

Uncovering the links between top leadership characteristics and subordinate public employees' work motivation in high merit-bureaucracies

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Abstract:

The recruitment of top leaders are essential decisions in public organizations. Hiring decisions represent an important tool of organizational design, capable of shaping the way bureaucracies operate. Leveraging recruitment can be strategically exploited, for instance to initiate wide-ranging changes, or rather to safeguard governance stability and continuity. The goal of this paper is to gauge how characteristics of incoming administrative leaders affect subordinate employees' motivation. We develop a theoretical argument that incoming leaders' personal characteristics matter for the motivation of employees, and therefore also for organizational performance. Administrative leaders come to the top with or without personal or political connections, and with varying degrees of relevant expertise or aspirations, which are all important signals considered by employees. We argue that employees in public organizations pay attention to changes in organizational leadership, and that for them, the idea of working under some top officials can either act as a motivator or a demotivator, depending on leadership profiles. We explore this question in a meritocratic context, Norway, and hypothesize that top officials' insidership into the organization or into the wider public sector, domain-specific expertise and absence of political connections and conflict of interest, should drive subordinate public employees work motivation upwards. To that end, we rely on a conjoint experiment administered to 2,206 employees in Norwegian ministries and agencies through the Norwegian Panel of Public Administrators in 2023. The article contributes to increase knowledge on the potentially adverse or favorable consequences that recruitment decisions can have inside bureaucracies. We argue that studying the motivational effects of personnel decisions in a highly meritocratic context provides important insights into the mechanisms of sustaining merit bureaucracies which are considered as important safeguards against patronage politics and other forms of undue political interference in public organizations.

Introduction

Recruitment decisions to fill top leadership positions are essential in organizational life in the public sector. The practice of hiring key officials has served as an instrument of organizational design (Egeberg and Trondal, 2018), capable of introducing transformative changes or safeguarding governance stability and continuity. Given the weight and consequences of such decisions, appointments have often been seen by political officials as one of the most important means of control and steering of the bureaucracy (Wood and Waterman, 1991). Far from only being a tool in the quest for control, politicians also use appointments as a way to reward loyal supporters (Kopecky et al. 2016).

Scholarship has focused quite a lot on political principals, to better explain and predict their willingness to use appointments as a means for control. That said, reversing the perspective to take into account viewpoints of bureaucratic actors potentially subjected to control (Furlong, 1998), be they top civil servants or not, is also crucial to gauge what effects political control and interference can have on them. In other words, it seems paramount to understand the effects that hiring decisions can produce, particularly as to public employee work attitudes and motivation. In addition, research about the relationships between public leaders and subordinates, despite being prolific about the effects of leadership styles and traits on public service motivation or work motivation (e.g., Andersen et al., 2018; Nielsen et al., 2019), has had only limited focus on how public leaders' career backgrounds and profiles are perceived by subordinate employees, and how this might affect work attitudes amongst them. This is not to say that leadership styles and how leaders actually perform is irrelevant; we rather intend to isolate the effects of leadership backgrounds on employee motivation. With such a focus on the consequences of selecting leaders with specific career attributes, we contribute to the growing literature interested in the effects of politicization of the bureaucracy, patronage, and meritocratic principles (Suzuki & Hur, 2024; Dahlström & Lapuente, 2022; Bach, 2020). We also intend make a methodological contribution to field, by conducting a conjoint experiment specially designed uncover subordinates work attitudes depending on characteristics of their leaders, which is not a very commonly adopted conjoint experiment design.

We theorize that the career profiles of prospective administrative leaders contain cues and signals decoded and interpreted by subordinate employees. Given what these leadership profiles announce or reveal, employees' motivation at the workplace can be driven up or down. In short, employees project themselves working under this or that administrative leader, and

what they contemplate might alternatively be motivating or discouraging. Indirectly, our research also says something about how political principals, or more broadly those taking hiring decisions, can increase (or decrease) the motivation of employees. This study and its research design take as vantage point a common situation in any organization – employees learning about a prospective leader before that person official starts working. This study therefore asks how information about the background of a prospective leader does affect employees' motivation.

Our study situates itself within the meritocratic context of Norway. We hypothesize that the insiderness of top officials within the organization or the broader public sector, domain-specific expertise, moderate bureaucratic ambition, and the absence of political entanglements or personal connections will positively impact employee motivation. To empirically test our hypotheses, we conducted a conjoint experiment involving 2,206 employees working in various Norwegian ministries and agencies. The data collection was carried out through the Norwegian Panel of Public Administrators in 2023.

We begin with a review of the state of the art, situating our study within the relevant public administration debates and scholarship. Following this, we articulate our theoretical framework and formulate a set of hypotheses. The subsequent section delves into the experimental design and methods employed, the data obtained, and the contextual backdrop of our study conducted in the Norwegian central administration. Our research then presents the results of the statistical analysis. Finally, we conclude by discussing the broader implications of our findings.

