Concentration of power in cabinets: Exploring the importance of the political context

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Abstract.
Weakening of the cabinet collective and strengthening of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies have often been explained by the personality of state leaders or long-term changes like increased fragmentation of public sector, internationalisation and mediatisation of politics. This article points to other, more contingent explanations for changes in the executive centre. The argument is that the number of parties in cabinet, the fragility of the coalition, and the cabinet’s parliamentary basis, also affect the need for political coordination and thus the concentration of power in cabinet. The impact of long-term societal changes on the concentration of decision-making power in cabinet thus depends on factors in the domestic political context. The argument is substantiated through a qualitative case study of Norway. Based on semi-structured interviews the study shows that different features of cabinet help explain the concentration of power seen in the last four Norwegian cabinets.

! Note to reader: This is an early draft of the final article in my article-based PhD-thesis. One of the other articles focuses on how presidentialisation tendencies in Norwegian coalitions instead might be described as concentration of power as core ministers, party leaders and parliamentary leaders still are important actors in the decision-making processes in cabinet. In order to avoid overlap, this article has a more explanatory focus. I am therefore particularly interested in and grateful for, feedback on how this present article can be framed to further strengthen the theoretical argument of the importance of short-term explanations and interlinkage with long-term explanations, and perhaps tone down the Norwegian case more.

Introduction
Over the last decades, a wide array of research has shown how western European cabinets have changed. Over the last thirty to forty years, collegial decision-making has been reduced, and instead, several countries have experienced ‘centralisation of authority around the chief executive’ (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000; @ref). This concentration of power is often explained by long-term developments in society. Some have focused on how fragmentation and sectorisation of the public sector has increased the need for political coordination at the centre (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000; @ref). Other contributions have shown how internationalization, such as decision-making in the European Union, has transferred authority and resources to chief executives (Johansson and Tallberg 2010). Some scholars also highlight how developments in the media have concentrated public attention on state leaders and led to a personalisation of politics (McAllister 2007; Karvonen 2010).

The concentration of power seems to assume different forms in Western European democracies due to different contextual relations. The literature on presidentialisation and personalisation of politics, mentions the personality of state leaders as one factor constraining and shaping executive leadership (Webb and Poguntke 2005: 337). This literature also emphasizes the political context, such as the size and cohesion of the cabinet’s parliamentary support, as another short-term contingent factor (Van Biezen and Hopkin 2005). Few contributions, however, offer a systematic insight into what the political context consist of, and how the different elements actually might affect
the concentration of power in cabinets. A different strain of research might nevertheless contribute. The literature on coalition cabinets has traditionally focused on formation and termination of coalitions (ref). In recent decades, however, this literature has focused more on the actual performance of cabinets. Based on the coalition governance literature, features like the number of parties in cabinet, the fragility of the coalition and the parliamentary basis of the cabinet, can be said to be important parts of the domestic political context. The central argument in this article is that these features of the political context will affect the increased need for political coordination created by long-term societal changes, and thereby the concentration of power in cabinets. The article thus tries to combine elements from two strains of research, the coalition governance literature, and the literature on presidentialisation. Although changes in the political context might be short-term and happen from one election to another, they will nevertheless affect the same indicators often associated with prime minister empowerment and presidentialisation. Thus, it seem fruitful include the domestic political context when analysing such changes. How the different elements of the political context might affect the need for political coordination and thereby the concentration of power in cabinet, is illustrated through a case study of Norwegian cabinets. Like the Scandinavian neighbours, Norwegian cabinets have traditionally had strong collegial features, favouring consensus in the decision-making process (Christensen 2003). In recent years, however, the number of cabinet meetings has been reduced and inner circles have gained an increasingly important role in cabinet decision-making (ref). The article explores how the features of the political context might have contributed to this concentration of power in cabinet. The article covers developments in the last four cabinets, Kjell Magne Bondevik I (1997–2000), Jens Stoltenberg I (2000–2001), Kjell Magne Bondevik II (2001–2005), and Jens Stoltenberg II (2005–2009). Studying these cabinets provides a good opportunity to explore how different political features have influenced the concentration of power, since they have varied concerning the number of parties in cabinet, the ideological distance between coalition partners, and the cabinet’s parliamentary basis. Another advantage of studying Norwegian cabinets is the availability of decision-makers in Norway. Hence, this article draws mainly on semi-structured interviews with 19 ministers from the Norwegian cabinets and six secretary-generals, all with experience from the years under study.

