THE INTERACTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE TRADITION AND ORGANISATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS: THE CASE OF AGENCY PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

Comparative scholars emphasise that public administration should be understood in terms of context-bound patterns of organising and decision-making. Agencies in the same context will display more commonalities than those in another. At the same time, there is good empirical evidence for organisational-level variation in decision making. For instance, not all agencies in one country are delegated similar levels of personnel management autonomy. This article develops a theoretical argument about how administrative tradition moderates the effect of organisational drivers of personnel management autonomy. We identify the degree of uniformity embedded in administrative tradition as a key explanatory factor for this relationship. In empirical terms, the article compares the perceived personnel management autonomy of agencies in 10 European countries nested in three country clusters (Scandinavian, Latin-Napoleonic and Continental). The analysis confirms theoretical expectations about the context-specific effects of organisational characteristics on personnel management autonomy in agencies.

POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS

This article explains why agency managers' perceived degree of personnel management autonomy varies between different administrative traditions. It shows that some contexts display a greater heterogeneity of delegating personnel management autonomy to agency managers, whereas other contexts are characterised by homogenous practices of delegation to agencies of the same legal type. This finding suggests that changes in agencies' legal type are important instruments of effective reform in high-uniformity contexts, whereas they will have only a limited effect in low-uniformity contexts.

[T]here is not, and cannot be, one best theory for explaining agency behaviour, anywhere, any time.[1]

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to the debate about the relevance of macro- versus meso-level explanations for the comparative study of bureaucracy (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987; Levi-Faur, 2004). This debate revolves around the challenge of cross-country comparison under conditions of within-country variation: 'The central problem of cross-systems comparison is how to distinguish the conditions under which there is greater variation across than within systems' (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987: 477). Macro-level explanations are situated at the level of groups of countries or individual countries representing distinct administrative traditions (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Painter and Peters, 2010; Peters, 2008; Yesilkagit, 2010). In comparative research on public sector reforms, such contextual factors are understood as 'implementation habitats' that filter which kinds of reform are appropriate (Bezes and Parrado, 2013; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). In the literature on the governing of agencies, macro-level explanations suggest that agencies in the same context will display more commonalities than those in dissimilar contexts (Pollitt et al., 2004).

Another strand of literature emphasises substantial variation in the governing of agencies within similar contexts. These studies show how agencies differ regarding formal and actual autonomy (Bach, 2014; Painter and Yee, 2011; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008), the use of management instruments (Lægreid et al., 2011; Verhoest and Wynen, 2018) and ministerial control through performance contracts (Askim et al., 2019; Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009). They are located at the meso-level of analysis, as they

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[1] This quote is from a book that summarizes the findings of a project under the co-direction of Christopher Pollitt, who passed away in 2018 (Pollitt et al., 2004: 28). Christopher's work has been a major source of inspiration for this article's authors and many others engaged in the comparative study of agencies.

aim at explaining variation in the governing of agencies as a function of organisational characteristics. They often implicitly assume that theoretical assumptions about the drivers of variation can 'travel' across different country contexts.

This article bridges the meso-level literature on the governing of agencies with the macro-level literature on administrative traditions. It provides a theoretical argument about the interplay of agencies' broader environment with fundamental patterns of organisational decision-making, building upon studies of government agencies combining contextual and organisational perspectives (Bach et al., 2017; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2010). We argue that the analytical value of administrative tradition is not limited to explaining cross-national variation in agency management. More specifically, we suggest that administrative tradition interacts with explanations at the organisational level, affecting the explanatory power of organisational-level explanations and hence their ability to travel across contexts.

While most scholars would agree upon the relevance of both macro- and meso-level explanations, few studies have been able to compare the relative explanatory power of both perspectives (Bach, 2014; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2010). The key insight from these studies is that country differences are not restricted to overall levels of perceived agency autonomy, but also include variation in the explanatory power of organisational variables. Following up on this body of research, we investigate the relative importance of macro-level contextual and meso-level organizational factors to explain agencies' personnel management autonomy (PMA), one of several sub-dimensions of organisational autonomy (Verhoest et al., 2010). Moreover, we move the research frontier by theorising how the notion of uniformity embedded in administrative tradition (Bezes and Parrado, 2013; Ongaro, 2008; Peters, 2008) moderates the relevance of organisational explanations for PMA.

