

# Autonomy and Control in the Norwegian Civil Service: Does Agency Form Matter?

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# Contents

PREFACE .....	3
ABSTRACT .....	4
SAMMENDRAG .....	5
INTRODUCTION .....	7
THE CONTEXT .....	8
THEORETICAL APPROACHES .....	10
The structural-instrumental perspective .....	11
A cultural-institutional perspective .....	12
External pressure.....	14
Blending the perspectives .....	15
DATA BASE AND METHODOLOGY.....	15
EMPIRICAL RESULTS .....	18
The dependent variables: autonomy and control.....	18
Bivariate and multivariate analyses .....	24
Multivariate analysis.....	27
DISCUSSION .....	29
CONCLUSION .....	31
LITERATURE .....	32
APPENDIX.....	35
Independent variables.....	35

# Preface

This paper is written as a part of the research program «Regulation, Control and Auditing» funded by the Norwegian Research Council. Earlier version of the paper was presented at the Stanford/SOG conference on «Autonomization of the State. From integrated administrative models to single-purpose organizations», Stanford April 1–2 2005 and at the Ninth International Research Symposium on Public Management – IRSPM IX, Bocconi School of Management, Milan, April 6–8 2005. We would like to thank Vidar W. Rolland and John-Erik Aagotnes for their substantial help in formulating the questionnaire and collecting the data. We will also thank Tom Christensen for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

# Abstract

This paper describes the degree of perceived autonomy and control in Norwegian state agencies, examines the relationships between different dimensions of autonomy, and analyzes the variations in perceived autonomy and control. One of the main findings of a broad survey of Norwegian state agencies carried out in 2004 is that agencies have quite a lot of autonomy. However, this autonomy is not of a general nature but varies significantly along different dimensions. Some autonomy dimensions represent clusters that supplement one other, while others are rather loosely coupled. The formulated hypotheses based on selected variables derived from a structural-instrumental, a cultural-institutional, and an environmental approach generally did not get strong support from the empirical analyses. There are, however, some significant relationships with variables derived from all three perspectives.

# Sammendrag

Dette notatet beskriver opplevd autonomi og kontroll i norske statlige forvaltningsorgan. Det fokuseres spesielt på relasjonene mellom ulike dimensjoner ved autonomi, slik som personalmessig autonomi, finansiell autonomi og policy-autonomi og på variasjoner i autonomi og kontroll slik det oppleves fra de ulike forvaltningsorganene. Det empiriske grunnlaget er en bredt anlagt spørreundersøkelse til statlige forvaltningsorgan utenom departementene som ble gjennomført i 2004. Et hovedfunn er at forvaltningsorganene opplever en betydelig autonomi. Men denne autonomien varierer langs ulike dimensjoner og er for eksempel større i personalsaker enn i finansielle spørsmål. Noen autonomidimensjoner utgjør sammenhengende knippe mens andre er mer løst koplet. De formulerte hypotesene på grunnlag av et strukturelt-instrumentelt perspektiv, et kulturelt-institusjonelt perspektiv og et omgivelsesperspektiv får generelt ikke sterk støtte i de empiriske analysene. Det er imidlertid signifikante sammenhenger med variabler fra alle tre perspektivene.



# Introduction

Agencies represent a traditional organizational form in the Norwegian central government with a long history. They are an integral part of the Norwegian civil service, and norms and practices for agency autonomy and control have become established over time. In the last decade, however, agencies have been subjected to reorganizations and reforms. As in many other countries, there has been a general trend in Norway to upgrade the role of agencies by giving them increased autonomy and by introducing role-purification. This development has been especially strong for regulatory agencies. The Norwegian government recently formulated a new regulatory policy focusing on the autonomization and strengthening of supervisory agencies. In addition, efforts to increase agency autonomy have been accompanied by an increase in external auditing and control. This dual prescription of both enhanced autonomy and more control produces an inherent tension in agency reforms. On the one hand, the agencies are supposed to gain more autonomy, both from political executives and from market actors. On the other hand, central political control is expected to be enhanced by a strengthening of frame steering and regulatory power (Christensen and Læg Reid 2004a).

Generally there is a strong belief among reform agents that formal structure will make a difference, and reorganization is thus a main strategy in agency reform. There is a large literature on how formal structure affects behavior (Egeberg 2003), but still the implications of formal structure are often not always very well understood (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). In this paper we will challenge the one-sided focus on formal agency structure and look at cultural and environmental features as well in order to understand how autonomy and control are perceived in different forms of agencies.

This paper sets out to do two things: 1) to describe the degree of perceived autonomy and control in Norwegian state agencies and to examine the relationships between different dimensions of autonomy; 2) to analyze the variation in perceived autonomy and control, emphasizing the importance of the structural, cultural, and environmental features of the agencies. The empirical basis is a broad survey of Norwegian state agencies carried out in 2004.

State agencies are part of the civil service, but they are structurally disaggregated from the ministries. They carry out public tasks on a permanent basis, are staffed by civil servants, are subject to public law procedures, and are normally financed mainly by the state budget. They have some autonomy from the ministries in policy decision-making and in personnel, financial, and managerial matters, but they are not totally independent (Pollitt et al. 2004).

The main set of dependent variables in this paper is different dimensions of autonomy and control. Agency autonomy is a multidimensional concept and not linked to agencies' formal legal status in any straightforward way. Agencies with the same formal status may vary substantially in their autonomy (Pollitt et al. 2004), and autonomy may apply to varying degrees to a number of different dimensions, such as policy autonomy, managerial autonomy, and structural, financial, and legal autonomy (Christensen 2001, Verhoest et al. 2004). One may also differentiate between strategic

autonomy and operational autonomy along some of these dimensions (Verhoest et al. 2004). Autonomy along one dimension may not imply autonomy along others (Bouckaert and Peters 2004). The level of autonomy may also vary over time. There are differences between structural autonomy, legal autonomy, and de facto autonomy. Structural disaggregation and autonomy in practice often go together, but there may also be agencies which score high on disaggregation and low on autonomy (Graham and Roberts 2004), and vice versa. Agency autonomy must also be seen in relation to control from superior bodies. The agencies are not independent in any absolute sense, but are quasi-autonomous entities and the ministries will normally use different forms for control and steering to constrain the agencies' autonomy.

In this paper we will first present the Norwegian context of agencification and administrative reform. Second, we will outline three theoretical perspectives, focusing on different explanatory variables, and formulate hypotheses on the relationships between these independent variables and perceived autonomy and control. Third, we will briefly describe the data base and methodology. Fourth, we will present the empirical results. Finally, we will discuss the findings and draw conclusions.

## The context

Norway is a small unitary, parliamentary, and multiparty state. Since the early 1970s, it has mainly been ruled by minority governments, and since 1994 it has been connected to the EU through the Economic Area Agreement. In a comparative perspective, it has a strong democratic tradition, scores high on per capita income and abundance of natural resources, has relatively strong collectivistic and egalitarian values, is consensus-oriented, and has a low level of internal conflict and well-developed corporatist arrangements. It also has one of the most comprehensive and universal welfare states in the world with a large public sector. Its economy is open and dependent on export. The relationships between parliament, ministers, and agencies are based on the principle of ministerial responsibility, meaning that the minister is responsible to the parliament for all activities within his or her policy area in the ministry as well as in subordinate bodies. Political control over the civil service has, however, been general and passive, allowing the executive a lot of leeway. This seems to reflect some major features of the political-administrative system: high levels of mutual trust and shared attitudes and norms among political and administrative leaders and within the public sector (Christensen and Lægveid 2005a). The level of trust in public institutions is generally higher than in most other countries (Norris 1999). Surveys of political support for national government and parliament nearly always accord Norway a leading position. Nevertheless, the pattern of confidence in political institutions is cyclical, and the level was lower at the end of the 1990s than in the early 1980s (Listhaug 1995, 1998).

