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Public Administration Research in Norway: An Organisational and Institutional Approach to Political Organisations

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1 Introduction: Government capacity and good government

Over the past 40 years, the central public administration in Norway has been characterised by both stability and change, reflecting to some degree different reform trajectories such as New Public Management (NPM) and New Public Governance (Christensen et al., 2018). The boundaries between the public and private sectors, between the national, sub-national and supra-national levels and between policy areas have become more blurred. To grasp this complexity and dynamic development simple context-free instrumental rationality has to be supplemented by institutional approaches (Olsen, 2010).

Since the 1990s, more attention has been paid to the importance of governance capacity, the quality of government and a well-performing administrative apparatus to understand why some countries are more successful than others in looking after their citizens’ welfare and ensuring a high standard of living. Fukuyama suggested that the world should look to the Nordic countries in order to build prosperous, well-governed and liberal democracies. In his view, the Nordic combination of a strong state, well-functioning rule of law and a responsible democracy is a useful recipe for good government. This attention to governance capacity and the related “institutional turn” in public administration research has highlighted the need to “bring the bureaucracy back in” and to apply an organisation theory-based institutional approach (March and Olsen, 1989). Politics is not only about deliberation and decision-making but also about putting decisions into practice. Thus, administrative capacity regarding specialisation, coordination, regulation, analysis and delivery is crucial. In representative democracies, good government depends
not only on the input side of the political process but also on the output side; here the quality of the administrative apparatus has a major role to play.

The Norwegian approach to the study of public administration underlines two main reasons why it is important. First, because it is a major political actor and not simply a neutral managerial, technical and logistical tool. Organising entails mobilising biases; in other words, how we organise the administrative apparatus affects which problems and solutions receive attention and are prioritised, and which are neglected or rejected (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). The way the public administration is organised and how it recruits its personnel has significant impact on the quality of the government’s governance of society. Thus, the organisation of the administration is a potentially powerful political instrument able to influence the content of public policy. Second, the capacity and competence of the administrative apparatus are crucial for the implementation of public policy and have implications for the living conditions and wellbeing of citizens. The quality and impartiality of the administration and the absence of corruption are core components of good government.

In this chapter, I will examine three substantial trends in Public Administration research from a Norwegian perspective, focusing especially on administrative reforms and the central government level. First, I will describe the theoretical development; second, I will address the development towards more time series and comparative data; and third, I will discuss the trend towards effects and impact studies and the vision of public administration as an architectonic discipline. Finally, I describe the links and relevance to practice and teaching in the field and draw some conclusions.

2 Theoretical development: the institutional turn and meso-level theories

Norwegian Public Administration research has been hugely inspired by the longstanding collaboration between Johan P. Olsen and James G. March who have changed the way we think about organisations, institutions and democratic governance. They developed theories of bounded rationality and also challenged the legal-constitutional legacy in Public Administration (PA) research. In the 1970s they introduced the Garbage Can Model in the study of loosely coupled organisations, non-routine situations and decision-making under ambiguity. In the 1980s they launched the New Institutionalism, painting a picture of public organisations integrated into a complex and dynamic political and societal network of organised interests and stakeholders and focussing on the potential for democratic governance
by combining environmental features, purposeful actors and historically developed institutions. Later on, Norwegian PA research also developed stronger connections with Nordic and European scholars, not least through the ARENA, Centre for European Studies, at the University of Oslo and through several European comparative projects.

Norwegian research on public administration is mainly based on organisation and institutional theory and on democratic theory (Christensen & Lægreid, 2017; Olsen, 2016). It paints a picture of public administration as a component of complex political and societal networks of organised interests and clients. It is a story of the complex and dynamic interplay between competing logics, loyalties and influences, demanding more elaborate models of decision-making and change than assumed by the Weberian ideal model.

A main argument is that patterns of governance cannot be adequately understood without including organisational factors, and a core question is what difference organisational factors play in the governance processes (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). The public bureaucracies are seen not only as an instrument but also as partly autonomous institutions that do not adapt in a simple and straightforward way to new steering signals or to changing environmental pressure. The ideal model of bureaucracy is supplemented by empirical studies of living institutions and how they work in practice. The internal management focus is supplemented by a broader political and normative focus; and the emphasis on rule-following, processes and procedures is supplemented by a results and performance orientation. Theories of decision-making under ambiguous circumstances and institutional constraints where the logic of appropriateness supplements a logic of consequentiality, complement the theoretical tradition based on bounded rationality (March & Olsen, 1989).

