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Political fragmentation and “The purple zone”: how party fragmentation affects political–administrative relations

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ABSTRACT

A good cooperative relationship between politics and administration is essential to good governance and efficient decision making in public organisations. This study of the cooperative relationship is based on the notion that politics and administration is intertwined, making interaction between politicians and administrators necessary. The study focuses on how political fragmentation affects cooperative relations between politics and administration. Using data from both Norwegian mayors and municipal directors (436 respondents from 303 municipalities), the effects of three different types of political fragmentation are investigated: number of political parties in council and the steering coalition, the Laakso-Taagepera index, and ideological distance between parties. The findings indicate that cooperative relationships get worse with increasing ideological distance and improves with political fragmentation in the council under the conditions of divided government (political parties in the steering coalition spanning both sides of the left–right dimensions). Implications for the study of political–administrative relations are discussed.

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Introduction

All representative democracies depend on an administrative apparatus to prepare and implement political decisions. While elected politicians shall assure the existence of popular or democratic legitimacy through the values of ‘(..) responsiveness, direction, and revitalization’ (Aberbach and Rockman 1988, 606), the administration or bureaucracy shall be based on the values of ‘(..) continuity, professionalism, expertise, and effectiveness’ guaranteeing legitimacy based on technical effectiveness. Although politicians and

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administrators base their legitimacy in different values, they are – in principle – part of the same political-administrative system with a shared common goal to do the best possible for the population. Still, they play different but interdependent roles in the general policy process (Lasswell 1970). In principle, the distinction between politics and administration is rather clear. Politicians should set goals, make prioritisations between values, and decide on distribution of benefits and burdens. Administrators should provide technical information to help politicians make informed decisions and assist politicians in concretising and implementing policy decisions (Weber 1947, Simon 1945/1976).

Concepts like ‘the purple zone’ (Bello and Spano 2015, Alford et al. 2017), ‘overlapping roles’ (Svara 1985, Mouritzen and Svara 2002, Nelson and Svara 2015), ‘common spaces’ (Aberbach, Putnam, and Rockman 1981), or ‘grey zone’ (Jacobsen 2006), however, indicate that the distinction between what is political and what is administrative in many cases is blurred, necessitating interaction between political and administrative actors in the policy process. Although we have rather good knowledge on the existence of a zone – rather than a line – between politics and administration, we know less about the dynamics in this zone, especially how interactions between politicians and administrators are impacted by contextual factors (Demir 2009, Demir and Reddick 2012). This study starts from the basic notion that a well-functioning political system will depend on an extensive interaction and cooperation between key political and administrative actors. The quality of this interaction/cooperation will thus be crucial for the system.

Furthermore, we argue that this interaction takes place in a context – organisational, economic, cultural, and political – that impacts and shapes the interaction (O’toole and Meier 2015, Jacobsen 2003). In this study, we focus on one contextual factor: political fragmentation. Increasing political fragmentation – the dispersion of political power on many different hands – seems to be a common trend in most Western democracies (Pildes 2021). Using two different theoretical approaches we outline two diverging expectations on how political fragmentation affects the collaborative relationship between politics and administration, more specifically between an elected mayor and an appointed municipal manager. The first theoretical approach is based on James Svara’s (1999, 1985, 2001) notion of complementarity. Based on this approach we outline an expectation that political fragmentation will have a negative effect on the collaborative relations between politicians and administrators. The second theoretical approach is rooted in principal-agent theory (Moe 1984), and more specifically on the Multiple Principals Hypothesis (Dixit 1997, Palus and Yackee 2022, Voorn et al. 2019, Blaka, Jacobsen, and Morken 2021). From this perspective it is argued that the more fragmented the principals are, the more autonomy will be provided for the agents, and that this in turn will create room for a more positive

collaborative relationship between politicians and administrators. On a more general level, this study aims to bring together a public administration perspective with a focus on the functioning of political-administrative relations, and a political science perspective with a focus on how political processes affects and shapes political-administrative relations (Lodge and Wegrich 2012).

