Summary

Economic inequality and political power are more closely connected than democratic ideals in advanced societies suggest. Those who own and control large firms – the capitalist class – do not only accumulate wealth; they also accumulate influence, deploying economic resources to shape the political conditions under which they operate. They do so through a range of strategies: funding political parties, cultivating ties to policymakers, staffing government advisory bodies, and moving between positions in business and politics in ways that blur the boundary between the economic and political fields. These patterns are addressed in this thesis: how business-political ties have evolved over time, who within the capitalist class is politically active, and whether class background shapes the careers of those who circulate between political and economic power.

Norway may seem an unlikely setting for a study of economic power and political influence. It is a society with a strong welfare state, compressed wages, high social trust, and a political culture that emphasizes equality and solidarity. Yet Norway has not been exempted from the global growth in economic inequality during the past decades; research on the Norwegian case documents that wealth inequality is highly skewed, and elite recruitment is more socially restricted than was earlier believed. This paradox makes Norway a particularly instructive case: if the mechanisms connecting economic and political power operate here, they are likely to be more pervasive and durable than is commonly assumed. Historically organized around a tripartite model of cooperation between the state, employers, and trade unions, Norway has seen a partial erosion of formal corporatist structures and a shift toward less institutionalized, more individualized forms of business political engagement.

The three articles draw on different data sources and methods but share a common approach that foregrounds processes and social relations within the upper stratum of Norwegian society. Article I uses publicly available data on the boards of the 500 largest Norwegian firms and the 360 wealthiest individuals, combined with records of political donations, government advisory committee memberships, and business association boards, to map the political activities of different segments of the Norwegian capitalist class in 2019. Article II uses anonymous register data from Statistics Norway to track the political integration of Norway's 500 largest firms at four time points between 2005 and 2020, covering both formal corporatist ties and the recruitment of former politicians to corporate boards. Article III draws on anonymous register data for 326 former Norwegian political elites – ministers, members of parliament, and state

secretaries – and uses sequence analysis to map their career trajectories after leaving office, before estimating how class background shapes the probability of different professional trajectories.

The three articles produce a set of interconnected findings. Article I shows that the Norwegian capitalist class is internally divided in its political strategies: the inner circle of connected corporate directors exercise influence primarily through institutional channels – government advisory committees and business association boards – while wealthy owners exercise influence primarily through corporate donations to political parties. Despite this division of labor, the two groups are ideologically unified: over 95 percent of corporate donations go to right-of-center parties, and the largest donations originate from firms where owners and inner circle directors overlap. Article II shows that although the Norwegian corporate network is persistently sparse, business-political integration has grown substantially over the study period. The most striking trend is a substantial increase in revolving-door appointments – firms recruiting former politicians and senior civil servants to their boards – concentrated among well-connected corporate boards. This suggests that declining corporatism has not weakened business political leverage but redirected it toward more personalized channels. Article III shows that class background is the strongest predictor of post-political career success among former Norwegian political elites. Those from upper and upper-middle class origins are substantially more likely to convert their political experience into top positions in the private sector or organized interests, and do so with less career turbulence than those from working-class backgrounds.

Taken together, the findings challenge the idea that concentrated economic power and a strong welfare state are incompatible. In Norway, the capitalist class pursues political influence through multiple complementary channels, business-political integration is growing rather than declining, and the career advantages of elites with upper-class origin extend beyond sectoral boundaries. Much of this operates quietly – below the threshold of public debate and democratic scrutiny. The thesis contributes to understanding not only of how power can work in quiet ways in Norway, but why inequality in access to power persists in societies that are formally committed to political equality.