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Short- and long-term delegation: what are the effects on politicians' sense of control?

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ABSTRACT

The ability of elected representatives to ensure that output is in line with political priorities is a core element of representative democracy. The article explores how delegation affects politicians' sense of control over the administration, examining delegation practices in Norwegian municipalities and the effects of accountability mechanisms. We find no effects of long-term delegation but negative effects of short-term delegation, indicating that politicians have shorter time horizons than assumed by the NPM notion of strategic political leadership. The negative effects are exacerbated when councillors interact with citizens, suggesting that short-term delegation offers insufficient leeway for politicians when addressing citizen input.

KEYWORDS Delegation; accountability; political control; local government; New Public Management

Introduction

Delegation of power to non-majoritarian bodies has been an important element of recent local government reforms (Overman 2016; Reitan, Gustafsson, and Blekesaune 2015). Inspired by New Public Management (NPM), decision powers have been transferred from the higher to the lower tier of the government, from elected officials to agencies, from public to private organizations, and from elected officials to the administration (Barberis 1998; Christensen and Læg Reid 2011a). Accordingly, delegation raises issues of accountability and political control (Læg Reid 2014). Although primarily a programme for administrative reform, NPM also includes implicit and explicit recommendations for the exercise of political authority. That elected representatives are able to control the formulation and implementation of policy is at the core of representative democracy. However, whereas a growing body of literature examines issues of accountability and political control from the perspective of the administration or agencies (e.g. Bach, Hammerschmid, and Löffler 2018; Christensen and Læg Reid 2015; Rommel and Christiaens 2009; Van de Walle 2018), discussions on the effects on politicians' sense of control remain largely theoretical. The article addresses this lacuna by examining how delegation from local councils to the administration affects local councillors' perceptions of political control.

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Like NPM (Hood 1991), delegation of power to non-majoritarian institutions elicits various responses. At one end of the continuum, we find those who see delegation as a means of increasing the capacity of elected bodies. The assumption is that, when relieved of the day-to-day running of the polity, politicians may assign their time to more long-term, strategic considerations, thus increasing their sense of overall control. At the other end, we find those who claim that the underlying notions of delegation are ill-suited to the logic of political leadership – that elected officials may be unwilling or unable to adopt the role of strategic goal formulators (Lægreid 2014).

From this literature, two competing assumptions arise: either that delegation increases political control or that it decreases political control. The article examines the two assumptions in a Norwegian context. Combining data from the Municipal Organization Database (Monkerud et al. 2016),¹ which contains data on the delegation practices in Norwegian municipalities, and the Local Democracy Survey (Winsvold 2019), which contains data about the control perceptions of local councillors in Norway, we study the relationship between delegation and control. In particular, we investigate how delegation from the political level to the administrative level affects local councillors' perception of democratic control – that is, the extent to which they feel that they oversee the outcomes and processes in their municipalities.

We distinguish between delegation that has a short time horizon – that is, does not extend the powers of the administration into the future – and delegation that is strategic and has a longer time horizon. Interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, we find that whereas short-term delegation negatively affects control perceptions, long-term delegation has no significant effects on control perceptions. In addition, the negative effects of short-term delegation on control perceptions are greater when mechanisms for social accountability are in place. That is to say, the effects of short-term delegation are most acutely felt when the local councillors operate under the continuous scrutiny of the citizens. This, we conclude, suggests that the problem either lies in short-term delegation hampering councillors' involvement in implementation and in single cases or lies in social accountability that, with its emphasis on public responsiveness, does not address issues of accountability in delegation from elected officials to the administration. In other words, either the notion of strategic political leadership or the accompanying accountability mechanisms are flawed.

The argument is structured as follows: First, based on theories of political control and accountability, we develop a set of assumptions about the relationships between delegation, accountability mechanisms, and democratic control. Second, we explore these relationships with data from Norwegian municipal councils. Finally, we discuss the findings and their implications for the theoretical understanding of the effects of delegation on democracy.

