Political Leadership and Bureaucratic Autonomy:

Effects of Agencification

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Previous studies have shown that agencification tends to reduce political control within a government portfolio. However, doubts have been raised as regards the robustness of these findings. In this article we document that agency officials pay significantly less attention to signals from executive politicians than their counterparts within ministerial (cabinet-level) departments. This finding holds when we control for variation in tasks, the political salience of issue areas and officials' rank. Simultaneously we observe that the three control variables all have an independent effect on officials' attentiveness to a steer from above. In addition we find that the more organizational capacity available within the respective ministerial departments, the more agency personnel tend to assign weight to signals from the political leadership. We apply large-N questionnaire data at three points in time; spanning two decades and shifting administrative doctrines.

Introduction[1]

Two decades of New Public Management (NPM) reforms have made the

agencification phenomenon highly topical and it has, not surprisingly then, attracted

considerable scholarly attention. Students have focused on the causes of NPM

agencification as well as on its consequences. Unfortunately, however, recent studies

have been inconclusive as regards the extent to which agencification has resulted in a

relative insulation of agency decision-making from political considerations

(Christensen and Lægreid 2006; 2007; Verhoest et al. 2004; Yesilkagit and Thiel 2008).

Drawing on large-N elite surveys covering three points in time (1986, 1996 and 2006), this article shows that:

- Agency officials pay significantly less attention to signals from executive politicians than their counterparts in ministerial departments. This observation is shown to be robust by being <u>consistent across time</u>.

- <u>This finding holds</u> when we control for variation in tasks, the political salience of issue areas, and officials' level of position. The finding that agency officials in general are less exposed to political control than their counterparts in ministerial departments means that there might be more leeway for expert-based decision-making or for taking other concerns into consideration within agencies, such as for example user and clientele interests.

- Simultaneously, the article also demonstrates that these three control variables all have <u>independent effects</u> on the dependent variable.

- In addition this study reveals that the more <u>organizational capacity</u> available in the respective ministerial departments, the more agency personnel tend to assign weight to signals from their respective ministers.

By an 'agency' we mean an administrative body which is formally and organizationally separated from a ministerial, or cabinet-level, department, and which carries out public tasks at a national level on a permanent basis, is staffed by public servants, is financed mainly by the state budget and is subject to public legal procedures. Agencies are supposed to enjoy some autonomy from their respective

ministerial departments as regards decision-making, including decision-making in managerial, personnel and budgetary matters. However, the respective ministers normally keep the political responsibility for agencies' activities (cf. Pollitt and Talbot 2004). Historically, ministries have been arranged either as 'integrated ministries', meaning that a ministerial portfolio constitutes a unitary organization, or as a vertically specialised structure, meaning that a portfolio is split into a ministerial, or cabinet-level, department on the one hand and one or more separate agencies on the other. Contingent upon administrative doctrines, fads and fashions, and administrative policy objectives and calculations, agencies seem to have been moved out of and into ministerial departments, often in a cyclical manner (Aucoin 1990; Hood and Jackson 1991; Pollitt 2008; Verhoest et al. 2007). Thus, although NPM has placed agencification high on the administrative policy agenda, agencification and de-agencification have in fact made up one of the enduring themes of public administration.

We proceed as follows: in the next section we develop the theoretical argument on the effects of agencification for political steering of the government apparatus. We then describe the data and method before we present the findings. Then follows a discussion on the robustness of the findings, implications for organizational design, and how semi-detached national agencies in European countries may re-couple into, and thus become parts of, an emerging multi-level European Union (EU) executive.