This study also extends previous research on the effect of multiple principals on political-administrative relations to the setting of local government institutions organised according to a council-manager form (Nelson and Svava 2010), a form common in both the US and the European context (Connolly 2017, Sellers, Lidstrom, and Y 2020). Furthermore, it extends research on the effects of fragmentation by focusing on how political fragmentation affects one crucial aspect of the relationship between politics and administration: the quality of cooperation between the mayor and the municipal director (MD). The research questions are investigated empirically through an empirical database consisting of both administrative and political leaders in the same institutions.

Quality of political-administrative cooperation

Even though the line between politics and administration gets blurred in real life, politicians and administrators are *expected* to fill different roles in the political-administrative system of a representative democracy (Weber 1947, Wilson 1989, Rainey 1989, Rainey 2014). They are in fact expected to act on different rationales (Simon 1976). The political logic is based on values, prioritisation between groups and preferences, and thus conflict of interest (Lowi 1972). Politicians are expected to act 'with passion and prejudice'. Administrators should, on the other hand, work from the principle 'without passion and prejudice', looking at problems from different angles, and focus on the best means available to obtain goals set by politicians (Weber 1947). These logics are not only different, but may also be conflicting (Hansen and Ejersbo 2002, Svava 1991)

When politicians and administrators meet in the 'purple zone', it is important that they base their interaction on a reciprocal understanding of their different roles. Politicians must respect that professional and scientific points of view not always coincide with political interests. Pointing to unwanted effects of a political choice is not only the right of the administrators, but also a plight. If an administration omits sound professional points of view that are negative for the ruling political majority, they will take a partisan stand, and thus get involved in politics. On the other hand, the administration must accept politicians' right to make decisions that in the eye of a professional bureaucrat may be regarded as sub-optimal or even downright stupid. Having such a basic understanding of different roles represents the

foundation for a fruitful relation between politics and administration (Mouritzen and Svava 2002).

Second, the relation between politicians and administrators should be based in reciprocal trust (Gron and Salomonsen 2019, Svava 1999). The relationship between politicians and administrators will always be one characterised by asymmetric information, and thus uncertainty. Politicians will have availability to information that may be used to 'harm' the administrators, and the same will be the situation the other way around. To make this principal-agent relation work in the presence of risks of opportunism, both administrators and politicians should have trust in each other (Williamson 1993).

Finally, a good relation is also characterised by a good communication climate (Gron and Salomonsen 2019, Liao and Sun 2020). In the case of relations between politicians and administrators, it can be argued that good communication will be characterised by openness and feedback. This is based in the notion that any relationship between politicians and administrators will be continuously developing as a learning relationship (Argyris 1994, Gabris and Nelson 2013). Thus, good communication between politicians and administrators should be open for (constructive) criticism and reciprocal exchange of information how the relation can be improved.

The three elements mentioned above constitutes what can be labelled the cooperative quality of the relationship between politicians and administrators (Liao and Sun 2020). In a council-manager form of local government the main cooperative relation will take place between the politically elected mayor and the administratively appointed municipal director (MD) (Nelson and Svava 2015). These two actors, however, are situated in a specific context. Both actors must consider that they are acting in given roles specifying duties and rights, and that they in many instances will act on behalf of others.

Political fragmentation and political-administrative cooperation

One central element of the cooperative context is the political system (Jacobsen 2006, Demir and Reddick 2012). It is also perhaps one of the most important contextual factors, as it is 'close' – i.e., will have immediate impact of the politics-administration relation (Johns 2017). Democratic political-administrative systems can in most instances be divided into different levels, where each of the higher levels can be regarded as the principal of a lower level (Reichert and Jungblut 2007). Parliaments or councils take the role of principals of both cabinets/executive political organs and the administration, while cabinets/executive political organs functions as the daily principals for the administration. Problems of delegation can thus be identified on two levels: between parliament/council and cabinets/executive

political organs, and between cabinets/executive political organs and the administration.

In most political systems, interaction with the administration is located to a political elite in the executive branch, both president/prime ministers/ministers in a parliamentary system and a presidential system, and a mayor in most municipal systems (Mouritzen and Svava 2002, Alba and Navarro 2006). Although interaction between politicians and administrators most of the time takes place at the executive political level, it is impossible to decouple the political executive from the legislative organisation.