Delegation, accountability, and democratic control

Delegation is the (partial) transfer of decision powers from majoritarian to non-majoritarian institutions (Thatcher and Sweet 2002). Although delegation is by no means a new phenomenon, it has become more widespread owing to the implementation of NPM reforms (Barberis 1998; Overman 2016). Drawing on insights from two separate and, to some extent, conflicting approaches, NPM prescribes delegation as a means of tackling what is perceived as the ills of public administration. First, inspired by public choice theories, and in particular the budget maximizing model (Niskanen

1971), delegation is seen to prevent the capture of decision-making by vote-seeking politicians and budget-maximizing bureaucrats (Majone 1996). The second source of inspiration, managerialism, prescribes more private-sector styles of management, including contract management, market orientation, and managerial accountability (Lægreid 2014).

The transfer of power to non-majoritarian institutions raises issues of democratic control and accountability. Democratic control – that is, the ability of elected officials to ensure that decisions and policy implementations are in line with political priorities – is a core element of representative democracy. Delegation may affect this ability (Hammond et al. 2019) and, by consequence, the strength of representative democracy. Delegation also raises the question of whether ‘new’ accountability has displaced ‘old’ accountability (Barberis 1998; Lægreid 2014; Peters 2011). ‘Old’ accountability is *ex ante*, in that it stipulates that political leaders are accountable to the public for processes, procedures, and finances (Behn 2001). ‘New’ accountability, in contrast, is *ex post*, in that it specifies that agents are accountable to their principals for performance and results. What matters, from this perspective, is not the exercise of delegated authority in accordance with predefined processes and procedures but rather the effectiveness and efficiency of outputs.

The article first assumes that ‘old’ and ‘new’ accountability co-exist and then examines the relationships between delegation, political control, and accountability mechanisms. To this end, we examine three claims central to ‘new’ accountability. The first claim is that delegation is a device for pre-commitment. The idea is that officials seeking re-election have short time horizons and hence lack credibility (Majone 1996). Delegation, in this view, serves to ‘overcome myopia or weakness of the will on the part of the collectivity’ (Sunstein 1991, 641), thereby protecting decision-makers from preference change and time-inconsistency (Elster 2000). From this claim, we derive two assumptions: First, we assume that delegation is a means for elected representatives to pre-commit and therefore is indicative of strategic political leadership. Second, we assume that the effects of delegation on local officials’ sense of control will be most pronounced in the long run, when a strategy-oriented politician is most likely to feel the effects of pre-commitment. If, however, the notion of strategic political leadership does not hold, we might assume that because delegation reduces the availability of certain options, its effects are most acutely felt in the short run (Desmidt and Meyfroot 2021; Elster 2000). A recent study by Bello-Gomez and Avellaneda (2021) corroborates this claim, indicating a non-strategic attitude among mayors who are less likely to delegate when the consequences of a decision are easily estimated.

The second claim is that *ex post* accountability mechanisms have a positive effect on elected officials’ sense of control. *Ex post* accountability emphasizes the effectiveness and efficiency of public policy (Bovens, Schillemans, and ‘T Hart 2008). Accordingly, processes of account-holding, which involve information, deliberation/debate, and sanction (Schillemans 2011), are designed for evaluating and identifying measures to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public policy. Via information, accurate, timely, and clear diagnoses of key performance dimensions can be obtained, whether based on feedback from bureaucrats, experts, or citizens. Deliberation and debate establish continuous stakeholder dialogue and performance feedback. Finally, sanctions ensure that executive actors adopt the lessons learned from performance feedback and stakeholder dialogue (Bovens, Schillemans, and ‘T Hart 2008). The

postulation, then, is that by compelling administrators to act on performance feedback, the introduction of ex post accountability mechanisms will enhance politicians' sense of control.

