Strengthening of the executive centre: looking beyond NPM as the explanation for change

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Abstract
In several countries, attempts have been made to increase the capacity to coordinate and control public policy in the executive centre. The literature on whole-of-government and joined-up government describes these changes as reassertion efforts to counter the negative effects of former New Public Management (NPM) reforms. The main research question discussed in this article is whether the strengthening of the executive centre also should be explained by broader developments in society and by features of the cabinet itself. The research question is answered by looking at changes in Norway over the last three decades. Although former NPM reforms play a part in the Norwegian case, the article finds that the efforts undertaken should also be explained by the wish to improve cabinet decision-making and to solve conflicts between parties in cabinet.

Points for practitioners
This article examines different explanations for change in the executive centre in Norway. Over the last three decades, the Norwegian executive centre has been strengthened by the increased number of political appointees in ministries, by the enlargement of the Prime Minister’s Office where its own coordination minister was appointed in 2009, and by the formalization of an inner cabinet. The empirical data are gathered from internal cabinet documents and semi-structured interviews with administrative and political leaders. The article finds that developments in Norway have several explanations, suggesting that changes in the executive centre are heterogeneous, and are seldom undertaken to serve only one purpose.

Keywords
Cabinet decision-making, coordination, Norway, post-NPM, reassertion, strengthening

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Introduction

In recent decades, various efforts have been made in several countries to strengthen the executive centre, the core of the government apparatus. In a number of Western European countries and in North America, a growing number of political appointees has enabled increased horizontal coordination and political control of cabinet policy (Dahlström et al., 2011a; Peters, 2004). Some countries have also named tsars with responsibility for broad policy areas (Smith, 2011). To increase vertical coordination in cabinet, audit capabilities have been strengthened, and cabinet units for better strategic planning and implementation have been set up (Halligan, 2006; Wanna, 2006). As collegial decision-making in many countries has been weakened (Foster, 2005; Pedersen and Knudsen, 2005; Sundström, 2009), smaller cabinet committees have increased in importance as coordination organs (Knudsen, 2007), and prime ministers have been empowered (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The rise in prime ministerial power seen in several Western European countries has been enabled by an increase of staff at the central cabinet offices (Dahlström et al., 2011a; Peters et al., 2000). 1

These various changes are often referred to as reactions, to rebuild (Peters, 2004), to reassert (Christensen et al., 2007; Halligan, 2006), to recentre (Dahlström et al., 2011a). The changes are said to be countering the negative effects of former NPM reforms (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007a; Dahlström et al., 2011a). The relationship between NPM and post-NPM efforts is plausible in the outer parts of the public sector, where devolution and horizontal specialization from the first-generation NPM reforms have led to organizational mergers to better solve cross-cutting policy issues (Halligan, 2006). In the executive centre, however, the various efforts to strengthen coordination capacities seem to have several explanations. 2 For instance, scholars have shown how the process of Europeanization has transferred authority and resources to prime ministers and their offices (Johansson and Tallberg, 2010). Furthermore, the increased politicization of ministries has in some countries been explained by the transition from single-party to multi-party cabinets (Dahlström and Pierre, 2011). With that background, the research question raised in this article is whether efforts to strengthen the executive centre should also be explained by broad developments in society and features of the cabinet itself. In other words, the article aims to look beyond NPM when explaining changes in the core of the government apparatus.

The research question is answered by examining developments in Norway – a reluctant reformer where NPM reforms started late and were less extensive than elsewhere (Christensen and Lægreid, 2001; Olsen, 1996: 189). The Norwegian executive centre has been strengthened by the increased number of political appointees in ministries, by the enlargement of the Prime Minister’s Office (Christensen and Lægreid, 2002), where their own coordination minister was appointed in 2009 (Kolltveit, 2012b), and by the increased importance and formalization of an inner cabinet (Kolltveit, 2012a). The scope of these efforts suggests that changes other than former NPM reforms also drive developments in the
executive centre. Norway thus seems like a suitable case to answer the research questions raised in the article.

To explore and explain developments in the executive centre, this article draws on both interviews and document studies. Cabinet meeting agendas and other internal cabinet documents have been retrieved from the last 30 years, and semi-structured interviews have been conducted with administrative and political leaders, primarily from the last four cabinets. The empirical material in this article supplements the existing literature on coordination in Norwegian cabinets. More generally, the article’s findings supplement the understanding of why efforts are undertaken to strengthen the executive centre in parliamentary democracies.

