

Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together? The Personality Traits of Administrative and Political Elites in Municipal Denmark

Christoffer Florczak

Ph.D.-Fellow

florczak@sam.sdu.dk

University of Southern Denmark

Robert Klemmensen

Professor (WSR)

rkl@sam.sdu.dk

University of Southern Denmark

EARLY, ROUGH DRAFT DO NOT CIRCULATE OR QUOTE WITHOUT AUTHORS' PERMISSIONS

Abstract

The recent increased interest in behavioral public administration has brought with it a plethora of concepts imported from psychology. Personality is such a concept an emerging literature suggests that personality has a host of consequences for how politicians and administrative elites behave. However, we only have few studies which systematically examine how the personalities of elected and administrative elites are distributed on the Big Five personality dimensions. We fill this hole in the literature by presenting a comparison of municipal top civil servants' (n = 530, 31 % response rate) and politicians' (n = 1200, 50% response rate) personality traits as measured by a pre-validated 30-item big five instrument (Wellnitz *et al.*, *Forthcoming*; Soto and John, 2016). We find some similarity between the samples, as extraversion, agreeableness, open-mindedness and conscientiousness are truncated towards the high end of the scale for both groups, and negative emotionality towards the lower end of the scale for both groups. However, we find significant differences between politicians and bureaucrats in all five traits: Bureaucrats show higher openness and extraversion, and politicians show higher conscientiousness, agreeableness and negative emotionality. Furthermore, we explore the differences between mayors and politicians, and municipal directors and managers. Mayors are less open and more emotionally stable than regular city councilors, and no differences between directors and managers are found. Implications for representativeness, management, and the relations between politicians and administrators are discussed.

1. Introduction

Political science, public administration and psychology have long had an interest in examining traits and behavior of political and bureaucratic elites. Recently, the big five personality traits have been introduced to public administration (Cooper et al., 2013; Nørgaard, 2018), prompting exploration of public administration related topics through this new lens. However, it has proven notoriously difficult to gather data on politicians and top civil servants most likely as a result of their high demand functions in society (John, Naumann and Soto, 2008), and therefore only a handful of studies exist across the three fields. Most studies examine either politicians or civil servants, but some have pooled both civil servants and politicians to achieve sufficient statistical power. Studies have examined parliamentarians in a host of countries (See Nørgaard and Klemmensen 2018 for a recent review), but have rarely focused on the lower tiers of government and directly compared politicians and bureaucrats at the same time.

Investigating the structure of elite personalities is important because we know that sizeable correlations exist between personality constructs and a plethora of behaviors such as decision making, risk aversion and propensity to be framed by proposal (Judge *et al.*, 2002; Redlawsk and Lau, 2013; Sheffer *et al.*, 2017). The first step in showing effects of elite personality traits on political or bureaucratic behaviors is mapping and comparing traits across these groups. One question that remains unanswered is whether political and administrative elites have the same or different personality structures. The question is if the two groups are selected from the same personality pool or if there are systematic differences in the pools that elected and administrative elites are drawn from. On the one hand the socialization procedures into modern political institutions are getting formalized to a greater extent as the professionalization of politics increases. The bureaucracy has also expanded and become even more professionalized with the growth in the modern states and strongly formulated educational requirements and ethical practices. On the other hand, both the innate struggles of party and candidate competition put on the individual politician and the selection mechanisms internally in the party structures create a high demand environment likely to attract and contain individuals with certain trait scores. The selection mechanisms amongst high level bureaucrats are arguably different, but no less demanding, than those of the politician. Top-level administrators climbed the organizational ladder to the top, entering into high responsibility positions, with merely a hand full of qualified candidates to compete against, and with both relatively concentrated influence and working conditions to match. Thus, success in navigating the political and bureaucratic arenas is likely to be conditioned on different mechanisms, that might require either different trait scores or the same trait scores for different reasons.

Studying personality traits at the elite level has been mostly carried out using qualitative 'at a distance measures' (Winter, 2013). These measures decrease the types of analyses that can be employed, and therefore limit the studies to comparing a few political leaders at a time, and the literature is therefore devoid of any large-scale comparisons. This study remedies this, as it compares the personality trait scores of a large-scale sample of Danish local government elective representatives (n= 1200, 50% response rate) with an equally large scale-sample of high level municipal bureaucrats (n = 530, 31% response rate). We examine both trait and (plan to add) facet level differences between groups.