This approach goes beyond the generic macro-oriented theories that try to arrive at universally valid insights for all types of formal organisation in the public sector. Instead, it applies meso-level theories that take diverse contextual constraints into consideration (Pollitt, 2013) and argue that we have to go beyond “catch all” theories that can be applied at all times, everywhere and in all situations. For example, the level of citizens’ trust in government institutions and the level of corruption in a given country will make a big difference to how the public administration works.

A broad organisation theory-based institutional approach to public administration contrasts with ideas like a “generic” public administration, convergence of administrative arrangements and simple models of administrative reforms (Olsen, 2010). Global prescriptions for administrative reforms have been responded to differently depending on national and sector-specific institutional arrangements and historical traditions resulting in organisational
principles derived from multiple contextual factors working together in a complex mix (Olsen, 2016). There are, however, also ambitions to contribute to a general organisational approach to public governance by focusing on dimensions that cut across governance structures and processes and might allow for generalisation across time and space (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

Norwegian PA research often combines organisation theory with more general political science theory. Bounded rationality is a central concept. The historical-institutional context has been brought back in, and neo-institutional theories have increasingly been used, in particular from the 1990s on. Especially during turbulent and unsettled times or periods of transition, unruly and wicked problems emerge that make it necessary to supplement the simple principal-agent way of thinking with institutional approaches in order to grasp developments. The discretion enjoyed by public sector organisations with regard not only to administrative and technical issues but also policy issues has increased, and they have become political actors that not only serve their political principals but also have multiple relationships to society. We cannot assume that they have sufficient capability, cognitive capacity or power to act as rational actors.

There is no generally accepted empirical administrative theory that specifies under what conditions one set of factors has greater explanatory power than another or how their mutual influence can be understood. Norwegian PA researchers embrace the growing claim that context matters, but there is still no good understanding of how different contexts matter and we still have some way to go to uncover the complexity of contexts as a missing link between the general and the particular (Pollitt, 2013). We face the challenge of explaining how hybrid organisations based on mixed political orders and partly competing organisational principles can be contextualised and understood (Olsen, 2010). We have to include the context in our models at the same time as we have to acknowledge that institutions have their own explanatory power and are not dominated by environmental determinism. Rather than decontextualised generic theories, we need middle-range theories that account for cultural trajectories, polity features and environmental constraints (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016).

In contrast to the simple diffusion or copying of administrative reforms across countries, the story of administrative reform in Norway is more about translating, editing and adapting to the historical-institutional tradition (Røvik, 2011). We may question how fruitful a stage or phases approach is whereby one set of reforms replaces previous reforms over time. It might be more useful to look at the different reform trends as complementary or supplementary perspectives. The argument is that PA is a compound system
where one has to find a balance between partly competing goals and values (Olsen, 2010). There are permanent tensions between hierarchies, markets and networks and between loyalty to political signals from the government of today, to Rechtstaat values, to due process, to stakeholder interests and to efficiency and service quality. These constitute trade-offs that the public administration has to live with, yielding a picture of a complex and dynamic public administration. The implication is that good governance is more than majority rule and that it is necessary to pay heed to several competing concerns and values.

An organisational approach to administrative reforms is preoccupied with how different ways of organising the reform processes may influence the reform trajectories (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018). Reform processes are seen as decision-making processes, which allocate resources, attention, actors, identities, roles, resources and capabilities. Organisational characteristics and administrative structures create possibilities for reform while at the same time they place restrictions on it. Adding to this the role of professions is also important. Professional bureaucrats are essential trendsetters and the bureaucracy is often more important than political parties as political workshops defining what is true, possible and valuable.

What we have witnessed in recent decades is not a successive replacement of one model by another, but rather a process of adaptation, layering and co-existence of different doctrines in line with the theory of gradual institutional change. This has been labelled a transformative approach, because it underlines the need to go beyond single factor explanations and to examine how political design is enabled and constrained by environmental factors, administrative traditions and polity features (Christensen & Lægreid, 2016). The multi-level governance approach has likewise been challenged by a multilevel administrative system approach designed to grasp the organisational dimension of turbulent change processes.

