Political leadership in local councils
Comparing Norway and Denmark
(POLECO)

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1. Introduction
Recognizing the importance of political leadership for local governments’ goal attainment and problem-solving capacity, this research project aims to study current conditions for local councilors’ exercise of political leadership in Norwegian and Danish municipalities. We will explore what kind of political leadership we find among councilors, how institutional contexts impact upon local political leadership, and to what extent local political leadership is a determining factor for policy capacity. The project takes an institutional approach to the study of political leadership. At the macro level, we will analyze the impact of cross-national differences in municipal size, allocated tasks and forms and levels of state regulation in order assess the impact of constitutional factors and municipal amalgamation reforms on the ability of local politicians to exercise political leadership. At the meso level, we will examine the recent efforts of Norwegian and Danish municipalities to reorganize the institutional conditions for local policy making and assess the impact of ongoing reforms and experiments on councilors’ ability to exercise political leadership. Finally, at the micro level, we will study councilors’ perceptions of their role as local politicians in order to identify how differences in role perceptions influence the exercise of political leadership. Our ambition is to identify barriers to, and drivers of, political leadership among local councilors with a view to inspiring and guiding future reforms.

The project relates to the program plan for DEMOS by specifically addressing the relationship between local democracy and national government (Prioritized Area 4.1). By focusing on political leadership in multi-level governance systems, the project also emphasizes issues of coordination and sectorization in political and administrative work (Prioritized Area 4.2). The project will contribute in various ways to policy improvement. First, it aims to fill a gap in the research literature about how political leadership is exercised in local governments and the extent to which national regulations and other relevant institutional designs enhance or hamper the ability of local politicians to exercise political leadership, and thereby secure goal attainment and enhance the local problem-solving capacity. Evidence from the sparse research in this area (e.g. Jenssen 2010; Haga et al. 2014) points to a need to rethink the organization and exercise of local political leadership and policy making in Norway. Second, due to the central role played by local governments in service delivery in the decentralized Nordic welfare states, their local autonomy vis-à-vis central government is likely to remain restricted. By exploring the conditions of, and possibilities for, strengthening political leadership by local councilors, the project opens up for alternative sources to capacity building and local autonomy and thus complements existing theories on multi-level governance. Finally, through case studies of current cutting-edge experiments and reforms to promote political leadership among councilors, the project aims to identify promising institutional designs for organizing local political work. This is especially relevant in the context of the present Local Government Reform in Norway, which offers an excellent opportunity for local governments to rethink and reorganize the way elected representatives act out their role as politicians vis-à-vis local administrators, private stakeholders and citizens.

2. Aspects relating to the research project
2.1 Background and status of knowledge
There is a long tradition of strong local democracy in both Norway and Denmark, and elected representatives play a key role as political leaders in adapting nationally defined welfare services to local conditions (Kjellberg 1995; Goldsmith and Page 2010, Baldersheim and Smith 2011; Pierre
2.2 Approaches and hypotheses

The analytical framework for our study is illustrated in figure 1. The figure is not exhaustive, as relevant variables will vary depending on the specific analyses to be carried out (see section 3.1) and additional variables may be included later on. Our analyses of political leadership among councilors will, for example, include gender as a variable in order to investigate possible differences in how leadership roles are played out.

Below, we present our three main research questions and hypotheses, as well as the central variables included in our analytical framework.
**RQ1: What kind of political leadership do we find in Norwegian and Danish local governments?**

Political leadership is the principal variable in our project. Just like other forms of leadership, political leadership is about directing and creating change by enlisting followers willing to engage in change processes. Political leadership involves the exercise of power, but in contrast to what has been argued by Niccolò Machiavelli, Max Weber and other classical leadership theorists, recent theories of political leadership stress that it is the exercise of discursive rather than coercive forms of power that constitutes political leadership (Nye, 1990; Burns, 2003). As argued by Robert C. Tucker (1995), political leadership involves the construction of a political community with a collective political identity and destiny, and a willingness to be led. Performing this leadership task involves three main functions: the formulation of a problem diagnosis that calls for political action; the proposal of a political strategy to solve this problem; and the mobilization of support for the political leader among members of the political community. Therefore, rhetorical skills are key resources for political leaders. Burns (2003) takes this understanding of political leadership one step further, arguing that the third task is not only to mobilize support among followers, but to recruit them to participate and invest their own resources and capacities in formulating and realizing the political project. Formal authority and coercive powers, as institutionalized in formal organizational structures, can be a valuable resource for political leaders. But favourable institutions do not guarantee success, as illustrated by recurrent instances of competition for political leadership between elected politicians and civic leaders (Couto, 2010). Ultimately, this means that the political leadership carried out by elected local politicians depends on their ability to use their formal positions to exercise political leadership, that is, to join forces both with their local councils and with local citizens and stakeholders, in a shared attempt to define and solve policy problems by mobilizing all relevant and available internal and external resources.