The article first elaborates how changes in the executive centre have been seen as efforts to reverse the negative effects of former NPM reforms. Two supplementary explanations of change are then presented. In the section on research design, concrete expectations based on the three explanations are spelled out. The Norwegian case is then analysed in light of these expectations.

**Explanatory theoretical framework**

As underlined by the core executive literature, several actors and decision-making arenas constitute the executive centre (Elgie, 2011). The theoretical concept ‘strengthening of the executive centre’ thus entails quite heterogeneous changes, such as a growing number of political appointees in ministries and at the central cabinet offices, strengthening of audit capabilities, and establishment of planning and implementation units in cabinet, and the appointment of tsars or cabinet committees with responsibility for certain policy areas.

**NPM and reassertion efforts in the executive centre**

This broad array of changes in the central government apparatus is often described as responses to reverse the negative effects of the first wave of NPM reforms (Bogdanor, 2005; Christensen and Lægreid, 2007a; Halligan, 2006; Pollitt, 2003; Verhoest et al., 2007). The second wave of reforms has been given different names in the literature, such as post-NPM (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007a), whole-of-government (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007b), and joined-up government (Bogdanor, 2005; Pollitt, 2003). Some scholars have argued that the scope of recentring efforts mirrors the scope of former NPM reforms. The different measures to reassert the centre have been strongest in the Anglo-American countries where NPM reforms were most comprehensive. The recentring efforts have not been so strong in Scandinavia and in continental European countries, where NPM reforms were less comprehensive (Dahlström et al., 2011a: 264). According to Dahlström et al., the reform patterns thus ‘seem to suggest that recentring processes are first and foremost a reaction on earlier decentring’ (2011a: 270).

The underlying argument is that increased specialization and fragmentation of the public sector from former NPM reforms have moved decisions out, and
deprived prime ministers, individual ministers, and the administrative leadership of some of their ability to formulate and to control cabinet policy (Christensen et al., 2007; Dahlström et al., 2011b). This development has led to a new focus on integrated organizational structures and the use of instruments to improve coherence and coordination (Christensen and Lægreid, 2012).

Post-NPM is largely about overcoming the perceived NPM-generated weaknesses produced by specialization, fragmentation, and marketization. In response, post-NPM is associated with a strengthening of coordination through more centralized or collaborative capacity, whether it is called ‘whole of government’ or ‘joined-up government’. (Lodge and Gill, 2011: 143)

Besides institutional fragmentation, the sectorization process is important to understand the link between NPM reforms and recentring efforts in the executive centre. Although NPM reforms are mainly decentralizing, there are potentially some controlling elements through management-by-objectives-and-results (MBOR). The increased focus on MBOR has given the parent ministries the chance to control the subordinate agencies, increasing vertical coordination inside the sector (Christensen and Lægreid, 2008).

However, horizontal challenges between sectors remain. As devolution moved out regulatory and service-producing agencies, ministries have become more policy oriented and sectorized. The increased sectorization of the central government apparatus has worsened coordination problems and weakened the collegial decision-making in cabinet (Peters et al., 2000: 9). The central government apparatus has become both more fragmented and sectorized, and specific organizational solutions are implemented to ensure both vertical and horizontal coordination in the executive centre. This NPM-based explanation can be elaborated as an hypothesis:

- If changes in the executive sector were reactions to the former NPM reforms, we would expect reassertion efforts particularly aimed at countering the negative effects of the specific NPM reforms.

Societal changes and strengthening of the executive centre

The relationship between NPM and post-NPM in the executive centre rests on what Verhoest et al. (2007) call a basic assertion of organization theory, namely that specialization and differentiation increase the need for coordination (Mintzberg, 1979). However, efforts to strengthen the executive centre might have other explanations, as various developments in society also increase the need for coordination in cabinet.

