

Unpacking Nordic Administrative Reforms: Agile and Adaptive Governments

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Abstract

This article examines current reform experiences in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, focusing on the assumed Nordic administrative model. The research questions is : How do Nordic public sector executives perceive reform processes, trends, contents and management instruments? To answer these questions we apply a theory of gradual institutional change. The database is a survey of top civil servants in ministries and central agencies in 19 European countries conducted in 2012–2015 within the COCOPS project funded by the EC 7th Framework Program. We show that the Nordic countries are pragmatic and motivated reformers. There is a high level of reform activity and public involvement. The reforms aim to improve services more than cut costs. The Nordic model emerges as one that is agile and adaptive. New reform elements have been incorporated into the existing welfare state model, which accounts for differences between the five countries.

Introduction

This article addresses the core elements in the assumed Nordic administrative model – and examines how central governments incorporate various reform ideas. We take a closer look at the administrative reforms launched in the Nordic countries in recent decades. The focus is on public management reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017), in other words attempts to reorganize administrative institutions, by changing structural arrangements, procedures and management tools (Jacobsson et al., 2015; Torfing et al., 2012; Egeberg and Trondal, 2018). The reform impulses come from many directions and take many different forms, and the Nordic countries have been influenced by various contemporary governance ideas — New Public Management (NPM), New Public Governance (NPG) and a Neo-Weberian State (NWS), to name the most important ones. Variations in such administrative traditions and reforms are of critical importance for the way a nation-state deals with important societal challenges, and there may be lessons to be learned from further exploring them. The Nordic model is especially interesting because it is widely regarded as successful by international comparison. A number of comparative studies of economic and social performance have ranked the Nordic countries high on the global scale. We investigate to what extent there is a specifically Nordic model of public management reform. We examine what characterizes it, and argue that an incremental reform model is a core feature. The article more specifically asks the following questions:

- How do top civil servants perceive public management reform processes, reform trends, reform content and management instruments?
- How can we understand these reform trajectories and reform perceptions?

The article argues that reforms do not replace one another over time. Rather, new reform elements supplement existing ones through a “layering” process (Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Previous reforms do not fade away, but are instead complemented by new trends. This results in a mixed order in which there is an accumulation of different reform trends (Olsen, 2010). This links to the second research question and the empirical focus on the Nordic countries. In the latter, this mixed order supports an *agile, flexible and adaptive*

approach to public management reform, where new external ideas are wired into the existing reform pattern. Dynamic reforms lead to a dynamic response. This might partly explain the relative success of the Nordic public administration.

We understand agility as a strategy to cope with an environment characterized by high volatility, uncertainty and unpredictability, and as the ability to build and balance stability and change within the administrative system (Ansell, Trondal and Ødegaard 2017). The concept of adaptive governance is similar, whereby its starting point is the observation that governments need to be able to deal with a highly volatile environment, and it calls for ambidextrous administrations able to incorporate elements belonging to different organizational and reform types (Janssen and van der Voort 2015).

In the article we first present the theoretical approach and then describe the research design and data basis. Thereafter, we give a brief outline of the Nordic administrative context and then go on to discuss reform processes, reform content, trends and management instruments. We introduce the experiences and perceptions of top civil servants in ministries and central agencies in European countries, documented in a major survey. Accordingly, we mainly address public management reform as seen from the top of the public administration. Finally, we analyze the findings and draw some conclusions about how the Nordic countries deal with dominant reforms in the public sector.

Theoretical Approach: Administrative Reform as Layering, Agility and Adaptation

Public management reform literature has long recognized that administrative reforms are not one-dimensional. The idea of a “global public management revolution” (Kettl, 2000) where New Public Management was the dominant governance paradigm has given way to a more nuanced approach where the understanding is that historical-institutional features in each country or region shape the way reforms are implemented and public value is produced. Following from that, we would expect a sedimentation in which new and old reforms coexist, even if they are based on normative and organizational principles that are in some respects inconsistent (Christensen and Lægreid, 2009). This reflects the notion that the administrative apparatus is not perfectly integrated, coherent or monolithic; neither is it a simple blueprint of dominant international reform trends (Hammerschmid et. al., 2016). Today, there is no single set of doctrines, reform trends, administrative processes, management instruments or

organizational structures. Diverse approaches coexist within the same administrative apparatus and there is no ‘one best way’ orientation (Alford and Hughes, 2008). Instead, administrative arrangements tend to be characterized by complex and shifting repertoires of organizational structures and principles, including hybrid and combined arrangements. Therefore, we have moved beyond reform dichotomies, such as NPM or NPG, to study mixed orders characterized by a blend of reform trends and different organizational features (Olsen, 2009).

When looking at reform trajectories, we do not expect to find profound and radical change or complete replacements in the administrative apparatus, caused, for example, by external shocks or shifting dominant reform trends producing critical junctures, punctuated equilibrium and windows of opportunity for new arrangements (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Neither do we expect to see a clear institutional path-dependent development, where pre-existing organizational arrangements are reinforced (Krasner, 1988) or where internal pressure pushes the system back to a previous equilibrium (Kettl, 2004). Seeing reforms as a result of deliberate design by powerful reform agents or administrative and political executives scoring high on rational calculation and conscious organizational means-end thinking (Dahl and Lindblom, 1953) might also be an insufficient understanding of administrative reform processes.

