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Citation

Hesstvedt, S., & Christensen, J. (2021). Political and administrative control of expert groups - a mixed-methods study. *Governance: An International Journal Of Policy Administration And Institutions*. doi:10.1111/gove.12599


Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3185558>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Political and administrative control of expert groups—A mixed-methods study

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Abstract

Governments face a fundamental dilemma when asking expert groups for advice. Experts possess knowledge that can help governments design effective and legitimate policies. However, they can also propose different policies than those preferred by government. How do governments solve this conundrum? Through a mixed-methods study, the article examines politico-administrative control with expert advisory commissions in Norway. Arguing that both politicians and bureaucrats can take interest in limiting the gap between political/administrative policy preferences and expert group output, the article examines by what means they seek to control expert groups and how control varies across policy portfolios. It finds that while politicians rely on control by design, bureaucrats use both design and interventions. Moreover, political and bureaucratic controls are stronger in the area of financial/economic policy than elsewhere. The article makes a novel contribution to scholarship at the intersection of public administration and knowledge and policymaking.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, many governments have set up task forces composed of virologists, epidemiologists, economists, and other experts to provide advice on how to tackle the crisis. This is only the latest example of the broader reliance of governments on external expertise in the formulation of public policies. Policymakers at the national and international level make extensive use of expert bodies for advice in day-to-day policymaking. Examples include the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other science panels advising the United Nations (Haas, 2017), the European Commission's sprawling system of expert groups (Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2011), and ad hoc advisory commissions and task forces used in the development of policy by many national governments (Marier, 2009; Rowe & McAllister, 2006).

Yet, decision makers face a fundamental dilemma when asking expert groups and commissions for advice. On the one hand, experts possess knowledge that can help governments design policies that more effectively address societal problems. Drawing on external experts can also increase the credibility and legitimacy of policies, by signaling that policies are based on neutral and independent expertise rather than partisan interests. On the other hand, it carries considerable political risks. Expert groups may challenge the government's definition of the problem and recommend different policy solutions than those preferred by the government. While concerns about policy effectiveness and legitimacy warrant that expert groups conduct their inquiries independently and without government intervention, concerns that expert advice will conflict with government preferences point to the need to control these groups.

How do governments solve this conundrum? The issue is not systematically addressed in existing scholarship on knowledge and policymaking. Literature on “knowledge utilization” argues that politicians often use expertise and science as tactical, strategic and political tools (Boswell, 2008), but has not looked more closely at *how* governments seek to control expert advice. And whereas work on “policy advisory systems” highlights that different advisory actors vary in their exposure to political control (Craft & Howlett, 2013), it has left control of external advisory input largely unexplored. Moreover, while specific studies of expert groups and commissions point out that advisory bodies are often subjected to government control strategies and strategic considerations (Hunter & Boswell, 2015; Rowe & McAllister, 2006), this work typically relies on case-studies of one or a few commissions that cannot necessarily be generalized across policy areas or commission systems at large.

In this article, we attempt to fill this lacuna, both theoretically and empirically, by asking: *By what means and under what conditions are expert groups subjected to control by their politico-administrative principals?*

Extending insights from scholarship on delegation and on bureaucratic politics, we make the following arguments. First, we argue that expert advisory groups in effect face two principals with incentives to exert control: the elected government and the permanent administration. Second, we argue that politicians and bureaucrats are likely to choose different control strategies: We expect politicians to control expert groups mostly by design (ex ante control strategies) rather than by ex post interventions that have high legitimacy costs, whereas bureaucrats resort more to ex post control since bureaucratic interventions in expert group work carry lower legitimacy costs. Third, we expect both political and bureaucratic control of expert groups to vary across policy areas. As the political risks of consulting expert groups are likely to vary with the salience of the policy portfolio, we expect stronger political control of expert bodies in salient fields, whereas bureaucratic control is likely to vary with the strength of the ministry.

Our propositions are examined through a mixed-methods study of Norwegian ad hoc advisory commissions. In a two-step quantitative/qualitative analysis (Hendren et al., 2018), we combine qualitative interviews with 26 civil servants and academics with an original data set of more than 400 advisory commissions—containing a total of 4000 members and 1400 secretaries—active in the period 1990–2017. We use the semi-structured interviews to map the forms and policy area variation of politico-administrative control, before examining statistically whether these observations can be corroborated at the aggregate level.

Our analysis shows that politicians primarily seek to limit preference divergence by controlling commissions' design—for example, by narrowing the terms of reference and selecting experts based on partisan rationales—and very seldom intervene in the work of expert groups. Bureaucrats also rely on control by design, but in addition actively intervene in expert group work, through participation in the commission secretariat or in the commission itself. Moreover, we find that both politicians and bureaucrats are more eager to control commissions that are appointed by the finance ministry, whereas groups under the culture ministry are controlled less than commissions under other ministries.

The article makes theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions to the literature. First, it puts forward an original theoretical argument about the relationships between politicians, bureaucrats and expert groups, which lie at the center of much contemporary policymaking. Second, our study responds to calls for rigorous mixed-methods research in public administration, showing the added value of closely integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses when investigating these relationships. Third, we contribute with new and systematic empirical insights into the relationship between expert bodies and their principals, which point to a fertile terrain for empirical research at the intersection of public administration and knowledge and policymaking.

The article is structured as follows: In the next sections, we review existing literature on control of expert advice and then present our theoretical argument and expectations. In the following parts, we present the empirical context and the research design. We thereafter present the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications and generalizability of our findings.

2 | PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND PERSPECTIVES

Politicians rely on input from experts of various sorts. These experts are found in a range of different institutions, located inside, outside, and at the fringe of government. On the one hand, there are the in-house experts that provide politicians with day-to-day advice and information: bureaucrats located in ministerial departments, agencies and other parts of the central administration. On the other hand, you have the “outsiders”: policy experts that work in external knowledge institutions such as consultancy firms, think tanks, and universities.

This article concerns expert bodies that are located somewhere in the middle, that is, expert groups, commissions, and task forces appointed by government but that include outside experts. These are consultative bodies, appointed on a permanent or temporary basis. They have the task of providing governments with analysis, knowledge, and policy recommendations, or as the European Commission writes about expert groups: “Although the Commission has considerable in-house expertise, it needs specialist advice from outside experts as a basis for sound policymaking”.¹ While such bodies are mandated by, designed by and report to government, they also include external experts—such as academics and researchers—whose primary

organizational affiliation and socialization is outside of the permanent government structures. As such, expert groups and commissions are neither clearly positioned inside nor outside the administration (Bressers et al., 2017, p. 1190).

