

Does agency age matter in administrative reform?: Policy autonomy and public management in Swedish agencies

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Abstract

This paper looks at the policy autonomy of different “generations” of agencies in Sweden. Taking a historical institutional perspective, we argue that the policy autonomy of public agencies is related to the dominant political and administrative trends at the time when the agency was first created, i.e. that institutional relations created at that formative moment tend to persist. In the Swedish context, one such trend is of particular importance; the managerial trend that started in 1963 with the Program Budgeting (PB) reform. This was an institutional reform that presented a paradigm shift in Swedish public administration. This reform was reinforced in the 1990s by the New Public Management (NPM) reform, which introduced new instruments and measures consistent with the managerial paradigm previously introduced by the PB reform. This managerial trend aimed at limiting agencies’ policy autonomy. Thus, we hypothesise that (1) agencies founded before the PB reform will enjoy more extensive policy autonomy than agencies founded during or after this reform and (2) there will be no such difference between agencies founded before and after the NPM reform. These hypotheses are tested on empirical data consisting of a web survey in which 157 Swedish agencies have stated to what extent they perceive that they enjoy policy autonomy. The results confirm both our hypotheses, thus demonstrating the importance of considering the scope of institutional change when analysing and comparing the effects of administrative reforms in different countries.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between public agencies and government departments has been a key issue in administrative reform for the past couple of decades. Indeed, the policy-operations institutional split and the creation of autonomous public agencies has been one of the most conspicuous manifestations of public management reform in a large number of countries (Aucoin, 1998; Christensen & Laegreid, 2006; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004). Executive agencies have been institutionalised features of government for some time now and there is a growing interest in the policy autonomy of these agencies.

The issue of policy autonomy is important not least since it relates to wider issues concerning the legitimacy of the political system. In formal terms, and leaving the growing debate on emerging forms of output-based legitimacy aside, citizens can only hold politicians—not civil servants—to account for political decisions and agency performance. Thus, not least from a democratic perspective we need to know to what extent public agencies act independently of their political masters, how much influence agencies exercise in policy processes, and what factors affect these patterns. The purpose of this paper is to contribute new knowledge to this field of research.

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Many accounts of agencies' policy autonomy overlook the fact that such autonomy is essentially a two-way street. There is now growing evidence of the significance of executive agencies in shaping public policy. Still, the typical approach to agency autonomy is to investigate the extent to which departments can control the policy activities or the internal management of the agencies, thus ignoring the more complex issues of agency influence over policy. However, there are studies, for example that by Verhoest, Verschurere, Rubecksen, and MacCarthaigh (2010), that take the opposite perspective by studying the level of autonomy as reported by the agencies themselves. Following their example, we look at the level of policy autonomy perceived by different generations of Swedish agencies.

In most countries, the rise of autonomous or semi-autonomous public agencies is closely associated with the rise of New Public Management (NPM) (Aucoin, 1998; Christensen & Lægreid, 2006; Pollitt, Bathgate, Caulfield, Smullen, & Talbot, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004). Starting in a few Anglo-Saxon countries in the 1980s, this reform spread quickly across the Western world and beyond. One of the key points of this reform was to reduce the policy autonomy of agencies and instead increase their operational autonomy.

Drawing on a historical institutional perspective on NPM reform, Verhoest et al. (2010:256–257) show that agencies formed before the introduction of NPM enjoy higher levels of policy autonomy compared to agencies that were created later. There are several reasons why the time of foundation of an agency should have an impact on its policy autonomy. The historical institutional explanation offered by previous scholars (Lægreid, Roness, & Rubecksen, 2006; Verhoest et al., 2010:35) is that, analytically speaking, age is a proxy for agency culture: “a public sector organization is established at a specific time, and is therefore shaped by particular cultural contexts or norms and values that leave a permanent impression on it” (Verhoest et al., 2010:35).

This paper conducts an empirical test of these findings by measuring policy autonomy in a different way and in a different cultural and institutional context. The empirical data is collected in Sweden where core public management ideas were introduced in 1963 during the Program Budgeting (PB) reform, i.e. about two decades before the global diffusion of NPM. Our analysis substantiates the importance of considering the types of change triggered by administrative reform when using age as an explanatory variable. Specifically, we investigate what degree of change is necessary before we should expect a difference in policy autonomy between agencies that were founded before and after an administrative reform. Our results indicate that this requires what Hall (1993) calls an institutional change of “the third degree”. We will discuss Hall's typology of change and how it can be applied to administrative reform later in the paper.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. We first define policy autonomy and discuss how such autonomy is related to agency age and administrative reform in an institutional perspective. This section will be followed by a brief description of the Swedish administrative context and the introduction of two hypotheses. We then turn to our empirical analysis by introducing our data set, specifying independent variables and presenting our empirical results. The paper closes with a discussion of the results and how they speak to the conceptual issues raised earlier in the paper.

2. Defining policy autonomy

There are several different kinds of autonomy (see e.g. Christensen, 2001; Lægreid et al., 2006; Verhoest et al., 2010). The focus in this study is on the policy autonomy of public agencies. Policy is often associated with a decision or a sequence of decisions that define a course of action, for example what the goals of an agency should be and through what strategies these goals should be achieved (Hill, 2009:14–19). Policy autonomy is thus related to the authority to make decisions on goals and strategies. An agency enjoys a high degree of policy autonomy when these competencies are delegated from external actors, such as the government or the parliament, to the agency itself by reducing regulation and *ex ante* approval requirements of other actors (Verhoest, Peters, Bouckaert, & Verschurere, 2004).

A complete delegation of these tasks is however unlikely. We therefore also consider agency *involvement* in policy formulation processes as an aspect of policy autonomy. Thus, an agency does not just enjoy policy autonomy when it sets its own policies protected from any influence of the parent department; policy autonomy is also at hand when an agency can influence early stages of the policy process, such as the initiation, the information, the consideration, and the decision-making stages (Jenkins, 1978:17) by having a high degree of access to the parent department or to the context in which these processes take place. We will return to the issue of how we operationalise and measure policy autonomy in the methodology section.

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