The article is organized as follows. In the theoretical section, the term concentration of power is first assessed, before relevant parts of the cabinet’s political context are elaborated, providing a framework for further analysis. After some methodological considerations, the article then examines how these different features have contributed to the concentration of power in Norwegian cabinets, leading to a discussion on developments in Scandinavia and more general on different explanations of change in cabinet decision-making.

Describing and explaining concentration of power in cabinets
Scholars have used different labels on changes in cabinet, for instance presidentialisation (Foley 1993; Poguntke and Webb 2005), prime ministerial predominance (Heffernan 2003), or chief executive empowerment (Johansson and Tallberg 2010). Common for these approaches is the description of how prime ministers with increased resources decides more in cabinet, often at the expense of the cabinet collective. The different types of changes in cabinet, might with a general
term be called concentration of power (Savoie 1999); changes where the power to
decide cabinet issues is assembled on fewer hands, typically implying a weakening of
the full cabinet, and strengthening of the prime minister. However, concentration of
power in cabinet is seldom a question of moving from cabinet to prime ministerial
government. As Andeweg (1993; 1997) has underlined, the degree of collegiality in
cabinet decision-making should be seen as a continuum. In between cabinet and
prime ministerial government, are examples where a small group of ministers
dominate the decision-making process. The indicator for such an oligarchic system is
an inner cabinet, formal or informal (Andeweg 1993: 28). As Larsson has pointed out
on a general note, no other minister is involved in all the aspects of cabinet life like
the finance minister (1993). In several parliamentary democracies, concentration of
power has thus happened around the prime minister, finance minister and other core

In multi-party cabinets, the functional equivalent of the powerful prime minister is
a strong collective coalition leadership (Andeweg 2000: 383–384). Inner cabinets of
prime ministers and party leaders have been common in coalition cabinets in Western
Europe. Although the empowerment of such inner circles seems less documented than
prime ministerial empowerment, some scholars have described their increased
importance. In Belgium for instance, the ‘kern cabinet’ consisting of prime minister
and vice premiers of all coalition parties, has been increasingly used since the mid-
1970s, and has developed into a forum for both conflict prevention and conflict
resolution (Fiers and Krouwel 2005: 134; Frognier 1997). Based on the above,
concentration of power should not only imply weakening of the cabinet and the
empowerment of prime ministers, but also strengthening of smaller groups of
ministers. Having elaborated the meaning of the term ‘concentration of power’, the
article now looks closer at different explanations for such changes.

Explanations for concentration of power
Changes inside cabinets are often explained by long-term developments in society.
According to some scholars, enhanced complexity due to increased fragmentation and
differentiation in the public sector, has led to coordination challenges at cabinet level. As
a reaction, prime ministers have gained economic and personnel resources so the
political core is better equipped to steer the fragmented institutional structures (Peters
et al. 2000: 8). Others have focused on how internationalization has transferred
several decisions to the international arena where national policies are coordinated, leaving state leaders with important decisions at the expense of other ministers
(Poguntke and Webb 2005: 13–14). Contributions favouring such explanations have
for instance shown how decision-making in the European Union has transferred
authority and resources to chief executives (Damgaard 2000; Johansson and Tallberg
2010). Changes in cabinet might also have been affected by the changing structure of
mass communication. The mediatisation of politics implies a stronger focus on
personality instead of issues and programs (@ref), and popular state leaders might
bypass other cabinet actors in setting the political agenda (Poguntke and Webb 2005:
15).

Together with these long-term changes in society, short-term changes might also
affect the concentration of power in cabinet. According to Webb and Poguntke,
Several country experts (Spain, Sweden, and UK) stress that presidential-style domination of political leaders often is explained by short-term contingent factors, such as the size and cohesion of the parliamentary support on which they can draw, their current standing with the electorate, their personalities, and (...) events. [Such] contingent factors constrain and shape executive leadership in all types of democratic regime (2005: 337).