As explained above, decision makers may have good reasons to seek to control this kind of expert bodies. Yet, government control of expert groups has received surprisingly little attention in scholarship on knowledge and expert advice in policymaking. Research on “policy advisory systems” (PAS) has for example established that governments increasingly make use of non-government policy advisors in policymaking (Craft & Howlett, 2013). Yet, while this literature has discussed government control over in-house bureaucratic policy advice, it has paid little attention to whether governments attempt to control advisory groups with external participation. Similarly, knowledge utilization research (Radaelli, 1999; Weiss, 1979) has pointed to inherent tensions in the relationship between experts and policymakers and argued that political actors may use expert knowledge for political-strategic reasons. Politicians may request scientific advice to substantiate policy, dismiss expert advice if it is too far from their policy preferences, and cherry-pick information that resonates with their worldviews (Boswell, 2008; Schrefler, 2010). Yet, this research has paid little attention to the specific strategies of political steering of experts. The concept of “political” or “strategic” use of knowledge has also proven difficult to operationalize and study empirically (Christensen, 2020). We argue that studying these dynamics in terms of government “control” offers a more concrete and researchable approach.

By contrast, a number of specific studies of expert groups and advisory commissions have taken interest in the question of control, pointing to situations where expert groups have been appointed to validate political preferences and legitimize controversial decisions (Ashfort, 1990; Salter, 1988), structured and mandated in ways that limit commissions’ leeway to present independent recommendations and evidence (Hunter & Boswell, 2015), and ignored due to politically ill-received recommendations (Bulmer, 1981; Inwood & Johns, 2016). Yet, much of this literature relies on single, in-depth case studies of a small set of cases (Inwood, 2005; Prasser & Tracey, 2014; Rowe & McAllister, 2006) or study expert groups appointed within specific policy areas, such as financial issues or immigration (Hunter & Boswell, 2015; Marier, 2009; Owens, 2015). Moreover, the conceptualization of control motives, and how they shape government actions vis-à-vis experts, varies substantially across the different studies and according to the specific case(s) under scrutiny. Going beyond these studies, we apply a theoretical framework and empirical strategy that enable systematic assessment of the mechanisms and prevalence of government control across a larger set of commissions and policy areas.

In the next section, we develop some broad expectations about whether and how governments control expert groups, inspired primarily by arguments from delegation scholarship. More precisely, we conceptualize the relationship as a principal-agent (PA) relationship, and rely on the understanding of control as presented in studies of delegation to public and quasi-governmental bodies (Lewis, 2011; Strøm, 2000). At its core, this framework presumes that an agency problem arises when a principal delegates tasks to an agent who has interests and incentives that are incompatible with those of the principal. To limit the extent to which agents act in ways that conflict with government intentions, politicians attempt to control agents in various ways (Epstein & O’Halloran, 1999).

We believe that the PA lens offers a fruitful point of departure for analyzing the relationship between government and expert advisory groups. First, the relationship involves a delegation problem: Governments (principal) delegate the task of analyzing a policy issue to expert groups (agent) that have expertise about the problem at hand, but thereby face the risk that

commissions will recommend policies that deviate from the government's policy preferences. (Note that in this relationship, the agent is the expert group and *not* the individual expert.) Second, the relationship is contractual, as expert groups have to adhere to the terms of reference written by government. In many cases, the delegation is also revocable: expert groups may be discontinued at the discretion of government. Third, the PA framework provides analytically distinguishable and empirically measurable concepts of control that have so far been missing in studies of expert groups. The framework has also proven useful to illuminate politico-administrative control with other arm's length technocratic bodies whose rationale is to commit decision making to expert recommendations, such as independent regulatory agencies and central banks (Thatcher & Sweet, 2002, p. 3; Elgie & McMenemy, 2005; Enns-Jedenastik, 2014). Certainly, unlike these bodies, expert groups are not delegated independent authority to implement policy or to preside over public budgets, meaning that the risks associated with the delegation may be less pronounced. Nonetheless, there are several reasons to suspect that governments will be motivated to control them. In the following section, we develop these expectations in greater detail.

3 | CONTROL WITH EXPERT GROUPS

3.1 | Who controls? Political and administrative principals

Although often not explicated in the literature, a significant feature of many expert groups is that they face two principals: politicians and bureaucrats. Expert groups are often de facto attached to the government bureaucracy—for example, a ministry—rather than directly to elected officials. As such, bureaucrats in the appointing ministry and the Cabinet serve as a conjoined principal. We argue that both principals will take an interest in controlling expert groups.

For politicians, asking expert bodies for advice carries both potential benefits and risks. An obvious benefit is getting access to knowledge that can help government improve and knowledge-base decisions (Bawn, 1995; Gailmard & Patty, 2007). There are also benefits for the legitimacy of policies: opposition parties, the public and stakeholders may be more likely to accept policies based on impartial expertise rather than partisan premises (Hesstvedt & Christiansen, 2021). Furthermore, delegating policy preparation to expert bodies removes some source of temptation from politicians, as expert groups conduct policy preparation independently of election cycles (Greasley & Hanretty, 2016). Yet, there are also considerable risks involved. Outside experts may have different ideas than governing parties about what the problem is and what constitutes appropriate solutions, which may undercut the government's policy agenda or even lend support to the proposals of the opposition. Although politicians could risk jeopardizing the benefits of independent expert advice, they may therefore seek to control expert groups to avoid unwanted policy proposals.

Bureaucrats face a similar trade-off. According to the bureaucratic politics literature, government departments have goals and policy preferences of their own and constantly engage in power battles to realize these preferences (Allison & Halperin, 1972). Government departments are therefore interested in knowledge input from external experts both to support the preparation of ministry policies and to lend legitimacy to these policies. Yet, they may be wary of proposals that go against the established outlook and policy preferences of the ministry. In other words, bureaucrats also have reasons to control expert groups. For instance, studies have found finance ministries in various countries to actively steer the activities of expert commissions (Christensen, 2017; Gilad et al., 2018).

3.2 | Control by what means? Ex ante versus ex post control

From the delegation literature, we know that principals can limit preference divergence ex ante, that is, before any action actually has taken place by the agent, by means of strategic design. Ex post control strategies entail ongoing corrections to the agent's actions, by monitoring and direct interventions.

We expect politicians to rely on ex ante strategies and to avoid ex post control of expert groups. Overt political interventions can easily be seen as interfering with objective expert deliberations. As it is crucial that expert bodies are perceived as independent and apolitical, this kind of ex post control can thus imperil the legitimacy and credibility benefits of delegation (Greasley & Hanretty, 2016). Moreover, external participants, such as academics, do not depend on government for their careers or livelihoods and can blow the whistle if politicians try to meddle in group deliberations. Ex ante strategies are more discreet, by making sure that the preferences of politicians and expert groups are aligned from the start. This can be achieved by screening and strategically selecting candidates, or by formulating the terms of reference in ways that narrow the expert groups' scope of inquiry.