Theories of political leadership draw a distinction between an innovative and an adaptive approach to leadership (e.g. Brooker 2010; see also Bäck et al. 2002). Innovative political leadership is leadership for significant change, and is closely associated with the diagnosis of a crisis of some sort. Innovative leadership calls for large-scale change in order to overcome threats to the political community. Adaptive leadership is more managerial in kind and consists of minor adjustments to existing practises. While recruitment of the political community and alliances are paramount in the case of innovative political leadership, the most important partners in adaptive political leadership...
are public managers. We will investigate both innovative and adaptive political leadership in local councils.

Because mayors in Denmark, and especially in Norway, have limited formal powers, local political leadership may also be enacted by other actors, such as committee leaders and other councilors (Svara 1994; Stone 1995). All political actors will therefore be investigated, as well as CEOs, with a view to capturing the apex of leadership where political and administrative leaders interact. The extensive exchange between politicians and the municipal administration makes it probable that way leadership is enacted by councilors will be heavily influenced by the behavior of the CEO (Mouritzen and Svara 2002; Jacobsen 2006). Furthermore, as illustrated in figure 1, in multi-level and multi-actor political systems, political decision-making is a result of complex interplays between regional and central government, as well as with a range of private stakeholders. Because local politicians possess a limited degree of sovereign ‘power over’ people, they must seek the ‘power to’ solve problems and achieve goals (Stone 1989; Sørensen 2006). The way local politicians enact their roles, give direction to collaborative policy processes, and facilitate and endorse the outcome of these negotiated collaborations, is therefore pivotal for local political leadership (Svara 1994; Leach and Wilson 2002; Torfing et al. 2012). The relationship between elected politicians and other governmental levels, as well as their constituencies and specific stakeholders, therefore also needs to be investigated.

To investigate how innovative and adaptive political leadership is enacted by councilors, as well as to identify possible variations in local political leadership between the two countries and between municipalities within each country, we will concentrate on the activity of conducting political leadership, rather than focusing on leadership styles. We take our point of departure in the literature on local political leadership (e.g. Svara 1994; Stone 1995; Leach and Wilson 2002; Torfing et al. 2012), and we draw on Kjær’s (2013:267) definition which emphasizes political leaders’ ability to invest political capital – understood as potential political influence – in a way that matches relative norms in a given locality and increases the leaders’ political capital. In accordance with that definition, the leadership tasks to be performed are threefold: formulating policy, devising political strategies to solve problems/implement measures; and mobilizing support within the political community. Leadership will be defined as the simultaneous and intertwined handling of all three kinds of tasks. The way specific tasks are handled may, however, also be significant, e.g. in Denmark where successful coalition building seems to be decisive in enabling mayors, whose powers are formally limited, to become quite influential in their communities (Kjær 2013:266).

The ambition of the project is to observe and collect stories about local political leadership that are embedded in specific local contexts, as well as to measure the degree of innovative and adaptive leadership in quantitative terms (see section 3.1). Few quantitative studies exist on this topic, but we will base our operationalization on the empirical measurements used by Dyhrberg-Noerregaard and Kjær (2014), which quantify the degree to which the relevant actors are involved in the performance of the three kinds of leadership tasks or functions defined above. Here, we will also consider the political economy literature, depicting political leadership in terms of conflict of interests between politicians’ partisan preferences (see for example Eslava 2011).

RQ2: To what degree does institutional context impact upon local political leadership?

The institutional context in terms of organizational structure and legal frameworks, as well as informal structures such as role perceptions, constitutes a decisive framework for political leadership. Thus, while political leadership is about handling, utilizing or even exploiting institutions to solve problems and design innovative policies, the very same institutions are likely to influence both the performance of political leadership and the incumbents’ ability to exercise leadership.
Regarding institutional context, at the macro level there are (despite many similarities, cf. section 2.3) significant differences in the legal frameworks in which local policy making takes place in the Nordic countries. Comparing Norway and Denmark, the first relevant variable is the significant difference in local government size and responsibilities that resulted from the 2007 amalgamation reform in Denmark. A key argument in favor of larger political entities is, in accordance with Dahl and Tufte (1973:138), to enhance ‘system capacity’ – that is, the problem solving capacity needed to solve major community issues (see also Dentes et al. 2014:334). Due to the municipalities’ large size and broad responsibilities, therefore, our hypothesis is that innovative political leaders in Danish local councils are more likely than their Norwegian colleagues to succeed in goal attainment and innovative problem solving in their local communities.

