

# Public Administration Sustainability and its Organizational Basis

## Abstract

Benefiting from a novel data-set spanning nearly half a century, this study probes the sustainability of public governance. Theoretically, it examines how sustainable public governance rests on its organizational fabric. The study illuminates how organizational factors systematically influence decision-making behaviour and thus administrative governance across time. Moreover, the study argues that since organization structure is amendable to deliberate manipulative change, it may thus be an important *design instrument* of the context of choice in public governance. Accordingly, the paper offers an avenue to build bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds of public administration. Empirically and methodologically, the study offers a novel large-N (13 173) and longitudinal data-set that spans five observation points in 1976, 1986, 1996, 2006 and 2016, 9 surveys at ministry and agency levels, and several generations of government officials. Taken together, the data-set demonstrates both administrative sustainability in public administration and probes its organizational basis.

## Points for practitioners

A sustainable public administration is a necessary condition for public service delivery. Based on from observations that spans 40 years (1976 to 2016), this study offers an opportunity to test public governance over time. The data-set enables us to systematically trace public governance processes over half a century. Secondly, this study examines how sustainable public governance rests on its organizational fabric. Organizational factors systematically influence decision-making behaviour and arguably influence administrative governance.

Moreover, organization structure is amendable to deliberate manipulative change and may thus be an important *design instrument* of the context of choice in public governance. As such, the paper offers an avenue to build bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds of public administration.

**Key words:** Central administration, decision-making behavior, design, organizational approach, public governance, sustainability

## **Introduction**

Whereas a vast body of scholarly literature suggests that public sector organizations are profoundly unstable and thus unsustainable in the long run (e.g. Ansell and Torfing 2014; Ansell and Trondal 2017), this study suggests that public governance processes are profoundly stable and sustainable. However, whereas most studies of public governance rely on cross-sectional data-sets, this paper benefits from a novel data-set that spans 40 years and is thus able to probe the sustainability of public governance by using a long time-frame. Theoretically, this study argues that sustainable public governance profoundly rests on its organizational fabric. The paper thus adds an organizational approach to public governance studies. These twin contributions are important since times of administrative reform and turbulence has put to question the sustainability of public sector organizations and thus public service delivery (e.g. Alvesson and Spicer 2019; Ansell et al. 2017; Olsen 2017, 2018).

Periods of political and economic turbulence call for studying conditions for political order and for safeguarding sustainable public service delivery. However, political science and public administration harbor competing claims and ideas on the robustness of governments and public organizations (Bouilloud et al. 2019; Fligstein 2001). A vast literature suggest that

*public* organizations are particularly dependent on and adapts to its task environment (e.g. Meyer et al 1997; Selznick 2015; Tolbert and Zucker 1983). This argument advocates that public organizations are profoundly embedded into their adjacent environments (Fligstein 2001; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) and that they have to continuously reform if they wish to grow and survive (Selznick 1958). A pragmatist literature also suggests a middle ground between stability and responsiveness in which organizations both defend core values at the same time as they permanently adapt to on-going problems it confronts (Ansell et al. 2015; Bouilloud et al. 2019). Despite critical literature argues that environmental demands are often diffuse or at times inconsistent (Kraatz 2015), a general empirical forecast from this argument has been that public administration tend to adapt effectively to its relevant task environment, and consequently that public governance processes – and public administration writ large – is unsustainable over longer periods of time. This paper, by contrast, suggests that public administration harbors profound sustainability (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen 2010; March and Olsen 1989; Streek and Thelen 2005) and that sustainable public governance rests on its organizational fabric. This study makes two contributions to literature:

- Theoretically, it introduces an organizational approach to the study of administrative sustainability. Three reasons motivate this theoretical choice: First, an organizational approach does not figure prominently in the governance literature (e.g. Bevir 2010; Levi-Faur 2012). Secondly, organizational factors arguably make a systematic and patterned impact on decision-making behaviour, and thus are likely to explain behavioural continuity among government civil servants over time (see Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Olsen 2006; Simon 1983: 22). Finally, organization structure, compared to other factors that might intervene in the policy process, is likely to be more amendable to deliberate manipulative change and may thus be an important design instrument of the context of choice in public governance

(Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Thaler and Sunstein 2009). As such, the paper offers an avenue to build bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds of public administration (O'Leary et al. 2010: 292). An organizational approach should thus also serve as an action program for political science, making it practically relevant for solving societal problems (see Egeberg and Trondal 2018).

