer is

subject to verification of teacher records, sanctioned posts, and enrolment data by the relevant offices (PMIU-PESRP, n.d.).

By the period of fieldwork, according to PITB officials, the system had run through more than twenty rounds. In 2024 the Punjab Cabinet approved a new e-Transfer Policy superseding the 2013 framework (SED, 2024a). The same year, the government introduced year-round transfers on hardship grounds, including disability, widowhood, divorce, and long-distance circumstances (*The Nation*, 2024), with applications submitted to district officers, district committees required to decide within thirty days, and copies uploaded for review at ministerial level (*Pakistan Today*, 2024). Scrutiny of hardship documents in that round was coordinated through meetings with divisional Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners (SED, 2024b). This shift, referred to by participants as the Round 22 change, is central to the analysis below.

4.3 Why This Case

The case is selected as a crucial case for the curtailment thesis (Eckstein, 1975). Three conditions make curtailment most likely here. The system was designed explicitly to remove individual and political discretion. The allocated good lends itself to codification, since postings can be scored on seniority, distance, and category. And the system operates at provincial scale, which favors standardized processing over case-by-case judgment. If discretion nonetheless persists in consequential forms, the finding cannot easily be attributed to weak design intent or an unsuitable task, and it therefore bears directly on the generality of the curtailment expectation. At the same time, the case satisfies the politically saturated allocation scope condition, making it suitable for assessing how the framework travels.

5. Research Design

5.1 Congruence Analysis

The study uses a qualitative single-case design and congruence analysis, in which multiple theoretical expectations are deduced in advance and confronted with within-case evidence to assess their relative explanatory leverage (Blatter & Haverland, 2012). Congruence analysis is suited to the aim of adjudication among named rivals, and it does not require the large number of observations needed for variation-based inference. The unit of analysis is the discretion site. For each site, the analysis asks which expectation the evidence supports, how strong that evidence is, and whether rival interpretations can be excluded.

5.2 Fieldwork and Access

Access was obtained through a four-month research internship with PITB, running from 3 March to 30 June 2025 and arranged specifically to study the e-transfer system. The internship was not an employment relationship or a full-time placement. Fieldwork consisted of periodic visits to PITB, approximately one or two per month, during which interviews with system officials were conducted and the author engaged in informal conversations with members of the project team about the system's design, operation, and recent policy changes. Field notes were written up after each visit, and internal system documentation, including validation logic and workflow specifications, was reviewed on site for contextual understanding. No internal documentation is cited or reproduced in this article, and every claim about the system's rules is sourced to publicly available policy instruments.

This affiliation provided access, contextual familiarity, and the opportunity to check interview accounts informally against how the system was discussed within the organization. It did not involve sustained participant observation, and the study does not claim to be an ethnography. It is, however, in-

formed by organizational ethnography in its analytical orientation (Ybema et al., 2009). Following Pors (2015), participant accounts were read for practices, routines, and workarounds rather than for evaluations of the system, and attention was paid to the invisible work through which departmental mandates are translated into scoring rules, data fields, and exception procedures.

5.3 Participants and Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six participants (Table 2). Three PITB officials were selected for their direct involvement in the design, development, and operation of the SIS e-transfer portal. As system architects, they had observed the system across its rounds, maintained its validation logic, handled exceptions, and seen where departmental policymakers accepted or overrode technical recommendations. This vantage point allowed them to compare the pre-digital and digital systems and to report decisions not visible in published documents. Three government school teachers were selected to represent the principal transfer pathways: promotion-based transfer, general merit transfer, and a transfer involving the hardship category. Teachers provide the street-level perspective against which implementer accounts can be checked.

Table 2. Interview participants

Code	Role	Basis for selection
P1	PITB official, e-transfer system	Involvement in system design and in criteria and policy exchanges with the SED
P2	PITB official, e-transfer system	Involvement in system operation across rounds; exception and integrity issues
P3	PITB official, e-transfer system	Involvement in system development and operation
T1	Government school teacher, elementary sector, 30 years of service	Promotion-based transfer
T2	Government school teacher	General merit-round transfer
T3	Government school teacher	Transfer involving the hardship category

Note: All interviews were conducted in Lahore between March and June 2025. Interviews were conducted in Urdu and English, and quotations were translated by the author where the original was in Urdu.

