Bureaucracy vs. democracy?

Politicians’ and bureaucrats’ assessments of citizens’ influence through procedure or performance-related channels

Jon Pierre
Gothenburg University
Sweden

Annelin Gustavsen
Nordland Research Institute
Norway

B. Guy Peters
University of Pittsburgh
USA

Asbjørn Røiseland
University of Nordland
Norway

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Abstract. With an increasing emphasis on delivery and output as a source of legitimacy for the local state, questions arise about how politicians and civil servants perceive conventional, input-based channels for citizens’ influence in relationship to performance and output-oriented opportunities for such influence. This paper compares the attitudes on these issues of senior local politicians and civil servants in Norwegian and Swedish local authorities. The analysis draws on a dataset generated in 2012 among a set of six political and administrative leaders in all Norwegian and Swedish municipalities. We also compare a service sector where public management reform has been extensive (care of the elderly) with a service sector where regulation and law enforcement dominates (planning and building). Thus the paper compares politicians with bureaucrats; Swedish and Norwegian local governments; and different functional areas of local government service. Politicians accord greater importance to input-based channels of influence and to throughput than do bureaucrats. The data also suggests that politicians remain very much in control, despite recent public management reform.

1. Introduction: Politicians, civil servants, and local public management reform

It is intriguing to observe the adaptive capacity of local government in face of external pressures. Public management reform, cutbacks, global pressures and increasingly assertive clients present powerful challenges to elected officials and civil servants, yet at the surface only few changes in institutional structure and roles seem to be implemented (see Pierre, 2009). Furthermore, many of these changes, e.g. administrative reform and public management reform, have second and third-order changes which challenge this apparent stability. For instance, public management reform has opened up new points of contact for citizens’, or customers’, into the public sector. Even so, however, local governments in many countries look and behave remarkably similar to what they did several decades ago.

Or do they? This paper explores changes in the institutional roles of elected officials and civil servants in the face of reform aiming at opening up service-delivering institutions to citizens for their direct input on those services. To what extent have such reforms altered entrenched roles in local government, and how do these officials assess these new channels of citizens’ potential influence on public service as compared to conventional channels such as political parties and general elections? How much change is taking place behind the stable facades of local authorities in response to the empowerment of citizens qua customers and public management reform?

The apparent stability in the midst of extensive change suggests a high degree of adaptive behavior within existing structures among politicians and bureaucrats in the public sector. Institutional assignments and roles are incrementally redefined, leaving the visible infrastructure of the local state largely intact while the organization responds to challenges. Another way of describing this development is as a case of constitutional drift where the modus operandi of public servants and politicians gradually change without any
corresponding change in the legal framework of local government. Such development takes place at the nation state level, too, although it tends to be more visible at the local government level than in national politics and administration. Local institutions and officials have to respond both to changes in their external environment and to changes imposed by the national regime within which they are embedded. This additional source of contingencies only serves to increase the demand on adaptive capacity among local governments.

One of the most profound changes in local government modus operandi over the past couple of decades has been the introduction of markets into public service delivery and the empowerment of the recipients of those services to choose among competing service providers. NPM reform has meant that, in the words of Miller and Rose (2008:105), the “logics of welfare bureaucracies are replaced by new logics of competition”. This “new logic” alters the roles of elected officials and civil servants from sustaining due process and equal treatment to regulating competition and markets in public service delivery. Again, this consequence of reform plays out much more strongly at the local government level compared to the national level since citizens typically engage the public sector and experience the changes brought about by reform at the local level.

All of this suggests that the impact of reform, particularly those elements of reform that most immediately relate to the exchanges between citizens and the public sector, should be investigated primarily at the local government level. Against that backdrop, this paper reports a study on local government politicians and civil servants in Norway and Sweden with regard to the impact of public management reform on their respective roles in the political system. Public management reform has significantly challenged the role of the politicians as representatives of the citizens. The separation of policy and operations in the local political system and the introduction of political steering by defining goals and delegating operative responsibilities to civil servants has to some extent redefined the nature of elective office at the local level.