- Empirically and methodologically, this study offers a novel large-N (13 173) and longitudinal data-set that spans 40 years. By building on a large number of observations with five observation-points over time, the data-set enables studying public governance processes over almost half a century. The data base consists of 9 surveys distributed to government officials in the central administration of Norway in 1976, 1986, 1996, 2006, 2016 (see beneath). Taken together, the paper demonstrates both administrative sustainability of the civil service and probes its organizational basis.

The time period studied is signified by profound change in the task environment of the civil service, such as the ups and downs of competing administrative reforms (e.g. Klenk and Reiter 2019; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017), rival calls for making the administrative state smarter and modern (e.g. Aucoin 1990; Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Emery and Giauque 2014; Kettl 2002), as well as competing and shifting ideas about forms of political association (Olsen 2017; Bulmer and Joseph 2016). Nevertheless, this paper argues and empirically shows that public administration is foremost characterized by profound sustainability in which key parameters of public governance processes remain profoundly stable (see also Christensen and Lægreid 2009; Pollitt 2008). Moreover, based on a large set of observations from two different groups of respondents (ministries and agencies) across 40 years and exposing them to similar questions this time period, makes our conclusions comparable

robust.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section outlines an organizational theory approach to account for decision-behaviour in public governance. Following a presentation of the data and methods, the empirical section highlights two key observations: First, the data documents systematic effects of the organizational structuring of the central administration on administrative behaviour. Secondly, the data shows a surprisingly degree of behavioural continuity over time. The paper concludes with a discussion and avenues for future research.

### **An organizational approach to administration sustainability**

This section outlines an organizational approach to administrative sustainability.

Sustainability is defined here as a set of stable patterns of governance processes over time, measured by a stable set of patterns of decision-making behaviour among civil servants (see below). Sustainability thus defined does not imply coordinated human interaction in organizations (e.g. Pfahl 2005) nor the role of public administration in wider societal sustainability (e.g. Delmas and Young 2009; Leuenberger and Bartle 2009), but merely that certain *patterns* of interaction are preserved *within* public organizations. To explain administrative sustainability, we need to understand how decision processes in government respond to a set of fairly stable organizational factors. Moreover, it is important to observe decision behaviour of government civil servants over time (Kettl 2002; Olsen 2017). Stable premises for behavioural choices are reflected in the organizational structure of the government apparatus (Fredrickson et al. 2012; Olsen 2017; Waldo 1952).

An organizational approach is grounded on the assumption that internal organizational characteristics may explain both how organizations act and how they change. Organizational

characteristics of the governmental apparatus systematically enable, constrain, and shape public governance processes, thus making some policy choices more likely than others. A theory of organization is thus also a theory of politics (Waldo 1952). Moreover, an organizational approach unpacks the complexity of public administration (Frederickson et al. 2012: 252). Organizational factors focus and mobilize attention and action capacity around certain problems and solutions while ignoring others, focus attention along particular lines of conflict and cooperation, and so on (Simon 1983: 21). An organizational approach posits that organizational factors are not merely an expression of symbol politics (Feldman and March 1981; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Brunsson 1989) but create systematic bias in individual human behaviour and also collective decision-making processes by directing and nudging individual and collective choices towards certain problems and solutions, thereby making certain outcomes more plausible than others (Fligstein 2001; Gulick 1937; Hammond 1986; Schattschneider 1975; Thaler and Sunstein 2009). Contemporary studies in organization theory has focused particular on the explanatory power of organizational factors such as organizational structure, demography and location (Egeberg 2012; Egeberg and Trondal 2018).

