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**THE INTERACTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE TRADITION AND
ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS: THE CASE OF AGENCY
AUTONOMY**

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ABSTRACT

Comparative scholars emphasize that public administration should be understood in terms of context-bound patterns of organizing and decision-making. Agencies in the same context will display more commonalities than agencies in another context. At the same time, there is good empirical evidence for organizational-level variation in decision-making. For instance, not all agencies in one country are delegated similar levels of management autonomy. This article develops a theoretical argument about how administrative tradition and societal culture moderate the effect of organizational drivers of management autonomy. We identify the degree of uniformity embedded in administrative traditions and societal culture as key explanatory factor for this relationship. In empirical terms, the article compares the perceived management autonomy of agencies in ten European countries nested in three country clusters (Nordic, Latin-Napoleonic, Continental). The analysis reveals context-specific effects of organizational characteristics on management autonomy in government agencies.

[T]here is not, and cannot be, one best theory for explaining agency behaviour, anywhere, any time.¹

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to the debate about the relevance of macro- versus meso-level explanations for the comparative study of bureaucracy (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987; Levi-Faur, 2004). This debate revolves around the challenge of cross-country comparison under conditions of within-country variation: ‘The central problem of cross-systems comparison is how to distinguish the conditions under which there is greater variation across than within systems’ (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987: 477). Macro-level explanations are situated at the level of groups of countries or individual countries representing distinct administrative traditions (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Painter and Peters, 2010; Peters, 2008) or societal cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Verhoest, 2011). In comparative research on public sector reforms, such contextual factors are understood as ‘implementation habitats’ that filter which kinds of reform are appropriate (Bezes and Parrado, 2013; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). In the literature on the governing of agencies, macro-level explanations suggest that agencies in the same context will display more commonalities compared to agencies in dissimilar contexts (Pollitt et al., 2004).

Another strand of literature emphasizes substantial variation in the governing of agencies within similar contexts. Those studies show how agencies vary regarding formal and actual autonomy (Bach, 2014; Painter and Yee, 2011; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008); the use of management instruments (Lægreid et al., 2011; Verhoest and Wynen, 2018); and ministerial control through performance contracts (Askim, 2015;

¹ This quote is from a book that summarizes the findings of a project under the co-direction of Christopher Pollitt, who passed away in 2018 (Pollitt et al., 2004: 28). Christopher’s work has been a major source of inspiration for this paper’s authors and many others engaged in the comparative study of agencies.

Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009). Most studies aim at explaining variation in the governing of agencies as a function of organizational characteristics, and they often implicitly assume that theoretical assumptions about the drivers of variation can ‘travel’ across different country contexts.

This article bridges the on the governing of agencies with the literature on administrative traditions and societal culture. It provides a theoretical argument about the interplay of agencies’ broader environment with fundamental patterns of organizational decision-making, building upon studies of government agencies combining contextual and organizational perspectives (Bach et al., 2017; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2010; Yesilkagit and Christensen, 2010). We argue that administrative traditions may not only have a direct effect on agency management, but also interact with explanations at the organizational level.

While most scholars would agree upon the relevance of both macro- and meso-level explanations, few studies have been able to compare the relative explanatory power of both perspectives (Bach, 2014; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2010). The key insight from these studies is that country differences are not restricted to overall levels of perceived agency autonomy, but also include variation in the explanatory power of organizational variables. We investigate the relative importance of macro-level contextual factors and meso-level organizational factors for explaining agency autonomy. Moreover, we move the research frontier by theorizing how the notion of uniformity embedded in administrative traditions (Bezes and Parrado, 2013; Ongaro, 2008; Peters, 2008) and societal cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Verhoest, 2011) moderates the relevance of organizational explanations for agency autonomy.

In empirical terms, the article draws on the unique COBRA dataset (Comparative Public Organization Data Base for Research and Analysis) comprising survey data on perceived agency autonomy in ten European countries (Verhoest et al., 2012; Verhoest et al., 2018). This is possibly the largest cross-country dataset available on agencies’ actual

autonomy as perceived by agency senior executives, which allows for a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond the scope of existing comparative research.