The sample is small by the standards of variation-seeking designs. The appropriate standard for this study, however, is information power rather than saturation (Malterud et al., 2016). The aim is narrow, a single allocation system; the sample is highly specific, comprising the builders of the system and users of each principal pathway; the analysis is guided by established theory; and the implementer interviews are dense, because each official spoke to the system's operational history. Under these conditions, a small purposive sample can hold sufficient information power for analytical claims, though not for claims about prevalence (Small, 2009).

5.4 Documents

The documentary corpus comprises the transfer policy framework across its versions, including the e-Transfer Policy 2024 and its 2025 amendments; SED notifications governing the introduction of the system and the scheduling and scrutiny of transfer rounds; SIS portal guidance; and public statements and press reporting on the system and the 2024 hardship policy. Documents serve two purposes. They establish the formal rules against which practices described in interviews can be located, and they allow independent corroboration of factual claims, most importantly the 2024 change in hardship processing.

5.5 Analysis

Interview material was analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a codebook derived from Table 1, supplemented by inductive codes for practices the framework did not anticipate. Each reported practice was coded to a stage of the transfer process, to a level of analysis, and to the expectation it supported or disconfirmed. Coded material was then aggregated into the discretion site map in Table 3. For each site, evidence strength was assessed by the number of independent source types supporting it: interview accounts from different participant groups, and documentary evidence. Sites supported by implementer and teacher accounts and by documents are classified as strong; sites supported by two source types as moderate; and sites supported by a single source type as suggestive. Findings are reported primarily through paraphrase, with brief quotation where a participant's wording carries analytical weight.

5.6 Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Several steps supported the credibility of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Implementer claims were checked against teacher accounts and documents wherever possible, and the most consequential claim, the 2024 change in hardship processing, is corroborated by official notifications and press reporting independent of the interviews. Rival interpretations were considered explicitly, particularly for the Round 22 decision.

Two sources of bias warrant acknowledgement. First, PITB officials were overruled on the hardship decision and may have institutional reasons to present it unfavorably; their accounts are therefore read alongside the departmental rationale they also reported and against the documentary record. Second, the author's affiliation with PITB during fieldwork created proximity to the implementer's perspective. The periodic and non-employment nature of the internship limited this proximity, and the inclusion of teacher accounts and public documents was designed to counterbalance it.

All participants gave informed consent and are identified by anonymous codes. No formal institutional ethics review was required for this study; consent was obtained orally at the start of each interview and recorded in the interviewer's field notes.

6. Findings: Mapping the Discretion Sites

Table 3 summarizes the discretion sites identified, the expectation each supports, its level of analysis, and the strength of supporting evidence. The subsections that follow present the evidence for each expectation.

Table 3. Discretion sites across the e-transfer system

Discretion site	Description	Expectation	Level	Sources	Strength
Promotion-based allocation	Promoted teachers placed automatically on promotion rank, without application or file handling.	E1	Meso	T1; policy framework	Moderate
General merit allocation	Points computed and merit lists generated by the system; no official decides who receives which post.	E1	Meso	T2; P1, P2; policy framework	Strong

Discretion site	Description	Expectation	Level	Sources	Strength
Criteria design	Departmental policymakers decide which attributes count and their weights, shaping outcomes before any application.	E2	Macro	P1; policy versions	Moderate
Data verification and correction	District officials verify, correct, or reject record errors on which scores and cutoffs depend.	E2 (with E3 elements)	Meso / Micro	P1; T3; SIS guidance; SED notifications	Strong
Hardship certification	From 2024, hardship cases adjudicated manually by district committees under ministerial and administrative oversight.	E2	Macro / Meso	P1, P2; T3; SED notifications; press reporting	Strong
Non-actualization gaming	Top-ranked applicants decline allocated posts without consequence; seats wasted, lower-ranked applicants excluded.	E3	Micro	P2; PITB accounts	Suggestive
Data-layer timing	Timing of vacancy disclosure and data entry relative to application windows creates strategic decision points.	E3	Micro / Meso	PITB accounts; T3	Moderate