One obvious characteristic of importance is the degree and type of support the minister/mayor has in the legislative and executive branches of government. This can be defined as the degree of political concentration, or the opposite: *political fragmentation*. Fragmentation in general terms relates to the number of actors involved in a certain decision process, both in static and dynamic (over time) terms (Ricciuti 2004). It can be the number of institutions involved, the number of ministers, and the number of political parties both in the ruling coalition/cabinet and in the parliament/council. The most common definition in systems based on partisan voting is the number of political parties in government and the cabinet/ruling majority, and their relative size (Reingewertz 2015). The most concentrated situation will be where one party has all the seats and thus solely constitutes the ruling majority. Fragmentation will increase with the number of parties. Another common measure of fragmentation is the Laakso-Taagepera Index (LTI), indicating the relative strength of the parties in the council/cabinet (Borge and Hopland 2017, Laakso and Taagepera 1979). This definition of fragmentation is not necessarily connected to the number of principals (one principal may be totally dominating in a situation with only two). However, fragmentation can also be defined as the ideological distance or difference in interests (polarisation) between these actors, or what Palus and Yackee (2022, 46) call 'preference divergence'. Fragmentation defined as ideological distance is not directly linked to the number of principals, but the difference between them in values and political ideology (Sullivan and Minns 1976). In this study, we include all three measures, as there is a possibility that different types of fragmentation may produce different outcomes.

How political fragmentation in parliament/council affects the relationship between politicians and administrators at the executive level is, however, little studied. Building on James H. Svava's (1999, 1985, 2001) work on complementarity between politics and administration, one may expect fragmentation to affect cooperative quality in a negative way. In his first article presenting the 'dichotomy-duality model' a variant on the model is described as 'council incursion' (Svava 1985). This model describes a situation where the '(...) council makes administrators wary of offering any proposals concerning mission and is unpredictable in its reactions to policy recommendations from

staff. It accepts many recommendations but, in some cases, undercuts extensive staff preparations and sets off to make own policy decisions. The council probes persistently but somewhat haphazardly into administrative matters and dabbles in management'. (Svara 1999, 229). In later empirical studies, this model is explicitly coupled with political fragmentation. In a study of the relationship between the council and the city manager in large cities, Svara concludes that '(w)hen council members have difficulty relating to each other and to the mayor and when there is greater division in the city council, the council–manager relationship is less positive as well' (Svara 1999, 176). High political fragmentation will also probably force both mayor and municipal director to play active roles as a 'balance artist' (Stillman 1977). The manager must navigate in a highly politicised environment and thus will have less time for running government. The mayor must probably use more time and resources on balancing diverse and conflicting political fractions, and thus less time to develop missions, goals, and strategies. A consequence might be less room for both the political and administrative executive to work out a good relation based on trust and a positive communicative climate.

Applying a principal-agent (PA) approach results in somewhat different expectations. Although not directly addressing cooperative quality, PA theory elaborates on how many or multiple principals indirectly may affect cooperative relations. Basically, the multiple principals hypothesis proposes that control over agents will decrease with an increasing number of principals (Voorn et al, 2019). As a municipal council is the principal of both the mayor and the municipal director, multiple principals or fragmentation will probably increase conflict within the council, forcing council members to use more time and resources on handling internal conflicts and less time on following up the actions of the agents (Jacobsen 2006, Sørensen 2007). Furthermore, political fractions will more often find themselves in situations where they must back up decisions that goes counter to their political program. This forms an incentive for parties in a fragmented majority to attempt to distance themselves from the implementation of decisions (Hood 2002). Fragmentation will also make it harder to agree on common goals, and thus to set clear performance goals, establish clear and unambiguous incentives, and to devote time to monitor the performance of the agents (McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1989, Whitford 2002, Whitford, 2005). Finally, political fragmentation may decrease the predictability of policy decisions, opening for more flexibility at the executive level to adapt to political changes (Gron and Salomonsen 2019). All these elements will favour increased *autonomy* for the agents (Voorn and van Genugten 2022, Voorn et al. 2019, Moe 2012, Boushey and Mcgrath 2020, Whitford 2002, Whitford 2005).

Under conditions of political fragmentation, a PA approach leads us to assume that agent discretion will increase, both for the political (minister/

mayor) and the administrative agent (secretary general/municipal director). This will open for more flexibility in the relationship between the two, making greater room for adaption and change, and creating better conditions for establishing a trustful relationship.