This theoretical development might provide material for an interesting debate about whether PA is a separate discipline or a sub-discipline of Political Science. In contrast to the continental European and US tradition, Political Science and Public Administration are not seen as separate disciplines in Norway but are integrated into one discipline. Maybe the Norwegian take on the study of Public Administration as a mixture of political science and organization theory with a substantial empirical orientation is a fruitful combination that furthers an understanding of public organisations as important political actors in a democratic governance setting. These features were typical in Public Administration research in the US until 1960, but were later lost. Norwegian PA research is more process-oriented than American
research, applies qualitative approaches and focuses more on how ideas about organising are shaped, diffused and translated. Many scholars come from a constructivist tradition, but most of them take a moderate stand and avoid a purely subjectivist position.

One might claim that Norwegian public management scholarship has been remote enough to evade the “paradigm police” and connected enough to influence the more vulnerable elements of non-Nordic research communities. One special feature of Scandinavian organisation theory is its interest in the practice of organising – an interest that is facilitated by the openness and transparency of organisations and the easy access to them, especially in the public sector. Scandinavian institutionalism revolves round the concepts of appropriateness, translation, loose coupling and decision-making under ambiguity and uncertainty. Global and local approaches are combined, there are strong disciplinary roots combined with interdisciplinary openness combining paradigmatic approaches and empirical pluralism. A main focus is on how public sector organisations work in practice from a behavioural perspective rather than how they work on paper or are supposed to work in line with a formal-legal and normative tradition.

Norwegian organisational studies pay a lot of attention to the public sector as a whole. Their focus is less on internal management, ideas about cost cutting and efficiency in individual organisations and organisational strategies, and more on the institutional environment. An interest in democratic governance and the organisational basis for politics is a special characteristic of the Norwegian approach (Christensen & Lægreid, 2017). A main question is how different institutions affect citizens’ living conditions and contribute to a legitimate governance system (Olsen, 2010). Administrative institutions and their staff affect policy design and the implementation of decisions, and thus influence whose values, interests and world views are attended to. While the study of organisational design is dominated by empirical analyses, it also includes normative and prescriptive analyses. An organisational perspective on decision-making in public organisations addresses formal structure, but also looks at demography and organisational locus (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

The special mixture of political science and organisation theory has given Norwegian public administration research a relatively strong theoretical profile. A core argument in the Norwegian research community is that political processes and the content of public policy cannot be fully understood without considering the structure and practice of public administration. Norwegian public administration research shows continuity through its focus on the political features and the democratic context of the civil service, on formal structure, bounded rationality and internal processes. It has also been
characterised by a development from an intra-organisational approach to an inter-organisational one and by a greater interest in comparative studies and the internationalisation of public administration.

A main lesson from Norwegian PA research is that public administration faces increasingly complex and dynamic environmental and internal conditions, reflected in multi-functional organisational forms. Compound administrative reforms are multi-dimensional and represent combinations of competing, inconsistent and contradictory organisational principles and structures that co-exist and balance interests and values. It is not a question of hierarchy, market or networks but of how the mixtures of these forms of coordination change in different reform movements and how the trade-off between them alters. In a composite public administration system democratic governance is about organising to cope with lasting tensions and shifting balances of power (Olsen, 2010). There is no best practice, quick fix or panacea and the chances of successful reform increase when the historical-institutional context is taken into account. Normally the reforms have to pass a compatibility test, and if they avoid a cultural clash they are more likely to be successful. Criticism of de-contextualised theories such as rational choice has gradually expanded.

The Norwegian lesson is that administrative reforms must be matched carefully with the needs, traditions and resources of each political system. Reforms that do not consider the historical-institutional context tend to result in new reforms rather than increasing performance. The argument is that global myths and prescriptions for administrative reforms are interpreted, translated and responded to differently depending on national and sector-specific institutional arrangements and historical traditions. In recent years enthusiasm for some of the NPM-related reforms has gradually waned. There has been a rediscovery of the historical-institutional context and the Neo-Weberian state. The lesson is that there is a need to consider the domestic administrative and institutional context when designing and implementing administrative reforms.

The study of Norwegian public administration and political organisations can be summed up in the following propositions (see Olsen, 2018).