Agencies have been a major organizational form in the Norwegian central government for a long time and have displayed a lot of path-dependency, representing an enduring historical conflict between the political executive and professional groups (Christensen and Roness 1999). Around 1850 the first autonomous professional agencies (called directorates) outside the integrated and jurist-dominated hierarchical

ministries were established, primarily in the communications sector. A second wave of independent agencies followed in the 1870s. This agency type was imitated from Sweden. In the period between the establishment of the parliamentary principle in 1884 and the outbreak of World War I the number of new independent agencies stagnated, and in the period between the world wars a partially integrated agency model became more widespread.

In the mid-1950s the government stated a new principle for agency structure and increased the number of independent agencies. The idea was that more technical issues and routine tasks should be moved to the agencies, while policy and planning tasks should stay within the ministries. The new doctrine resulted in the establishment of several new agencies over the next 15 years, but this development slowed down in the 1970s, partly for political reasons (Christensen and Roness 1999, Grønlie 2001).

The dominant agency model in Norway has historically been rather unified, with little horizontal specialization (Christensen and Læg Reid 2004b). In most agencies administrative tasks, regulatory and control tasks, and service provision and production tasks have been combined and integrated. Traditionally, Norway has not had any type of administrative court. Appeals are directed to the parent ministry, which can also instruct the agencies. The idea that there ought to be separate agencies for different tasks is rather new, although some of the agencies have enjoyed enhanced authority for some time, mainly in financial and personnel matters, but also in some more substantive areas (Læg Reid et al. 2003).

Over the past 15 years, a process of structural devolution has been going on in the Norwegian central government, and the independent agency model has become more differentiated (Christensen and Læg Reid 2003). This development was partly inspired by New Public Management ideas and solutions, but was also a part of Norway's adaptation to the EU and the internal market. The model combines vertical inter-organizational specialization (or structural disaggregation), whereby agencies formally gain more authority, with increased horizontal inter-organizational specialization, whereby the distribution of roles and tasks among agencies are more differentiated and non-overlapping.

Until the late 1980s major public sectors like railways, telecommunications, electrical power, postal services, forestry, grain sales, airports, road construction, and public broadcasting were organized as integrated government services, whereby the state held the roles of owner, provider, purchaser, regulator, and controller. Since then, the commercial parts of these enterprises have become corporatized, while the regulatory parts have been streamlined into separate agencies, creating a more fragmented and disintegrated model. Over time, the primary task of an increasing proportion of agencies has become regulation and scrutiny (Rubecksen 2004). Some of these agencies, like the Data Inspectorate, the Lottery Inspectorate, and the Media Authority, are new, but many also represent re-labelling and rearrangements of former activities and organizations.

Since the mid-1990s NPM has gained a stronger footing in Norway, and reforms have become increasingly comprehensive and radical in recent years (Christensen and Læg Reid 2001, 2002). The introduction of Management by Objectives and Results, private sector management tools, changes from horizontally integrated ministerial

models to single-purpose models, increased agencification, and the establishment of autonomous regulatory bodies have been the result. There has also been a strong trend in some policy areas to merge smaller bodies into larger units. One example of this is the reform of higher education in the mid-1990s, in which many relatively small state colleges were merged, reducing the number from 98 to 26 (Lægreid et al. 2003).

In 2003 the current conservative-centre minority government put forward a White Paper to the parliament (St.meld nr. 17 (2002–2003)), proposing a new regulatory policy, whereby regulatory agencies would increase their independence from the ministries. Political considerations were to be confined primarily to setting general norms through laws and rules, while executive politicians were expected to leave individual cases to be handled by competent professionals in the regulatory agencies. The regulatory agencies were to be endowed with legitimacy by removing the ambiguity inherent in mixing political and professional considerations, by making the balance between these considerations more explicit, and by strengthening their professional competence. The opportunities for ministers to instruct the agencies in the handling of individual cases should be reduced by directing ministerial responsibility more toward broader policy questions and general guidelines. In addition, it was proposed to change the complaints procedure in several agencies by moving it away from the ministries and into new independent bodies of appeal. The parliament did not approve all of these proposals, and a compromise was reached with some of the opposition parties in which the establishment of independent appeal boards was postponed until after the next general election. It was also agreed that the restriction in the power of executive political leaders to instruct the agencies should not be introduced as a general principle but should be handled on a case-by-case basis (Christensen and Lægreid 2004b).

Summing up, the independent agency model is an old and contested organizational form in the Norwegian central government. One of the most enduring conflicts in Norwegian administrative policy has revolved around the issues of agency autonomy and ministerial control. There seems to be no final answer or best solution to the question of how to balance autonomy and control, and one lesson from the past is that one has to learn to live with a certain amount of tension between these two considerations and with the unstable trade-offs that occur both over time and across different administrative cultures and structural arrangements.

## Theoretical approaches

We will distinguish between three perspectives on organizations: a structural-instrumental approach, a cultural-institutional approach, and an environmental approach, which stresses the importance of external pressure. The first perspective emphasizes the formal organizational structure, and we would thus expect to find a close link between formal structure and how autonomy and control are perceived and practised. For example, the regulatory agencies may differ from civil service organizations performing other tasks and with different forms of affiliation. By contrast, the institutional perspective would attribute variations in how autonomy and control are perceived and practised to other organizational features, such as age, size, and culture.

The external pressure, emphasized by the environmental approach, is primarily related to market pressure and competition, and may, as shown below, share some common ground with the instrumental perspective. We will now present these perspectives in some detail and derive some hypotheses from them.

## A structural-instrumental perspective

A main feature of many organizational approaches is the concept of bounded rationality (March and Simon 1958), which implies that decision-makers have limited time and attention and cannot address all goals, all alternatives, and all consequences. They face problems of capacity and understanding and have to make some selections. The formal organizational structure represents one important selection mechanism. Formal structures and procedures organize some actors, cleavages, problems, and solutions into decision-making processes in the public sector, while others are excluded.

Gulick (1937) argues that there is a rather close connection between the formal structure chosen and the practice within and between organizations, underlining that the way formal authority is distributed among hierarchical levels is important for autonomy in practice. In a system characterized by independent agencies this distribution is biased against the political executive and we will thus generally expect to find rather high level of autonomy in the agencies. The formal instruments of steering are diluted, the distance between administrative levels increases, and political signals are generally weaker in independent bodies (Egeberg 2003). Whether agencies are specialized according to process, purpose, clientele, or geography will also affect their behavior.

Decision-makers act on behalf of formal organizations. A structural-instrumental approach presumes that one has to study how the public sector is organized in order to understand how it works. It makes a difference whether central government is an integrated system under ministerial responsibility or a disintegrated system of autonomous or semi-autonomous organizations, whether it is centralized or decentralized, and whether it is specialized according to the principle of geography and/or other principles (Christensen and Lægreid 2005c).

According to this perspective formal structure matters, but it is not the only organizational feature that may be instrumentally designed. It is not enough to focus on the narrow internal organizational structure of the agencies, for the division of tasks as well as their external organization may play an important role in their behavior. Thus, explanatory factors include formal structural features both within and between public organizations as well as polity features (Christensen and Lægreid 2003, Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

Based on this general perspective we will adopt three structural variables: form of affiliation, type of agency, and primary tasks.<sup>1</sup> *Form of affiliation* represents the external organization, or form and degree of structural disaggregation from the parent ministry. Our main distinction will be between ordinary agencies and agencies with various forms and degrees of formal autonomy. Our general hypothesis (H1) will be that the most

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the independent variables, see the Appendix.

structurally disaggregated organizations will perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than agencies that are structurally closer to the ministry.

The term *type of agency* refers to the internal organization of the agencies. Based on Gulick's principles of specialization we will distinguish between: 1) agencies organized on the principle of purpose, process, or clientele at the national level without any regional or local branches; 2) agencies in which the main principle for organization is geography (area), with one agency in each region or district but without a central agency between the local bodies and the ministry; and 3) organizations with purpose, process, or clientele as the main principle of organization at the national level, but with sub-organizations (branches) in various territorial areas. We will expect the existence of a geographical component in agency specialization in addition to specialization according to ministerial sectors will tend to increase the autonomy of subordinate bodies. Agencies organized according to geography will be more embedded in regional or local networks, which will tend to increase their autonomy from their parent ministry. In Norway, most ministries are organized according to purpose, a few have elements of process or clientele, while none are specialized according to geography at the ministerial level. Thus, our hypothesis (H2) will be that agencies organized according to geography in combination with another principle will perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than agencies without a territorial component. External and internal organization may also supplement each other. Agencies scoring high on disaggregation that are also specialized according to geography may thus have greater autonomy than agencies which score low on disaggregation and are specialized according to purpose.

