

## New Organisational Solutions in Norwegian Local Councils: Leaving a Puzzling Role for Local Politicians?

Signy Irene Vabo\*

Inspired by the concept of New Public Management, recent organisational alterations in Norwegian local councils have aimed to change the role of local politicians from a traditional to a strategic political one. Traditionally, local politicians have been involved in the day-to-day activities of the council, and have tended to address single issues and details. Strategic leadership implies, however, a withdrawal from close contact with the service departments and a primary focus on (preferably pivotal) issues of a general and/or principle nature, such as budgeting, goal setting, and planning. In addition, establishment of stronger coordinating bodies is emphasised. Drawing on evidence from a large body of research, it is concluded that so far, for the ordinary local politician, the new role is rather puzzling, that is, confusing and perplexing, thus creating a certain sense of uneasiness. Two theoretical reasons for this state of affairs are presented. First, it is demonstrated that some of the chosen organisational solutions simply cannot be assumed to work as intended. Second, it is argued that the concept of strategic political leadership represents such a challenge to the local politicians' traditional behaviour that a certain amount of reluctance and prevarication is to be expected. The article concludes with a discussion of why the changes have taken place in several municipalities, despite the demonstrable weaknesses in the basic idea. One suggested reason is the improvements to the working conditions of the political and administrative elite as a result of the changes.

### Introduction

In the early 1980s, a parallel trend of local government modernisation started in Norway and the other Nordic countries. In the Free Commune experiments, first initiated in Sweden, the goal was to explore the consequences of applying less formal and less extensive national regulations to local councils (Baldersheim & Stava 1993; Baldersheim & Ståhlberg 1994).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the legislation has been changed and the local councils have gained great autonomy over internal organisational matters. Since the beginning of the 1990s a great many local councils have restructured their political, administrative, and service-producing bodies (Albæk 1995; Bogason 1996; Klausen & Ståhlberg 1998).

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Historically, because of the great growth in welfare service delivery, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the caseload in Nordic municipalities has grown at a steady rate and the need for organisational specialisation has increased. One of the intentions behind the comprehensive decentralisation of public-welfare functions to local councils has been, and still is, to obtain cross-sectoral and spatial coordination and prioritisation of policies and finances at a local level. However, local politicians do not seem to give enough consideration to the overall view of the functions of local councils. In Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, sector-divided policy making is regarded as a problem (Albæk 1995, 245–46).

This challenge has occupied a central place in what we may call the two waves of municipal reorganisation in recent years in Norway. First there was a conversion to what was called the principal standing committee model or the main-committee model (*hovedutvalgsmodellen*) in the 1980s, and then a conversion away from this model in the 1990s (Hagen & Hovik 1991; Gravdahl & Hagen 1997; Vabo 1997b). The main-committee model was developed by the Association of Local and Regional Authorities during the latter part of the 1970s. As a response to the former dispersed system with its considerable number of committees of political members, a new model representing a much more simplified and a orderly structure of 4–5 committees corresponding to 4–5 agencies or service departments was introduced. By 1990 almost every Norwegian local council had adopted this main-committee model. According to surveys, politicians appeared to have a positive regard for the new model. By concentrating political work in only a few committees, they felt their position enhanced compared with that of the administrative officers. However, the problem of sectorisation still remained; in fact the model appeared to encourage a rather narrow sector or service perspective among the politicians. The argument here has been that alliances tend to develop between politicians and the administrative officers. Local politicians working within the main-committee model are assumed to concentrate on advocating the view of the service department(s) for which they have responsibility – at the expense of maintaining an overview and what is best for the community as a whole (Fevolden 1982; Stava 1993, 175–81).

At the beginning of the 1990s, again initiating organisational changes, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities viewed the problem of sector-divided policy making as being that of too close a relationship between politicians and administrative service-producing bodies (Kommunenes Sentralforbund 1989). Again following recommendations from the Association, many local councils introduced a system of 'professional management' which entails that politicians focus only on pivotal issues such as budgeting, goal setting, planning, and general issues. Furthermore, strong coordinating mechanisms have been institutionalised, including significant changes in committee structure. These changes have been

inspired quite extensively by ideas found in the New Public Management concept, which has influenced public management reforms all over Europe over the last 10–15 years (Hood 1991, 1995; Dunleavy & Hood 1994; Wright 1994; Albæk 1995; Naschold 1996; Klausen & Ståhlberg 1998, 11). In the first part of this article the aim is to describe and discuss how recent changes in Norwegian local councils relate to this general concept.

The second theme to be examined is the impact of actual organisational changes on the role of local politicians in Norwegian local councils. The initial assumption is that, rather than making local politicians into strategic managers, the organisational changes have resulted in a rather puzzling role for the general local politician, that is, a perplexing and, to some extent, an incongruous role. Two theoretical reasons for this are set out and discussed:

- Some of the chosen organisational solutions can simply not be expected to work as intended.
- The concept of strategic political leadership is challenging local politicians' traditional behaviour.

To decipher the impact of recent changes, the large body of existing research on the effects of organisational changes in Norwegian local councils will be drawn upon in a systematic analysis (the studies included are listed in Appendix 1). Two journal articles from this body of research have been previously published. One of them uses only data from the Free Commune experiment which was concluded in 1991 (Bukve 1996). The other article is about the more recently developed committee structures, but relies simply on comparative data on only two local councils (Tuft 1995b). In addition, though based on different empirical information, Nylehn (1996) has written an article on strategy in local government (see also Johnsen 1998). This article combines existing evidence in its focus on the expected changes in the role of local politicians brought about by the New Public Management principles.

In the first part of the article recent changes in organisational structure of Norwegian local councils will be described, taking into account the administrative concept of New Public Management. In the second part of the article some theoretically based assumptions about the kind of changes that have taken place in the Norwegian local councils under investigation will be introduced and relevant empirical data presented. The article will conclude with a summary and final discussion.

## Organisational Changes – Interpreted within the Framework of New Public Management

The council (*kommunestyret*) in Norwegian municipalities is elected

according to a system of proportional representation.<sup>2</sup> The mayor is elected by the council (i.e. by the controlling party group or coalition), but no decision-making power accrues to them from this fact.<sup>3</sup> In accordance with the Local Government Act of 1992 the council appoints the executive committee (*formannskapet*), normally with less than 25 percent of the members of the council (minimum five members). The executive committee is responsible for certain economic matters, including the presentation of the budget and the obligatory multi-year plan. Although the executive committee has never had a distinctly executive function, it has had a significant coordinating function combining responsibility for overall finance, policy, and property (Bukve 1996, 154).<sup>4</sup> In the Norwegian context the chief executive officer is a career public servant, that is, not politically elected.

Figure 1. Organisational Changes in Norwegian Local Councils Placed within Two New Public Management Paradigms.

