

# Reserved but Principled – and Sometimes Functional: Explaining Decentralisation Preferences Among Regional Bureaucrats

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## Abstract

In recent decades, decentralisation measures have been implemented in most advanced democracies. While such reforms may be driven by subnational pressures and demands for empowerment, the central government usually has the deciding power to decentralise. Literature on regional preference has proliferated since the 1990s, though we know little of regional administrative preferences in relation to this process. As policy formulators and implementers, they are directly affected by dispersion of authority downwards, as it directly affects their organisational structures and portfolio of responsibilities. This article analyses decentralisation preferences among regional bureaucrats in Norway in the context of the 2015-2020 Regional Government Reform. Utilising an original survey and testing five explanations, the bureaucrats are generally reserved about taking on additional functions, with support for increasing their portfolio primarily explained by a principled motivation to increase regional autonomy, followed by feelings of regional attachment. Functional arguments also matter, though to a lesser extent. The bureaucrats' principled, rather than functional, attitude towards regionalisation deviates from theoretical premises of decentralisation literature, while also challenging more underlying notions of bureaucratic thinking, inviting further research into how these dynamics manifest themselves among members of the civil service.

## Introduction

Key words:  
decentralization reform,  
regional administrations,  
administrative preferences

In most states today, competences – for instances a specific welfare service – are located at the government level where they are deemed best suited and most effective when provided to the citizens. A trend of regionalisation has been documented among most advanced democracies in the decades since 1950, with particular waves of reform in the 1970s and 1990s (Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010). Further regional empowerment has continued since then, accompanied by increased scholarly attention to the regional level. A common feature of this process has been the dispersion of competences downwards from the national level (and in some cases upwards from the local level). Such a reallocation of competences affects the administrative capacities of the government levels affected, through for instance, the reorganisation of budgetary and human resources. As their jobs consist of implementing and administrating policies, political decisions and various forms of services, reforming their managerial portfolio makes regional administrations direct stakeholders in regionalisation reforms.

Upwards communication in the administrative chain of command, and the administrative- political contact at the upper echelons of a bureaucracy, is a (though not the only one) source of influence for policy formulation. In this regard, bureaucrats play important roles regarding not only policy

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implementation, but also its design, making it relevant and important to understand their reform motivations and preferences (Egeberg & Stigen, 2018). Bureaucrats' preference for certain kinds of tasks may have implications for how they respond to institutional reform. This is especially so when the design of the bureaucracy is altered, providing opportunities to shape their working environments (Gains & John, 2010, p. 456). Moreover, administrative resistance against structural reform can make implementation more difficult, and their post-reform working environments more uncertain (and vice versa). With reforms set to take place, do bureaucrats actually desire a broader portfolio of responsibilities, or do they prefer to preserve the status quo? And what factors explain such preferences?

With a documented trend of regional empowerment, particularly relating to institutional developments in the EU since the 1990s (Marks, 1993), scholars have sought to explain preferences of regional actors for a range of topics, and also developed models to explain these preferences. This literature has usually addressed topics related either to externalities, for instance regional preferences regarding the institutional arrangement of the supranational level (Tatham & Bauer, 2014b) or identifying drivers of preferences regarding norms of governance, such as what ought to be the government's role in the economy (Tatham & Bauer, 2015). It has to a lesser extent addressed preferences regarding regional institutions themselves, such as the role and scope of regional government, or attitudes towards regional institutional change.

This article seeks to address that. Utilising decentralisation theory and public administration literature, it explores Norwegian regional bureaucrats' preferences for the regionalisation of competences, plugging both a substantive and geographical gap by adding a Nordic setting to the literature, which thus far has been largely neglected.

In 2020, the Norwegian Regional Government Reform amalgamated 15 of 19 counties, forming 11 new regions, as well as transferring some new competences and administrative functions to the regional level. Initiated and implemented by the central government, and not explicitly driven by regional demands, this reform provides an opportunity to study decentralisation preferences among regional administrators outside an otherwise common setting in which such reforms are desired or demanded at the subnational level. While the attitudes of citizens and politicians towards the reform have been documented in both academic and non-academic literature, less is known about the regional bureaucrats, whose jobs, tasks, and positions were directly affected by the reform's outcome.<sup>1</sup>

Utilising original survey data collected from Norwegian regional bureaucrats during the reform process, this article explores factors that affect their desire to increase the regional portfolio of responsibilities and competences in nine policy areas.

Overall, the regional bureaucrats do not display a great desire for large-scale regionalisation of competences, indicating instead a preference for (pre-reform) status-quo arrangements. Where a desire for regionalisation is observed, it is primarily driven by a principled rather than functional dynamics. Bureaucrats

desiring increased levels of autonomy, and those highly attached to their counties are largely positive towards widening the regional portfolio. This is also true, though to a lesser extent, for administrative elites. The bureaucrats' seniority does not matter much, and when it does, its effect is more ambivalent, representing the only case where they want fewer functions located at the regional level. While improving regional public service quality is considered highly desirable, it does not affect their regionalisation preferences. It is also unaffected by their attitudes towards increased regional autonomy, indicating an overall picture of bureaucrats driven more by principles of governance and logics of identity rather than arguments pertaining to functional effects. The relative importance of these two dynamics is somewhat surprising, challenging theoretical arguments for decentralisation as well as general notions of bureaucratic thinking.

The article is structured as follows: The next section briefly summarises the 2015-2020 Norwegian Regional Government Reform. Following this, the third section outlines theoretical expectations and hypotheses, before defining data collection and research designs in the fourth section. Results are then presented, followed by discussions of central findings, with concluding remarks. The article thus contributes to our empirical knowledge of administrative preferences, shedding light on the determinants of support towards downwards dispersion of competences.

## The Norwegian Regional Reform

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the territorial structure and competence portfolio of the Norwegian counties have been subject to debate, reforms and attempts at reforms. Although periodically, various central government-appointed commissions have stressed a need to reform, the outcome has usually been minor administrative responsibility transfers to or from the regional level.<sup>2</sup>

In 2013, the newly elected minority coalition government consisting of the Conservative and Progress parties initiated a municipal amalgamation reform, relying on the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties to secure a parliamentary majority. By creating larger municipal units, the government parties claimed the regional tier to be superfluous, preferring to abolish the county governments and transfer their functions to the local level. A parliamentary majority for the abolition of the regional level has historically been non-existent, however. Moreover, wanting to decentralise functions from the central level to the counties, the Liberal and Christian Democratic parties desired a similar reform of the regional level in exchange for backing the government's municipal reform.

The government agreed, and in 2015, the Minister of Local Government and Modernisation engaged the counties' elected officials to commence processes to determine their decentralisation and amalgamation preferences. Many counties held the former as conditional for accepting the latter. The counties' competence preferences ranged from broad and general policy areas to individual and specific administrative tasks and responsibilities, while also stressing the importance of retaining the competences they already held.