1.1 Theory

1.2 Conceptions of Personality

The five factor model of personality has dominated the psychological literature since the 1990's (John, Naumann and Soto, 2008), and has been popularized by authors such as Costa and McCrae (1992), Goldberg (1990), and Soto and John (2016). The five factors most commonly used are Openness (or Open-

mindedness), Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Negative Emotionality (or Neuroticism or Emotional Stability, the latter being reversed). Open individuals exhibit intellectual curiosity, an affinity for abstract thinking, and appreciation of art. Conscientious people are orderly and hard-working, oftentimes dutiful, punctual and reliable. Extroversion manifests in sociability, domineering, energetic and enthusiastic behavior. Agreeableness denotes kindness, compassion, respectfulness, warmth and caring tendencies. Negative Emotionality shows moodiness, emotional instability, and propensities towards depression, fear, worrying and brooding.

The literature on public administration has also been interested in individual differences broadly speaking, notably motivational constructs like public service motivation and related phenomena (Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry, 1996; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Bozeman and Su, 2015), and only recently has the psychological notion of personality been introduced to the field (Cooper *et al.*, 2013; Nørgaard, 2018). Discussion was had around what was considered the 'bureaucratic personality' (Merton, 1940; Williams, Sjoberg and Sjoberg, 1980; Bozeman and Rainey, 1998) which was derived by studying bureaucrats. Although varying by authors, most agreed that it was a conceptualization of personality characterized by needs for rule adherence, structuring and systematizing. This description is remarkably coherent with the description of the high tail end of trait conscientiousness, and especially the facet orderliness. However, the bureaucratic personality does not extend much beyond this characterization, and although the dominant trait of bureaucrats might be akin to conscientiousness, the big five frame-work can yield a broader systematized understanding of the personality of bureaucrats.

1.3 Bureaucrat-politician comparison

While top civil servants and political elites are probably attracted by power but there are reasons to believe that they nevertheless differ in their personality structures. The municipalities are the most decentralized unit in the Danish three tier governmental structure, comprising 98 municipalities with wide variations in demographics, economy and internal structure, each with their own individual municipal council (Greve, 2006). The many politicians at this level are not full-time employees in their respective councils, but are, in this sense, ordinary citizens with full time jobs next to their political obligations. They are to some extent reimbursed for time spent on city council matters, but only the mayors and a few "Council Men" ('Rådmænd', special titles for the heads of political committees used in the largest cities) are full time employees (Gallagher, Mair and Laver, 2011; Christensen and Elklit, 2013). Naturally, there are selective and socialization pressures in the party structures, but formal training is limited, discretion is relatively individual, and many different interests as well as educational and occupational backgrounds are present. The nature of Danish municipal politicians is perhaps best summed up by a recent Danish work sketching and characterizing the electives and their obligations entitled "The Last True Amateurs" (Kjær and Madsen, 2015)

The Danish municipal top-level civil servants, however, are anything but amateurs. Consisting mostly of highly trained, university educated, career bureaucrats, municipal high-level managers are very skilled, bringing a broad range of competencies to their positions (Bhatti, Olsen and Pedersen, 2009; Christensen, 2013; Olsen, 2013). As the competition for power positions increases towards the top of the organization, it is likely that selection criteria get progressively narrower, and selection on certain trait scores become stronger, increasing the distinctiveness of the people in these organizational tiers. Additionally, leadership functions are often the core of being a top-level bureaucrat, and as the general psychological literature

amply demonstrates, both the attaining of a leadership role and leadership behavior itself is heavily influenced by personality traits (Judge *et al.*, 2002; Dinh *et al.*, 2014).

Although both groups have risen in professionalization over the years, the groups arguably function under different institutional constraints and conditions. Clearly, institutional pressure is exerted on both groups, but sometimes in different manners. Firstly, it is likely that the political environment will select and socialize for extraverted individuals, capable of enacting their will and socially influencing others, whilst the bureaucrats are likely to be highly extraverted due to their leadership roles and ability to take charge. Secondly, arguing and presenting ideas is a given in politics and administration, and political and administrative problem-solving is an increasingly advanced endeavor, which could lead to high openness for both groups. Thirdly, competition, be it political or for high power bureaucratic positions, unstable environments, and increased responsibility are expected to sort away individuals high in negative emotionality, as negative emotionality increases negative reactions to signs of failure, insecurity, and punishment for failing. Fourthly, both politicians and managers have to work with people and are likely to be motivated by the desire to help others and to create good policies for helping people. It is however likely that politicians are more agreeable, as they participate in the political activities and work largely pro bono, where the administrators have stronger career related rational motives for delivering services and carrying out policies. Fifthly, organizational skills and industriousness are hallmarks of the administrator, and the politicians are essentially participating in volunteer work in addition to their own paid jobs, which could also be a sign of the highly conscientious individual.

