

## Agencification and Location: Does Agency Site Matter?

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**Abstract** Two decades of New Public Management have placed agencification high on the agenda of administrative policy-makers. However, agencification (and de-agencification) has been one of the enduring themes of public administration. Agencies organized at arm's length from ministerial departments have fairly often been located outside of the capital or political centre. Although practitioners tend to assign some weight to central versus peripheral location as regards political-administrative behavior, this relationship has been almost totally ignored by scholars in the field. In this paper, based on a large-N elite survey, we show that agency autonomy, agency influence and inter-institutional coordination seem to be relatively unaffected by agency site. This study also specifies some conditions under which this finding is valid.

**Keywords** Agencification · Autonomy · Co-ordination · Influence · New public management · Site

### Introduction

During the last couple of decades public administration has experienced a shift in the balance between bureaucratic autonomy and bureaucratic integration, marked by

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‘agencification’ (Thynne 2003: 323). ‘Agencification’ has signified a transfer of government activities to agency-type organization vertically specialized outside ministerial departments. Related to the New Public Management (NPM) movement, governments across continents have established agencies at arm’s length from ministerial departments in order to take care of certain regulatory and administrative tasks (Pollitt et al. 2004; Verhoest et al. 2004). For many of the same reasons agencification has also taken place at the European Union (EU) level. These developments have been accompanied by a rapidly growing scholarly literature on agencification at the national level as well as at the EU level. (For an overview of the literature on national agencification, see Christensen and Læg Reid 2006; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004. As regards the EU level, see Barbieri and Ongaro 2008; Groenleer 2006; Wettenhall 2005.) The vast majority of the ‘agencification’ scholarship has focused attention towards administrative history, reform and change and less on the effects of agencification (e.g. Pollitt et al. 2004). However, to the extent that this literature *has* explored what effects agencification might cause on actual political-administrative behavior organization structures, procedures and legal capacities have served as key independent variables (Thynne 2003; Yesilkagit and van Thiel 2008; Egeberg and Trondal 2009). Yet, agencification seems in practice fairly often accompanied by geographical relocation away from the national capital or, in the case of the EU, from Brussels to places outside Belgium. This spatial dimension has largely been neglected in studies of agencification effects. Although an old topic of administrative science (e.g. Gulick 1937), in the study of state building, party formation and voting behavior (Rokkan and Urwin 1982), as well as the symbolic meaning of architecture (Goodsell 1977), the effects of place or site has been largely neglected in public administration scholarship. This paper aims at filling this lacuna. The question posed is: Does the geographical site of agencies matter with respect to agency autonomy, agency influence, and inter-institutional coordination? The conclusions benefits from a large-N elite survey among agency officials ( $N=1452$ ).

The value added of this study is twofold:

- First, it fills a gap in existing agencification scholarship by adding a spatial dimension.
- Secondly, it tests the extent to which site can be an instrument of administrative policy. Organization studies indicate that the physical location of offices affects coordination and information exchange (Pfeffer 1982; Jacobsen 1989; Egeberg 1994; Therborn 2006; Hatch and Cunliffe 2006). Governments and the European Commission as well often assume a causal relationship between geographical distance between agencies and ministerial departments/Commission DGs on the one hand and the actual autonomy of agencies on the other (see below). This study demonstrates, however, that site is *not* significantly related to agency autonomy, agency influence, and inter-institutional coordination.

The absence of the spatial dimension in the literature on the effects of agencification is puzzling since practitioners sometimes justify often highly contested relocations by arguing that physical distance might serve to underpin the intended autonomy of agencies from political executives. The geographical location and re-location of government institutions also tend to mobilize more attention and resistance from stakeholders than for example organizing and reorganizing such

institutions (Meyer and Stensaker 2009). For example, when the Norwegian government in 2003 decided to move some national agencies out of the capital Oslo it was argued that geographical distance was instrumental in augmenting agency autonomy vis-à-vis the respective ministries. The responsible minister for the 2003 reform claimed that “the agencies will gain stronger independence outside of Oslo...” (Norman 2004: 98—authors’ translation). The same minister argued in the succeeding Parliamentary debate that “re-location is good agency policy because it contributes to increased *de facto* independence” (Hommen 2003: 39—authors’ translation). In short, geographical dispersion of government institutions was considered an instrument of administrative policy. Similarly, the European Commission sees geographical dispersion of Community institutions as part of its administrative policy. With particular reference to the geographical localization of EU-level agencies, the European Commission has argued that,

“the fact that regulatory agencies are spread around the EU, whilst executive agencies are housed in Brussels or Luxembourg, is just the most obvious symbol of their very different relationship with the Commission” (European Commission 2008: 3). “The Commission also feels that the agency’s [geographical] seat is a constituent element of the basic act and should therefore be included in it” (European Commission 2005: 4; see also Szapiro 2005: 3).