The third claim is that the effect of delegation is contingent on the available accountability mechanisms. We distinguish between managerial and social accountability. Whereas managerial accountability mechanisms can typically be linked to the NPM ideas of governance, social accountability mechanisms can be ascribed to the ideas of New Public Governance (NPG), which challenge the NPM view of the motives of the agent. From an NPG perspective, the agent is disposed not primarily to act out of self-interest but rather in the interest of society (Caldwell and Karri 2005; Mills, Bradley, and Keast 2021), and the principal would therefore have less need to control the agent. Moreover, NPG conceptualizes the public governance system as encompassing exchanges also with society at large and encourages collaboration with stakeholders outside the formal public system (Koliba et al. 2019; Mills, Bradley, and Keast 2021). Social accountability mechanisms through which citizens can enter into dialogue with public authorities would hence be preferred within an NPG regime. As observed by Christensen and Lægreid (2011a), any current regime is likely to include elements from previous and current trends, resulting in a specific mix of layers attributable to, for example, NPM and NPG reform processes as well as organizational ideas stemming from traditional public administration (see Mills, Bradley, and Keast 2021). The layering of managerial and social accountability mechanisms, based on different assumptions about the needs for management and control, may create tensions because the instruments are designed to obtain different goals and are thereby likely to produce contrasting results. The main managerial accountability mechanisms include contracts, performance indicators, bookkeeping, and evaluation, and the aim is to improve efficiency and effectiveness of public policy (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Social accountability mechanisms, in contrast, include 'a wide range of institutional innovations that both encourage and project voice' (Fox 2015, 346), such as citizen monitoring and oversight, public complaint and grievance redress mechanisms, and direct citizen participation in decision-making. The idea is that increased citizen engagement is conducive to public responsiveness, which in turn enhances institutional performance (Fox 2015). Managerial and social accountability differ in several important respects. Most notably, whereas the citizens by definition are the ultimate principals in a democracy, in managerial accountability, elected officials act as principals on behalf of the citizens, vis-à-vis the administration. In social accountability, the elected officials clearly have the role of agents. We assume that holding to account is more conducive to elected officials' sense of control than their being held to account. By implication, we assume that managerial accountability has a positive effect and that social accountability has a negative effect on the control perceptions of local officials.

NPM and delegation in Norwegian municipalities

NPM is a global phenomenon: it has instigated public service reforms in many countries (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). It is also a local phenomenon: the processes of reform vary between countries (Christensen and Lægreid 2011b). Although described as a 'reluctant reformer' (Lægreid and Christensen 1999), NPM-related ideas have inspired public sector reforms also in Norway. At the local level, a certain delegation to the administration has been recognized by law since 1980, but a revision

of the Local Government Act in 1992, during the heyday of NPM, bestowed on the municipalities considerable leeway in the organization and execution of tasks and competencies. Among other things, the law revision allowed the municipal council to delegate an extensive range of powers to the administration (Bernt, Overå, and Hove 2002, 395–6). Whereas the municipal council is the highest municipal body and possesses all authority and responsibility, each municipality has the authority to decide its own delegation practice within a wide formal framework (Monkerud et al. 2016). Delegation to the administration is restricted to ‘matters that do not involve questions of principle’ (Local Government Act 2018, sections 5–3 and 13–1). However, deciding which matters involve questions of principle is largely left to the municipal council. A matter considered a ‘question of principle’ in one municipality may not be deemed so in another. By implication, local councillors have considerable leeway in deciding which matters must be directly decided by elected representatives and which may favourably be delegated to the administration. Although this latitude leads to variation in delegation practices across municipalities, it ensures that the council has considerable control over the delegation practices of the municipality. The council or other elected bodies may delegate to the chief administrator, who may then choose to delegate to his or her subordinates. The mechanisms for holding the administration to account were strengthened in the Local Government Act of 2018. Two provisions currently regulate delegation and control. First, to engage councillors and ensure their awareness of the distribution of powers, the municipal council must decide on delegation regulations at the beginning of each term. Second, the chief administrator is obliged to report on the results of the internal control and state supervision to the municipal council. The idea is that more information leads to better control and that the administration therefore should provide information that permits councillors to exercise political control.

Other than these provisions, the council can decide the type and range of control mechanisms. Information on delegation practices concerning economic powers and employer authorities in Norwegian municipalities registered every fourth year shows ample variation in delegation practices across municipalities, and this variation has been stable over time (Monkerud et al. 2016). Owing to the variation in both delegation and accountability practices, the Norwegian municipal sector is a good case for the study of how delegation and accountability practices affect politicians’ sense of control.