In empirical terms, the article draws on the unique Comparative Public Organization Data Base for Research and Analysis (COBRA) dataset comprising survey data on perceived PMA in 10 European countries (Verhoest et al., 2012). This is possibly the largest cross-

country dataset available on agencies' actual autonomy as perceived by agency senior executives, which allows for a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond the scope of existing comparative research.

The next section reviews the comparative public administration literature and the literature on agencies with regard to the relative importance of contextual and organisational explanations for PMA. Next, we present the article's theoretical framework, which revolves around the direct effects of administrative tradition and the mediated effects of organisational factors on perceived PMA. Then, we introduce the data and methods and present our results. The article concludes with directions for further research into the context-bound nature of organisational life in the public sector.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTEXTUAL AND ORGANISATIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR PMA

This section presents a theoretical framework for the comparative study of agencies' PMA. First, it elaborates on the effect of administrative tradition on PMA. Second, drawing on the idea of uniformity as a distinct characteristic of administrative tradition, we propose context-specific hypotheses about the interaction of macro-context and meso-level explanations. We illustrate this analytical approach through a comparative study of agencies' perceived management autonomy, understood as agencies' ability to take actions corresponding to their own preferences in the absence of external constraints (Maggetti and Verhoest, 2014). The article focuses on PMA, which encompasses decisions regarding agency staff, such as recruitment, promotion, or salary levels. These activities take place in all agencies, which ensures a high level of measurement validity. Substantially, PMA is a powerful indicator of top-down political or administrative interference in agency

management, as decisions on staffing and promotion are typical ways of exercising control over agencies (Bach, 2014).

The Effects of Macro-Level Context Factors on PMA

There is good empirical evidence that contextual factors make a significant difference for multiple dimensions of agency autonomy (Bach, 2014; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest, 2018; Verhoest et al., 2010). To operationalise contextual differences, we distinguish between administrative traditions, which stand for contextual factors shared within families of countries, rather than being peculiar to a single country (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Ongaro, 2008; Painter and Peters, 2010; Yesilkagit, 2010).[2]

Administrative tradition has been defined as a 'historically based set of values, structures and relationships with other institutions that defines the nature of appropriate public administration within society (Peters, 2008: 118). According to Yesilkagit (2010), it refers both to formal governance structures as well as inherited sets of ideas and beliefs. Administrative traditions embody distinct ideas of what constitutes good public administration in a given context (Bach et al., 2017). This article focuses on differences and similarities between the Continental, Latin-Napoleonic and Scandinavian administrative traditions. The Continental and Latin-Napoleonic traditions are characterised by 'a very strong and all-encompassing body of public law governing every administrative sphere' (Painter and Peters, 2010: 22), fostering a legalistic orientation in administrative behaviour that emphasises uniformity and formalism (Ongaro, 2008). The countries within those administrative traditions share a strong emphasis on the *Rechtsstaat* (rule-of-law state); this

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[2] Raadschelders et al. (2015: 432-435) provide a critical account of applying the idea of 'families of nations' in comparative public administration research.

implies a heavy reliance on input-oriented control systems (Bach et al., 2017), which has been associated with low levels of organisational autonomy (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

The *Rechtsstaat* countries contrast with common law countries adhering to a public interest model characterised by an *ad hoc* approach towards organising the public sector (Hood, 1986). Although our country sample does not include any public interest countries, several observers note that the legalistic orientation in the Scandinavian countries has been weakened over time, placing them in between *Rechtsstaat* and public interest models (Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The Scandinavian and, to a lesser extent, Continental traditions differ from the Latin-Napoleonic tradition in their emphasis on subsidiarity, decentralisation and a stronger focus on self-governance, which is more open for the involvement of societal actors. These aspects potentially enhance parent ministries' willingness to delegate substantial autonomy to agencies (Verhoest et al., 2010). Hence, in comparison to the Continental and the Scandinavian tradition, the Latin-Napoleonic tradition stands out by its strong emphasis on a centralised and uniform public sector (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Painter and Peters, 2010).