The literature on core executives, governance, and presidentialization has all focused on how various societal changes have affected political actors in the executive centre (Elgie, 2011; Peters, 2004; Pierre, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005).
The focus has often been on the processes of internationalization, which is said to transfer authority to the international arena, often leaving state leaders with important decisions at the expense of other ministerial colleagues (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 13–14). Contributions favouring such explanations have for instance shown how participation in the European Union has increased the need for coordination authority and resources in national cabinets, often at the hands of the chief executives (Damgaard, 2000; Johansson and Tallberg, 2010).

Much emphasis has also been put on developments in the media. Mediatization of politics implies that the media’s agenda-setting power has grown and that the political system has adjusted to the new demands of mass media (Asp, 1986). Mediatization has not only affected election campaigns, but also governing and policymaking processes (Strömbäck, 2008). The increased pressure from the media often lead directly to larger communication units both in the ministries and at the Prime Minister’s Office (Heffernan, 2006). However, mediatization might also affect decision-making in the executive centre more indirectly. Ministers must often act quickly to give speedy answers and make decisions on single issues, challenging the coherence of cabinet policy, and thus increasing the need for coordination.

The societal development emphasized in this article concerns the growth of governmental activity. Political steering is challenged not only because NPM reforms have left the public sector more fragmented, but also because the public sector’s ambit has grown. As governmental activity has increased, budgets and politicians’ sectoral responsibilities have increased correspondingly (Peters et al., 2000: 8). Cabinets are involved in more issues and ministries must produce more material, which in turn means that cabinets as decision-making machineries are exposed to more pressure. As pressure and the complexity of business has grown, the cabinet is no longer the decision-making body it once was (Foster, 2005: 135). The expansion of state functions might thus create a need to create supplementary decision-making arenas in the executive centre. This society-based explanation can also be elaborated into the following hypothesis:

- If changes in the executive centre were reactions to the increased workload of cabinets, we would expect efforts aimed at improving the cabinet decision-making processes.

**Cabinet features and strengthening of the executive centre**

While the former two explanations are related to long-term changes in society, the need for increased capacity to coordinate cabinet policy might also stem from short-term changes more closely related to features of the cabinet itself.

The number of parties in cabinet is an important feature, essential for the level of conflict in cabinets. The coalition literature has underlined how ministries and parties constitute ‘centrifugal forces’ in coalition cabinets (Andeweg, 1988).
Rivalry both between ministries and between coalition partners creates conflicts, and policymaking is thus more conflictual in coalitions than in single-party cabinets (Andeweg and Timmermans, 2008: 269). In addition, conflicts in coalitions are often graver, since disagreements are more serious along party lines than they are along department lines (Andeweg, 1997). To keep the cabinet together it is necessary to coordinate the different political interests in cabinet. Political survival requires the cabinet to appear coherent, united, and in control (Davies, 1997: 132). Given that the political interests are more diverse in a coalition, there will therefore be a strong need to strengthen the decision-making centre in multi-party cabinets (Andeweg, 1988).

Focusing on developments that will enhance the need for coordination in cabinet, one might say that going from a single-party cabinet to a coalition will increase political disagreements in the cabinet, and thus enhance the need for strengthening the executive centre in order to coordinate policy and avoid conflicts. In Sweden, for instance, the transition from single party to coalition has been cited as one of the main explanations for the large growth in political appointees in ministries (Dahlström and Pierre, 2011). This party-based explanation can be elaborated into the following hypothesis:

If changes in the executive centre were reactions to the number of parties in cabinet, we would expect efforts particularly aimed at accommodating the increased political disagreements in cabinet.

Research design

The changes in the Norwegian executive centre can be said to consist of the increased number of political appointees in ministries, by the enlargement of the Prime Minister’s Office where their own coordination minister was appointed in 2009, and by the increased importance and formalization of an inner cabinet. These empirical developments in the Norwegian case thus only capture some of the possible changes within the theoretical concept of strengthening the executive centre.

The article aims to analyse developments in the Norwegian executive centre over the last 30 years in light of the three explanations and the hypotheses sketched out above (see Table 1).