The conventional role of the civil servant has changed significantly, too. By opening up new and alternative channels for input on public service, citizens have been offered a legitimate, alternative pathway into local government. Unlike the conventional, collective input channels, customer choice models of service delivery enable the individual client/customer to choose among competing service producers and also to engage civil servants much more directly than was possible in the conventional arrangement. Reform has meant that civil servants have become legitimate targets for citizens and clients. These models thus open up the previously impenetrable local public administration to the citizens who can engage the political system both through the conventional, representative channel and by stating their claims directly to civil servants.

These developments raise the important question of how politicians and bureaucrats in different institutional contexts perceive the conventional and emerging channels of interaction between the local state and its citizens. Being an elected official and the civil servants are essentially public roles where expectations in the external environment are as important as systemic role definitions in shaping practice and modus operandi. Politicians
could be assumed to emphasize the importance of the conventional democratic process, with elected officials in control of the public organizations and political parties as the leading structures funneling citizens’ demands into the political system. A growing importance of direct contacts between citizens and the bureaucracy could undermine the role and eventually also the legitimacy of the representative process.

The bureaucrats, on the other hand, have little experience in dealing with direct contacts with citizens and clients. Their conventional role is to provide policy advice, execute the decisions made at the political level and report to elected officials (Gains, 2009). Dealing directly with clients has not been part of the traditional assignments of civil servants. How do they view this new role in relationship to the conventional process of democracy?

These two clusters of research questions lead us to the third set of issues; the changing relationship between politicians and bureaucrats in the local state. Public management reforms have arguably manifested themselves most clearly at the local government level, not least with regard to their impact on the changing interface between the public sector and its clients. Such reforms have also altered the relationship between elected officials and civil servants. While this relationship has been studied extensively at the nation-state level, we know much less about how it plays out in the local context. At the national scene we have witnessed all conceivable models of interaction, ranging from the Wilsonian strict dichotomy between politics and administration via the “village” model of politico-administrative collaboration to the “administrative state” model where civil servants by virtue of their tenure and expertise de facto control the system (see, for instance, Aberbach et al., 1972; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008; Marx, 1957; Peters, 2010; Peters and Pierre, 2004; Waldo, 1948).

The typical pattern coming out of this host of literature is that nationally, as Aberbach et al. (1972), argue, “politicians and bureaucrats live in an uneasy relationship”. At the local government level, by contrast, elected officials and civil servants tend to work alongside each other throughout the policy process. Taking this argument to extreme levels, some have suggested that the city manager, the most senior civil servant in the city, has the oversight and inclination to cater to the public interest as well as do elected officials, if not better (Moore, 1995; for a critique see Rhodes and Wanna, 2007). Other observers take a more nuanced view, suggesting that city managers have gradually become increasingly professionalized and tend to work in partnership with elected officials (Nalbandian and Portillo, 2006). Either way, it seems clear that while the politico-bureaucratic relationship at the national government level may be characterized by some degree of conflicting interests, the view at the local level is more one of shared values and goals and working in partnership rather than to engage each other in confrontation (Mouritzen and Svara 2002).

Outside the politico-administrative system, citizens assess different avenues to influence public decision making (Gustavsen, Pierre and Røiseland, forthcoming). The strategy underpinning such access in terms of preferred targets and the means of communication is reflective of how citizens perceive the roles of politicians and bureaucrats in the local authority. Public management reform affects these assessments in different ways. The average citizen is probably not aware of politicians’ main role as goal setters; nor are they
very likely to know the finer details of reform to create autonomous, operative institutions. However, judging by the percentage of clients who exercise active choice among competing service producers citizens are well informed about those elements of reform which seek to empower the client in relationship to the local state.