A certain level of local autonomy is a prerequisite for councillors’ ability to make long-term strategic decisions. Although the Norwegian legal framework grants municipalities the necessary autonomy to make strategic decisions, their ability to do so may vary based on their financial situation. However, stable and predictable incomes from local taxes and national transfers allow the municipalities to plan ahead, also in times of economic strain. In general, therefore, Norwegian municipalities are regarded as having a high level of autonomy (Ladner, Keuffer, and Baldersheim 2016), both financially and legally.

Research design and data

We assume that the effects of delegation depend on the time horizon of delegation. Starting from the supposition that elected representatives intend to take on the role of strategic, visionary leaders, we propose two hypotheses. The first hypothesis (H1) is that short-term delegation increases local councillors’ sense of control, as such

delegation will relieve them of the day-to-day running of the municipality, instead allowing them to plan and think more strategically. The second hypothesis (H2) is that long-term delegation negatively affects councillors' opportunities to think and plan ahead, thereby decreasing their sense of control. Schillemans (2011) notes that the 'larger the mandate of the agency is, the larger the discretionary powers are with which it can take policy decisions on its own, the more problematic it is from a democratic perspective when hierarchical accountability is curtailed'. This observation may, however, be equally valid should delegation enhance democratic control. The general expectation is that the more delegation, the higher (or lower) the perceived democratic control. Moreover, a third hypothesis (H3) stipulates that the introduction of ex post accountability mechanisms will enhance elected representatives' sense of control. The fourth, and final, hypothesis (H4) is that control perceptions are contingent on the type of accountability mechanisms available. In particular, we assume that managerial accountability mechanisms have a positive effect and social accountability mechanisms have a negative effect on the control perceptions of local councillors. The hypotheses are summarized in [Figure 1](#).

Note that we measure 'perceived' and not 'actual' control. Although the two are most likely linked, their relation may be either weak or strong. Leaning on Overman, Schillemans, and Grimmelikhuijsen (2020), we argue that regardless of the extent to which control perceptions indicate actual control, they are important simply because elected officials act on them. In other words, the behaviour of elected officials will vary with their perception of being able to influence the actions of non-elected officials.

To assess the effects of delegation and accountability mechanisms on local councillors' sense of political control, we draw on two data sources. Councillors' perceptions of control were measured in a survey to Norwegian councillors – the local democracy survey. The survey was conducted by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities in 2018, and 75 out of Norway's then 422 municipalities participated in the survey (Winsvold 2019).² The questionnaires were answered during council meetings, and the response rate was 100%. In total, 1,923 local councillors – that is, 18% of Norwegian councillors – completed the survey.

Because the municipalities had to make an active choice to participate in the survey, the sample is not representative of Norwegian municipalities. However, regarding delegation practices, there is no indication that the sample of municipalities is especially biased (see Appendix, [table A1](#)). The municipalities had to cover part of the costs

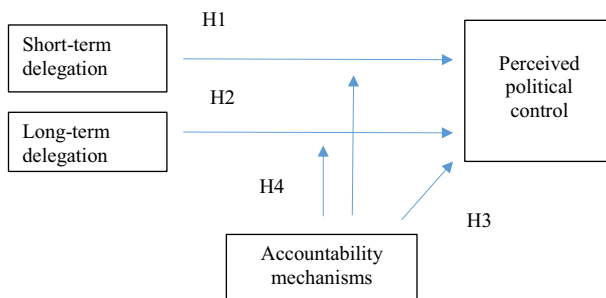


Figure 1. The assumed relationships between delegation, accountability mechanisms, and perceived political control.

for the survey; therefore, one might suspect that wealthy municipalities would be overrepresented – but this is not the case. The average municipal budget per capita of participating municipalities and non-participating municipalities is approximately the same. Nevertheless, given that municipalities had to apply for participation in the survey and pay a small participation fee, there is reason to suspect that the participating municipalities are more concerned than others about the quality of local democracy. This should be kept in mind in the interpretation of the results.