To the best of the authors' knowledge only one study offers a direct comparison between the two groups. Ashton, Kushner, Siegel (2008) use municipal samples of 169 bureaucrats and 161 politicians, and a 10-item big five battery to compare the personality scores between samples. They find that politicians are weakly to moderately more extraverted than the bureaucrats. However, the relatively small sample sizes and the limited item pools makes facet comparison impossible, and it follows that the two items per trait might reflect one or two facets instead of all three used in the BFI-2-S as proposed by Soto and John (2017). Additionally, the sample sizes may be insufficient to detect smaller, subtler, differences in traits between the groups, thereby warranting a larger study.

1.4 Bureaucrat differentiation

Deriving from the logic of the strength of the institutional environment as a conditioner for trait scores, the most natural institutional variable to examine is arguably organizational hierarchical differences. For instance, the closer to the top of the organization, the larger the responsibility, and the more assertiveness and stress resilience is needed. Therefore, comparing the absolute bureaucratic top and the third chain of managers is likely to increase the chance of finding differences.

1.5 Politician differentiation

As outlined above the largest institutional difference between politicians in the municipal setting is whether they have a paid position or not. In addition to being full time politicians, the mayors also have the overall responsibility of leading and coordinating the bureaucracy. The mayor is therefore pragmatically in charge of carrying out the will of the collective city council. It is therefore to be expected that differences in traits might arise where certain trait scores are more beneficial in executing policy implementations or coping with increased responsibility.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

Two samples were collected for this paper. The first sample, consisting of municipal politicians were collected in April and May 2018. The politicians were contacted by email and given access to a web-survey. The municipalities were then contacted to get access to any missing emails, and less than five emails were missing in total when the web-based survey was administered. We therefore consider our sample frame to be the entire population of elected municipal politicians in Denmark. We achieve a response rate of 53% with 1301 returned questionnaires, therefore giving us a relatively highly representative sample, especially considering most other attempts at gathering data on political elites. Amongst these were 44 mayors, which we also consider highly representative considering that 98 municipalities have 104 mayors in total (one for each municipality, and seven mayors in the capital, Copenhagen).

The second sample was collected between August and October 2018, and consisted of high level municipal bureaucrats. The sample-frame for these civil servants was determined by examining each municipalities' organizational diagram and selecting the three highest tiers of leaders in each municipality. The municipality websites were then searched to gather as many mails as possible, and wherever mails were missing, the municipalities were contacted, first by mail and later by phone, to increase possible participation rate. We therefore also consider our sample frame for the civil servants to be the total population of high ranking municipal bureaucrats in Denmark. To date 530 questionnaires were returned which equals a response-rate of 31%.

It is of note that the large variance in municipal setup, demographics and geography leads to some variation in regard to what is placed in the three upper tiers of civil servants. This is best exemplified by some of the smaller island municipalities, which, for instance, include ferry directors in their three highest tiers of managers. Although this is not *pr. se.* the classical notion of a top civil servant, we include these as well. First, we consider this a natural variation in the Danish municipal system, which is precisely designed to deal with the heterogenous circumstances of local matters, and therefore administrative leaders will naturally also differ in which tasks they are set to administer. Second, we assure consistency in sampling strategy by letting the municipalities define what is included in their three highest tiers, and we do not rely on our own notions of managers, so to speak.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Big five personality traits

The personality trait inventory employed in both questionnaires is the Big Five Inventory 2 Short form (BFI-2-S) (Soto and John 2017), which was translated and validated in Danish by Wellnitz et. al (forthcoming). Each trait has six questions, and are measured on a five-point likert-scale from 1 to 5. The scales have been constructed using STATA, and most scales show a Cronbach's alpha between .6 and .7, indicating acceptable scale reliabilities. Only agreeableness showed poor reliability at a Cronbach's alpha slightly above .5.

2.2.2 Facet scales

The facet scales are sub-dimensions of personality traits. Each trait has three corresponding facets, consisting of two questions each:

Table 1. Trait-Facet

Trait	Facet
Extraversion	Sociability

	Assertiveness Energy Level
Agreeableness	Compassion Respectfulness Trust
Conscientiousness	Organization Productiveness Responsibility
Negative Emotionality	Anxiety Depression Emotional Volatility
Openness	Aesthetic Sensitivity Intellectual Curiosity Creative Imagination

2.2.3 Politician/Civil servant

This variable is coded so all politicians, both regular and mayors, are coded as 1 and all civil servants, both directors and managers, are coded 0.