State of the Art:

Scholarship looking at civil service recruitment practices, staffing, public personnel management and human resources (including promotion and retention) has so far had two major sets of concerns: concerns around merit on the one hand and concerns around political and personal connections on the other. These concerns might be treated jointly and placed on the same continuums, or treated separately, but *in fine*, studies aim to empirically and systematically establish how meritocratic, politicized or even partial and preferential staffing practices and decisions can be (Bach et al., 2020; Dahlström and Lapuente, 2017).

First, research on merit-based recruitments has been looking at formal and informal hiring process, practices and/or their outcomes (that is, taking the profile of recruits as proxies of

mirroring recruitment criteria and priorities)¹. Despite being much of a black box sometimes, hiring processes and practices can be reconstructed using legal frameworks (Geddes, 1994), or on the basis of perceptions (of civil servants, experts...). Typically, these studies understand merit as being essentially composed of different dimensions and characteristics, namely “qualifications, competence, and the absence of political favoritism.” (Ingraham, 2006, p.487). More specifically, qualifications and competence have to do with substantive and policy-relevant expertise, managerial skills, bureaucratic professionalization, and other such key credentials obtained via education, training or over the course of a career.

The second set of concerns revolves around political and personal connections constituting a basis for recruiting (top) civil servants. In these circumstances, we often speak of formal politicization (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014) when given rules governing recruitments, their interpretation or the absence of such rules allow for political interferences and give politicians a relative free hand in hiring political supporters and/or personally trusted and loyal individuals. What can be then witnessed is a greater intrusion or injection of politics into administration (Cooper, 2021). It is often argued that just focusing on the political-partisan aspects of politicization is not enough. That is why studies try to approach and disentangle both personal and political ties depending on data at their disposal and methodological strategies. Here again, methodological approaches abound to measure politicization and personal connections, but looking at backgrounds and retracing the life of civil servants, is one commonplace way to conclude about their political-partisan or personal loyalties, which may have helped in order to get recruited or promoted. These concerns are also well-reflected in the patronage literature in a variety of contexts, be it in the global south, the Americas or even in southern, central, or eastern Europe (Kopecky et al., 2012, Grindle, 2012; Panizza et al., 2018; Staronova and Rybář, 2021).

Scholarship tends to be plentiful when it comes to characterizing and mapping meritocratic principles, politicization, or personalization of staffing across space and across time. However, fewer studies set out to inquire into the consequences that various modes of organizing civil service systems can have (Dahlström and Lapuente, 2022; 2019). Research is nonetheless growing about the politics of public personnel; making this field increasingly complex and challenging to navigate at the same time, in part due to contrasting if not contradictory bodies of evidence about the effects of cultivating accountability over autonomy and *vice-versa* in

¹ Sometimes the profile of recruits is compared to the pool of other candidates for the job (Bach and Veit, 2018).

sometimes very different settings. Research on the politics of human resources takes different foci and perspectives. First, it can look at the macro-level, systemic effects of the meritocratic formula, for instance on the deterrence of corruption across a large number of polities (Dahlström et al., 2012). Second, it can be set at the meso-level of organizations or policy domains, for example to show the effects of politicizing agencies responsible for the production of statistics and knowledge (Boräng et al., 2018). Finally, research can investigate the micro-level consequences of politicizing recruitments or upholding meritocratic principles. Micro-level consequences involve affecting the attitudes of civil servants, for example public managers' attitudes towards innovation (Lapuente and Suzuki, 2020). It has also been shown, in survey research, that politicization does impact work attitudes of civil servants by demotivating them (Kim et al., 2021).

In addition to evidence that this research field on the effects of meritocratic principles or politicization of the bureaucracy on performance has been expanding over time (Oliveira et al., 2024), a few scholars have begun taking work attitudes and motivation of civil servants as key outcome variables, as we do in this study. At this stage though, more research needs to be done to further specify and unpack the relationships between staffing decisions to fill positions at the very top of public organizations, and public employees' attitudes at the workplace.

Theoretical framework:

To sort out and spell out the mechanisms linking administrative leaders' characteristics and subordinate employees' motivation, we make three broad theoretical arguments. The first argument (that we label "*workplace consequences argument*") stipulates that career backgrounds and profiles of leaders carry key information and function like cues for employees to foresee possibly forthcoming changes affecting their own work, that of their unit, or even the life of their organization as a whole. Indeed, leaders active in the public sector are not made equal in their capacity to safeguard the survival and good performance of the organization, to navigate political and sectoral environments, to dexterously introduce or refrain from introducing risky reforms, etc. This theoretical argument draws on the literatures on politicization of the bureaucracy and its outcomes (Kim et al., 2022, Bach, 2020), the trade-off between loyalty and competence (Lewis and Waterman, 2013), bureaucratic ambition (Teodoro, 2011), person-organization fit, and sector-switching and imprinting (see below).