Personality is often a topic in the media, and prime ministers like Gerhard Schröder, Tony Blair, Göran Persson, and Anders Fogh Rasmussen amongst others, were frequently described as ‘presidential’ in their leadership style (Helms 2005; Mylenberg and Steensbeck 2009; Sundström 2009). This manifested itself in the work of cabinet. Blair and Persson, for instance, took over responsibility from other line ministers and were said to prefer smaller meetings, undermining the cabinet meeting as a decision-making arena (Helms 2005; Sundström 2009). In Spain, electoral strength, and inter-party dynamics, have been important factors in explaining tendencies of presidentialisation (Van Biezen and Hopkin 2005). However, few contributions discuss what the political context consists of, and shows how the relevant elements might affect the concentration of power in cabinets. Drawing on the coalition governance literature, the next section elaborates relevant parts of the political context and assesses how they might affect the concentration of power in cabinets.

Elaborating elements in the political context
All political systems have country specific, historical conditions, affecting decision-making processes in cabinet. That might be the role of bureaucracy (@ref), the election system, number of parties (@ref), and administrative characteristics of institutions like the Prime Minister’s Office (Müller-Rommel 1993). Focusing on different features of cabinet, the following relevant parts of the political context can be outlined from the coalition governance literature: the number of parties, the fragility of the coalition, and the parliamentary basis of cabinet.

The perhaps most important feature is the number of parties in cabinet. This affects both the degree and form of concentration of power. In single-party cabinets, department lines functions as centrifugal forces, creating conflict in cabinets. In coalitions, party lines are additional centrifugal forces (Andeweg 1988). Rivalry between coalition parties is a constant source of conflict and policymaking is thus more conflictual in coalitions than in single-party cabinets (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008: 269; Frognier 1993). Often, conflicts in coalitions are also graver, since conflicts along party lines are more serious than disagreements along department lines (Andeweg 1997: 65). The need for concentrating decision-making power on fewer hands thus seems to be greater in coalitions compared with single-party cabinets. The number of parties in cabinet also seems to affect who is empowered. To constrain departmental heterogeneity cabinets usually have different mechanisms as a strong prime minister, special powers to the finance minister, an inner cabinet of overlords, or special cabinet committees (Andeweg 1988: 129). To limit the political heterogeneity coalition cabinets often have inner cabinets composed of leading ministers from all factions or parties, or a coalition committee with actors internal and external to the cabinet (Andeweg 1997; Andeweg and Timmermans 2008). Developments in society, like for instance fragmentation and differentiation in
the public sector, might have led to coordination challenges at cabinet level, and an increased need for a strong prime minister. In coalitions, however, the presence of coalition partners might curb prime minister empowerment. Instead, one could expect the increased political heterogeneity and additional party conflicts to reinforce the underlying need for coordination, leading to a concentration of power also around inner cabinets consisting of leading coalition partners.

In coalitions, the concentration of power might also vary because of the fragility of the cabinet. The fragility depends both on the political differences between the participating parties, and the political preparations like the extent of the negotiated coalition agreement and the allocation of portfolios (@ref). Former studies have shown that the ideological range in coalitions affect the longevity of coalitions (Warwick 1992). It seems plausible that the fragility of coalitions also affect the concentration of power in cabinet. In robust coalitions, individual ministers might to a greater extend decide issues within their departmental responsibility. In fragile coalitions, however, more issues are potentially destroying for the coalition making it more important to ‘keeping tabs’ on the coalition partners (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008: 277; Martin and Vanberg 2004; Thies 2001). According to Strom et al., the ‘more fragile the coalition, the greater the need for coalition partners to monitor and control each other’s behaviour’ (2010: 521). Inner cabinets are decisive monitoring devices in these situations, and might play a more important role to solve the most difficult cases in order to make the coalition survive.2

Closely related to the cabinet’s fragility, is the internal distribution of power in coalitions. Whether the prime minister’s party is much bigger than other coalition partners, or the coalition consist of parties of similar size. Here, however, the relation to concentration of power is less obvious. According to Webb and Poguntke, large parties in countries with fragmented party systems, will experience stronger presidentialization tendencies than small parties (2005: 344). On the other side, prime ministers in coalitions with small coalition partners cannot decide too unilaterally without risking the coalition’s existence.