The next section reviews the comparative public administration literature and the literature on agencies with regard to the relative importance of contextual and organizational explanations for agency autonomy. Next, we present the article's theoretical framework, which revolves around the expected effects of contextual factors, organizational factors, and their interaction on perceived agency autonomy. Then we introduce our data and methods and present our results. The article concludes with directions for further research into the context-bound nature of organizational life in the public sector.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTEXTUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPLANATIONS FOR AGENCY AUTONOMY

This section presents theoretical framework for the comparative study of agencies' management autonomy. First, it elaborates on the effect of contextual factors on agency autonomy. Second, we hypothesize direct effects of organizational characteristics on agency autonomy. Finally, we propose context-specific hypotheses about the interaction of macro-context and meso-level explanations, drawing on the idea of uniformity as a distinct context characteristic. We illustrate this analytical approach through a comparative study of agencies' perceived management autonomy, understood as agencies' ability to take actions corresponding to their own preferences in the absence of external constraints (Maggetti and Verhoest, 2014). The article focuses on personnel management autonomy (PMA), which encompasses decisions regarding agency staff such as recruitment, promotion, or salary levels. These are activities taking place in all agencies, which ensures a high level of measurement validity. Substantially, PMA is a powerful indicator of top-down political or

administrative interference in agency management, as decisions on staffing and promotion are typical ways of exercising control over agencies (Bach, 2014).

The Effects of Macro-Level Context Factors on Agency Autonomy

There is good empirical evidence that contextual factors make a significant difference for agency autonomy (Bach, 2014; Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest, 2018; Verhoest et al., 2010). To operationalize contextual differences, we distinguish between administrative tradition (Ongaro, 2008; Painter and Peters, 2010; Yesilkagit, 2010) and societal culture (Hofstede, 2001; Verhoest, 2011). Both concepts stand for contextual factors shared within ‘families’ of countries, rather than being peculiar to a single country.

Administrative tradition has been defined as a ‘historically based set of values, structures and relationships with other institutions that defines the nature of appropriate public administration within society (Peters, 2008: 118). According to Yesilkagit (2010), administrative tradition refers both to formal governance structures as well as inherited set of ideas and beliefs. Administrative traditions embody distinct ideas of what constitutes ‘good public administration’ in a given context (Bach et al., 2017). This article focuses on differences and similarities between the Continental, Latin-Napoleonic and Scandinavian administrative traditions. The former are characterized by ‘a very strong and all-encompassing body of public law governing every administrative sphere’ (Painter and Peters, 2010: 22), fostering a legalistic orientation in administrative behaviour which emphasizes uniformity and formalism (Ongaro, 2008). Those countries follow the *Rechtsstaat* tradition, which heavily relies on input-oriented control systems (Bach et al., 2017) and generally displays low levels of organizational autonomy (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

The *Rechtsstaat* tradition contrasts with common law countries adhering to a public interest model which are characterized by an *ad hoc* approach towards organizing the public

sector (Hood, 1986). Although our sample does not include any public interest countries, several observers note that the legalistic orientation in the Nordic countries has been weakened over time, placing them in between *Rechtsstaat* and public interest models (Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The Scandinavian and, to a lesser extent, the Continental traditions differ from the Latin-Napoleonic tradition as to their emphasis on subsidiarity, decentralization, and a stronger focus on self-governance which is more open for the involvement of societal actors. These aspects potentially enhance parent ministries' willingness to delegate substantial autonomy to agencies (Verhoest et al., 2010).

Moreover, we expect differences between the three country clusters based on their respective societal culture. Latin-Napoleonic countries differ from the other countries in the sample in that their societal cultures score high on power distance (i.e. high societal acceptance of unequal distribution of power) and uncertainty avoidance (i.e. members of a society feel threatened by complex or unknown situations) (Verhoest, 2011). The Nordic countries score low on both power distance and uncertainty avoidance, whereas Continental countries are in between Latin-Napoleonic and Nordic countries. Following Hofstede (2001), we hypothesize that governments in contexts characterized by high power distance and uncertainty avoidance will prefer centralized bureaucracies, uniform regulations and hierarchical leadership. Moreover, the combination of high power distance and uncertainty avoidance suggests limited empowerment of lower organizational levels and low levels of delegation of managerial flexibilities (Hofstede, 2001: 388-389). Taking these elements together, we propose a context-dominant hypothesis about a general effect of macro-context on agency autonomy.