	Paradigm: Public choice theory	Paradigm: Managerialism	
Centralisation	Hands-on political leadership, politicians become managers of policy and administration	Extensive discretion to enhance the managers' capacity for taking action – to achieve best results, (centralised) political control over strategic policies and defining purpose/objectives, non-involvement in the implementation phase	Decentralisation
Coordination	Enhanced powers for the coordinating centre, focus on strategic priorities	Managers free to exercise authority over resources and personnel; managers should not be excused from their responsibility by falling back on rules or regulations not of their own making	Deregulation
Control	Politicisation in staffing positions serving the executive,	Accountability through reporting requirements, explicit performance appraisals,	Delegation
	reduced size and department complexity to reduce managers' power and autonomy,	policy and programme evaluation, external monitoring,	
		and a great range of sanctions	
	and/or new agencies able to stand alone, privatising and contracting out		

The recent alterations in organisational structure within the local councils will be described along the lines of two paradigms of New Public Management, as defined by Aucoin (1990a, 116–19). Aucoin demonstrates how the concept is based on two quite different, and rather contrasting, views on what constitutes the problem with traditional bureaucracy in a modern and complex society such as today's. Taking the paradigm of public choice theory as the point of departure, he asserts that the budget-maximising bureaucrat is considered the problem (the Niskanen convention). Powerful bureaucrats are held to pursue their own interests, and the issue here is to re-establish representative democracy. According to the alternative paradigm of managerialism, on the other hand, it is the bad performance of the bureaucracy that constitutes the primary concern. Traditional organisational design and (lack of) management are criticised and ideas are derived from private-sector experience. It is claimed that what is needed is professional management, not administration. The aim is to avoid waste and to make the system more efficient through the implementation of managerial principles (Hood 1991, 10–15; Hood & Jackson 1994).

Aucoin (1990a, 119–25) links the public choice theory with the notions of centralisation, coordination, and control. The managerialism paradigm, on the other hand, is associated with decentralisation, deregulation, and delegation. In Figure 1 the trends in recent organisational changes in Norwegian local councils (tinted squares), commented upon below, are placed within this framework of alternative New Public Management approaches.

#### *Decentralisation – Through Strategic Decision Making*

The most thorough organisational shift in Norwegian local government has been caused by the introduction of the concept of strategic political leadership. The emphasis has been on what may be called 'professional management', by which politicians are meant to define goals and indicators of success, and in which results rather than procedures (or means) are stressed (Hood 1991, 4–5, 1995, 96–7; Dunleavy & Hood 1994, 9).<sup>5</sup> Extensive professionalisation of politicians, as implied in the hands-on approach, has not been adopted by the typical, average-sized Norwegian local council. In some of the cities, however, the number of full-time politicians is considerable (Myrvold & Osttveiten 1999, 33).

In Norwegian local councils an attempt has been made to transform the involved politician into the managing politician (Hagen & Nylehn 1990; Bukve 1991a, 1996; Bukve & Hagen 1994; Baldersheim et al. 1995). Traditional political involvement in almost all kinds of issues and all phases

of the decision-making process has been replaced with the view that politicians should emphasise the purpose of the organisation and concentrate on issues of general or principle interest, including goal formulation and evaluation. On the institutional level, data from 1996 show that the executive committees or boards are increasingly acquiring a strategic function. Even though it has become common to delegate the responsibility for various issues to the committees, the executive boards still remain responsible for the pivotal decisions regarding future developments, i.e. the budget and consequential planning matters (Gravdahl & Hagen 1997, 16–18).

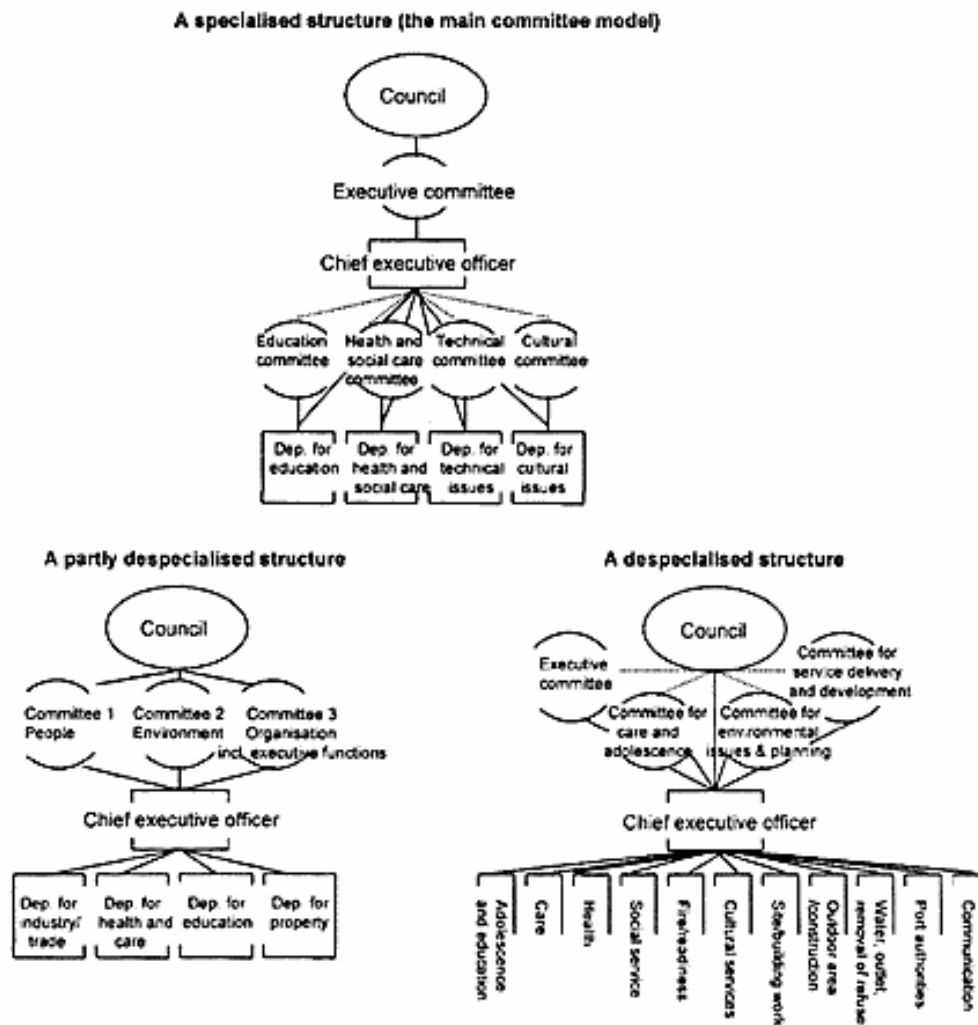
#### *Strengthened Coordination Mechanisms – Through Inclusive Assessments*

On the rhetorical level, the changes in Norwegian local councils are based on the managerial paradigm, and characterised by an ambition to disperse (or delegate) decision-making power, thus giving the managers more scope to manoeuvre. The level of delegation in matters of economy and personnel management has varied from limited to some delegation, depending on the council (Johnsen 1996; Gravdahl & Hagen 1997). Although the data are not very accurate, the absence of wide delegation of power is hardly surprising. Thus, as public choice theory would lead us to expect, there has been a concurrent emphasis on coordination. In general, the role of the chief executive officer has been strengthened. In addition, the aim of the de-specialised committee structure that has been adopted by an increasing number of municipalities is to strengthen the coordinating function. Broadly speaking, two kinds of alternative committee models to the traditional main-committee model have been developed. These are illustrated in Figure 2.

In the traditional main-committee model the committees have at least some delegated decision-making power. In addition, they are responsible for drafting business to be decided on by the executive committee or the council and for attending to administrative business. As illustrated in Figure 2, recent developments can be characterised by two trends:<sup>6</sup>

- Changes in the committees' degree of and type of specialisation, that is, the extent of their area of concern. A fusion of the committees' areas of responsibility, whereby the committees in most cases are made responsible for a wider range of services than in the main-committee model, has been noted.<sup>7</sup> In addition, in some municipalities committees with general, cross-cutting functions have replaced the traditional committees focused on specific public services. In 1994 about 90 percent of the local councils had single-sector-based committees, compared to 65 percent in 1998.