The third structural variable is the character of *primary tasks*. Studies of state agencies reveal that there are significant variations in their behavior according to what their primary tasks are (Pollitt et al. 2004). Not only the degree of vertical specialization and type of horizontal specialization but also the task structure is of importance when it comes to how autonomy is exercised in practice. Here, the basis of categorization is their own perception of what kind of tasks they have. We will distinguish between regulatory tasks, service providing or producing tasks, and policy-formulation or other ways of exercising public authority. According to the regulatory and administrative policy doctrines of today, regulatory agencies should be at arm's length from ministries in order to enhance credibility and reduce political uncertainty, and political executives should not interfere in the activities of service providing and producing agencies, because this could disturb free and fair market competition. Thus, the hypothesis (H3) is that agencies with regulatory tasks or service providing or producing tasks generally will have more autonomy than agencies with other primary tasks.

## **A cultural-institutional perspective**

A second set of factors concern the historical and cultural traditions of political-administrative systems (Selznick 1957). In institutional approaches informal norms, identities, and the logic of appropriateness are more important than interests and intentions and the logic of consequentiality (March and Olsen 1989). The point of departure is that a certain style of controlling agencies has developed over time. Norms

and values within agencies and central government and internal dynamics are important. Path dependencies constrain what is appropriate and possible to move to agency status and how the agencies will operate. The reform road taken reflects the main features of national institutional processes, where institutional «roots» determine the path followed (Krasner 1988). Change is characterized by historical inefficiency and incrementalism. What happens in one agency is not a blueprint for developments in other agencies. Regulatory reforms reinforce underlying distinctive agency-specific or sector-specific trajectories and historical legacies, and the effects of formal structure are mediated and constrained by contextual factors (Thatcher and Stone Sweet 2002). Administrative traditions represent ‘filters’ producing different outcomes in different sectors, and agencies.

Certain styles of controlling agencies have developed over the years, whereby agencies are seen as strong and integrated instruments of political development serving particular political goals. For a long time this was a dominant feature of the Norwegian administrative model (Grønlie 1999). Over the past years, however, this model has been challenged, and the culture has changed toward giving agencies more leeway and autonomy and allowing for looser coupling to political goals, and it has gradually come to be taken for granted that agencies should be at arm’s length from the political executive. The extent of this cultural change will probably vary between policy areas, tasks, and agencies. In some administrative cultures well-established informal contacts and networks between ministries and agencies may undermine their autonomy and create stronger integration between ministry and agency than expected from the formal model (Jacobsson 1984, Pierre 2004).

We will distinguish between four indicators of administrative culture. First, *agency age*. Normally, the development of a distinct culture and tradition takes some time. Older organizations will tend to have developed a stronger identity than younger ones, and the potential for socialization of their members into a common culture is higher. Thus, we will expect (H4) that older agencies will perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than younger agencies.

Second, *agency size*. Small agencies may generally have a more homogeneous culture and a more distinct identity than large agencies, and are thus more able to modify signals coming from the ministry. At the same time, they may have less administrative capability to exploit and utilize the possibilities offered by disaggregation and formal autonomy. Thus, assuming the primacy of homogeneous identity one may expect (H5a) small agencies generally perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than large agencies. If, on the other hand, we assume primacy of capacity we may expect (H5b) large agencies in practice to perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than small agencies.

Third, we argue that *mutual trust* also makes a difference. If there is a high level of mutual trust between an agency and the parent ministry there will be no cultural collusion between them, and thus no particular need for comprehensive steering and control from the top. Our hypothesis (H6) will then be that a high level of mutual trust between the agency and parent ministry will enhance agency autonomy. The effects of large autonomy in a high trust system will, however, be smaller because of shared

identities, high level of socialization, and similarities in problem definitions and solutions at the different administrative levels.

Fourth, we will expect internal *agency culture* to affect the degree of autonomy and control. Agencies with a strong professional culture underlining expertise and professional quality will generally perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than other agencies (H7a). In particular, we will expect policy autonomy concerning individual decisions or issues (operational autonomy) to be more extensive in agencies scoring high on professional quality values. Also, agencies with a strong customer and service culture will perceive themselves as having more autonomy and less control than other agencies (H7b).

## External pressure

A third set of factors describe the autonomy and control of agencies primarily as a response to external pressure (Olsen 1992). The importance of the environment may be of two kinds (Christensen and Lægveid 2001). In the first instance there may be an adaptation to internationally based norms and beliefs about how an agency should be run and steered simply because these have become the prevailing doctrine in the institutional environment. New Public Management, with its strong focus on privatization, disaggregation, and agency autonomy, has been taken for granted and become ideologically dominant. Thus, there will be pressure for all agencies to engage in similar practices. The hypothesis (H8) will be that there is generally a high degree of autonomy and low variation in autonomy between agencies. What will be reported, however, is not necessarily practice, but interpretations of practice (Sahlin-Andersson 1996).

In the second instance, autonomy may be adopted to solve widespread problems created by the technical environment, such as performance and economic competition and market pressure in a global economy. Agencies are said to become more autonomous because this improves credibility and reduces problems of political uncertainty (Gilardi 2004). Especially for agencies operating in the market it is important to prevent political executives interfering in their daily business in order to enhance free, fair, and equal competition in the market and thus promote economy and efficiency. Autonomous agencies are seen as a favorable organizational form because agencies can be insulated from immediate, partisan political pressure. Thus, the agency model is chosen because it is the most efficient organizational form.

In this case a high level of agency autonomy will be the result not of ideological hegemony, but of the perceived technical efficiency of this model. Pollitt et al. (2004) have revealed that the way agencies are steered depends on whether they are embedded in a market or not. Agencies operating on a market need some kind of commercial independence and discretion to match their competitors and interference and steering from parent ministries in their daily businesses tend to undermine their position vis-a-vis other market actors. The hypothesis (H9) is that agencies working in a market or a quasi-market situation will have more autonomy from the parent ministry than agencies

which have no competitors. We will expect this to be the case especially when it comes to autonomy concerning individual decisions or issues (operational autonomy).

## **Blending the perspectives**

The external pressure from the institutional environment or the technical environment may to some extent be handled instrumentally. Thus, governments and agencies may adopt new organizational forms to increase their legitimacy or to reduce the uncertainties produced by the market. The less one emphasizes the deterministic aspects of external pressure from the environment, the more this set of factors may be associated with a structural-instrumental approach. However, the degree of freedom in organizational design will probably be more limited by external pressure than by the structural features discussed previously.

We will argue that environmental, cultural, and structural context constitute transformative preconditions and constraints that in a complex and dynamic way affect the trade-off between autonomy and control (Christensen and Lægveid 2001). Cultural factors can modify the effects of formal structure, but cultural factors can also support structural devolution and make the effects even stronger. In the same way, external forces by a competitive market may be enhanced or tempered by structural features or administrative culture and tradition (Christensen and Lægveid 2004a). A main presumption is that formal organizational structures constrain organizational behavior, but also that the autonomy and control of agencies cannot be traced to one single factor such as formal structure. The type of formal structure is normally a broad category, which gives some direction but also allows a great variety of actual behavior.

Summing up, the complexity of the context matters, task-specific factors are important and the degree of perceived autonomy and control is the result of a blend of external pressure, path dependencies, and structural constraints (Olsen 1992, Pollitt et al. 2004). Instead of assuming that organizational forms determine the degree of autonomy or that autonomy is totally determined by external pressure or internal administrative culture, we will argue that we have to combine these features to understand the scope, level, and variation of autonomy and control. This will be done by focusing on the degree of freedom that exists within different organizational forms and in the great variety of situations arising both in administrative culture and in the environment.