Looking at the cabinets’ parliamentary basis, prime ministers leading majority cabinets often have powerful positions, and majority cabinets are thus more likely to dominate domestic politics than minority cabinets (Johansen and Tallberg 2010: 211;). Minority cabinets, which have been common in the Scandinavian countries, have to seek support from other parties for their proposals. Indeed, majority cabinets might lose parliamentary votes if party discipline breaks down, and the executive and legislative elements of the parties have different preferences (Laver 1999: 7). However, political differences are presumably smaller inside parties than between parties, making it easier for majority cabinets to get their proposals through parliament. This has not only bearing for the ability to dominate domestic politics, but also on the decision-making processes inside cabinet. Decisions taken in majority cabinet are more definite, making the decision-making process inside cabinet more important and potentially conflictual. When the most important decisions are taken inside cabinet, there might be a greater need for mitigating mechanisms such as a strong prime minister, or in coalitions inner cabinets or coalition committees.

To sum up, there are various features of cabinet that might affect the concentration of power in cabinet. Based on the elaborations above, it seem plausible that the number of parties in cabinet, the fragility of cabinet, and the cabinet’s parliamentary basis, might modify the impact of long-term changes in society. These features of
cabinet are important parts of the domestic political context, and might be viewed as intermediate variables. Including such short-term changes opens up for studies with a shorter time span, and for explaining why concentration of power seems to appear differently in cabinets exposed for the same underlying societal changes.

**Methodological considerations**

This article explores how changes in the political context might contribute to concentration of power in decision-making in the last four Norwegian cabinets.

*Table 1: Norwegian Cabinets 1997-2009.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cabinet</th>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>Parliamentary support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1997-2000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoltenberg I</td>
<td>Labour Party</td>
<td>39,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2000-2001)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bondevik II</td>
<td>Christian Democratic Party, Conservative party, Liberal Party</td>
<td>37,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2001-2005)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoltenberg II</td>
<td>Centre Party, Labour Party, Socialist Left Party</td>
<td>51,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2005-2009)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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1 share of seats in parliament,

Traditionally, Norwegian cabinets have had strong collegial features, favouring consensus in cabinet decision-making (Christensen 2003). The cabinet have met often, and the cabinet meetings have been called the pillars of the cabinet’s collegial working form (Skjeie 2001: 182). The prime minister’s position has comparatively been weak (King 1994; O’Malley 2007). Ministers have been central in cabinet decision-making, thanks to the principle of ministerial responsibility, where ministers are constitutionally responsible to parliament for all activities in their subordinate bodies (Nordby 2000). Internal cabinet committees have played a limited role, and the full cabinet has thus been labelled the most important ‘committee’ (Rommetvedt 1994). Given this dual character, the working form of Norwegian cabinets in the 1960s, 70s and 80s has been called a hybrid, with the full cabinet and the single ministers being the most important actors (Eriksen 2003: 84).

As table 1 shows, there are three coalitions and one single-party cabinet in the study. The three coalitions vary in ideological distance between parties and cabinet fragility. Kjell Magne Bondevik’s first cabinet consisted of three centrist parties, while the political differences were larger in Bondevik II cabinet with the conservative party participating.³ Consisting of the Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the Socialist Left Party, Jens Stoltenberg’s second cabinet also had clear political differences, and the survival of the fragile coalition was often discussed in the media (@ref). Three out of the four cabinets have been minority cabinets, which also have been most common in Norway in the post-war period (Rasch 2011). The Stoltenberg II cabinet held 51,5 per cent of the seats in Parliament, making it the first majority government in Norway since the mid-1980s.

Former studies suggest that the long-term development in Norwegian ministries has increased complexity and pushed horizontal coordination up to cabinet level (@ref) The strengthening of the Prime Minister’s Office has been seen as a response to enhance coordination in cabinet (Christensen and Lægreid 2002). Few contributions have investigated changes in the decision-making processes in recent Norwegian cabinets. Based on the theoretical discussion we can expect varying
concentration of power in these cabinets since they vary with regards to the number of parties, the ideological distance, and parliamentary basis. The Norwegian cabinets thus provide a good opportunity to examine how different political features have influenced the concentration of power. Ideally, the study could have contained more cabinets giving more variation on the different variables, for instance former Labour party cabinets, Willoch’s single-party minority cabinet (1981–1983), or Willoch’s majority coalition (1983–1986). Relying on interviews, however, it has been necessary to limit the scope of investigation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 ministers and 6 secretary-generals. To explore changes in the concentration of power, the interviewees were asked about how issues were decided in cabinet, and about the role of cabinet collective and inner circles in cabinet decision-making. While the interviewed minister’s can provide first-hand knowledge about cabinet decision-making, the interviewed secretary-generals have served several cabinets and thereby have better opportunity to compare cabinets and evaluate developments over time. The different type of informants thus supplements each other.