Figure 2. Three Examples of Different Committee Structures: A Traditional Main-Committee Model (Specialised), the Model Chosen by the Municipality of Inderøy (Partly Despecialised), and that Chosen by Narvik (Despecialised).



- Changes in the distribution of decision-making power. There has been a transition from a system of diffused political decision-making power, in which committees were assigned a limited amount of decision-making power (as in the main-committee model), to one or other of the following systems:
  - A system of committees that have considerably more delegated decision-making power from the council (as in the partly despecialised committee structure shown in Figure 2). Data indicate that the number of councils to have delegated a large element of decision-making power from the council to the committees was considerably higher in 1998 than in 1994.



- A system of committees with an advisory function *vis-à-vis* the council, in which the council has all the decision-making power (as in the despecialised committee model shown in Figure 2). Data indicate that the number of local councils that have chosen to set up *advisory* committees rose from about 8 percent in 1994 to about 13 percent in 1998.

These changes mean that in many municipalities the administrative departments no longer relate to just one committee, and that the committees no longer relate to just one administrative department. That is, the political and administrative bodies are no longer directly coupled (parallel organised). In 1994 the political committees and the service departments had identical areas of responsibility in about 90 percent of the local councils, compared with 55 percent in 1998.

#### *Delegation – Through Accountability Related to Organisational Outputs*

As illustrated in Figure 1, control can be secured through different organisational set-ups. Radical changes in the way service production is organised, in the direction of greater competition and privatisation, come highly recommended in the New Public Management concept (Stoker 1991, 238–42; Dunleavy & Hood 1994, 9–10; Hood 1995, 96–7). However, these kinds of changes are infrequent in Norway, as in the other Nordic countries (Hagen & Sørensen 1998; Klausen & Ståhlberg 1998).

Speaking from the vantage point of managerialism, however, Aucoin (1990b, 202) says that constitutional principles and good organisational design demand increased discretion of managers to be accompanied by improved accountability. Accordingly, in strategic management reasoning it is assumed that the real operating experience of the organisation is available to the political overseers through the development of appropriate accounting systems measuring the performance and costs of the organisation's performance (Hood 1991, 4; Dunleavy & Hood 1994, 12–13; Hood 1995, 94, 96–7; Moore 1995, 55, 115). Therefore, the measurement and adjustment of organisational outputs are mostly needed in those Norwegian local councils that have a non-specialised committee structure, where the administrative officers' discretion is greatest, and the contact between politicians and administrative officers on day-to-day activities is least. Here, the politicians are supposed to be kept sufficiently informed – to evaluate the performance of the organisation and to learn and initiate improvements – by reports, contracts, and (quantitatively) evaluated results as provided by the administrative officers.

### *Summing Up: What the New Organisational Arrangements Are About*

To simplify the picture of the organisational changes, the kind of models to be discussed in the following sections will be characterised as fully or partly despecialised. When 'specialised committee models' are mentioned in the coming discussion, reference is being made to a structure similar in principle to the main-committee model presented in Figure 2. What is meant by 'despecialised models' is either the kind of model presented as the partly despecialised committee model in figure 2, or some kind of advisory committee model.

This simplification is justified by the fact that encouragement to act as a strategic manager is significantly stronger for politicians working within the despecialised than in the specialised systems. It is, of course, theoretically possible to focus on strategies within a specialised model, but in Norwegian local councils the idea of strategic political leadership has been connected to the despecialised committee models. By despecialising the committees, the possibility for local politicians to acquire detailed knowledge about specific issues has been reduced. They are compelled to give the overall picture greater consideration and, hopefully, thereby to address to a greater extent issues of general interest or of a principle nature (Hagen & Nylehn 1990, 120; Baldersheim 1993, 162).

First of all, the opportunity to coordinate the administrative officers' influence on political decisions, and for local politicians to have contact with the administrative officers, has been restricted.<sup>8</sup> In the despecialised models the committees either have no decision-making power and/or their field of concern is less specialised than in the traditional specialised model. Secondly, in the despecialised models the political and administrative parts of the organisation are normally decoupled. Thus, to avoid too close connections between administrative staff and politicians, the committees with political representation and the service departments do not deal with the same issues.<sup>9</sup>

The trend in the organisational changes in Norwegian local councils, and in the local councils referred to in this article, is clear: generally the aim is to develop a new role for local politicians – as strategic political managers. The traditional role, in which the politicians are in close contact with the organisation and involved in its day-to-day running, and in which they primarily deal with single issues and the minutiae of government, has been abandoned. Local politicians are expected to surrender their executive function and focus on issues of general or principle concern, such as budgeting, goal setting, and planning. Furthermore, by putting the emphasis on coordination, the role of the coordinating bodies – whether political or administrative – is strengthened in the despecialised models. The specialised main-committee model definitely leaves less power to the coordinating centre than do the despecialised models.

## Organisational Change: Impact on the Role of Local Politicians

### *Initial Assumptions*

The question to be analysed in this part of the article is whether the reorganisational efforts in Norwegian local councils have succeeded in changing the role of the local politicians as wished for, i.e. from a traditional to a strategic role. Theoretically, there are at least two reasons why the intended changes are not likely to have taken place – both established knowledge about causes and effects and the involved actors' traditional behaviour are challenged.

The competing assumptions regarding the effects of the organisational changes are summed up in Table 1. The empirical indicators developed to elucidate the theoretically based hypotheses are listed on the left side of the table. All these indicators describe the actual behaviour of local politicians. The first three groups of indicators refer to the changes in Norwegian local councils as illustrated in Figure 1 – decentralisation, coordination, and delegation. The last group of indicators – power and confidence – is included

Table 1. Assumed Impact of Organisational Changes on Politicians' Behaviour – Indicators and Expected Findings

Empirical indicators	Competing assumptions	
	Strategic role	Puzzling role
Decentralisation – strategic decision making?		
1. Contact between general politicians and administrative officers	Almost eliminated	Reduced, but still considerable
2. Focus on detail and single issues	Almost eliminated	Reduced, but still considerable
Coordination – greater overall focus?		
3. Sectorisation	Changes are likely to have the intended effect, i.e. greater overall focus	
Delegation – improved accountability?		
4. Reports on results (output)	Satisfactory reporting	Unsatisfactory reporting
What about power and confidence?		
5. Power over and ability to influence administrative officers	More power in despecialised committee structures	Less power in despecialised committee structures
6. Confidence in the administrative officers	Not altered	Less confidence in despecialised committee structures

as a result of the theoretical discussion of possible side effects. The right side of the table sums up the kind of behaviour to be expected when the system of strategic political leadership is successfully implemented and, on the other hand, what is to be expected when the reorganisation efforts result in a puzzling role for the ordinary local politician. In the following section the theoretical reasoning behind these expectations will be discussed.

### *Challenging Established Expectations*

The inspiration behind the idea of strategic political leadership can be found in Wilson's (1887) nineteenth-century idea of a 'neutral' bureaucrat providing only 'technical' knowledge, and in Weber's (1952) ideal model of a bureaucracy with politicians making policies and bureaucrats carrying them out. This was further developed within the framework of organisational theory into the idea of a hierarchy of goals by Simon (1976, 52–60), and into more recent concepts of management by objectives (MbO) by Drucker (1955; 1976, 29), and further into the theory of management by results (MbR) of the 1980s and 1990s (Naschold 1996, 64–5). According to Aucoin (1990a, 124–27), the key to the success of this strategy lies in the degree to which politicians are able and willing to specify the primary missions in a clear and coherent fashion and to restrain themselves from adding new objectives. In addition, policy should be confined to only a few core values and managers should exercise discretion in policy implementation.