## **Data base and methodology**

In the formal structural arrangements of the Norwegian state apparatus the form of affiliation is a crucial organizational feature for classifying whether an organization is part of the civil service or not. At the national level the civil service is divided into quite small ministries with directorates/central agencies, other ordinary public administration bodies, agencies with extended authority, and government administrative enterprises, all outside the ministries but reporting to a ministry. Civil service organizations at the

regional or local level may report either directly to a ministry or through an organization at the national level. All civil service organizations are, legally speaking, government entities subject to ministerial directions and subordinated to ministerial control. In contrast to state-owned companies, civil service organizations are regulated through the state budget, the state collective wage agreement, the state pension scheme, the Freedom of Information Act, and the administrative law. Some agencies and all government administrative enterprises are given enhanced budgetary leeway (Lægneid et al. 2003). In short, the form of affiliation grants different sets of formal constraints or freedom of action in the interplay with general governmental regulative frameworks. In this respect, the level of agency autonomy and political steering and control, at least to a certain degree, formally follows as a consequence of form of affiliation.

In Norway, agencies outside the ministries represent the largest share of the civil service. In 2003 only a small percentage of civil servants were employed by ministries (about 3,900). In comparison, about 120,000 civil servants (including those at the regional and local levels) were employed by directorates/central agencies, other ordinary public administration bodies, agencies with extended authority, and government administrative enterprises. This number decreased from 185,000 in 1990, mainly due to the transformation of some large agencies and administrative enterprises into state-owned companies outside the civil service (e.g., Norwegian State Railways, the Norwegian Power Company, Telenor, the Norwegian Post, the airport administration and road construction).

The data base used in this paper is a survey addressed to all organizations in the civil service outside the ministries in 2004—i. e., organizations that are part of the state as a legal entity and are reporting to one or more ministries. It excludes ministries, local government, state-owned companies and governmental foundations. The civil service organizations are divided into *sub-forms of affiliation*. As of 2004 there were 57 directorates/central agencies, 125 other ordinary public administration bodies, 28 agencies with extended authority, and 5 government administrative enterprises.

The population of organizations consists of three different *agency types*: First, all single national civil service organizations without subordinate units, comprising 107 bodies (e.g., the Norwegian Competition Authority, the Directorate for Nature Management, and the Data Inspectorate). Second, integrated civil service organizations consisting of a national unit as well as subordinated regional or local branches (e.g., the Norwegian Tax Administration, Norwegian Customs and Excise, and the National Police Directorate). All of these 40 national units are included in the population, and they were asked to answer on behalf of the whole organization. Third, all single units in groups of similar civil service organizations in different geographical areas, reporting directly to one or more ministry (e.g., the County Governors, colleges etc.), comprising 68 bodies covering specific parts of the country.

Given these criteria, the population adds up to 215 civil service organizations. One questionnaire was sent to each agency, and a central manager was asked to answer on behalf of the whole organization. The questionnaire was an adaptation of a similar

survey carried out in Belgium (Flanders) in 2002–2003 (Verhoest et al. 2003).<sup>2</sup> It was rather comprehensive, covering organizational characteristics, autonomy dimensions, steering and control relationships, and organizational culture (Lægneid et al. 2004). A total of 150 organizations answered the survey, which constitutes a response rate of 70 %. There are only small variations in the response rate according to sub-form of affiliation and type of agency and between different ministerial areas. For half of the ministerial areas the response rate was over 80 % and none was below 50 %. Thus our conclusion is that the respondents are quite representative for the population of Norwegian state agencies.

The information on form of affiliation, type of agency, and agency age is based on the Norwegian State Administration Database, covering changes in the formal structure in state organizations from 1947 onwards (Lægneid et al. 2003). The information on the other independent variables and on all of the dependent variables is based on the questionnaire.

The dependent variables we will use in this paper are different dimensions of autonomy and control, as perceived by the civil service organizations. In considering *autonomy* we will differentiate between personnel autonomy, financial autonomy, and policy autonomy. Policy autonomy will include to what degree the agency can formulate its own goals and objectives independently of the parent ministry. In addition to this measure of strategic policy autonomy we also will examine operational policy autonomy. One indication of this kind of autonomy is to what degree the agency can decide on policy instruments, such as use of resources and other input, to achieve their goals without involvement from the parent ministry. Another indication is to what degree the agency can decide on matters concerning task accomplishment without involvement from the ministry.

The *steering and control* variables are different types of general rules in central government for financial management, personnel and salary arrangements, health, safety, and environmental regulations, and more specific rules regulating the rights of various ministries to instruct individual agencies. The regulations of international bodies like the EU and the WTO may also constrain agency autonomy. Furthermore, the parent ministry and the Ministry of Finance may generally steer and control the activities and practices of the agencies.

To describe and explain the degree of and variation in perceived autonomy and control we will primarily use univariate frequencies, bivariate correlations of all relevant relationships (summed up by measures like Pearson's  $r$ ), and multivariate analysis of independent variables having significant bivariate correlations (summed up by standardized beta coefficients in linear regressions). While univariate frequencies of dependent variables include all categories, in the bivariate and multivariate analyses we use additive indexes and some variables which are dichotomized according to the most relevant categories in each case.

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire is part of the «Comparative Public Organization Data Base for Research and Analysis – Network» (COBRA). More information on the COBRA network is available on the Internet: <http://www.publicmanagement-cobra.org/>

## Empirical results

### **The dependent variables: autonomy and control**

The first questions we would like to cover are to what extent the agencies perceive themselves as having autonomy, and whether this autonomy is of a general character or differentiated between the various dimensions. We will distinguish between personnel autonomy, financial autonomy, and policy autonomy. For personnel autonomy and policy autonomy we will also distinguish between strategic autonomy (concerning general decisions/issues) and operational autonomy (concerning individual decisions/issues).

***Personnel autonomy.*** There has been a general trend in Norway over the past 15 years to make the rather centralized and standardized salary and personnel system more flexible and decentralized. Agencies have gained more discretion both in personnel matters and in setting pay scales and salaries (Christensen and Lægveid 1998).

Table 1 shows, first, that the agencies report a rather high level of personnel autonomy. The proportion stating that they have a lot of autonomy is considerably higher than those saying they have little or no autonomy. Second, the agencies differentiate between strategic personnel autonomy and operational personnel autonomy. Overall autonomy for agencies in personnel matters is greater in operational issues than in strategic issues. This is the case along all the five dimensions of personnel autonomy. Added to this, autonomy is greatest when it comes to recruitment and to evaluation of personnel. On such issues the agencies have quite a lot of autonomy both in formulating criteria and standards and in deciding individual cases. Autonomy is perceived to be lowest with regard to salaries and wage increases and concerning downsizing and dismissals.

Table 1. To what extent can the agency independently of the parent ministry or superior body make decisions on various personnel issues? Percentages.

	To a large degree	To some degree	Little or no degree	N=100%
<i>Strategic personnel matters:</i>				
Level of salaries	35	50	15	148
General criteria for promotion	43	45	13	148
General criteria for evaluation	65	27	8	148
General criteria for recruitment	61	32	7	148
General criteria for downsizing	31	48	22	147
<i>Operational personnel matters:</i>				
Wage increases for individual employees	60	23	18	146
Promotion of individual employees	65	20	15	146
Evaluation of individual employees	81	17	2	147
Recruiting individual employees	88	10	2	146
Dismissal of individual employees	60	25	15	146

For the rest of the analysis we constructed two additive indexes, one for strategic personnel autonomy and one for operational personnel autonomy.<sup>3</sup> The indexes range from 0 (not a large degree of autonomy in any dimension in Table 1) to 5 (a large degree of autonomy in all dimensions). For strategic personnel autonomy 19 % of the agencies reported a large degree of autonomy on all five dimensions and 25 % not a large degree of autonomy along any dimension. The corresponding percentages for operational personnel autonomy are 41 % and 9 %.