Recent theoretical and empirical development building on political fragmentation, and more specifically the multiple principals hypothesis, yields even more nuanced insights. Palus and Yackee (2022) argue that the general multiple principals hypothesis on increased agency autonomy only will hold in situations where there also is ideological or preferential fragmentation. At the legislative level one might expect numerical fragmentation to be highly correlated with ideological fragmentation as many political parties increase the probability of parties at the ‘fringes’ of the political spectrum to be represented. However, most political systems rely on an executive to run the day-to-day politics. Following the arguments in the section above, we will expect increasing ideological distance in the executive – what we will term divided government – to be associated with higher levels of conflict, less time and interest in controlling agents, and increased incentives to not to be involved in policy implementation. The consequence is more discretionary room for the agents. In a case where there are several principals sharing basic common values and interest, what we may term unified government, one could assume that the principals would keep tighter control and delegate less discretionary powers to both political and administrative agents (Boushey and McGrath 2020).

In a system based on partisan voting, this can be operationalised as the political similarity of the parties constituting the cabinet or ruling majority. When the political parties in cabinet/the executive committee span the political spectrum (divided government), there will be less autonomy delegated to the executive agents (mayor/MD) as opposing parties will keep a tighter control on the agents expected to implement their collective decisions. Thus, it is only when the executive principals are unified that mayors and MDs will experience high autonomy. Low ideological fragmentation in the cabinet or executive committee may thus ‘neutralise’ the effect of numerical (and probably ideological) fragmentation in the legislative. And on the contrary, high ideological fragmentation in the cabinet or executive committee may thus ‘reinforce’ the effect of numerical (and probably ideological) fragmentation in the legislative.

Data and methods

Norwegian municipalities are all organised according to a modified ‘council-manager’ model (Mouritzen and Svava 2002), except for two larger municipalities being organised on parliamentary principles. The Norwegian model is called ‘modified’ as the role of the mayor – although

still in principle no more than a 'primus inter pares' - is somewhat stronger here than in for instance the US. The law on local government in Norway opens for quite extensive delegation of authority to the mayor, something that also takes place in all municipalities. Furthermore, almost all Norwegian mayors are full-time, salaried positions. Still, full executive and administrative authority rests with a full-time, professional manager. Because of this arrangement, most interaction between politics and administration is channelled through the mayor and the manager. There are currently 354 'council-manager' municipalities in Norway, ranging in population size from less than 200 inhabitants to more than half a million, and in square kilometres ranging from just above 6 to almost 10,000. Representatives of political parties to the council are elected every four years, and seats are distributed according to proportionality. The council elects the mayor and the vice-mayor, and the two thus represent the steering coalition. The mayor is in almost all municipalities a full-time, salaried position.

The top administrative manager (MD) is a full-time, not time limited position. Even though the council appoints the MD, most research conclude that these recruitment processes are non-partisan (Baldersheim et al. 2021). According to the law on municipalities, the MD is the formal link to the political level (through the mayor) and has full responsibility for the whole of the municipal administration (i.e., all persons employed in the municipality). A recently revised law on local government in Norway (2020) explicitly specified that political-administrative interaction should be channelled through the MD and the mayor. The Norwegian MD is formally a strong executive authority with clear responsibility for administrative appointments, organisation of the administration, as well presenting a unified budget to the political level.

In the autumn of 2020, a survey was sent to all MDs and mayors in Norway (354¹), with a response rate of 58 ($n = 206$) for MDs and 65 ($n = 230$) for mayors. The responses are highly representative of Norwegian municipalities (size, geographical location), mayors (political party affiliation, gender), and MDs (gender). This is surely not a guarantee for representativeness on other relevant variables in this study. A total of 303 of the Norwegian municipalities are represented in the data set. The number of missing values on individual questions is low, ranging between 1 and 7. To avoid loss of units, missing values on individual variables were replaced with the series mean.

The quality of cooperation between the mayor and the CAO was measured through five items, using a Likert-scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree):

Mayor and CAO in our municipality have respect for the diverse roles in the municipality.