- Organisations and institutions matter.
- The organisational basis of government institutions matters.
- Living institutions matter. Beyond the formal-legal institutions.
- Attentions, identities and appropriateness matter. Beyond the decision-making framework and rational choice.
- Normative principles matter. Democracy, the sovereign people and the sovereign individual.
– Organisational principles matter: Democracy beyond simple principal-agent relations.
– Connections and networks matter. Organised interest built into governmental organisations.
– Europeanisation and internationalisation matter. Beyond the state as the dominant policy entity.
– History, culture and context matter. But history is ambiguous.
– Complexity and dynamics matter. Organisations are complex and dynamic systems. Outcome is difficult to predict.

3 Longitudinal, comparative and panel data

In recent decades, PA researchers have put greater emphasis on large empirical studies. The Norwegian public sector is rather unique in the easy access to data that it provides to PA researchers, which is clearly a major advantage for the latter. It also says something about the status of this research in a high-trust society. One important empirical focus has been real-life studies of public administration organisations and institutions and of administrative reforms and policies. These have shown that reform processes in Norway are often characterised by compromise and an apolitical rhetoric, yielding incremental and uncertain results. The search for unifying compromises indicates that system effects might often trump substantive policy effects.

What the research on public administration reforms needs more than anything else is reliable data that go beyond single reforms, individual organisations, cross-sectional data and one-country studies. Over the past decades, there has been a significant contribution to the development and production of databases and data sets for public management research in Norway. I will mention just a few.

First, the Norwegian State Administrative Data Base, a dataset comprising all formal structural changes in the Norwegian state administration over the past 70 years covering ministries, central agencies, state-owned companies and foundations. The database provides unique and systematic information about structural changes in the government administration, such as the establishment of new organisations, organisational deaths, the merging and splitting of organisations and moving organisations vertically and horizontally.

Second, the Norwegian Civil Service survey, which includes responses from civil servants in ministries and central agencies collected every tenth year since 1976, provides unique longitudinal data on the tasks, role perceptions and behavioural patterns of civil servants in ministries and central agencies.
as well as on the degree of Europeanisation and attitudes to administrative reforms.

Third, the Municipal Organisational Data Base Surveys, which have been conducted every fourth year since 1996, mainly cover political and administrative structures and working methods at local and regional levels. These datasets are internationally unique. They are invariably used in government-commissioned research as well as by Norwegian political and administrative actors in Norway addressing reorganisation issues.

Fourth, the development of international cross-country datasets on administrative reforms, agencification, autonomy, control, accountability, proliferation, coordination, management and performance of government agencies throughout Europe. Examples are *Comparative Public Organisation Data Base for Research and Analysis* (COBRA), the *Cost Action on Comparative Research into Current Trends in Public Sector Organisations* (CRIPO), the project on *Coordination for Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future* (CO-COPS) and the permanent study group in EGPA on Governance of Public Sector Organisations. The development and maintenance of international cutting-edge datasets has provided invaluable knowledge and experience for the study of public administration and governance in Norway and has enabled PA researchers to participate regularly in international collaborative research.

Fifth, a national infrastructure of coordinated online panels for social science research on democracy and governance is planned in Bergen. It will enable coordinated data-collection in online panels that cover the entire core of the structure of democratic governance. The plan is to establish three new online panels (public administrators, judges and journalists) and expand two existing panels (the citizens’ panel and the electorate panel) as part of the Digital Social Science Core Facility (DIGSSCORE) at the University of Bergen. The Panel of Public Administrators emerges from a 40-year long tradition of surveying central government officials in Norway. It will recruit from a base of public administrators at all levels of government – national, regional, local. This infrastructure will make it possible to analyse across sub-populations, to do panel studies and longitudinal studies. It can also contribute to the behavioural turn in PA research focusing on different types of experimental research.

The realisation that it is impossible to understand the development of the public administration from an internal, domestic point of view alone has led to a greater interest in comparative studies between countries. The same goes for the need – occasioned by the fact that different countries have different starting points and are in different phases of reform – to track changes over
time using longitudinal data. What the discipline probably needs more than anything else is good comparative data, both over time and across countries.