We believe that, rather than being radical or path-dependent or based on rational design, reforms tend to be characterized by institutional syncretism – an adaptive recombination of existing and new administrative arrangements (Ansell et al., 2017). Adaptive governance has been suggested as a useful reform strategy to move towards a stable, accountable and responsive government apparatus (Brunner, 2010; Jansen and van der Voort, 2016). We expect new arrangements to be layered on top of pre-existing reforms and established structures, rather than replacing them. This enables existing administrative arrangements to be combined with new reform elements, producing multi-structured administrative apparatus and hybrid organizational arrangements (Christensen and Lægreid, 2009). The challenge is to understand the complexity of administrative reform (Hwang, 2019).

One implication is that, being neither solely path-dependent nor representative of a radical break with pre-existing arrangements, reform processes are characterized by robustness and change. That said, change cannot be seen solely as deliberate change by active reform agents, as automatically environmentally determined or as strongly path-dependent (Olsen, 2010;

Egeberg, Gornitzka and Trondal, 2016). Rather, it should be seen more as a transformative process combining external pressure, instrumental design and cultural constraints (Christensen and Lægreid, 2018). The administrative apparatus does not adapt in a simple and straightforward way, either to new steering signals or to changing external pressure. What is seen as reasonable and appropriate matters, and it constrains internal incremental adaptation (Olsen, 1997). Simultaneously, existing administrative structures create possibilities for reform, but also place restrictions on change.

To capture the complexity of macro-level reforms that encompass different administrative levels as well as policy areas, we have to go beyond a one-factor explanation. This article therefore attempts to delve deeper into what institutional change mechanisms mean for the study of public management reform. We draw upon Streeck and Thelen (2005), who characterize changes according to their degree of continuity and incrementalism. Our argument is that adaptation and gradual transformation characterizes the Nordic reform trajectory.

The three institutional change mechanisms usually reported in the literature on gradual institutional change are layering, conversion, and drift (Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Layering indicates that new institutional elements are layered on top of existing ones. In this case, new institutional elements may be introduced, but the older ones do not immediately disappear. Naturally, this can prolong an institutional change process considerably, and confusion can arise as to which institutional order prevails. In public management reform, this could for example mean that the new idea of consumer choice would be added to other opportunities for citizens. New elements are simply piled on to – or layered upon – existing elements. Conversion and drift imply that new reform elements are not blindly copied and diffused, but that they are translated and edited to fit the local context (Wedlin and Sahlin, 2017; Røvik 1996). Reforms and reform measures have to pass a compatibility test when they encounter the national or local context (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993)

Kickert and Van de Meer (2011) analyze reforms as a continuous process of sequential events, as a series of accommodations, adjustments and adaptations; an ongoing accumulation of small, slow and gradual changes, with certain more or less important “crucial events”, but not one single, radical, one-off change moment. Rather than being ideologically informed, the reforms tend to be more pragmatic, characterized by a combination of stability and change, continuous

renewal and layered change where different structural and procedural arrangements coexist and affect one another. Pragmatism has been seen as a “third way” between rational and structural approaches to reform (Farjoun, Ansell and Boin, 2015). Alford and Hughes (2008) have argued for “public value pragmatism” as the next phase in the public management framework in the sense of finding appropriate responses to different contexts and circumstances.

Thus, according to the literature, how much key actors can influence institutional change varies. Sometimes actors – for example politicians charged with making public management reform happen – can influence change processes through displacement and layering. In other instances, the actors have less power over institutional conversion or over when the importance of an institution begins to drift.

Our argument is that the Nordic countries might be a good illustration of these theoretical ideas. The Nordic countries share a number of characteristics, but there are also notable differences among them (Knutsen, 2017; Wivel and Nedregaard 2018). On the one hand, the Nordic countries are similar in many respects. They have parliamentary systems where political loyalty is a main administrative norm. The administrative apparatus is supposed to be a neutral tool for the current government and to be responsive to signals from the political leadership. They also adhere to *Rechtstaat* values such as impartiality, neutrality, fairness, predictability, due process and rule of law.

They all have well-developed administrative systems. Their administrative apparatuses are characterized by merit-based bureaucratic professionalism. They enjoy a consensus-oriented democratic tradition (Lægreid, 2017). The Nordic countries are also known as large universal welfare states with extensive public sectors, but they also allow competition, marketization and contracting out of various tasks. They enjoy a well-established cooperation between the state, civil society and the private sector through a system of integrated participation in government by stakeholders. Their decision-making style is pragmatic and collaborative. Trade unions are rather strong. There is a high level of trust in government as well as relationships based on mutual trust between politicians and the administration and between ministries and central agencies.

Ministries and semi-independent central agencies are core bodies in the central governments of

the Nordic countries and they have been around for a long time (Balle Hansen et al., 2012). The central agencies are more numerous, normally bigger than the ministries, and have overall more capacity. The Nordic countries also share a political culture underlining the central role of the state in managing society. There is a strong statist view of governance and the state-welfare orientation is strong (Painter and Peters, 2010). Civil servants' actions are generally open to scrutiny, and the transparency of and open access to government documents are high. Furthermore, the Nordic countries are ranked at the top of the scale regarding executive capacity, rule of law and control of corruption (World Bank 2016, Bertelsmanns Stiftung, 2015).

On the other hand, there are notable differences among the Nordic countries. Except for Iceland, they were not hit especially hard by the financial crisis of 2008–09. The main governing principle is ministerial responsibility, but Sweden has a dualistic system in which the central agencies are formally more independent and responsible to the cabinet as a collegium. Sweden has also taken a more radical NPM path (Christensen and Bjurstrøm, 2017). Denmark, Sweden and Finland are EU member states, while Norway and Iceland are not.