Mayor and CAO in our municipality have mutual trust in that all relevant information will be presented in their conversations with each other

;In the cooperation between mayor and CAO in our municipality, there is plenty of room for constructive criticism.

Mayor and CAO in our municipality continually discusses how their cooperation can be improved.

The cooperation between the mayor and CAO in our municipality works very well.

As no previously validated instrument measuring the cooperative quality between politics and administration existed, we had to construct questions for the survey ourselves. This was done through a qualitative study consisting of interviews with 10 mayors and 10 municipal directors in the same municipalities (Baldersheim et al. 2021). A Principal Component Analysis of the five items resulted in one factor with an Eigenvalue higher than 1, all scores were highly significant (between 0.69 and 0.86), and the five items showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). The regression score from the factor analysis was computed to represent the dependent variable ('quality of cooperation') and was recoded to yield only positive numbers. The distribution of this variable is quite negatively skewed (mean = 4.84 on a scale from 0 to 5.57, standard deviation = 1). High score indicates high-quality cooperation between the mayor and the MD. Very few respondents, both among mayors and MDs perceive the relationship as bad. Rather, this study is reporting on different degrees of 'good cooperative quality' as most tick for the alternatives 'agree' and 'totally agree'. Attempts to transform the variable to obtain higher degree of normal distribution (log and square root) did not give positive results, so it was decided to keep the original variable.

Data about numbers of political parties in the council and political fragmentation, as well as control variables (municipal size and economy), was retrieved from national statistics. Political fragmentation was measured in three different ways. First as number of political parties in a) the council and b) in the steering coalition. Second, the Laakso-Taagepera Index (LTI) – one divided by the sum of the squared share (proportion) of seats for each party in the council – was computed. If the index reaches the numerical value of 1, all parties have approximately the same number of seats in the council. The closer to zero, one party will have all the seats.

Finally, we measured ideological distance or preference divergence by comparing the party affiliation of mayor and vice-mayor. Usually, the two largest parties in the steering coalition share these posts. Ideological distance was computed using political party as a proxy for ideology. Research on Norwegian political parties indicate a high convergence between adherence to political party and ideological stance on several political issues, and the

parties place themselves highly similar on different dimensions ranging from economy (left-right), cultural liberalism-conservatism, and immigration (Aardal 2011). On these dimensions, the Communist Party (Rødt) is placed at one end of the continuum with the progressive party (Fremskrittspartiet) at the other. We use this dimension assigning the numeric value of 0 to the Communist Party, and the numeric value of 5 to the Progressive party. The other parties were ranked as follows: 1 = Socialist Party (SV), 2 = Social Democrat Party (AP), 3 = Agrarian Party (SP), Christian Democrats (Krf), Liberals (V), Environmentalists (MDG), and Others (a varying group of local political party constellations), and 4 = Conservative Party (H). The ideological distance was measured simply by deducting the value of the mayor's party with the value of the vice-mayor's party. The larger the numerical value, the larger the ideological distance.² Although this is a quite common measure of ideological fragmentation, and currently used in studies of for instance Germany (Boll and Sidki 2021), France (Le Maux, Rocaboy, and Goodspeed 2011), and Denmark (Houlberg and Pedersen 2015), the main weakness with this measure is that it does not capture ideological conflict on other dimensions like religion, centre-periphery, and globalisation (Aardal 2011). Results must be interpreted with this in mind.

Unified or dispersed government was computed as a dichotomy based on information from the municipalities on the political parties being part of the 'steering coalition'. Although no formal cabinet formation takes place in the Norwegian local government system, a law obliging the municipalities to build a majority behind the yearly budget has resulted in political parties in all Norwegian municipalities formalising a 'collaborative agreement' in the beginning of the election period. Compared to forming a cabinet in a parliamentary system it is a looser agreement, and it is not unusual that parties break out of the agreement during the election period. Still, the agreement gives good information on the unity of political parties governing the municipality. Agreements between political parties on the same side of the main political divide (left – right) was coded as unified government (numerical value 0), and agreements including parties spanning both sides of the divide were coded as divided (numerical value 1) (Palus and Yackee 2022). Unified was thus one of the following two combinations: the Communist Party (Rødt), Socialist Party (SV), Social Democrat Party (AP), or Progressive Party (Fremskrittspartiet), Conservative Party (H), Christian Democrats (Krf), and Liberals (V). Parties classified as belonging to the political centre on the left–right dimension, including the Agrarian Party (SP), the Environmentalists (MDG), and Others (a varying group of local political party constellations), were allowed to be included in both constellations.