The fact that the Norwegian central government consists of national agencies that are located in the capital Oslo as well as outside of Oslo makes it possible to analyze potential consequences of agency site. Somewhat surprisingly, this study shows that site doesn’t seem to matter very much as regards agency autonomy, agency influence or inter-institutional coordination. However, one essential note is warranted here: The agencies studied are randomly distributed geographically as regards their formal autonomy. Hence, more autonomous agencies were not selected for geographical relocation by the Norwegian government. Concomitantly, the observations reported in this study are *not* explained by an overlap between the formal autonomy of agencies and their geographical locus. The mainly non-correlates of agency site as reported in this study are thoroughly discussed in the concluding section. Before presenting the empirical analysis, however, the next section suggests a theoretical argument on the role of organizational locus. The subsequent sections describe our data and method before presenting the empirical findings.

### **Organizational locus—the theoretical argument**

Face-to-face contacts appear in general to be highly appreciated when critical decisions are made in organizations (Jablin 1987: 394). Jönsson et al. (2000: 186) argue that processes involving considerable uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise require information exchange via face-to-face contacts and group conversation. A large-N questionnaire study among government officials revealed that 72% deemed face-to-face contact in formal meetings to be important for carrying out their daily tasks while other face-to-face contacts were emphasized by 68% (Egeberg 1994). Such decision-making through face-to face-interaction presupposes a common site

and cannot be conducted by modern communication technologies (Therborn 2006). Thus, such interaction might be sensitive to the physical arrangement of organizations and to physical distances. Although practitioners fairly often talk about what can be gained from locating entities together or separately (as in our case), the phenomenon has attracted marginal scholarly attention. Goodsell (1977, 1988) has focused on the symbolic aspects of interior designs and architecture and how they might express variants of bureaucratic culture and political authority, however, without dealing with behavioral consequences. A large-N questionnaire study showed that government officials' contact patterns are, when controlling for organizational role, somewhat related to their physical placement. However, the causal direction of the relationship could not be ascertained (Egeberg 1994, 2003). Jacobsen's (1989) study design solved this causal problem. He focused on the effects of several physical rearrangements of ministerial departments, in which the formal organizational structure remained unchanged, and demonstrated that relocating ministerial departments into the main building of their respective ministries increased the level of interdepartmental communication and coordination (Jacobsen 1989). Organization studies in other contexts point to similar effects of physical location of offices (Pfeffer 1982; Hatch and Cunliffe 2006).

On this background, we might expect that agency site makes some difference as regards agency autonomy, agency influence and inter-institutional coordination. However, there is one noteworthy difference between the ministerial department case referred to above (Jacobsen 1989) and the national agency case dealt with in this paper. In the former case, due to the physical proximity of ministerial departments, not only face-to-face contact in formal and arranged meetings but also *unplanned* face-to-face interaction could be affected. In the agency case, due to the fact that even agencies situated in Oslo are placed in separate buildings at a certain distance from each other and from ministries, parliament and headquarters of interest groups, only the frequency of *formal* and *planned* face-to-face meetings can in practice be affected by location outside of the capital. Agency location outside of the capital makes meetings with institutions and organizations in the capital more costly both in terms of money and time. In addition, such location could also impact on the frequency of meetings with institutions outside of Oslo, such as (domestic) regional administration and EU institutions, since traveling in that case may become even more costly. The reason is that the structure of the airline and rail network often is arranged in a way that makes traveling via the capital necessary. The forms of contact that cannot be expected to be affected by physical distance are email, phone, post and video conferences.

Our data do not allow us to discriminate between the various forms of contact. What this study does is to use seven proxies as indicators of agency autonomy, agency influence and inter-institutional coordination: contact patterns, steering signals, officials' identities, agencies success in getting arguments across, coordination patterns, and finally mutual trust.

- First, the frequency of contact in general will serve as an indicator of the potential for agency autonomy, agency influence, and inter-institutional coordination:
  - On the one hand, the less contact the more agency autonomy, the less agency influence, and the less inter-institutional co-ordination.

- On the other hand, the more contact the less agency autonomy, the more agency influence, and the more inter-institutional co-ordination.