4 From processes and administrative behaviour to performance and effects

What should an organisation theory for studying public administration and public policy explain, i.e. what are the dependent variables? The focus in Norway has been on processes and on public decision-making behaviour. What pattern of influence is there between different actors in agenda-setting, assessment of alternatives, formal decisions and implementation? Less emphasis has been placed on the effects of the different reforms and forms of organisation. Over time, however, there has been an enhanced interest in the societal outcome, effects and impact. Public administration is an integral part of the political-administrative system and the focus is therefore on the dynamic relationship between political and administrative actors in a democratic context (March & Olsen, 1989). When addressing effects and implications, the Norwegian approach has gone beyond the narrower focus on decision-making and also addressed the broader concept of performance, including the effects on political steering and control, power relations, accountability, trust and legitimacy.

One concern is what empirical support there is for the assumed or expected effects of the different administrative reforms. The paradox is that reforms like NPM build their legitimacy on the assumption that they will produce effects, such as more efficiency and effectiveness and a more economic use of resources, yet at the same time there is little systematic, reliable or generalised knowledge about these kinds of effects. The jury is still out on the degree to which administrative reforms work in practice; for example has New Public Management led to a “government that works better and costs less” as promised. One of the big flaws in NPM was probably the claim that a clear dividing line existed between policy-making and formulation on the one hand and policy implementation on the other, reflecting the old debate about the separation between politics and administration. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence on the effects of NPM. New Public Management has been around for 30 years, yet there have been few comparative evaluations of it. Instead, NPM scholars have spent too much time studying the reform process and examining the forces driving the reforms while merely speculating about their impact on efficiency and service quality.
Effects are often assumed or promised, but there are few systematic and reliable studies of whether they actually happen. Evidence of efficiency gains has been patchy and incomplete and systematic quantitative empirical investigations over time have been lacking, so there is little hard evidence of whether NPM’s main goal of cost reduction and improved efficiency has actually been achieved. There is therefore a great need for good, reliable data over time on the effects of NPM reforms. The Achilles heel in administrative reforms is that the reform actors have limited understanding of the consequences and implications of their own reform initiatives.

Reform agents often face the problem of over-selling; because to get a reform accepted they often have to promise more than they can deliver. They are also puzzled by the implementation problem versus the model problem. When the results fail to materialise, their answer is often that one has to try harder. Their solution is to take a more sophisticated approach, to train political and administrative executives better or to replace them. Another strategy is to ask if there is something wrong with the model – maybe the model should be adjusted to make it fit administrative reality better. This is also linked to the fact that NPM reforms are a rather loose collection of tools and measures, a shopping basket from which reform agents can choose partly competing reform elements. We have to remember that administrative reforms are often a political exercise not informed by a coherent theory.

A third concern is the efficiency problem versus the expectation problem. Often dissatisfaction with public sector organisations has more to do with unrealistically high expectations among users, clients and citizens about what public sector organisations are capable of rather than with poor efficiency. So maybe we need a policy to lower expectations rather than to increase efficiency. A good administrative apparatus requires not only governance capacity but also governance legitimacy.

We also have to focus on the relationship between efficiency and other important aspects of performance in the public sector such as fairness, impartiality and predictability. One implication is that there is a need to go beyond the narrow concept of performance linked to economy and efficiency and to include the broader democratic implications for power relations, trust and legitimacy.

An important implication is that public sector organisations cannot just copy private sector management tools and organisational forms and expect successful implementation and results. After all, public sector organisations differ significantly from private sector organisations in that they are more multifunctional, they have political executives as leaders and many of them do not operate in a market. So the policy advice is that administrative
reforms need to be adapted to local contexts, implying that holistic models have clear limitations. One strength of Norwegian administrative reforms is that they have been adjusted to the Norwegian tradition of openness and stakeholder involvement even if this has also changed since the heyday of corporatism.

One lesson is that most governments fail to learn sufficiently from previous administrative reforms in their country or in other countries, the reasons being that their impacts are often ambiguous, and politicians are generally more interested in launching new reforms than learning from previous ones. Another lesson is that when means-end knowledge of reforms is poor, a cautious, experimental and incremental reform style is more promising than big bang reform. In Norway, the former reform style is more common than the latter.

5 Towards an “architectonic discipline”?

To what extent PA can live up to the vision of being an architectonic and applied discipline has been a core question in the Norwegian approach. Successful deliberate institutional design requires realism with regard to analytical capacity and knowledge of cause-effect relations as well as to power relations, resources and action capabilities (Olsen, 2018).