By contrast, we expect bureaucrats to mostly correct commissions in their ongoing work. The bureaucracy's role vis-à-vis commissions is much more ambiguous than politicians' role. Civil servants may themselves participate on commissions as subject-matter experts and can be viewed as providers of neutral information about the administrative feasibility of proposals. If bureaucrats attempt to steer the work of expert bodies, this may be justified with reference to their knowledge and professional experience. This ambiguity provides bureaucrats with considerable room for maneuver in exercising control, and the legitimacy costs of ex post interventions are lower than for politicians.

Our first two expectations are therefore that politicians will control expert groups predominantly by design, and less so by interventions (*Proposition 1*), whereas bureaucrats will seek to steer commissions by intervention, and less so by design (*Proposition 2*).

3.3 | Control under what conditions? Portfolio saliency and ministry strength

Lastly, political and bureaucratic control may vary across policy portfolios and ministries. First, we expect politicians to take particular interest in controlling salient policy portfolios. From the party politics literature, we know that politicians care more about cost-intensive, cross-cutting and publicly salient policy portfolios, such as the finance and economy portfolios, and take less interest in policy areas that attract little public attention and prestige, such as the sports or tourism portfolios (Druckman & Warwick, 2005). Furthermore, from the agency literature, we know that politicians are more concerned about avoiding agency loss and tend to limit agency discretion in salient policy areas (Calvert et al., 1989). Transposed to expert groups, our third proposition is thus that politicians will control expert groups in politically salient policy areas more than expert groups in other areas (*Proposition 3*).

Second, for bureaucratic principals, control can be expected to vary based on the strength of the ministry. Strong ministries, for example, a finance ministry, may seek to defend a status quo that is based on the policy orientation of the ministry, and will therefore be especially interested in avoiding that expert groups propose policies that diverge from the ministry line. Moreover, strong ministries have more resources that allow them to actually impose control,

including greater in-house expertise capacities that help them steer discussions in expert groups. By contrast, weak ministries, for example, a ministry of equal opportunities, have less of a stake in the status quo and will be less concerned about the risk that expert policy proposals differ from the ministry's preferences. We therefore expect that strong ministries will exert more bureaucratic control over expert groups than weak ministries (*Proposition 4*).

4 | RESEARCH SETTING: NORWAY AND AD HOC ADVISORY COMMISSIONS

This article examines control with expert bodies through an analysis of Norwegian ad hoc advisory commissions (*Norges offentlige utredninger—NOU*). Norway has a knowledge-intensive policymaking tradition, with a merit bureaucracy and strong reliance on academic expertise in policy preparation. Advisory commissions have been characterized as a “cornerstone” of this governance model (Arter, 2008; Christensen & Holst, 2017). Commissions and their expert members have had considerable impact on Norwegian public policy, setting the direction for, for example, market-oriented tax reform, New Public Management reforms of the energy, telecom, and postal sectors, or revisions of school curricula (Christensen, 2017; Lie & Venneslan, 2010).

Appointed by Cabinet, the task of commissions is to inquire into a specific policy problem and recommend solutions. Upon appointment, the government formulates the terms of reference, which serves as the contract between the appointing government and the commission, defining the mission and tasks of the commission. The government also appoints a chairperson and members, and assigns the commission a secretariat. The chairperson manages the work, deliberations, and progress of the commission, and coordinates with the secretariat, which supports the commission's work. Commission members can be bureaucrats, academics, interest group representatives, politicians, citizens, or others, but commissions must have balanced gender representation and are expected to be broadly geographically representative. At the end of its work, the commission delivers a public advisory report with policy recommendations and is then dissolved. The report is usually sent out for a public hearing (*remiss*). Governments often use the report as basis for the formulation of specific policy proposals, which are then submitted as white papers or propositions to parliament.

Importantly, the commission system is regulated by a set of executive guidelines that place the power to control commissions with the Cabinet and ministries. Formally, it is up to the sitting cabinet and relevant ministry to appoint and design a commission *ex ante*. Parliamentary approval is not required, and the government can choose to constitute a commission if a policy problem “has significant economic or administrative consequences” or “concerns significant fundamental or political questions” (Office of the Prime Minister, 2018, p. 5). The responsible minister and ministry prepare the terms of reference and member composition, which are then discussed by the Cabinet in government conferences and officially approved by the Council of State (Ministry of Finance, 2016; Office of the Prime Minister, 2018). Regarding *ex post* control, the *Guide for the Work of Public Commissions* (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, 2019) describes best practices for commission work, but does not establish formal rules about the conduct of officials on commissions. In other words, there are few legal constraints on *ex ante* and *ex post* control, and politicians and bureaucrats have leeway to enact control if they should wish so.

5 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

5.1 | Mixed-methods design

This article investigates how and under what conditions expert groups are subjected to politico-administrative control using a mixed-methods research design (Seawright, 2016). To provide a robust assessment of the propositions, 26 in-depth interviews are triangulated with an original data set of more than 400 expert commissions.

Our strategy can be described as follows. First, we conducted interviews with civil servants and academics who had experience as members or secretaries of commissions. Information given by the interviewees about politico-administrative control was then structured and coded according to the controlling principal (political vs. bureaucratic) and stage of control (ex ante vs. ex post). Second, to examine whether these observations were observable at the population level, we proceeded with a quantitative mapping of control mechanisms mentioned in the interviews. Here, we were able to examine three specific control mechanisms (see description below).

In other words, the qualitative analysis has an *exploratory* purpose that enables us to chart the control mechanisms and to make preliminary inferences about the patterns of control. The purpose of the quantitative analysis is to *corroborate the validity* of these observations at the population level, as well as to examine whether there is systematic variation across ministries and policy portfolios. Explicating the research strategy in a mixed-methods design vocabulary (cf. Hendren et al., 2018), data collection was conducted in a two-step sequence² (qualitative → quantitative), where the qualitative part forms the dominant part of the analysis (for a similar research design, see Chetkovich, 2003).

The benefit of this design is that we are able to take advantage of both methodologies' strengths and avoid some of their limitations. While a constraint with qualitative methods is the difficulty to report estimates of uncertainty, which limits the possibility to draw generalizable conclusions, quantitative studies are often restrained by a limited ability to grasp underlying mechanisms (King et al., 1994). By combining our findings from in-depth interviews with rigorous examination of the same relationships based on large-N data, we can both uncover the mechanisms of politico-administrative control and draw conclusions at the aggregate level about the extent to which and in what situations these instruments are used.