The NPM reforms in Norway have left the central government apparatus fragmented and sectorized. Authority has been transferred from the political-administrative level to regulatory agencies, service-producing agencies, and state-owned companies, making the public sector more differentiated and fragmented (Christensen and Lægreid, 2001). Management-by-objectives-and-results (MBOR) was implemented in the 1990s as an important feature of Norwegian reforms, giving ministries important control tools (Christensen et al., 2007). These tools increased vertical coordination in the sector, although they did not
contribute to coordination between ministries. Previous work has shown how Norwegian civil servants participate more in working groups within ministries than across ministries (Christensen et al., 2010). The ministries’ vertical structures seem to spread into the cabinet (Christensen and Lægreid, 2002: 81–82; Fimreite and Lægreid, 2005: 180). We would thus expect that the Prime Minister’s Office has been strengthened, including the appointment of the coordination minister, to ensure horizontal coordination in cabinet.5

Regarding the second explanation, less is known about the workload of Norwegian cabinets. In Norway, the cabinet meeting has traditionally been the highest organ for coordinating cabinet policy (Christensen and Lægreid, 2002: 66), and has been called the pillar of the cabinet’s collegial working form (Skjeie, 2001: 182). This article draws on internal cabinet documents to investigate how the number of issues discussed at cabinet meetings has developed. Access to these documents is in principle restricted for 25 years. However, the study that is the basis of this article has been granted access by prime ministers and the present party leaders. The empirical section then analyses whether the cabinet subcommittee has grown into a supplementary decision-making arena in order to improve the cabinet decision-making processes.

Regarding the party-based explanation, the number of parties in cabinet would be a simple indicator of political disagreements in cabinet. However, cabinet documents are utilized in addition to establish whether coalition cabinets have presented more cases at the cabinet meetings than have single-party cabinets. This is seen as an indicator of political disagreements that need to be solved by cabinet. The empirical analysis then investigates whether the increased number of state secretaries in Norwegian ministries has been used to strengthen political coordination in

Table 1. Norwegian cabinets 1983–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Parties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gro Harlem Brundtland II</td>
<td>1986–89</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gro Harlem Brundtland III</td>
<td>1990–96</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torbjørn Jagland</td>
<td>1996–97</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jens Stoltenberg I</td>
<td>2000–01</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jens Stoltenberg II</td>
<td>2005–to date</td>
<td>Centre Party, Labour Party, Socialist Left Party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Norwegian Social Science Data Service.
cabinet. These junior ministers are mentioned in the Norwegian constitution and can act on behalf of the minister.

Previous contributions have described some of the efforts to strengthen the Norwegian executive centre. However, to analyse whether these changes actually function in line with expectations from the three explanations, new data are required. The present article therefore draws on interviews with chiefs of staff and secretaries-general from the last four cabinets. Interviews employing open-ended questions were conducted by the author, primarily in autumn 2011 and spring 2012. The interviews covered various questions about change in the Norwegian executive centre, including the role of the Prime Minister’s Office, the coordination minister, internal cabinet committees, and state secretaries in the cabinet decision-making processes. The interviews also included questions about the actors’ perceived reasons for developments in the Norwegian executive centre. The interviews were conversational, and answers have thus not been quantified as more standardized surveys would have made possible. The interviewees sometimes differ in their assessments of developments. However, the citations were chosen for illustrative purposes only when there was a general agreement among the interviewees. The 10 interviews lasted 41–71 minutes, with an average of 59 minutes.

**Analysing changes in the Norwegian executive centre**

There have been few full reforms to strengthen the executive centre in Norway. Instead, developments have gradually increased the capacity to coordinate cabinet policy. The following section analyses the developments in the Norwegian executive centre in light of the three expectations elaborated above.

**Reassertion to increase horizontal coordination**

In Norway, no new cabinet committees have been set up specifically to increase horizontal coordination or to solve cross-cutting policy issues.

Looking at the Prime Minister’s Office, there has been a marked growth in the number of administrative and political appointees. However, with only 60 civil servants and eight politicians, the office remains comparatively small. According to the secretaries-general who were interviewed, the increase in personnel has given the Prime Minister’s Office a more central role in the decision-making process in cabinet. The growth in the number of civil servants has enabled a more active role towards other ministries before issues are presented at cabinet meetings. The Prime Minister’s Office is in close contact with line ministries to prepare the prime minister before the meetings. According to the secretaries-general interviewed, civil servants at the Prime Minister’s Office increasingly also go into detail, claiming a policy-developing role. However, the interviewees do not agree as to whether this active and intervening role has caused the Prime Minister’s Office to develop into a ‘superministry’.
The growth of political appointees has enabled the Prime Minister’s Office to have a more active role in coordinating the views of different ministries. The office helps develop compromises when ministries disagree and no solution can be found at the cabinet meetings. This processual role was apparently further enhanced after the appointment of a coordination minister at the Prime Minister’s Office in 2009. The promotion of the chief of staff, Karl Eirik Schjøtt-Pedersen, from state secretary to minister created much media attention because the new minister did not have any portfolio and thus did not have to answer to parliament. In Norwegian cabinets, it has been common to have one or two ministers with responsibility for limited areas within other ministries. Schjøtt-Pedersen, however, was the first minister without portfolio for over 50 years. The appointment offered a specific organizational solution to ensure coordination. According to the interviewees, however, the coordination minister was mainly named to relieve Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg. According to one secretary-general,