In addition, we included two control variables at the municipality level: general municipal economy and municipality size (number of inhabitants). Economy is operationalised as municipal free income per capita, an indicator

Table 1. Mean and standard deviations, and bivariate correlation (Pearson's r) between measures of political fragmentation (NOK = Norwegian kroner).

	Mean (std)	(Y)	(X1)	(X2)	(X3)	(X4)	(X5)	(X6)
(Y) Cooperative relation	4.84 (1.0)	1.0						
(X1) No of parties in council	6.4 (2.2)	.01	1.0					
(X2) No of parties steering coalition	3.0 (1.4)	-.02	.65**	1.0				
(X3) LTI	0.27 (0.11)	.09	.75**	.55**	1.0			
(X4) Ideological distance	0.93 (0.72)	-.07	.15**	.22**	.29**	1.0		
(X5) Unified (0) or divided (1)	0.72 (0.44)	-.06	.15**	.35**	.22**	.34**	1.0	
(X6) Free income 2020 (NOK)	69272 (14508)	-.05	-.66**	-.38**	-.65**	-.06	-.01	1.0
(X7) Municipal size 2020 (log)	11869 (20800)	.08	.89**	.56**	.63**	0.09	.10*	-.77**

N=436, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$.

computed yearly by the National Bureau of Statistics, indicating the amount of money there 'is left' in the municipality after the tasks and duties mandated by law are fulfilled. A stressful municipal economy may result in a more heated political climate and possibly more political parties following more narrow interests, while also clearly influencing the relationship between the two actors formally responsible for the economy. As there are many small municipalities in Norway, the variable municipal size was log-transformed to obtain a higher degree of normal distribution. Table 1 displays univariate statistics (mean, standard deviation) and the bivariate correlations between the variables.

The results in Table 1 indicate that Norwegian municipalities are characterised by many political parties, and thus rather high political fragmentation. The number of political parties in the council is strongly correlated with municipal size (and to a lesser extent with the LTI), indicating stronger fragmentation in larger municipalities.

Analysis

As mayors and MDs are nested in municipalities, we decided to investigate the relevance of running a two-level model (level 1 = respondents, level 2 = municipalities), where ideological distance, fragmentation in council, number of political parties in council and the steering coalition, unified/divided government, economy, and municipal size are predictors at level 2.

We first investigated the relevance of a multi-level approach by estimating an 'empty random intercept model' without any predictors (Model 1 in Table 2), and then to estimate the intraclass correlation (icc). The icc in this

Table 2. Multilevel linear regression. Maximum likelihood estimation. N = 436. Unstandardized coefficients.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4 (unified)	Model 5 (divided)
Intercept	4.82***	5.02***	4.18***	4.04***	5.76***
No of parties in council		.03	.02	.03	-.07
No of parties in steering coalition		-.04	-.05	-.07	.00
LTI		.65	1.12	.58	5.67***
Ideological distance		-.13*	-.14**	-.02	-.27**
Free income per capita 2020 (1000 NOK)			.007	.008	.009
Municipal size 2020 (log)			.07	.07	.07
ICC	0.5747	0.5792	0.5783	0.6565	0.4333
No of groups	303	303	303	197	106
No of obs	436	436	436	288	148
LR test	43.64***	42.61***	42.48***	31.94***	7.84**
AIC	1198.67	1190.58	1193.06	727.50	459.18

* = $p < 0.10$, ** = $p < 0.05$, *** = $p < 0.01$.

case indicates that approximately 57% of the variance in the dependent variable (quality of cooperation) is explained by municipal differences.

Model 2 introduces the fragmentation variables, while model 3 also includes the control variables. The models indicate no significant effects of the number of parties or the LTI on the cooperative relations between the mayor and the MD. However, if fragmentation is measured as ideological distance in the steering coalition, we can detect a general, negative effect on the quality of cooperation. The effect on fragmentation of cooperative relations seems thus to depend on the type of fragmentation one is studying.