An organization structure is a normative structure composed of rules and roles specifying who is expected to what, when, and how (Scott and Davis 2016). It suggests how roles, power and responsibilities are distributed, controlled and coordinated. It influences decision-making behaviour by providing individuals with ‘a systematic and predictable selection of problems, solutions and choice opportunities’ (March and Olsen 1976). Whilst organizational structure does not necessarily predict nor determine actual decision-making behaviour, it does make some choices become more *likely* than others (e.g. Egeberg and Trondal 2018). As such, organization theory builds on decision theory with its focus on explaining decision-making

behaviour (Simon 1965). This entails that organizational factors do not impact *directly* on society; rather, they have an indirect effect by influencing the policy process. Bounded rationality (Simon 1965) is one of three key mechanisms that connect role expectations to behaviour; the organizational structure helps simplify actors' cognitive worlds by directing attention towards a selection of possible problems and solutions and ways to connect them. This concept holds that decision-makers operate under three restrictions: limited information in regards to possible solutions and alternatives, limited cognitive capacity to evaluate and process information, and limited time to make decisions. Consequently, actors opt for a selection of satisfactory alternatives instead of optimal ones and often turn to their immediate surroundings and readily available data and knowledge to find suitable choices (Simon 1965). The second mechanism, the logic of appropriateness, views human action as driven by internalized perceptions of what is perceived as appropriate (March and Olsen 1989). Lastly, actors may find that rule and role compliance is in accordance with their own self-interest and utility function. Organizations are thus incentive systems that administer rewards and punishments (e.g. Ostrom et al. 2015; Simon 1983).

One basic empirical prediction that follows from this is that public governance processes – and the decision-making behavior of civil servants – are likely to be influenced and biased more by the organizational structures of the central administration than by demands from the task environment. One caveat should however be mentioned: The above inference holds in strongly settled and institutionally orders but not necessarily in orders that are in the making or in transformation (Olsen 2017). That being said, an organizational approach implies that structural characteristics *within* central administrations bias behaviour. Three such structural variables are discussed in the following: Inter-organizational vertical specialization

(ministry/agency), intra-organizational specialization (rank), and organizational affiliation (seniority).

*Inter-organizational vertical specialization* denotes division of responsibility and labour between levels of authority. *Vertical specialization* is an organizational tool and an organizational signal to anchor relatively independent expertise in certain organizational units – such as government agencies – and thereby balance political loyalty and professional neutrality (e.g. Bach et al. 2015; Egeberg and Trondal 2017; Lægreid and Verhoest 2010; Pollitt and Talbot 2004). Government agencies are typically established to pursue the dual role as independent advisory expert body and at the same time acting as the loyal agent to the elected political leadership. Agencies established on arm's length distance may for example safeguard *continuity* in the governing process independently of shifting governments. Inter-organizational vertical specialization enable agencies to operate relatively insulated from political steering on the one hand but being relatively influenced by affected interests and professional concerns, often organized into advisory systems (Egeberg and Trondal 2009; Gornitzka and Sverdrup 2011; Veit et al. 2017; Verhoest 2017). Contrary to agencies, ministries are organizationally more exposed to direct political guidance and control. Proximity to political leadership significantly reduces ambiguities stemming from interpretive leeway in task execution (Egeberg and Trondal 2009).

One empirical prediction is that ministry officials, as opposed to agency officials, are likely to report that political institutions are relatively more important, that the administrative apparatus is relatively well coordinated, that they enjoy relatively more political influence and power, and that they have greater trust in the government apparatus.



*Intra-organizational vertical specialization* denotes division of responsibility and labour *within* levels of authority. This variable is measured here by official's rank within their respective ministry and agency. Higher ranked staff in both ministries and subordinated agencies is shown to be more attentive to political signals than lower ranked personnel (e.g. Egeberg and Sætren 1999; Christensen and Lægreid 2009). Studies show that top-ranked staff have a wider range of attention and tend to identify more frequently with organizations as wholes than staff located at lower echelons. Additionally, these officials are exposed to a broader range of information than lower level staff and thus may be more attentive to broader organizational perspectives than lower ranked personnel (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). It follows that government officials with lower ranks are more loosely coupled to the political leadership and have a more local perspective on task execution compared to higher ranked staff.

