

The Politics of Expert Advice

A study of governments' use of policy advisory commissions
in Norway, 1972-2018

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Summary

Contemporary governments have become increasingly dependent on expert advice. Many policy puzzles – such as climate change, migration crises, financial turmoil, and pandemics – are not easily solved unless politicians consult experts with superior and specialized knowledge. At the same time, expert dependency also engenders several dilemmas. On the one hand, delegation of policy preparation to unelected experts may imply that politicians lose control over policymaking. On the other hand, science and expertise run the risk of being politicized when entering the political sphere, as their advice may be interpreted and used to reach prevailing political interests.

Nonetheless, current research has not focused much on how politicians act when encountering expert bodies. More concretely, this thesis argues that more systematic knowledge is needed about how current political agendas, partisan interests, and other long- and short-term political goals may or may not affect governments' appointment of expert arrangements, as well as how they are subjected to control. The thesis therefore asks: To what extent and in what ways do political considerations affect governments' consultation of experts?

Theoretically, the thesis employs perspectives from the study of politics – more precisely the literature on delegation and party politics – to examine the research question. Empirically, it presents and analyses original data on Norwegian policy advisory commissions (*Norges Offentlige Utredninger* – NOU). As commissions have enabled Norwegian governments to gather scientific evidence and regulatory know-how from prominent experts and stakeholders over a period of nearly 50 years, they make a pertinent case for the topic at hand.

The four articles of the thesis investigate how various political considerations affect governments' appointment of commissions, as well as how they are subjected to control by the politicians and ministries that appoint them. Empirically, the articles use both a quantitative and a mixed method approach by drawing on self-assembled data material: A comprehensive dataset that contains information about the entire population of Norwegian inquiry commissions that submitted a report between 1972 and 2018, in addition to interviews with commission members and secretaries.

Combined, the articles suggest that politics matter for consultation of experts in many respects. For example, the thesis presents evidence suggesting that commissions are appointed more strategically over time; that politicians and bureaucrats subject commissions to control by various means; and that partisanship and the realpolitik situation matter for appointments and selection of experts. However, the thesis does not corroborate all the expectations that arise from a party politics and delegation perspective. Norwegian political parties do not use commissions to increase public support or to push their own party-political agenda, governments have jointly contributed to 'expertizing' the commission system, and commissions appointed by ministries that handles low saliency policy issues are controlled less than commissions under e.g. the Ministry of Finance.

Overall, the thesis contributes to the current literature by showing that theories of delegation and party politics may be fruitful starting points if one wants to understand the relationship between current-day politicians and experts. Furthermore, it contributes by illustrating that the political and institutional context in which a political actor operates matter for expert consultation and control. In Norway, the meritocratic administrative system and consensus-oriented political systems restrains the extent to which politicians are able and willing to politicize expert arrangements. Finally, the thesis presents one of the most comprehensive studies of Norwegian commissions to date. By elaborating on a 'state-centered' perspective on NOUs, it provides new theoretical knowledge about how politics may affect the increasingly expertized commission system.