6.1 Curtailment (E1): Real but Confined to the Routine Core

The clearest evidence of curtailment concerns promotion-based transfer. T1, an elementary-sector teacher with thirty years of service, described a transfer that occurred without any application on her part. The system placed her at her preferred location on the basis of promotion rank. Beyond the documents required by the promotion process itself, she had no dealings with officials and did not use the portal's vacancy search. She characterized the experience as involving no hustle and no office visits. Against the pre-digital baseline, in which a comparable move required locating vacancies, moving files, and often securing intervention, this is a substantial change, and it corresponds closely to the system-level bureaucracy described by Bovens and Zouridis (2002).

General merit transfers show the same pattern at the allocation stage. Points are computed automatically and merit lists are generated by the system. PITB officials described no point in a routine round at which an individual official decides who receives which post once criteria are fixed and data entered. T2, who transferred through a general merit round, confirmed that the process was conducted entirely through the portal, without in-person interaction with departmental officials. PITB officials also reported that transfer cycles which had taken eight to nine months now take under two months, and published merit lists allow teachers, for the first time, to see why colleagues rank above them.

The evidence therefore supports E1, but only within a bounded domain. Curtailment describes the interior of the routine process. Its disconfirming condition in Table 1, that judgment over outcomes persists or reappears elsewhere, is met at the system's edges, to which the analysis now turns.

6.2 Relocation (E2): The Dominant Pattern

Criteria design

The points schedule that determines who outranks whom is not a fixed technical parameter. It is revised by departmental policymakers, who decide which attributes count, how much each is worth, and which categories receive special treatment. P1 described criteria changes as emerging from exchanges between the SED and PITB in which departmental officials held final authority. Because every downstream allocation follows mechanically from these choices, a change to the weight of seniority or the definition of a category reconfigures the merit list for all applicants before any application is received. The successive versions of the transfer policy confirm that criteria and categories have been revised over time (SED, 2024a, 2025). The site is not new, but its consequentiality is: under the paper system a rule change set the terms of a negotiation that officials could still bend case by case, whereas under the portal it propagates mechanically to every applicant. Discretion has thus moved upward, from the clerks and intermediaries who once influenced individual files to the policymakers who set the parameters for everyone, and the same decision now carries far more weight.

Data verification

The second site concerns the facts on which scores depend. Teacher records in the SIS contain errors in joining dates, qualifications, and posting histories, and these errors produce incorrect scores. Transparency has made such errors contestable. P1 explained that a teacher who sees the published merit list can object that a colleague's joining date is wrong, after which the department rules the objection proved or rejected. Whether an error is corrected, however, in P1's words, depends on who has the authority. In a points-based system a single incorrect date can move a teacher across the cutoff for a post, so the official who accepts or rejects a correction exercises consequential judgment over individual outcomes.

The documentary record confirms the centrality of this function. The SIS portal states that any transfer is subject to verification of records by the relevant offices (PMIU-PESRP, n.d.), and SED instructions for transfer rounds make district chief executive officers responsible for updating teacher records on the SIS before rounds open (SED, 2024b). T3, who applied through the hardship category, described uncertainty about how her records and application were being assessed, which illustrates the limited visibility of this stage to applicants. Relative to the pre-digital baseline, verification is not simply a relocated version of clerical gatekeeping. It is exercised within a system that publishes rankings and invites objections, which gives it a partly new, contest-driven character. For this reason the site is classified as relocation with elements of reconstitution.

Hardship certification and the Round 22 decision

The third and most politically significant site is hardship certification. According to PITB officials, hardship and medical cases had been processed through the digital system under earlier policy. In 2024, in what participants referred to as Round 22, the SED moved adjudication of these cases back to manual departmental processing. P1 stated that PITB's advice had been that the category should not be made manual, and that policymakers decided otherwise.