Concentration of power in Norwegian cabinets 1997–2009
The next sections analyses developments in the last four Norwegian cabinets with a special emphasis on how the different features of cabinet have contributed to concentration of power in cabinet decision-making.

Number of parties in cabinet
In the Norwegian case, the number of parties in cabinet seems to have affected the balance between cabinet collective and single ministers, and the use of inner circles in cabinet decision-making. In Stoltenberg’s single party cabinet (2000–2001), as in former Norwegian cabinets, the full cabinet and the single ministers were the most important actors in cabinet decision-making. The cabinet meeting was the primary decision-making arena, although smaller groups of ministers sometimes had to ‘cut through’ to solve conflicts that the full cabinet could not agree upon. This group often consisted of prime minister, finance minister, and the relevant line ministers. As in former Labour cabinets, extensive issues like the state budget were discussed also involving parliamentary and party actors.

According to interviewed ministers, in the coalitions more cases had to be presented at the cabinet meetings. In the single-party cabinet it was enough for a minister to ‘read the party program to know the room for manoeuvre’, as one minister puts it. While disagreements in Stoltenberg I often was related to the allocation of money, the number of potential conflicts was larger in the coalitions. According to a minister in Stoltenberg II,

In pure Labour Party cabinets, conflicts were to a great degree related to funding issues. The main dimension was how to allocate money between the different sectors. Now there are other conflict dimensions, party dimensions in addition. […] In multiparty cabinets, the different parties might have different views, and the prime minister has […] to find solutions everybody can support.

In the studied coalition cabinets, the prime ministers have found these solutions together with the other party leaders in the so-called cabinet subcommittee. This informal inner cabinet, consisting of prime minister, the two other party leaders, and
the finance minister, was first established to discuss difficult issues when the Willoch Cabinet went from being a one party cabinet to a three party coalition in 1983 (Rommetvedt 1994: 251). In the studied coalitions, the subcommittee has grown in importance at the expense of the cabinet collective; to solve issues the full cabinet fails to agree upon. The use of the subcommittee in Bondevik I (1997–2000) has been characterised as a deviation from the Norwegian tradition to have important political discussions in the full cabinet collective (Christensen and Lægred 2002: 74). This deviation became even clearer in Bondevik II and Stoltenberg II where the importance of the subcommittee as a decision-making organ grew even further.

In the Norwegian case, the number of parties might explain why more cases must be discussed at cabinet meetings, and why inner circles become more important in cabinet decision-making. However, the number of parties cannot explain the different importance of the cabinet subcommittee in the studied coalitions.

**Ideological distances and the fragility of cabinet**

In Bondevik II (2001–2005), the subcommittee played a more important role in cabinet decision-making compared to Bondevik I; they met more regularly and decided more issues that were controversial. This development can partly be explained by the political preparations. According to a minister,

> In Bondevik II, we had a written political foundation, which we detailed in the government negotiations after elections. In Bondevik II, there was no common platform. The political centre was the government alternative, but we were too weak and centre-right won instead. We did make a political platform in the government negotiations, but it was not as thorough and solid as in Bondevik I. Therefore, there was a greater need to use the subcommittee in Bondevik II.

In Bondevik II opinions were more divided in the Bondevik II cabinet since the Conservative party participated instead of the Centre party. Especially disagreements over economic policy, tax cuts, and the economy of local government made the Bondevik II cabinet more conflicted, increasing the need for the subcommittee.