Since the 1970s, administrative reforms have reallocated competences both to and from the regional level – the most significant of which was the centralisation of hospital ownership and specialist healthcare services in 2002, which had until then grown to become the largest area of responsibility for the counties.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the regional reform, the Norwegian counties' competences consisted of:

1. Secondary schools, including adult training and vocational education. This being the most significant policy area, amounting to roughly 47% of the county's expenses,
2. Public transport systems and county roads; following secondary education in significance, amounting to roughly 21% and 12% of the county's expenses, respectively,
3. Dental services,
4. Culture, including the management of lottery funds for sports facilities and cultural buildings as well as cultural heritage protection,
5. Environmental and water management authority, including allocation of fish farming licenses,
6. Regional research funds and innovation, and (7) Business and commerce related activities.

In addition to these, cross-sector and cross-level cooperation regarding the overall development and planning of the regional level also takes place.<sup>4</sup>

After the counties had expressed their decentralisation preferences, a government-appointed committee proposed a range of tasks to be transferred, which was summarised into five broad areas:

1. Commerce, Competence and Integration,
2. Culture and Cultural Heritage Protection
3. Climate, Environment and Natural Resources,
4. Health and Living, and
5. Roads and Transport.

After concluding hearings on the committee's report, the government issued a white paper laying out a list of functions they would transfer, which partly reflected those suggested by the committee. It also stipulated that further competences would be subject to review for decentralisation in the future. The government transferred functions within:

1. Business and Business-oriented Research,
2. Agriculture,
3. Roads, Transport and Related Infrastructure,
4. Competence and Integration,
5. Public Health,
6. Northern Norway (involving matters relating to the arctic area, and as such only applicable to the northern counties), and
7. Climate and Environment.

Competences subject to consideration in the future included:

1. Business and Business-oriented Research,
2. Competence and Integration,
3. Child Protective Services and
4. Culture

On 1 January 2020, the reform was implemented, amalgamating counties as well as transferring the competences. It is interesting to note that the reform was largely desired, initiated, designed, and implemented at the central level, without being grounded in regional desires. In fact, it was widely resisted at the regional level, largely due to the amalgamations, several of which happened against the counties' will. This created a context in which we may examine preferences towards regionalisation processes when they are not the result of subnational pressures, which has often been an important motivator and cause for regional reform elsewhere.

## Theoretical Framework

Since the 1990s, theoretical and empirical literature relating to preferences of regional actors has proliferated. Consequently, scholars have developed models that capture the driving forces and logics behind the trend of the empowerment of regions (Bauer, 2006; Bauer, Pitschel, & Studinger, 2010; Gains & John, 2010; Studinger & Bauer, 2012; Tatham & Bauer, 2014a; 2014b).

This literature commonly views regionalisation as a consequence of subnational and supranational institutional developments, by for instance observing regional demands for control over power dispersion, or demands for having a greater say on supranational integration measures (Tatham & Bauer, 2014a; 2014b). However, the actual power to disperse authority away from the national level often rests with the national governments themselves (Tatham & Bauer, 2016).

Moreover, the Nordic regionalism debate draws on many similar arguments as those in other European countries, which were influenced by a growing institutionalisation of regional cooperation and integration since the 1990s. Among its core characteristics is an increased focus on the regional level as an arena for political decision-making (Baldersheim & Ståhlberg, 1999). To gauge the drivers of Norwegian regional bureaucrats' decentralisation preferences, therefore, a set of hypotheses are formed based on logics that have explained preference variation in other regions. These hypotheses combine decentralisation theory and public administration literature, utilising principles and functional aspects from both, to form an overarching view of how we should expect regional bureaucrats to respond to decentralisation measures.

## Five Expectations

Descriptively, regional administrative preference literature has usually observed support for the status-quo, and no great desires to upend existing institutional arrangements and structures of governance. This is also found among Norwegian regional bureaucrats (Myksvoll 2018).

To assess the preferences among regional bureaucrats, the following section proposes five central explanatories. These have to do with theoretical and political motivations for decentralisation, the bureaucrats' positions within the administrations, and their feelings of regional territorial attachment.

### Motivations to Decentralise

The underlying theoretical reasoning for undertaking subnational territorial and administrative reforms is usually focused on increasing both the subnational government's independent decision-making capacity, as well as improving its output (public service) quality. As functions are decentralised, it increases the autonomy of the subnational level, while public services become more tailored and suited to the needs of the citizens at the local levels. These logics largely find their origins in the works of Tiebout (1956) and Oates (1972) (Alibegović & Slijepčević, 2016, p. 54). More recently, scholars have operationalised the concept of such regional authority by constructing the Regional Authority Index (Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010), in which the region's *self-rule* consists not only of its competence portfolio, but more generally the regional government's capacities to exercise its authority independently of central government.

The desire to increase subnational autonomy has been an important driving force behind regional reforms across democratic regimes, as the notion of subnational autonomy has become a "panacea" – a popular principle of governance and a normatively justified policy with little room for criticism – since the 1970s (Saito, 2008).

This relates to the second rationale motivating decentralisation. As they become subject to political and administrative management closer to the citizens, public services are improved: a rationale drawing on the notion that in order to be as efficient and effective as possible, services should be delivered at the lowest level possible, so that they become better tailored to the needs of the citizens, who are more homogenous in their needs and interests at disaggregated levels (Saito, 2008; Tiebout, 1956).

Both of these motivations were expressed by the reform's political supporters.<sup>5</sup> If we then put these arguments to regional bureaucrats as motivations to reform the regional level, how do they respond? Following general notions of bureaucratic pragmatic thinking (Aberbach, Putnam, & Rockman, 1981) and in keeping with the theoretical logics outlined above, we should expect that those who consider it important to increase regional autonomy – that is, the region's capacities for independent governance – and to improve regional public services, also support decentralisation measures.

*H1.a: The more important regional bureaucrats consider increasing regional self-rule to be, the greater their desire to allocate competences to the regional level.*

*H1.b: The more important regional bureaucrats consider improving public services to be, the greater their desire to allocate competences to the regional level.*

## Professional Motivations

A central aspect of preference formation theory in the public administration literature relates to the professional motivations and self-interests of the individual bureaucrat.

These form important determinants regarding the preferences they have and/or decisions they make, be it on the role of government in the economy (Tatham & Bauer, 2015), the prospects of job security (Bauer, Pitschel, & Studinger, 2010), preferences when the design of their institution is altered (Gains & John, 2010) or decision-making behaviour generally (Egeberg & Stigen, 2018).