This account is independently corroborated. Official notifications and press reporting show that in 2024 hardship applications were submitted to district officers, decided by district committees within a thirty-day window, uploaded for review at ministerial level, and scrutinized through meetings involving divisional Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners (*Pakistan Today*, 2024; SED, 2024b). Authority over the category thus moved away from the portal's rule engine and toward district committees, the education minister's office, and the civil administration. The Chief Minister's Special Monitoring Unit

presents the hardship policy as a flagship initiative of the provincial leadership (Special Monitoring Unit, n.d.), and reports that approximately 22,900 teachers were transferred under it, indicating both the political salience of the category and its scale.

Three interpretations of the decision are possible. The first is functional. P2 offered the departmental rationale: a residual set of cases, perhaps fifteen to twenty distinct scenarios, occurs so rarely, sometimes once in ten thousand applications, that it cannot sensibly be written into policy, while bulk cases are already covered. P1 gave an example of a teacher facing a threatening domestic situation who did not qualify under the formal divorce category, but whose circumstances the department judged to require a transfer. On this reading, manual processing responds to the digital rigidity of rule engines confronted with complex human circumstances (Coglianese, 2021; Zouridis et al., 2020). The second interpretation is political: returning a salient, sympathetic category to manual processing creates discretion that can be exercised visibly and credited to political leadership. The third concerns capacity: manual processing might reflect difficulties in verifying hardship claims digitally.

The evidence does not allow motive to be established with confidence, and the article does not claim to do so. Two observations nonetheless narrow the field. The capacity interpretation is weakened by PITB's account that digital infrastructure for the category existed and that the technical implementer advised against the change. And the functional interpretation, while plausible for genuine edge cases, does not explain why the entire category, rather than a residual exception track, was moved to manual adjudication. What can be stated firmly is that, whatever the motive, the decision relocated discretion: judgment over a category the system had processed was reclaimed by departmental and political principals, and the transparency that had governed it was reduced. The motive question matters for normative evaluation; the location of discretion, which is the object of E2, is established.

6.3 Reconstitution (E3): Digitally Native Discretion

Non-actualization gaming

Once allocated a post through the merit system, a teacher can decline the transfer without consequence. The post is wasted for that round and applicants ranked below lose the opportunity. P2 identified this as a systemic integrity problem, observing that some people apply for fun, that nobody asks why a transfer was not actualized, and that modest consequences would help applicants understand that the choice carries weight. PITB officials described applications made without intent to move, for instance to test one's standing.

This behavior has no clear pre-digital analogue. Under the paper system, an application required locating vacancies, assembling documents, and visiting offices. These compliance costs (Moynihan et al., 2015) were a source of exclusion, but they also imposed an incidental discipline: few teachers would incur them without a genuine intention to move. By reducing the cost of applying to near zero, the portal removed that discipline without replacing it, and the policy provided no mechanism, such as a penalty or a cascade to the next candidate, to absorb speculative applications. The resulting behavior is strategic action enabled by the system's own mechanics, consistent with the broader finding that actors game rule systems in ways designers fail to anticipate (Bevan & Hood, 2006). Because the evidence for this site comes from implementer accounts alone, it is classified as suggestive, and its prevalence is not estimated.

Data-layer timing

PITB officials reported that participants have learned that the timing of vacancy disclosure and data entry relative to application windows can affect outcomes. T3 described observing patterns in how vacancy announcements were timed relative to application windows, which she interpreted as deliberate. Whether

each instance reflects intent cannot be established from these data. The significance of the finding lies elsewhere: the system's temporal architecture, with discrete rounds, data cutoffs, and disclosure dates, creates decision points that did not exist in a continuous paper process, and both officials and applicants recognize these points as strategically consequential. This places the site within E3.

7. The Configuration Verdict and Its Mechanisms

7.1 The Configuration

The evidence supports all three expectations, each in a distinct domain. Curtailment governs the routine allocation core, where promotion-based and general merit allocation are genuinely automated and clerk-level gatekeeping is suppressed. Relocation governs the system's architecture and exceptions, and it is the dominant pattern: it is supported at three sites, two with strong evidence, and it accounts for the most consequential forms of remaining discretion. Reconstitution governs the user and data layer, where non-actualization gaming and strategic timing exploit the system's mechanics; it is present but secondary.