More broadly, there is now growing evidence that citizens’ trust in and support of government is to a greater extent derived from their assessments of the quality of public administration and public service than from the representative process (see Gilley, 2006, 2009; Goul Andersen, 2006; Peters, 2010; Rothstein, 2009). Public management reform which allows clients to engage the public service directly and not through the representative process is directly related to those sentiments. While representation, responsiveness and electoral accountability remain important, citizens’ view of government is increasingly shaped by the quality of the services they receive.

To sum up so far, our focus is on how local government politicians and civil servants assess the significance of conventional, input-related, conventional channels of influencing local politics and administration and also the more emerging channels of influence which target service producers and civil servants.

2. Research design

The central question here is how politicians and senior civil servants in Norwegian and Swedish local authorities view citizens’ influence through different channels. To what extent do politicians and bureaucrats think that it is more relevant and rewarding for citizens to approach bureaucrats instead of politicians? To what extent are bureaucrats willing to serve as targets for citizens seeking to influence the public services they receive? To what extent have the democratic roles of elected officials and senior civil servants been redefined by public management reforms?

We situate this analysis in a framework that allows us to evaluate the significance of differences along five dimensions. The first dimension relates to the roles of elected officials and civil servants in democratic governance. We have already mentioned the reforms and developments in the institutional frameworks of elected officials and civil servants. Given recent reform which to some extent redefines the bureaucrats as a legitimate target for citizens’ demands, and keeping in mind the relative degree of partnership between the roles at the local government level, we are interested in seeing how they assess their respective roles.

The second comparative dimension is local government size. Although often thought to ideally suited for research drawing on “most similar systems” design the Scandinavian countries display important differences on variables that speak to the present analysis. Norwegian local authorities are significantly smaller in terms of population than their
Swedish counterparts; the average population size in Norway is 11,000 to be compared to the Swedish 32,500.\(^1\)

The size of the local authority matters in several ways. Unlike smaller organizations where staff at the senior political and administrative levels can enjoy an informal, cozy relationship, bigger public organizations tend to have more formalized roles and, as a result of a more elaborated division of labor, more specified work descriptions. That means that politicians do not simply take over administrative tasks, and vice versa. With bureaucrats assuming a quasi-democratic role as points of contacts for citizens and clients, this becomes a potential issue in bigger local authorities.

Third, and related to the previous point, we compare local government systems with different experiences of New Public Management (NPM) reform. Swedish local authorities have implemented such reform to a larger extent than has been the case in Norway. This may to some extent be a function of municipal size; bigger municipalities in Norway have implemented such reform more extensively than have the smaller municipalities in Sweden. Creating internal markets and facilitating customer choice requires a population of some size to function and in order to attract private service providers to enter the local market.\(^2\)

Fourth, we are comparing local government systems with different degrees of autonomy in relationship to central and regional government. Swedish local authorities enjoy more autonomy in relationship to central government than do the Norwegian local authorities. While national government is very much present in the Norwegian local government context, stressing the local government role as providers of national welfare services (Fimreite and Tranvik 2010), the greater autonomy in Swedish local governments (Bäck and Johanson 2010) is likely to result in more increased focus on the local agenda. This may help create a closer link between the political system and the citizens in the Swedish municipalities than is the case in Norway.

The fifth and final comparative dimension is between different issue areas. Our data sets compare politicians’ and bureaucrats’ attitudes in care of the elderly and planning and building sectors. Care of the elderly as a sector of public service is characterized by close proximity to clients (or customers) and their relatives; expectations on the organization to be able to adapt its service in accordance with individual needs and demands; and with professionally trained street-level bureaucrats working directly with clients. Planning and building represents a very different type of issue area. Here, there is a stronger emphasis on due process and legality but also transparency and the facilitation of democratic discourse. There is much less direct contact with clients than is the case in the care of the elderly. At the same time, the public interest is more present, as planning is basically a matter of designing the public space. This means that the opportunities for output-based influence

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\(^1\) About half of the Norwegian municipalities have a population less than 5000. The equivalent median value for Sweden is 15,300.

\(^2\) We found this pattern very clearly during a series of case studies among small and big local authorities in Norway and Sweden. Smaller local authorities had major problems sustaining market-based service producers because the local demand was too small.
should be better in the care of the elderly, whereas planning and building should be driven primarily by input-driven demands.