**Financial autonomy.** Agencies may also have financial autonomy. Over the past 20 years there has been a general tendency in Norway to change the administration of the state budget in the direction of giving agencies more discretion in how to use the allocated resources. It has become easier to move funds from one year to another and between investment, salaries, and general operations. In addition, it has become more common among agencies to charge fees for products and services (Rubecksen 2003).

Table 2 reveals, first, that the agencies have almost no autonomy when it comes to making loans for investment. This has to do with the fact that they are included in the state budget, which generally means that their funding should come from the annual

<sup>3</sup> For both indexes all intercorrelations are significant at the .01 level. Pearson's  $r$  is between .77 and .30. The way the two indexes have been created is by counting occurrences of agencies reporting a large degree of personnel autonomy for each of the five different dimensions.

state budget so they are not allowed to take up loans independently. The extended authority and increased autonomy in financial matters have not been expanded to the area of making loans.

*Table 2. To what degree can the agency independently of the parent ministry or superior body make decisions on various financial issues? Percentages.*

	To a large degree	To some degree	To little or no degree	N=100%
Make loans for investment	2	1	97	146
Set tariffs/prices for products and services	23	33	43	145
Set fees, charges	13	28	59	143
Conclude legal contracts/agreements with private sector actors	65	29	6	146

By contrast, the second finding is that agencies have a high degree of autonomy when it comes to concluding legal contracts and agreements with partners and actors in the private sector. Many agencies also have some limited autonomy in setting tariffs, prices, fees, and charges for their products and services. Compared to personnel autonomy, however, financial autonomy is more restricted, apart from the opportunity to conclude legal contracts.

For the rest of the analysis we use an additive index for financial autonomy.<sup>4</sup> The index ranges from 0 (not a large degree of autonomy on any dimension in Table 2) to 4 (a large degree of autonomy on all dimensions). 34 % of the agencies do not report a large degree of financial autonomy on any dimension; 45 % report a large degree of financial autonomy on one dimension, 9 % on two, 11 % on three, and only 1 % on all four dimensions.

***Policy autonomy.*** When it comes to policy autonomy we distinguish between strategic policy autonomy and operational policy autonomy. The former concerns the ability of the agency to set its own goals and objectives. We asked the agencies to what degree they were involved in setting the general goals for their agency. 20 % of the agencies reported that they set their goals alone, 45 % said that the goal were formulated by the agency in cooperation with the parent ministry, 27 % reported that the parent ministry set the goals in cooperation with the agency, and 8 % of the agencies said the goals were formulated by the parent ministry alone. This picture reveals that the goal formulation process to a large extent is a cooperative effort between the agency and the parent ministry, and that, as perceived by the agencies at least, it is more a bottom-up process than a top-down process. This finding confirms similar patterns revealed in a

<sup>4</sup> The intercorrelations are significant at the .01 level and Pearson's  $r$  is between .22 and .64 for all correlations except for the correlation between the ability to make loans for investment and to set tariffs/prices for products and services, which is .14 (sign. .09) and to enter contracts (Pearson's  $r$  is .09, sign. .03). The index is constructed in the same way as for the indexes related to personnel autonomy, by counting occurrences of agencies reporting a large degree of financial autonomy with respect to the four different dimensions.

comprehensive study including agency leaders as well as political and administrative executives in the ministries (Christensen and Lægveid 2002). Thus, the hierarchical element, according to which goals should be exogenous and externally decided by the parent ministry, is much weaker than assumed by the official practitioners' model of Management by Objectives and Results.

Operational policy autonomy is the degree of freedom that agencies have in making decisions about policy instruments and task accomplishment.

As Table 3 reveals, the agencies generally have a high degree of autonomy in choosing specific operational means and measures in day-to-day activities. About half of the agencies report that they take such decisions with little involvement or restrictions from the parent ministry. The degree of autonomy concerning policy instruments is slightly lower, but also rather high.

*Table 3. Which of the following assertions gives the most precise description of your autonomy in choosing policy instruments and in task accomplishment? Percentages.*

	Policy Instruments: Choice of general policy instruments (use of resources, inputs) for achievement of goals and objectives for the agency	Task accomplishment: Choice of concrete, operational means and measures (prioritizing of activities) for the agency
The agency takes most decisions alone. The parent ministry is only partly involved and sets few restrictions	29	46
The agency takes most decisions alone after consulting the parent ministry	10	5
The agency takes most decisions alone in accordance with the constraints and restrictions set by the parent ministry	60	48
The parent ministry takes most decisions itself after consulting the agency	2	1
N=100%	146	146

For the rest of the analysis we constructed an additive index for operational policy autonomy. The index ranges from 2 (agencies take most decisions alone and the parent ministry is only partly involved and sets few restrictions when choosing both policy instruments as well as when it comes to task accomplishment) to 0 (not agreeing with this assertion either for policy instruments or for task accomplishment).<sup>5</sup> 34 % of the agencies report a large degree of operational policy autonomy along both dimensions, 19 % report a lot of autonomy along one dimension, and 47 % say they do not have much autonomy along any dimension.

<sup>5</sup> The correlation (Pearson's  $r$ ) between the two variables that the index is based on is .57 (sign. .001). The index is constructed in the same way as for the other indexes, by counting occurrences of agencies reporting a large extent of operational policy autonomy with respect to the two dimensions (policy instruments and task accomplishment).

***Steering and control.*** The relationship between superior bodies and the agencies is not only about autonomy. Steering and control represent the other side of the coin. This can take the form of various rules and regulations, like general rules for financial management; salary and personnel regulations; rules regulating safety, environmental, and health issues; and international rules, regulations, and standards issued by international organizations such as the EU or the WTO. Also the Ministry of Finance and the parent ministry may put specific constraints on the agencies. The parent ministry may have general rights of instruction on all issues, or there may be restrictions on its rights of instruction in specific cases.

Table 4 reveals, first, that most of the agencies report that they are constrained by general financial management regulations, something which was also shown in a comprehensive study of political and administrative executives in the Norwegian ministries, agencies, and state-owned companies in 2001 (Christensen and Læg Reid 2002). In 1997 the Ministry of Finance introduced a new comprehensive set of regulations for financial management in central government based on principles of performance management, which was rather unpopular among the agencies. Some years later this critique resulted in revision and simplification of the finance management regulations, but still these rules and regulations seem to put strong constraints on many agencies. Second, we also see that, in spite of increased liberalization and decentralization of the rather centralized and standardized personnel and salary arrangements over the past 15 years, the agencies still report significant constraints from such rules and regulations. Here one should take into account the rather strong state employees' unions in Norway, which have considerable influence on such issues (Rones 2001).

Third, somewhat surprisingly in the light of the increased integration of the Norwegian central government into the EU (Jacobsson, Læg Reid and Pedersen 2003), and also the increased importance of other international organizations as regulatory and standardization bodies, such international constraints seem to play a less important role than the general domestic regulations in the fields of finance, salaries, and personnel. Table 4 also shows that the control constraints from the parent ministry vary considerably between agencies, but also that the agencies generally report stronger constraints from their own parent ministry than from the Ministry of Finance. Here one should bear in mind that, following the reorganization of the state budget system in the mid-1990s, much of the financial allocation to the agencies was delegated from the Ministry of Finance to the parent ministries.

*Table 4. Control constraints on agencies from various rules, regulations and actors. Percentages.*

	Very large	Large	To some degree	Small	Very small	Do not know	N=100%
Financial management regulations	18	32	37	11	1	1	148
Salary and personnel regulations	12	45	30	11	1	1	148
Health, environmental, and safety regulations	7	28	28	23	12	1	148
International regulations and standards (i.e. EU, WTO)	8	14	22	33	19	3	147
Parent ministry	8	26	43	16	5	1	148
Ministry of Finance	6	15	7	26	10	6	145

There are strong significant intercorrelations between these control dimensions. We will thus use an additive index for control constraints, ranging from 0 (very large constraints on none of the dimensions in Table 4) to 6 (very large constraints on all regulations and actors).<sup>6</sup> 73 % of the agencies do not report very large constraints from any of these rules, regulations, or actors.