Beyond the argument that leaders' characteristics are signals that help anticipating whether and how the workplace will be re-shaped, we make a second theoretical argument ("*leader-follower homophily*"). This argument holds that subordinates should have a relative tendency to prefer leaders that are not too different from them. In other words, similarity between leader and followers is an important element of the relationships they have with one another, which also can generate positive outcomes. We posit that this similarity is not only be a matter of shared demographic characteristics (Hassan & Hatmaker, 2015), but should somehow be linked to professional backgrounds and characteristics. Signals of similarity would attract subordinates towards their administrative leaders and be one of the drivers of work motivation.

The third theoretical argument ("*own career fate argument*") proposes that career backgrounds and profiles of administrative leaders carry key information for employees to realize which competences and assets are valued and worth having in public organizations, and especially which ones are relevant if one wants to fare well, or even climb the ranks and one day make it to the top. We acknowledge that not every public employee desires or aspires to exert leadership responsibilities at some point in a career. At the same time though, such leadership aspirations should exist at least for a subset of the public servant population. Hence, the "*own career fate*" argument is actually of a broader scope, and does not only refer to vertical, hierarchical progression, but rather to career developments in general. Indeed, recruiting public servants, including leaders, endowed with specific characteristics can produce a chain reaction within public organizations. Such a contagion effect has been found in public administration scholarship, using experiments in a Latin American context (Mikkelsen et al., 2022), but can reasonably be thought to exist elsewhere in the western world. This research shows that bureaucrats react to the professionalization and increased capacity of other incoming bureaucrats and subsequently interrogate their own situation in light of current developments, especially in public personnel policy, and the fate of '*entrants*' create incentives to invest in expertise and other competences. In a similar vein, we argue that current developments observed in many parts of the world, such as recruiting loyalists at the apex of organizations, might also disincentivize and demotivate bureaucrats.

Theoretical expectations

Individual civil servants and their attitudes are intimately linked to their organization and how they perceive it (e.g, Klatt and Fairholm, 2023). It could even be said that there are dynamic relationships and exchanges occurring between public employees and their organization (see Suzuki and Hur, 2020, who develop arguments based on social exchange theory). That being said, administrative leadership must also be considered, as it may alter the relationship between employees and their organization, and thus affect work attitudes. Indeed, administrative leaders are usually granted with the ability and leeway to introduce a series of change at the workplace, which can be either welcome and accepted by their subordinates or may be opposed and give rise to discontent. As like attract like, subordinates might also be drawn towards and prefer administrative leaders who share similar professional characteristics. In parallel, administrative leaders are also conspicuous living examples of career development and advancement within the bureaucratic apparatus, and in that, serve as referentials against which civil servants can compare themselves, in part to estimate their own situation or chances of career progression.

The first important characteristic of leadership that can be assessed by subordinates is the degree of fit between the (incoming) leader and the rest of the organization. Person-organization fit theory emphasizes that the match can vary between individuals (such as administrative leaders) and their organization environments, along goals and strategic orientations, practices, and tasks, but also principles and value-promotion (e.g., Vigoda-Gadot and Meiri, 2008). The fit is most likely to be high when a leader has already worked inside the organization before and has been socialized in that environment. For subordinates, knowing that incoming leaders have insider experience can be interpreted as an indication that adverse and unwanted changes are unlikely to be put in place, due to the level of familiarity that the leader has with the organization, its personnel, and typical ways to operate. Recruiting insiders as administrative leaders might also be an important source of motivation for subordinates, giving them hope that they themselves could one day climb the latter and be given greater leadership and management responsibilities, even if they do not necessarily reach the very top of their organization.

Relatively high levels of person-organization fit might also be preserved even in the case where the leader does not possess first-hand insider experience but does nonetheless have a clear public sector background. In this case, the fit between a leader and an organization falls more generally onto the publicness dimension (Petrovsky et al., 2015). As a corollary, it is harder for outsiders and sector-switchers from the private or charitable sector to score high on degrees of

publicness fit (James et al., 2021). A questionable publicness fit at the level of administrative leadership might raise concerns in the workforce that management recipes from the private sector might be given a try or even more widely applied in their own organization. For instance, private sector experience in the administrative leadership has been shown to go hand in hand with attempts to change organizational practices, such as resorting to a greater extent to temporary employments (Wiersma et al., 2024).

The sociology of professions also offers insights into how important espousing the same professional logics in a group can be (Andersen, 2009). It underlines that sharing a common knowledge base and professional norms is a glue that can bring cohesion from which an organization can benefit, in order to improve performance. Recruiting leaders that adhere to these professional norms and possess similar substantive knowledge should be positively received by subordinates and elicit their motivation. We formulate the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that have previously been employed in the organization.

Hypothesis 2: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that are public sector insiders, relative to sector-switchers from the private or charitable sectors.

Hypothesis 3: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that are specialists with a strong expertise that is relevant for the job.