In the following analysis we will distinguish between roles (politicians vs bureaucrats), policy issues (elderly care vs. building and planning policies) and country (Norway vs Sweden). The latter variable will represent the three dimensions related to country discussed above (2–4).

Throughout the paper we make a distinction between procedural and performance-related means of influence. The fundamental distinction between these two types of influence is whether they target elected officials or civil servants. The (input-related) procedural channels of influence we study include voting in local elections; contacting a local politician; contacting the media; and participate in a demonstration. Engaging in these “voice” activities relates to conventional means of influencing political decision makers. The output-related channels we have included in the survey are contacting a bureaucrat; contacting people who work in the service sector; and (in care of the elderly) choosing service provider and (in planning and building) threatening to move to another municipality. Choosing service provider and threatening to move could be seen as examples of “exit” options in public service.

Again, these activities describe different channels of potential influence available to clients. We do not measure how susceptible politicians and bureaucrats are to pressures through these channels, nor do we study how successful clients have been using these channels to influence public services. In the present context we are solely interested in how politicians and bureaucrats assess these channels.

Measuring how elected officials and civil servants assess procedural and performance-related points of input gives us some idea of how they perceive the legitimacy generated from the input- and output sides of the political systems. However, we are very much aware of the complexity of legitimacy and our data only provide measurement of some aspects of legitimacy. A deeper analysis of the legitimacy of local government would also require data collected among citizens and clients. Thus, the present analysis does not speak directly to issues of input- or output-based legitimacy of local government.

Although we are conducting this comparison in two different national contexts we intend to, within reason, extrapolate our findings to theoretical statements about which factors that seem to shape political and administrative democratic roles in local government. National context and other comparative dimensions should thus to the extent possible be replaced by values on explanatory variables (see Peters, 2013; Przeworski, 1987).

3. The data set

The Norwegian leadership survey was conducted during spring 2012 and was directed towards six municipal leaders in all (429) municipalities in Norway. The survey was sent electronically to all recipients through the electronic survey-tool Questback. The recipients of the survey were two elected politicians in each municipality; the mayor and the vice-
mayor, and four respective leaders of administrative sections; heads of administration, heads of elderly care and support services; heads of entrepreneurial planning; and heads of financial planning. The survey yielded 1,094 respondents of 2488, equal to a response rate of 44 percent.³

Table 1: Data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leadership survey Norway</th>
<th>Leadership survey Sweden</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Method</td>
<td>Survey by e-mail</td>
<td>Survey by e-mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (response rate)</td>
<td>1,094 (44 %)</td>
<td>671 (40 %)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of data collection</td>
<td>Spring 2012</td>
<td>Spring/early Summer 2012</td>
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</table>

The Swedish leadership survey was conducted during spring/early summer 2012 and was sent to six municipal leaders in all 289 municipalities. The recipients were the mayors⁴ and vice-mayors, four respective leaders of administrative sections; heads of administration, heads of elderly care and support services; heads of entrepreneurial planning, and heads of financial planning. The survey which was sent to 1,662 respondents generated 671 answers, which equals a response rate of 40 percent.⁵

In addition to background variables such as age, gender, location, education and profession, the survey included questions about satisfaction with local services, particularly elderly care, building and planning policies and primary school services. The survey also asked local leaders to rate the degree to which they believed citizens were able to influence local services through a selection of hypothetic measures. The survey also asked the respondents to rate the importance of a selection of factors which are popularly perceived as necessary for legitimate governance, such as participation in elections, efficiency of services, and citizen access to decision-making within services. Mayors and vice-mayors were also asked to state their party affiliation.