In addition, we will include a variable that reveals whether there are rules and regulations which restrict the parent ministry's power to instruct the agency. 45 % report that there are such restrictions. These types of restrictions are normally relevant for certain areas of agency activities and may be enshrined in law, but in some cases they cover all activities. They can be case-specific, but also of a more general character.

***Interdependencies.*** Another interesting question is whether perceived autonomy along the different dimensions indicates some kind of cumulative pattern, whether there are certain clusters of autonomy, or whether there is a differentiated pattern. Table 6 shows that the dimensions are quite loosely coupled. There is not a cumulative pattern, indicating that if there is a high degree of autonomy along one dimension, there is not always a high degree of autonomy along other dimensions. There are, however, some clusters, so the pattern is not totally differentiated. Thus, there is a significant positive correlation between strategic personnel autonomy and operational personnel autonomy and also between operational personnel autonomy and financial autonomy. Interestingly enough, there are no significant negative correlations between the different autonomy dimensions.

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<sup>6</sup> The intercorrelations are significant at the .01 level and Pearson's  $r$  is between .67 and .21 for all correlations. The index is constructed by counting the occurrences of agencies reporting to very strong control constraints according to the six different dimensions of control constraints.

Table 5. Intercorrelations between dependent variables. Pearson's *r*.

	Operational personnel autonomy	Financial Management autonomy	Strategic policy autonomy	Operational policy autonomy
Strategic personnel autonomy	,45**	,15	-,07	,11
Operational personnel autonomy		,32**	,05	,11
Financial management autonomy			,05	,14
Strategic policy autonomy				,05

\*\* : Significant at the 0.01 level; \* : Significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Summing up, this picture confirms that the autonomy dimensions vary, as revealed from other studies (Christensen 2001, Verhorst et al. 2004). This does not mean, however, that agencies score high along some dimensions and low on others. Instead, the general impression is of positive correlations between some autonomy dimensions and rather loose or indifferent correlations between others.

## Bivariate and multivariate analyses

The next questions on which we focus are how the scores on the different independent variables, i.e. our indicators of structural, cultural, and environmental features, correlate with the autonomy and control variables. We first examine the bivariate relations between each set of variables and the different autonomy and control dimensions, and then do a multivariate analysis of the relative importance of the various variables for agency autonomy and control.

*Structural features.* Are there any differences in perceived autonomy and control according to the structural features of the agencies? Table 6 reveals that, except for financial autonomy, form of affiliation has no significant effect on autonomy and control. This means that structural disaggregation makes a difference when it comes to perceived financial autonomy. Agencies with some form and degree of formal autonomy generally report a large degree of financial autonomy on more indicators than ordinary agencies. For personnel autonomy, policy autonomy, and control constraints, form of affiliation does not seem to be of any great significance. Thus, in general, H1 is not confirmed.

Table 6 Bivariate correlations between independent and dependent variables. Pearson's *r*.

	Strategic personnel autonomy	Operational personnel autonomy	Financial autonomy	Strategic policy autonomy	Operational policy autonomy	Control constraints	Constraints on instructions
<i>Structural variables:</i>							
Form of affiliation	.01	.10	.26**	.13	-.12	.14	.01
Type of agency	-.14	.03	-.18*	-.08	-.23**	.09	.09
<i>Primary tasks:</i>							
-service providing	-.21**	-.03	.27**	.00	.04	-.05	.03
-regulation	.04	-.05	-.24**	.03	-.10	.01	.01
<i>Cultural variables:</i>							
Agency age	.14	.11	-.05	-.03	.13	-.01	-.20*
Agency size	.04	.38**	.07	-.04	-.06	.13	-.04
Mutual trust	.06	-.06	.03	-.07	.08	.21*	-.06
Professional culture	.07	-.07	.05	-.14	.17*	.05	.01
Customer and service culture	.14	.07	.02	-.10	.14	-.06	.02
<i>Environmental variables:</i>							
Market competition	-.18*	.04	.26**	.05	.04	.01	.08

\*\* : Significant at the .01 level; \* : Significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

Like the form of affiliation, type of agency makes a difference when it comes to financial autonomy, but this structural feature is also of importance for operational policy autonomy. Agencies specialized mainly according to geography normally have less strategic personnel autonomy, less financial autonomy, and also less operational policy autonomy than agencies without territorial branches. These correlations are the opposite of what our formulated hypothesis (H2) led us to expect. One possible explanation is that no agency only uses the principle of geography, since all agencies with a territorial base are also specialized according to purpose, process or clientele, being either directly subordinated a ministry or having a central agency between itself and the ministry. Thus the principles of specialization are combined, and in practice other principles are more important for understanding the degree of autonomy than the principle of geography.

When it comes to primary tasks, agencies with regulatory tasks or service providing or producing tasks do not in general perceive themselves to have more autonomy than agencies with other primary tasks. On the contrary, agencies with service providing or producing tasks have generally less strategic personnel autonomy than agencies with other tasks, but more financial autonomy. For regulatory agencies financial autonomy is generally low. Thus, when it comes to service providing or producing agencies, our stated hypothesis (H3) is only confirmed for financial autonomy.

*Cultural features.* The general impression of Table 6 is that cultural features have relatively few significant effects on autonomy and control. Agency age is only significantly correlated with constraints on instructions from the parent ministry. Thus, in general, H4 is not confirmed. Agency size has a significant positive effect on operational personnel autonomy, meaning that large agencies generally have more autonomy in individual hiring, promotion, pay setting, and dismissals than smaller units. Overall, however, neither of the hypotheses on the importance of agency size (H5a, H5b) is confirmed.

Mutual trust has a significant positive effect on the control constraints index, meaning that agencies perceiving a very high level of mutual trust between the agency and the parent ministry also report fewer constraints on many regulations and from central actors. For the other dimensions of autonomy and control, trust is of less relevance. Thus, in general, our stated hypothesis (H6) is not confirmed. This may be due to the generally high level of trust and little variation between agencies with regard to this cultural feature: most of the agencies report a very high or a high level of mutual trust between the agency and the ministry.

Internal professional culture makes a difference when it comes to operational policy autonomy. Agencies with very good professional quality have more operational policy autonomy than other agencies. Thus, H7a is confirmed for the most relevant case, but not otherwise. With regard to the importance of customer and service culture, the stated hypothesis (H7b) is not confirmed for any dimension of autonomy and control.

*Environmental features.* The hypothesis on the degree and variation of autonomy and control (H8) is a bit difficult to evaluate. As shown in Tables 1 to 4, for some of the chosen dimensions most agencies score high on autonomy and low on steering and control. As mentioned above (cf. Table 6), there are also some significant correlations between organizational features and autonomy and control, but the main picture is little variation between agency forms. However, even if a null hypothesis on no or low variation was to be confirmed, it would not tell us much about what features may affect agency autonomy and control. The fact that agency age seems to be of little relevance may indicate that internal agency-specific norms established over time are less important than the dominant external administrative doctrines of our time coming from the NPM-movement, which certifies agency autonomy as a «best practice.» Another interpretation may be that our indicators on agency culture are not able to reveal the specific historical legacy that characterizes the various Norwegian agencies.

With regard to the more specific hypothesis on the importance of environmental features, agencies which operate in a market or in a quasi-market situation facing competition have less strategic personnel autonomy than other agencies. They do, however, have greater financial autonomy. In general, the stated hypothesis (H9) is not confirmed.

## Multivariate analysis

We now turn to the question of the relative explanatory power of the different independent variables on agency autonomy and control.<sup>7</sup> The multivariate analyses generally confirm the main pattern revealed in the bivariate analyses. One general finding from the multivariate analysis, summed up in Table 7, is that the independent variables explain only a small part of the variation in the dependent variables. After controlling for other variables there are few significant correlations. The structural-instrumental perspective has some explanatory power for financial autonomy and operational policy autonomy. National agencies with no regional or local branches normally have more financial autonomy and operational policy autonomy than other agencies. This is somewhat surprising given our initial hypothesis (H2). Form of affiliation does not, however, have any significant effect on agency autonomy and control (H1). This is surprising, given the importance that this variable is assigned in administrative reforms and recent regulatory reforms.