The main picture is that the different state models that the Nordic countries represent are not alternatives, but supplementary models that generate hybrid and complex arrangements (Olsen, 1988) From the literature, we know that “reform strategies matter” (Blom-Hansen, Christensen, Fimreite and Selle, 2012). However, the literature does not identify one single dominant administrative tradition. Rather, the order is mixed and does not remain stable across countries and over time, but tends to vary.

Turning to the administrative executives' assessment of the public sector reforms around 2013, we examine to what extent perceptions of recent reform trends and processes in the Nordic countries are in line with either of the reform trajectories (NPM, NPG or NWS), and how these perceptions align across the Nordic countries.

Based on this discussion we would have the follow expectations:

- The reform landscape in the Nordic countries is characterized by complexity, a combination of continuity and change and similarities and differences between the countries.

- There is not one single factor behind the perceived reform processes; they are instead driven by a combination of external and internal factors.
- The perceived reform content can be considered as a trade-off between different features.
- The perceived reform trends are a mixture of different reform packages.
- Many partly overlapping and supplementary reform instruments are used.

Research Design and Data

We approach the research questions by using data from a large-scale online survey of central government ministries and central agencies conducted in the period 2012–2015.¹ We also draw on secondary research on administrative reforms in the Nordic countries over the past decades.

We chose the Nordic countries as cases for two main reasons. Firstly, the Nordic countries have been regarded as model states when it comes to government reforms (Fukumiyama 2014). Secondly, the Nordic countries were previously described as “laggards” in the reform context. The many reforms undertaken in recent decades indicate that this has changed, however, so we wanted to examine how the Nordic countries respond to reforms today.

The survey was based on a full census of all ministries and central agencies in 19 European countries. It targeted the top three administrative levels in the ministries and the top two levels in the agencies. The data set is unique in that for the first time it provided comparative data covering all five Nordic countries. A total of 7077 top executives responded to the survey, of whom 1907 came from the Nordic countries.² This represents an overall 28.3 % response rate. The response rate for the Nordic countries was slightly higher: 35.4 %.³ The survey does not claim full representativeness, but it is nevertheless an exceptional data source, being the largest comparative executive dataset of its kind covering all the Nordic countries. Several studies have been published based on these data, and the specific design of the survey has been described in detail in comprehensive volumes such as Hammerschmid et.al. (2016) and Greve et al. (2016). The problems of equivalence, perception data, the top-level focus and the lack of time series have been recognized and addressed and represent some limitations on the data used. While recognizing these limitations, we find the data to be unique and well fitted to inform our

research interests.

The institutional layering approach to reform emphasizes that we face a more complex and hybrid governmental system and a repertoire of different organizational tools. Adding to this, there is often a loose coupling between the broad models of reform and the specific organizational tools in place, which might be linked to several models (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). We examine the recent administrative reforms by looking at perceptions of reform processes, trends, content, and the use of management instruments. We focus on the relevance of different instruments, contrasting the traditional administration with instruments more prominent under NPM, NPG and NWS. The perceptions of dominant *reform processes* can capture how organizations approach the reforms and how different actors are involved in such processes, e.g. whether they are top-down or bottom-up, driven by politicians or bureaucrats, and the level of public involvement. The perceptions of *reform trends* identify the prevalence of both NPM and post-NPM reforms in the different countries. The perceptions of *reform content* cover whether reforms are seen as consistent, comprehensive or partial, substantive or symbolic. *Management instruments* are the specific tools used by government or managers, e.g. benchmarking, performance appraisal, and strategic planning.

The analysis mostly relies on cross-sectional data from the survey of top civil servants and addresses mainly data from the respondents in the Nordic countries. To some extent, we also report differences within the Nordic family of countries, and between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe. Since the survey data only cover one particular point in time, we cannot say much about the processes leading to the observed pattern. Nevertheless, we argue that the account of the trajectories and the results from the survey taken together make a thorough analysis of the administrative reforms in the Nordic countries possible. More importantly, they enable us to assess the status of current reforms using concepts from the theory of gradual institutional change.

The data give a picture of how the reforms are perceived from the top of the central government apparatus. We do not know what the perceptions would be among ‘street-level bureaucrats’ or among public officials working in local or regional government. It is an administrative elite survey focusing on a limited selection of administrative executives at the top of central government organizations. These individuals are sometimes disconnected from the processes

going on at lower levels in the administrative apparatus and might wish to portray their organization in a positive light. They might therefore provide a biased picture of their own organization, seeing it as more favorable and presenting themselves as more responsible reformers than others would do. We have, however, no reason to believe that such bias varies systematically across countries, and our data cover top civil servants in all ministries and central agencies in many different countries.

The descriptive data are mainly presented as means for each country and for the Nordic countries together. In addition, we present OLS regressions, revealing the effects of country differences when controlling for structural factors such as administrative level, size, position and tasks. We use Sweden as a reference category.

The Views on Nordic Administrative Reforms

Reform Processes: Combining Internal and External Drivers

The survey results show that the top executives in the Nordic countries were inclined to agree on middle positions regarding *reform processes* (Table 1). This was true when they were asked to indicate whether the observed reform processes were crisis-driven or planned, contested by the unions or not, and characterized by major public involvement or not. The overall impression is that the reforms were more pragmatic and less ideological. There was also no strong overall reform pressure, either from lower-level public employees or from politicians. In line with the theory of gradual institutional change, the top civil servants did not tend to one extreme or the other, but rather applied a reform process that combined crisis-driven and planned reforms, politically driven and bureaucrat-driven reforms, union support and reform contestedness, and also high and low public involvement. On a scale from 1 to 10 the respondents clustered around 5 on most dimensions. The exception was the “top-down – bottom-up” dimension, where the reforms overall were seen as more top-down than bottom-up.