The Stoltenberg II cabinet (2005–2009) also consisted of parties with clear political differences. Although the detailed coalition agreement entailed compromises between the parties (Allern 2011), the agreement was not prioritized enough, according to interviewed ministers, and several fundamental disagreements remained. Especially the environmental conflict dimension was prominent in the Stoltenberg II cabinet, and the political differences between the parties were underlined with the allocation of portfolios. In Norway, there has traditionally been a strong association between parties’ core policy concern and the distribution of ministries (Narud and Strøm 2000: 181–182), and it might heighten tension in cabinet when parties control ministries within areas where they have their most intense preferences. This was the case in Stoltenberg II, increasing the need for the subcommittee as an arena to carve out compromises. According to a minister,

> In this cabinet, parties have the minister in areas where they have strong engagement, for instance the Minister of Environment from the Socialist Left Party, the Minister of Transport from the Centre party. They then pull in each direction both on the basis of ministers and parties. That can give the subcommittee even more weight.
In Stoltenberg II, the cabinet subcommittee quickly became an organ where all sensitive cases and problematic issues had to be solved. The extensive use of the subcommittee made the decision-making process in cabinet time very consuming, and the system nearly broke down. The appointment of the experienced Karl Erik Schjøtt-Pedersen as a new chief of staff at the Prime Minister’s office in 2006, helped ease the workload of the subcommittee. Schjøtt-Pedersen was referred to as a ‘cleaning boy’ in the media (Karlsen and Hegvik 2006). Smaller disagreements could then be solved bilaterally, outside the subcommittee, with the Prime Minister’s office and the new chief of staff as an important broker, while the most difficult issues were left for the subcommittee. Although Prime Minister Stoltenberg was central in these negotiations, the use of the subcommittee could in fact benefit the small parties in the coalition, since Stoltenberg and the two party leaders were on more equal footing in the subcommittee than in the full cabinet. In Stoltenberg II, the subcommittee eventually became an integrated part of the cabinet decision-making process with own meeting papers and documents like cabinet minutes.

The parliamentary basis of cabinet
The increased importance of the cabinet subcommittee in Stoltenberg II might also stem from the cabinets parliamentary basis. Stoltenberg I and the two Bondevik cabinets were minority cabinets, and had to get support from other parties in parliament in order to get their policies through. Parliamentarians from the governing parties would negotiate the cabinet proposals with opposition parties in order to find majority. The change from minority to majority cabinet in Stoltenberg II, resulted in a distinct displacement of power from parliament to government. According to a minister,

The change was very marked. It moved more power inside cabinet, making it more unforgiving and brutal in cabinet, because battles were lost and won there.

According to interviewed ministers, this might have contributed to an increased need for an institutionalised inner cabinet. Several ministers saw the subcommittee as the most important arena, and therefore wanted to present their cases there, before handling in the cabinet meetings, overburdening the subcommittee. With majority in parliament, the cabinet proposals became official policy, without the involvement of opposition parties. Since decisions in cabinet presumably were final, the decision-making process in the Stoltenberg II cabinet became tenser, and there was an increased need of the subcommittee to reach agreements. The majority situation in fact ‘reversed’ much of the decision-making process. In Stoltenberg II, consultations and discussions with their parliamentary party groups were held before decision-making in cabinet started. These executive-legislative relations were even institutionalised with own notes presenting the cases and reflecting the views of the party fractions.

Supplementary explanations to the Norwegian case
The personality of state leaders is another short-term explanation for prime minister empowerment and changes in cabinet decision-making. Two different prime ministers have led the four studied Norwegian cabinets, hence important differences between the cabinets might stem from different personality. However, neither of the two prime
According to interviewed ministers, both Kjell Magne Bondevik and Jens Stoltenberg tried to use the cabinet meetings to make decisions and solve conflicts, although it proved difficult in both cabinets and the subcommittee was thus increasingly used. There seems to be some differences in leadership style. Bondevik, which later has made a point of his vision for ‘including leadership’, even conducted employee conversations with his ministers (Bondevik 2006). Jens Stoltenberg on the other hand, has been accused by former colleagues of being conflict averse (Bekkemellem 2009; Valla 2007). However, interviews do not support the impression of a dominant prime minister. Overall, personality does not seem to explain the changes in Norway. Although, there might be differences between the two prime minister, there is little to suggest a marked shift towards a more dominant leadership style, as was seen for instance in Sweden under Göran Persson (Sundström 2009: 165), or in Denmark under Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Mylenberg and Steensbeck 2009).