The extensive delegation of decision-making powers to agencies is a noteworthy feature of the Scandinavian tradition. The notion of autonomous agencies has historically been most pronounced in Sweden, where agencies are constitutionally protected from political interventions in single-case decisions. Finland has a similar 'dualistic model', whereas Denmark and Norway are characterised by a formally hierarchical relationship between parent ministries and agencies (Hansen et al., 2012: 260). Despite these differences, the longstanding reliance on agencies for service delivery is a distinct feature of the Scandinavian countries. The implementation of managerial reforms in the Scandinavian tradition therefore primarily consisted of granting more managerial autonomy to existing agencies, rather than hiving-off units from ministries (Hansen et al., 2012). Hence, although Scandinavian administrations display important features of the *Rechtsstaat* model (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014), they

have strongly emphasised delegating managerial autonomy to agencies (e.g. Bach, 2014). Those features suggest overall higher degrees of PMA as well in Scandinavian countries than Continental and Latin-Napoleonic countries.

Taking these elements together, we propose the following hypothesis about the direct effect of administrative tradition on PMA.

H1: Agencies in countries belonging to the Scandinavian cluster will report higher levels of autonomy than agencies in the Continental and the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, with agencies in the Continental cluster being in a middle position.

The Context-Dependent Effects of Organisational Characteristics on PMA

The next paragraphs develop hypotheses regarding context-specific effects of organisational characteristics on PMA. We address three sets of organisational-level variables that have been widely discussed in the recent literature: formal structure, culture and task. The key argument of this article is twofold: First, administrative traditions differ in terms of the degree of uniformity in public administration. Second, the degree of uniformity embedded in administrative traditions moderates the effect of organisational-level explanations on PMA.

In the literature on administrative tradition, the notion of uniformity is primarily connected to the equal treatment of citizens, but creating a uniform administration has also been a state-building strategy, as in the case of the Latin-Napoleonic tradition (Peters, 2008). The notion of uniformity also relates to the idea of the 'state' as an overarching entity in continental Europe, which is different from the notion of 'government' in the Anglo-American tradition (Painter and Peters, 2010). In state-centric traditions, agencies are part of the state from which they derive their authority, whereas agencies in public interest contexts are acting 'in their own name' and are hardly designed according to standard legal frameworks (Hood, 1986: 186). Arguably, based on our literature review, the Latin-

Napoleonic tradition displays the highest degree of uniformity in public administration, whereas the Scandinavian tradition with its substantial delegation of decision-making powers to agencies is characterised by (relatively) low levels of uniformity. Although typically characterised as highly legalistic and hierarchical, the Continental tradition can be placed in between the Latin-Napoleonic and the Scandinavian traditions. We develop hypotheses on the moderating effect of the degree of uniformity in public administration on organisational-level explanations of PMA.

In much of the literature, *formal structure* is analysed as the outcome of politicians' decision to delegate tasks to the bureaucracy. This literature studies the reasons decision-makers delegate public tasks to agencies and why they prefer some aspects of formal structure to others (Painter and Yee, 2011). In contrast, this article studies formal structure as an explanatory variable, assuming that it channels agency decision-making by defining who will perform a particular activity in what way (Egeberg, 2012). In terms of understanding PMA, formal structures constraining the exercise of ministerial control over agencies are particularly relevant (Christensen, 2001; Verhoest et al., 2004).

The fundamental assumption regarding the direct effect of *formal autonomy* on perceived autonomy is that 'choice of organisational form makes a real difference' (Bilodeau et al., 2006). To allow for systematic comparison of agencies across contexts, van Thiel (2012) proposed a typology ranging from (a) units of government, (b) departmental agencies without legal independence, (c) legally independent agencies created by statute, to (d) government foundations and state-owned enterprises. Moving along the continuum from type (a) to type (d) means that agencies are subjected to less strict regulatory frameworks, potentially allowing them more (perceived) autonomy (e.g. Bach, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008). We therefore expect perceived PMA to vary according to agency type, which is a proxy of formal autonomy. In our analysis, we distinguish between

departmental agencies and legally independent agencies and expect that legally independent agencies will report higher levels of autonomy than semi-autonomous agencies.