During the tenure, Prime Minister Stoltenberg slipped into a new role. He became more of an all-round politician, and was not just fighting about details. To free time for the prime minister, the chief of staff was given more authority.

Changes at the Prime Minister’s Office have increased the capacity to coordinate cabinet policy, and strengthened the ability to ensure agreement between line ministries. However, the new role of the coordination minister should also be seen in relation to how cabinet decision-making more broadly has changed over recent decades in Norway.

**Efforts to improve cabinet decision-making**

Before investigating whether efforts in the executive centre are undertaken to improve cabinet decision-making, details of such cabinet meetings are first scrutinized. During the period being studied, cabinet decision-making in Norway seems to have changed.

As Table 2 shows, the number of cabinet meetings has been reduced over the last 30 years, although it remains comparatively high. The number of cabinet issues has varied between cabinets, but the overall trend seems to suggest a growing number of cases, in contrast to Sweden, for instance, where the number of topics discussed in formal cabinet meetings has fallen dramatically (Sundström, 2009: 162). With fewer meetings and more issues, Norwegian cabinets have to deal with more issues at each meeting. This tendency was continued in the Stoltenberg II cabinet after 2009, when the cabinet went from twice-weekly to weekly cabinet meetings.

According to interviewees, the increase in the cabinet’s total workload has complicated the use of the cabinet meeting as the primary arena for cabinet decision-making. In former Labour single-party cabinets (Jagland, Brundtland II, Brundtland III, Stoltenberg I) smaller groups consisting of the prime minister, finance minister, and relevant line ministers had to solve conflicts that the full cabinet
could not agree upon. In the coalitions studied, the cabinet subcommittee, consisting of the prime minister, party leaders, and in some instances also the finance minister, has had this role. In Willoch II, the subcommittee was mainly used for informal consultations and discussions, although it sometimes also decided difficult issues, making it resemble an inner cabinet (Rommetvedt, 1994; Willoch, 1997). The reliance on the subcommittee to discuss and sometimes solve difficult issues continued under the Syse cabinet (Narud and Strøm, 2003: 179). Over the last two decades, the cabinet subcommittee has evolved into a decisive decision-making organ (Kolltveit, 2012a).

Table 2. Overview of cabinet meetings 1984–2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. cabinet meetings</th>
<th>No. issues</th>
<th>Issues per meeting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willoch II</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>8.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>7.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brundtland II</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>6.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>6.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syse</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>661</td>
<td>7.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brundtland III</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>7.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>7.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>6.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>578</td>
<td>7.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagland</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>9.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondevik I</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>10.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>11.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoltenberg I</td>
<td>2000–01</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondevik II</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>941</td>
<td>11.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>765</td>
<td>10.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>10.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aThe number of cabinet meetings does not include the ritual Council of State led by the king. In the period studied there have been some changes in how budgetary issues have been handled at cabinet meetings. In the 1980s and 1990s it was common for line ministries to present cabinet notes with comments on the different implications of the finance minister’s budget. To ensure comparability with later decades, these issues have been counted as part of the general discussion on the state budget.

*bBased on the year from November 1989 to November 1990.

*cThree weeks short of a full year.

Source: The Prime Minister’s Office.

There is pressure to have time for long debates on several issues in cabinet. However, the workload in cabinet just increases. Obviously, there are limits to how long
we discuss and discuss in the plenary sessions. The need to determine cases in the sub-committee increases. There are not so many people in the subcommittee asking to speak.