Table 1. Reform processes as perceived by top civil servants in the Nordic countries. Means.

	Nordic	D	F	I	N	S
Crisis driven – planned	5.3	5.3	5.3	4.8	5.5	5.3
Driven by politicians – driven by bureaucrats	5.1	6.0	5.4	5.8	5.0	4.0
	5.1	4.8	4.6	4.2	5.7	5.6

Contested by unions / supported by unions	4.6	3.8	4.3	2.9	5.6	5.0
No public involvement – high public involvement	3.3	3.0	2.8	4.6	4.1	3.2
Top-down – bottom up						

Question: “Please indicate your views on public sector reforms using the scale below. Public sector reforms in my policy area tend to be...”. Scale 1 – 10. Source, Lægreid and Rykkja (2016) Fig 6.1, p 113

The Icelandic reform processes were more top-down with little public involvement and less supported by the unions. In contrast, Norwegian reform processes had higher public involvement. The executives in the Nordic countries generally observed higher public involvement and more support from the unions and said that reform processes were more bureaucrat-driven and less crisis-driven than in other country families (Lægreid and Rykkja, 2016).

Reform Content: More about Service Improvement than Cost-Cutting

Regarding *reform content* (whether the reforms were considered consistent/inconsistent, comprehensive/partial, substantive/symbolic, being about cost-cutting/service improvement, and too much/not enough), the respondents also took a middle position (Table 2). On a 1–10 scale, they on average revolved around 5. A theory of gradual institutional change would expect reforms to be neither very consistent nor comprehensive. Layering would indicate that they are neither completely consistent nor very inconsistent, but somewhere in between. Incremental and gradual change would not imply very comprehensive reforms nor very partial ones, but something in between, as is the case in the data presented here.

What we see, then, are executives who largely report composite reforms that are both consistent and inconsistent, comprehensive and partial, substantive and symbolic, designed to cut costs and improve services, and seen as neither too much nor too little, but in between. This can be taken to reflect a characteristically Nordic decision-making style identified in earlier research and exemplified by terms like pragmatism, collaboration, and participation.

Table 2. Reform content as perceived by top civil servants in the Nordic countries. Means

	Nordic	D	F	I	N	S
Consistent – inconsistent	5.4	4.8	5.6	6.0	4.9	5.3

Too much – too little	5.4	5.4	5.1	5.8	5.9	5.3
Comprehensive – partial	5.3	4.4	5.4	5.2	5.3	5.6
Substantive – symbolic	4,8	4.3	5.5	5.2	4.4	4.8
Cost cutting – service improvement	4.5	4.1	3.9	3.4	5.7	5.1

Question: “Please indicate your views on public sector reforms using the scale below. Public sector reforms in my policy area tend to be...”. Scale 1 – 10. Source: Lægreid and Rykkja (2016), Fig 6.2, p. 116

The Nordic reforms are more about service improvement than about cost cutting, which is likewise more the norm in other countries in the COCOPS survey (Lægreid and Rykkja, 2016). This is especially the case for Norway.

Reform Trends: A Mixed Pattern, High Activity and Combining Different Reforms

The most important reform trends in the Nordic central governments, according to the executives, were transparency and open government, followed by digital or e-government, and collaboration and cooperation among public sector organizations (Table 3). Except for digital government, these can be said to be typical NPG reform trends. The executives from the Nordic countries seemed to place particular emphasis on these trends. At the same time, one might question whether it is correct to call these trends, since transparency and open government have a long tradition in the Nordic countries.

Table 3. Reform trends as perceived by top civil servants in the Nordic countries. Means.

	Nordic	D	F	I	N	S
Transparency	5,9	5.4	6.2	5.8	5.6	5.9
Digital- or E-Government	5,7	5.8	6.1	5.4	5.6	5.2
Collaboration and cooperation	5,6	5.3	6.2	4.9	5.2	5.6
Focusing on outcomes and results	5,6	6.0	5.9	5.1	4.9	5.5
Cutting red tape	5,4	4.6	5.6	5.2	4.9	5.6
Treatment of service users as customers	5.1	4.7	5.7	4.9	4.4	4.9
External partnerships	4.8	4.6	5.4	4.4	4.2	4.6
Flexible employment	4.7	3.4	5.3	5.1	4.6	4.3
Downsizing	4.3	5.0	4.0	5.5	3.1	4.7

Citizens' participation	4.1	3.7	4.3	3.8	3.8	4.2
Merger	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.3	3.8	3.6
Contracting out	3.6	3.3	3.8	3.4	3.3	3.7
Agencification	2.7	2.7	2.3	3.4	3.5	2.4
Privatization	2.6	2.5	2.6	2.7	2.5	2.7

Question: "How important are the following reform trends in your policy area?" Scale: 1 (Not at all) – 7 (To a large extent). Source: Lægreid and Rykkja (2016). Table 6.1, p 115

First, transparency and open government were seen as significantly more prominent in the Nordic countries. Second, downsizing is not so common in the Nordic countries. This is especially the case for Norway. In addition, digitalization and collaboration among public sector organizations were seen as important in the Nordic countries.