The assumption that public decision making can be restricted to a political process in which basic values and missions or goals are determined on the one hand and technical implementation on the other hand, is problematic in many respects. First, the order of objectives and means is not always obvious (Lindblom 1965; March & Olsen 1979; Svara 1998). Furthermore, because our knowledge about causes and effects is uncertain, the prepared material put forward by the administrative officers is most likely to be biased (Allison 1971; Offerdal 1992, 63–4). Moreover, the number of basic values held by the politicians is most often considerable and they hardly ever explicitly constitute the guidelines of the work of the administrative officers (Aucoin 1990a, 127; Moore 1995, 21–2, 33). Most of the time, officers have to act on incoherent mandates, with no useful instructions as to which goals or objectives should have precedence when conflicts arise. In addition, it is well known that employees have a major impact on the process of implementation (Pressman & Wildavsky 1973; Lipsky 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian 1980). Thus, when politicians accept a division of spheres and allow the administrative officers a certain measure of discretion, they also accept that decision-making power is handed over to the administrative part of the organisation (Aucoin 1990b, 200–1; Page 1992).

First of all, the emphasis on the separation of the political and administrative spheres seems to be peculiar to the Norwegian organisational efforts. Nowhere in the literature on New Public Management is it presumed that the political and administrative actors should not talk to each other during the preparation of business, as well as in the implementation and evaluation phases. On the contrary, Aucoin (1990a, 123) mentions that decentralisation is effective only if managers in authority are in close contact and communication with their superiors. There are therefore good reasons for local politicians to maintain contact with the administrative officers, regardless of what kind of regulative structure they have imposed on themselves (referred to by indicator (1), Table 1).

Second, the assumption that politicians gain more power, in the sense of influencing the policy outcome, is theoretically not at all well founded. It is, therefore, likely that the politicians will react against their new situation. Especially given the longstanding tradition of involvement in all phases of the decision-making process, the loss of power might be hard to accept for local politicians working within the new despecialised committee models (referred to by indicator (5), Table 1).

Furthermore, Wright (1994, 126) points out that it is difficult to assess performance when a great deal of work in the public sector is collective in nature, and Aucoin (1990b, 203) aptly states that evaluation 'is as much art as it is science'. He argues that formal evaluation exercises cannot remove the need for judgement in the political processes of accountability. Measuring results or outcomes from public enterprises is at best complicated (Offerdal 1992, 21–7; Wright 1994, 126; Andersen et al. 1998, 331–2). Even Moore (1995, 34), basing his concept of strategic management on performance indicators, realises that the available techniques are neither routinely used, nor invariably powerful when they are used. In addition, if their department or private position can be harmed, administrative officers are likely to be reluctant to release bad results (Downs 1967; Niskanen 1971).<sup>10</sup>

Hence, there are several legitimate reasons why the politicians should be sceptical towards evaluations of organisational output. Because of the described loss of close contact with the officers involved in day-to-day activities, the politicians working within despecialised committee structures are much more dependent on the information provided by their administrative staff. At the same time, because they interact less with the administrative officers they get to know them less than do the politicians working within a specialised structure. It is therefore likely that the politicians working within the despecialised committee system will not have the same confidence in the administrative staff as politicians within the specialised model (referred to by indicator (6), Table 1). In addition, it is an empirical question whether politicians feel well informed by the reports on organisational output or results (referred to by indicator (4), Table 1).

Regarding the alterations in the committee structure, however, the theoretically reasonable predictions seem to be much more in accordance with the intended changes. According to Mintzberg (1979), organisational structure encompasses those formal and semiformal means that organisations use to divide and coordinate their work in order to establish stable patterns of behaviour. In other words, organisational structures focus attention on organisational goals and provide a tool both for specialising and for coordinating organisational behaviour. Consistent efforts are being made in the despecialised systems to assign to the committees cross-sectoral responsibilities to prevent sectorisation. In this kind of model, coordination is further enhanced by the decoupling of the political and administrative organisations. Therefore, politicians working in a despecialised system will probably perceive themselves as being concerned with the whole picture rather than a specific sector (i.e. a service or an administrative department), more so than politicians in a specialised committee environment (referred to by indicator (3), Table 1).

#### *Challenging Local Politicians' Traditional Behaviour*

The concept of roles has been used in several local government analyses (Rosenberg 1984; Bukve & Hagen 1994; Larsen & Offerdal 1994; Andersen et al. 1998), and is considered to be especially fruitful when applied to studies of politicians in a complex environment (Searing 1991). We can define a politician's role as consisting of externally expected behaviour and actual behaviour (Vabo 1997c). Although significant efforts have been made to change the role of the local politicians under investigation in this study, it is fairly obvious that the politicians retain no little leeway in deciding how to practise their role. Generally, formal institutions regulate rational choices (i.e. regulatory institutions), but, in addition, organisational behaviour depends on informal rules or norms guiding what is regarded as appropriate behaviour (March & Olsen 1989; Crawford & Ostrom 1995; Scott 1995).

In Norwegian local councils it is likely that the system of strategic political leadership, as found in the despecialised models, will meet with competing expectations – from citizens, from administrative staff, and from the politicians themselves. First, a focus on strategy – defined as dealing with (preferably pivotal) issues of a principle or general nature – stands in sharp contrast to what local politicians traditionally have been concerned with, and some would say (Offerdal 1992; Stewart 1998, 75–6) should be concerned with. Working within the specialised main-committee model, politicians have had the opportunity to influence how concrete problems are solved. That is, they have been able to focus on single issues and have been concerned about the processes as well as the results. It might, therefore, be hard for local politicians to accept a new role. Second, local

politicians have traditionally not only been internal managers, they have also been serving – and some would say (Offerdal 1995) should be serving – people or groups directly, and acting as leaders in the community (Andersen et al. 1998, 329). The public might want their local politician to be their ombudsman, which implies that the politicians will be more or less forced to engage in single issues most likely of little general interest. As a result of such conflicting expectations, there are, therefore, reasons to believe that local politicians will not have totally changed their ways – from focusing on details and ‘insignificant’ single issues, to focusing on issues of principle to the exclusion of all else (referred to by indicator (2), Table 1).

To sum up, in accordance with Table 1 the assumption is that if the politicians’ role (i.e. behaviour) – by working within a despecialised structure – has changed from a traditional to a more strategic role, contact between politicians in general and the administrative officers should be significantly reduced. Another assumption is that politicians will be less concerned with details and single issues and about their own specific service department, and more about the overall effects of their actions. Furthermore, when working in the despecialised structure it is assumed that politicians will verify that results are reported in a satisfactory manner, since they have to rely on such reports to keep informed. Regarding the power of the politicians, the argument is that their ability to influence administrative officers will increase, since they are focusing on the broad and important issues.

However, the theoretical perspectives presented indicate that reality might present a somewhat different picture. This is not to say that local politicians have not left their traditional ways at all, but that the local councils that have introduced the new despecialised committee structures, and thereby the concept of strategic political leadership, are not expected to succeed. Because the concept is theoretically challenging and the expectations are conflicting, it is more likely that local politicians will end up puzzled. That is, despite the expectations implied in the new despecialised committee structure, it is not very likely that the local politicians really will have reduced their contact with administrative staff and stopped focusing on detail and single issues. Accordingly, it is unlikely that satisfactory systems for evaluation and the reporting of results will have been developed. In addition, as a result of the separation of political and administrative spheres implied in the despecialised committee models, it is to be expected that politicians will experience a decline in power and reduced confidence in the administrative officers.