In other words, a bureaucrat's position is often held as a dominant and controlling factor for explaining their attitudes and behaviour (Yoo & Wright, 1994). These propositions may effectively be summarised in what has become known as "Miles' Law": where you stand depends on where you sit (Miles, 1978), and, when introducing this logic to decentralisation reform, effectively incorporates elements of the public choice literature and the budget-maximising premise of bureaucracies (Niskanen, 1971). While this premise has been challenged, and that senior and high-ranked bureaucrats instead may prefer smaller, elite bureaus rather than heading "heavily staffed, large budget but routine, conflictual and low status agencies" (Dunleavy, 1991, p. 202), empirical observations testing these assumptions among civil servants at the subnational level have found that such preferences depend on the type of task they want to undertake within the job they have (Gains & John, 2010). Moreover, the jury is still out on the explanatory power of these conflicting premises regarding subnational bureaucrats facing competence decentralisation.

The Regional Government Reform involved significant restructuring of the regional administrations, both in terms of their geographical location and organisational structure. Amalgamating administrative organisations and taking on a wider array of responsibilities creates a new "habitus" for the bureaus affected, in which individuals will seek to position themselves according to the values characterising the social and formal hierarchies within the new and enlarged bureaus.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the impact of structural reforms on the individual bureaucrat depends on their ability to navigate and position themselves within the administration, which in turn depends on the position they hold prior to the reform.

These logics also lean on the arguments that higher-ranked civil servants (1) have more frequent contact with the political sphere of government, and that (2) their 'overarching view' of the administration is more holistic than that of the street-level bureaucrat's, thereby being able to see opportunities for altering or widening their institutions' managerial portfolio.

These logics may also apply to those without a formally higher rank than their colleagues, but with extensive experience in the administration. Based on these assumptions, the second set of explanatory tests the professional motivations of the bureaucrats in two distinct ways; through their seniority, and

their rank, assuming a relationship with decentralisation preferences in line with the budget-maximising model's premises.

*H2.a: The higher the bureaucrat's seniority, the greater the desire to allocate competences to the regional level.*

*H2.b: The higher the bureaucrat's rank, the greater the desire to allocate competences to the regional level.*

Theoretically, we should expect some level of correlation between these two factors, as higher-ranked members of the administration may also have greater seniority than their lower-ranked colleagues. To address this, issues of multicollinearity are empirically tested for in the data section.

## Attachment

The last explanatory relates to the territorial dimension of regionalisation. Long-established territorially-based communities may create common feelings of identity or belonging, which may materialise as feelings of attachment, produced and reproduced through discourses relating to the territories and communities in question (Terlouw, 2016). This may produce demands for empowerment, cultivating a 'rise of regions' (Tatham & Mbaye, 2018).

This community logic, and its effect on increasing regional authority, may arise "because individuals prefer to choose rules who share their cultural/linguistic/political norms (...) where regional community is strong, one should find more regional authority" (Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010, p. 65). The territorial dimension of subnational empowerment has been documented as an important determinant in regionalisation literature, including regional elite preferences for competence allocation in the EU system (Tatham & Bauer, 2016).

As regional government employees, the regional bureaucrats are also members of the territorial communities in which they administrate, implement and provide services. Assuming a territorial attachment is present among the bureaucrats, this should be further strengthened by the fact that their daily work consists of managing and providing services on behalf of the regional level.

If one is strongly attached to one's territorial jurisdiction, one desires to strengthen the relative importance of that territory, in this case, through allocating more functions to it at the cost of the central level. Hence, bureaucrats strongly attached to the territory in which they administrate and implement policy, can be expected to want to increase the regional level's authority through a broadening of its managerial portfolio.

*H3 – The stronger the feeling of attachment the bureaucrat has to their county, the greater the desire to allocate competences to it.*

## Data and Research Design

Original survey data collected between November 2017 and January 2018 captured a range of observables related to the bureaucrats' reform preferences.

Through the web-based tool SurveyXact, a total of 3628 county government employees in each county, excluding the capital Oslo, received a survey consisting of 41 questions by email.<sup>7</sup> Of the recipients, 1239 responded in full, yielding a total response rate of 34%. Permission for the data collection was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data's Data Protection Services, while the administrative leaders in each county were also made aware of the survey in advance. Those who had not responded after the initial distribution received two reminders at 2-week intervals. As a statistical dataset of reform preferences from all of Norway's county administrations, it is the first of its kind (Myksvoll, 2018).

To measure their decentralisation preferences, the respondents were given nine points to freely distribute between the local, regional and national government levels in nine policy areas (nine points to distribute in agriculture, nine points to distribute in climate and environment, and so on; a total of 81 points).<sup>8</sup> The policy areas were chosen based on their prevalence in the reform as possible areas where regionalisation could take place.<sup>9</sup> They were informed that the more points they allocated to a single level, the more it would entail costs and financing but also rights and responsibilities within that specific policy area. Table 1 summarises the respondent's point distribution to the regional level, and for contextual purposes also includes the number of county councils that desired competences within, or broader aspects of, each individual policy area when they made their preferences to the government.

*Table 1. Summary of dependent variables*

Policy Area	Min/Max	Mean (SD)	Median	Desired by (n/17 counties)
Agriculture	0/9	3.21 (1.81)	3	12
Climate and Environment	0/9	3.06 (1.47)	3	17
Community Development	0/9	3.67 (1.6)	3	11
Cultural Grants (Arrangements and Grant Management)	0/9	4.23 (1.85)	4	14
Cultural Institutions	0/9	3.57 (1.54)	3	9
Immigrant Integration	0/9	2.12 (1.37)	2	10
Regional Planning	0/9	5.9 (1.94)	6	8
Roads and Transport	0/9	3.82 (1.66)	3	15
Secondary Education <sup>10</sup>	0/9	6.62 (2.2)	7	10

Descriptive summary statistics of regional bureaucrats' point allocation to the regional level. Nine points distributable in each of the policy areas. N = 1239 for all policy areas.

To measure their preferences regarding the importance of increasing regional self-rule and improving regional public services, the respondents answered on an ordinal scale ranging from 1: "not important" to 5: "very important". The position-based variables were captured by the respondents' seniority in terms of years (recoded to decades), while their rank was ordered into three levels: consultant/advisor (also known as 'street-level bureaucrat'), middle-management, and management. A 10-point scale measured the respondents' feelings of attachment to their county. Table 2 summarises the central explanatory variables.

*Table 2. Summary of central explanatory variables*

Explanatory Factor	Variable Description	Min/Max	Mean (SD)	Expected Sign
Theoretical arguments for reform	How important is increasing regional self-rule to you?	1/5	4.2 (0.94)	+
	How important is improving regional (public) services to you?	1/5	4.53 (0.75)	+
Administrative position	How many years have you been employed in the county's administration?	0/4.5	1 (0.88)	+
	What is your rank in the administration?	1/3	1.31 (0.61)	+
Identity	To what degree do you feel attached to your county?	1/10	7.8 (2.13)	+

N = 1239. Control variables reported in supplementary appendix.

To account for other possible causes of regionalisation preference variation, controls at both individual and regional levels are included.