We hypothesise a moderating effect of the degree of uniformity peculiar to the agency's context on the relationship between formal and perceived PMA. In contexts with high degrees of uniformity in public administration, we expect a stronger effect of agency type on perceived PMA than other traditions (Bach et al., 2017). We therefore expect limited variation in perceived PMA *within* the same agency type due to uniform formal regulations, but clear differences *between* agency types. These differences will be less pronounced under conditions of low uniformity in public administration, which leads to the following hypothesis:

> *H2: The effect of legal independence on perceived PMA will be stronger in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the Scandinavian cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.*

Another element of formal structure is *agency size* (Egeberg, 2012). The assumption is that larger agencies – all else being equal – are in a better position to resist attempts at top-down control. Moreover, a minimum size may be considered a precondition for obtaining autonomy, as small organisations may not have the capacity 'to exploit and utilise the possibilities offered by disaggregation and formal autonomy' (Lægreid et al., 2006: 242). From a principal-agent perspective, an increase in agency size also increases information asymmetries, constraining the parent ministry's steering efforts (Verhoest et al., 2010). The larger the agency, the lower the relative control capacity of the parent ministry and the higher the risk of agency loss (Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009). We would therefore generally expect large agencies to report higher levels of PMA than small agencies, but suggest that the strength of this relationship will depend on the degree of uniformity in public administration. Whereas we expect a more pronounced effect of agency type in uniform contexts (see above),

we suggest that organisational explanations not related to formal-legal categories become less important with increasing levels of uniformity. In simplified terms, we suggest that uniform traditions are characterised by a 'one size fits all' approach to agency management, with the exception of formal-legal differences. We therefore expect perceived PMA to be similar across agencies with different sizes in high-uniformity contexts and propose the following hypothesis:

> *H3: The positive effect of organisational size on perceived PMA will be weaker in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the Scandinavian cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.*

Another explanatory perspective in research on agency autonomy focuses on how *organisational culture*, i.e. norms, values and identities, affects decision-making behaviour (Verhoest et al., 2010; Yesilkagit, 2004). From this perspective, agencies are not primarily rational instruments for obtaining goals, but value-bearing institutions with their own distinct identities and norms about appropriate behaviour (Selznick, 1957). Norms and values develop gradually and are transmitted through socialization. A strong organisational culture represents a 'filter' through which external signals are evaluated according to their effects on the organisation's stability. The effectiveness of control from superior bodies therefore depends on their compatibility with established norms and values in the agencies (Yesilkagit, 2004).

Agency age – referring to the year in which the agency was set up for the first time as an autonomous body – is clearly linked to organisational culture (Lægreid et al., 2006; Verhoest et al., 2010). This is because the development of a distinct culture within an organisation ('institutionalisation') takes time. Thus, the older the organisation is, the stronger its distinct identity, and the higher the potential for socialisation of its members into a common culture. In consequence, old organisations are more likely to resist pressure from outside actors.

Following this article's overall argument, the effect of agency age will be context dependent. The difference between old and young agencies will be less pronounced in contexts where uniformity within the public sector is highly valued and where we expect organisational characteristics other than legal independence to have a weaker effect on PMA compared to less-uniform contexts. We propose the following hypothesis:

H4: The positive effect of organisational age on perceived PMA will be weaker in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the Scandinavian cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

Finally, a *task perspective* on agency autonomy suggests that agencies with similar tasks will exhibit similar levels of perceived autonomy across contexts (Bouckaert and Peters, 2004; Painter and Yee, 2011; Pollitt et al., 2004; van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). The nature of the agency's main task(s) will affect how much autonomy the agency is granted by its parent ministry (relative to agencies with other tasks) and how it will react towards ministerial control efforts (Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009; Verhoest et al., 2010). A common way of conceptualizing agency task is according to activities, such as direct service delivery (Bouckaert and Peters, 2004; van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014).