Morten Egeberg has developed a prescriptive design model in which the criteria for selecting explanatory factors are that they, in addition to being relevant for understanding variations in decision-making behaviour, must also be manipulative and operational. He has emphasised three main groups of such factors, which might be seen as toolkits for organisational design: formal organisational structure, organisational locus and organisational demography (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

Numerous analyses based on the data from the Norwegian administrative surveys from 1976 to 2016 show systematically that structural features are most important for understanding variations in civil servants’ work related to their attitudes and decision-making behaviour. Organisational boundaries and constraints matter for the bureaucrats’ perceptions and behaviour at work, meaning that organising implies mobilising bias. Organisational affiliations, positions and tasks are important to understand the civil servants’ perceptions and decision-making behaviour: where you stand depends on where you sit. The only demographic variable that has a significant and stable effect is professional background. These findings have implications for organisational design. Knowledge of how organisational factors might be deliberately changed and
how they can influence governance processes is an important precondition for institutional design. The argument is that organisational factors can be seen as design instruments which can make a difference to public governance.

That being said, often the evidence-based knowledge about specific effects of different organisational arrangements is uncertain and the powers of reform agents are limited (Lægreid, 2018). Different organisational forms matter and affect the way public organisations operate and work in practice. However, usually there is no one-to-one relationship between organisational design and performance. Organisational structure cannot determine particular policy outcomes, but they might create biases in governance processes, making some choices more likely than others. The provable connections indicate a direction for development more than a precise statement about the strength or extent of changes in decision content when formal structures change.

The impacts of design factors are especially uncertain when we move from effect on decision-making behaviour further out in the effect chain towards societal impacts. While Egeberg mainly focuses on effects on public governance such as vertical and horizontal processes and meta-governance like reorganising, Olsen has a broader agenda on how the dynamics of institutional change and political institutions might affect democratic governance and political consequences beyond the policy process. Thus, it is important also to address the broader effect on democracy and legitimacy.

One has to accept that governance through institution building is challenging. Organisations are complex and dynamic systems, interactions between the parts might produce an outcome that is difficult to predict, and experiential learning is difficult because the future may be uncertain and ambiguous. From a democratic perspective institutional design should be about how citizens can decide how to be organised politically and about how it can enhance democratic identities among citizens. Even if there are many normative theories of political design, there is little agreement among them. Thus, there are no objective criteria for good design because goals and values will vary and the dynamic relationship between political and administrative actors in a democratic context has to be taken into consideration in organisational tool design.

6 Links and relevance to practice and teaching

Norwegian PA research has strong relevance and links to practice. One example of this is that Norway has been a frontrunner in Power Studies,
starting with the first power study in the 1970s with a special focus on public administration, followed by a second one in the 1990s. These research programmes were launched by the government and the parliament. The first power study has been characterised as the big leap forward in Norwegian political science. It brought new theory-informed empirical knowledge about how the public administration works in practice and paved the way for subsequent databases about the structure and practice of public administration which have been useful not only for research but also for practitioners and policy-makers.

Second, by introducing new concepts and approaches to the study of the political-administrative system it influenced the political and administrative leaders’ vocabulary, image and understanding of public administration more generally. Third, PA scholars have been involved in studying the processes and effect of a wide range of administrative reform policies and administrative reforms such as municipal organisations in the aftermath of the new Municipal Act in 1992, the Hospital Reform (2001), the Labour and Welfare Administration (the NAV Reform) in 2005, the Collaboration Reform (2012), the Municipal Reform (2014) and the Police Reform (2015). Fourth, PA scholars have been used as experts in different public commissions on administrative reforms and administrative policies.

Fifth, PA in Norway has also been successful in teaching, which can be seen as a result of good theoretical informed and practical and empirically inspired research. In contrast to many other European countries the study and teaching of public administration has not been singled out as an individual speciality, academically and organisationally independent of political science, democratic theory and organisational theory. The field of Public Administration in Norway has over time had a practical aim, and the research questions have grown out of specific societal problems and not merely focussed on internal management issues but also on public organisations as political organisations and institutions. Political knowledge is to a great extent pragmatic, based on experiences that citizens, politicians and bureaucrats have had when they have faced problems and conflicts. Public administration research and teaching in Norway has been a success because it has been able to combine interests for contemporary problems with interest for general issues that different political-administrative systems face.