Delegation practices and accountability mechanisms were evaluated through a survey distributed to all Norwegian municipalities, and the data are registered in the Organization Database. Data are collected every four years, at the beginning of the councillors' four-year election term. We use municipal data from the 2016 survey (Monkerud et al. 2016). Because delegation guidelines are decided at the beginning of each election term, we assume that few changes have been made to the delegation between 2016 and 2018, when the local democracy survey was administered. Regarding the Organization Database, the response rate for the survey is approximately 80% but varies between questions. Owing to low response rate for some of the delegation-related questions, data for only 40 of the 75 municipalities are included in the analysis, and the number of councillors is reduced to 950.

Perceived democratic control, the dependent variable of the study, was measured by a formative index including four items. The councillors were asked to report whether they agreed or disagreed with four statements on political control on a four-point scale ranging from totally agree (4) to totally disagree (1). The statements capture aspects of political control necessary for the politicians to hold the administration accountable: responsiveness, easy access to information on the workings of the administration, clear lines of responsibility, and control with implementation. The index includes the following statements: 1) The administration is responsive to political signals; 2) Information about administrative units at all levels of the municipal organization is easily accessible; 3) The division of responsibility between politics and administration is clear; and 4) The elected officials' control with administrative implementation works well. Correlation between the different statements or aspects of control is moderate to high (Pearson's R varies from 0.411 to 0.516), and all the variables load on the same factor with factor loadings between 0.73 and 0.70 (see factor analysis in Appendix, [table A2](#)). Arguing that the statements measure different aspects of the same multifaceted concept, we construct a formative index of the four variables.

As mentioned above, delegation is formally made from the council to the chief administrator. Delegation to the administrative level is included in the analysis as two different indexes. The first index includes three items capturing the delegation of economic power limited to the present year: a) The chief administrator can redistribute resources within this year's budget; b) The chief administrator can make budget adjustments at the expenditure side when this is matched by increased revenues; and c) The chief administrator can approve the outcome of local wage negotiations. Common to these three items is that they do not extend the powers of the chief administrator into the future.

The next delegation index is composed of delegation practices that bestow on the administration the power to alter the budgets also in the future and to hire staff or make reorganizations, which will have repercussions for a longer time horizon. This kind of delegation is more strategic, as it invests the chief administrator with greater powers and allows him or her to plan further ahead. The index comprises

three items: a) The chief administrator can transfer surplus to the next year's budget; b) The chief administrator has the opportunity to hire all staff; and c) The chief administrator has the opportunity to make internal reorganizations.

In the model, two managerial and two social accountability mechanisms are included. The managerial accountability mechanisms comprise the 'soft' mechanism called 'benchmarking', which gives the councillors information on the performance of the administration compared with other municipalities, and the more forceful mechanism of control committee scrutiny. The control committee comprises elected representatives who can scrutinize the decisions of the administration and report the results to the municipal council. The council may then pass sanctions. Benchmarking is measured as the number of benchmarked public services. Control committee activity is measured as the number of meetings in the control committee per year. The social accountability mechanisms also comprise one 'soft' mechanism, namely the level of citizen information, as well as a more directly intervening accountability mechanism – the number of participatory arrangements in the municipality. Descriptive statistics on all index items are included in the Appendix (see Appendix, [table A3](#), [table A4](#) and [table A5](#)).

A number of control variables are included in the analysis. Assuming that perceived control may be affected by the size of the political portfolio, we control for population size. Moreover, we assume that perceived control may increase with experience and therefore control for age and number of election periods. Perceived control is also likely to be higher among those in higher positions; therefore, we discern between members of the executive board, who represent the political elite of the municipal council, and the backbenchers. Finally, we expect the councillors belonging to the winning coalition to feel more in control compared with their counterparts from smaller parties. We consider representatives from the party of the mayor or vice mayor as belonging to the winning coalition.