Agencification effects – the theoretical argument

Our point of departure is the assumption that institutional forms do matter, not only in shaping individual actors' strategies but also their preferences and identities (March and Olsen 1989). When analyzing agencification effects, we focus on one particular aspect of institutions, namely their organizational structure: we ask if assigning tasks to a body vertically separated from a ministerial department means that these tasks are dealt with differently than they would have been within a ministerial department. Thus, we assume that a certain drawing of organizational borderlines and specification of role expectations make a difference in terms of actual decision behaviour (Gulick 1937; Hammond 1990). The argument is not that a particular structural design determines actors' choices, rather that particular organisational forms make some choices more likely than others. This is not only due to the potential activation of rewards and punishments if role expectations are not met, but, perhaps even more important, due to the simplification that the organizational structure provides: it focuses attention on certain problems, solutions, consequences and conflicts while ignoring others. Given that individuals operate under conditions of 'bounded rationality' and limited cognitive capacities, a kind of 'perfect match' occurs between the individual actor's need for simplification on the one hand and the selection and filter that the structure provides on the other (Simon 1965). Since a decision-maker is unable to attend to everything at the same time and to consider all possible alternatives and their consequences, he or she will tend to

concentrate on those issues that a particular organizational unit expects him or her to focus on (Augier and March 2001).

In 2003 a review article summarized the findings on *inter alia* agencification effects (Egeberg 2003). It pointed to that although many of the same kinds of tasks are performed at the level of ministerial departments and agencies respectively (e.g. legislative proposals are worked out at both levels), policy choices are affected by the organizational context within which they are made: Compared with their counterparts in ministerial departments, agency officials exercise their discretion relatively insulated from ongoing political processes at the cabinet level (cf. also Greer 1994; Wood and Waterman 1991). Agency officials have relatively little contact with the political leadership of their respective ministries, with other ministerial departments than their parent department, and with parliament. Most typically they tend to give priority to professional considerations rather than political concerns, and they also usually assign more weight to user and clientele concerns than to signals from executive politicians. This loss of political control can be partly compensated for by strengthening relevant organizational units in the respective ministerial departments ('organizational duplication'). In ministerial departments, on the other hand, top priority is given to signals from the minister but also to professional concerns. Considerably less emphasis is attached to user and client interests (Egeberg 2003). Thus, the implication for organizational design seems to be that a vertically integrated ministry represents the best way to safeguard political control in all

phases of the policy process (Desveaux 1995; Hult 1987). Vertical specialisation through agencification may, on the other hand, secure that more independent expert considerations are fed into the policy process at various stages. Such a split between a ministerial department on the one hand and an agency on the other also seems to give user and client groups a stronger voice.

NPM agencification studies seem to be less conclusive on effects as regards the degree of political control. In a review chapter, Christensen and Lægreid (2006: 30) emphasize that the *de facto* autonomy of agencies may vary according to various circumstances such as agency tasks and the political salience and conflict potential of an issue area. Thus, real agency autonomy might not correspond with formal autonomy (see also Yesilkagit and Thiel 2008). In this article we will control for such factors since there are good reasons to believe that they *could* be important. The question is, however, whether such variables are so strongly related to the amount of ministerial steering that the effect of organizational structure (agencification) disappears altogether. Accordingly, this could be the case if agency personnel deal with tasks that are typically 'political' - such as legislative proposals - allowing much discretion. 'Political' tasks could make agency officials subject to the same amount of political supervision as their colleagues in ministerial departments. In effect, agencification would not matter. Also, it might be the case that agency officials whose issue area is characterized by public debate and conflict are more inclined to attach importance to a political steer from the top. And, finally, if one controls for

officials' rank it could be that senior officials in agencies are as politically attentive as their counterparts in ministerial departments. When analyzing the relationship between officials' organizational position (ministerial department versus agency) on the one hand and the weight officials assign to signals from their respective executive politicians on the other, our data allow us to control for the impact of these other variables across three points in time. Importantly, our data contain 'pre-NPM observations' (1986), 'NPM observations' (1996) and 'post-NPM observations' (2006). As regards agency personnel, our data allow us to investigate whether their political attentiveness is related to the amount of organizational capacity found within their respective ministerial departments. We will also show the relative importance of professional considerations and the importance attached to user and client interests. However, in the following analysis we will mainly focus on officials' attentiveness to political signals from above as the dependent variable.