2.2.4 Director/Civil servant

This variable is coded so that municipal directors and area directors are coded 0 and managers are coded 1.

2.2.5 Mayor/Politician

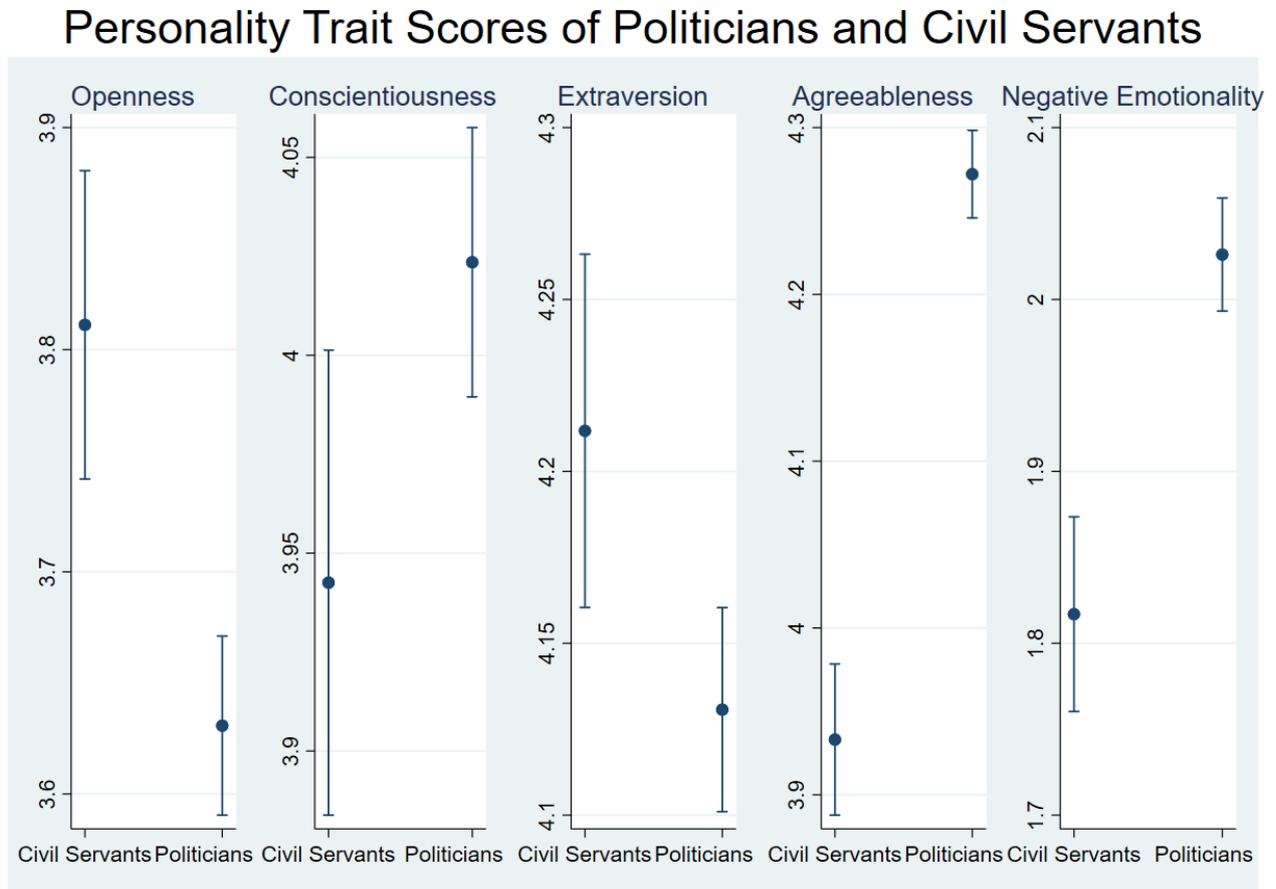
In this variable mayors are coded 1 and politicians 0.

3. Results

3.1 Politician/Civil servant comparison

Below is the comparison of traits between municipal politicians and top-level civil servants. Overall both groups are skewed towards the high tail end of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, and conversely both groups score low on trait negative emotionality.