Changes in cabinet and the importance of the political context
The different features of cabinet seem to have some explanatory strength when analysing developments in the last four Norwegian cabinets. In the single party cabinet of Stoltenberg I, the cabinet collective played an important role. In the studied coalitions, the cabinet collective have been weaker, and inner circles institutionalised through the subcommittees have been central in solving conflicting issues. Looking closer at the three coalitions, the study suggest that this informal inner cabinet has been most used in the fragile coalitions. Bondevik I both had smaller political differences and a more thorough coalition agreement, than Bondevik II. Despite its detailed coalition agreement, considerable disagreements remained in the Stoltenberg II cabinet, making the subcommittee as a decisive arena to solve conflicts. In Stoltenberg’s second cabinet, the majority situation increased expectations both in the ministries and at parliamentary level, creating a pressure inside cabinet. The development resembles what was seen in Denmark in 1993–1994, when the Social Democratic-led four party coalition had a fragile one-vote majority in parliament, leading to a ‘strong external pressure to perform with its majority and strong internal pressure from individual members of the coalition, who used the power of their decisive vote to attract public attention’ (Wolf 1996: 158). In Stoltenberg II, this pressure enhanced the need for mechanisms like the subcommittee to ensure the political coordination in cabinet. However, as this study is designed, it is difficult to distinguish the impact of cabinet fragility and the majority situation. Another weakness might be that minority and majority cabinets might be to broad and imprecise categories. It is possible that minority cabinets with permanent supporting parties in parliament, as seen in both Sweden and Denmark (@ref), will experience stronger pressure in the decision-making process, compared to minority cabinets getting support from different parties in parliament from case to case.

Overall, the Norwegian case seems to support the notion that features of cabinet affect concentration of power in cabinet. The study thus underlines that decision-making processes vary between cabinets. As emphasised by Eriksen, the hybrid character of the Norwegian system with cabinet and single ministers being the most important actors, are thought to give room for flexibility compared to more rigid systems, and the working form might more easily be adjusted to the leader style of different prime ministers and changes in the domestic political context (2003: 84).
On a comparative note, developments in Norway resemble what has been seen in the other Scandinavian countries. Although the Swedish and Danish Prime Minister’s have been somewhat more than a primus inter pares (Damgaard 2004; Larsson 1994), the cabinets in all the Scandinavian countries have traditionally had a high degree of collegiality (@ref). However, this collegiality seems to have been challenged in recent decades. In Denmark, the coordination committee has occasionally functioned as an inner cabinet with coalition party leaders and high-ranking members of cabinet (Knudsen 2000). The committee has been more formalised since the mid-1990s, and been an important instrument for the prime minister to ‘exert leadership and cohesiveness among coalition partners’ and rank-and file cabinet minister (Wolf 1998: 37). While the Committee for Economic Affairs chaired by the finance minister, was the central coordination arena in the 1990s, from 2001 there was a displacement of power to the Coordination Committee chaired by the Prime Minister and consisting of party leaders in cabinet and core ministers (Jensen 2003: 200; Jensen 2008). The prominent role of this inner cabinet in the decision-making process was partly due to the fact that Anders Fogh Rasmussen’s first cabinet had a stable majority through their permanent agreement with the Danish people's party (Jensen 2008; Fuglsang and Jensen 2010). In Sweden, the chief executive has also increased his influence at the expense of other cabinet members over the last decades (Bäck et al 2007: 95). Inner cabinets have not been common in Sweden (Larsson 1994), although informal ad hoc groups were organized in Göran Persson cabinet to prepare discussions in cabinet (Persson 2003). In Persson’s cabinet, fewer issues were settled collectively and at government meetings, prime minister and finance minister more often than before only informed other ministers of the overall priorities the government should pursue (Sundström 2009). While there still are collegial elements in cabinet decision-making, these trends point to a weakening of the traditional collegial nature of Scandinavian cabinets. As Persson and Wiberg have underlined, the Scandinavian countries might be at a crossroads, perhaps heading away from the traditional consensual culture (2011).