In the Stoltenberg II cabinet, a division of labour evolved between the subcommittee and the Prime Minister’s Office to solve remaining disagreements; both between the various ministries responsible, and disagreements along party lines. According to the coordination minister Schjøtt-Pedersen,

Before, all such disagreements went to the subcommittee. Since the chief of staff function was changed, however, a significant number of them can be solved in processes led by me and with state secretaries representing the party leaders.

In the Stoltenberg II coalition, the cabinet subcommittee became an arena for political horse-trading where victories and defeats were divided between the coalition parties; for example, immigration policy could be tightened as long as the number of forces in Afghanistan were reduced. In Stoltenberg II, the work of the subcommittee was also formalized, and their own meeting agendas and subcommittee notes were prepared with the official cabinet minutes as templates. Overall, the growing importance of the cabinet subcommittee as a supplementary decision-making arena over the last three decades and the appointment of a coordination minister at the Prime Minister’s Office can partly be viewed as a desire to improve the cabinet decision-making process.

**Efforts to accommodate political disagreements**

Over the period studied, Norwegian cabinets have varied between single-party cabinets and multi-party coalitions. A closer look at the numbers reported in Table 2 suggests that political disagreements in cabinet might have increased in the coalitions studies. The numbers show a slight trend of coalitions presenting more issues to cabinet than do single-party cabinets. In the period under study, single-party cabinets have presented on average seven cases at each meeting, while the coalitions have had an average of 10. These numbers indicate that ministers in single-party cabinets have had more authority to decide issues within their ministries, while in coalitions more issues have been potentially conflictual and thus have had to be brought to the cabinet meetings. Based on the elaborations above, we would expect the efforts to strengthen the executive centre to mirror this varying political landscape.

Looking at the politicization of Norwegian ministries, the number of state secretaries has more than doubled over the last 30 years (see Table 3). To a certain degree, the number of parties in cabinet affects the number of state secretaries. Single-party cabinets on average had 27 state secretaries while the coalitions have had an average of 32. However, the growth can not only be explained by transition from single-party to multi-party. In the Stoltenberg II cabinet, for instance, 10 new
state secretaries were appointed. The rise led to criticism from the opposition, questioning the increased need for political coordination from one coalition cabinet to another (Lilleås, 2009).

Over the period studied, new state secretaries have been assigned to all ministries, suggesting that the growth has happened to help ease the increased workload of ministers. In general, state secretaries from one party are seldom appointed to a ministry only to ensure that a minister from another party is sticking to the agreed policy agenda. Such ‘shadowing’ partly happens at the Prime Minister’s Office and at the Ministry of Finance. In 1997, Prime Minister Bondevik appointed state secretaries from the other coalition parties at the Prime Minister’s Office, partly to ensure that no one was overrun by the other coalition partners (Karlsen, 1997). However, responsibility for the different ministries and policy areas was distributed between the different state secretaries regardless of their own party affiliation.

Scrutinizing the actual work, the Norwegian state secretaries do not seem to solve political disagreements in permanent committees. In the period studied, the number of permanent committees of state secretaries has decreased. In the latest Stoltenberg II cabinet, these committees were even abandoned completely, and ad hoc committees were instead set up when needed. According to the secretaries-general who were interviewed, the permanent state secretary committees could be valuable when discussing the cabinet’s general approach when preparing cabinet white papers, or to clarify minor disagreements, etc. Too often, however, the state secretary committees had a limited importance, because of their inability to solve conflicts. The state secretaries were not at a high enough level politically to clarify difficult issues, and disagreements were therefore often pushed further to cabinet. According to one secretary-general,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet</th>
<th>No. state secretaries in the ministries</th>
<th>No. permanent state secretary committees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Willoch II</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brundtland II</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syse</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brundtland III</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jagland</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondevik I</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoltenberg I</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondevik II</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoltenberg II</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Norwegian Social Science Data Services, The Prime Minister’s Office (personal communication), Statskonsult (1999).
The main purpose is to decide issues in order to relieve the cabinet. Very often, however, there is a full round of discussion in cabinet, as if the state secretary committee has done nothing. Then the whole purpose disappears. Participation in these permanent committees instead becomes an extra work burden for the state secretaries.