In addition to measuring ‘agency autonomy’ by frequency of contacts, ‘agency autonomy’ is also measured by the next three proxies:

- How important various actors in the environment are perceived to be when crucial decisions are made within one’s own issue area
- The extent to which steering signals from other actors are emphasized
- The extent to which agency personnel identify themselves with the central administration as a whole. The expectation is that identification with the executive in general means that broader concerns are taken into consideration when decisions are made; thus the agency is probably less independent.

Next, ‘agency influence’ is operationalized as the following proxy:

- The extent to which agencies succeed in getting their arguments across.

Finally, ‘inter-institutional coordination’ is measured by the final two proxies:

- How good coordination among various institutions is deemed to be
- The perceived degree of mutual trust.

## Data and method

Whereas the bulk of public administration studies rely on low-N case studies with the main use of interview and documentary data, only few studies apply quantitative survey and large-N analysis (Haverland 2006). This paper relies on large-N elite survey data within the Norwegian central administration, covering a huge number of topics; *inter alia* officials’ backgrounds and careers, their tasks, contact patterns, assessments of power relationships and administrative reforms, etc. Over the last 30 years, a group of Norwegian scholars (including the authors) have conducted surveys in the Norwegian central administration each decade (1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006). This study applies data from the 2006-survey because only this survey contains a significant geographical dispersion of agencies. This survey was conducted as an online survey by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service encompassing officials from all Norwegian ministries (18 ministries in total) and subordinated agencies (49 in total). The survey at the ministerial level was sent to *all* officials at the level equivalent to the ‘A-level’ with a minimum of 1 year in office. Appointment at this level usually requires a university degree. The survey at the agency level was distributed to a random selection of *every third* official at the ‘A-level’ with at least 1 year in office. The main reason for selecting only a random number of agency officials is the large staff numbers in the agencies. This analysis uses only the agency data because all ministries are located in Oslo. The total number of responses at the agency level is 1452, giving a response rate of 59. In sum, this survey represents the most extensive analyses of domestic core-executives in international comparison, and perhaps the only data set that enables an assessment of the potential effects of organizational locus.

In the next section, the organizational locus variable is dichotomized by using the address of the agency: Of the 49 agencies included in the data base, 30 agencies (61%) are located in the capital of the country (Oslo) and 19 agencies (39%) are located outside the capital. This implies that our dichotomized variable ‘agency site’ includes 1119 (77%) officials in the capital and 332 (23%) officials located outside of the capital. The dichotomized variable is fairly lopsided which may accompany some difficulties with obtaining significant observations in regression analyses. However, in this study we only present tables containing percentages, Pearson’s  $r$  and the level of significance. Due to the large  $N$ , even very weak correlations (i.e. less than .10) may be statistically significant. However, ‘unpatterned’ (single) correlations at this level, even if statistically significant, will not be assigned weight to.

One caveat is 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 behavior are always reflecting actual behavior. Studying actors’ perceptions render the conclusions vulnerable to perceptual errors. However, perceptions serve as cognitive and normative frames for action rendering it more likely than not that particular behavioral dynamics are associated with certain perceptual patterns (Aberbach et al. 1981: 86; Van Knippenberg and Van Leeuwen 2001: 250).

Finally, to what extent are our empirical observations generalizable? Other countries than Norway have also located and relocated national agencies outside of the administrative centre—for example in the case of US federal agencies, Swedish agencies and UK agencies. Secondly, the impact of organizational locus may also be relevant at other levels of governance than the national one. For example, agencification at the EU level has resulted in more than 30 agency-like bodies organized at arm’s length from the Community institutions in Brussels (Trondal and Jeppesen 2008). Most of these agencies were located outside Brussels when they were established in the first place. At present EU-level agencies are scattered all around the European continent. However, there is currently no research on the effects of this geographical dispersion of EU-level agencies. Thus, the results reported in this paper might be of relevance also for understanding the role of agency site at the EU level.