Based on this article, two points can be made, one methodological concerning the intertwinedness of different explanatory factors, and one more substantial concerning the impact of the political context. The first point to be made is that the impact from long-term and short-term explanations for changes in cabinet might to be difficult to separate. In the literature on prime minister empowerment and presidentialisation, focus has often been on long-term changes in society (@ref). However, it seems difficult to distinguish these from the short-term factors as they both affect the same indicators usually used to measure presidentialisation. As Poguntke and Webb writes, they have been interested in the “long term developments, which enhance the potential of the chief executive office for strong leadership“ (2005: 340). However, not only long-term changes affect the background ministers, the degree of collective decision-making in cabinet etc. These indicators of what Poguntke and Webb call structural presidentialisation are also affected by contingent changes. The number of ministers with parliamentary background, for instance, might be explained by the cabinet’s parliamentary basis (Kolltveit 2012a). As this article has pointed out, the decision-making in cabinet also depends on the features of cabinet. When affecting the same indicators as the structural presidentialisation, such contingent features should also be taken into account.
The second point is that the features of cabinet might enhance the concentration of power. According to Poguntke and Webb, contingent influences might hinder a prime minister to fully realize the potential for strong leadership (2005: 340). Looking more broadly on concentration of power however, contingent influences like the parliamentary basis or number of parties might in fact also enhance developments. While a weak parliamentary basis might hinder a strong prime minister vis-à-vis parliament, having a majority might increase the need for inner cabinets and the concentration of power. Short-term changes might thus enhance the underlying long-term changes.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a cabinet’s political context affects decision-making processes inside cabinets. Drawing on the coalition governance literature, this article has tried to shed light over what this political context might consist of, and how it affects changes in cabinet decision-making. The article has shown how the cabinet collective in Norway has been weakened, and a concentration of power has happened around the so-called subcommittee consisting of the prime minister, party leaders, and finance minister. This development has varied due to different features of the cabinets. First, the number of parties seems to affect the use of the cabinet collective and the institutionalisation of inner circles. Second, the concentration of decision-making power in the cabinet subcommittee is dependent on the level of conflict between the coalition parties. Third, the cabinet’s parliamentary basis might enhanced political differences and increased the need for arenas smaller than the cabinet collective to decide cabinet policy.

The empowerment of state leaders and weakening of collegial elements in cabinet, have been explained in several countries by long-term changes in society and the personality of leaders (Poguntke and Webb 2005; @ref). This article underlines that cabinet decision-making is flexible and might vary according to features of cabinet, implying that long-term and short-term changes at different levels of society play together. This concrete interplay, however, should be subject to further research.

Notes
1 There is an important analytical difference between collegiality and collectivity, as Andeweg points out (1993, 1997). Collectivity concerns who are responsible for decisions, and is often embodied in the constitution. Collegiality concerns which actors are central in the decision-making process, and thus vary between cabinets.
2 Junior ministers or state secretaries might be other important monitoring mechanisms (Strøm et al. (2010: 521).
3 This is underlined by the fact that parliamentarians from the Christian Democratic Party rate the Centre party to be closer in overall policy than the Conservative Party in (Narud and Rasch 2007).
4 The minister interviews were conducted in the spring/summer 2010. Eight follow-up interviews were conducted autumn 2011. The Secretary Generals were interviewed spring/summer 2012.
5 The Secretary Generals was chosen mainly based on seniority. They also cover important policy areas like finance, justice, health, education, and transportation.
6 This is in accordance with Kolltveit (2012b), which find that coalitions have presented more cases to cabinet than single party cabinets over the last 30 years in Norway. Unfortunately, there are no comparable numbers including all of the last four cabinets.
Karl Erik Schjøtt-Pedersen was former Minister of Finance and leader of the Finance Committee in parliament. As a formalisation of the new role, Schjøtt-Pedersen was named minister without portfolio in 2009.

In the first years of the Stoltenberg II cabinet, there were some high-profile instances where parliamentarians from the governing parties opposed the cabinet’s proposals. This prompted a better organisation of the executive-legislative relations.

Editor of the Norwegian newspaper Nordlys, Hans Kristian Amundsen, called Jens Stoltenberg the only one being ‘president-like’ after a questioning of the Prime Minister candidates in the election campaign in 2009. However, these labels have almost never been used either by media or other politicians.

REFERENCES