5.2 | Qualitative analysis: Data and coding

The interview sampling strategy was based on the following criteria. First, we focused on two types of participants: academics and researchers at independent research institutes, and ministerial civil servants who were either involved in the process of setting up a commission and/or participated as members or secretaries. Second, we sampled persons with experience from multiple commissions. Most interviewees had experience from at least two commissions after 1990, of which at least one had to be appointed after year 2000. Third, to examine policy area variation, we conducted interviews with participants appointed by seven different ministries that vary in strength and in the extent to which they manage politically salient policy portfolios. The ministries were (1) Finance, (2) Justice, (3) Labor and Social Affairs, (4) Health, (5) Commerce, (6) Education, and (7) Culture. According to Druckman and Warwick's (2005, p. 41) ratings of portfolio salience in Norway, finance is a highly salient portfolio, whereas the culture portfolio

has very low salience. The other portfolios are of medium salience, with Social Services and Health scoring somewhat higher than the rest. This overlaps with the strength of ministries in Norway, where the Ministry of Finance is considered the most powerful and the Ministry of Culture is regarded as a weak ministry (Lie & Venneslan, 2010). The overlap between portfolio salience and ministry strength does not create a problem in our analysis, since the two features are expected to have an impact on different dependent variables—political and bureaucratic control—which we examine separately in our analysis.

In total, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 academics and 15 civil servants. Each interview was carried out by one of the authors and lasted on average 1 h 15 min. We asked general questions about the commission's work, set-up, output and its relations to the appointing ministry, the incumbent minister and sitting government. Interviews were transcribed and quotes were coded in Nvivo. The complete file with coded quotes according to our control scheme is available upon request.

5.3 | Quantitative analysis: Data and coding

In the quantitative analysis, the commission population is ad hoc commissions that submitted a report between 1990 and 2018 and that included at least one academic member.³ The commission data set was gathered by manually reading and coding online versions of commission reports.⁴ We first registered names, professional titles and institutional affiliations of all members and secretaries, and classified them according to their affiliation (academics, bureaucrats, etc.). Civil servants were also classified by their ministry employment and rank, and academics according to the number of commissions they had previously participated on. The total number of commissions, members and secretaries per ministry can be reviewed in Table 1. Among commission participants, academics made up 48 percent of chairpersons, 26 percent of members and 6 percent of secretaries on commissions, whereas ministry civil servants accounted for 4 percent of chairpersons, 10 percent of members and 63 percent of secretaries (see Supporting Information, Table A1).

In the analysis, we study three control instruments for substantive and pragmatic reasons: Several of our informants mentioned them in the interviews, and we were able to measure them with information in our data set. The measures do not cover all control aspects and they are not the only possible measures; yet, we believe they tap into core elements of control with expert groups.

We operationalize the control instruments in the following way. First, informants observed that politicians sometimes select academic experts based on partisan considerations. For example, we were told that left-leaning governments tend to consult academics with experience from commissions of previous left-leaning governments, and vice versa for the Centre-right. As a measure of *political control*, we therefore count the number of academics on a given commission that have been appointed previously to commissions by one political bloc only (we label these “reoccurring experts”). To construct this variable, we first identified academics that appeared multiple times in the commission system. Appointments were then coded according to the political bloc that initiated the commission. Among the academics appointed multiple times to commissions, we code as reoccurring experts those who had *only* participated on commissions appointed by left-leaning governments (i.e. they were never consulted by center-right governments) or who had *only* participated on commissions appointed by center-right governments (never consulted by left-leaning governments). The number of reoccurring experts per commission is the first dependent variable in our quantitative analysis.

TABLE 1 Number of commissions, members and secretaries, per ministry

Ministry	Commissions	Members	Secretaries
Finance	75	692	395
Labor and social affairs	31	267	128
Health	45	528	118
Justice	70	570	164
Commerce	22	204	65
Education	41	493	172
Culture	15	156	33
Ministries, rest or missing	114	1156	377
Total	413	4066	1452

Second, interviewees mentioned that the bureaucracy controls commissions by appointing civil servants from the responsible ministry to the secretariat, and by appointing top bureaucrats as commission members. *Bureaucratic control* is therefore operationalized by two separate count variables: (a) The number of secretaries in a commission who are bureaucrats from the appointing ministry, (b) The number of high-ranking bureaucrats among the members of a commission, with high-ranking official referring to principal officers, deputy director generals, assistant director generals, director generals and secretary generals. These variables are the second and third dependent variables in the quantitative analysis. All variables are measured at the level of the commission.

In the results section, we report descriptive figures showing the prevalence of control instruments. We also examine the effect of policy portfolios and ministries in a set of regression models, where the three outcome variables are regressed with dummies for each of the seven ministries. One regression is modeled per dependent variable and ministry dummy, including controls. As the dependent variables are over-dispersed count variables, negative binomial regressions are applied (King, 1988). Supporting Information Table A2 shows the descriptive statistics for the variables, including controls.

6 | RESULTS: QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

6.1 | Political control

It is really fashionable among politicians to talk about ‘knowledge-based policymaking’. Well, I didn’t know that this very often means that you have a political standpoint and then you find research that fits this standpoint, and not the other way around. There is a considerable degree of cherry-picking (Interview 5, 2019)

This quote—from a bureaucrat with experience from multiple appointment processes and secretariats—reflects an impression that many of our informants had. While politicians take interest in having a solid knowledge basis for their policy proposals, they also tend to care about whether a commission presents politically palatable proposals. Our material revealed that they attempted to achieve this in the following ways.

As anticipated, politicians are wary about directly intervening in commission work. In fact, none of our informants in the civil service could recall that a minister or other political actors had attempted to directly intervene or communicate with a commission while it was active. For instance, one civil servant stated: “I have worked with many commissions, and I have never experienced political meddling in the work of a commission” (Interview 12A, 2019). Another ministry official explained: “The minister does not come and say how things should be done while the commission is working” (Interview 18, 2016).

In contrast, we were told that politicians control *ex ante* by defining the terms of reference and member composition. Formally, it is up to Cabinet to decide the terms of reference and composition of a commission. And according to several civil servants, both aspects are often discussed in the Cabinet’s weekly and informal Cabinet lunches.

First, politicians often seek to formulate the mandates in ways that restrict expert groups’ scope of inquiry: “You can say that political concerns were safeguarded through the mandate that was given”, as one interviewee put it (Interview 12A, 2019). For instance, a civil servant in the Ministry of Health observed that politicians set the direction by defining “concretely which alternatives to look at ... The commission was asked to assess whether a policy program should be continued ... so it was pretty explicit that we were supposed to propose cuts” (Interview 7, 2019). The terms of reference can thus be politically colored: “If the Christian People’s Party had been in government, it would maybe have been formulated differently” (Interview 22, 2016) and “I reckon that the mandate would have looked different with a different kind of government” (Interview 6, 2019), two informants related.