## Empirical Evidence

The empirical findings presented below form the basis for the concluding

discussion of the doubts laid out above as to the success of the local councils in implementing the system of strategic political leadership. The data and method used in this part of the article are described in greater detail in Appendices 1 and 2. The following presentation refers directly to the questions posed in Table 1.

#### *Restricted Contact between Politicians and Administrative Officers?*<sup>11</sup>

In two of the local councils where the committee structure is partly despecialised (Lunner and Inderøy), the councillors themselves report that there is a clear division between the political and the administrative part of the organisation. The relationship between politicians and administrative officers has become less intense, as intended. Accordingly, in one of the despecialised local councils (Trondheim), the councillors say they feel the loss of what before were 'points of contact'. There are fewer opportunities to discuss issues with the administrative officers, and the administrative officers see less of the politicians.

However, in these local councils a large amount of information and views are exchanged on an informal basis between the councillors and the administration. Correspondingly, when 14 local councils with different committee structures are compared, no significant differences in the amount of contact between councillors and administrative officers for the purpose of obtaining information before making decisions on specific issues are found. A similar result is revealed when one of the local councils with a despecialised committee structure is analysed (Narvik). The councillors in this municipality had been in contact with administrative officers more often than the average councillor in 15 other councils. Nevertheless, relatively fewer of these councillors had actually worked with the administrative officers on preparatory business.

#### *Focus on Issues of Pivotal and General Importance?*<sup>12</sup>

Most of the case studies show that after adopting a system of strategic political leadership the council tends to deal with fewer issues, but of greater importance than earlier, for example in the area of goal setting and planning. As a consequence, councillors report that the councils have become even more inactive than before, and the debates less lively and crucial. Councillors feel frustrated. Being tied to general issues does not allow them to clearly define their stance – politically or ideologically – *vis-à-vis* their constituents.

The picture, however, is uneven. Regardless of the chosen committee model, councillors still seem to pay some attention to details and single issues. Studies of two of the local councils with a despecialised committee



structure (Trondheim and Narvik) show that the attempt to make politicians focus only on general issues had no effect on their actual behaviour. In one of these councils (Narvik), the amount of business of general importance (for example, goal setting and planning) actually dropped between 1990 and 1993. Accordingly, in two of the local councils the attempt to introduce strategic political leadership (in Selje and Tynset) was rejected. It has been shown that only a small proportion of councillors feel any obligation to take into account the effects of their actions on the whole community. In addition, in one of the local councils with a despecialised committee structure (Narvik), the councillors are actually dealing with more cases and they are more engaged and active than they were before, when they worked within a specialised model.

#### *Strong Coordination through Greater Overall Focus?*<sup>13</sup>

In the evaluation of the free communes, whose committee structure must be viewed as fairly specialised (Selje, Sauherad, and Tynset), the conclusion was that the degree of agreement between politicians and administration officers was considerable. Councillors focused (too much) on advocating the view of their own service departments. With a despecialised committee model, however, councillors seem to adopt a more distant relationship to the service departments, and the issues promoted by their chief officers, than do councillors working within a specialised model. Furthermore, politicians working within a despecialised model consider the council to be less affected by pressure put upon them by administrative officers for the different services than are councillors working within a specialised committee structure.

Data from in-depth studies of a despecialised council (Narvik) show, however, that some sort of connection to administrative sectors or services has remained. Even though the politicians were more attuned to the needs of the whole community after the change, they still tended to advocate the view of the service departments their committee was responsible for. This might indicate that the politicians allow themselves to some extent to promote the view of their own departments, whilst they simultaneously seem to be concerned with the grand picture when addressing the same issues in council meetings.

#### *Unsatisfactory Reports on Results?*<sup>14</sup>

When it comes to evaluation and information on results in the local councils where the committee structure has been despecialised, the picture is clear: there is no relationship between delegation of responsibility and the quality of this kind of information. Politicians in two of the local councils with a partly despecialised committee structure (Inderøy and Lunner) did not find

any improvement in information on results after the new committee structure was in place. They also pointed out that the written information was less detailed and accurate, and therefore of less worth, than the information they gained earlier through verbal contact with the administrative officers.

Accordingly, the evaluation of one of the local councils with an even more despecialised committee structure (Trondheim) concluded that the reports presented to the politicians contained data solely describing what was spent on different services. Nearly three years after the process of reorganisation started, required information on results was still non-existent. Indeed, comparing a similar despecialised council (Narvik) with 15 other local councils, it can be attested that councillors working within the former model were less informed about results.

#### *Lack of Power and Influence on Administrative Officers?*<sup>15</sup>

In the study of three specialised local councils (Selje, Sauherad, and Tynset) one of the conclusions is that the high degree of specialisation within this model allows politicians to control administrative officers. However, the consequences of changes in the direction of a more despecialised model seem to be unambiguous. Politicians who have withdrawn from the day-to-day activities, to focus primarily on issues of a general or principle nature, say that they have lost power. This is reported not only in the studies of councillors in the local councils with a definite despecialised model (Trondheim, Ørland, and Narvik<sup>16</sup>), but also in the local councils with a more moderate despecialised committee model (such as Inderøy). Furthermore, councillors' lack of power over the administrative officers in the more despecialised committee structures is one of the most convincing findings in the study of 14 local councils.

#### *Lack of Confidence in the Administrative Officers?*<sup>17</sup>

Another clear finding in the comprehensive study is that local politicians' confidence in their administrative officers is considerably lower in local councils with a despecialised committee structure than in the ones with a specialised structure. This feature stands out particularly clearly in one of the studies of a local council with a despecialised model (Narvik), where great efforts have been made to separate the political and administrative spheres. Councillors here (who also are members of one of the committees) were positively worried about the loyalty of the administrative officers. For example, hardly any of the interviewed councillors felt confident that what they had decided upon in the council would be followed up and implemented by the administration.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In accordance with the objections raised against the underlying presuppositions regarding the organisational changes in Norwegian municipalities, there is sufficient evidence to allow us to say that the concept of strategic leadership has not been implemented as intended. At least, this is the case for the politicians working within despecialised committee structures in the local councils examined in this study. This might not be surprising. What is interesting, however, is that the politicians have ended up in what for them must seem a rather puzzling role – the ordinary politician is perplexed and feels uncomfortable in her or his new role. Even though councillors working in a despecialised committee structure experience a more distanced relationship with the administration officers than do councillors working within a specialised structure, there is a great deal of informal verbal contact between them. The focus has not changed so that the politicians pay attention only to issues of overall importance – their interest in solving minor problems still remains. Furthermore, information on results is just as good, or bad, regardless of what kind of committee structure the local councils have implemented. Hence, presumably because they no longer have the chance to keep themselves informed through taking part in the everyday life of the organisation, councillors in the despecialised committee structure feel badly informed.