Data and method

This article relies on six large-N surveys within the Norwegian central administration - both at the ministry level and the agency level (see Table 1 below). Over the last 30 years, a group of Norwegian scholars have each decade conducted surveys in the Norwegian central administration (1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006). This study reports from the surveys from 1986, 1996 and 2006. The 1976 survey is not

included in our analysis because this survey did not incorporate agencies subordinate to the ministry level.

Both the 1986 and the 1996 surveys consist of separate date files for ministry officials and agency officials, albeit no combined data file encompassing all government officials (see Table 1 below). Similarly, the 2006 survey consists of separate data files for ministry officials and agency officials, however, also including a combined data file that cover both ministry and agency officials (N = 3326). This combined 2006 file renders possible an analysis of the relationship between officials' organizational position (ministerial department versus agency) on the one hand and the weight officials assign to signals from their respective executive politicians on the other hand, controlled for the three independent variables discussed in the former section (see Table 6 below). Consequently, a regression analysis that incorporates this organizational variable is possible by utilizing the combined 2006 data file.

Whereas the surveys from 1986 and 1996 were distributed to the respondents by postal mail, the 2006 survey was conducted as an online survey by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service. As shown by Table 1, the total response rates have decreased only marginally during this 20 years period. The drop in response rates from 1996 to 2006 may partly stem from a change of survey technology from postal survey to online survey. The effects of survey technologies on response rates are largely unknown in the literature (Simsek and Veiga 2001: 224) and therefore difficult

to conclude in this particular study. One additional explanation for decreasing response rates may be a general fatigue among respondents towards surveys more broadly. The drop in response rate from 1986 to 1996 may reflect such a dynamic because both surveys were using the same technology (postal survey).

All six surveys encompass officials from all Norwegian ministries (currently 18 ministries in total) and subordinated agencies (currently 51 agencies in total). At all time periods, the survey at the ministerial level was sent to *all* officials at the level equivalent to the 'A-level' with a minimum of one year in office. Appointment at this level usually requires a university degree. Hence, the sample of this survey is the total universe of 'A-level' civil servants in Norwegian ministries. The surveys at the agency level were distributed to a random selection of *every third* official at the 'A-level' with at least one year in office. The main reason for selecting only a random number of agency officials is the large staff numbers in the agencies. Together, these surveys represent the most thorough screening of the Norwegian central administration, and are also probably among the most extensive surveys of domestic central administrations in international comparison (see also Geuijen et al. 2008). Table 1 shows the sizes of the samples and response rates in the ministry and agency surveys from 1986, 1996 and 2006.

Table 1 Sample sizes and response rates in the ministry and agency surveys, 1986, 1996 and 2006

	Ministry surveys			Agency surveys		
	1986	*1996*	*2006*	*1986*	*1996*	*2006*
N	1185	1497	1874	1072	1024	1452
Response rates	72 %	72 %	67 %	68 %	64 %	59 %

Two caveats are needed: As in most social sciences based on interview and survey data, the observations reported in this article rest on the *perceptions* of the respondents. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that actors' perceptions of administrative behavior always reflect actual behavior. Studying actors' perceptions render the conclusions vulnerable to perceptual errors. However, by using large-N data from *two* different groups of respondents at *three* different points in time render the conclusions less subject to random distributions and methodological errors. Secondly, the effects of organizational duplication are only possible to discern within the agency surveys because this variable was never included in the ministry surveys. Concomitantly, a complete statistical control of organizational duplication is not possible.

Finally, to what extent are our empirical observations generalizable? The sheer statistical distribution of agencification across countries should not in itself matter

with regard to the *effects* of agencification on the potential for political steering. These effects are arguably conditioned by particular organizational forms, not by the statistical distribution of these forms. Although a reluctant reformer, the Norwegian government is nevertheless an integral part of the OECD area, thus sharing many of the key characteristics of the constituent states (Christensen and Lægreid 2006). Secondly, the impact of agencification on the potential for political steering as observed in this article may also be relevant at other levels of governance than the national one. For example, agencification at the EU level has accompanied more than 30 agency-like bodies organized at arm's length from the Community institutions in Brussels. Thus, the results reported in our study might be of some relevance also for understanding agencification effects at the European level (Trondal and Jeppesen 2008).