Second, informants observed that politicians sometimes strategically select members and the chairperson. While academic credentials and expertise were important, politicians were also concerned about whether the expert could provide politically palatable advice. Some also pointed to the importance of political affinity with the sitting government. A researcher with experience from several commissions stated that the selection of experts was “a combination of input from the bureaucracy, which has good knowledge about who is an expert in the field, and concrete suggestions from politicians, who wanted their own people on the commission” (Interview 1, 2019). Other informants related that “the commission included people that had a political background as part of their CV” (Interview 12B, 2019) and that “[The minister] wanted to find people who were connected to the Progress Party ... The minister wanted to calm tensions within the party” (Interview 21, 2016). Others noted that politicians tended to prefer members and experts that they knew on a personal or professional level: “Too many know each other from before. I think that is worrisome ... But in a small country like Norway, I guess it is difficult to avoid” (Interview 6, 2019).

Lastly, informants pointed to policy area variation. An academic who participated on a commission under the Ministry of Culture, for example related that “I think they [politicians] took little interest in the issue... Cultural policy is generally an issue that attracts little political attention” (Interview 2, 2018). In contrast, several bureaucrats told us that politicians were more eager to control policy areas with substantial financial costs: “This [welfare policy] is a very politicized policy area... It is a very costly policy area. They [the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs] have gigantic budgets” (Interview 5, 2019). Informants appointed by the Ministry of Finance also explained: “[Political control with commissions] depends on the ministry ... The Ministry of Finance manages one third of the National budget.” (Interview 7, 2019).

6.2 | Bureaucratic control

The interviews revealed that not only politicians take an interest in controlling commissions. Bureaucrats also seek to reduce the chances that commissions diverge from the ministry line. However, in contrast to politicians, bureaucrats tend to use both *ex ante* and *ex post* instruments.

First, the mandate is an important design instrument for civil servants. Bureaucrats draft the first proposal before it is sent to ministers, and often have strong views about what the mandate should include. As one academic member observed: “The design of the mandate to a great extent happens in the ministry. It is an important instrument of power” (Interview 23, 2016). Another informant described how the Ministry of Finance would steer the commission through the mandate “based on what they wanted from the commission ... it is kind of a ‘the questions you ask determine the answers you get’ way of thinking” (Interview 5, 2019).

Second, the bureaucracy wields considerable influence over member composition. The bureaucracy usually presents the first list of names before any political involvement. When selecting experts, academic merits and competence are important, and gender and geographical representation also need to be taken into account. But we were also told that bureaucrats consider whether external actors share the ministry’s views. For instance, one informant described the Ministry of Finance’s approach as follows: “A ‘downside’ is that a commission can arrive at something that the Ministry of Finance does not agree with. They are worried that a commission will say something else than what they want. Therefore, they are concerned about what the mandate says and who chairs the commission” (Interview 17, 2016).

Third, it emerged from our interviews that the secretariat is a particularly important bureaucratic control instrument. In contrast to the terms of reference and member composition, the appointing ministry decides the composition of the secretariat. The secretariat usually does much of the actual writing of the report, in addition to gathering information and data. This setup gives the secretariat considerable leverage over commission work.

For example, we were told that ministries staff secretariats with their own officials. While most academics emphasized that the bureaucratic secretaries were valuable resources due to their subject-matter knowledge, they also pointed to considerable tensions. There were numerous examples of civil servant secretaries who actively intervened in the expert commissions’ work. For instance, academics noted that the secretariat was very active in pushing its agenda (Interview 24, 2016) and had strong opinions about what kind of recommendations the commission should arrive at (Interview 11, 2019). As one informant explained: “[I]f we didn’t go exactly in the direction that he [the secretary] wanted, he would come and say that it should be like this or like that” (Interview 11, 2019). Several researchers also experienced that the secretariat made changes to the manuscript without seeking approval:

The chapter was edited by the secretariat between our meetings, and major parts of the text had been changed. Some of the things that we [the members] had agreed upon were deleted from the text, while new things were added. [And then I wondered:] Who had really decided this? (Interview 1, 2019)

An academic chairing a commission appointed by the Ministry of Finance even experienced that the secretariat resisted direction and instead acted according to the wishes of the ministry:

I had major problems with the secretariat from the ministry. When I told them that they were to follow my instructions and act in another role [as secretaries loyal to the commission and not the ministry], they got furious. ... In my opinion, the secretariat should not be located in the ministry. As long as the ministry controls the secretariat, they have a huge influence on commissions' output. (Interview 16, 2015)

Furthermore, top bureaucrats that are appointed as members hold an ambiguous role. A top bureaucrat in the Ministry of Finance related that “there was a perception within the commission that I was a representative of the ministry, but I was also there as an expert” (Interview 10). Another informant said that “the member from the ministry presented the view of the ministry ... he was there to keep watch” (Interview 17, 2016). This dual role seemed to confuse several of the experts, who found it “challenging” that high-ranking civil servants were represented on the commission (Interview 1, 2019). “It’s a problem that you don’t know when the member is speaking for himself and when he is speaking on behalf of the ministry,” as another informant put it (Interview 23, 2016).

Lastly, as many of the quotes reported so far illustrate, the Ministry of Finance displayed particularly active control behavior. For instance, one civil servant described that: “In the Ministry of Finance, the principle is that the ministry has a representative on the commission, who has the right to speak and make proposals. If the secretariat thinks that things are going wrong, they will tell the ministry’s representative” (Interview 21, 2016). Informants also reported active control behavior from other ministries, such as the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. For instance, one civil servant described that “when we have had people in secretariats appointed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, they have come back rather frustrated and have felt that they have been pretty controlled” (Interview 5, 2019).

7 | RESULTS: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

7.1 | Political control: Reappointment of academics

In the interviews, it was revealed that politicians sometimes cherry-pick experts to ensure control with commissions' recommendations. Figure 1 shows the average number of reoccurring experts per commission, in general and per ministry portfolio. Recall that a reoccurring expert is defined as an academic that is appointed to commissions multiple times *by one political bloc only*. In the bar to the left, we see that commissions on average included 0.57 reoccurring experts. If we consider that the total number of academics per commission is 2.55 on average, this means that more than one fifth of academics on commissions were reoccurring experts—which is a substantial share. Yet, it also means that many commissions were *not* subjected to ex ante political control by this measure. Furthermore, we see that commissions under the Education portfolio on average contain the most reoccurring experts, whereas commissions under the Culture and Commerce portfolios contain the fewest reoccurring experts.