One empirical prediction is that officials in higher ranks, as opposed to officials in lower ranks, are likely to report that political institutions are relatively more important, that the administrative apparatus is relatively well coordinated, that they enjoy relatively more political influence and power, and that they have greater trust in the government apparatus.

*Organizational affiliation* consists generally of varying degrees of organizational loyalty, attachment, time and energy. A 'primary affiliation' can thus be defined as the structure to which participants are expected to devote most of their loyalty, time and energy. One empirical proxy would be high organizational seniority. A 'secondary affiliation' can be defined as the structure to which participants are expected to devote medium to low loyalty,

time and energy. One empirical proxy would be medium to low organizational seniority or length of service. It is assumed that intra-organizational socialization takes time and that it will induce actors to internalize certain patterns of organizational rules, norms and beliefs and dilute the impact of background factors such as gender and age (e.g. Peters et al. 2015; Selden 1997). It follows that secondary affiliations cannot be expected to shape actors' decision behaviour to the same extent as primary affiliations do. Secondary affiliations often include participation in collegial bodies, committees and networks (Egeberg 2012). Although one can assume that decision-making behaviour is a result of both primary *and* secondary affiliations, a *logic of primacy* would suggest that primary affiliation is likely to affect behaviour more extensively than the secondary (March 1994).

One empirical prediction is that officials with high seniority, as opposed to officials with lower seniority, are likely to report that political institutions are relatively more important, that the administrative apparatus is relatively well coordinated, that they enjoy relatively more political influence and power, and that they have greater trust in the government apparatus.

## **Data and methods**

The paper relies on 9 large-N surveys within the Norwegian central administration—both at the ministry level (N=7662) and the agency level (N=5511) (Table 1), collected by a group of Norwegian scholars, including the author. The surveys have been distributed to officials every 10<sup>th</sup> year from 1976 to 2016. The surveys cover bureaucrats' background, careers, internal and external contacts, priorities, perceptions, power relationships, reforms, trust, and internationalization broadly defined. This paper uses a selection of variables that are vastly used in contemporary literature to measure decision behaviour (e.g. Bouckaert et al. 2010;

Christensen and Lægveid 2008; Egeberg and Trondal 2019). That is, civil servants' perceptions on the importance of institutions, their coordination patterns, and trust relationships. By asking officials involved in the policy-making processes, the paper documents how civil servants over time assesses the influence of various institutions, the extent to which the civil service is deemed fragmented or coordinated, the degree to which civil servants enjoy influence and power, and the degree of mutual trust in different parts of the governing system. Essentially, the paper assesses continuity and change on these variables and how they vary with the organizational structuring of the central administration. As to the latter, the 1986, 1996 and 2006 surveys consist of separate data files for ministry and agency officials. Moreover, the 2016 survey also consists of separate data files for ministry officials and agency officials as well as a combined data file that covers both ministry and agency officials (N = 4285). This combined 2016 file renders possible to do separate analyses on the relationship between inter-organizational vertical specialization (ministerial department versus agency) and their decision-making behaviour. Consequently, the theoretical potential of the data-set is vast by encompassing this central structural characteristic of the central administration.

--Table 1 about here--

Survey technology has changed during these 40 years: Whereas the surveys from 1986 and 1996 were distributed to respondents by postal mail, the Norwegian Social Science Data Service conducted the 2006 and 2016 surveys as online surveys. Despite change of survey technology and survey fatigue, the total response rates dropped only marginally over time (see Table 1). Still, a slight descent in response rates from 1996 onwards 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 establish 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).

The surveys encompass officials from all Norwegian ministries and all subordinated agencies. At all periods, the survey at the ministerial level was distributed to *all* officials at the level equivalent to the 'A-level' with a minimum of *one year* in office. Hence, the sample covers 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 the world (see also Geuijen et al. 2008).