These results generally support the findings of other studies, namely, that NPG reform trends are becoming increasingly relevant in Europe (Wegrich and Stimac, 2014; Lægreid et al., 2015; Greve and Ejersbo, 2016). A common trend in the Nordic countries was that typical NPM reforms (privatization, agencification, and contracting out) were considered less important than NPG reform elements (digital government, transparency, citizen participation, and collaboration). The most characteristic common reform trend was transparency, while privatization was least important. Overall, most reform trends, whether NWS, NPM or NPG-oriented, scored higher among Nordic top executives than among their colleagues in the rest of Europe.

Based on these results, rather than finding support for a single, purist reform model, we see elements of a repertoire of several models in the Nordic countries. This supports the findings of Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) in their comparison of public management reform across thirteen countries. NPM reforms are intact. Some NPM reform elements, such as performance management, focusing on outcomes and results, and treating users as customers, were seen as very important. The management elements of the NPM movement were overall seen as much more important than the marketization elements. At the same time, "reducing red tape", more associated with traditional public administration reforms, was also seen as relatively important. Seen together, this generates a picture that supports the argument that public administration is a mixed order of partly overlapping, partly supplementary, and partly competing elements that have a rather compound nature (Olsen, 2010). It also reflects the finding that managerialism

has not lost its standing in the post-NPM era, although it might have shifted towards a new generation of post-NPM managerialism exemplified by “networked governance”, and may also be seen more pragmatically as only one set of tools in a larger tool bag (Painter, 2011).

In contrast to a previous picture of the Nordic countries as reluctant reformers (Olsen, 1996), they now seem to be rather active and eager. The picture that emerges is one of agile administrations, inclined to adopt new reform elements. The Nordic countries’ executives scored higher than the rest of Europe in their assessment of a number of new reform trends. This was especially the case for transparency and post-NPM reforms, such as digital government and collaboration among public sector organizations. The executives from the Nordic countries also scored high on their assessment of typical NPM reforms, such as performance management. The only major reform trend that the Nordic respondents saw as less important compared to the rest of Europe was downsizing.

Management Instruments: A Combination of Steering, Economy and Quality Tools

If we look at the more specific reform means and measures, different management instruments play an important role in carrying out reforms, and can be a critical link between reform and improved performance (Hou et al., 2003). We have grouped the different management instruments into three categories: 1) Instruments related to quality, 2) instruments related to steering and 3) instruments related to economy (Ejersbo and Greve, 2016). When examining the use of specific management instruments, the Nordic executives said they used instruments related to *steering* such as strategic planning, management by objectives, performance appraisal talks, and risk management, to a fairly large extent (Table 4).

Table 4. Perceived use of reform instruments as reported by top civil servants in the Nordic countries. Means.

	Nordic	D	F	I	N	S
<i>Instruments related to quality</i>	4.5	4.1	4.4	4.6	4.5	4.6
- Customer/user surveys	4.8	4.5	4.9	4.0	4.5	5.2
- Service points	3.7	2.9	3.6	4.7	4.0	3.4
- Quality management	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.5	4.9	4.7
- Codes of conduct	5.0	4.3	4.8	5.2	5.5	5.1
- Benchmarking	4.2	5.2	4.1	4.4	3.7	4.4

<i>Instruments related to steering</i>	5.6	5.6	5.9	4.7	5.3	5.6
- Strategic planning	5.8	5.8	5.9	5.6	5.7	5.9
- Steering by contract	4.7	5.3	5.8	3.9	3.6	4.1
- Management by objectives	5.9	5.8	6.0	5.3	5.7	6.0
- Performance appraisal talks	6.3	6.7	6.6	5.1	5.9	6.4
- Risk management	5.1	4.6	5.1	3.0	5.3	5.8
<i>Instruments related to economy</i>	4.6	4.5	4.1	4.0	3.9	5.8
- Cost accounting systems	5.1	4.6	5.0	5.2	4.1	6.0
- Decentralization of financial decisions	4.6	3.9	4.3	4.0	4.6	5.5
- Decentralization of staffing decisions	4.5	4.6	4.1	4.1	4.4	5.3
- Performance-related pay	4.1	5.0	3.3	2.9	2.7	6.2

Question: "To what extent are the following instruments used in your organization?"

Scale: 1 (not at all) – 7 (to a large extent). Based on a factor analysis of the answers from the Nordic countries the instruments were grouped into three clusters. Source: Ejersbo and Greve (2016), p. 138.

The executives from the Nordic countries also stood out in their assessment of the use of instruments related to *economy*. This is especially the case for Sweden. Both steering and economy-related instruments can be categorized as typical NPM instruments. Also, different forms of decentralization and performance-related pay were used frequently in the Nordic countries. In relation to instruments related to *quality*, the respondents from the Nordic countries reported that codes of conduct as well as customer surveys and quality management were also fairly common.

Table 4 shows, first, that a wide variety of public management instruments are in use. The Nordic countries have opted to choose from the whole "menu" and not leave anything out. This would be in line with the argument that new organizational "recipes" travel into organizations, which then try to incorporate them into their practice (Røvik, 2011). It also means that the Nordic countries have not taken on board the whole NPM concept, but have rather gradually built certain management instruments into their public management systems. This means that the Nordic countries have been able to choose the instruments they want to employ and have downplayed others, resulting in what we may call *a flexible approach* to management instruments.