### **Findings: the (almost) non-correlates of agency site**

Table 1 shows that agency officials’ pattern of contact reflects very much the sectoral specialization of the government administration. Thus, horizontal interaction is clearly less frequent than vertical interaction, including contact with the respective parent ministries. However, there is hardly any significant relationship between agency site on the one hand and officials’ contact patterns on the other. Not only is the proportion having frequent contact with actors in the capital about the same (actors such as ministries, parliament and interest organizations) but this holds for contact with actors outside of the capital as well (actors such as government regional administration, county and municipal administration, and EU institutions). Two correlations are statistically significant; however, they are so weak that we cannot

**Table 1** Per cent officials having contacts with the following actors, by agency site

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Political leadership in parent ministry	4	4	-.02
Officials in parent ministry	31	30	-.00
Other ministries (political leadership and officials)	9	7	.02
Other agencies	23	25	-.04
Own regional and local service	40	41	.00
Other regional and local services	14	13	.00
County and municipal administration	17	15	.04
Relevant standing committees in the domestic Parliament	0	0	-.07*
Other standing committees in the domestic Parliament	0	0	-.02
Employment and trade organizations	10	14	-.06**
Other organizations	14	18	-.04
The European Commission	3	5	-.03
EU-level agencies	3	5	-.01
Mean N	1094	303	

This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following five-point scale: every week or more often (value 1), every month (value 2), sometimes (value 3), never (value 4), not relevant (value 5). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–4. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$

assign any weight to them. These two negative relationships are also contrary to what was theoretically predicted.

Next, Tables 2, 3 and 4 apply dependent variables that aim at tapping 'agency autonomy' more precisely than the general contact variable. Table 2 reveals that superior authorities are indeed considered to be important when agency officials are to make crucial decisions. However, agency locus doesn't make much difference in this respect. Neither the impact that affected interest groups might have seems to be associated with the location of agencies. This pattern is confirmed in Table 3: Although agency personnel primarily emphasize professional concerns in their work, the considerable weight assigned to signals from affected interest groups and the parent ministry is clearly not contingent upon agency site. Table 4 unveils that the same holds for the scope of identification: site doesn't strongly affect the extent to which 'whole-of-government' concerns are paid attention to. Again, the few correlations that are statistically significant are weak or irrelevant (professional considerations, own agency identification) and therefore not given further attention.

Table 5 presents a dependent variable that aims at measuring 'agency influence' more precisely than the general contact variable used in Table 1. A considerable proportion of agency officials see their respective agencies as relatively influential, and particularly so in relationship to their lead ministries. However, in general, only weak correlations exist between agency site on the one hand and the ability to get one's arguments across on the other. Agency influence vis-à-vis the European Commission is, however, somewhat stronger correlated with agency site: Contrary to what was expected, agencies outside of the capital report getting their viewpoints

**Table 2** Per cent officials who deem the following actors important when crucial decisions are made within their own issue area, by agency site

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Own ministry	75	73	.03
Own regional or local service	34	38	-.04
Other ministries or services	28	23	.04
County and municipal administration	16	11	.09*
The domestic Parliament	53	49	.03
The Government	55	50	.01
Employment and trade organizations	16	19	-.05
Other organizations	14	12	.01
The European Commission	16	18	-.06
EU-level agencies	11	11	-.02
Mean N	938	276	

This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following six-point scale: very important (value 1), fairly important (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly unimportant (value 4), very unimportant (value 5), do not know/not relevant (value 6). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$

and wishes more effectively accepted by the European Commission than agencies in the capital. Since neither this correlation is particularly strong, and since we are not able to grasp the underlying mechanism in this case, we will not go further into this. Also, supporting this view, we have already seen that agency site doesn't make a significant difference neither as regards contact with the Commission (Table 1) nor as regards the perceived importance of the Commission (Table 2).

Finally, Tables 6 and 7 are meant to provide more valid observations of 'inter-institutional coordination' than the general contact variable used in Table 1. Not

**Table 3** Per cent officials who deem the following considerations to be important when they do their work, by agency site

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Signals from the political leadership (cabinet, minister, junior minister in parent ministry)	68	63	.03
Signals from officials in the parent ministry	75	72	.02
Professional considerations	93	97	-.08*
Signals from affected groups, clients, user groups	76	78	-.01
Mean N	1026	307	

This table 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). Pearson's r is run with all values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$



**Table 4** Per cent officials who report allegiance to and identification with the following entities

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Own agency as a whole	77	82	-.08*
The central administration as a whole	37	42	-.06*
Mean N	954	278	

This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following six-point scale: very strong (value 1), fairly strong (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly weak (value 4), very weak (value 5), not relevant (value 6). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$

surprisingly, given the sectorally organized government, coordination within one's own policy sector is perceived as better than coordination across sectors. However, once more the location of national agencies doesn't seem to make a noteworthy difference in this respect. Only one relationship is statistically significant in the expected direction, and this relationship is a weak one. As shown in Table 7, mutual trust, which might be seen as highly conducive to actual coordination among institutions, doesn't at all vary by agency site.