Two caveats are needed: As in most social sciences based on interview and survey data, the observations reported rest on the *perceptions* of the respondents. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that actors' perceptions of administrative behaviour always reflect actual behaviour. Studying actors' perceptions renders the conclusions vulnerable to perceptual errors. However, by using large-N data from *two* different groups of respondents across 40 years, we render the conclusions less subject to random distributions and methodological errors. Secondly, are the empirical observations generalizable? Norway has been pictured as a reluctant reformer and a slow learner of administrative reforms (Olsen 1997). As such, the

data might over-emphasize continuity over change. 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; Verhoest 2017). Even more, such administrative characteristics – such as agencification – is also prevalent at the EU, resulting in more than 30 agency-like bodies organized at arm’s length from the Community institutions in Brussels. Thus, the results reported should be of relevance also for understanding sustainable governance more generally (Egeberg and Trondal 2017).

### **Public governance during 40 years**

This section study civil servants’ perceptions of institutional importance in the policy process (tables 3 and 4), their views on power and influence (tables 5 and 6), and coordination and fragmentation of the administrative service (tables 7, 8 and 9). Before entering survey findings, however, the below figures show a steadily growth in the central administration in staff numbers which has supplied public governance with ever-greater administrative capacities. The same period is characterized by increased administrative reform: Whereas the number of ministries and agencies has remained constant, they have been subject to internal reforms, such as enlargement of units, reshuffling of units, and the merger of units (Christensen et al. 2018). However, the overall organizational architecture of the central administration remain stable over time as regards vertical and horizontal specialization.

--Table 2 about here--

**On institutional importance:** Tables 3 and 4 provides a thorough review of how civil servants in ministries and agencies judge the importance of different institutions and units over time. We ask them to make this judgement when important decisions within their own

dossier are made. Both tables demonstrate how civil servants' views on the importance of institutions reflect the organizational structure of the civil service – both intra- and inter-organizationally. Firstly, own organizational affiliation is generally viewed as more important than other organizations. For example, ministerial officials view own ministry as far more important than other ministries. Similar patterns are discerned for agency officials. Secondly, assessments of institutional importance tend to drop profoundly when crossing organizational boundaries – both horizontally and vertically. One interesting observation is that ministerial officials increasingly view 'own agencies and public business' as more important over time (48% in 1976 and 65% in 2016), whilst agency officials deem 'own ministry' as increasingly important (64% in 1986 and 78% in 2016). This observation signifies increasing integration between ministries and agencies over time, similar to the 'whole of government' trend with increased focus on administrative coordination and cohesion. A surprising observation is stability in the role of the media. Whereas it is observed that mass media increasingly influence government agendas (Strömbäck and Esser 2015; Figenschou et al. 2017), our data suggests few effects over time, even at the ministerial level. While we observe a steadily increase in the reported role of mass media from 1976 to 2006, we see a sudden drop from 2006 to 2016. The latter *might* partly be explained by the inroad of information and communication specialists in government during this period, and a corresponding less direct contact between government officials and media.

Reflecting organizational structure, respondents in ministerial department view political institutions as more important than respondents at agency level: The government and the parliament is deemed far more important among ministerial staff than among agency staff. Table 3 also shows that ministerial staff increasingly emphasizes the role of political institutions. The latter finding suggests increased politicization of ministerial departments.

Yet, a parallel process of politicization is not observed at agency level, thus suggesting a growing politics – administration gap over time. Yet, at a more general level both Tables 3 and 4 document profound continuity over time in how civil servants view institutional importance. Similar levels of continuity over time is observed with respect to the importance ascribed to supranational and international governmental institutions. These are robust observations due to the time span of these observations and that several generations of civil servants have answered similar questions.

-- Tables 3 and 4 about here--

It is primarily ministerial-level officials who report change over time, notably by ascribing less importance to sub-national authorities. Even the European Commission and other international governmental organization score higher in this regards than sub-national authorities. In addition, we observe a declining role of employee organizations. This might reflect an internal de-corporatization of the state in which employees are decreasingly organized and/or supported by employee organizations. Moreover, agency staff report increased importance of own miniseries, which might reflect increased *quest for order* in the state and more emphasize on administrative coordination (e.g. Christensen and Læg Reid 2008). However, Table 5 below shows that only a handful agency officials report increased inter-organizational vertical coordination within own sector over time. Finally, Tables 3 and 4 also report overall stability as regards internationalization of public governance processes over time. Reflecting organizational structure, whereas ministerial officials tend to emphasize *political* institutions at EU level, agency staff tend to ascribe more weight to technocratic EU-level institutions such as EU agencies.