H1_{macro}: Agencies in countries belonging to the Nordic cluster will report higher levels of autonomy compared to agencies in the Continental and the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, with agencies in the Continental cluster being in a middle position.

The Effects of Organizational Characteristics and their Interaction with Macro-Level Factors on Agency Autonomy

The next paragraphs develop context-independent hypotheses regarding the effect of organizational characteristics on agency autonomy, as well as context-specific hypotheses specifying the extent to which a given context strengthens or weakens this effect. The article addresses three sets of organizational variables that have been widely discussed in the recent literature: formal structure, cultural features, and task-related characteristics. Although administrative tradition and societal culture provide somewhat different explanations for context-specific effects of organizational characteristics, we identify the degree of uniformity in public management as an underlying dimension of both perspectives.

In the literature on administrative traditions, the notion of uniformity is primarily connected to the equal treatment of citizens, but creating a uniform administration has also been a state-building strategy, as in the case of the Latin-Napoleonic tradition (Peters, 2008). The notion of uniformity also relates to the idea of the ‘state’ as an overarching entity in continental Europe, which is different from the notion of ‘government in the Anglo-American tradition (Painter and Peters, 2010). In state-centric traditions, agencies are part of the state from which they derive their authority, whereas agencies in public interest contexts are acting ‘in their own name’ and are hardly designed according to standard legal frameworks (Hood, 1986: 186). In the societal culture literature, high degrees of power distance and uncertainty avoidance are associated with detailed regulations and hierarchical leadership (Hofstede, 2001). These attributes suggest high degrees of uniformity in perceived autonomy among agencies with similar formal-legal characteristics, as well as limited effects of other organizational-level explanations.

In much of the literature, *formal structure* is analysed as the outcome of politicians' decision to delegate tasks to the bureaucracy. This literature studies the reasons why decision-makers delegate public tasks to agencies, and why they prefer some aspects of formal structure to others (Painter and Yee, 2011). In contrast, this article studies formal structure as explanatory variable, assuming that formal structure channels agency decision-making by defining who will perform a particular activity in what way (Egeberg, 2012). In terms of understanding agency autonomy, formal structures constraining the exercise of ministerial control over agencies are particularly relevant (Christensen, 2001; Verhoest et al., 2004). This article makes assumptions about the direct and moderated effects of formal autonomy and agency size on perceived agency autonomy.

The fundamental assumption regarding the effect of *formal autonomy* on perceived autonomy is that 'choice of organizational form makes a real difference' (Bilodeau et al., 2006). To allow for systematic comparison of agencies across contexts, van Thiel (2012) proposed a typology ranging from (a) units of government, (b) departmental agencies without legal independence, (c) legally independent agencies created by statute, to (d) different types of government foundations and state-owned enterprises. Moving along the continuum from type (a) to type (d) means that agencies are subjected to less strict regulatory frameworks, potentially allowing them more (perceived) autonomy (e.g. Bach, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel, 2008). We therefore expect perceived autonomy to vary according to agency type, which is a proxy of formal autonomy. In our analysis, we distinguish between departmental agencies and legally independent agencies.

H2_{meso}: Legally independent agencies will report higher levels of autonomy than semi-autonomous agencies.

In addition, we hypothesize a moderating effect of the degree of uniformity peculiar to the agency's context on the relationship between formal and perceived autonomy. First, in

contexts with a strong *Rechtsstaat* tradition, we expect a stronger effect of agency type on perceived agency autonomy compared to other traditions (Bach et al., 2017). Moreover, in highly uncertainty-avoiding cultures, governments will minimize administrative discretion, producing similar effects. In such contexts, regulations concerning agency type and the corresponding managerial flexibilities will be more extensive. We therefore expect limited variation in perceived autonomy within the same agency type due to uniform formal regulations. Likewise, in a societal culture stressing power distance, agency types will be more clearly distinguished in terms of the formal autonomy granted to agency managers, resulting in a clear hierarchy of formal autonomy.