Models 4 and 5 split the sample into two groups, one representing divided and the other unified government. While there is no effect on the quality of cooperation under situations of unified government, there is a quite strong and positive effect of fragmentation measured both as the LTI and ideological distance when government is divided. Comparing the AICs clearly indicates that the separate analyses presented in models 4 and 5 fit the data better than model 1 to 3.

To test the robustness of the results,³ we first conducted a multilevel analysis with an interactional variable (unified * fragmentation) to see if the results were comparable to the results in the two separate analyses in models 4 and 5. The analysis supported the previous results in that the interaction term was positive and significant at the .05 level, indicating that effect of fragmentation on cooperative relations increases at positive values of the variable unified or divided (divide being high value). In addition, the variable unified/divided provided a positive effect (0.65) significant at the .10 level, while the negative effect of ideological distance became insignificant. This also largely supports the findings from models 4 and 5.

Next, we conducted an ordinary regression. Although the ICC from the empty model clearly indicated that a multilevel model was appropriate,

similar results using different analytical tools will increase the reliability of the findings. An OLS-analysis like model 3 gave almost identical results with the exception that LTI turned significant at the 10%-level. OLS-analyses like models 4 and 5 resulted in almost identical estimates. As a third test of robustness, only the 133 municipalities with responses from both the mayor and the MD were selected. Although the reduced number of observations and groups yielded lower statistical power, and thus less significant results (especially in the conditional analyses of models 4 and 5), the sizes and directions of the individual coefficients were largely similar. Finally, we explored the possibility of differences in perceptions between the mayor (numerical value = 0) and the MD (numerical value = 1) by including this dichotomous level 1 variable into models 3, 4 and 5. This variable had negative and significant effects in all three models (although only at the 10%-level in models 4 and 5), indicating that MDs in general perceived the quality of cooperation slightly less good than the mayors. The other coefficients remained almost identical to what is displayed in [Table 2](#). To follow up this finding, we conducted separate analyses for mayors and MDs. The two variables fragmentation and ideological distance had coefficients with similar direction for both groups (positive effect for LTI, negative for ideological distance), but the effects were only significant for the MDs. This indicates that fragmentation and ideological distance are first and foremost of importance to the administrative leaders, less so for the mayors.

Discussion

Initially, we outlined two different expectations on the effect of political fragmentation on the cooperative relation between politicians and administrators, in this case Norwegian municipal mayors and CAOs. Fragmentation was empirically operationalised in three different ways: as the number of political parties in the council and in the steering coalition ('government'), the relative size of each political party in relation to the other parties in the council (the Laakso-Taagepera index) and ideological distance measured as the difference between the mayor and the vice-mayors political party membership. Furthermore, we assumed that this effect would be conditioned on whether the government or the steering coalition of the municipality was unified or divided. A unified steering coalition was empirically defined as parties on the same side of the left-right dimension, while a divided steering coalition consisted of political parties spanning both sides of this dimension.

Two important theoretical points can be derived from the empirical findings. First, the study shows that fragmentation is far from a homogenous phenomenon. The three measures used in this study capture different characteristics of fragmentation, opening for the possibility that they may have different and even opposite effects. And, as they most probably are tightly

intertwined, the effect of one measure may get confounded with (potentially) contrasting effects of elements captured by other measures. Focusing on the quality of cooperation at the political-administrative apex, this study shows that different types of fragmentation have opposite effects. This leads to support for both PA theory and the multiple principals hypothesis, and for Svava's complementarity theory, depending on what type of fragmentation one is studying.

The empirical results support the expectations based in Svava's complementarity theory when the context is characterised by ideological fragmentation. Increasing ideological distance between the two most central representatives in the 'steering coalition' seems to lower the quality of cooperation at the political-administrative apex. However, when the context is characterised by equal strength between political parties in the council (measured by the LTI), it seems to produce higher quality of cooperation between the mayor and the MD. Following principal-agent-theory, this is an expected indirect consequence of higher autonomy for the two agents – the mayor and the MD (Boushey and Mcgrath 2020, Moe 1984, Moe 2012, McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1989). The theoretical linkage between numerical political fragmentation, increased agent discretion, and better room for a good cooperative context between the mayor and the MD is thus partially corroborated through this study. Finally, fragmentation measured as just the number of principals seems to be without consequence for the quality of cooperation between mayor and MD.