In accordance with the theory-based assumptions, there is no doubt that this confusing situation has had some unintended and undesirable side effects. Politicians in a despecialised committee structure have less confidence in their administrative officers than do councillors in a specialised system. They also report having less influence on the administrative officers than do politicians in a specialised system. To the councillors, power is connected to the processing of single issues and the solution of concrete problems. Some issues might seem insignificant because of their limited scope but, more often than issues of a general nature, they set off political discussions within the local council. They can also clarify the politicians' (and their parties') more principled point of view. Councillors find it hard to take a definite stand when dealing with long-term goals or matters of principle.

In sum, the ordinary local politicians do not feel comfortable with a committee system in which they are distanced from the daily life of the organisations, and in which they are supposed to deal only with pivotal issues of general interest. In other words, the local politicians do not like their own organisational solution. The obvious question arising from this conclusion is: Why did the politicians change the committee structure and organisational routines in the first place?

There are probably several answers to this question. First we must

distinguish between the so-called 'abdication hypothesis', on the one hand, and the assumption that politicians actually want to control the administrative officers, on the other hand (Bawn 1995, 62). The abdication hypothesis holds that the politicians do not really care about organisational outcomes, i.e. the administrative departments' policy decisions. So if delegation of responsibility allows the councillors to claim credit for the results while avoiding blame for costs, they might not care too much about their general loss of power and how the political apparatus is organised (Kiewiet & McCubbins 1991, 2-3).

Discussing the American Congress, however, Bawn (1995) and many others point out that this view is not consistent with the large efforts made by politicians to organise their own activity and their relationship to administrative officers. However, even allowing for this view – that there is some sort of conscious, strategic thinking behind the chosen committee structure and organisational routines – several competing explanations exist.

First, the local politicians might not have been well enough informed about the assumed effects of the alternative organisational systems before they decided to implement the present changes (Montin 1993). Most of the municipalities included in this study participated in pilot projects. In reality, there was little knowledge about the effects of the various organisational models when reforms were introduced. In fact, the information they did have came from the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, who recommended solutions like the ones chosen by the local councils. Unfortunately, this explanation quickly runs into trouble when taking into account the long-term development described in this article. Thus, even though the reports from the pilot projects warned about the effects of the organisational effort, a great number of municipalities have changed their structure in accordance with the initial suggestion from the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities.

Second, the reason why the local councils have restructured their organisation might be simply to perform a little window dressing. Theoretically, it is important for any organisation to present itself as up to date and on top of developments (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Brunsson 1989; Rovik 1992). Because the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities defined sectorisation and lack of coordination as an organisational problem – and offered a broad selection of apparently useful organisation solutions – it might have been hard for the local councils to resist taking action (Hovik & Stigen 1995). The organisational effort might therefore be more of a symbolic than a strategic action. If this is the case, it is of minor interest for the politicians even to ask for possible effects of the changes planned and made. The aim is to appear modern.

Third, however, Hovik and Stigen (1995) demonstrate that the municipalities' choice of organisational structure is unlikely to be arbitrary. They point to the existence of both external and internal interests underlying the promotion of different organisational changes. The implemented models require, as discussed, the establishment of a strong coordinating centre. In short, the specialised main-committee model leaves less decision-making power to the coordinating centre than do the more despecialised models.

The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities is regarded as representing important external interests, and they have argued that it is in the interest of the municipalities in general to avoid committee structures that connect central and local government. The sectorisation inherent in the traditional main-committee model might be seen as a sign of integration into the welfare state, with the local sectors (the linked political and administrative bodies) connected to the central governmental ministries (Baldersheim 1993, 162). Furthermore, Baldersheim (1993) stresses the economic forces behind organisational change. There is no doubt that the central authorities, having responsibility for total public spending, have stressed efficiency in the production of welfare services. Some will even claim that efficiency has become the only purpose of the changes, and that local democracy is suffering as a result (Kleven 1997). It is therefore hardly surprising that the Local Government Act of 1992 encourages these kinds of tightly coordinated organisational solutions.

Present internal interests are probably even more interesting and pertinent as an explanation why Norwegian municipalities adopt organisational models that have been the object of serious questioning. Hovik and Stigen (1995, 126–7) confirm that the changes have resulted in a strengthened position for the chief executive officer in relationship to the directors of the service departments. Regarding the politicians, the general level of frustration does not mean that all politicians are equally affected by the changes (Andersen et al. 1998, 330–1). It might be that an elite – the mayor, the members of the executive committee, the committee leaders, and the experienced councillors – actually feel that they gain power, or at least do not lose their chance to influence the system, while the rest of the politicians in actual fact do lose power. Most members of the political elite are probably still in a position to interact with administrative officers (formally it is only the political elite that are in the position to stay in contact with the administrative officers) and they know the system (from experience). In practice, it is likely that they have greater contact with the day-to-day activities than their colleagues.

Without drawing any final conclusion here, data from one of the studies presented above (the comprehensive one including 14 local councils) indicate that the most frustrated politicians are the ones who are not part of the elite. Members of the executive committee (normally less than 25 percent

of the council) have more confidence in their ability to sway administrative officers, and they have more confidence in the administrative officers than have the ordinary council members (Vabo 1997b, 57–63). The interests of key actors may be an important reason why the changes have taken place. Thus, not only do the new despecialised committee systems result in widespread frustration on the part of most politicians, they probably also cause a separation between the informed and closed circle of elite politicians and a growing number of backbenchers.

## Appendix 1

To make a comparison of the kind of local councils included in the study and listed in Table A1.1, in 1990 the average number of inhabitants in a Norwegian municipality was 9486, the median 4404, the smallest municipality had only 230 inhabitants (Utsira) and the largest had 461,644 (Oslo). In general, the further north (i.e. especially in the counties of Nordland and Finnmark), the smaller the population of the municipalities.

The article is mainly based on case studies in which the aim was to evaluate the effect of changes implemented experimentally and as projects by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (the Free Commune experiment, and the Project for Renewal of Local Councils) or the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (the Pilot Commune project) (Bukve 1991a; Hovik 1994; Kleven 1994; Kleven & Hovik 1994; Tufte 1994; Lie et al. 1995). Vabo has systematised and summed up the findings in all of these studies in a separate publication (1996). In addition, an in-depth study of a local council that had adopted the so-called advisory committee model has been conducted (this study was financed by the Nordic Committee on Social Research (NOS-S) (Vabo 1997a)). Furthermore, financed by the Norwegian Research Council, a more comprehensive study of the changing role of local politicians, covering 14 local councils, has been carried out (Vabo 1997b). Some organisational data used were collected in 1999 by the present author by means of a questionnaire to a sample of 119 of the 435 Norwegian local councils (large local councils (with more than 10,000 inhabitants) are deliberately overrepresented in the sample). Some information stems from a database (1991–96) managed by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (Gravdahl & Hagen 1997).