This knowledge has been disseminated through several popular textbooks that have been widely used at Norwegian Universities and University Colleges over the years (Christensen et al., 2002, 2005). Public Administration teaching in Norway is attracting a lot of students and it produced a whole new generation of political scientists, of whom many have become civil servants
who have had a great impact on the way civil service works in practice. Since 1976 the percentage of social scientists in Norwegian ministries has increased from 4% to 30% and in central agencies from 4% in 1986 to 20% in 2016. Most of these are political scientists and many have majored in Public Administration. They also have a strong position in regional and local governments.

7 Conclusion

One main development in PA research in Norway over recent decades has been increased internationalisation. In contrast to 30 years ago, most publications are in English, and there are much stronger international networks among scholars, more participation in international conferences and also more joint international research projects and publications. Overall, this has strengthened the quality of research in the field both theoretically and empirically as well as in terms of substance. This development also makes it more difficult to distinguish a specifically Norwegian approach from the broader international one because over the years it has become more integrated into international PA research. There are still some distinguishing features, however. Norwegian research has gone beyond formal-legal categories and studied the actual practice of “living” organisations and institutions. Single factor explanations face considerable problems when their claims are confronted with empirical data. The same goes for principal-agent models, especially in transitional periods and unsettled situations. What we see in diverse empirical realities is much in contrast to the ideas of “global recipes” and simple models of administrative reforms.

Another feature of the Norwegian approach is its strong empirical orientation. The empirical focus has, however, been more on processes and decision-making than on effects and implications. There is a need for stronger evidence-based policy-making in the field of administrative studies in both Norway and elsewhere. So far, the knowledge base regarding the effects and implications of administrative reforms is rather inconclusive. Reliable data are lacking, and systematic analyses of effects are scarce. To decrease the gap between citizens’ demands on the one hand and what public administration can deliver on the other, one can either improve the performance of the public administration, reduce expectations or a combination of the two. So far, most effort has been on the performance side, but perhaps there should also be an increased focus on the demand side. One might ask if reform failure is more political than bureaucratic which might be the case if the political
institutions failed to provide clear, consistent and realistic goals and rarely allocated adequate resources to deal with the scope of the problem.

The challenge for future research in Norway is a need for more systematic comparative studies over time and across countries, administrative levels and policy areas. There is also a need for more and better studies able to analyse the dynamics of reform and change by focusing on the effects of structural reforms using a broad concept of performance. Reforms and organisational tools do work sometimes under specific conditions. Rather than an idealistic and over-optimistic approach, a more humble and modest path might be more appropriate.

In my view PA research in Norway should stick to its roots and search for theories-based empirical knowledge about living public administration, governmental institutions and democratic governance. Rather than focussing on management, administration, organisations and organising in general it should address public and political organisations. A political organisation approach should analyse the mixed order of the political-administrative system and the tensions between different governance levels such as the local, the regional, the national and the international, as well as between policy areas and between different institutional spheres such as public administration, parliament, government, courts, corporatist arrangements, media, markets and civil society (Olsen, 2018).

Public administration faces challenges regarding how to handle big transboundary “wicked issues” in which the problem structure does not overlap with the organisational structure. A critique of PA research has been that it has been too preoccupied with internal management issues and administrative techniques of public administration and neglected the larger forces at work (Roberts, 2014). There is also a need for PA to go back to its roots and address the big issues that contemporary political-instrumental systems have to deal with. We have to go beyond internal management problems and address the big wicked issues that society is facing in our time and examine the “megatrends” such as digitalisation, climate change, demography, migration, internationalisation, societal security and financial stress to explain the path taken by public administration reforms. In Norway, some ongoing comparative projects are trying to address the problems of coordination, capacity and legitimacy in wicked policy areas, such as internal security, climate change, immigration and crime.6

We also have to go beyond routine situations and business as usual and address the conditions for democratic governance in transitional periods and unsettled situations. Management matters, but how we organise also has political implications. There is a need for long-term commitments and good
access to reliable data to make progress in theoretically informed empirical studies of public organisations in democratic contexts.

Notes

1. This chapter is a revised, updated and expanded version of Lægreid (2017).
2. For more information on this database and the following please see: www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/.
6. For example, the GOVCAP project (Organising for Internal Security and Crisis Management. Building Governance Capacity and Legitimacy), the COCAL project (Coordination, Capacity and Legitimacy: Organising for Climate Change, Immigration, and the Police) and the TROPICO project (Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments).

References