At the individual level, the control variables draw on socialisation literature commonly employed in explanatory models in preference formation literature (Yoo & Wright, 1994; Tatham & Bauer, 2015; Egeberg & Stigen, 2018). These include the bureaucrat's characteristics and background (gender, age, ideological self-placement, educational level and pathways), as well as other career observables (previous experience in the public and private sectors, and the department in which they were employed at the time of the data collection).

Lastly, the competence transfers constituted one element of the reform, the county amalgamations the other. Thus, the bureaucrats' preferences towards the amalgamations are also controlled for.

Regional level controls include county level demographic, economic and geographic variables. Through the logic of scale economic effects, territorial, economic and government size of regions is perceived to affect the efficiency and capacity the government has to take on responsibilities and tasks (Studinger & Bauer, 2012, p. 16; Tatham & Bauer, 2016, p. 2). In this sense, demographic and economic variables are measured by county population and GDP/capita.

The geographical factor is linked to the reform's amalgamations. Territorial consolidation reforms invariably create new centres and peripheries within the territories affected. In other words, county amalgamations establish new regional capitals at the expense of old centres, now turned peripheries within the new region (Lie, 2006, p. 49; 90). As such, the central explanatory variables are also controlled for by assessing the status of each pre-amalgamated county as constituting either a regional centre or periphery within the new region.

While the bureaucrats represent their distinct counties, and thus sharing a number of (observed and unobserved) characteristics according to their geographical placement, empirically testing the level of regional clustering among the bureaucrats in each policy area reveals low levels (mean = .012, max = .03 in the empty models) of intraclass correlation. In other words, on average,

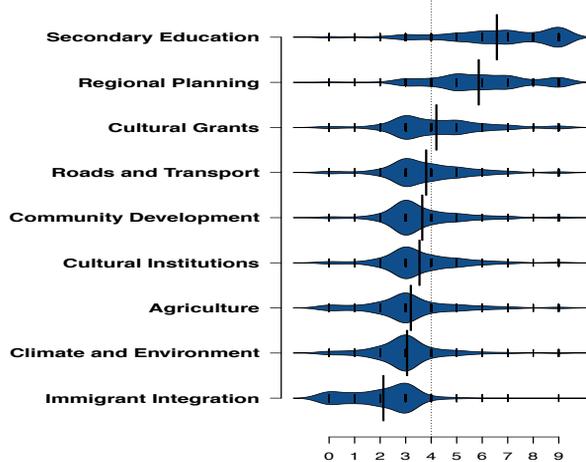
regional clustering only accounts for 1.2% of point allocation variance among the respondents. Hence, the bureaucrats' point allocation is analysed in two single level linear OLS- regression models: (1) a 'rudimentary' model, where only the central variables of interest are included ( $n = 1239$ ), and (2) a model with 30 individual and regional level controls added ( $n = 1114$ ).

Given the number of variables, the data was tested for possible issues of multicollinearity. The variance inflation factor for the full models returned overall (mean = 1.41) and individual (max = 2.73) values in all nine policy areas indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem when running the proposed models in any of them.

## Results

Figure 1 displays the bureaucrats' point allocation to the regional level in the nine policy areas. Across all areas, the point distribution averages just above 4. Clustering their point allocation around the 3-4-point range in most of the policy areas, the regional bureaucrats display no great desire to empower the regional level in policy areas for which they are not already responsible. This shows as *Secondary Education* and *Regional Planning* tops the point distribution with 6.6 and 5.8 points, respectively, forming significant outliers in the point allocation, whilst also displaying a more even distribution rather than being heavily clustered around a single point.

Figure 1. Regional bureaucrats' point allocation to the regional level



Beanplot of regional bureaucrats' point allocation to the regional level in descending order. Dashed line represents overall mean, solid lines represent individual means. Larger "beans" represent higher densities. X-axis denotes points allocated by the regional bureaucrats.  $N = 1239$ .

It is important to note that these two are policy areas in which the county governments already have a relatively high number of responsibilities; as such, while they significantly differ from the rest, this is not surprising when considering the overall impression that the bureaucrats prefer a (pre-reform) status-quo arrangement of competence allocation.

The lower point allocation in *Roads and Transport*, which is the second most important area for the counties, could be explained as a manifestation of desiring specific tasks within the area, rather than a desire for a “complete takeover”. The wider distribution of points on the two most highly desired areas may also suggest a difference of opinion between desiring new competences and merely retaining what they already have.

The distribution of points in the various policies reveals varying degrees of congruence. *Immigrant Integration* clusters around 3 points, but a considerable number of bureaucrats have allocated fewer points, while very few have gone above, making this the policy area least desired by the bureaucrats. In between this and the two top outliers, we see that the bureaucrats have largely clustered their point distribution around the 3–4-point range, though the allocation skews mostly upwards, (*Cultural Grants, Roads and Transport, Community Development, Cultural Institutions*), suggesting that a significant amount of bureaucrats are positive to receiving additional tasks in these areas, while two (*Agriculture and Climate and Environment*) are more normally distributed around the 3-point cluster.

*Agriculture and Climate and Environment* are interesting cases as a number of tasks within them are located at the County Governor, a county-level central government institution. Hence, a transfer of tasks within these areas is a more complicated matter, as they would entail institutional decentralisation, but not, in the strictest sense, regionalisation, as they would move from one regional authority to another. Whether the bureaucrats’ point allocation reflects this is uncertain.

Overall, figure 1 presents a picture of somewhat reserved regional bureaucrats; policy areas already located at the regional level are desired kept (or expanded), while other policy areas are looked on with some reservation – though not without differences of opinion.

### Drivers of competence desires

Addressing the drivers of their point allocation, the bureaucrats’ preferences are primarily driven by the “increasing self-rule” argument. In every policy area, those perceiving it important to increase regional autonomy are more positive towards regionalising competences. Following this, we see that stronger feelings of county attachment increases point allocation in just over half of the policies (*Secondary Education, Roads and Transport, Community Development, Climate and Environment, and Immigrant Integration*).

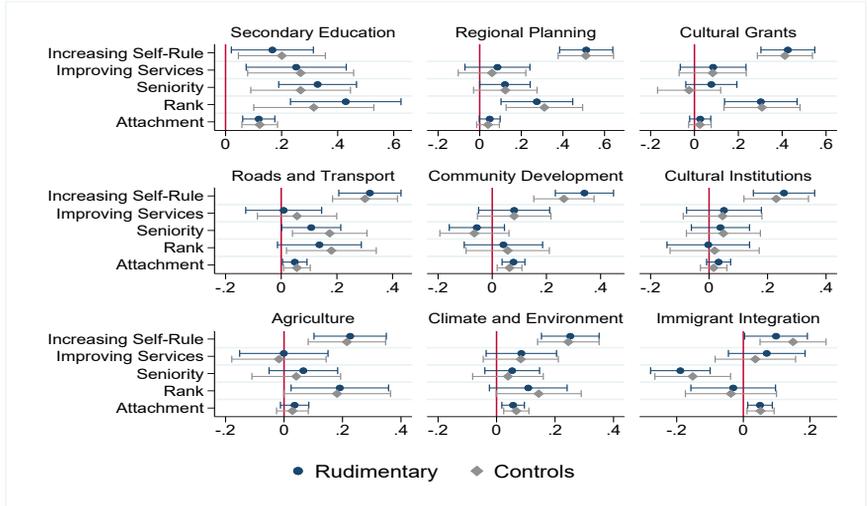
The higher the bureaucrat’s rank, the more positive they are towards increasing regional decision-making responsibilities in over half over the policy areas, though this depends on the presence of control variables in certain cases (*Secondary Education, Regional Planning, Cultural Grants, Roads and Transport* when controls are introduced, and *Agriculture* when they are not).