7. As outlined above, the fusion of functions of the committees can be done in two ways. An example of service-divided committees with extended responsibilities is youth committees. Here the responsibility for all services was previously divided among a committee for schools (primary schools and, occasionally, day-care facilities) and a committee for health and social affairs (child welfare and, occasionally, nurseries) subsumed under the wing of this single committee. Another example is to be found in the municipalities that have only two committees, of which cultural affairs, the environment, and business and industrial development comprise the area of responsibility of one, and education, health-care issues, and children and youth-related affairs that of the other. An example of the function-based type of system is when the committees are given operational responsibility (of all service areas), as well as responsibility for planning, resource management, development, etc.
8. The profound trust in the chief executive officer implied in this model is probably a side effect of the special esteem allotted to holders of this post in Norwegian local councils, where it is deemed unlikely that they will act in the manner of a budget-maximising bureaucrat. However, this does not prevent them being given significant discretion through holding this pivotal position.
9. In most local councils that have implemented a despecialised committee structure, politicians are not allowed to have contact with the administrative officers in charge of preparing various reports. This would be permitted in other local councils, but probably restricted by a regulation stating, for example, that contacts should be reported to the chief executive officer. In some despecialised committee systems, politicians are free to contact the chief officer (or director) of the departments, in others not.
10. A point very well demonstrated in the context of Norwegian local government by Kleven (1993).
11. The data in this paragraph stem from: Hovik (1994, 79, 96-7, 100-6, 111), Tufte (1994, 67-8), Lie and colleagues (1995, 79-80, 147-50), and Vabo (1997a, 62; 1997b, 61).
12. The data in this paragraph stem from: Hagen & Nylehn (1990), Bukve (1991a, 33, 85, 103-5), Hovik (1994, 113, 117), Kleven and Hovik (1994, 163-4), Tufte (1994, 34-7, 43-6, 52-3, 57), Bukve (1995, 185, 187), Lie et al. (1995, 75, 83-4, 147-52), and Vabo (1997a, 58; 1997b, 61).
13. The data in this paragraph stem from: Bukve (1991a, 73), Hovik (1994, 75, 77), Tufte (1994, 40-1), Lie et al. (1995, 77, 82-3), and Vabo (1997b, 66-7, 92-3).
14. The data in this paragraph stem from: Hovik (1994, 99-113), Tufte (1994, 60), Lie et al. (1995, 147, 150-2), and Vabo (1997a, 68-70).
15. The data in this paragraph stem from: Bukve (1991a, 86), Hovik (1994, 45, 53-69, 99-100), Kleven and Hovik (1994, 160, 162, 169), Tufte (1994, 52-3, 57, 63-6, 68-9), Lie et al. (1995, 74-5, 83-4), and Vabo (1997a, 66, 94-5; 1997b, 61).
16. In the early evaluation of the changes in Narvik, however, this impression was only partly confirmed. Indeed, Tufte (1994, 52-3, 57) reports that the great workload caused by the large number of cases dealt with by the council, as the only decision-making body, in itself might have reduced the politicians' influence. However, when evaluating the system one to two years after implementation of the new model, councillors did not experience any lack of say over the administrative officers, the reason being the newly established control committee (made obligatory in the Local Government Act reform 1992) which oversees the preparatory work of the administration and also the process of implementation (Tufte 1994, 63-6, 68-9). Apparent divergencies in results are probably caused by a change in the responsibilities of the control committee, which five years after the organisational change was initiated did not hold such a position at all (Vabo 1997a, 66).
17. The data in this paragraph stem from: Vabo (1997a, 66-7; 1997b, 61-2).

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of the council) have more confidence in their ability to sway administrative officers, and they have more confidence in the administrative officers than have the ordinary council members (Vabo 1997b, 57–63). The interests of key actors may be an important reason why the changes have taken place. Thus, not only do the new despecialised committee systems result in widespread frustration on the part of most politicians, they probably also cause a separation between the informed and closed circle of elite politicians and a growing number of backbenchers.

## Appendix 1

To make a comparison of the kind of local councils included in the study and listed in Table A1.1, in 1990 the average number of inhabitants in a Norwegian municipality was 9486, the median 4404, the smallest municipality had only 230 inhabitants (Utsira) and the largest had 461,644 (Oslo). In general, the further north (i.e. especially in the counties of Nordland and Finnmark), the smaller the population of the municipalities.

The article is mainly based on case studies in which the aim was to evaluate the effect of changes implemented experimentally and as projects by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (the Free Commune experiment, and the Project for Renewal of Local Councils) or the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (the Pilot Commune project) (Bukve 1991a; Hovik 1994; Kleven 1994; Kleven & Hovik 1994; Tufte 1994; Lie et al. 1995). Vabo has systematised and summed up the findings in all of these studies in a separate publication (1996). In addition, an in-depth study of a local council that had adopted the so-called advisory committee model has been conducted (this study was financed by the Nordic Committee on Social Research (NOS-S) (Vabo 1997a)). Furthermore, financed by the Norwegian Research Council, a more comprehensive study of the changing role of local politicians, covering 14 local councils, has been carried out (Vabo 1997b). Some organisational data used were collected in 1999 by the present author by means of a questionnaire to a sample of 119 of the 435 Norwegian local councils (large local councils (with more than 10,000 inhabitants) are deliberately overrepresented in the sample). Some information stems from a database (1991–96) managed by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (Gravdahl & Hagen 1997).

Table A1.1 The Local Councils Represented, Their Population, the Studies Conducted and Method(s) in Use, Year of Evaluation and Reorganisation and Type of Committee Structure

Local council	County	Population 1.1.97 (approx.)	Existing studies (see codes Table A1.2)	When evaluated	When reorganised	The (new) committee structure
Alstadhaug	Nordland	7500	3	1993	1992	Partly despecialised: a model with few strong committees, without parallel organising
Dovre	Oppland	3000	1	1989/90	1988	Specialised: adjusted main-committee model
Drammen	Buskerud	6000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Giske	Møre- og Romsdal	6000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Inderøy	Nord-Trøndelag	6000	2	1992/93	1992	Partly despecialised: a model with few strong committees, without parallel organising
Lindås	Hordaland	12,000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Lunner	Oppland	8000	2	1992/93	1992	Partly despecialised: a model with few strong committees, without parallel organising
Narvik	Nordland	19,000	5 & 6	1992/93 1997	1991	Despecialised: advisory committee model
Ringebu	Oppland	5000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Saltdal	Nordland	5000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Sande	Vestfold	7000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Sauherad	Telemark	4500	1	1989/90	1988	Specialised: adjusted main-committee model
Selje	Sogn og Fjordane	3200	1	1989/90	1988-90	Specialised: adjusted main-committee model
Trondheim	Sor-Trøndelag	140,000	4	1994/95	1992	Despecialised: advisory committee model
Tynset	Hedmark	5500	1	1989/90	1988/89	Specialised: adjusted main-committee model
Våler	Hedmark	4000	*	-	-	Specialised: main-committee model
Orland	Sor-Trøndelag	5000	3	1993	1991/92	Despecialised: advisory committee model

\* Vabo's (1997b) study covers 14 local councils. In Drammen, Giske, Lindås Ringebu, Saltdal, Sande, Tynset, and Våler the change in committee structure had been minimal until 1997. The local councils of Alstadhaug, Inderøy, Lunner, Narvik, Trondheim, and Orland were included because of the significant changes in the political part of the organisation.