The reform discussion about 'hiving off public services from ministries to agencies was primarily concerned with *service delivery* functions. From a functional perspective, public service delivery involves the need for managerial flexibility to deal with varying levels of demand in terms of quality and content for public services. We therefore expect delivery agencies to push for high levels of autonomy in their relationship with superior authorities 'because they interact most frequently with the citizens and private organisations as users' (Verhoest et al., 2010: 213) that demand efficient and innovative service delivery. Painter and Yee (2011) argue that the high visibility of service delivery agencies' outputs 'provides an ex-post control mechanism that allows for looser control over day-to-day operations' (p. 400; see

also Boon et al., 2019a; Boon et al., 2019b). This kind of output control is potentially easier to apply to service delivery agencies, as their outputs are more easily measurable (Verhoest et al., 2010). According to such arguments, agencies with service delivery as their primary task will report higher levels of PMA than agencies with other primary tasks. We propose that high degrees of uniformity will counterbalance task effects on PMA. All else being equal, we expect no significant differences between agencies performing different tasks highly uniform contexts, whereas we expect task-specific patterns of perceived PMA medium- to low-uniformity contexts.

> *H5: The positive effect of service delivery as a primary organisational task on perceived PMA will be weaker in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the Scandinavian cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.*

Several authors emphasise *political salience* as a particularly relevant task characteristic for explaining agency autonomy (Bach, 2014; Dudley, 1994; Pollitt et al., 2004). Political salience is associated with agency size and a face-to-face relationship with a relatively large proportion of the public (or both). Pollitt (2005) argues that political salience may surge upwards and die back quickly, but asserts that some issues can be regarded as politically salient on a continuous basis (e.g. healthcare). We expect that politicians have strong incentives to exercise control over highly salient agencies, resulting in lower levels of perceived PMA (Bach, 2014; Dudley, 1994). We use the policy sector as a proxy for political salience and distinguish between agencies in the welfare and social policy sector and agencies in economic and other policy sectors. In welfare and social policy, the proportion of citizens with a face-to-face relationship to an agency is relatively larger than in economic or other policy sectors, where policy implementation targets professional groups. Agencies in the welfare and social policy sector will be most politically salient because they affect relatively more citizens (Pollitt, 2005). In line with the article's general argument, we propose that

political salience will not affect perceived PMA in contexts with strong norms of uniformity in public management, assuming that ministry-agency relations will be similar for all agencies, irrespective of the agencies' political salience.

> *H6: There will be a weaker effect of operating within the welfare and social policy sector on perceived PMA for agencies in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the Scandinavian cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.*

DATA AND METHODS

The article's main data source is a survey conducted by the COBRA network (Verhoest et al., 2012). The main criterion for inclusion in the population was a formal relationship with a parent ministry that may exercise control over the agency. The chief executive of each agency was asked to complete several questions on management autonomy on behalf of the entire organisation. The data on independent variables (agency type, size, age, primary task and policy sector) were either coded by researchers (e.g. policy sector, agency type) or collected using the same survey and cross-checked with administrative data sources.

The COBRA dataset comprises unique agency-level data covering a representative sample for each country in terms of agency type, primary tasks, ministries and policy sectors. Our analysis covers 10 countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden (Scandinavian); Belgium, Italy and Portugal (Latin-Napoleonic); and Austria, Germany and the Netherlands (Continental).[3] This selection allows us to compare country clusters with a sufficiently large numbers of countries per group. There is, however, considerable variation in the number of observations per country due to different agency populations. To reduce the effect of these differences, we weighted the observations, using the country with the highest number of

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[3] Similar to Bach et al. (2017) and Verhoest et al. (2012) we use the term 'Continental' for the latter group of countries. Painter and Peters (2010) use the term 'Germanic' for the same group of countries.

observations as a benchmark. The weights are a multiplier to make the number of observations for each country equal to those of the benchmark country.