Another key attribute of administrative leaders is their reform personality which is a key component of the so-called bureaucratic ambition (Teodoro, 2011). Incoming leaders with high bureaucratic ambition might, in certain contexts, set an organization on a path that can turn out to be hardly acceptable for its employees, the political leadership, if not for the public at large. Imagined mandates to carry out a transformative agenda and radical plans to reshape an organization might trigger strong counter reactions and political-administrative dramas (Christensen and Lægheid, 2021). In a similar vein, administrative leaders' serious lack of ambition, inflexibility and support for the status quo might also drive down employee's motivation. We thus expect that pragmatism and moderation in administrative leadership should boost work motivation most of the time. This expectation is also in line with classical images of politico-administrative relations, portraying bureaucrats as favoring prudence, balance of opposite forces and piecemeal changes (Aberbach et al., 1981).

Hypothesis 4: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that are pragmatic reformers, instead of status quo oriented or ambitious reformers.

Administrative leaders might display a recognizable political-partisan profile, as a result of prior engagement in politics (Bach, 2020). Employees might believe such leaders to be more politically responsive, which might also make their own organization more and more subject to political control and interference. This also signifies that employees can start anticipating adjustments and revisions of policy agendas and priorities that would prompt the organization to change course. Employees might not particularly look forward to such changes under a new administrative leadership. Negative consequences on civil servants' job attitudes and behavior have been observed when administrative leaders are perceived by their subordinates as illegitimate and loyalist outsiders who are appointed mainly for the sake of political control (Story et al., 2023). Trade-offs between political loyalty and competence might also be at the expense of administrative leadership's policy relevant expertise, and educational and professional qualifications (Krause & O'Connell, 2019; Hollibaugh et al., 2014; Lewis & Waterman, 2013). These trade-offs and their implications in terms of loss of expertise and professional standards inside the organization might also be discernible by subordinate employees. Still, public employees might tolerate the incoming of administrative leaders close to political parties not sitting in government, due to lower perceived risks of political steering and signs of greater openness to ideological diversity.

Hypothesis 5a: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that have never been active in party politics whatsoever.

Hypothesis 5b: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders that have been active in a party not sitting in current government.

Finally, administrative leaders might appear to have personal connections with members of the political leadership, hinting that they owe their job more to relational proximity and ties to key decision-makers than to their own abilities and achievements. Personal connections with a limited number of powerful politicians, by definition, are in short supply in the population, and may create a suspicion of nepotism. Furthermore, in a meritocratic and egalitarian context, using personal connections to obtain a job might be seen negatively and bear the mark of social stigma. All of this should decrease employees' morale and motivation when hearing about personal connections being advantageous to career advancement.

Hypothesis 6: Employees' motivation to work is higher under prospective leaders not having ties nor personal connections with powerful political actors (such as ministers or top political appointees).

Data and context:


To put our hypotheses to the test, we use conjoint experiment data. Conjoint experiments are increasingly used in public administration scholarship and in political science at large. Public administration studies have conducted conjoint experiments asking civil servants about other civil servants and their profiles (e.g., Oliveros et al., 2018; Meyer-Sahling et al., 2021), for instance to infer about public hiring preferences (Jankowski et al., 2021). Other studies have run conjoint experiment where politicians were exposed to various civil servants' profiles, aiming to understand how, in the minds of politicians, certain civil servants' profiles could be better at exerting effort or performing (Toral, 2024). Sometimes, participants in conjoint experiments are public employees who are faced with different profiles of leaders, to uncover employee's leadership preferences (Offringa and Groeneveld, 2023). This last group of studies looking at the relationship between leadership profiles and subordinate employees' preferences and attitudes comes probably the closest to the conjoint experiment we carried out.

Conjoint or discrete choice experiments are a special type of experiment usually conducted online. During a conjoint experiment, participants select and/or rate a range of alternative options, each with a different set of attributes (Hainmueller et al, 2014). Selection and rating tasks can be repeated several times. The scenario and choices of conjoint experiment are said to have a high degree of realism, also because they resemble or mimic the trade-offs that public and political actors make in order to choose from different options in the real world (Aleksovska et al., 2022, p. 135).

As to the design of our experiment, respondents were asked to imagine a situation where there is vacant position in the senior management of their organization (ministry or agency). They were told that several candidates stood out in the recommendation. Then, respondents were shown two hypothetical candidates for this position (candidates A and B). Both candidate profiles were randomly generated. Respondents had to carefully peruse and examine the characteristics of these profiles and pick the candidate under which they would prefer to be

working². Respondents were then shown another pair of candidate profiles (candidates C and D) and had to similarly operate a choice between these two profiles, selecting the one under whose leadership they would prefer to be working. In other words, respondents had to think of and project themselves working under different administrative leaderships, and then report under which one they would prefer to work. Picture 1 shows what respondents saw while partaking in the experiment.