How does agencification matter?

In this section we present the survey results. First, a general overview of the signals and considerations deemed important by officials at the ministerial department level and the agency level respectively is provided. Observations are available at three points in time: 1986, 1996 and 2006. Table 2 reveals a considerable difference between ministry and agency officials as regards their attentiveness to signals from executive politicians. This difference is quite clear across time, although agency personnel assign somewhat more weight to political signals in 2006 than before. Professional

considerations are deemed important by an overwhelming majority at both levels at all three points in time. User and client concerns rank relatively high and particularly so at the agency level where such concerns are more frequently evoked than political concerns.

Table 2 Percent government officials who consider the following <u>signals and considerations</u> important when doing their work[a,b]

Administrative level:	Ministry officials			Agency officials		
Year:	1986	1996	2006	1986	1996	2006
Signals from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, state secretary)	90	89	89	53	58	67
Professional considerations	90	91	95	92	93	94
Signals from users, clients, affected parties	67	58	67	80	71	77
Mean N	794	1435	1848	635	975	1333

a) *This table combines value 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*
b) *Comparing Mean N for 1986 with sample size for 1986 (Table 1), the number of missing values seems rather high. The reason is that the 1986 questionnaire included a filter question that allowed only those exercising a certain amount of discretion to answer the question on importance attached to various signals. Thus, those not exercising the required amount of discretion are added to the missing values cases.*

In Table 3 we investigate whether organizational structure matters when controlling for the kind of <u>tasks</u> officials have. As expected, a larger proportion of those spending much of their working time on political tasks - that is tasks with a lot of

discretion - consider signals from executive politicians as important compared to those not having such tasks. We also find that although officials at both levels are involved in legislative proposals, there is a considerable difference in terms of political sensitivity depending on their organizational position. Agency personnel are significantly less attentive to political signals than their counterparts within ministerial departments even when they engage in typically political decision-making, such as law preparation. The pattern is quite consistent across the three points in time.

Table 3 Percent officials who consider <u>political signals</u>[a] from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, state secretary) important, by working time devoted to <u>making/changing laws, regulations, agreements, conventions</u>[b]

Adm. level:	*Ministry officials*						*Agency officials*					
Year:	*1986*		*1996*		*2006*		*1986*		*1996*		*2006*	
Working time devoted to making/changing laws, regulations, agreements, conventions:	*Much*	*Little*	*Much*	*Little*	*Much*	*Little*	*Much*	*Little*	*Much*	*Little*	*Much*	*Little*
Signals from the political leadership	95	88	95	88	96	85	63	51	75	55	76	59

N	169	619	299	1044	403	1471	82	529	123	787	175	1277

a) *This variable combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*

b) *This variable is dichotomous with the following values: value 1 ("Much") combines the following two original values: very dominating part of working time (value 1), fairly dominating part of working time (value 2). Value 2 ("Little") combines the following three original values: some working time (value 3), fairly little working time (value 4), very little/no working time (value 5).*

By controlling for the degree to which <u>political debate</u> takes place within an issue area we also, as for legislative work, try to find out whether the political salience of a policy field matters as regards officials' attentiveness to signals from their executive politicians. The question on public debate was not posed in 1996. Table 4 shows, as expected, that public debate tends to make officials more politically sensitive. However, the impact of organizational structure is at the same time pretty clear: Even if the level of public debate is kept constant, a considerably smaller proportion of agency personnel attach importance to signals from executive politicians compared to ministry personnel. Again, the finding is quite consistent across time.