Furthermore, central state regulations vary significantly across policy sectors, but also across national systems, with more extensive regulations in Norway than in Denmark (e.g. Sellers and Lidström 2007; Goldsmith and Page 2010). The room for maneuver at the local level - or local autonomy - is usually determined by the ‘functions’ or tasks held by local governments as well as the degree of ‘discretion’ local governments enjoy in handling their responsibilities (e.g. Goldsmith and Page 2010: 5–7). In this project, however, we assume that local autonomy also depends on the ‘freedom to’ undertake activities and exercise an independent impact on important issues (Pratchett 2004: 363, 366, see also Kjellberg 1995). Theoretically, local autonomy do not have to be defined as freedom in relation to particular legal or other constraints imposed by national governments, but may be defined more broadly as the capacity to define and express local identity through political activity (e.g. Goldsmith 1990; Fleurke and Willems 2006). Seen from a ‘freedom from’ perspective on autonomy, one might hypothesize that political leadership in Danish local councils, which are subject to significantly less central state regulation than their Norwegian counterparts, should be most successful in solving local problems and promote local community development in accordance with local preferences. But seen from a ‘freedom to’ perspective, the hypothesis would be that innovative political leadership is likely to utilize and circumvent regulative institutions in order to attain local goals and solve problems. To investigate the impact of varying central state regulations, not only will the two countries be compared, but also more specifically two policy sectors within each country with strong and weak regulations, respectively (see section 3.1).

Turning to the institutional context at the meso level, the formal structures within each municipality are also likely to shape the performance of local political leadership (e.g. Vabo 2000; Bäck et al. 2006, Berg and Rao 2005). Local governments in Norway and Denmark are, to a large extent, free to organize their political activities. In our analytical framework (see figure 1) we have emphasized four aspects of obvious importance. The first differentiates between governmental form, where the position of ‘mayor’ is somewhat stronger in Denmark than in Norway, and where Danish mayors are formally in charge of the day-to-day running of their municipal administrations, unlike in Norwegian local governments where this is the responsibility of a so-called CEO (Mouritzen and Svara 2002: 55–66, 260; Berg og Kjær 2007:15,16). Previous research (e.g. Back et al. 2002: chap. 8), suggests that Danish mayors perform more innovative political leadership tasks than their Norwegian colleagues. How the remaining council members are affected by this, however, is a more complex issue, which we intend to examine in the project. Furthermore, while local governments in both countries adhere to a mayoral system, Norwegian local governments are allowed to replace the traditional ‘eldermen’ principle with a parliamentary government system, thereby turning the formal position of ‘mayor’ into a more symbolic function and introducing a ministerial type of government. The leadership roles available to mayors and councilors – especially those who belong to opposition parties – are therefore likely to be different in the two models. Within the traditional eldermen model, for example, other actors may also perform a role as political leaders, reducing the difference between the so-called A- and B-teams in local councils.
The remaining aspects of the institutional context to be investigated at the meso level are: the self-determined rules and procedures and practices pertaining to the different kinds of committees that are delegated power from and/or prepare cases for the council, as well as ad-hoc organization of political work in the council, where Danish local governments have experimented with different forms (Sørensen and Torfing 2013; Agger et al. 2010). It is likely that the degree of delegation from the council to committees or ad-hoc organizations, as well as the degree of involvement of citizens and stakeholders in the preparation or implementation of policy making, will shape the kind of political leadership exercised by councilors.

Finally, in order to assess the institutional context at the micro level, we will focus on differences in role perceptions. We know from research that informal community structures influence the way politicians exercise political leadership and interact with public administrators and citizens (Almond and Verba, 1980; Sørensen, 2002). Traditions, culture and values will vary both across countries and across local government borders. Moreover, role perceptions vary between mayors as well as between councilors even within the same macro and meso institutional contexts (e.g. Berg and Rao 2005; Jacobsen 2006; Kjær 2013; Willumsen 2014). We will study how local political logics of appropriateness and routines affect local councilors’ political leadership (March and Olsen 1995). The hypothesis is that an adaptive political culture mainly focusing on the safe implementation of national rules and regulations and minor administrative adjustments of local policies will hamper the exercise of innovative political leadership, thereby reducing the ability of local authorities to solve pressing policy problems and realize ambitious policy goals.