Picture 1. Screenshot of the conjoint experiment


 NORSK FORVALTNINGSPANEL

Forestill deg at en stilling i toppledelsen av din organisasjon er ledig.
 Det er flere kandidater som skiller seg ut i innstillingen. Vennligst les beskrivelsen av to av disse kandidatene nøye og ta stilling til spørsmålene under.

	Kandidat A	Kandidat B
Arbeidserfaring fra departementet:	Har ingen arbeidserfaring fra ditt departement	Har ingen arbeidserfaring fra ditt departement
Personlighet:	Pragmatisk	Pragmatisk
Faglig ekspertise:	Generalist med lite faglig ekspertise i departementets ansvarsområde	Generalist med lite faglig ekspertise i departementets ansvarsområde
Karrierevei:	Har mangeårig erfaring fra privat sektor	Har mangeårig erfaring fra privat sektor
Personlige forhold:	Er i statsrådets vennekrets	Er gift med en statlig toppleder utenfor din sektor
Politisk aktivitet:	Har aldri vært aktiv i et politisk parti	Har vært aktiv i et parti som i dag sitter i regjeringen

Hvor enig eller uenig er du i følgende påstander:

Svært enig Enig Noe enig Verken enig eller uenig Noe uenig Uenig Svært uenig

Jeg ville likt å jobbe under kandidat A sin ledelse.

Jeg ville likt å jobbe under kandidat B sin ledelse.

Alt tatt i betraktning, under hvilken kandidats ledelse ville du foretrukket å jobbe?

Kandidat A

Kandidat B

Profilnummer 7 klikk her for å kontakte oss på rfp@forvaltningspanel.no

² To some extent to increase engagement into the experiment, before selecting their preferred candidate option, respondents had to report their level of agreement with the statement “I would like to work under candidate [A ; B]’S leadership”, using a 7-point scale. We do not make use of these responses to build our outcome variable. See figure 1.

The advantage of our design is that it seeks to mimic the content of informal chats and discussions that can occur within bureaucratic organizations between colleagues, about who is going to replace their outgoing administrative leader. We argue that such discussion can even make it to the press or the public debate at large, especially because it is about filling top level positions in sometimes important agencies and ministries, which makes these positions quite visible and subject to public scrutiny. The conjoint experiment also displays profiles of prospective leaders much like how these would take shape in a CV or in press releases content, etc. The specificities of our design were therefore chosen on purpose.

However, our design may suffer from limitations. These pertain to the measurement of work motivation as our main outcome variable. Our outcome variable is more about anticipated motivation to work under this or that leadership, and not about ongoing, present work motivation. Another shortcoming is that we could not use a full battery of items tapping into these kinds of motivational constructs, also due to space constraints in the survey and the format of conjoint experiment.

Attributes

This study has 6 independent variables, working as attributes of prospective administrative leaders that have been recommended for the job: Work experience in the organization, personal connections, career paths, political activism, substantive expertise, reform personality. These attributes and their levels are displayed in table 1. We used slightly different formulations for respondents employed in ministries and agencies, respectively.

Table 1. Attributes and attributes levels of prospective leaders

Attribute	Attribute levels <i>Ministries</i>	Attribute levels <i>Agencies</i>
Work experience in the organization	has work experience from this ministry has no work experience from this ministry	has work experience from this agency has no work experience from this agency
Personal connections	has studied together with the state secretary	has studied together with the state secretary of the parent ministry

	is married to a top executive in another sector	is married to a top executive in another sector
	is in the minister's circle of friends	is in the circle of friends of the minister of the parent ministry
career paths	has many years' experience in the public sector	has many years' experience in the public sector
	has many years' experience in the private sector	has many years' experience in the private sector
	has many years' experience in the charitable sector	has many years' experience in the charitable sector
Political activism	has never been active in a political party	has never been active in a political party
	has been active in a party that currently sits in government	has been active in a party that currently sits in government
	has been active in a party that does not currently sit in government	has been active in a party that does not currently sit in government
Substantive expertise	specialist with strong substantive expertise in the department area of responsibility	specialist with strong substantive expertise in the agency area of responsibility
	generalist with little substantive expertise in the department area of responsibility	generalist with little substantive expertise in the agency area of responsibility
Personality	ambitious reformer pragmatic status quo oriented	ambitious reformer pragmatic status quo oriented

Sample:

Data was collected from November to December 2023 using the Norwegian panel of public administration (*Norsk forvaltningspanel*, NFP) which is hosted by the DIGSSCORE facility at the University of Bergen. The obtained sample is composed of 2,206 respondents, which approximately represent 10 percent of all employees in Norwegian central government. Respondents mostly work for non-ministerial bodies like agencies (55.30%), while the rest of the sample works in ministries (44.70%). 50% of respondents are women, 46% are men, the rest not disclosing this information. 60% of respondents had more than 44 years of age at the time of answering the survey.