**On power and influence:** It is methodologically difficult to measure *actual* power and influence through survey questionnaires. Our solution is to ask civil servants how they view the success of own unit in getting viewpoints and preferences accepted by other institutions and actors. Tables 5 and 6 offers a comprehensive picture of such assessments over time. The data suggests similar patterns as above, that is continuity over time and predicted variation between ministerial and agency personnel.

First, respondents report that 'own' unit are more successful in getting their interests and viewpoints across within own policy sector than across sectors, and within own institution than across institutions. To illustrate, ministerial officials report greater success in influencing own ministry than other ministries. Similarly, three times as many agency officials report that own unit have succeeded influencing own ministry than other ministries and agencies. While 'own ministry' score highest among ministerial staff, the Parliament, other ministries and agencies share a second place. Moreover, reflecting vertical inter-organizational specialization, the data report predicted variation between ministry and agency staff, particularly as regards influencing political institutions such as the Parliament and the Government. Ministerial staff report more influence in this regard than agency personnel. Taken together, these observations suggest how ministries are tighter coupled to the policy process than agencies, Moreover, they show how the central administration is loosely coupled to the sub-national level: Civil servants report fairly low influence towards local and regional administration. Similar observations are made vis-a-vis the European Commission. Agency respondents received one additional question as to their perceived success in influencing EU agencies and European agency networks. Tables 5 and 6 suggests a general low level of influence towards both EU agencies, networks of agencies as well as the European Commission. This finding most likely reflects Norway's form of affiliation towards the EU



which grants the Norwegian civil service week formal access to the EU decision-making cycle.

--Tables 5 and 6 about here--

**On coordination and fragmentation:** Coordination is not a technical-neutral question – it affects the distribution and concentration of power. Questions about coordination can thus become controversial and lead to contestation: It is most often less popular to be subject to coordination than to be the one that coordinates (Bouckaert et al. 2010). The following tables demonstrates how government officials view coordination within their own policy area over time. This question first entered the survey in 2006. Despite a shorter time-horizon on this item, Tables 7 and 8 reveal profound continuity over time in officials' judgements on coordination. One important observation is that despite increased quest for politico-administrative order, coordination and cohesion in administrative doctrines and national government programmes, the civil servants report small changes in how they characterize coordination within their own policy area. Moreover, contrary to the hole-of-government image of increased coordination in government, Tables 6 and 7 report continuity in administrative coordination.

Secondly, both tables show how organizational boundaries affect decision-making behaviour: Coordination is reduced by almost 50% when crossing organizational and sectoral boundaries in the central administration. Twice as many report good coordination between different government institutions within own policy sector than across policy sectors. Finally, both tables reveal high degree of both europeanization and internationalization of the civil service: Twice as many civil servants report good coordination with supranational and international

organizations than with sub-national authorities. This observation suggests lower levels of national administrative integration between the central administration and sub-national authorities than between the central administration and supranational and international administrations.

--Tables 7 and 8 about here--

Luther Gulick (1937) claimed that coordination between organizations can be achieved both through organizing – for example by establishing separate coordination units – and through «the minds and wills» of actors. Coordination through organizing often appear when attitudes and trust relationships alone do not suffice. Coordination through trust relationships might make the social glue within and across organizations stronger, making collaboration easier, making organizations more robust, and contribute to legitimize the government decisions and actions. In short, mutual trust relationships are signifiers of institutionalization 'by which we move from something that is diffuse, unstable, and unfixd into something more settled, stable, and integrated' (Selznick 2015: 15). Organizations infused with value in the Selznick sense has a distinct institutional *character* that help cement both external societal support as well as lead to internalized guidelines that guide behaviour. Table 8 shows how civil servants in the Norwegian central administration characterizes mutual trust relationships between ministries and agencies. This question first entered the survey in 2006, which offers only two observation-points. Overall, the data suggests high degree of mutual trust inside the central administration over time. Moreover, trust relationships seem to be institutionalized since it varies marginally – both over time and between institutions (ministries and agencies).