This article's dependent variable is agencies' autonomy as reported by chief executives, more specifically PMA (Bach, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004). This dimension of management autonomy relates to the agency's discretion to take general decisions concerning policies regarding (1) salary level, (2) rules and procedures regarding promotion and (3) the evaluation of staff without interference from ministries. For each item, organisations can have either no (0) or full autonomy (1). All three variables load on the same factor in a factor analysis using a polychoric matrix. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy equals 0.75, which is an acceptable degree of commonality. The Bartlett test of sphericity is highly significant ($\chi^2(3)$= 1436.707, p<0.01), again confirming a high commonality between the three variables. In the analyses, we use a factor score as the measure for PMA.

Turning to the explanatory variables, agency type is measured via a dummy variable with the value '1' if the agency has its own legal identity vested in public or private law and '0' if the organisation has no legal identity (van Thiel, 2012). Agency size (measured in FTE) and age (years since foundation) are included as continuous variables, and we use natural logarithms to correct for skewed distributions. A dummy variable is used to measure the primary task, distinguishing between general public services or business and industrial services (1) and other tasks (0) encompassing regulation, exercising other kinds of public authority and policy development (see Verhoest et al. 2010 for a detailed account of these categories). Finally, using a simplified version of the United Nation Classification of Functions of Government, we use a dummy with the value '1' for agencies active in the policy sectors of culture, education and social protection and '0' for agencies active in economic and other policy sectors.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the main variables and reports whether the estimation subsample is representative of the entire sample and thereby the population. A

comparison of the averages and standard deviations of the subsample with the entire sample indicates no major differences, suggesting that missing values were randomly distributed. However, the table indicates that agency size is slightly higher in the sample used for regressions. Nevertheless, this difference in size is distributed evenly over the entire population. The data were also tested for multicollinearity using a variance inflation factor (VIF). The mean VIF equals 1.34, indicating the absence of collinearity problems.

[Table 1]

ECONOMETRIC MODEL AND RESULTS

To estimate the degree of PMA, we use a Tobit model. Some organisations do not have any degree of PMA, i.e. some observations are left censored. This restriction is taken into account by employing Tobit models (Greene, 1997). Let the latent variable y_i^* of our econometric model be N(μ,σ²) and

$$y_i^* = x_i'\beta + \varepsilon_i, \tag{1}$$

Where β is the parameter vector to be estimated, x_i the vector of explanatory variables and ε_i the error term. The observed degree of PMA is

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 0 \text{ if } y_i^* \leq 0, \\ y_i^* \text{ if } y_i^* > 0. \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

The assumption of a Tobit model is an underlying structural model for the unobserved variable y^*. Yet we only observe $y>0$ if the propensity to have PMA is larger than zero. If the propensity is below zero, we only observe $y=0$. To test the robustness of the model, following Czarnitzki and Kraft (2004), we performed a fractional response model, which treats the dependent variable as a share bound between zero and one. The results are similar to those of the Tobit models.

[Table 2]

Table 2 contains the results of four models, one for the entire sample including all country clusters and one per cluster (Scandinavian, Latin and Continental). Model 1 allows us to assess the effects of different administrative traditions on PMA by including dummies for the different clusters. This model shows that agencies belonging to the Scandinavian and (to a lesser extent) the Continental cluster have a higher likelihood of reporting high PMA than the agencies belonging to the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, in line with H1.

The remaining models represent the results of the analysis per country-cluster, which allow us to test the context-dependent effects of organisational variables by comparing these models. Turning to the formal structure first, we find that the effect of agency type on actual autonomy is positive for agencies belonging to all three clusters. More importantly, adjusted Wald tests show that the positive effects is significantly larger for agencies belonging to the Latin-Napoleonic cluster than the two other clusters and significantly larger for agencies belonging to the Continental cluster than the Scandinavian cluster. These results fully support H2, showing a context-dependent effect of agency type, which is stronger in administrative traditions characterised by higher degrees of uniformity. Agency size has a positive effect for the PMA of agencies in the Scandinavian and Continental cluster, but not in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster. Although the adjusted Wald test does not show significant difference between the Scandinavian and Continental clusters, we find at least partial support for the context-dependent effect of organisational size (H3) on PMA, as the positive effect of organisational size on PMA is completely absent in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster.