Roughly 16% percent of surveyed public employees chose not to give responses to the conjoint experiment, which still make our study well-powered (that is, power levels above 90%, for a significance level of 0.05). In our dataset, after we reshaped it for the sake of the analysis, each line stands for one profile shown to the respondent. Given that respondents saw four profiles, the dataset could theoretically contain a maximum of 8,824 lines (4x2,206), without any missing observation. As some respondents chose not to answer, we end up with 7,380 observations in the final dataset.

Context:

This study takes place in a particular setting: Norwegian central administration. Much as neighboring Denmark and Sweden, Norway is characterized by its strong merit-based and open civil service system (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017; Allern, 2012). Expert surveys have provided confirmatory evidence that recruitment of senior civil servants in the Nordic countries tends to be more merit based, while political and personal connections are less critical hiring criteria than in other parts of the western world (Cooper, 2021). More specifically, Nordic countries are places where we commonly find an entrenched and widespread set of norms, standards, and principles about the autonomy, professionalism, and competencies of administrators and other public actors, which in part can be traced back to (north-) western cultural traits that emphasize impersonal values in the public sphere as opposed to relational and personal ties like acquaintances and kinship (Fukuyama, 2014). However, it does not necessarily follow that the Norwegian system is completely free and exempt from politicization of the bureaucracy.

In effect, we still find pockets of politicization in the Norwegian administrative landscape, and at different levels of government (Bach et al. forthcoming). Politicization is also further sustained by the activity of political staff who have grown in number and now wield considerable power, namely political appointees like state secretaries (Askim et al., 2014), and political advisers (Askim et al, 2023). Other indications of politicization include administrative turnover induced by political change (Askim et al., 2024) or evidence of the recruitment of administrative leaders of non-ministerial bodies previously active in politics (Askim & Bach, 2021), at the frontstage or backstage (Veit & Vedder, 2024). The Norwegian case is therefore well-suited to unravel how various administrative leadership profiles (and what these have to reveal about meritocracy or politicalization) are perceived by, and affect, public employees' work attitudes in ministries and agencies.

Results:

We estimated Average Marginal component effects (AMCEs) following a standard procedure, namely running OLS regressions, clustering standard errors at the level of the individual respondent. The main results of our conjoint experiment are displayed in figure 1 below.

Variations in employees' motivation to work under prospective administrative leaders with different profiles is generally in line with our hypotheses, with nonetheless a few mixed results. Public employees, regardless of their organizational affiliation (ministry or agency), are more likely to prefer working under prospective leaders who have previously worked in their organization by 14 percentage points, than under outsiders. Employees are more likely to prefer working under prospective leaders that are public sector insiders compared to sector-switchers from the private sector, by 9.8 percentage points. Employees' motivation seems unaffected at the idea of working under sector-switchers from the charitable sector compared to sector-switcher from the private sector, as results are not statistically significant. It might suggest that public employees consider such private sector and charitable sector backgrounds as not entirely distinct. As to prospective leaders' substantive expertise, employees are more likely to be motivated to work under specialist leaders who have strong policy relevant expertise than under generalist leaders that lack such expertise, by 17.8 percentage points.

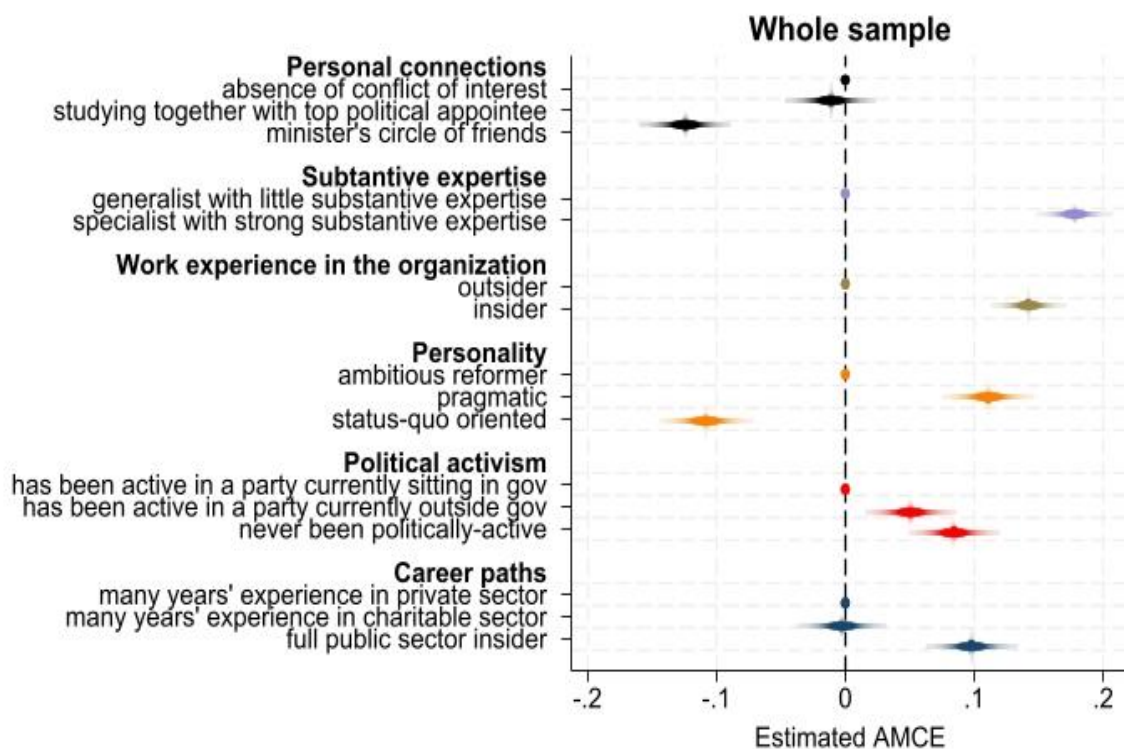
Prospective administrative leaders' reform personality is likely to also raise employee's work motivation. When employees imagine working under a leader that is a pragmatic reformer, their motivation is more likely to grow by nearly 11 percentage points, compared to working under a leader that is an ambitious reformer. Against our expectations though, employees' motivation is more likely to go down under a leadership who wants to stick to the status quo, by 10 percentage points, compared to a leadership that would champion ambitious reforms. This would suggest that public employees prefer doing their job under a leadership that shows at least a modicum of administrative ambition rather than under sheer proponents of immobilism.