When it comes to cultural variables, agency age has a significant effect on the scope of ministries to instruct the agencies, and agency size also makes a difference for operational personnel autonomy. Also the mutual trust between agency and ministry has a significant effect when it comes to constraints on the agencies imposed by general regulations, the parent ministry, or the Ministry of Finance. However, other cultural features, like the extent of professional culture does not seem to influence perceived autonomy and control to any significant extent. Market competition has not a significant effect when controlling for structural and cultural features.

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<sup>7</sup> Only variables with significant bivariate correlations are included in the analysis.

Table 7. Summary of regression equations by structural, cultural and environmental features affecting agency autonomy and control. Standardized Beta coefficients. Linear regressions.

	Strategic personnel autonomy	Operational personnel autonomy	Financial autonomy	Operational policy autonomy	Control constraints	Constraints on instructions
<i>Structural variables:</i>						
Form of affiliation	-	-	.14	-	-	-
Type of agency	-	-	-.15*	-.20**	-	-
Primary task:						
-service provision	-.15	-	.11	-	-	-
-regulation	-	-	-.09	-	-	-
<i>Cultural variables:</i>						
Agency age	-	-	-	-	-	-.20**
Agency size	-	.38**	-	-	.	-
Mutual trust	-	-	-	-	.21*	-
Professional culture	-	-	-	.14	-	-
<i>Environmental variables:</i>						
Market competition	-.11	-	.12	-	-	-
Multiple R	.23	.38	.38	.26	.21	.20
R2	.05	.14	.14	.07	.04	.04
Adjusted R2	.04	.14	.11	.05	.04	.03
F statistics	3.968	2.403	4.711	5.043	6.523	5.844
Significance of F	.021	.000	.001	.008	.012	.017

\*\* : Significant at the .01-level; \* : Significant at the .05-level (2-tailed). - : not included in the analysis

Summing up, the explanatory power of our perspectives is relatively weak, but we find some significant effects from structural and cultural variables. Autonomy seems to be a multi-dimensional concept, and there is no one-factor explanation for variation in agency autonomy.

## Discussion

In this section we will discuss our findings in relation to other studies on autonomy and control in public-sector agencies and companies. Studies of different forms of affiliation indicate that government control of state-owned companies is seen as overly formal and relatively passive, and also that the sub-forms have many similar features, with little differentiation between company types. There is no close match between the legal status and operational practice of each sub-form (Grønlie 2001, Statskonsult 1998). A plausible conclusion from the existing studies is that while organizational form matters, it does not closely determine the pattern of autonomy and control. Even if the form of affiliation allows significant leeway for a trade-off between different objectives and values, it is fair to say that, generally speaking, the possibilities for political control decrease with increasing structural disaggregation from the ministries (Wik 2002). The extent of agency contact with ministries drops when they are converted from organizational forms that are close to the ministries to forms that are further away from them, and less weight is given to signals from the political executive (Egeberg 1989). The hypothesis is that structural devolution weakens the instruments of control and increases the autonomy of independent agencies. Surveys of the Norwegian civil service have shown that civil servants in central agencies outside the ministries see political signals and considerations as significantly less important for decision-making than civil servants inside the ministries (Christensen and Egeberg 1997, Christensen and Læg Reid 1998), and structural devolution tends to reduce the steering power of the political executive (Christensen and Læg Reid 2005b).

Our findings in this paper confirm that agencies generally have large autonomy, but also that organizational forms represent rather rough and broad categories that allow variations in actual autonomy and control. This means that variations within the same organizational form might be larger than variations between different forms (Verhoest et al. 2004, Wik 2002). When assessing these findings one also has to take into account the effects of sampling on the dependent variable (Peters 2004, Geddes 2003). By focusing on organizations that are meant to be relatively autonomous we may not be able to understand whether the degree of autonomy observed is atypical or typical for all state organizations. Including a fuller range of state organizations at the national level might have given a better understanding of the consequences of organizational form. This might especially have been the case if we had not only studied sub-forms within the agency model but also included ministries and state-owned companies. Our findings seem to indicate that the sub-form of affiliation is of less importance than whether the agency has regional/local branches or not.

The effects of form of affiliation are also modified by contextual factors, in Norway as well as in other countries. There are trade-offs between autonomy and control between countries, but also between and within different forms of affiliation within the same country (Wik 2002). Even in the same agency or state organization there may be significant variation over time, across different policy areas or according to performance, results, and political situation (Grønlie 2001). This implies that structure matters, but also that each organizational form is quite broad, allowing for variation in

practice. One lesson is that one should be careful about regarding form of affiliation and other structural features as determining autonomy and steering relations and instead perceive them as a repertoire of agency forms hosting potential actions and rules that can be activated under different contextual circumstances. This being said, this study has also revealed that agencies generally have great autonomy especially when it comes to operational autonomy, indicating that the agency model, as expected from a structural-instrumental approach, gives a lot of leeway and discretion to the agencies included.

One important contextual feature is the administrative culture and tradition in which the agencies operate. Such norms can either be agency-specific, representing vertical depth, or more general covering the whole of central government, representing horizontal width (Krasner 1988). In this paper we have primarily tried to reveal the first type of administrative culture. Our findings are that some of our indicators have some effects on autonomy and steering relations, but they are not particularly strong. Nevertheless, broader and more general administrative norms that do not differentiate to any strong degree between agencies may also have an effect.

One comprehensive comparative study of agencies in the fields of prisons, meteorology, forestry, and social security in four EU countries concludes that there is high variability in agencies and volatility in agency status and boundaries, that the official practitioner's ideal model is rare in reality, that there is extensive national path dependency, that there is great variation in activities according to the agency's primary tasks, but also according to how embedded they are in international networks and markets, that performance indicators are widespread but seldom used to clarify major trade-offs, and that full-scale performance management is rare (Pollitt et al. 2004). Our study indicates that primary tasks may make a difference, even if our measures do not have a great impact and are not significant when controlling for other features. Agencies that are primarily concerned with service providing or producing tasks tend to have more autonomy along some dimensions than agencies involved in other types of tasks.

External pressure, represented by the degree of competition and the extent to which international markets, rules, and regulations are involved, also makes a difference when it comes to autonomy and steering of agencies (Pollitt et al. 2004). In our case, market competition seems to have some influence on strategic personnel autonomy, but not on other autonomy dimensions, and the effects are not significant when controlling for structural and cultural factors.

Summing up, the lesson is that context matters, and that there is no best way of governing regulatory agencies. Neither the organizational structure, nor the daily practical work, nor the steering of agencies is standardized. The structural-instrumental perspective can provide some insights into the processes of autonomization and control, but less than expected by reform agents or by other believers in the importance of formal structure. Agency practice is more diverse and context-dependent than the official model implies. Formal structure cannot be seen in isolation and as a narrow internal feature of organizations but must be extended to include task structure and the historical-institutional context and external networks and situations in which an agency is involved. A main observation is that one cannot easily infer from regulatory reform programs and formal agency structure how autonomy and control will be exercised in practice. Agency status in itself is an uncertain predictor of steering relationships (Pollitt

et al. 2004), especially when it comes to variations between different sub-forms of agencies. The legal status and formal powers of the agencies represent broad categories that allow for huge variations in actual behavior. There are great variations in how the rules for control, instructions, and appeals are formulated for different agencies and how they are practised (Christensen and Læg Reid 2004b). We have to go beyond the legal status and formal powers of the regulatory agencies and examine the 'living' organizations to understand how agency autonomy is exercised in practice (Pollitt et al. 2004).

## Conclusion

In this paper we have shown, first, that the agencies have quite a lot of autonomy. The general pattern is that the trade-off between autonomy and control tends to tip in favor of autonomy. There are, however, significant variations in the degree of autonomy along different dimensions. There is generally higher autonomy in personnel matters than in financial matters, but the agencies also report a relatively high degree of autonomy with regard to policy. Furthermore, more autonomy is perceived in operational matters than in more strategic matters. However, this autonomy is not absolute but is constrained to a relatively large degree by general rules, regulations, and procedures in the fields of finance, salaries, and personnel. This general picture is important and reveals that agencies have a scope and degree of autonomy which is in accordance with the general presumptions from a structural-instrumental approach that an agency model will enhance autonomy.