Table 4 Percent officials who consider <u>political signals</u>[a] from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, state secretary) important, by the degree of <u>public debate</u> on the issue area that the officials are working on[b]

Adm. level:	Ministry officials				Agency officials			
Year:	1986		2006		1986		2006	
Political								

contestation:	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Signals from the political leadership	94	83	95	80	67	47	77	64
N	465	330	973	901	185	426	132	193

a) This variable combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).

b) This variable is dichotomous with the following values: value 1 combines the following two original values: to a very large extent (value 1), to a fairly large extent (value 2). Value 2 combines the following three original values: both/and (value 3), to a fairly little extent (value 4), to a very little extent (value 5).

In Table 5 we control for the effect of officials' rank. As expected, a larger proportion of senior officials consider political signals to be important compared to lower level personnel. However, by keeping level of position constant we see that organizational affiliation (ministerial department versus agency) makes a significant difference: Agency personnel are clearly less inclined to deem signals from executive politicians as important as their counterparts within ministerial departments.

Table 5 Percent officials who consider political signals[a] from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, state secretary) important, by positional level[b]

Adm. level:	Ministry officials						Agency officials					
Year:	1986		1996		2006		1986		1996		2006	
Positional level:	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Signals from the	96	84	94	84	94	82	61	45	68	52	73	62

political leadership												
N	377	418	737	698	1030	789	275	337	332	609	578	730

a) *This variable combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*

b) *This variable is dichotomous with the following values at the ministry level: A high position includes the following ranks: Principal officer/adviser, Assistant director general/adviser, Deputy director general/adviser, Director general/adviser, and positions over the level of Director general. A low position includes the following ranks: Executive officer, higher executive officer/adviser. At the agency level a high position includes the following four ranks: Principal adviser/adviser, Assistant director general/adviser, Deputy director general/adviser, and Director or equivalent. A low position includes executive officer, higher executive officer/adviser.*

Since the 2006 data also contain a common file for ministry and agency officials (cf. Data and Method Section), it is possible to run a multiple regression analysis including the four independent variables dealt with so far. Table 6 shows that the amount of political debate within a policy field and officials' organizational position (ministry versus agency) are both fairly strongly related to officials' political attentiveness. The position level of personnel and their tasks are much weaker related to attentiveness although the relationships are statistically significant. Our primary purpose is to demonstrate that agencification (organizational position) has an independent effect, which indeed seems to be the case. However, at the same time the variables included explain a considerable part of the variance of the dependent variable.

Table 6 Summary of factors affecting officials' perceptions of the importance of signals from the political leadership (Standardised Beta coefficients. Linear regressions on ministry and agency officials, 2006 data) [a]

b. Organizational position (ministry versus agency)[b]	.25**
c. Working time on making/changing laws, regulations, agreements, conventions[c]	.12**
d. Public debate[d]	.28**
e. Level of position[e]	.13**
R^2	.24
Adjusted R^2	.24
F Statistic	213.662
Significance F	.000

*) $p \leq 0.05$ **) $p \leq 0.01$

Original question: "How much importance to you put on the following considerations and signals when you do your work?"

    a) *The dependent variable in this table has an ordinal scale with the following values: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*

    b) *Value 1: Ministry official, value 2: agency official.*

    c) *This variable has the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*

    d) *This variable has the following five-point scale: to a very great extent (value 1), to a fairly great extent (value 2), both/and (value 3), to a fairly little extent (value 4), to a very little extent (value 5).*

    e) *This variable has the following five values: Director general or higher levels/adviser/Director or equivalent (value 1), deputy director general (value 2), Assistant director general/adviser (value 3), Principal officer/adviser (value 4), Executive officer, higher executive officer/adviser (value 5).*

Agency personnel have, at all three points in time, been asked to what extent their parent ministerial departments contain <u>organizational units that duplicate or overlap</u>

the portfolio of their respective agencies. Table 7 unveils that such duplication indeed makes a difference as regards political attentiveness at the agency level. Consistently across time, approximately 70 percent of those experiencing duplication assign importance to signals from the political leadership while this holds for only about 40 percent of those not having this experience. However, in comparison, we should remember that about 90 percent of ministry personnel attach importance to signals from above. In Table 8 we present a multiple regression analysis showing the relative effect of the independent variables, including organizational duplication, on the importance of political signals from executive politicians. As said, this analysis can only cover agency personnel. Therefore, the analysis does not include the variable 'organizational position'. Table 8 serves to demonstrate that organizational duplication, tasks and position level all have a moderate effect while public debate again turns out to be more strongly related to officials' political attentiveness.