Graph 1: Average scores on the big five personality traits politicians and civil servants compared

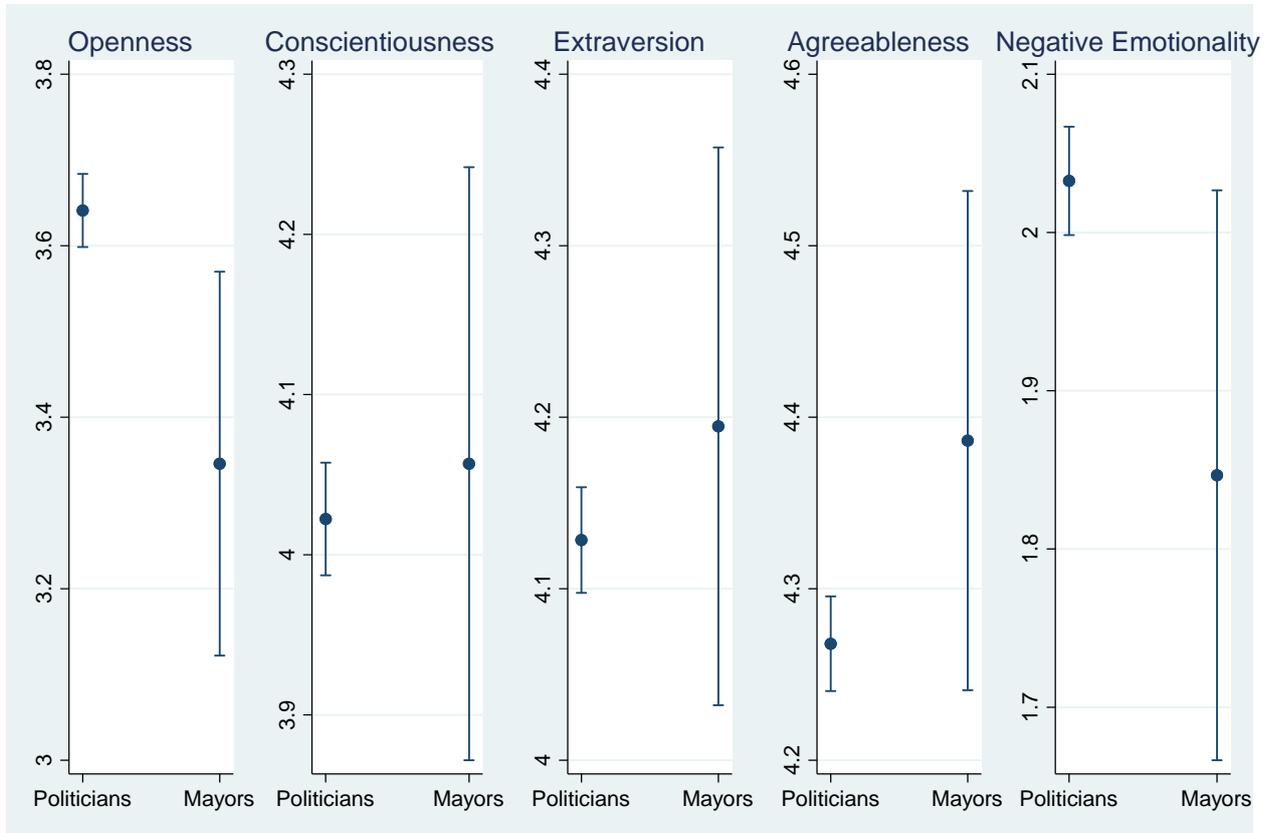


Turning to the group differences, there are significant differences between politicians and civil servants on all five traits at an alpha level of 0.05, the highest p-value being 0.019 in the trait conscientiousness ttest. Counter to conventional wisdom, civil servants are significantly more openminded than the politicians, perhaps reflecting their on average higher levels of education, as education also correlates with openness. Civil servants were expected to score high on trait conscientiousness, which is supported by the data, but the politicians were significantly more conscientious in comparison. The politicians were expected to be highly extraverted, which is again supported by the data, but they were less extraverted when compared to the civil servants. This could reflect the nature of leadership, as functioning in a leadership role might require even higher levels of domineering behavior. The most sizeable difference between the groups are found in trait agreeableness, where the politicians are significantly more agreeable than the civil servants.