Just behind in prevalence, the seniority of the bureaucrats affects their point allocation in under half of the policies (*Secondary Education, Regional Planning* when controls are omitted, *Roads and Transport, and Immigrant Integration*). This is also the only instance in which we observe a negative effect. The greater

the bureaucrats’ seniority, the less they desire regional responsibility of immigrant integration measures.

Finally, although valued highly by the bureaucrats (mean 4,53 / 5), the importance of improving public services at the regional level does not significantly affect any policy areas, except in the case of *Secondary Education*.

Figure 2. Effects of central explanatory variables on regional bureaucrats’ regionalisation preferences



OLS-regression of central explanatory variables on bureaucrats’ point allocation in nine policy areas. Central explanatories tested in two models: (1) a “Rudimentary” model (N = 1239 in all policy areas), containing only the central explanatories and (2) a “Controls” model (N = 1114 in all policy areas), which includes all 30 regional and individual level controls. Policy areas ordered in descending prevalence (left-right, top-bottom) according to the bureaucrats’ point allocation in figure 1; regression coefficients on the x-axes; 95% confidence intervals displayed.

Given the number of dependent variables and the central explanatory variables’ varying effects, it makes more sense to evaluate the hypotheses in a scale-like manner rather than dichotomously rejecting or failing to reject the null hypotheses. On one end of this scale, we see that H1.a is confirmed in all cases, while at the other end H1.b is mostly rejected, except in the case of *Secondary Education*. In between these extremes, H2.a, H2.b and H3 are rejected (or confirmed) to various degrees, depending on the policy.

### Principled or Functional Autonomy?

The bureaucrats’ perceived feelings of the importance to increase regional autonomy matters most to their desires to regionalise competences. This explanatory shows the most consistent and highest degree of influence on the bureaucrats’ allocation of points to the regional rather than the local and national levels. However, its direct effects on the dependent variables cannot explain the type of correlation we are seeing.

The theoretical foundation for this explanatory variable is intricately linked with the ability for a subnational government to increase its capacities and

efficiency in administrating and delivering services (Tiebout, 1956; Oates, 1972; Saito, 2008; Hooghe, Marks, & Schakel, 2010). Adding to this the broadly accepted view in public administration literature that though they are not completely separated from the sphere of policy-making as earlier theory posited (Demir & Nyhan, 2008), bureaucrats are, through the necessity of their jobs, more pragmatically-than-ideologically thinking (Aberbach, Putnam, & Rockman, 1981). Combining decentralisation theory and public administration literature leads to an assumption that bureaucrats may support increasing levels of regional autonomy not necessarily as a principally valued good in and of itself, but rather as a function to achieve government effectiveness.

In other words, greater regional autonomy could be held as a means to an end; the assumption being that with greater autonomy comes greater effectiveness and improved services.

A way of empirically testing this assumption with the available data is through a series of two-way interaction regressions. These were run with the *increased autonomy* and *improving services* variables on the full models. Assessing if increased autonomy was seen as a means to achieving improved service quality, the latter's effect on the point allocation was observed at the different values of the former. In none of the policies did it produce a significant change in the effect observed in figure 2, leaving the improved services variable non-significant (except in the *Secondary Education* case). This indicates that the bureaucrats are treating the two notions more independently than the underlying theory holds, suggesting that the regional bureaucrats view the autonomy argument as a determining factor on its own rather than as a function to achieve something else. The results of the interaction regression can only indicate, however, as there is a lack of overlap between those who strongly desire autonomy but do not at all desire to improve services. Controlling for this still gives an indication that an interaction between the two is not taking place.

Where increasing subnational autonomy through decentralisation has become a regarded as a normatively justified policy in and of itself (Saito, 2008), it may also be motivated through a desire to increase the importance and status of the regional territories. Indeed, the regional empowerment that have taken place the last few decades has been explained as a result of increased subnational pressures, driven in part by identity and community logics (Tatham & Mbaye, 2018). The observations in figure 2 and the lack of any significant interactions between the autonomy and services arguments disentangles the observed effects from a functional attitude among the bureaucrats, suggesting instead a principled one. This is further strengthened with the second most prevalent finding in the discussion: that higher degrees of regional attachment (sometimes) increases support for regionalising competences.

### A Moderately Identity-Driven Desire

The identity and community-driven logics that have accounted for regionalisation pressures in a range of democratic polities is visible to some extent among the bureaucrats as well. Their county attachment does increase

support for competence regionalisation in several policies, though where there is a significant effect, its substantive size is somewhat moderate.

While the level of county attachment is relatively high among the bureaucrats (see table 1), the general level of regional territorial sentiment is comparatively weaker in Norway than in other European countries. Although calls for a ‘Nordic regionalism’ debate have been made (Baldersheim & Ståhlberg, 1999), community attachments in Norway is predominantly found at the local rather than the regional level (Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Flo, 2015). This may help to explain the moderate effects we are seeing. Despite this, it should not be ignored as an explanatory factor, being the second most prevalent driver of the bureaucrats’ regionalisation preferences.

### Carefully optimistic elites

The bureaucrats’ rank in the administrations does in some cases lead to increased support for regionalising competences. While the effect is robust independent of controls in Regional Planning, Secondary Education and Cultural Grant Management, its effect only becomes significant through controlling factors in Roads and Transport and is oppositely moderated towards non-significance in Agriculture.

Thought supported by the budget-maximising model’s premises, the underlying logic behind administrative elites being positive towards increasing regional responsibilities could be explained by somewhat different dynamics:

1. Widening managerial responsibilities leads to a feeling of increased status. Administrative elites, overseeing the responsibilities and provisions of the services and implementations of policies thus get a greater say on the government's functions and have opportunities to become, or stay, highly placed in the post- reform bureau’s new habitus.
2. As elites, placed in the higher echelons of the administrative institutions, they have more frequent contact with politicians than the street-level bureaucrat. They also have a more ‘holistic’ view of their departments or institution, and as such could argue through functional necessity the need for additional competences. As they may not deem every policy area functionally necessary to regionalise, it could explain why some of the policy areas are affected and others are not.