According to the secretaries-general who were interviewed, the state secretaries do consult each other informally to discuss difficult political issues between ministries early in the process. As seen in Sweden, however, the state secretaries have been most important in easing the ministers’ workload inside the ministry, and in contact with actors outside the cabinet, like those in the party organization, the parliament, and the media (Dahlström and Pierre, 2011; Statskonsult, 1999).

In the Norwegian case, the change from single-party cabinet to coalition seems to have increased the underlying need for increased coordination in the executive centre. However, state secretaries have not primarily solved political disagreements. Instead, the change from single-party cabinet to coalition seems to have invigorated coordination arenas such as the subcommittee, and led to organizational changes at the Prime Minister’s Office. According to a secretary-general,

The subcommittee and the construction with a minister at the Prime Minister’s Office is a streamlining of coordination processes used before. The difference now is that the number of cases has increased, so the need is greater. It is clear that the number of cases is bigger in a cabinet consisting of several parties than in a cabinet from one party.

However, the number of parties alone cannot explain why the cabinet subcommittee’s importance has varied between coalition cabinets in Norway. This suggests that other features also affect political differences in cabinet and thus the need for reassertion of the centre. According to the secretaries-general interviewed, the majority situation contributed to making the political landscape more complex, and making the subcommittee an integrated part of cabinet decision-making in the Stoltenberg II cabinet.

**Discussing explanations for change in the executive centre**

Summing up the empirical analysis, the Norwegian case does not quite match all the theoretical expectations. The strengthening of the Prime Minister’s Office has increased coordination, as expected from the NPM explanation. However, the appointment of a coordination minister should also be seen as an effort to improve cabinet decision-making, and to relieve an overburdened prime minister. The number of issues in Norwegian cabinets has grown over the period studied, and the increasing importance of the cabinet subcommittee could be seen as a supplementary decision-making arena, as expected from the workload
explanation. However, the need for such a supplement has also been affected by the growing political disagreements in cabinet. The politicization of Norwegian ministries has not primarily happened to solve political disagreements, as expected from the party-based explanation. The marked growth of political appointees has been most important to relieve the ministers in their daily work. Overall, the Norwegian case thus suggests that the various changes in the executive centre have several explanations and serve several purposes.

The expectation that reassertion efforts in particular are aimed at increasing coordination in cabinet was based on the view that recentring processes are primarily reactions to earlier decentraling. Although NPM reforms might have increased the need for coordination at the centre, fragmentation and sectorization in the public sector are not only caused by such reforms. As Jensen (2011) notes with regard to Denmark, the structure had been complex and decentralized long before the reform wave of NPM, and there had been constant pressure for better coordination. In Norway, sectorization also has historical explanations, such as the traditions of ministerial responsibility (Fimreite and Lægreid, 2005) and the weak formal demands of administrative coordination (Statskonsult, 2002: 9). Sectorization is thus nothing new, although it might have been further enhanced by NPM reforms, leading to an increased need to reassert the centre. As this article has shown, NPM reforms have increased sectorization in the central government apparatus, and the Prime Minister’s Office has been strengthened to secure horizontal coordination. The Norwegian case thus illustrates that former NPM reforms indeed can contribute to changes in the executive centre.

However, strengthening efforts have several explanations. As emphasized by other scholars, countries where NPM reforms were less comprehensive have also strengthened the centre (Dahlstrøm et al., 2011b: 273). This suggests that one should look beyond the NPM-generated weaknesses of fragmentation and sectorization to explain changes in the executive centre. The Norwegian case reinforces this impression, and shows how changes in the executive centre should also be understood as a wish to increase efficiency in cabinet decision-making and to solve conflicts between parties in cabinet. In other words, there might be numerous centrifugal developments leading to centripetal reactions in the executive centre.

The literature on post-NPM refers to changes in the public sector as reactions to former NPM reforms. The relationship between NPM and post-NPM efforts might be obvious in the public sector’s outer parts, where former horizontal specialization has led to organizational mergers. In the executive centre, NPM reforms might lead to sectorization and thereby contribute to the enhanced need for coordination. However, the link between NPM and post-NPM seems less closely attached in the core of the government apparatus. This understanding is in line with the views that NPM and post-NPM efforts could coexist and should be viewed as parallel processes, as also emphasized by other scholars (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007a; Verhoest et al., 2007).
Conclusion

Drawing on cabinet documents and interviews with senior actors, this article has tried to explain changes in the executive centre in Norway. The strengthening of the Prime Minister’s Office can be seen as an effort to increase horizontal coordination in cabinet, as expected from the NPM explanation. The appointment of a coordination minister, the growing importance of the cabinet subcommittee, and the politicization of Norwegian ministries, however, should be seen in relation to how cabinet decision-making has changed over the last three decades, and how the number of parties in cabinet can increase the need for alternative decision-making arenas.