3.2 Regular politician/Mayor comparison

Graph 2. Average scores on the big five personality traits politicians and mayors compared

Personality Trait Scores of Politicians and Mayors

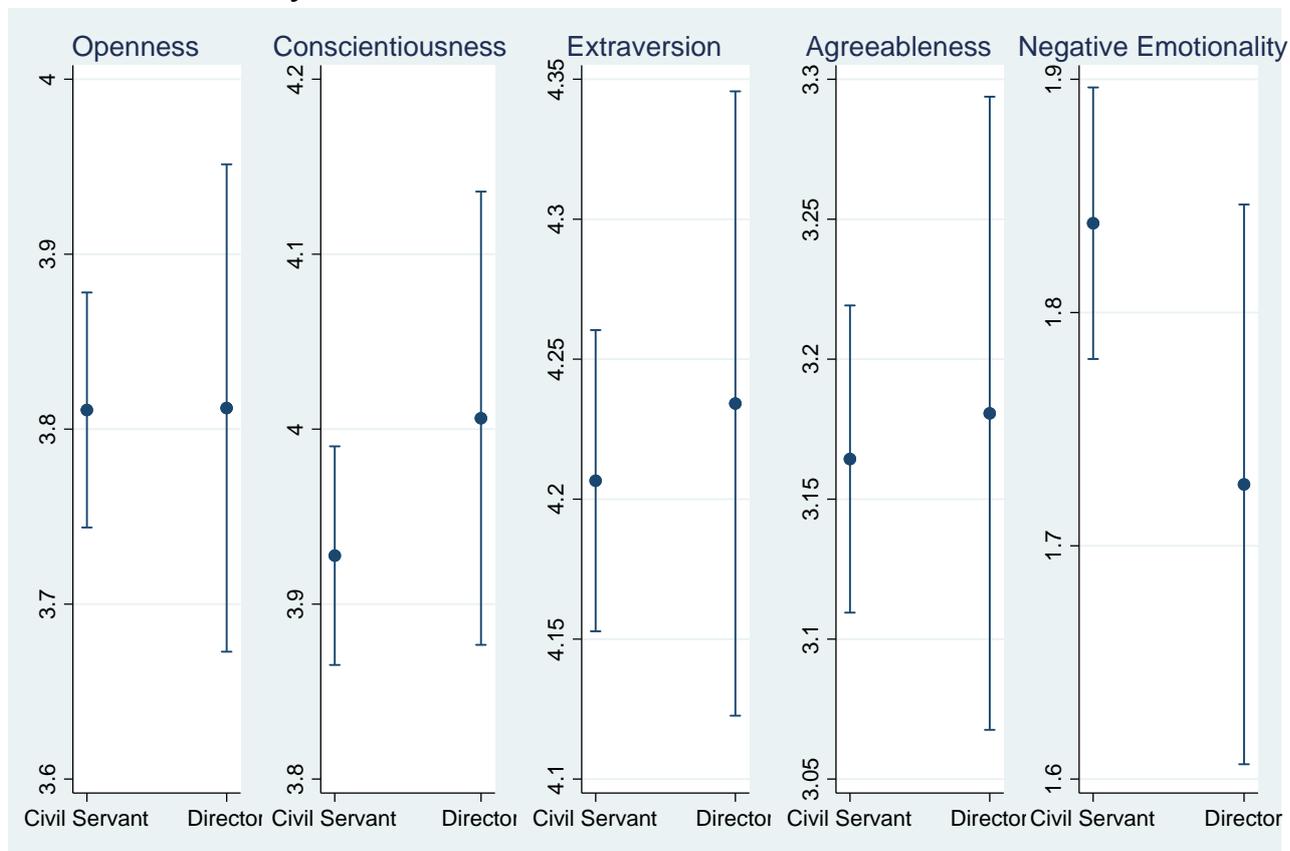


The analysis shows significant differences between the regular politicians and the mayors on trait openness and trait negative emotionality. The regular politicians are more openminded than the mayors, perhaps due to the mayors' roles as executors of policy, thereby putting constraints on how open a thought pattern successful mayors can exhibit. Negative emotionality achieves statistical significance at a p-value of 0.047, leading to the conclusion, that mayors score less on the negative emotionality trait than their regular politician counterparts. This might be due to institutional pressure of having more influence, it requires more emotional stability to cope with higher power positions than relatively lower power positions.

3.3 Director/manager comparison

Graph 3 Average scores on the big five personality traits directors and managers compared

Personality Trait Scores of Civil Servants and Directors



We find no significant differences between directors and third level managers.

Discussion

The preliminary results shown above indicates that there are important differences between elected elites and the administrative elites. These differences might be consequential in the advice that civil servants offer. The differences might also be consequential for level of cooperation and conflict between civil servants and politicians. In the second iteration of the paper we aim at consolidating our sample of top civil servant as well as the sample of politicians. We have send out a third reminder to both groups in the hope that our sample sizes increase. We are mostly concerned about our sample of civil servant which we fear is still unrepresentative.