Because we have data from only one point in time, we cannot conclude on the causal direction of the association between delegation and perceived control. Theoretically, we argue that delegation practice affects sense of control; however, it could be the other way around, that is, that councillors with a high sense of control feel more comfortable in delegating decision powers to the administration or councillors with low self-esteem, who lack the courage to make decisions themselves and thereby delegate to the chief administrator. That being said, the all-encompassing NPM-induced pressure for delegation strengthens the claim that delegation would be introduced in both courageous and anxious councils. Nevertheless, to more precisely evaluate the causal direction, we would need data for two points in time. This should be a task for future research.

Analysis

[Table 1](#) shows the substantial variation in the assessment of political control. On average, however, the assessment is more positive than negative ([Table 1](#)). Variation is also observed in the delegation practices ([Table 2](#)) and accountability mechanisms ([Table 3](#)).

How, then, do delegation practices affect councillors' perceptions of control? Our starting point was a theoretically derived assumption that short-term delegation would positively affect (H1) and long-term delegation would negatively affect (H2) perceived political control. Moreover, we assumed that managerial accountability mechanisms could compensate for the lack of control owing to the transfer of powers that delegation implies (H3).

Table 1. Political control. Mean values, standard variation. N = 950.

	Mean value	Std. dev.
The administration is responsive to political signals	2.96	0.74
Information about administrative units at all levels of the municipal organization is easily accessible	2.89	0.73
The division of responsibility between politics and administration is clear	2.99	0.71
The elected officials' control with administrative implementation works well	2.85	0.72
Democratic control index	2.92	0.58

Table 2. Delegation practices. Percentage of municipalities in the sample. N = 40.

This year	The chief administrator can redistribute resources within this year's budget	68
	The chief administrator can make budget adjustments at the expenditure side when this is matched by increased revenues	67
	The chief administrator can approve the outcome of local wage negotiations.	78
Next year	The chief administrator can transfer surplus to the next year's budget	25
	The chief administrator has the opportunity to hire all staff	88
	The chief administrator has the opportunity to make internal reorganizations	95

Table 3. Accountability mechanisms. N = 40.

	Min	Max	Mean	Std. dev.
Benchmarking	0	14	7.62	5.70
Number of cases in the control committee	10	97	38.10	20.02
Information index	0	6	3.16	1.67
Participation index	0	10	2.68	2.24

The hierarchical structure of the data allows us to assess the impact of the variables on both the municipal and individual level through multi-level regression. The results are displayed in [Table 4](#). In Model 1, only delegation practices and accountability mechanisms are included, and in model 2, the control variables are included.

Significant at *0.05; **0.01

Running an empty model (Model 0), we see that the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) is 0.12, which indicates that the municipal level accounts for 12% of the variation in perceived control. When we include the delegation and accountability variables (Model 1), the ICC is reduced to 0.06, indicating that they account for 6% of the observed variation in perceived control.

The analysis shows that short-term delegation (this year) has a negative effect on perceived control, whereas long-term delegation (next year) has no significant effect. This result lends support neither to H1 nor to H2. Regarding the managerial accountability mechanisms, benchmarking has a positive effect, which lends some support to H3. However, among the social accountability mechanisms, participatory arrangements have a positive effect on perceived control, which is contrary to our expectations. H3 is therefore only partly confirmed.

Next, we investigate whether the effect of delegation on perceived control was contingent on the accountability mechanisms in place. To assess the interaction effects, we included the interaction of each accountability mechanism with short-term and long-term delegation. The results are displayed in [Table 5](#).

Table 4. Multi-level regression. Unstandardized coefficient.

		Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
Delegation	Delegation to chief administrator – This year		–0.07*	–0.08*
	Delegation to chief administrator – Next year		0.05	0.06
Managerial accountability mechanisms	Benchmarking		0.02**	0.02**
	Number of meetings in the control committee		–0.02	–0.03
Social accountability mechanisms	Information		–0.03	–0.04
	Citizen participation		0.04*	0.04*
Control variables	Age			0.04
	Gender			0.07
	Executive committee			–0.03
	Number of election periods			0.05*
	Winning coalition			0.11**
	Municipal size			0.00
	Constant	2.92**	2.97**	2.69**
	N individuals	950	950	950
	N groups	40	40	40
	ICC	0.12	0.06	0.06
AIC	1577.924	1572.082	1552.783	

Table 5 shows a negative interaction between short-term delegation and participatory arrangements, indicating that the negative effect of such delegation is greater in municipalities with many arrangements for citizen involvement.