However, the design of this study does not make it possible to distinguish clearly whether efforts are undertaken either to improve decision-making or to increase political coordination. Despite these shortcomings, the article adds to the growing literature showing the various drivers of change in the executive centre (Dahlström and Pierre, 2011).

The insight that basic structural features of cabinet can affect reassertion efforts in the executive centre should also be relevant beyond the Norwegian case, for instance in countries with frequent coalition cabinets. However, the number of parties is not the only structural feature affecting reassertion efforts in the executive centre. The Norwegian case seems to suggest that cabinet features such as the parliamentary basis of cabinet might also contribute to changes in the executive centre. Previous contributions have also emphasized how reassertion efforts in Denmark partly resulted from party political realities (Jensen, 2011). Further comparative research should be undertaken, however, to understand how such basic structural features of cabinet can affect strengthening of the executive centre.

Notes

1. Besides these structural changes in the centre, some countries have also changed the work methods of cabinet. For instance in Finland, where new programmes and strategy documents are used to increase horizontal coordination (Kekkonen and Raunio, 2011).
2. Here, coordination is seen as part of political steering, together with priority setting, implementation, and control. Coordination at cabinet level thus includes the search for agreement and avoidance of divergences among parties and departments (Halligan, 2011). The term ‘executive centre’ is used as an analytical point of departure, drawing attention to certain actors and decision-making arenas in central government. For an overview of the literature on the core executive, see Elgie (2011).
3. In Sweden, for instance, the fear of leakages to the media made Prime Minister Göran Persson prefer smaller decision-making arenas to the cabinet meetings (Sundström, 2009).
4. Several of the regulatory agencies were later moved out of Oslo (Christensen and Lægreid, 2007c). Another important NPM-inspired reform has been the reform of the Norwegian hospital system.
5. The Prime Minister’s Office in Norway serves as office for both the prime minister and the cabinet, and has four main sections (administration, domestic, international and communication).
6. The limitation is mainly pragmatic, as former officials and politicians were more difficult to get access to. Secondary literature is therefore used as a supplement. An interview with former Prime Minister Bondevik has also been included.

7. The most well-known post-NPM-inspired reforms in Norway in recent decades have been mergers of central agencies, leading to new entities such as the Food Authority, the Directorate of Health and Social Affairs, and the Welfare Administration (Christensen and Lægreid, 2008).

8. From 1986 to 2006, the number of administrative employees at the Prime Minister’s Office more than doubled, the highest growth rate of all ministries (Kolltveit, 2012b). The number of state secretaries has also grown. In the Willoch II cabinet, there were three state secretaries at the Prime Minister’s Office; in the Stoltenberg II cabinet three decades later, the number of state secretaries had increased to eight (Kolltveit, 2012b).

9. There seem to be several explanations why the number of cases has increased in Norway. Some of the interviewed secretaries-general highlight how ministers have become increasingly ambitious about political steering and implementation, and do not merely leave important decisions to other actors such as parliament, counties, and municipalities. Others underline how public scrutiny on cabinet affairs has increased the number of cases cabinet has to deal with.

10. Unfortunately, it was not possible to get access to overviews of cabinet issues from the Stoltenberg II cabinet.

References


**Appendix: List of interviews**


Fevolden T, Secretary General, Ministry of Research and Education (1992–), 1 March 2012.

Flatø LE, Chief of Staff, Prime Minister’s Office (2005–06), 31 May 2012.

Hasle AKL, Secretary General, Ministry of Health (1999–2013), 1 September 2011.

Hildrum E, Secretary General, Ministry of Transport and Communication (2005–), 22 March 2012.


Schjøtt-Pedersen KE, Chief of Staff, later Minister without Portfolio, Prime Minister’s Office, (2006–), 29 June 2011.

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