We also plan to investigate the behavioral consequences of these differences using various behavioral indicators from the registries.

Literature

- Bhatti, Y., Olsen, A. L. and Pedersen, L. H. (2009) 'The effects of administrative professionals on contracting out', *Governance*, 22(1), pp. 121–137. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-0491.2008.01424.x.
- Bozeman, B. and Rainey, H. G. (1998) 'Organizational Rules and the "Bureaucratic Personality"', *American Journal of Political Science*, 42(1), pp. 163–189.
- Bozeman, B. and Su, X. (2015) 'Public Service Motivation Concepts and Theory : A Critique', *Public Administration Review*, 75(5), pp. 700–710. doi: 10.1111/puar.12248.A.
- Christensen, J. G. (2013) 'Det Administrative System', in Christensen, J. G. and Elklit, J. (eds) *Det Demokratiske System*. 3. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag, pp. 130–170.
- Christensen, J. G. and Elklit, J. (2013) *Det Demokratiske System*. 3. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Dinh, J. E. et al. (2014) 'Leadership theory and research in the new millennium: Current theoretical trends and changing perspectives', *Leadership Quarterly*. Elsevier B.V., 25(1), pp. 36–62. doi: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2013.11.005.
- Gallagher, M., Mair, P. and Laver, M. (2011) *Representative Government In Modern Europe*. 5th edn. McGraw-Hill.
- Goldberg, L. R. (1990) 'Personality Processes and individual differences; An alternative "Description of personality": The Big-Five factor structure', *Journal of Personality and Psychology*, 59(6), pp. 1216–1229. doi: doi:10.1037/0022-3514.59.6.1216.
- Greve, C. (2006) 'Public management reform in Denmark', *Public Management Review*, 8(1), pp. 161–169. doi: 10.1080/14719030500518956.
- John, O. P., Naumann, L. P. and Soto, C. J. (2008) *Paradigm shift to the integrative Big Five Trait taxonomy, Handbook of personality: Theory and research*. doi: 10.1016/S0191-8869(97)81000-8.
- Judge, T. A. et al. (2002) 'Personality and leadership: A qualitative and quantitative review', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(4), pp. 765–780. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.87.4.765.
- Kim, S. et al. (2013) 'Investigating the structure and meaning of public service motivation across populations: Developing an international instrument and addressing issues of measurement invariance', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 23(1), pp. 79–102. doi: 10.1093/jopart/mus027.
- Kjær, U. and Madsen, C. L. (2015) *De Sidste Sande Amatører*. 1. Gyldendal.
- McCrae, R. R. and Costa, P. T. (1992) 'Discriminant Validity of NEO-PIR Facet Scales', *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, pp. 229–237. doi: 10.1177/001316449205200128.
- Merton, R. K. (1940) 'Bureaucratic Structure and Personality', *Social Forces*, 18(4), pp. 560–568. Available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2570634.pdf?acceptTC=true>.
- Nørgaard, A. S. and Klemmensen, R. (2018) 'The personalities of Danish MPs: Trait- and aspect-level differences', *Journal of Personality*, (October 2017), pp. 1–9. doi: 10.1111/jopy.12388.
- Olsen, A. L. (2013) 'Absolut flertal og forvaltningens dagsordenssættende indflydelse – er der en kausal sammenhæng?', *Politica*, (2), pp. 139–158.
- Perry, J. L. (1996) 'Measuring Public Service Motivation : An Assessment of Construct Reliability and Validity', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 6(1), pp. 5–22.

Perry, J. L. and Wise, L. R. (1990) 'The Motivational Bases of Public Service', *Public Administration Review*, 50(3), pp. 367–373.

Redlawsk, D. P. and Lau, R. R. (2013) 'Behavioral Decision-Making', in *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sheffer, L. *et al.* (2017) 'Nonrepresentative Representatives: An Experimental Study of the Decision Making of Elected Politicians', *American Political Science Review*, 112(2), pp. 302–321. doi: 10.1017/S0003055417000569.