The configuration confirms the prediction derived from the scope condition. Digitization has removed the most visible channels of political access to individual transfer decisions: the clerk's control over vacancy information, the intermediary's recommendation, and the informal market that grew around both. It has not removed political access from the system. Influence that once operated through frontline officials must now operate, if at all, through criteria-setting, verification decisions, and a manual hardship process overseen by ministerial and administrative authorities. Access to these sites requires different resources than access to a district clerk did. Whether this raises or lowers the overall barrier to political influence cannot be settled from these data, but the change in its location is documented. This pattern is consistent with Bussell's (2012) argument that digital reform can curb lower-level discretion while leaving higher-level opportunities intact.

7.2 Where Relocated Discretion Settles

The relocation literature has documented that discretion moves, but it has been less precise about where it goes. The Punjab case suggests a general answer. Any rule-based allocation system depends on three functions that it cannot perform for itself (Table 4). Someone must specify the rules the system applies. Someone must establish the facts to which those rules are applied. And someone must decide what happens to cases the rules do not fit. Automation can execute rules on facts with great consistency, but it cannot choose the rules, certify the facts, or recognize the limits of its own categories. These three functions are therefore the natural destinations of relocated discretion, and each of the relocation sites identified in Punjab corresponds to one of them.

Table 4. The anatomy of relocated discretion

Function	Question it answers	Site in Punjab	Holders of discretion
Rule specification	What counts, and how much?	Criteria design	SED policymakers, in exchange with PITB
Fact establishment	What is true of this applicant?	Data verification and correction	District Education Authority officials
Exception granting	What happens to cases the rules do not fit?	Hardship certification	District committees, ministerial and civil-administration oversight

This account connects the relocation expectation to the codifiability argument of Young et al. (2019). The more fully a task can be specified in advance, the more completely its execution can be automated, but specification itself, and the handling of what escapes specification, remain irreducibly discretionary. The framework is portable: it predicts that in any rule-based allocation system, digitization will concentrate discretion at rule specification, fact establishment, and exception granting, and that the political significance of each will depend on who controls it.

7.3 Discretion Reclamation

The literature largely treats digitization as something that acts on bureaucracy. The Round 22 decision shows bureaucracy, and the political principals above it, acting on digitization. The SED did not merely fail to automate a category; it reversed automation that already existed, against the advice of its technical implementer. The article terms this *discretion reclamation*: the deliberate de-automation of a category by principals seeking to recover judgment over it. Reclamation differs from ordinary relocation because it is intentional and reversible. Subsequent amendments to the transfer policy provide for hardship transfer orders to be issued through the SIS portal throughout the year (SED, 2025), which suggests that the boundary between automated and manual processing continues to move. In politically saturated allocation, where discretion has political value, the boundary of automation should be understood as contested and dynamic rather than as a fixed outcome of system design.

7.4 Friction Loss

Reconstituted discretion in the Punjab case arises from a mechanism the article terms *friction loss*. Administrative burden research has emphasized the costs that procedures impose on citizens and how those costs exclude (Moynihan et al., 2015). Reducing those costs is a legitimate aim of digital reform, and in Punjab it produced real gains in access and speed. Friction, however, also performs incidental work: it screens out applications that participants do not seriously intend. When digitization collapses compliance costs without building in a substitute, such as a cascade mechanism, a commitment device, or a proportionate consequence, strategic behavior that friction once suppressed becomes available. The implication is not that burdens should be restored, but that designers of low-friction systems must anticipate the behavioral functions friction previously served.

7.5 Propositions

The analysis yields four propositions for testing in other politically saturated allocation systems, such as postings in other provincial services, university admissions, or public licensing.

1. *Bounded curtailment.* Digitization curtails discretion in the routine allocation core of a politically saturated allocation system in proportion to the codifiability of the allocation criteria.
2. *Functional relocation.* Discretion displaced from the allocation core concentrates at rule specification, fact establishment, and exception granting, and its political significance varies with the proximity of those functions to elected principals.
3. *Reclamation.* The more politically valuable a category of allocation, the more likely principals are to de-automate it, particularly where the category is sympathetic and publicly salient.
4. *Friction loss.* Where digitization reduces the compliance costs of participation without introducing substitute commitment mechanisms, new forms of strategic behavior by applicants will emerge.