The political activism of prospective administrative leaders has also triggered reactions from the part of subordinates. Employees are more likely to prefer working under leaders that do not have any political activism to report, by 8.4 percentage points, than under leaders who have

been politically active in a party sitting in government. Employees still express some acceptance of leader’s political backgrounds, provided these come from an opposition party. Employees are more likely to prefer working under leaders that have been politically active in opposition parties, by nearly 5 percentage points, than under leaders who have been politically active in a party sitting in government.

Lastly, employees are less likely to prefer working under prospective leaders when told that he or she is part of a minister’s circle of friend (decrease by 12.3 percentage points), than under leaders who do not have any sort of direct personal connection with members of the political leadership. Studying together with top political appointees did not seem to be a problematic characteristic of the administrative leadership, in view of results not being statistically significant.

Figure 1: AMCEs for the whole sample

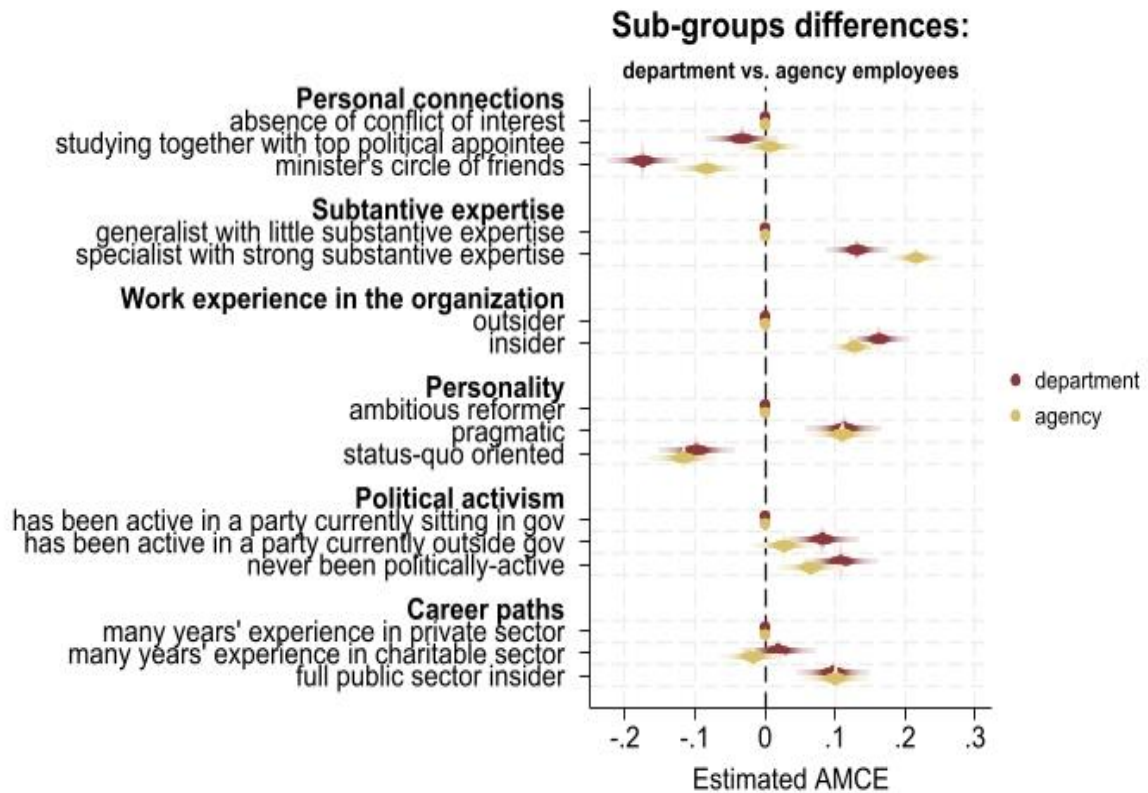


Our sample was made of two main groups of employees: ministry and agency employees. We therefore can expect subtle differences, for instance with regard to acceptability of political