To gauge the bureaucrats’ task preferences in a more detailed manner, the survey also included an open-ended response option in which they could describe tasks and functions they desired at the regional level more explicitly. To address whether the effects of rank on point allocation was explained by motivations related to increased status or functional necessity, their open responses were compared across their ranks.

The bureaucrats do not display a substantial difference across the three ranks. Their answers are similar both regarding the policies and tasks they

mention, and the arguments they make, generally pointing towards functional necessity.

If we then treat their regionalisation justifications as a constant, yet the elites appear more positive in certain areas, the explanation may be found elsewhere, such as personal self-interest through increased status. The research design limits us from fully capturing this rationale, however, as the survey did not include questions relating to the bureaucrats' job motivations (and few would openly admit to being motivated by personal status and self-interest). Hence, the assumption that this finding is due to self-interests is mostly based on inductive inference, while our empirical observations point to a regionalisation justification based on functional necessity. Our understanding of the rank-effect is then perhaps best explained by returning to the overall picture of the bureaucrats' preferences.

### Reserved but Principled (and Sometimes Functional)

For the bureaucrats to empower the regional level, the perceived importance of increasing regional autonomy matters most.

While the theoretical underpinning for this relation is interlinked with the regional governments' effectiveness, empirically testing this has revealed a more principled thinking among the bureaucrats than initially assumed.

This also relates to the community and identity logics observed in other regional preference studies, and the bureaucrats' attachment to their counties indeed plays a role when the bureaucrats distribute their points to the regional level, though to a lesser extent.

Following the principles and identity-based justifications for decentralisation, the bureaucrats' positions also matter somewhat, as higher-ranked officials are more positive to regionalising competences in certain areas, though their seniority rarely affects their preferences, and represents the only case in which we observe a negative effect.

The perceived importance of improving regional public services does not matter, neither directly as a cause of regionalisation desires, nor when treated as a functional end reached through increased levels of self-rule. This is interesting, as it conflicts with some theoretical assumptions of decentralisation and public administration theories. As the theoretical linkage between the two arguments fails to materialise empirically, the Norwegian regional bureaucrats instead seem to view increased autonomy as a desirable outcome in and of itself rather than as a function to improve public service qualities at the regional level. This leaves us with a picture of regional bureaucrats more driven by principles of governance and identity-logics rather than arguments pertaining to functional pressures, effects, and pragmatism, challenging aspects of decentralisation theories and notions of bureaucratic thinking.

## Conclusions

Since 1950, the regional level has gradually increased its importance across democratic regimes. Subnational demands for regional empowerment have often driven this process. This has not been the case in Norway. Leaving out

subnational community pressures as a force for regionalisation, the underlying rationales for undertaking regional reforms are, however, similar to those found in other countries. As direct stakeholders of regionalisation, this article has explored the regionalisation preferences among Norwegian regional bureaucrats in context of the 2015-2020 Norwegian Regional Government Reform.

A continuous strand in the public administration literature is to understand and explain the behaviour and preferences of bureaucrats (Egeberg & Stigen, 2018). Contributing to this literature, the aim of this article has been to explore the drivers of regional bureaucrats' regionalisation preferences, addressing how various dynamics affect them based on a combination of decentralisation theory and public administration literature.

A historic alteration of the regional level, the Norwegian Regional Government Reform amalgamated counties and transferred a set of functions to the regional governments. To examine the regional bureaucrats' attitudes towards this process, an original survey captured and measured a range of observables related to their desires for increasing the scope of regional responsibilities.

Generally, the bureaucrats do not display a great eagerness to regionalise competences. Instead, the pre-reform arrangement of competence placement seems most desirable. Where the bureaucrats desire more functions to the regional level, they are primarily driven by governance principles and community logics, less so by arguments relating to functional effects and pressures.

For the bureaucrats to support widening responsibilities at the regional level, their desire to increase the level of regional autonomy matters most, being consistently and positively related with the allocation of competences to the regional level.

This explanatory factor serves as a more independent dynamic than the theoretical foundations for it would suggest. Although the bureaucrats feel it is important to improve the quality of the services they provide, it does not influence their desires to regionalise more responsibilities to the regional governments. This is somewhat surprising, as the notions of increased autonomy and improved services are theoretically linked. Testing this linkage empirically, however, shows that the effect of the "improved services" argument remains insignificant across all levels of desires for increased autonomy. This indicates a more principled approach rather than a functional line of thinking among the bureaucrats than is assumed in both decentralisation theory and broader public administration literature.

It is, however, supported by the second most prevalent finding. Playing into the same dynamics as a desire to increase regional autonomy, the bureaucrats' feeling of regional attachment also increases support for regionalising competences, though to a somewhat lesser extent. Taken together, we therefore see a strong explanation for regional administrative decentralisation preferences from principles and valued norms held by the bureaucrats.

Functional explanations for desiring competence regionalisation are more ambivalent, as administrative elites and more senior members of the

administrations sometimes, though to a lesser extent, support regionalising competences within certain policy areas, but also represent the only case of a negative effect.

This is not to say that these types of explanations don't matter. Higher ranked and more senior bureaucrats can be expected to have some knowledge of which competences could – or should – be transferred to the regional level. We do not fully know, however, whether these explanatories capture the desire for increased responsibilities due to purely functional necessity or professional self-interest, though empirical observations through open-ended responses suggest the former. However, these responses do not vary distinctly from their lower ranked colleagues; as such the validity of assuming that a purely functional and not personal motivation-based argument lies behind these explanatories may be debatable, as a widened managerial portfolio also may invoke a feeling of increased personal status within the new regional administrations.

Having explored various drivers of decentralisation preferences among regional bureaucrats, the findings in this article have shed light on a “principle-functional” dynamic, showing how, when faced with decentralisation measures, regional bureaucrats are driven by the former to a larger extent than the latter. This finding challenges some notions of bureaucratic functional thinking, and invites further research into how these dynamics motivate members of the civil service.