Table A1.2 Explanation of the Codes Used to Describe the Conducted Studies and Methods in Use

Code	Main report from the study conducted	Additional relevant publications	Methods in use
1	Bukve (1991a)	Hagen & Nylehn (1990); Bukve (1991b, 1991c, 1995, 1996); Bukve & Hagen (1991, 1994); Bukve & Simonsen (1991); Baldersheim & Ståhlberg (1994)	Documents, questionnaire, and interviews
2	Hovik (1994)	(Baldersheim et al. 1995)	Documents, questionnaire, and interviews
3	Kleven (1994); Kleven & Hovik (1994)		Documents, questionnaire, and interviews
4	Lie et al. (1995)	Lie (1991a, 1991b, 1993); Lie & Hauge (1991); Baldersheim et al. (1995)	Questionnaire and interviews
5	Tufte (1994)	Baldersheim et al. (1995); Tufte (1995a, 1995b)	Documents, questionnaire, and interviews
6	Vabo (1997a)		Documents, questionnaire, and interviews
*	Vabo (1997b)	Vabo (1996, 1997c); Montin et al. (1999); Kleven et al. (2000);	Questionnaire to members of the council, 1991–95, regression analysis (14 local councils included)

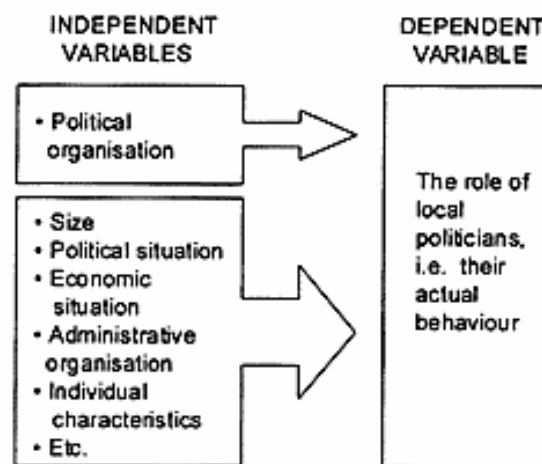
## Appendix 2: Data and Method

The empirical data utilised were collated from existing case studies, most of them comparative. An overview of the analyses included, the local councils involved, and the methods used for collecting data in the original studies is given in Appendix 1.

The independent or exploratory variable is the political organisation adopted by the local councils. The dependent variable, or what is under scrutiny, is the role of the local politicians defined in terms of the *behaviour* of local politicians. The reasoning behind the use of existing studies in this article is illustrated in Figure A2.1.

Although political organisation is the main explanatory variable, there are several other independent variables that might influence the role of local politicians. Former studies of Norwegian local councils conclude, for example, that size makes a difference to the way in which the local council works (Harvold 1990; Kalseth et al. 1993; Naess & Wærness 1996; Hagen & Sorensen 1998). Furthermore, although it is hard to find any effect of political party composition on the council (Sorensen 1989, 1995), this might be a matter of what kind of measures you use. Analysing education policy in detail, Martinussen and Pettersen (1998) do find differences between

Figure A2.1 Independent Variables in the Study of Local Politicians' Behaviour.



parties. It is also clear that political strength (i.e. the party composition in the coalition behind the mayor) is of great importance. The stronger the political leadership, the lower the administration costs (Kalseth & Rattso 1994), the lower the charges or fees (Borge 1995; Rattso & Sorensen 1997) and the lower the budget deficit (Borge 1996). The economic situation of the local council is also likely to make a difference to the politicians' behaviour (Brunsson & Rombach 1982; Rombach 1986; Mouritzen 1991). In addition, how the administrative apparatus is organised will probably influence their performance (Myrvold 1998). Last, but not least, personal or local characteristics such as gender, political experience, position in the political system, and the parties' position (minority/majority etc.) are likely to make a difference to how the role is filled by the local politicians (Kleven 1997; Vabo 1997b).

The local councils investigated vary greatly on all the mentioned variables. As an example, the largest local councils included have 140,000 inhabitants (Trondheim), the smallest 3,000 (Dovre). Since the reanalysis is based on existing studies, any control for these alternative explanatory variables has been out of the question. However, the challenge to control for this kind of variation is dealt with in two ways. First of all, most of the studies reported are comparative case studies where some of these additional explanatory variables were already taken into account in the original study. Of the seven studies included, only two of them are single-case studies (Lie et al. 1995; Vabo 1997a). In two of the analyses several cases are compared (Bukve & Hagen 1991; Kleven 1994; Kleven & Hovik 1994), and in two studies dealing with only two cases, data have been collected from different moments in time – before and after the changes in political organisation (Hovik 1994; Tufte 1994). The last study is based on data from 14 local councils and most of the alternative explanatory variables listed above are controlled for in the multiple regression analyses (Vabo 1997b).

Second, the logic followed in the reanalyses is that if the same effect of an actual committee structure is found in several independent studies, conducted in very different local councils and by independent researchers, the evidence supporting or refuting the proposed assumptions about the impact of structure will be significant. In the reanalyses, therefore, only findings that are characteristic of the local councils that have been investigated have been reported. That is, the empirical evidence described has not in any way been selected to suit the hypotheses.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

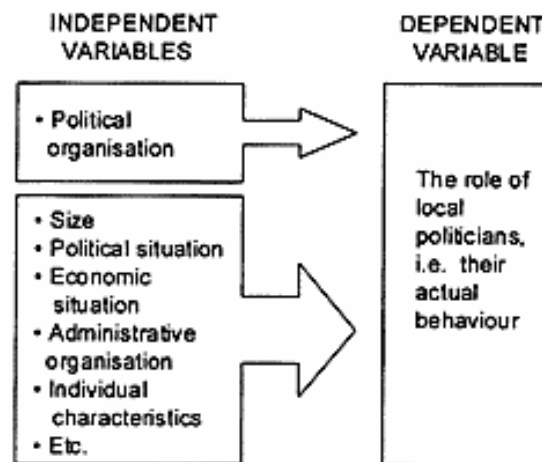
This article is part of a project funded by the Research Council of Norway, the Division of Culture and Society's programme on 'Local Government Decisions and Central Government Intervention'. The author would like to thank Professor George Jones and the members of the Comparative Democracy Group, Government Department, at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) for important input to the first version of this article in spring 1999. The author is especially indebted to Francisco Gaetani for his initial inspiration and to Rotem Gonen for her comprehensive remarks. The author is also grateful for invaluable comments from Terje P. Hagen, Tore Hansen, Sissel Hovik, Trine M. Myrvold, Audun Offerdal, Hans-Erik Ringkjøb, Inger M. Stigen, and the anonymous referees. Responsibility for the content is, however, the author's.

#### NOTES

1. The free-commune experiment in Norway was carried out between 1987 and 1991, and contained projects regarding the relationship between local and central government and the internal organisation of local councils. The idea was to discover areas in which the regulations for local councils had a deleterious effect on their performance. The local councils themselves initiated all projects, but they had to be approved by the Ministry of Local Government. Altogether, 47 local councils participated (Hovik 1991).
2. The executive committee and all other committees echo the political composition of the council (the seats are proportionally distributed). The mayor chairs the executive committee, but the degree to which the other committees are chaired by representatives of the majority party (parties) varies. In some local councils these positions are also proportionally distributed. The council selects the committee members, and, although it is officially required only in the case of the executive committee, it has become common for most of the committee members to be chosen from among the members of the council. Party members hold additional committee seats.
3. The position of the mayor must be regarded as relatively weak, as he is not responsible for any executive functions. Even so, although the mayor above all is the official representative of the local council both formally and symbolically, in some local councils a mayor with a strong personality can amass considerable political status.
4. However, since the new Local Government Act was passed, it has been entirely up to the council to decide what kind of additional responsibilities the executive committee should be given. It might be delegated power or act purely as an advisory body; it might be made responsible only for the statutory economic issues or for additional issues too (for example, physical planning and/or environmental issues).
5. That is, the Norwegian practice represents the classical approach to strategic management. Competing concepts have not taken root (see for example Mintzberg 1990; Moore 1995, 22, 50; and Whittington 1993).
6. The numbers presented below have been collected from two sources: a questionnaire (1999) to a sample of 119 of the 435 Norwegian local councils, and the database on local government organisation (1991-96) managed by the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development (Gravdahl & Hagen 1997).



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