Table 7 Percent agency officials who consider <u>political signals</u>[a] from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, state secretary) important, by <u>organisational duplication</u> between the agencies and the ministries[b]

Year:	1986		1996		2006	
Organisational duplication:	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Signals from the						

political leadership	68	40	71	43	72	47
N	270	343	498	448	831	621

a) *This variable combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).*

b) *This variable is dichotomous with the following values: Organisational duplication (Yes) includes the following original values: Yes, overlapping ministerial department (value 1), yes, overlapping offices, sections etc (value 2). No organisational duplication (No) includes the following original values: yes, overlapping single position(s) (value 3), no, no particular overlapping units/positions (value 4).*

Table 8 Summary of factors affecting agency officials' perceptions of the importance of <u>signals from the political leadership</u> (Standardised Beta coefficients. Linear regressions on agency officials, 2006 data) [a]

b. Organisational duplication between agency and parent ministry[b]	.13**
c. Working time on making/changing laws, regulations, agreements, conventions[c]	.10**
d. Level of position[d]	.13**
e. Public debate[e]	.24**
R^2	.14
Adjusted R^2	.14
F Statistic	47.009
Significance F	.000

*) $p \leq 0.05$ **) $p \leq 0.01$
Original question: "How much importance to you put on the following considerations and signals when you do your work?"

a. The dependent variable in this table has an ordinal scale with the following values: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).
b. This variable is dichotomous with the following values: value 1 includes the following original values: Yes, departments (value 1), yes, offices, sections etc (value 2). Value 2 includes the following original values: yes, single position(s) (value 3), no, no particular units/positions (value 4).
c. This variable has the following five-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5).
d. This variable has the following values: Director or equivalent (value 1), Deputy director general/adviser (value 2), Assistant director general/adviser (value 3), Principal officer/adviser (value 4), Executive officer, Higher executive officer/adviser (value 5).
e. This variable has the following five-point scale: to a very great extent (value 1), to a fairly great extent (value 2), both/and (value 3), to a fairly little extent (value 4), to a very little extent (value 5).

Discussion

The organizational setting within which decision-making takes place seems to make a clear difference: Officials within ministerial departments are significantly more sensitive to signals from executive politicians than their counterparts within national agencies. The relationship is a robust one: it holds when controlling for type of tasks, the amount of public debate and contestation and officials' rank. Last, but not least, the findings are highly consistent across time. We have also seen that almost all officials, regardless of organizational position, deem professional considerations as important in their daily work. At the agency level, the more modest attention to political signals from above seems partly 'compensated for' by more emphasis on user and client interests. This may illustrate that the autonomous institution is seldom found; more autonomy gained in one relationship may be followed by more dependence in another relationship (Olsen 2008; Thatcher 2002). Thus, officials routinely have to cope with what might become competing expectations.

Our findings seem to be relatively independent of shifting administrative doctrines. Although NPM reforms may have resulted in an increased number of agencies, the *effects* are quite stable across time. However, since it is often assumed that the relationship between formal structure and actual behaviour is relatively weak in this respect (e.g. Christensen and Lægreid 2006), we might have expected that changing doctrines could have made a difference as regards agency decision-making. This is not the case: the proportion of agency personnel emphasizing political signals is not smaller in 1996 (the NPM period) than it was in 1986 (the pre-NPM period). User and clientele concerns did not come more to the fore during the NPM period. Agency personnel seem to become slightly more sensitive to political considerations in 2006. This could be interpreted as stemming from post-NPM doctrines like the 'joined-up government' trend. It is, however, more likely that this rather moderate change is due to an increasing level of political conflict and public debate.[2] As shown in the former section, the level of public debate is significantly related to officials' political attentiveness. Studies that have documented weak relationships between agencies' degree of formal autonomy and real autonomy (Lægreid et al. 2006; Yesilkagit and Thiel 2008) are compatible with the findings reported in this article: Our study provides data on agency decision-making *as well as* ministry decision-making and shows that organizational position (ministry vs. agency) makes a significant difference.