--Table 9 about here--

Finally, to gauge the relationships between inter-organizational vertical specialization (ministerial department versus agency) and decision-making behavior, while also incorporating rank and seniority, an OLS regression analysis was conducted that used the combined 2016 data file that covers both ministry and agency officials (N=4285 - Table 10). Two dependent variables were selected for analysis: Civil servants' perceived influence vis-à-vis own ministry/agency and civil servants' perceived influence vis-à-vis the Government.

The OLS regression models suggest that organizational structure significantly affects ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) power relationships. As predicted, officials in higher ranks and in ministerial departments are significantly more influential than those in lower ranks and in agencies. By contrast, seniority does not yield strong effect on power relationships, yet officials with longer terms of service tend to experience somewhat more influence than newcomers to office. Thus, organizational socialization is a much less salient predictor of influence than argued in much socialization literature and when compared to organizational factors. Moreover, this finding resonates with recent findings which shows that organizational socialization does not seem to be a precondition for role obedience (Egeberg and Stigen 2018).

-- Table 10 about here--

## **Conclusions**

The paper makes two main contributions: Theoretically, the paper demonstrates that organizational factors are vital determinants of decision-making behaviour in the civil service, and thus also a key explanation for the sustainability of public governance at an aggregate level.

Civil servants' perceptions of power, coordination and trust systematically reflect their

organizational embedment in the central administration. These items vary systematically with civil servants' inter- and intra-organizationally organizational embedment and remain remarkable stable over time. Thus, key observations essentially reflect the organizational architecture of the civil service and not the time periods studied. The findings thus showcase the organizational basis for public administration sustainability, and thus that public administration harbor some fairly stable resources expressed in the formal organization of the apparatus. Secondly, the study has offered a new large-N (13 173) and longitudinal data-set. By building both on a large number of observations and five observation-points over time, the data-set has enabled a study of public governance processes over nearly half a century. Consisting of 9 surveys from both the ministry and agency level from 1976 to 2016, the study provides robust probes both of administrative sustainability and its organizational basis.

The most puzzling empirical contribution is the notable continuity in administrative behaviour. Both ministry and agency officials consistently report that power is located in the same government institutions in 2016 as in 1976. We should reiterate, though, that these conclusions rest on the *perceptions* of the respondents. Admittedly, there are no guarantees that actors' perceptions of administrative behaviour always reflect actual behaviour. Yet, by using large-N data from two different groups of respondents (ministries and agencies) across 40 years and by exposing them to similar questions over time, the conclusions drawn are comparable robust.

Some findings, however, suggest change: Most importantly, governmental and parliamentary influence is deemed somewhat less when seen from agency officials' viewpoint, and weaker over time: whereas ministerial staff increasingly emphasizes the importance of political institutions, agency officials deem political institutions as increasingly unimportant. This

suggests a growing politics – administration gap over time. Yet, we also observe increased administrative integration within the central administration over time: Whilst ministerial officials ascribe increased importance to subordinate agencies over time, agency officials similarly deem own parent ministry as more important over time. This illustrates administrative integration, or *executive center formation*, within the core executive. At the same time, we see less integration of the central administration and sub-national authorities: Respondents view regional and local administrations as less important over time. We also observe lower degrees of internal corporatism in the state by the fact that employee organizations are deemed less important. During the same period, however, mass media is viewed as a stable influencer (Figenschou et al. 2017). This is a surprising finding since a vast field of research on media influence suggest that they play an increased role as policy agenda setter. Our observations may question this particular observation in literature.

Whereas a vast scholarly literature has emphasized that public sector organizations tend to be profoundly unstable and unsustainable in the long run, this study has demonstrated the deep stability and sustainability in public governance observable when using a long time-frame. To advance our understanding of public governance sustainability, future studies should invest in (collaborative) longitudinal data-sets both in national core executives as well as in the public administration of international organizations. Understanding the nuts and bolts of sustainable public administration and governance both at national and international levels is instrumental in safeguarding sustainable political order and public service delivery.

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