H2_{macro-meso}: The effect of legal independence on perceived autonomy is stronger in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster compared to the Nordic cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

Another element of formal structure is *agency size* (Egeberg, 2012). The assumption is that larger agencies – all else being equal – are in a better position to resist attempts at top-down control. Moreover, a minimum size may be considered as a precondition for obtaining autonomy, since small organizations may not have enough capacity ‘to exploit and utilize the possibilities offered by disaggregation and formal autonomy’ (Lægreid et al., 2006: 242). From a principal-agent perspective, an increase in agency size also increases information asymmetries, constraining the parent ministry’s steering efforts (Verhoest et al., 2010). The larger the agency, the lower the relative control capacity of the parent ministry, and the higher the risk of agency loss (Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009). We propose the following hypothesis:

H3_{meso}: Large agencies will report higher levels of autonomy than small agencies.

Turning to context-specific effects, we expect perceived autonomy to be similar across agencies with different sizes in contexts characterized by high degrees of uniformity.

Moreover, in contexts with high uncertainty avoidance, politicians and senior civil servants may perceive larger agencies to pose higher political risks in case of malfunctioning, since large agencies are more politically salient (Pollitt et al., 2004), which will counterbalance the expected meso-level effect of size on perceived autonomy. Hence, we propose the following context-specific effect of organizational size on de facto management autonomy:

H3_{macro-meso}: The positive effect of organizational size on perceived autonomy will be absent in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, compared to the Nordic cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

Another explanatory perspective in research on agency autonomy focuses on how *organizational culture*, i.e. norms, values, and identities, affects decision-making behaviour (Verhoest et al., 2010; Yesilkagit, 2004). From this perspective, agencies are not primarily instruments for obtaining goals, but value-bearing institutions with their own distinct identities and norms about appropriate behaviour (Selznick, 1957). Norms and values develop gradually and are transmitted through socialization. A strong organizational culture represents a ‘filter’ through which external signals are evaluated according to their effects on the organization’s stability. The effectiveness of control from superior bodies therefore depends on their compatibility with established norms and values in the agencies (Yesilkagit, 2004).

Agency age – referring to the year in which the agency was set up for the first time as an autonomous body – is clearly linked to organizational culture (Lægreid et al., 2006; Verhoest et al., 2010). The development of a distinct culture within an organization (‘institutionalization’) takes time. Thus, the older the organization is, the stronger its distinct identity, and the higher the potential for socialization of its members into a common culture.

In consequence, old organizations are more likely to successfully resist pressure from outside actors.

H4_{meso}: Old agencies will report to have more management autonomy than young agencies.

Again, the effect of agency age will be context-dependent. The difference between old and young agencies will be less pronounced in contexts where uniformity within the public sector is highly valued. Likewise, in a societal culture with high degrees of power distance, there will be a lower acceptance of organizational resistance to hierarchical ways of public management. We propose the following context-specific hypothesis:

H4_{macro-meso}: The positive effect of organizational age on perceived autonomy will be absent in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, compared to the Nordic cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

Finally, a *task perspective* on agency autonomy suggests that agencies with similar tasks will exhibit similar levels of perceived autonomy across contexts (Bouckaert and Peters, 2004; Painter and Yee, 2011; Pollitt et al., 2004; van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). The nature of the agency's main task(s) will affect how much autonomy the agency is granted by its parent ministry and how it will react towards ministerial control efforts (Binderkrantz and Christensen, 2009; Verhoest et al., 2010). A common way of conceptualizing agency task is according to activities such as direct service delivery (Bouckaert and Peters, 2004; van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014).

The reform discussion about 'hiving off public services from ministries to agencies was primarily concerned with *service delivery* functions. From a functional perspective, public service delivery involves the need for managerial flexibility to deal with varying levels of demand in terms of quality and content for public services. We therefore expect delivery

agencies to push for high levels of autonomy in their relationship with superior authorities ‘because they interact most frequently with the citizens and private organizations as users’ (Verhoest et al., 2010: 213) that demand efficient and innovative service delivery. Painter and Yee (2011) argue that the high visibility of service delivery agencies’ outputs ‘provides an ex-post control mechanism that allows for looser control over day-to-day operations’ (p. 400, see also XXXX). This kind of output control is potentially easier to apply to service delivery agencies, because their outputs are more easily measurable (Verhoest et al., 2010).