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## Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of control variables

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Gender	1239	0.49	0.50	0	0	1
Age	1239	48.88	10.21	22	49	69
Left-Right Ideological Self-Placement	1149	2.49	1.30	1	2	5
Education: Level	1239	4.65	0.77	1	5	6
Education: Oslo	1239	1.45	0.73	1	1	3
Education: Law	1239	0.06	0.24	0	0	1
Education: Economy	1239	0.26	0.44	0	0	1
Education: Social Sciences	1239	0.30	0.46	0	0	1
Education: Humanities	1239	0.23	0.42	0	0	1
Education: Natural Sciences	1239	0.16	0.37	0	0	1
Job Experience Outside Public Sector	1238	0.71	0.46	0	1	1
Has Worked: Central State	1239	0.18	0.38	0	0	1
Has Worked: Regional State	1239	0.20	0.40	0	0	1
Has Worked: Local State	1239	0.05	0.23	0	0	1
Previous Employment in Local Government	1239	0.42	0.49	0	0	1
Current Employment: Planning	1239	0.11	0.31	0	0	1
Current Employment: Economy	1239	0.12	0.33	0	0	1
Current Employment: Legal Service	1239	0.03	0.16	0	0	1
Current Employment: IT	1239	0.06	0.25	0	0	1
Current Employment: Culture	1239	0.17	0.38	0	0	1
Current Employment: Enterprise/Industry	1239	0.10	0.30	0	0	1
Current Employment: Regional Development	1239	0.20	0.40	0	0	1
Current Employment: Education	1239	0.16	0.36	0	0	1
Current Employment: Traffic	1239	0.06	0.24	0	0	1
Current Employment: Environment	1239	0.07	0.25	0	0	1
Stance: Forced Amalgamations	1211	2.46	1.37	1	2	5
Stance: Voluntary Amalgamations	1218	3.80	1.17	1	4	5
Population	1239	293,549.63	1.61e+05	76,149	247,084	604,368
GDP per Capita	1239	398.48	57.81	311	396	528
County Status: Periphery/Centre	1239	0.59	0.49	0	1	1

*Table A2. Correlation between central independent variables*

	Increasing Autonomy	Improving Services	Seniority	Rank	Attachment
Increasing Autonomy	1				
Improving Services	0.47 (0.00)	1			
Seniority	0.11 (0.00)	0.01 (0.80)	1		
Rank	0.13 (0.00)	0.09 (0.00)	0.12 (0.00)	1	
Attachment	0.20 (0.00)	0.11 (0.00)	0.19 (0.00)	0.06 (0.04)	1

Correlation matrix of central independent variables. Correlation coefficients with significance levels in brackets.

*Table A3. Correlation between dependent variables*

	Regional planning	Agri- culture	Inte- gration	Cultural grants	Cultural Institu- tions	Roads and Trans- port	Climate and Environ- ment	Secund- ary Educa- tion
Regional Planning	1							
Agri- culture	0.26 (0.00)	1						
Inte- gration	-0.02 (0.57)	0.20 (0.00)	1					
Cultural grants	0.41 (0.00)	0.31 (0.00)	0.08 (0.01)	1				
Cultural Institu- tions	0.29 (0.00)	0.26 (0.00)	0.14 (0.00)	0.51 (0.00)	1			
Roads and Transport	0.41 (0.00)	0.31 (0.00)	0.10 (0.00)	0.34 (0.00)	0.34 (0.00)	1		
Climate and Environ- ment	0.27 (0.00)	0.33 (0.00)	0.16 (0.00)	0.28 (0.00)	0.26 (0.00)	0.41 (0.00)	1	
Secondary Education	0.40 (0.00)	0.18 (0.00)	-0.05 (0.07)	0.31 (0.00)	0.23 (0.00)	0.30 (0.00)	0.10 (0.00)	1
Com- munity Develop- ment	0.45 (0.00)	0.27 (0.00)	0.12 (0.00)	0.37 (0.00)	0.35 (0.00)	0.40 (0.00)	0.29 (0.0000)	0.26 (0.00)

Correlation matrix of dependent variables. Correlation coefficients with significance levels in brackets.

Table A4. Regression tables

	Model	Increasing Autonomy	Improving Services	Seniority	Rank	Attachment	Gender	Age
Immigrant Integration	C	0.15*** (2.96)		-0.15*** (-2.62)		0.05* (2.50)		
	R	0.10* (2.04)		-0.19*** (-4.15)		0.05*** (2.66)		
Climate and Environment	C	0.25*** (4.58)				0.07*** (3.07)		
	R	0.25*** (5.02)				0.06*** (2.87)		
Agriculture	C	0.22*** (3.19)			0.19* (2.25)			
	R	0.23*** (3.59)						
Cultural Institutions	C	0.23*** (4.08)				0.06*** (2.75)		
	R	0.26*** (4.80)				0.08*** (3.65)		
Community Development	C	0.27*** (4.67)						
	R	0.34*** (6.22)						
Roads and Transport	C	0.30*** (5.06)		0.17* (2.55)	0.18* (2.19)	0.06* (2.31)		-0.02* (-2.58)
	R	0.32*** (5.59)		0.11* (2.00)		0.05* (2.18)		
Cultural Grants	C	0.41*** (6.44)			0.31*** (3.49)		0.28*** (2.63)	0.01* (1.98)
	R	0.43*** (6.81)			0.30*** (3.59)			
Regional Planning	C	0.51*** (7.52)			0.31*** (3.32)			
	R	0.51*** (7.85)		0.12* (1.96)	0.28*** (3.13)			
Secondary Education	C	0.20* (2.54)	0.27** (2.78)	0.27*** (2.96)	0.32** (2.88)	0.12*** (3.76)	-0.23 (-1.76)	
	R	0.17* (2.24)	0.25** (2.77)	0.33*** (4.64)	0.43*** (4.27)	0.12*** (4.05)		



	Model	Emp. Plan	Emp. Culture	Emp. Reg Dev	Emp. Edu	Emp. Traffic	Emp. Env	Spence: Voluntary Amalgamation	Population
Immigrant Integration	C			0.24* (2.13)	0.245 (2.03)	-			
Climate and Environment	C	-0.31* (-2.00)	-0.36** (-2.74)			-	0.40* (2.05)		
Agriculture	C			0.31* (2.06)		-0.48* (-2.07)			
Cultural Institutions	C				-0.45** (-3.26)	-			-0.00***
Community Development	C		-0.32* (-2.32)	0.33*** (2.60)	-0.46*** (-3.32)				-0.00*
Roads and Transport	C		-0.37* (-2.52)		-0.56*** (-3.85)	0.64** (3.10)			
Cultural Grants	C				-0.77*** (-4.98)	-0.49* (-2.20)			-0.00*
Regional Planning	C				-0.83*** (-5.08)				
Secondary Education	C		-0.46* (-2.34)					0.13* (2.22)	

Model	GDP/ Capita	Periphery / Centre	Constan t	N
Immigrant Integration	C		1.42* (2.27)	1114
	R		1.23*** (4.50)	1239
Climate and Environment	C		1.11 (1.67)	1114
	R		0.97*** (3.39)	1239
Agriculture	C		1.88* (2.24)	1114
	R		1.66*** (4.62)	1239
Cultural Institutions	C		2.69*** (3.85)	1114
	R		1.96*** (6.42)	1239
Community Development	C		1.35 (1.91)	1114
	R		1.26*** (4.04)	1239
Roads and Transport	C		1.69* (2.28)	1114
	R		1.77*** (5.44)	1239
Cultural Grants	C		0.00* (2.27)	1114
	R		-0.53 (-0.67)	1239
Regional Planning	C		1.36*** (3.81)	1114
	R		2.81*** (3.34)	1239
Secondary Education	C		2.49*** (6.69)	1114
	R		2.59*** (2.64)	1239
			2.95*** (6.93)	1239