**RQ3: To what degree is local political leadership a determining factor for policy capacity?**

As illustrated in figure 1, our analytical framework is premised on the assumption that in a multi-level and multi-actor political system, local political leadership will depend on institutional conditions that grant politicians ‘freedom from’ interference from politicians at other levels of governance or various stakeholders. At the same time, innovative local political leadership is likely to contribute to the ‘freedom to’ influence local community development. The ‘freedom to’ approach paves the way for a productive notion of policy capacity that is inspired by Dahl and Tufte’s seminal work on system capacity (1973:138). While system capacity is depicted as a function of formal public institutions, e.g. in terms of financial resources or the availability of suitable, appropriately qualified staff, the more open concept of policy capacity allows us to see beyond the structural characteristics and resource stocks of a governing system (see also Denters et al. 2014: 334). Policy capacity is defined as “the ability to marshal necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices about a set of strategic directions and allocate scarce resources to public ends” (Painter and Pierre 2005:2; see also Painter 2002). High policy capacity means that local strategies and goals are reached, while low capacity indicates that political leaders will not be able to bring their political intentions to fruition.

As illustrated in figure 1 we will, in accordance with Painter and Pierre (2005: 2–7), distinguish between the availability of resources and support systems on the one hand, and actual performance on the other. In measuring actual performance we will consider the literature on political economy, focusing for example on economic control (fiscal surplus/deficit) (eg. Hagen and Vabo 2005; Eslava 20112), and the kind of service adaptability measured by shifts in economic priorities as reactions for example to demographic changes. However, focusing solely on the success of actual performance leaves little room to take into account the unexpected and uncontrollable. It is therefore relevant to include also the actual resources made available, for example the quantity of financial and human resources, as well as support systems relating to procedural criteria such as collective decision-making processes, consensual elite formations and coordination procedures.

Our main hypothesis is that policy capacity will depend on innovative political leadership among local councilors. Local policy capacity may vary from one policy sector to another, and will
therefore be measured both for local governments as a whole and for two specific policy sectors (see section 3.1).

2.3 Choice of method

Seen from a ‘most similar’ case study perspective, Norway and Denmark represent two highly decentralized and universalistic Nordic welfare states (Esping-Andersen 1990). The two countries are relatively similar cases with a shared history with regard to civic culture and to the overall political administrative system (Goldsmith and Page 2010). This similarity allows us to isolate and study the impact of macro, meso and micro institutional differences on the political leadership exercised by local councilors (see section 2.2). Furthermore, comparing Norway with Denmark (and not one of the other Nordic countries) is of special interest in our project because enhanced policy capacity is a central argument for amalgamation reforms. Although Finland has also just been though a long reform period (2005–2012 and a new initiative from 2013), amalgamations have been most extensive in Denmark (notably the 2007 reform), where they have transformed the local government system.

We will use a mixed methods approach combining case studies and surveys in order to study local political leadership in context, as well as across contexts (see section 3.1 below).

3. The project plan, project management, organization and cooperation

3.1 Plan for the empirical work – organized in three stages

Stage one: Pre-study – aimed at providing an overview

The main aim of the pre-study is to identify local governments with different institutional conditions that favor policy capacity. The aim is also to gather data in both countries on local governments recognized for their especially high policy capacity. Thus, stage one of the project will feed into the ensuing stages.

We will identify local governments with high policy capacity – generally or in certain policy areas – based on information gathered using the Delphi method (Okoli and Pawlowski 2004), which involves structured communication with a panel of expert practitioners with extensive knowledge about institutional variations between municipalities in the two countries (e.g. at the county offices and associations for local governments (KS) in Norway). To prepare the case selection for stage two of the project, we will further investigate 10–20 of the identified municipalities using the internet, statistics and (telephone) interviews. The aim is to gather further information about policy capacity, as well as necessary data on institutional reforms and experiments at the meso and micro level.

Stage two: Case studies – aimed at obtaining in-depth knowledge

In the case studies, we will investigate how political leadership is actually performed in different institutional contexts, as well as different ways in which leadership is enacted, and how policy capacity is built. We will focus specifically on illuminating the institutional factors that either hamper or support the exercise of political leadership. Four municipalities in each country will be chosen for in-depth study, selected primarily on the basis of differences in local institutional contexts (mapped in stage one). Stage two will also serve to prepare the surveys to be applied to local politicians and CEOs (in stage three).