Second, agency autonomy is not of a general nature. The different dimensions of autonomy do not represent a cumulative pattern. Some autonomy dimensions represent a cluster and supplement one another, while others are rather loosely coupled. However, few indicators are negative correlated, meaning that a high score on one autonomy dimension does not go together with a low score on others.

Third, we were not able to explain much of the variance in the dependent variables, i.e. perceived agency autonomy and control. The formulated hypotheses based on the selected variables derived from the structural-instrumental, the cultural-institutional, and the environmental approach generally do not get strong support in the empirical analyses. Thus, the answer to the question posed in the title of our paper «Does agency form matter?» must be «not very much»; this goes for cultural and environmental features as well. We have, however, mainly studied variations between sub-forms of agencies and the effect of structural forms may be different if we had distinguished between agencies and other main forms of affiliation for state organizations.

Fourth, that said, there are some significant relationships related to variables derived from all three perspectives. From a structural-instrumental perspective, type of agency and also primary tasks make a difference for some autonomy and control dimensions. Seen from a cultural-institutional perspective, agency size, agency age, and also mutual trust have some explanatory power. Market competition seems to affect the degree of strategic personnel autonomy and financial autonomy, but is weakened when controlled for other features.

Thus, a lesson from this study is that there is no one-factor explanation for variations in agency autonomy and control. There is no single best theory which can explain agency activity in all situations and everywhere (Pollitt 2004). One has to look for explanatory factors among structural features, among cultural variables, and in the environment. Instead of deriving explanations based on one dominant logic, the challenge is to develop more complex propositions about how agencies work in practice. Another lesson is that there is a need to look for other variables derived from these perspectives, as well as from other approaches to gain a better understanding of the variation in agency autonomy and control.

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# Appendix

## Independent variables

### *Form of affiliation*

In the Norwegian State Administration Database we distinguish between four sub-forms of affiliation for civil service organizations outside the ministries: a) directorates/central agencies, b) other public administration bodies, c) agencies with extended authority, and d) government administrative enterprises (cf. Lægveid et al. 2003). The first two types are also often called ordinary civil service organizations (or ordinary agencies), and are most closely linked to the ministries and subjected to general governmental regulative frameworks and regulations encompassing virtually all sides of their activity. Government administrative enterprises represent the opposite side of the continuum, primarily used for state organizations maintaining governmental business management, and are as such given wide financial latitude. A civil service organization with extended authority is a sub-form where the organizations formally have been granted some professional and financial leeway in relation to political steering/control and regulative frameworks. This sub-form is somewhere in between ordinary civil service organizations and government administrative enterprises.

Due to the relatively low number of agencies with extended authority, and particularly government administrative enterprises, we will only distinguish between ordinary agencies and other agencies

*Table A1: Form of affiliation. Percentage.*

1. Other agencies	15
0. Ordinary agencies	85
<i>N=100 %</i>	150

### *Type of agency*

We distinguish between three types of agency with regard to their territorial coverage: a) *National agencies* have no subordinate units, and form the only state organization of its kind in the country; b) *Integrated agencies* have a central unit and one or more subordinate units located in different geographical areas; c) *Regional agencies* are units covering a specific territorial area, reporting directly to one or more ministry. The data on type of agency is also extracted from the Norwegian State Administration Database.

*Table A2: Type of agency. Percentage.*

1. National agency	51
2. Integrated agency	19
3. Regional agency	30
N=100 %	150

**Primary task**

In the survey, questions were formulated in order to gather information on both primary (main) and secondary (additional) tasks of various kinds that an organization can attend to. We used five categories for tasks according to the possible engagement in the following: a) regulation and scrutiny, b) other kinds of exercising authority, c) general public services, d) business and industrial services, and e) policy formulation. *Regulation and scrutiny* was singled out as a separate category from other kinds of exercising authority, due to the specific and circumscribed nature of these tasks. For *service provision and production*, a distinction was made between tasks which primarily are carried out on a non-profit basis (general public services) and those who are on some form of a market (business and industrial services). The category of policy formulation includes policy shaping as well as policy formulation.

In total, 33 answered that their primary task was regulation and scrutiny, 37 had other kinds of exercising authority, 69 had general public services, 7 had business and industrial services, and 4 had policy formulation. Due partly to the actual number of agencies in each category, and partly to the main interest in this paper, we distinguish between regulation and scrutiny, other kinds of exercising public authority/policy formulation, and service provision and production.

*Table A3: Primary task in agencies. Percentage.*

Regulation and scrutiny	23
Other kinds of exercising public authority (and policy formulation)	27
Service provision and production	50
N=100 %	150

This variable is also used in two dichotomous variants:

- a) 1: regulation and scrutiny, 0: other tasks;
- b) 1: service provision and production, 0: other tasks

**Agency age**

The data on agency age has been extracted from the Norwegian State Administration Database, which provides detailed information on year of establishment. In this paper we use a dichotomy: agencies established before 1990, and agencies established in 1990

or later. The cut is partly based on the gradually greater scope and intensity of the NMP movement from 1990 onwards (Lægneid et al. 2003).

*Table A4: Agency age. Percentage.*

1. Established before 1990	61
0. Established 1990 or later	39
N=100 %	150

### ***Agency size***

In the survey, the question of agency size used a predetermined set of categories for the number of employees (including subordinate branches): a) under 20, b) 20–49, c) 50–199, d) 200–499, and e) 500 and over. In this paper we use three categories, as shown in Table A5.

*Table A5: Agency size. Percentage.*

3. 200 employees and more	40
2. 50–199 employees	34
1. Less than 50 employees	26
N=100 %	147

### ***Mutual trust***

In the survey we asked for the extent of mutual trust between the agency and the parent ministry. The question originally gave the respondents the opportunity of choosing between five different categories: a) very high mutual trust, b) rather high mutual trust, c) high and low mutual trust, d) rather low mutual trust, e) very low mutual trust. Less than 8 % reported having a level on trust in category c) or lower, while a majority reported a very high level. Thus, in this paper we have used a dichotomy: very high mutual trust vs. rather high mutual trust or lower.

*Table A6: Mutual trust between agency and parent ministry as seen from the agency. Percentage.*

1. Very high mutual trust	53
0. Rather high mutual trust or lower	47
N=100 %	146

### ***Administrative culture***

One set of questions in the survey aimed at assessing different aspects of the prevailing administrative culture in the agency: «Assess the agency as it exists today. How well is (each of the following 16 aspects) attended to in the agency? Try to see the agency at

distance.» For each aspect there was a scale: very bad, bad, average, good, and very good.

In this paper we have selected two aspects as indicators of administrative culture: professional quality, and customer and service culture. Only a small part of the agencies gave an assessment below average for professional quality (1 %) and customer and service culture (8 %). A large majority assessed professional quality very good (35 %) or good (52 %), while the score on customer and service culture was a bit lower (15% very good and 52 % good). For both aspects we use a dichotomy, but the cut is different to avoid skewed distributions.

*Table A7: Assessment of professional quality in the agency. Percentage.*

1. Very good	35
0. Good or less	65
N=100 %	145

*Table A8: Assessment of customer and service culture in the agency .Percentage.*

1. Very good or good	67
0. Average or less	33
N=100 %	145

### **Market competition**

Several questions were related to the extent of competition perceived by the agencies. First: «Taking the primary task of the organization as the point of departure – are there any other organizations carrying out the same or similar tasks and/or services within your field of work?» Here, 44 % of all agencies answered yes. They were posed a follow-up-question: «If yes, is the agency in a market or a quasi-market characterized by competition?» Some of them (36 %) answered no, while the majority answered yes to some extent (43 %) or to a large extent (22 %). Here, we only distinguish between whether the agencies are in a market or a quasi-market characterized by competition or not.

*Table A9: Is the agency in a market or a quasi- market characterized by competition? Percentage.*

1. Yes	30
0. No	70
N=100 %	150

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