Second, instruments related to quality appear to be present in the Nordic countries alongside instruments from the NPM-menu. Unlike the more clear-cut NPM model, the Nordic countries have not limited their choice of instruments to those related to the economy and steering. This reflects the fact that the Nordic countries have sought to improve and develop their welfare state models. Quality instruments can aid strategy, while steering instruments may secure the longer-term viability of the welfare state. It also corresponds well with the categorization of the Nordic countries as “modernizers” (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

Country variations matter

Using Sweden as a reference category, our regression analyses reveal that country differences have a statistically significant effect on *reform features* when controlling for structural features such as administrative level, position, size and tasks (see Table A1 and A2). Iceland and Sweden are different on all *reform process* indicators, and the difference is statistically significant. Compared with Sweden, the Icelandic reform processes were seen as more crisis-driven, bottom up and driven by bureaucrats, but also as more contested by the unions and with low public involvement. Regarding crisis-driven reform processes, Iceland is a deviant case. The Finnish processes were seen as more top-down, but also driven by bureaucrats, contested by the unions and having little public involvement. Denmark showed the same pattern as Finland except that there was no effect on top-down versus bottom-up processes. Norway also had a more bottom-up and bureaucrat-driven reform process compared with Sweden. Overall, it is difficult to see a convergent Nordic model of reform processes. There seem to be many drivers of reforms, and they have different strengths across countries. There is also a difference between the Swedish model and the other Scandinavian countries, especially regarding the processes seen as political- or bureaucrat-driven.

If we look at *reform trends* we also see statistically significant country differences when we examine the four most important reform trends. The exception is transparency, for which there is clearly a Nordic model. Overall, it is the most important reform trend in the Nordic countries. On this measure there are small differences between the Nordic countries, but large differences between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe. Regarding downsizing there are important differences between the Nordic countries, which also are statistically significant. Especially Norway scored low, while Iceland scored high. This indicates that the financial crisis, which

hit Iceland hardest, had an important impact. Regarding digital government and also performance government, all countries except for Iceland scored higher than Sweden, indicating that there is a distinct Swedish model along these two reform trends. Regarding the importance of collaboration and cooperation as a reform trend, the picture is more mixed. Finland scored higher than Sweden, while Norway and Iceland scored lower, and there were no effects for Denmark.

Regarding *reform content* there were statistically significant country effects on the cost-cutting/service improvement dimension. Iceland, Finland and Denmark scored higher than Sweden on cost-cutting, whereas Norway scored lower. The Norwegian reforms were also seen as more consistent, comprehensive, and substantive than the Swedish reforms. The effects were statistically significant.

Examining the *management instruments*, Sweden is a deviant case for instruments related to economy, such as performance pay, decentralization of financial and staffing decisions and cost accounting systems. With regard to these instruments, it is more relevant to talk about a Swedish model than a Nordic model. Regarding instruments related to quality, respondents from Norway and Iceland scored higher than those from Sweden, whereas there were no large differences between the executives in Denmark and Finland. On instruments related to steering, the executives in Finland scored significantly higher and Iceland lower than Sweden, whereas there were no differences for Norway and Denmark.

The regression analyses also show that the control variables make a difference, but have a weaker effect than country differences. Organizational level and position make a difference for reform processes. Size and administrative level matter for reform trends, reform content and management instruments, and policy area has some effects for reform content and management instruments. Overall, the main picture is that there are important country differences between the Nordic countries regarding reform processes, trends and content, as well as management instruments. Structural features such as size, administrative level and tasks also matter. This picture supports our expectations of an agile and adaptive reform trajectory in the Nordic countries, where the public administration at the same time takes contextual and situational factors into account.

A Nordic Compound and Layered Reform Model

Altogether, our analysis of reform processes, trends, content and management instruments shows that the Nordic countries have taken a rather pragmatic approach to recent public management reforms. Overall, the management components of NPM were present to a greater extent than the market components. At the same time, there was also a strong adherence to NPG reforms. The “management bureaucracy” (Hall, 2015) that previously characterized Nordic administrative reforms therefore seems to have been supplemented by NPG reforms. This supports the notion of what has been called a public value pragmatist approach, where the choice of management and reforms depends on the circumstances, such as the value being produced or the context and nature of the task, rather than on the adoption of a one-best-way orientation that fits all (Alford and Hughes, 2008). It also confirms earlier findings and testifies to the importance of historical legacy and contextual factors as well as to a trend towards more complex and hybrid reform patterns combining different reform trends (Christensen and Lægreid, 2009). Overall, our findings correspond to the expectations suggested by the theory of gradual institutional change, being characterized by layering, pragmatism and adaptation.

Revisiting our expectations, most of them are supported. First, we see neither a breakdown and replacement of earlier approaches, nor rigidity and stability. The reform trajectories reported by the Nordic executives are characterized by pragmatism, combining continuity and change, which produces gradual transformation. The overall picture is one that speaks more of system maintenance than radical change. The main result is a layering of reform elements rather than a displacement of earlier systems.

Second, there is no one-factor explanation or driver behind the perceived reform processes. Instead, there seems to be a combination of external and internal drivers. The reforms are seen neither as top-down nor as bottom-up, but as a combination of the two. They are planned, but also crisis driven. They are driven by bureaucrats as well as by politicians. They are supported as well as contested by civil service unions, and there is a rather high degree of public involvement in the reform processes. The perceived reform content is a trade-off between different features. The result is a combination of substantial and symbolic reforms, of comprehensive and partial reforms, and of consistent and inconsistent reforms. Overall, the reforms are oriented towards service improvement rather than cost-cutting.

Third, the perceptions of the reform trends reported by the Nordic executives can, taken together, be seen as an indication of there being a mixture of different reform packages in the Nordic countries, representing elements of New Public Management, New Public Governance and Neo-Weberian reforms. Different reform elements, such as contracting out, performance management, public-private partnerships and transparency, tend to overlap and can be linked to different reform packages (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Adding to that, some reform components within each package are heavily used, while others are used to a lesser extent. In the Nordic countries some NPM features, such as privatization and contracting out, were used to a lesser extent, while others, such as performance management were used more.