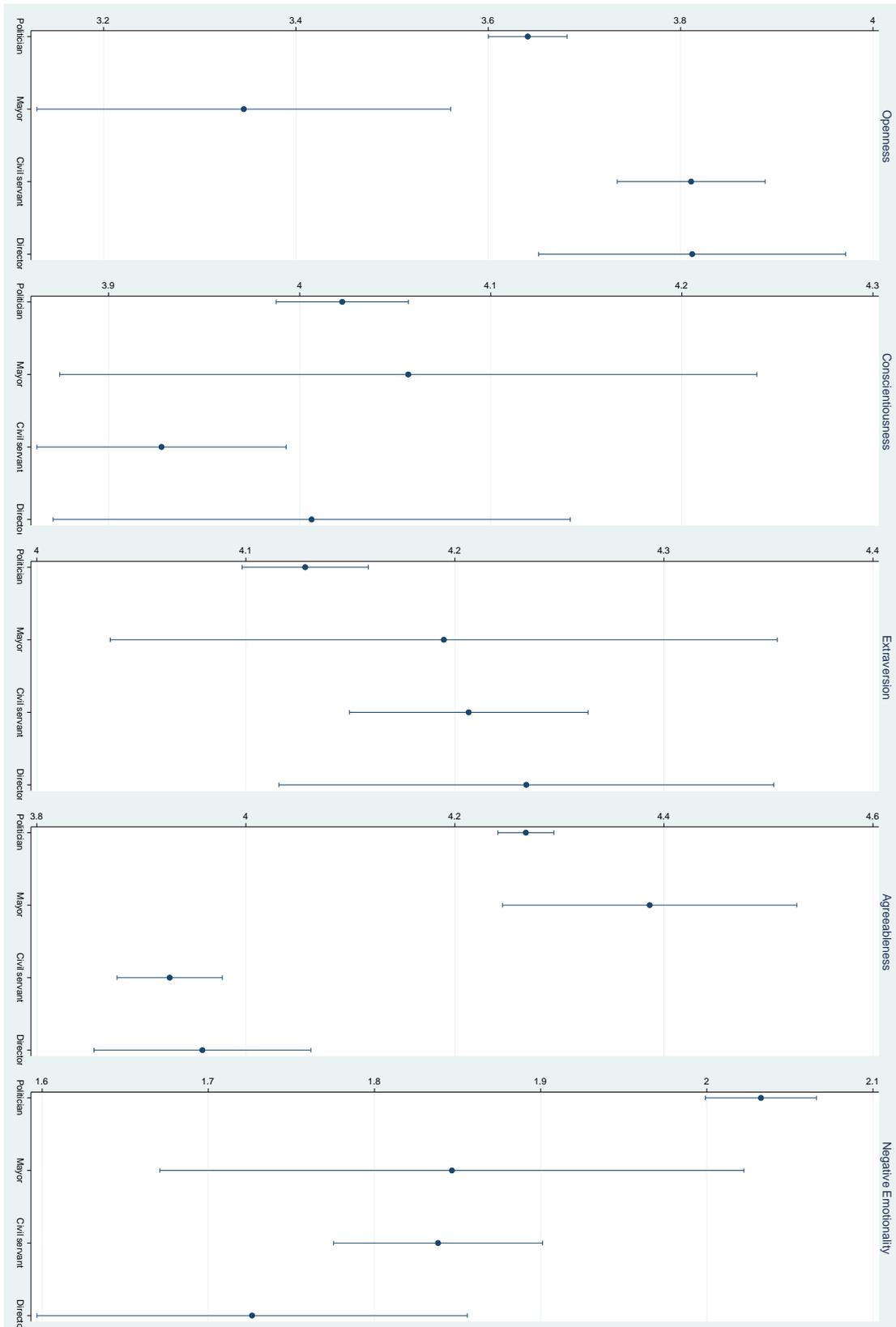
Soto, C. J. and John, O. P. (2016) 'The Next Big Five Inventory (BFI-2): Developing and Assessing a Hierarchical Model With 15 Facets to Enhance Bandwidth, Fidelity, and Predictive Power', *Personality Processes And Individual Differences*, 113(1), pp. 117–143. doi: 10.1037/pspp0000096.

Wellnitz, K. B. *et al.* (no date) 'The Big Five Inventory (BFI)-2 in Denmark and the US: Comparison of Facet-Level Structure, Convergent and Discriminant Validity, and Test-Retest Reliability Across Two Cultures'.

Williams, N. M., Sjoberg, G. and Sjoberg, A. F. (1980) 'The Bureaucratic Personality: An Alternate View', *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 16(3), pp. 389–405.

Winter, D. D. (2013) 'Personality Profiles of Political Elites', in Huddy, L., Sears, D. O., and Levy, J. S. (eds) *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*. 2. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Appendix 1: Trait comparison between all four groups



Personality Trait Scores of Politicians and Civil Servants