Second, this study also indicates that the effect of political fragmentation in many instances will be conditional (Palus and Yackee 2022). Ideological fragmentation only displays a negative effect on cooperation quality when government is divided, i.e., spans the political left–right divide. In situations of unified government, ideological fragmentation has no effect, probably because ideological distance between the mayor and the vice-mayor in such situations is naturally limited (steering coalition consists of parties on the same side of the left–right dimension). On the other hand, fragmentation measured as equality of strength between political parties (LTI) only has a positive effect on cooperative relations when there also is a fragmentation in the steering coalition, what we have termed divided government. Unified government thus seems to 'neutralize' any negative effects on cooperative relations stemming from fragmentation in the council.

Concerning the final empirical result, it is opposite to the one reported by Palus and Yackee (2022) in their study of state agency autonomy. They conclude that agency autonomy increases with ideological or preferential fragmentation, but only under conditions of unified government. Although seemingly in conflict with findings reported in this study, one should not ignore the large differences between the two studies. This study does not study autonomy directly as Palus and Yackee does. Furthermore, US state

agencies are quite different entities than municipal administration, and principals like state governors, state legislators in the upper and lower houses, and judges in elected state high courts are quite different from local authority politicians and political parties. Finally, the Norwegian multi-party-political system is quite different from the more polarised US two-party system.

Although this study lends partial support to the general multiple principals hypothesis, and in a wider sense, to general theories of the effects of 'weak government' (Roubini and Sachs 1989, Geys and Sorensen 2020, Reingewertz 2015, Sørensen 2007, Voorn et al. 2019), it also emphasises that this hypothesis or theory only will hold under certain conditions (Palus and Yackee 2022, Svava 1999, Jacobsen 2006). At the same time, it provides support for the complementarity perspective (Svava 1999, 2001), but again that this only will be valid under certain conditions.

Although not the focus of this study, the empirical results also indicate that the effects of political fragmentation on cooperative quality may have larger impact on administrators than on politicians. Both the positive effect of political fragmentation measured as equality of strength between parties, and the negative effect of ideological fragmentation, are significantly stronger for the MD than the mayor. This finding underlines the point that 'cooperative quality' is not an objective state but probably consists of diverging perceptions of the relationship. Future studies should delve deeper into the symmetry/asymmetry of perception of the relationship between politicians and administrators. Unfortunately, the current study was, due to little variation in the measure of cooperating quality, not fit to elaborate further on this.

Currently, there is a plethora of studies with findings underlining the fact that politics and administration is inherently intertwined, especially at the apex in politics and the administrative hierarchy. However, our knowledge of how the interaction between politicians and administrators is shaped by both individual, institutional, and national factors is still modest. The current study has only focused on one single, albeit important, characteristic of the political environment. And, overall, the findings here indicate that political factors outside the dyadic relationship between the mayor and the CAO influence the relationship between the two. This is a call for studying the relationship between politics and administration as something more clearly situated in a specific context (O'toole and Meier 2015, Jacobsen 2006, Demir 2009, Demir and Reddick 2012, Johns 2017). While this study has focused on a single part of the political-institutional context, future studies should also consider different administrative contexts, as well as higher-order differences in national context (political system, general trust, economic situation, etc.). In addition to that, future research should also consider that relations in essence are personal, thus evoking complex phenomena like 'trust', 'relationship quality' and 'likes and dislikes' (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2020, Liao and Sun 2020). As noted by Baekgaard et al. (2022, 21) '(...) relationships may vary not only

across nations, political systems, and time, but also across individuals'. As a constructive relationship between politics and administration is essential to governance and government performance, it is also essential to gain knowledge on the factors shaping this relationship.

Notes

1. Oslo, being both a municipality and a county, and Bergen, having a parliamentary political organisation, were excluded.
2. More formally the distance was computed using the following formula.

$$\sqrt{(a - b)^2}$$

Where:

a = mayor's political party (value from 0 to 5)

b = vice-mayor's political party (value from 0 to 5)

3. The analyses are available together with the dataset and the do-file on request to the author.

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