Fourth, our analysis shows that there are many partly overlapping and supplementary reform instruments in use. Instruments relating to quality are supplemented by instruments related to steering and to economy. Thus we see a mixture of different means and measures more or less tightly linked to overall reform trends.

Fifth, we see slightly different perceptions of reform processes, trends and reform content, as well as management instruments, among the Nordic administrations. Sweden seems to be a deviant case, scoring low on digital governance and high on economic management tools, such as decentralized financial and staff decisions, and performance management. Iceland scored high on crisis-driven reforms with low public involvement; its reforms were seen as contested by the unions and as focusing on cost-cutting and downsizing, while Norway displayed the opposite pattern. Also Finland and Denmark differed from Sweden regarding the perception of the extent of bureaucrat-driven reforms and whether they were contested by the unions and characterized by little public involvement. The only common reform trend across the five Nordic countries was transparency. Thus, it seems that reform features in the Nordic countries are very much related to contextual features, management style and administrative tradition. This is in accordance with the assumption of reforms as complex, agile and adaptive.

Our analysis shows similarities between the Nordic countries but also significant differences when it comes to administrative reforms. The Nordic countries can be characterized as modernizers with balanced performance management systems, an orientation towards decentralized public service delivery, and a renewed emphasis on whole-of-government coordination coupled with transparency initiatives. They can also be seen as modernizers when

it comes to public management reform. Management-based reforms are adopted to a great extent, but more as a carefully considered performance management reform system, which also incorporates citizens' perspectives. The result is a pragmatic performance management regime. Traditional values, such as social accountability, transparency and openness, trust, *Rechtstaat* values and professional standards are still strong, despite the fact that NPM reforms have increased marketization and efficiency concerns. A general public sector ethos seems to be strong and robust in the Nordic administrative systems.

It is also important to take the point of departure into account. Agencification has a very long history in the Nordic countries. The same goes for transparency and openness, which were on the reform agenda long before NPM became a popular reform trend. Transparency now seems to be a strong common reform trend in the Nordic countries. The same goes for increased involvement of stakeholders in the reform process, previously often labeled "corporative arrangements." Thus, our survey results indicate that the Nordic countries have adapted to changed circumstances without sacrificing their historical, institutionally induced paths of modernization. It is necessary to take into account formal structures, culture and the environment when trying to assess constraints on central actors' ability to conduct reforms. In this regard, a transformative perspective on public management reform may capture well what public sector reform in the Nordic countries is about (Christensen and Lægheid, 2007).

Schwartz (2006) differentiates between "pluck", "luck" and "stuck" when explaining reform in the Australian public sector. "Pluck" describes a situation where the government deliberately initiates reforms in order to fix institutions that have become dysfunctional owing to environmental pressure. When reforms are more endogenous and follow a certain path he talks about "stuck". A third option is "luck" and capture, that is when institutions suddenly function well owing to environmental changes. The experience of the Nordic countries to some extent resembles "stuck", whereby history and administrative traditions seem to matter. However, it is also important to recognize their more deliberate reform attempts – "pluck" – and the ability of the Nordic countries to build an agile and adaptive public sector by adapting to external changes and incorporating new reform trends. The reception of the new reforms in the Nordic countries probably also includes some "luck". At the same time, it is important to include the effects of more deliberate and planned elements when analyzing the reforms.

Conclusion

Our data clearly show that the Nordic countries can no longer be characterized as reform “laggards”. On the contrary, they have been dynamic in incorporating new external reform elements into the public sector. What we see can be understood as incremental change processes producing discontinuity rather than the breakdown and replacement of previous arrangements (Streek and Thelen, 2005). Reforms seem to have become a routine activity in which one set of reforms tends to generate a new one (Brunsson and Olsen, 1993). The administrative apparatus consists of composite institutional arrangements with partly competing views of how the public administration should be organized and structured. We face institutional syncretism and an agile and adaptive reform pattern. This tends to increase the need for continuous reforms that might lead to transformative changes over time. The reforms are not necessarily coherent, and there might be a loose coupling between big reform ideas and specific reform tools. Thus, administrative reforms should be analyzed as part of ecologies of nested and coevolving reforms (Olsen, 2010; Egeberg and Trondal, 2018). ‘Meta-reform’ concepts such as NPM, NPG or NWS can be informative, but do not take us very far. They are often not mutually exclusive terms, and the links between smaller reform tools and the big reform trajectories might be rather loose. The idea of reform phases, where new reforms replace old ones sequentially, get little support in our material. One reform idea is not simply swept away by another. Rather, our analysis indicates that the reform trends are complementary and supplementary rather than alternative.

Our analysis has further revealed a layered, complex and hybrid Nordic administrative reform model in which new reform elements are added to existing ones. The reform impulses come from many directions and take different forms. The Nordic countries have been influenced by various governance ideas. They display a modern managerial and performance management perspective on public sector reform coupled with participation and consultation, increasing awareness of the necessity of coordination in networks, and a continued emphasis on transparency. This is to some extent the Neo-Weberian State that Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) discussed, but represented in a more transformative way with an emphasis on performance and the added nuance of transparency and coordination in a whole-of-government form. A mix of reform elements is used, although managerial tools are at the forefront. The overall reform narrative is one of modernization with a combination of management, performance management, decentralization, whole-of-government, coordination in networks and

transparency. The Nordic model thus emerges as a mixed system (Olsen, 2010) combining professional governance, stakeholder engagement, legality, and the more traditional Weberian bureaucratic principles with a limited dose of market-based governance. The reforms are more system-maintaining than system-transforming, characterized by pragmatism, incrementalism and slow-motion transformation.