\* p<0.05, \*\*\*  
p<0.01, \*\*\*\*  
p<0.001

OLS-regression tables of figure 2 in paper. R = Rudimentary model; C = Controls model. Linear regression models of all nine policy areas. Non-significant effects omitted; t statistics in parentheses.  
LR Ideology: Left-Right Ideological Self-Placement; Edu: SS = Education: Social Sciences; Edu: Hum = Education: Humanities; Emp: Plan = Current Employment: Planning; Emp: Culture = Current Employment: Culture; Emp: Reg Dev = Current Employment: Regional Development; Emp: Edu = Current Employment: Education; Emp: Traffic = Current Employment: Traffic; Emp: Env = Current Employment: Environment; Prev. Emp: Local Gov = Previous Employment in Local Government

### Sector Dimensionality

The policy areas were chosen based on their prevalence in the reform. We should theoretically expect them to correlate to a certain extent, as they all relate to policy regionalisation. As table A3 shows, this is indeed the case. To explore this, an analysis of the central independent variables was rerun with a simple additive index constructed out of the nine policy areas as the dependent variable.

*Table A5. Regression analysis of central explanatory and control variables on regionalisation index dependent variable*

Variable	Rudimentary	Controls
Increasing Autonomy	0.29*** (0.03)	0.28*** (0.04)
Improving Services	0.08* (0.04)	0.08* (0.04)
Seniority	0.06* (0.03)	
Rank	0.16*** (0.05)	0.164*** (0.05)
Attachment	0.06*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)
Left-Right Ideological Self-Placement		-0.07*** (0.02)
Edu: SS		0.19*** (0.07)
Has Worked: Central State		-0.14* (0.08)
Prev. Emp.: Local Gov.		-0.13** (0.06)
Emp. LS		0.33* (0.20)
Emp. Culture		-0.15* (0.09)
Emp. Reg. Dev.		0.14* (0.08)
Emp. Edu		-0.36*** (0.08)
Emp. Traffic		-0.20* (0.12)
Stance: Voluntary Amalgamations		0.046* (0.03)
County Status: Centre/Periphery		-0.19** (0.08)
Constant	1.739*** (0.19)	1.67*** (0.43)
N	1,239	1,114
R-squared	0.14	0.21

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

OLS-regression tables of independent variables effects on regionalisation index based on the nine policy area variables. Non-significant effects omitted; standard error in parentheses.

Edu: SS = Education: Social Sciences; Emp. LS = Current Employment: Legal Service; Emp. Culture = Current Employment: Culture; Emp. Reg. Dev. = Current Employment: Regional Development; Emp. Edu = Current Employment: Education; Emp. Traffic = Current Employment: Traffic; Prev. Emp.: Local Gov. = Previous Employment in Local Government.

Overall, the effects do not significantly alter the paper's conclusions. A desire for increased autonomy still strongly affects their regionalisation preferences, while rank and attachment also do so, though to lesser extents.

In addition to a simple additive index analysis, a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test was run to determine whether the policy areas could be broken into distinguishable underlying categories. Returning a value of 0.84, this test demonstrates suitability for an explorative factor analysis.

Table A6. Explorative factor analysis of the nine policy areas (2-factor solution)

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Regional Planning	0.7602	
Agriculture		0.5260
Immigrant Integration		0.8198
Cultural Grants	0.6839	
Cultural Institutions	0.5803	
Roads and Transport	0.6582	
Climate and Environment	0.4692	
Secondary Education	0.6538	
Community Development	0.6502	
Variance explained (%)	34	16
Cronbach's $\alpha$	0.77	0.32
Notes: Factor analysis, 2 factors with eigenvalues over 1. Analysis run specifying 2 factors after initial explorative analysis. Factor loadings > 0.4 omitted.		
Factor correlation	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1	0.9422	0.3351
Factor 2	-0.3351	0.9422

The principal factor analysis returned nine components, with the two first displaying eigenvalues > 1 (3,3 and 1,2, respectively). They accounted for cumulatively 50% of the variance (37% and 14% respectively). Hence, a two-factor solution was chosen.

Although omitting factor loadings below 0.4, the initial two-factor solution returned some overlap between the two factors. This was the case in agriculture (0.41 and 0.53 loadings in factors 1 and 2, respectively), and Climate and Environment (0.47 and 0.44 in factors 1 and 2, respectively). To “clean” the factors, the lowest values of the two were omitted. Factor 1 thus retains seven of the policy areas, while factor 2 only consists of two.

Testing the internal consistency of the two factors reveals low levels of reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.77 and 0.32, suggesting the factors are somewhat heterogeneous. Theoretically, the nine policy areas could be viewed as pertaining to national or regional/local matters. The heterogeneous nature of the two factors weakens this suspicion, however, and no further analyses of the two factors were undertaken.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Lie (2006) and Blindheim (2013) for regional political preferences towards future county structures and competences. Moreover, research projects ongoing (as of 2020) are collecting data on politicians' and citizens' views on the reform, while non-academic documentation refers to a large body of media coverage and public debates relating to the reform.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1970s, a nation-wide reform established directly elected regional representatives and their administrations, though did not specify the functions they would receive. The

regional level's portfolio was since periodically debated, and while some minor reforms have taken place, large-scale territorial reforms prior to 2020 failed to materialise (Blom-Hansen, Christiansen, Fimreite, & Selle, 2012; Flo, 2004; Selstad, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> While some counties expressed a desire to 'retake' the hospitals in the reform, this never became a realistic part of the political discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See government-appointed committee's report "Decentralization of tasks from the state to the counties" (2018, p. 23) for a more detailed summary.

<sup>5</sup> Supporters of the reform frequently made use of these arguments in various discourses and debates. Additionally, the 2013-2017 Liberal and Christian Democratic parties' manifestos make arguments pertaining to increased autonomy and improved services. When the two parties entered government in 2018 and 2019 respectively, these same arguments were also included in the expanded government declarations.

<sup>6</sup> See Bourdieu (1996) for a detailed discussion of how cultural and economic hierarchy systems affect group dynamics within the habitus (or social space).

<sup>7</sup> Oslo is classified as both a municipality and a county. Hence, there is no separate regional administration, as local government institutions also undertake county responsibilities.

<sup>8</sup> A method mirroring the design of Tatham and Bauer (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Although the overall debate during the reform's process provided some of the policy selection, the primary source was the county government's letters to the central government which outlined the policies and responsibilities they desired, sourced from the counties' websites.

<sup>10</sup> Although secondary education was an existing and important area of responsibility for the counties pre-reform, several of the tasks transferred in the reform have to do with "competence" – that is, tasks relating to adult training, education for immigrants, job training programs etc., falling within the secondary education area.