H5_{meso}: Agencies having general public service delivery as primary task will report higher levels of perceived autonomy than agencies having other primary tasks.

As to context-specific explanations, we propose that high degrees of uniformity will counterbalance task effects on perceived management autonomy. All else being equal, we expect no differences between agencies performing different tasks highly uniform contexts, whereas we expect task-specific patterns of perceived agency autonomy medium to low uniformity contexts.

H5_{macro-meso}: The positive effect of service delivery as primary organizational task on perceived autonomy will be absent in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, compared to the Nordic cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

Several authors emphasize *political salience* as a particularly relevant task characteristic for explaining agency autonomy (Bach, 2014; Dudley, 1994; Pollitt et al., 2004). Political salience is associated with agency size and a face-to-face relationship with a relatively large proportion of the public (or both). Pollitt (2005) argues that political salience may surge upwards and die back quickly, yet asserts that some issues can be regarded as politically salient on a continuous basis (e.g. healthcare). We expect that politicians have

strong incentives to exercise control over highly salient agencies, resulting in lower levels of perceived agency autonomy (Bach, 2014; Dudley, 1994).

We use policy sector as proxy for political salience and distinguish between agencies in the welfare and social policy sector and agencies in economic and other policy sectors. In welfare and social policy, the proportion of citizens with a face-to-face relationship to the agency is relatively larger than in economic or other policy sectors, where policy implementation directly targets professional groups. Agencies in the welfare and social policy sector will be most politically salient because they affect relatively more citizens (Pollitt, 2005).

H6_{meso}: Agencies within the welfare and social policy sector will report lower levels of autonomy than agencies active in other policy sectors.

Turning to context-specific effects of political salience, we propose that political salience will not affect perceived levels of managerial autonomy in contexts with strong norms of uniformity in public management, assuming that ministry-agency relations will be similar for all agencies, irrespective of the agencies' political salience.

H6_{macro-meso}: There will be no effect of operating within the welfare and social policy sector on perceived autonomy for agencies in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster compared to the Nordic cluster, with the Continental cluster holding a middle position.

DATA AND METHODS

The article's main data source is a survey conducted by the COBRA-network (Verhoest et al., 2012). The main criterion for inclusion in the population was a formal relationship with a parent ministry that may exercise control over the agency. However, the nature of the relationship may vary, reflecting different formal-legal types (van Thiel, 2012). The chief

executive of each agency was asked to complete several question on management autonomy on behalf of the entire organization. The data on independent variables (agency type, size, age, primary task and policy sector) were either coded by researchers (e.g. policy sector, agency type) or collected using the same survey and cross-checked with administrative data sources.

The COBRA data set comprises unique agency-level data covering a representative sample for each country in terms of agency type, primary tasks, ministries and policy sectors. Our analysis covers ten countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (Nordic); Belgium, Italy, and Portugal (Latin-Napoleonic); and Austria, Germany, and the Netherlands (Continental). This selection allows us to compare country clusters with a sufficiently large numbers of countries per group. There is however considerable variation in the number of observations per country due to different agency populations. To reduce the effect of these differences, we weighted the observations, using the country with the highest number of observations as a benchmark. The weights are a multiplier to make the number of observations for each country equal to the number of observations of the benchmark country.

This article's dependent variable is agencies' management autonomy as reported by chief executives, more specifically PMA (Bach, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004). This dimension of management autonomy relates to the agency's discretion to take general decisions concerning policies regarding (1) salary level, (2) rules and procedures regarding promotion, and (3) evaluation of staff without interference from ministries. For each of the three items, organizations can either have no ("0") or full autonomy ("1"). All three variables load on the same factor in a factor analysis using a polychoric matrix. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy equals 0.75, which is an acceptable degree of commonality. The Bartlett test sphericity is highly significant ($\chi^2(3)= 1436.707$, $p<0.01$), again confirming a high commonality between the three variables. In the analyses, we use a factor score as the measure for PMA.