The eight case studies will involve a mixed set of methods, including interviews with leading politicians and CEOs; observations of political meetings in local councils and/or committees; and document analysis and backward mapping of selected policy processes focusing on the actors, actions and relationships involved in diagnosing policy problems, developing political strategies and mobilizing public support (Elmore 1985; Torfing 2007). To cover the range of responsibilities
We have

The project will also involve

We will

Stage three: Local leadership surveys – aimed at generalizing

The purpose of the surveys is to test hypotheses developed at stage two about how institutional reforms can impact upon local councilors’ political leadership. The questionnaire will be sent to councilors and CEOs in all Danish municipalities and to a randomly selected sample of approximately 120 municipalities in Norway (strata above and below 10’ inhabitants). The questions, in addition to relevant background variables, will map the leadership practices of local politicians, the institutional factors that affect them and the impact of different leadership practices on policy capacity, i.e. goal attainment and problem solving. To measure the challenging concept of ‘policy capacity’, we will utilize insights gained from the Delphi study (stage one) and different approaches elaborated and tested in the case studies (stage two). Considering variables as economic control (fiscal surplus/deficit) and service adaptability, the relevance of ‘objective’ data about performance will be duly discussed (for Norway, e.g. the NSD databases/KOSTRA). Well aware of the weaknesses, we will also consider presenting the informants to a series of simulated problem-solving situations in the questionnaire and use a reputation approach to ask councilors to evaluate each other’s performance. Furthermore, to enhance validity we will consider deploying a cross-lagged panel design (e.g. Kenny 2015), where independent and dependent variables are measured at two different moments in time.

We will tackle the growing challenge of low response rates by forming alliances with the national organization of CEOs and local government associations (KS/KL) in the two countries. In addition, we will encourage cooperation and integration with other projects within the DEMOS-program that is carrying out surveys among councilors in Norway.

3.2 Project management, project group and cooperation

The project will be directed by Signy Irene Vabo, professor of political science, University of Oslo. Vabo specializes in local governance and democracy and multilevel governance. She has co-edited several books and special issues on governance and leadership. In recent years, she has also published within the policy field of care for older people. The other key members of the project group are Asbjørn Roiseland (professor of political science, University of Nordland), Eva Sørensen (professor of public administration, Roskilde University) and Jacob Torfing (professor of political science, Roskilde University) (see attached CVs).

The project will also involve one researcher and one postdoctoral student (two-year), the first at the University of Oslo and the latter at the University of Nordland. They will participate in the data collection in both Norway and Denmark, as well as in the project dissemination. Research assistance will be hired at Roskilde University to support the Danish project team. We intend to provide further assistance by engaging Master students at the three involved universities.

We have established an academic advisory board to support the academic activities taking place during the project period, which will include: organizing panels at international conferences, preparing a special issue on local political leadership, and drafting an application for Horizon 2020 (cf. dissemination plan in grant application form). The academic advisory board consists of Professor Paul t’Hart (University of Utrecht, The Netherlands), Professor Jane Hartley (Open University, London, UK), Associate Professor Daniel Kübler (University of Zurich, Switzerland), and Associate Professor Sarah Ayes (University of Bristol, UK). All have confirmed their participation. We will also consider involving Norwegian and Danish colleagues to further
The research will, furthermore, be disseminated in journals. To fulfill the objectives of the project, the University of Oslo will also organize seminars and workshops to engage with local councils to experiment with transformative leadership among councilors. It is pivotal that the project will be reported to the Privacy Ombudsman for research (NSD). The project plan has, furthermore, been evaluated against the ‘checklist for ethical issues’ published on NFRs website. Gender equality is assured in the project team and academic advisory board, both of which have a good balance of men and women. We will also aim to ensure gender equality in recruiting younger scholars for the planned research positions. As for the project content, our analyses of political leadership among councilors will take into account differences in performance between genders.

5. Dissemination and communication of results
To fulfill our ambition to enrich and build theory, international activities and publications will be pivotal project outcomes. There is much to suggest that a study of political leadership in the Nordic context will be of great interest to the international academic audience. The results will, however, also be highly relevant to the general public in Norway and Denmark, as well as to inspire local councils to experiment with, and further develop, their organization and practice. Our dissemination strategy will therefore be targeted both at an academic audience (see grant application form) and users.

5.1 Communication with users – practitioners, students and the general public
In addition to participation in relevant conferences and seminars, including the events organized by DEMOS, we intend to organize at least two seminars where relevant policy makers at national and local level will participate. We intend also to organize a summer school at the University of Oslo on local political leadership, which will be open to politicians, administrative employees in local governments and other interested participants, and which will provide an opportunity for Norwegian practitioners to meet their Danish peers. The possibility of such an event will, however, depend on funding from external economic sources.

The research will, furthermore, be disseminated in existing Master programs at the involved universities, as well as in an international PhD course on local political leadership to be organized at the University of Oslo. We will also submit articles to newspapers and professional or trade journals in order to report our findings to the general public.

References