backgrounds or sector-switching backgrounds in the administrative leadership. There is robust empirical evidence that agency employees operate at a greater distance from ministers and put more emphasis on expertise in their decision making (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009). This would lead us to expect differential treatment effects. Generating different AMCEs for the two subgroups does reveals minimal differences, although ministry and agency employees seem to be mostly aligned in their perception of administrative leadership profiles. These differences are visible in figure 2.

Ministry employees appear quite sensitive to personal connections when agency employees do but to lesser extent. For instance, ministry employees' motivation very much goes down at the idea of working under administrative leaders who are in minister's circle of friends (by 17.5 percentage points), in contrast to working under leaders who have no direct personal connections to report with members of the political leadership. Amongst ministry employees, the effect of administrative leaders having studied together with political appointees active in their organization comes very close to be significant (p-value: 0.105). This point estimate is interesting in itself due to personal connections being more tenuous here; having studied together with someone does not automatically presupposes friendships nor mutual assistance in career advancement. Logically, agency employees' motivation is more likely to be boosted by the possible arrival of administrative leaders' who have high levels of substantive expertise, by 21.5 percentage points, compared to the arrival of mere generalists. The estimated AMCE for ministry employees is just around 13 percentage point, so more than 7 percentage point below that of agency employees. Finally, ministry and agency bureaucrats differ in their motivational stance towards administrative leaders' partisan-political loyalties. The difference appears when looking at the effect of prospective leaders' political activism in a party sitting in the opposition. Ministry employees seem to receive favorably the idea of working under an administrative leader with ties to opposition parties, by approximately 8 percentage point more than working under a leader with ties to the government in power. This effect is absent amongst agency employees.

Figure 2. Subgroups' differences in AMCEs



Robustness check:

[to be elaborated upon. Generating marginal means, especially to confirm sub-groups differences]

Marginal means for overall sample and for our two subgroups, namely agency and ministry employees. Additional support for our hypotheses.

Other heterogeneous effects: employees' rank and tasks?

Conclusion

This study aimed at unravelling and disentangling the effects of leadership career backgrounds on employee motivation to work. We found empirical support for our hypotheses, having put these to the test with the help of conjoint experimental data. This study shows that prospective leaders that have no political-partisan loyalties, or loyalties with opposition parties are more likely to positively affect employees' motivation at the workplace. This partially echoes previous findings pointing at the deleterious impact of politicization of bureaucratic organizations on employees work motivation. Our study also exposed that ministry employees

seem to be more alert and sensitive to these politicization processes than their colleagues in agencies, with nonetheless a greater toleration of leaders' ties to opposition political parties as opposed to leaders linked to the appointing government in power. Employees also preferred working under leaders without personal connections to the political leadership.

Prospective leaders' insidership within the organization or the broader public sector, their strong domain-specific expertise positively impacts subordinates' motivation to work under them. These estimated effects on work motivation were quite substantial, judging by crude differences expressed in percentage points. Finally, prospective leaders reform personality and ambition has been found to enhance work motivation, to the condition that these leaders show a pragmatic profile, compared to high levels of bureaucratic ambition.

This study shows that public employees pay close attention to the profiles of their administrative leaders and are able to express relatively clear-cut preferences about under which leadership they would like to work the most. Instead of an unbridgeable distance, indifference and loose connection between leaders and followers, we rather have elicited some aspects of the link that can exist between them. Signals sent within public organizations in times of recruitments are actually meaningful. Insidership and sector-specific expertise are key assets that motivate employees, probably because of more favorable workplace consequences that can be safeguarded by such leaders or simply because of mere like attract like kind of phenomenon. Leaders' absence of political and personal connections could also function as 'virtue signaling' in a high meritocratic context where employees have certain expectations towards their public leaders.

Similar conjoint experimental research on the effect of public leaders' career backgrounds could be conducted in the rest of the Nordics to confirm or question the results obtained in this study. It would be worthwhile running the same experiment with public administrators in more politicized settings and in other administrative traditions, to determine whether employee motivation suffers less when the incoming leadership shows signs of political loyalty and personal connections. The conjoint experiment could be conducted again with more follow-up survey items, to better comprehend what public employees think of leaders based on their backgrounds.

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