Turning to the explanatory variables, agency type is measured via a dummy variable with the value “1” if the agency has its own legal identity vested in public or private law and “0” if the organization has no legal identity (van Thiel, 2012). Agency size (measured in FTE) and age (years since foundation) are included as continuous variables, and we use natural logarithms to correct for skewed distributions. A dummy variable is used to measure primary task, distinguishing between general public services or business and industrial services (“1”) and other tasks (“0”) encompassing regulation, exercising other kinds of public authority and policy development (see Verhoest et al., 2010: for a detailed account of those categories) (see Verhoest et al. 2010 for a detailed account of those categories). Finally, using a simplified version of the United Nation Classification of Functions of Government, we use a dummy with the value “1” for agencies active in the policy sectors of culture, education and social protection, and “0” for agencies active in economic and other policy sectors.

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the main variables. This analysis tests whether the estimation subsample is representative of the entire sample and thereby the population. A comparison of the averages and standard deviations of the subsample with the entire sample indicates no major differences, suggesting that missing values were randomly distributed. Table 1, however, indicates that agency size is slightly higher in the sample used for regressions. Nevertheless, this difference in size is distributed evenly over the entire population. The data were also tested for multicollinearity using a Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The mean VIF equals 1.34, indicating the absence of collinearity problems.

[Table 1]

ECONOMETRIC MODEL AND RESULTS

To estimate the degree of PMA we make use of a Tobit model. Some organizations do not have any degree of PMA, i.e. some observations are left censored. This restriction is taken into

account by employing Tobit models (Greene, 1997; Gourieroux, 2000). Let the latent variable y_i^* of our econometric model be $N(\mu, \sigma^2)$ and

$$y_i^* = x_i' \beta + \varepsilon_i, \quad (1)$$

Where β is the parameter vector to be estimated, x_i the vector of explanatory variables and ε_i the error term. The observed degree of PMA is

$$y_i = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } y_i^* \leq 0, \\ y_i^* & \text{if } y_i^* > 0. \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

The assumption of a Tobit model is an underlying structural model for the unobserved variable y^* . Yet we only observe $y > 0$ if the propensity to have PMA is larger than zero. If the propensity is below zero, we only observe $y = 0$. To test the robustness of the model, following Czarnitzki and Kraft (2004), we performed a fractional response model, which treats the dependent variable as a share which is bound between zero and one. The results are similar to those of the Tobit models and are available upon request.

[Table 2]

Table 2 contains the results of four models, one for the entire sample including all country clusters and one per cluster (Nordic, Latin and Continental). Model 1 allows us to assess the effects of different administrative traditions on PMA by including dummies for the different clusters. This model shows that agencies belonging to the Nordic and (to a lesser extent) the Continental cluster have a higher likelihood of reporting high PMA compared to the agencies belonging to the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, in line with our context-dominant hypothesis $H1_{\text{macro}}$. Furthermore, model 1 shows the context-independent effects of the organizational variables we included. In the full sample, respondents from legally independent agencies are more likely to report higher degrees of PMA than semi-autonomous agencies. Moreover, large agencies have a higher likelihood of reporting high PMA compared to smaller organizations. Hence, legal independence and organizational size have a positive effect on perceived PMA executives, rendering support for $H2_{\text{meso}}$ and $H3_{\text{meso}}$. However, the

hypothesized context-independent effects of the other organizational variables (age and task characteristics) are not supported.

The remaining models represent the results of the analysis per country-cluster, which allow us to test context-dependent effects of organizational variables by comparing these models. First, the effect of agency type on actual autonomy is positive for agencies belonging to all three clusters. More importantly, adjusted Wald tests show that the positive effects is significantly larger for agencies belonging to the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, compared to the two other clusters; and significantly larger for agencies belonging to the Continental cluster, compared to the Nordic cluster. These results fully support $H2_{\text{macro-meso}}$, showing a context-dependent effect of agency type. Agency size has a positive effect for PMA of agencies in the Nordic and Continental cluster, but not in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster. Although the adjusted Wald test does not show significant difference between the Nordic and Continental clusters, we find at least partial support for the context independent effect of organizational size ($H3_{\text{macro-meso}}$), as the positive effect of organizational size on PMA is absent in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster.