4. Procedural and performance-related channels of influence: findings

The consistent pattern we find in the data (table 2 and 3) is that regardless of institutional role, national context or policy area respondents accord higher significance to procedural means of citizens’ influence than to performance-related means of influence. Beyond that

³ Due to the relative small size of Norwegian municipalities, not all local administrations have separate positions for the services/offices of interest. It is common for small municipalities to combine posts or to assign responsibilities for several services to the head of administration. Some respondents requested to be deleted from the e-mail list, which also explains why the original sample does not equal 6 x 429.
⁴ The two Swedish political leaders are “ordförande/vice-ordförande i kommunstyrelsen”.
⁵ Some respondents requested to be removed from the email list, which explains why the original sample does not equal 6 x 289.
there is some variation, albeit less than perhaps expected, but the overall pattern is that conventional models of democratic practices are still favored by the local political and administrative leadership in Norway and Sweden.

Table 2: Average score on evaluation on whether elderly care can be influenced through a selection of measures. Scale 1-5, standard deviance in brackets. Norwegian and Swedish sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Procedural-related means of influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting in local elections</td>
<td>3.96 (.77)</td>
<td>3.72 (.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting a local politician</td>
<td>4.07 (.67)</td>
<td>3.98 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting the media</td>
<td>3.64 (.86)</td>
<td>3.76 (.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part. in a demonstration</td>
<td>3.10 (1.02)</td>
<td>3.24 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-related means of influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing service</td>
<td>3.16 (.97)</td>
<td>3.14 (.99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting a bureaucrat</td>
<td>3.59 (.84)</td>
<td>3.74 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting people who work with elderly care services</td>
<td>3.24 (.98)</td>
<td>3.53 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (lowest)</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>587</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let us now compare response patterns in the two national contexts, Norway and Sweden. Again, in this comparison Norway is characterized by smaller municipalities, low autonomy, and moderate NPM reform while the Swedish data reflect a context featuring bigger municipalities, more autonomy, and more extensive NPM reform. Swedish politicians give very high scores to procedural means of influence but also to performance-related means of influence, particularly in care of the elderly (table 2). Civil servants in Swedish local government, too, tend to accord greater significance to the conventional, procedural means of influence.

Swedish politicians give higher scores to procedural means of influence than to performance-related means of influence (table 2 and 3). This pattern corroborates a more general finding in the data; politicians and bureaucrats tend to give higher scores to the means of influence which target their own roles. There are however exceptions to this pattern; Swedish elected officials give higher scores to performance-related means of influence than do Swedish bureaucrats.
Table 3: Average score on evaluation on whether building and planning policies can be influenced through a selection of measures. Scale 1-5, standard deviance in brackets. Norwegian and Swedish sample.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Procedural-related means of influence</th>
<th>Norway</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting in local elections</td>
<td>3.79 (.86)</td>
<td>3.45 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting a local politician</td>
<td>4.09 (.69)</td>
<td>3.95 (.75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting the media</td>
<td>3.36 (.88)</td>
<td>3.50 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part. in a demonstration</td>
<td>2.93 (1.00)</td>
<td>3.03 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.54</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.48</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-related means of influence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatening to move from mun.</td>
<td>2.09 (1.05)</td>
<td>2.38 (1.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting a bureaucrat</td>
<td>3.64 (.76)</td>
<td>3.65 (.85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting people who work with building and planning</td>
<td>3.58 (.80)</td>
<td>3.66 (.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.10</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.23</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N (lowest)</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>601</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main difference between Norway and Sweden is found among the politicians. Swedish political leaders seem to subscribe to conventional, procedural forms of citizens’ influence to a higher degree than do their Norwegian colleagues, especially when they assess voting and contacting a politician within the context of elderly care (table 2). This is a somewhat surprising pattern, given that Sweden has gone farther down the NPM reform road than has Norway. It might be the case that performance-related means of influence in the smaller Norwegian municipalities work fairly well despite the limited NPM reform; the smallness of the Norwegian local authorities means that citizens and clients routinely approach bureaucrats and service managers just as easily as they talk to politicians.