## Concluding discussion

When studying the effects that agencification might have on actual political-administrative behavior, *inter alia* related to agency autonomy, political scientists have focused on organizational structure and procedures as independent variables.

**Table 5** Per cent officials who report getting their viewpoints and wishes accepted within the following institutions

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
The Government	45	44	.04
The domestic Parliament	42	40	.05
The parent ministry	65	62	.08*
Other ministries or government services	28	24	.08*
County and municipal administration	26	23	.03
The European Commission	8	14	-.15**
The public in general, the public opinion	38	36	-.02
Mean N	949	277	

This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following six-point scale: very well (value 1), fairly well (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly bad (value 4), very bad (value 5), do not know/not relevant (value 6). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$

**Table 6** Perceptions of coordination: “How would you characterize coordination in your issue area along the following dimensions?” (per cent saying “good”)

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Coordination between government institutions within own sector	42	46	-.06
Coordination with government institutions in other sectors	21	26	-.03
Coordination with county and municipal administration	20	14	.08*
Mean N	954	278	

This table combines values 1 and 2 on the following six-point scale: very good (value 1), fairly good (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly bad (value 4), very bad (value 5), not relevant (value 6). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2).

\* $p \leq 0.05$

Even though geographical relocation fairly often (but far from always) seems to have accompanied agencification, the potential effect of agency site has so far been neglected in such studies. Interestingly, practitioners have, on the other hand, usually paid some attention to what can be achieved, e.g. in terms of actual coordination or institutional autonomy, by co-locating or separating institutions physically. Thus, relocation of already established national agencies has also taken place independently of on-going agencification processes. Our study documents that agency site doesn't make a noteworthy difference along the dimensions selected for measuring 'agency autonomy', 'agency influence' and 'inter-institutional coordination'.

Do these findings contradict the observations reported in the second section of this paper on the behavioral consequences of moving ministerial departments into or out of the main building of the respective ministries? Not necessarily: due to the physical proximity, these latter reshufflings also impacted on the *unplanned* encounters between officials. As argued, such face-to-face interaction could probably not be affected by agency relocation since agencies already were at a certain distance from other institutions even within the capital. Thus, since email, phone, post and video conferences are insensitive to physical distance, only the frequency of *arranged* meetings might be affected by agency locus. If our study had been conducted a hundred years ago, the results might have been quite different.

**Table 7** Mutual trust between own agency and the parent ministry (percentages)

	Agencies in the capital	Agencies outside of the capital	Pearson's r
Fairly good or better	74	76	.01
N	961	283	

Original question: “How would you characterize the level of mutual trust between your agency and the parent ministry?”. These values combine value 1 and 2 on the following six-point scale: very good (value 1), fairly good (value 2), both/and (value 3), fairly bad (value 4), very bad (value 5), do not know (value 6). Pearson's r, however, is run with values 1–5. Agencies in the capital (value 1), agencies outside of the capital (value 2)

This is largely due to the fact that location seems to be unrelated to autonomy, influence and inter-institutional coordination because of the efficiency of modern communication and transportation.

Arguably, though, it may be difficult to generalize or findings both across time *and* across institutions. After all, we have focused on already semi-detached, often highly specialized, agencies whose ‘need’ for being steered, influential or coordinated with others is relatively modest. Therefore, it is still possible that organizational locus will make a difference if we instead concentrate on bodies that are in general relatively more involved on the input-side of the policy-making process. Given that many decision processes are often hectic and intertwined, to be on the spot means that many actors and arenas can be reached in a relatively short time. Thus, under such circumstances, being located in the capital, or permanently represented in Brussels via delegations, offices etc. might turn out to be highly convenient. Hence, the impact of site might be conditioned by policy stage and the temporal dimensions of decision-making.

There are potentially numerous consequences of agency site that are *not* measured in our study. For example, agency dispersion might have symbolic effects: agencies may come to *look* more independent by being placed outside of the political centre. Also, for example, locating EU-level agencies outside of Brussels might give a signal that the EU bureaucracy is not growing. Moreover, the centre makes itself visible throughout the whole territory by geographical dispersion of its institutional apparatus. More concrete, de-concentration of agencies may provide additional professional job opportunities in geographical areas with a shortage of such jobs. Finally, agencies may come physically closer to professional and scientific milieus, or industries, that are of particular relevance to their activities.

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