In the full sample, agency age had no significant effect on PMA, but when considering the separate clusters, we find a positive effect in case of agencies belonging to the Nordic cluster. This positive effect is not discernible for agencies belonging to the other clusters, which renders at least partial support for the context-dependent hypothesis on organizational age ($H4_{\text{macro-meso}}$).

As to the task-related variables, agencies with service delivery tasks report more PMA in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, while reporting less PMA in the Nordic cluster. This finding is almost the exact opposite of what we expected in $H5_{\text{macro-meso}}$. Finally, although we did not find any context-independent effect of primary task on PMA, our proxy for political salience,

this variable has a negative effect on PMA in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster. In sum, our findings do not support $H6_{\text{macro-meso}}$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article started from the observation that empirical studies explain agency autonomy either by organizational variables irrespective of context or by context without considering agency differences. We argue that scholars need to consider how context characteristics moderate the effect of organizational variables on agency autonomy. We theorize that the same organizational variable will cause more or less systematic within-system variation, depending on the relative importance of uniformity embedded in the country's administrative tradition and societal culture.

First, we find strong support for the context-dominant hypothesis. Agencies in the Nordic and – to a lesser extent – Continental clusters report significantly higher levels of autonomy compared to Latin-Napoleonic countries. The cluster dummies jointly explain 57% of the variance in management autonomy between agencies (Model 1). The strongly embedded norm of uniformity in *Rechtsstaat*-oriented administrative traditions obviously hampers a substantial delegation of managerial autonomy. Moreover, the Latin-Napoleonic cluster is characterized by relatively high levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. Those cultural traits are associated with a preference for centralistic bureaucracies and detailed regulations inhibiting the delegation of authority (Hofstede, 2001). We thus find that context clearly matters for explaining overall levels of agency autonomy.

Second, the analysis corroborates two context-independent hypotheses. Although we know that agency type is not a perfect predictor of perceived autonomy (Verhoest et al., 2004), we find that legally independent agencies report higher levels of perceived autonomy in all models. Likewise, agency size positively influences perceived autonomy in all but one

model, suggesting that formal autonomy and size are robust predictors of perceived agency autonomy in Western European countries. In contrast, we found no significant effect for agency age and task-related variables in the full sample, yet these variables have a significant effect in some of the country cluster models.

Third, in line with our theory, we find that the effect of organizational factors on perceived agency autonomy depends on contextual factors. We theorized increasing levels of uniformity in public management from the Nordic to Continental to Latin-Napoleonic countries and a corresponding decline in organizational factors' explanatory power for agency autonomy (with the exception of formal autonomy, for which we assumed the exact opposite pattern). The analysis confirmed this pattern for agency type and size, as evidenced by clear differences in the effect sizes across clusters. Moreover, we only find a significant effect for agency age in the Nordic cluster, where we expected the highest level of variation explained by organizational factors.

However, several findings put question marks behind the lessons we draw above. The context-dependent hypothesis on service delivery as primary task is rejected as we find contradictory results. Likewise, we find context-specific effects of policy sector, our proxy for political salience, only in the Latin-Napoleonic cluster, but not in the other clusters. Those results resonate with earlier research findings showing that task characteristics only affect some aspects of agency governance (van Thiel and Yesilkagit, 2014). Moreover, this research shows urges for measurements of multiple tasks to provide a more accurate picture of what agencies do, but this was not possible with our cross-country dataset. As to political salience, the significant effect in the Napoleonic cluster could be associated with the relatively more hierarchical nature of those countries, which implies a stronger effect of political considerations on agency autonomy. At the very least, this suggests that uniformity is only one among several contextual dimensions moderating the effect of organizational characteristics on perceived agency autonomy.

A second remarkable finding is that the context-dependent hypotheses hold fairly well for the Latin-Napoleonic and the Nordic cluster, whereas the differential impact of the continental tradition is less clear-cut. In the context-dependent hypotheses, the continental tradition has a middle-position because it combines a legalistic approach with levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance below the Latin-Napoleonic and above the Nordic cluster. We assumed that the impact of societal culture is related to the level of uniformity it imposes on public management. The continental administrative culture puts less emphasis on uniformity, despite its legalistic *Rechtsstaat* character. Its emphasis on subsidiarity and decentralized decision-making gives leeway for more diversity within public management, leading to less clear-cut effects of organizational variables.