An overall comparison of politicians and bureaucrats shows relatively few significant differences. To some extent bureaucrats tend to consider themselves to be the principal focus for citizen influence while politicians see themselves as the principal locus for popular influence over policy. These differences between politicians and bureaucrats must however not be exaggerated. As intimated above, these two types of actors may not be as differentiated at the local level as at the national level (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981). This lack of differentiation is perhaps especially true in the relatively small municipalities in the samples. In these cases the two sets of actors interact so frequently that their potential differences may not be as pronounced as in other settings.

To the extent that there are differences between politicians and bureaucrats in the samples, they occurred to a greater extent between countries than between either policy areas or between politicians and bureaucrats. If we examine the attitudes of politicians in Sweden and Norway, three of the four relationships were significantly different. Swedish politicians tend to attribute significantly greater importance than did Norwegian politicians to the
various mechanisms for input-based, democratic influence over policy. Swedish local authorities enjoy more extensive autonomy in relationship to higher echelons of government, as mentioned earlier, which means that the local political process in Sweden offers more real choices and priorities than is the case in Norway. Bureaucrats in the two countries, however, tend to share perspectives on these mechanisms of influence and there were no significant differences.

In terms of the comparisons between politicians and bureaucrats which comprises the principal focus of this paper, there are also interesting contrasts between the two countries. In Norway there are significant differences in the assessment of the outputs influences on decisions. Bureaucrats express greater faith than do politicians in the influence of what we have deemed output measures, especially direct contacts with the individuals within government who are making the decisions—especially those bureaucrats themselves. On the other hand, the politicians and bureaucrats in Sweden differ significantly in their evaluations of the input mechanisms for influencing government. In particular, Swedish politicians expressed significantly stronger support for instruments such as voting to control policy than did the bureaucrats. There was little difference in these assessments between the two policy areas, although we had expected the building and planning policies to be influenced less by politics than care for the elderly.

In small settings dealing with well-institutionalized policies, politics and administration may, in practice, be merged. Or at a minimum political leaders lack the resources to be effective policy-makers and therefore the permanent officials may become the de facto controllers of public policy. This pattern of policy-making need not be undemocratic, given that there are close and stable connections between political and administrative officials. But it does demonstrate the marked differences between governance within smaller and larger local governments.

As we turn to compare the two areas of public service we find another important lack of difference in the data. We had expected care of the elderly would be more politicized than planning and building regulation, given the more technical nature of the latter policy. There were, however, few appreciable differences in the manner in which these policies were dealt with by local governments in the two countries. Both politicians and bureaucrats in Norway and Sweden thus think that care of the elderly is more susceptible to citizens’ influence than is planning and building, regardless of through which channel that influence is articulated. Care of the elderly provides more choice among service producers, particularly in the bigger Swedish municipalities, and street-level bureaucrats have more latitude in that policy sector compared to the highly regulated planning and building sector.

5. Conclusion

The findings reported above would in many ways seem to corroborate conventional wisdom. Politicians, on the whole, place more significance in procedural means of influence than do bureaucrats. Bureaucrats, on the other hand, see more importance in performance-related means of influence than to politicians. Similarly, highly regulated policy sectors like planning
and building offer less opportunities for citizens’ input compared to less regulated and more decentralized policy sectors, her exemplified by care of the elderly.

It is also in line with our expectations that the Swedish bigger and more autonomous municipalities pay greater attention to the political process compared to the smaller and more constrained Norwegian local authorities. Urban politics in Sweden is probably more vital than in Norway owing to the bigger budgets, more capable administrations and the existence of real policy choice.

We were more surprised by other findings. The small Norwegian municipalities have experienced very little NPM reform but seem to offer just as much opportunities for citizens to engage service producers as is the case in bigger, NPM-reformed municipalities. We believe that this is a highly integrated political and administrative context with easy access for citizens. Splitting the Norwegian sample into different municipal size in terms of population etc. possibly would have nuanced this observation.

6. References:


Goul Andersen, J. (2006), Political power and democracy in Denmark: Decline of democracy or change in democracy?”, *Journal of European Public Policy* 13:569-86.