In terms of organisational culture, we see that agency age had no significant effect on PMA in the full sample, but when considering the separate clusters, we find a positive effect for agencies belonging to the Scandinavian cluster. This positive effect is not discernible for agencies belonging to the other clusters, which renders at least partial support for our hypothesis on organisational age (H4).

For task-related variables, our theoretical expectations are not supported by the empirical results. We find that agencies with service delivery tasks report more PMA in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, while reporting less PMA in the Scandinavian cluster. This finding is almost the exact opposite of what we expected in H5. Finally, our proxy for political salience, the primary task, has a negative effect on PMA in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, which again is the opposite of what we expected (H6).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article started from the observation that empirical studies explain PMA either by organisational variables irrespective of context or by context without considering agency differences. We argue that scholars need to consider how context characteristics moderate the effect of organisational variables on PMA. We theorise that the same organisational variable will cause systematic within-system variation, depending on the relative importance of uniformity embedded in the country's administrative tradition.

First, we find strong support for our theoretical expectations regarding differences in PMA between country clusters. Agencies in the Scandinavian and – to a lesser extent – Continental clusters report significantly higher levels of PMA than Latin-Napoleonic countries. This finding suggests that the strongly embedded norm of uniformity in the Latin-Napoleonic countries goes together with a limited delegation of PMA to agencies. We thus find that administrative tradition clearly matters for explaining overall levels of PMA.

Second, in line with our theory, we find that the effect of several organisational factors on perceived PMA depends on administrative tradition. We theorised increasing levels of uniformity in public management from the Scandinavian to Continental to Latin-Napoleonic countries and a corresponding decline in organisational factors' explanatory power for PMA (with the exception of formal autonomy, for which we assumed the exact opposite pattern).

The empirical analysis confirmed this pattern for formal structure, namely agency type and size, as evidenced by clear differences in the effect sizes across clusters. Moreover, we find a significant effect for agency age in the Scandinavian cluster, where we expected the highest level of variation explained by organisational factors, yet no significant effects of agency age on PMA in the other country clusters.

However, several findings put our theoretical reasoning into question. The hypothesis on the conditional effect of service delivery as the primary task is rejected, as we find contradictory results, with both positive and negative effects on PMA. Likewise, in contrast to our expectations, we find context-specific effects of policy sector, our proxy for political salience, only in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, but not in the other clusters. These results resonate with earlier research showing that task characteristics only affect some aspects of agency governance (van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). Moreover, this research urges for measurements of multiple tasks to provide a more accurate picture of what agencies do, but this was not possible with our cross-country dataset. Future research will have to explore complementary explanations that can account for differential effects (positive vs. negative) of organisational characteristics, which we are unable to explain with our theoretical framework. For political salience, the unexpected significant effect in the Napoleonic cluster could be associated with the relatively more hierarchical nature of those countries, which implies a stronger effect of political considerations on PMA. At the very least, this finding suggests that uniformity is only one among several contextual dimensions moderating the effect of organisational characteristics on perceived PMA.

This article proposed a novel theoretical argument regarding context-dependent effects of organisational-level explanations for agency autonomy and tested this argument for one sub-dimension of agency autonomy using a sample of countries belonging to three distinct administrative traditions. The literature on agency autonomy highlights that autonomy is a multidimensional concept, which implies that different dimensions of autonomy may vary

independently from each other (Verhoest et al., 2010). That being said, the empirical literature shows that different dimensions of managerial autonomy often co-vary (e.g. Lægreid et al., 2006; Verhoest et al., 2010), suggesting that our empirical findings are likely to hold for other dimensions of managerial autonomy as well (such as financial management autonomy), whereas empirical patterns might be different for agencies' autonomy in mission-related decisions (policy autonomy).

In terms of the coverage of different administrative traditions, we would ideally have included data on agencies in countries belonging to other administrative traditions, especially the Anglo-American tradition (Painter and Peters, 2010). In the comparative literature, the latter is typically contrasted with administrative traditions subscribing to the fundamental ideas of the Rechtsstaat, including a distinction between public and private law and the notion of the 'state' as being separated from society (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The Anglo-American tradition also stands out by an ad hoc approach in the creation of public organisations (Hood, 1986). Overall, we would expect low degrees of uniformity in the Anglo-American tradition, and therefore even more substantial effects of organisational-level variables (other than agency type) on agency autonomy than the Scandinavian tradition, which is the least uniform in our sample.