Overall, our findings support theoretical accounts of the huge relevance of politico-administrative context for understanding public management (Aberbach and Rockman, 1987; Painter and Peters, 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). The choice between context-independent or context-dominant approaches in comparative public administrative research might be an idle one (Levi-Faur, 2004) as either approach leads to a loss of theoretical and empirical insights into differential effects organizational explanations. We are well-advised to use middle-range theories such as Pollitt's (2004) task-specific path dependency model to provide a realistic picture of what drives the practice of public management around the world.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Original Sample			Used Sample N=1430 (weighted)		Nordic Sample N=572 (weighted)		Latin- Napoleonic Sample N=429 (weighted)		Continental Sample N=429 (weighted)	
	Mean	Sd.	N	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.	Mean	Std. Err.
Dependents											
Personnel Management Autonomy	0.71	0.41	1334	0.69	0.02	0.91	0.01	0.46	0.03	0.64	0.03
Independents											
Type (legal identity)	0.49	0.50	1721	0.53	0.02	0.33	0.02	0.78	0.02	0.55	0.04
Size (ln)	4.84	1.90	1562	5.03	0.07	4.96	0.08	5.11	0.16	5.05	0.15
Age (ln)	2.87	1.12	1566	2.91	0.04	3.14	0.06	2.60	0.07	2.93	0.09
Primary task (services)	0.59	0.49	1312	0.59	0.02	0.58	0.02	0.59	0.04	0.61	0.04
Policy sector (culture, education, social protection)	0.38	0.48	1501	0.36	0.02	0.34	0.02	0.36	0.03	0.37	0.04
Nordic Countries											
Norway	0.09	0.29	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Finland	0.05	0.23	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Denmark	0.10	0.30	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Sweden	0.15	0.35	1726	0.10	0.01	0.25	0.02				
Latin Countries											
Belgium	0.07	0.26	1726	0.10	0.01			0.33	0.03		
Italy	0.02	0.15	1726	0.10	0.02			0.33	0.04		
Portugal	0.09	0.29	1726	0.10	0.01			0.33	0.03		
Continental Countries											
The Netherlands	0.12	0.32	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04
Austria	0.04	0.19	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04
Germany	0.04	0.20	1726	0.10	0.01					0.33	0.04

Table 2: Tobit results for perceived personnel management autonomy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Full sample	Nordic cluster	Latin- Napoleonic cluster	Continental cluster
VARIABLES	Mfx	Mfx	Mfx	Mfx
Type (legal identity)	0.446*** (0.0336)	0.197*** (0.0415)	1.270*** (0.158)	0.513*** (0.0851)
Size(ln)	0.0331*** (0.00926)	0.0291*** (0.00840)	0.0205 (0.0337)	0.0237* (0.0141)
Age(ln)	0.0146 (0.0147)	0.0183* (0.0102)	-0.0433 (0.0583)	-0.0106 (0.0273)
Primary task (services)	0.00933 (0.0376)	-0.0457* (0.0242)	0.198* (0.114)	0.0641 (0.0681)
Policy sector (culture, education, social protection)	-0.0359 (0.0340)	-0.00477 (0.0237)	-0.245** (0.113)	-0.0277 (0.0649)
Cluster dummies (Latin- Napoleonic=reference)				
Nordic cluster	0.760*** (0.0458)			
Continental cluster	0.352*** (0.0486)			
Country dummies	Not Included	Included	Included	Included
Constant	-0.200*** (0.0721)	0.576*** (0.0749)	-0.704** (0.298)	0.367*** (0.127)
Observations (weighted)	1430	572	429	429
Cragg-Uhler R ²	0.516	0.473	0.404	0.106
Joint significance cluster/country dummies	F(2.904)= 149.8***	F(3.903)= 7.99***	F(2.904)= 1.14	F(2.904)= 8.94***

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

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