Next, the results from the regression analysis of the relationship between policy portfolio and the number of reoccurring experts per commission are visualized in Figure 2 (see Supporting Information, Table A3 for regression table). In the regression, we control for the total number of academics per commission. To some extent, the figure corroborates the qualitative findings: Commissions appointed by the Ministry of Finance include significantly more reoccurring experts (i.e. appointed only by the left or only by the right) than commissions under

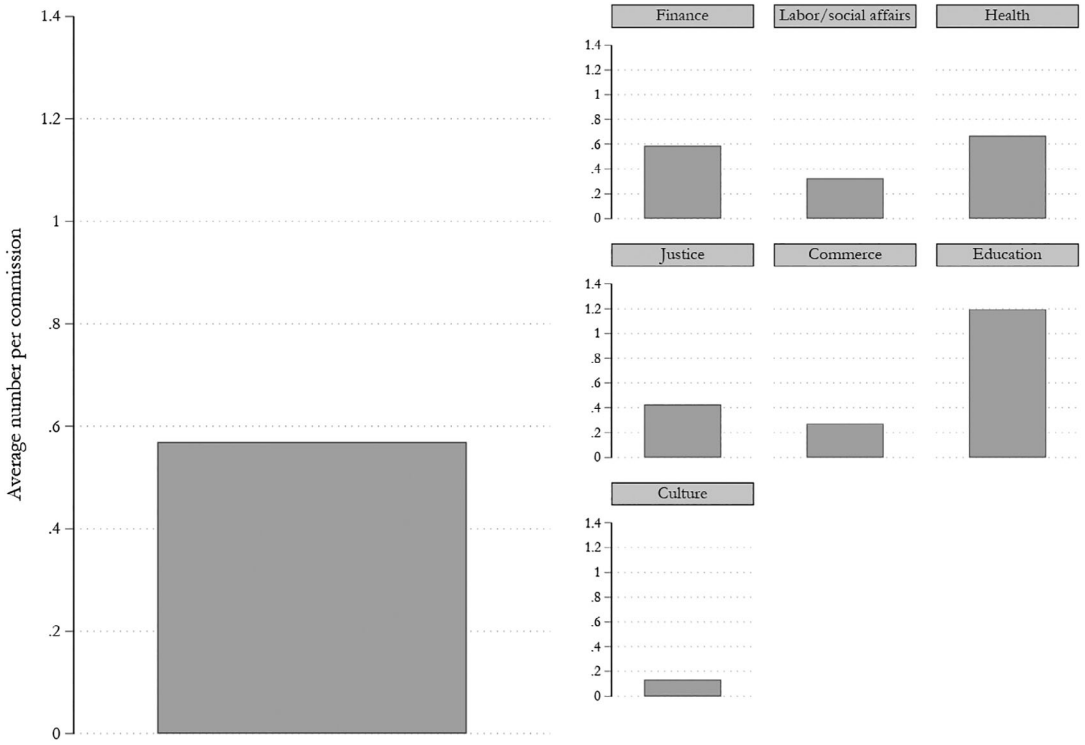


FIGURE 1 Average number of recurring academics, per commission. Average across all commissions (left) and per ministry (right)

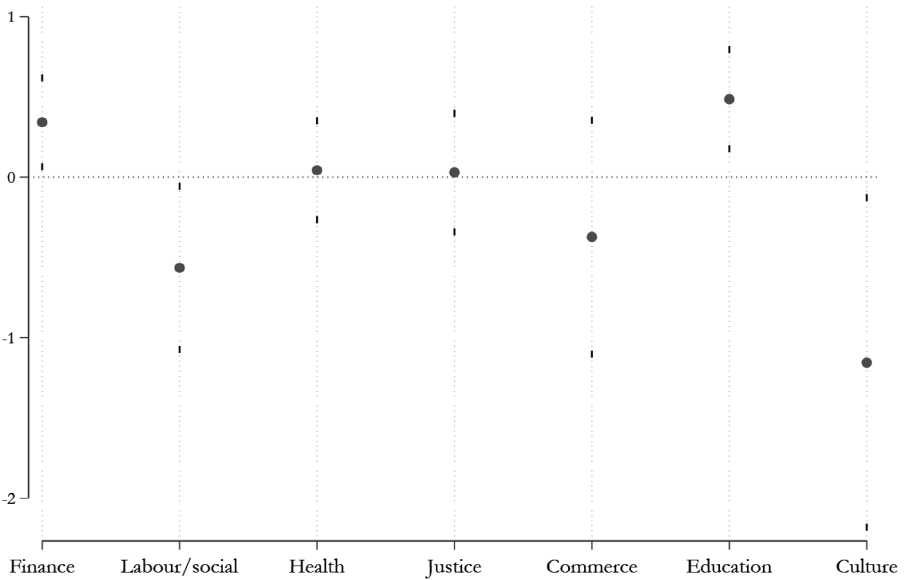


FIGURE 2 Political control: The relationship between policy portfolios and the number of recurring experts per commission. Notes: Visualization of seven negative binomial regressions. Coefficients on Y-axis. Ten percent confidence intervals

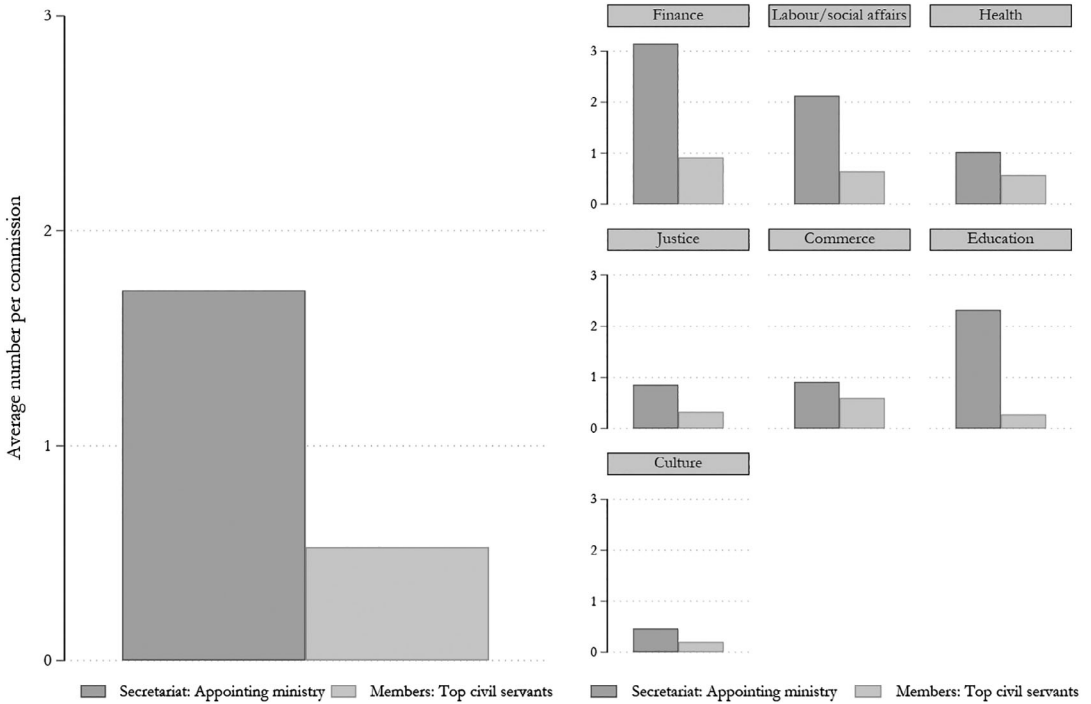


FIGURE 3 Average number of top civil servants and secretaries from the appointing ministry, per commission. Average across all commissions (left) and per ministry (right)