Our study adds to a knowledge basis for organizational design. One design implication is that if control by executive politicians is the overriding concern, portfolios should be organized solely as integrated ministries. If, on the other hand, one wants to mute signals from the political leadership and to some extent insulate professional considerations from political concerns, agencification is an option. Agencification may also lead to more weight being assigned to user and client interests. In a legislative process the existence of agencies thus underpins the role of 'un-politicized' expert advice, however, it may also strengthen the involvement of directly affected parties in the process. As regards implementation processes, such as law application, agencies may safeguard more equal treatment of individual cases across time regardless of shifting ministers of various political colours. If one aims at enhancing political steering while keeping agencies for other reasons, the establishment of organizational units within ministerial departments that overlap agency portfolios is an alternative. As shown, such organizational duplication boosts agency personnel's political attentiveness without annulling the difference that agencification makes in this respect.

National agencies organized at arm's length from their parent ministerial departments and which also in practice are partly encapsulated from direct steering from these departments constitute an administrative infrastructure that is relatively open for capture by external actors. We are here not thinking about 'agency capture' by clientele or regulatees (slightly touched upon above) but about national agencies

in European countries partly becoming building blocks of a multi-level EU administration. The main EU executive body, the European Commission, lacks its own agencies at the national level for the implementation of EU policies. In order to create more uniform implementation across the Union there are indications that the European Commission in cooperation with EU-level agencies establishes kind of partnerships with national agencies for this purpose, partly circumventing ministerial departments. National agencies are thus becoming 'double-hatted', or 'multi-hatted', serving both national ministries and EU-level bodies (Egeberg 2006; Egeberg and Trondal 2009; Martens 2008). Agency de-coupling (from ministerial departments) at the national level makes agency re-coupling across levels of governance possible. Integrated ministries would not have been conducive to such a development. Thus, re-coupling ('de-agencification') at the national level would seriously challenge administrative integration across levels of governance.

Conclusion

Agencification has, probably due to the NPM phenomenon, been high on the agenda of administrative policy-makers for a couple of decades. However, one of the enduring themes of public administration is whether a government portfolio should be organized as an integrated ministry or as a dual organization composed of a ministerial department and one or several semi-detached national agencies. Although many studies have documented systematic effects of agencification on

bureaucratic behaviour, such as less political control of decision-making at the agency level, doubt has been raised as regards the robustness of these findings. Quite reasonable questions have been asked in this respect: Is it not reason to believe that if one controls for the effect of tasks (more or less 'political'), the amount of public debate and conflict within a policy field, or officials' rank, one could very well find that agencification effects might disappear? In fact all these three factors have an independent effect on officials' political attentiveness, however, they do not at all annul the impact of agencification. In addition, overlapping organizational resources within ministerial departments seem to affect the importance attached to political signals. Our findings are remarkably consistent across three points in time, spanning two decades and shifting administrative doctrines.

This article has focused on the weight assigned to signals from executive politicians. As a by-product, though, it has been shown that professional considerations are very much alluded to at either level. Agency personnel emphasize user and client interests more than their counterparts within ministerial departments; they even rank such concerns higher than a steer from their political masters. We have also argued that the relative de-coupling of agencies, not only formally but also in practice, from the hierarchical chain of command has created an administrative infrastructure that may be highly conducive to re-coupling of national agencies in European countries into an emerging multi-level EU executive. Finally, we have pointed to some potential implications of our study for organizational design.

Notes

[2] Our data show that while in 1986 29 percent of agency officials reported that there was much public debate within their respective policy fields, 46 percent said the same in 2006.

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