8. Implications

8.1 For Theory

The findings support extending the digital-discretion framework to politically saturated allocation, with modification. The three-expectation structure travels, and so does the configuration verdict. What changes is the character of the discretion analyzed and the dynamics that follow from it. In welfare agencies, the question is what automation does to professional judgment. In politically saturated allocation, discretion carries political value, which means that its displacement generates incentives to recover it. Relocation in such systems is therefore not only an organizational by-product of automation but also a site of political contestation, and the boundary of automation itself becomes an object of struggle. This helps explain why technically capable digital reforms in patronage-saturated contexts can deliver genuine gains at their core while remaining vulnerable at their edges (Bussell, 2012; Heeks, 2002).

8.2 For Policy

The e-transfer system has delivered substantial gains in speed, transparency, and freedom from clerk-level gatekeeping. The analysis points to four reforms that would extend comparable accountability to the sites where discretion now resides.

1. *Build a documented exception pathway within the portal.* The 2025 amendments, which provide for hardship transfer orders to be issued through the portal, move partway in this direction. Routine hardship applications can be processed digitally against published criteria, while a recorded, reason-giving track handles genuinely unusual cases. This preserves the flexibility the department legitimately requires without returning the whole category to opacity, consistent with the principle that automated administration should retain reason-giving (Coglianese, 2021).
2. *Make data-correction decisions time-bound and recorded.* Because a single record error can move a teacher across a cutoff, objections and their outcomes should be logged in the portal with a decision deadline and a stated reason.
3. *Introduce a cascade mechanism for declined posts.* Automatically offering declined posts to the next eligible candidate would address seat wastage without requiring punitive measures, and would reduce the payoff to speculative applications.
4. *Publish an annual transfer calendar with fixed vacancy-disclosure dates.* Announcing rounds and disclosure dates at the start of each academic year would reduce uncertainty and narrow the scope for strategic timing.

The fifth site, criteria design, is appropriately a matter of policy authority rather than of system design, and the four recommendations above therefore leave it alone. Its accountability depends instead on transparency about how and why weights change, which could be served by publishing the rationale for each revision alongside the revised schedule.

8.3 Limitations and Future Research

Four limitations bound the findings. First, the study rests on six interviews and documents. It can establish that discretion sites exist and where they are located, but not how frequently discretion is exercised at each, and the evidence for non-actualization gaming in particular comes from implementer accounts alone. Second, the pre-digital baseline is reconstructed retrospectively, largely from the accounts of officials who later built its replacement. Third, the study cannot establish the motives behind the Round 22

decision, only its effects on the location of discretion. Fourth, a single case cannot establish the generality of the propositions.

Each limitation suggests a direction for further work. Administrative data on transfer rounds could quantify non-actualization and correction disputes across districts and cadres; related research using such data has already documented distributional consequences of the system, including long vacancy durations in rural schools after teachers transfer out (Habib et al., 2026). Research with District Education Authorities could examine how verification discretion is exercised in practice. Process tracing of the 2024 and 2025 policy changes could illuminate the motives and coalitions behind reclamation and its partial reversal. And comparative studies of other politically saturated allocation systems in South Asia could test the four propositions directly.

9. Conclusion

This article asked where discretion goes when transfers go digital. In Punjab's teacher e-transfer system, it goes several places at once. It is curtailed at the routine core, where postings are now computed rather than negotiated. It is relocated to the three functions no rule engine can perform for itself: specifying rules, establishing facts, and granting exceptions. And it is reconstituted in new forms that the system's own mechanics made possible.

None of this amounts to a failure of the reform. Transfer cycles that took the better part of a year now take weeks, and merit lists that were opaque are now public and contestable. These are real achievements in a system widely regarded as dysfunctional. The findings show, however, that digitization in politically saturated allocation reorganizes discretion rather than abolishing it, and that the boundary of automation remains open to reclamation by those with an interest in judgment. The governance task that follows is to bring the relocated and reconstituted sites of discretion under accountability comparable to that now achieved at the automated core. The concept of politically saturated allocation, and the propositions developed here, offer a basis for examining whether the same dynamics hold in analogous systems across the Global South.

Declarations

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