other ministries. By contrast, commissions under the Culture portfolio include significantly less reoccurring experts. However, for the Labor and Social Welfare portfolio, the relationship is negative, opposite to what we anticipated after the interviews.

7.2 | Bureaucratic control: Appointment of civil servants to commissions and secretariats

To measure bureaucratic control, Figure 3 shows the average number of top ministerial bureaucrats and secretaries from the appointing ministry per commission. The left-hand side of the figure shows that nearly two secretaries (1.72) per commission are employed in the appointing ministry. This is substantial, both in absolute terms and considering that the total number of secretaries is 3.5 on average. In comparison, top bureaucrats participate less frequently as commission members (0.53 per commission). To the right, we see that the Ministry of Finance appoints the greatest number of their own staff to secretariats and high-ranking civil servants as commission members, whereas the Ministry of Culture appoints the fewest.

Figures 4 and 5 examine the relationship between ministries and the two measures of bureaucratic control, visualizing the results of the regression analyses (see Supporting Information, Tables A4 and A5 for regression tables). In Figure 4, we control for the total number of secretaries per commission; in Figure 5, for the number of members per commission. The patterns corroborate the interviews: As visualized by the positive and significant correlation, commissions reporting to the Ministry of Finance include a significantly greater number of both

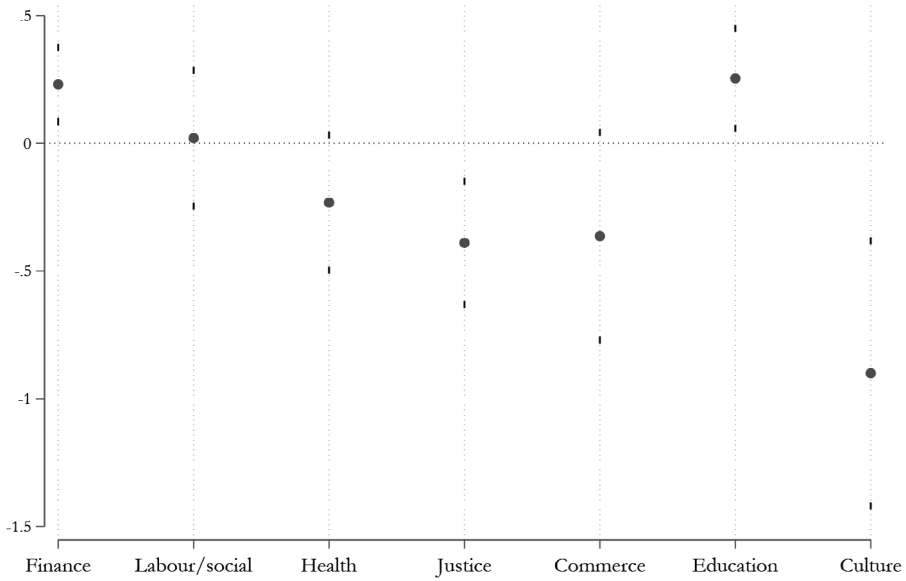


FIGURE 4 Bureaucratic control: The relationship between ministries and the number of secretaries from the appointing ministry per commission. *Notes:* Visualization of seven negative binomial regressions. Coefficients on Y-axis. Ten percent confidence intervals

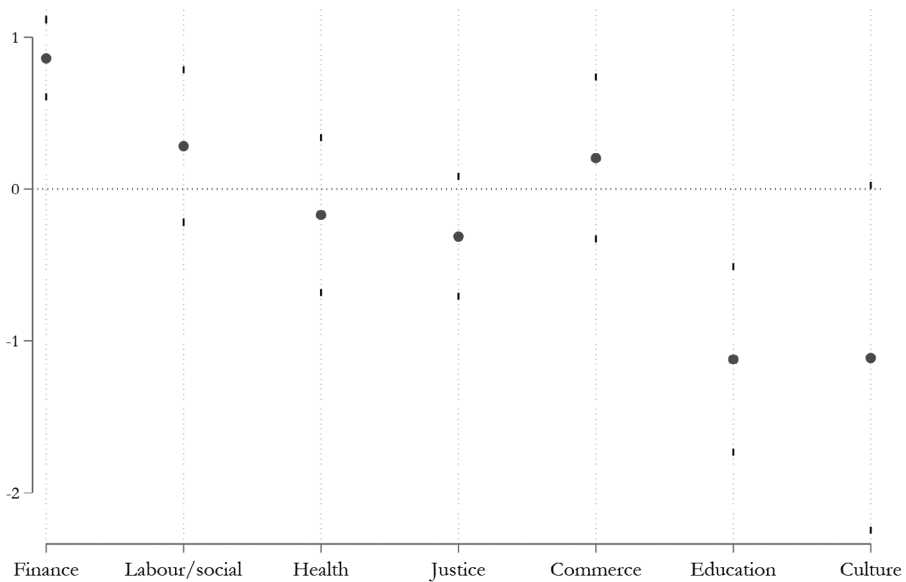


FIGURE 5 Bureaucratic control: The relationship between ministries and the number of high-ranking civil servants among commission members per commission. *Notes:* visualization of seven negative binomial regressions. Coefficients on Y-axis. Ten percent confidence intervals

secretaries from the ministry and of high-ranking bureaucrats as commission members. By contrast, the Ministry of Culture uses these control instruments less than other ministries, although only one of the negative effects is significant. Although the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs displays positive effects as expected, it is not significantly different from other ministries.

8 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our mixed-methods study of Norwegian advisory commissions produces important insights and new empirical knowledge about politico-administrative control of expert groups.