In sum, the Nordic countries have been active reformers, and the reform pattern stands out as complex. Both old and new institutional ideas and practices have been adopted on top of one another, but neither NPM or NPG has been abandoned. As reforms continue, governance ideas and practices endure in an ensemble. The result is not a neat and easily accessible governance structure, but a rather complex and mixed one, more difficult to understand and explain in full. Years of continuing reforms have resulted in a public sector in a constant state of transformation. The Nordic countries emerge as active, eager reformers, applying a wide repertoire of different reform means and measures. This leads us to conclude that the Nordic governments may also be characterized as truly agile and adaptive.

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Appendix:

Table A.1 Reform processes, trends and content. Linear regressions, standardized Beta coefficients.

REFORM PROCESSES	<i>Top-down/ bottom-up</i>	<i>Politically or bureaucrat- driven</i>	<i>Crisis-driven/ Planned</i>	<i>Contested or not by unions</i>	<i>Low or high public involvement</i>
<i>Country:</i>					
Norway	.11**	.16**			.07*
Denmark		.22**		-.09**	-.17**
Finland	-.13**	.23**		-.24**	-.16**
Iceland	.17**	.21**	-.10**	-.19**	-.33**
<i>Structural features:</i>					
Ministry/agency	-.07**	.08**			-.16**
Position	-.08**				-.10**
Size				.06*	
Welfare tasks	-.09**				
Economic tasks			-.05*		
<i>Demographic features:</i>					
Age				.05*	
R2	.10	.09	.01	.09	.15
Adjusted R2	.09	.08	.01	.08	.14
F	14.059	12.052	1.695	12.763	22.723
Sign.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
REFORM TRENDS	<i>Downsizing</i>	<i>Performance management</i>	<i>Transparency</i>	<i>Digital government</i>	<i>Cooperation and collaboration</i>
<i>Country:</i>					
Norway	-.27**	.12**		.17**	-.07*
Denmark	.08**	.14**		.20**	
Finland	-.11**	.21**		.40**	.26**
Iceland	.23**			.12**	-.08**
<i>Structural features:</i>					
Position				-.06*	
Size	.12**	.11**		.10**	.08*
<i>Demographic features:</i>					
Age			.08**	.08**	
Gender		.10**	.13**	.09**	.12**
Level of education				-.14**	.05*
R2	.16	.13	.08	.11	.14
Adjusted R2	.15	.12	.07	.11	.13
F	23.602	18.225	11.075	16.353	19.981
Sign.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
REFORM CONTENT	<i>Consistent/</i>	<i>Comprehensive/</i>	<i>Substantive/</i>	<i>Cost-cutting/</i>	<i>Too much/</i>

	<i>Inconsistent</i>	<i>Partial</i>	<i>Symbolic</i>	<i>Service improvement</i>	<i>Not enough</i>
<i>Country:</i>					
Norway	-.07*		-.09**	.13**	.09**
Denmark	-.06*	-.16**	-.09**	-.11**	
Finland				-.21**	-.07*
Iceland	.06*			-.20**	
<i>Structural features:</i>					
Ministry/agency	.07*	.06*	.06*		
Position	-.15**		.07*	-.10**	-.11**
Size	-.08**		-.07*	.06*	
Welfare tasks	.12**	.06*	.07*		-.08**
R2	.05	.03	.04	.12	.04
Adjusted R2	.05	.02	.03	.11	.03
F	7.037	4.07+	4.927	17.099	4.682
Sign.	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Only significant beta coefficients are reported in the table. *: Significant on .05 level; **: Significant on .01 level.

Source: Lægveid and Rykkja, Tab 6.2, page 120

Table A2 Management instruments. Linear regression, standardized Beta coefficients

<i>Management instrument</i>	<i>Instruments related to quality</i>	<i>Instruments related to steering</i>	<i>Instruments related to economy</i>
<i>Country^a:</i>			
Norway	0.087**		-0.459**
Denmark	-0.061*		-0.227**
Finland		0.158**	-0.550**
Iceland	0.124**	-0.177**	-0.310**
<i>Organizational features:</i>			
Size	0.218**	0.193**	0.129*
Ministry/agency	0.224**	0.119**	0.097**
<i>Policy area^b:</i>			
Welfare tasks			
Economic tasks	0.102**	0.082**	0.114**
R ²	0.113	0.177	0.331
Adjusted R ²	0.109	0.174	0.328
F	30.112	50.855	116.263
Sign.	0.000	0.000	0.000

^aReference: Sweden

^bReference: Traditional policy

Only significant beta coefficients are reported. Sig. level: **0.01; *0.05

Source: Ejersbo and Greve 2016, Table 7.4, page 141.

¹ The survey was conducted within a research project funded by the EU 7th Framework Programme: "Coordination of Cohesion in the Public Sector of the Future" (COCOPS). For more information about the project, the COCOPS survey and links to publications see <http://www.cocops.eu>

² The other countries were Austria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Spain and the UK. There were 335 respondents from Norway, 523 from Sweden, 703 from Finland, 200 from Iceland and 147 from Denmark.

³ The response rate was 28% in Norway, 40% in Sweden, 40% in Finland, 51% in Iceland and 19% in Denmark. The particularly low response rate for Denmark means that the results for Denmark might not be representative