This article's findings support theoretical accounts of the high relevance of the politico-administrative context for understanding public management (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987; Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The choice between meso-level and macro-level approaches in comparative public administrative research might be an idle one (Levi-Faur, 2004), as either leads to a loss of theoretical and empirical insights into differential effects organisational explanations. We are well-advised to use middle-range theories, such as Pollitt's (2004) task-specific path dependency model, to provide a realistic picture of what drives the practice of public management around the world.

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Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Original Sample Mean	Sd.	N	Used Sample N=1430 (weighted) Mean	Std. Err.	Scandinavian Sample N=572 (weighted) Mean	Std. Err.	Latin-Napoleonic Sample N=429 (weighted) Mean	Std. Err.	Continental Sample N=429 (weighted) Mean	Std. Err.
Dependents											
PMA	0.71	0.41	1334	0.69	0.02	0.91	0.01	0.46	0.03	0.64	0.03
Independents											
Type (legal identity)	0.49	0.50	1721	0.53	0.02	0.33	0.02	0.78	0.02	0.55	0.04
Size (ln)	4.84	1.90	1562	5.03	0.07	4.96	0.08	5.11	0.16	5.05	0.15
Age (ln)	2.87	1.12	1566	2.91	0.04	3.14	0.06	2.60	0.07	2.93	0.09
Primary task (services)	0.59	0.49	1312	0.59	0.02	0.58	0.02	0.59	0.04	0.61	0.04
Policy sector (culture, education, social protection)	0.38	0.48	1501	0.36	0.02	0.34	0.02	0.36	0.03	0.37	0.04
Scandinavian Countries											
Norway	0.09	0.29	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Finland	0.05	0.23	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Denmark	0.10	0.30	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Sweden	0.15	0.35	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Latin Countries											
Belgium	0.07	0.26	1726	0.10	0.01			0.33	0.03		
Italy	0.02	0.15	1726	0.10	0.02			0.33	0.04		
Portugal	0.09	0.29	1726	0.10	0.01			0.33	0.03		
Continental Countries											
The Netherlands	0.12	0.32	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04
Austria	0.04	0.19	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04
Germany	0.04	0.20	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04

Table 2: Tobit results for perceived PMA

VARIABLES	(1) Full sample Mfx	(2) Scandinavian cluster Mfx	(3) Latin-Napoleonic cluster Mfx	(4) Continental cluster Mfx
Type (legal identity)	0.446***	0.197***	1.270***	0.513***
	(0.0336)	(0.0415)	(0.158)	(0.0851)
Size (ln)	0.0331***	0.0291***	0.0205	0.0237*
	(0.00926)	(0.00840)	(0.0337)	(0.0141)
Age (ln)	0.0146	0.0183*	-0.0433	-0.0106
	(0.0147)	(0.0102)	(0.0583)	(0.0273)
Primary task (services)	0.00933	-0.0457*	0.198*	0.0641
	(0.0376)	(0.0242)	(0.114)	(0.0681)
Policy sector (culture, education, social protection)	-0.0359	-0.00477	-0.245**	-0.0277
	(0.0340)	(0.0237)	(0.113)	(0.0649)
Cluster dummies (Latin-Napoleonic=reference)				
Scandinavian cluster	0.760***			
	(0.0458)			
Continental cluster	0.352***			
	(0.0486)			
Country dummies	Not Included	Included	Included	Included
Constant	-0.200***	0.576***	-0.704**	0.367***
	(0.0721)	(0.0749)	(0.298)	(0.127)
Observations (weighted)	1430	572	429	429
Cragg-Uhler R²	0.516	0.473	0.404	0.106
Joint significance cluster/country dummies	F(2.904)= 149.8***	F(3.903)= 7.99***	F(2.904)= 1.14	F(2.904)= 8.94***

*Notes: Marginal effects (Mfx); standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1;*