First, our analysis has shown that while both politicians and bureaucrats seek to control expert groups, control strategies differ. The bureaucracy both sets the direction for commissions *ex ante* through the design of the mandate, composition and secretariat, *and* intervenes *ex post* through their commission participation if the group veers off course. Although several external experts grumbled about this active control behavior, bureaucrats were rarely called out in public for meddling in commission work. We suggest that this had to do with bureaucrats exploiting the ambiguity of their role: Bureaucrats' subject-matter expertise blurs the line between informative guidance and advocacy for the ministry's interests. By contrast, we find that politicians attempt to limit the chances of receiving politically unwanted advice by framing the mandates or by selecting experts who are both academically merited *and* sympathetic to the government's views. Yet, once the expert group is appointed, politicians refrain from intervening. This could have been otherwise: Formally, there is nothing that impedes politicians from intervening. Yet, it seems that politicians consider the legitimacy costs of intervention to be too high. These patterns largely confirm our theoretical expectations, although bureaucrats were more active in strategically designing expert groups than we anticipated.

Second, our study has uncovered systematic differences in control across policy portfolios. Most notably, expert groups under the Ministry of Finance were subject to significantly greater political and bureaucratic control than expert groups in other policy areas, whereas groups under the Ministry of Culture were less likely to be controlled by politicians and bureaucrats. We suggest that this can be explained by differences in portfolio salience and ministry strength: Whereas the economic/finance policy area is highly salient and the Ministry of Finance has a strong position in the state apparatus and considerable in-house analytical capacities (Lie & Vennesslan, 2010), the Ministry of Culture handles a low-salience area and is near the bottom of the ministerial pecking order. However, our empirical analysis does not allow us to draw strong conclusions about the factors that account for this variation, and as we discuss below, other explanations are possible.

Our study provides several contributions to existing literature. First, it goes beyond the oft-repeated argument in work on knowledge utilization that expertise can be used in political and strategic ways, by showing *by whom, how, and when* expert groups are used politically and strategically. Second, our mixed-methods analysis improves on previous small-n studies of expert commissions, not only by examining close-up the instruments of political and bureaucratic control over expert groups but also by providing systematic evidence for the use of these control instruments across commissions and policy areas. Third, our study adds to the delegation literature by extending principal-agent arguments to a new phenomenon, namely expert arrangements whose rationale is to provide knowledge and policy recommendations. The article thereby opens up a new research agenda at the intersection of public administration and knowledge and policymaking, which hopefully will stimulate more systematic research on how politicians and administrators control the many expert groups, commissions and task forces active at the national and international levels.

Our study also has important limits. Whereas our study investigates control strategies, it does not tell us how successful these control strategies were in influencing commission output or final policy decisions. Furthermore, our findings from Norway cannot automatically be generalized to other political systems. An important scope condition for our argument is that the

Norwegian administrative system is merit-based. This may imply that expert groups in Norway are controlled less than in other systems. In a merit-based system, bureaucrats may share the educational background and professional worldviews of external experts, which could make their preferences well aligned. Norwegian politicians, who operate within a political culture of merit-based decision making, may also be less inclined to intervene than in other systems. Yet, a merit-based bureaucracy may also make control over expert groups *more* likely, since bureaucrats can reasonably pass for experts and politicians may use expert groups to bypass an independent-minded bureaucracy. Even if the effect of a merit bureaucracy is uncertain, it is reasonable to believe that our findings will travel better to other merit bureaucracies, for example, other Northern European countries, than to countries with more politicized bureaucracies, such as the United States, Italy, or Spain.

Our study also does not consider other relevant differences between commissions, policy areas, and issues that may affect control. First, control may depend on the internal composition of expert groups, such as the relative shares of academics and societal stakeholders. Additional analyses do not show any significant differences in bureaucratic control between commissions with many and few academics (see Supporting Information, Table A6). Since our data set only includes commissions with at least one academic, it is not suited for analyzing the effect of stakeholder participation on control. Yet, this is an important question for further research.

Second, control may depend on the scientific disciplines represented on expert groups. Politicians may face major knowledge asymmetries when dealing with expert professions that use analytical models that are inaccessible to outsiders, such as economists' formal modeling and sophisticated econometrics or epidemiologists' models of how a virus spreads. From a PA perspective, this knowledge asymmetry would make political control more difficult. But one could also speculate that politicians, anticipating this knowledge dependence, would seek tighter *ex ante* control. Bureaucrats—especially in specialist merit bureaucracies—would not face the same disadvantage in dealing with academic experts since they themselves often have training in the same field.

Third, in policy areas that are characterized by high complexity, great uncertainty and wicked problems, principals may not have fixed preferences or understandings but rather a genuine need to learn from experts with unique knowledge about the problem. That principals seek to learn from experts is well accepted in principal-agent scholarship, which argues that the greater the technical uncertainty, the greater the gain from delegating to specialized experts and the lower the degree of control (Bawn, 1995). However, complexity and uncertainty do not remove the control motive altogether: principals will still want to make sure that the recommendations of expert groups do not run counter to policies they support, as seen for example in the intense politics surrounding expert inquiries into high-uncertainty issues like climate change or financial crisis.

Fourth, control may depend on the salience of the policy issue rather than the policy area. Some issues within salient portfolios attract minimal political attention, while some issues that fall under low-salience portfolios may be “hot topics” that generate great political interest. We would expect expert groups dealing with more salient issues to face greater political control. Unfortunately, this relationship is not possible to examine with our data. Yet, future studies could investigate this empirically by collecting data on how often an issue is mentioned in the media or parliamentary debates.

Finally, the repeated character of expert groups can matter for control. Politicians and bureaucrats repeatedly appoint expert groups, and civil servants and academics repeatedly

interact on commissions. This may favor political and bureaucratic control, since principals can sanction experts by reappointing academics who proved sympathetic to the political or ministry line and de-select researchers who had conflicting views. This may give rise to tight-knit policymaking networks of bureaucrats and researchers, that support a specific understanding of problems and solutions and keep alternative experts and perspectives out. Further exploring this dynamic aspect of control is an exciting avenue for research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions. We would also like to thank participants at the Policy, Bureaucracy, and Organization (PBO) seminar, Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo, May 2021, for valuable comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data and code that support the findings of the study are openly available in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/61WZQ8>. The data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/find-document/norwegian-official-reports/id1767/>.

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ENDNOTES

¹ <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=faq.faq&aide=2>, accessed April 2020.

² We conducted pilot interviews in 2015/2016, gathered the dataset in 2017, and conducted the rest of the interviews in 2018/2019.

³ The government also appointed a number of corporatist commissions without academics in this period, which we exclude from our analysis.

⁴ www.regjeringen.no/en/find-document/norwegian-official-report.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Hesstvedt S, Christensen J. Political and administrative control of expert groups—A mixed-methods study. *Governance*. 2021;1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12599>