Concluding discussion

NPM has introduced new motivations or justifications for the delegation of power from majoritarian to non-majoritarian institutions. In particular, the notion that politicians should ‘steer rather than row’ (Denhardt and Denhardt 2000) has informed delegation practices in the last decades. Rather than involving themselves in day-to-day politics, elected officials are expected to take on the role of strategic goal formulators. Inherent in this shift is a move from *ex ante* to *ex post* accountability. However, observers ask whether the notion of strategic goal formulation and the mode of accountability associated with it are suited to the role and self-understanding of elected officials (Lægreid 2014). Whereas traditionally, elected officials have been more concerned with single cases and the details of implementation, the concern is that the current emphasis on strategic decision-making and *ex post* accountability will leave elected officials feeling incapacitated and wing clipped.

Exploring the relationship between delegation and politicians’ sense of political control, we find that control perceptions depend on the time horizon of delegation but not in the way assumed in the NPM literature. Based on the idea of the strategic politician, we assume that short-term delegation would increase politicians’ sense of control by freeing them from the burden of day-to-day decisions and instead allowing them room for strategic thinking and planning. In a similar vein, we assume that long-term delegation would decrease their sense of control by depriving them of opportunities for strategic thinking and planning.

Table 5. Multi-level regressions. Unstandardized coefficient.

Delegation	Delegation to chief administrator – This year	–0.07
	Delegation to chief administrator – Next year	0.01
Managerial accountability mechanisms	Benchmarking	–0.01
	Number of meetings in the control committee	0.06
Social accountability mechanisms	Information index	–0.26**
	Participatory arrangements	0.28**
Interaction	Benchmarking * This year	0.00
	Benchmarking * Next year	0.01
	Control committee * This year	0.02
	Control committee * Next year	–0.02
	Information * This year	0.04
	Information * Next year	0.06
	Participation * This year	–0.09**
	Participation * Next year	–0.02
Control variables	Municipal size	0.00
	Age	0.04
	Gender	0.07
	Executive committee	–0.03
	Number of election periods	0.06*
	Political position (being from the same party as the mayor or vice mayor)	0.11**
	Constant	2.87**
	N individuals	950
	N groups	40
	ICC	0.04
	AIC	1557.122

Contrary to these assumptions, we find that short-term delegation decreases politicians' control perceptions, whereas long-term delegation has no effect on control perceptions. Hence, we find some support for the claim that NPM reforms misinterpret the role of elected representatives. The politicians in our sample are not strategic; rather, they are mostly preoccupied with what they can currently accomplish. Nevertheless, the loss of perceived control associated with short-term delegation should be understood in a context wherein long-term delegation might have already affected politicians' expectations of what they can influence. For example, extensive long-term delegation could cause politicians to stop seeing this distribution of influence as delegation and instead perceive the tasks delegated long-term as the natural domain of non-elected officials. If politicians adjust their expectations of what should be within their power to control, long-term delegation would likely not be perceived as a loss of control, whereas short-term delegation would be.

The critique of NPM reforms also misses the target in its understanding of ex post accountability mechanisms. Our findings partly support the claim that managerial accountability mechanisms have a positive effect on representatives' control perceptions. However, we find that the effect of delegation on control perceptions was not contingent on the presence of managerial accountability mechanisms – the negative effects of short-term delegation were the same in municipalities with and without such mechanisms.

In a democracy, citizens are by definition the ultimate principals. In social accountability arrangements (as in elections), politicians act as agents and are subject to control by the citizens qua principals. In managerial accountability arrangements,

however, elected officials take on the role of principals on behalf of the citizens, vis-à-vis the administration. We assumed that holding someone accountable would be more conducive to elected officials' sense of control than being held to account. In other words, we assumed that whereas managerial accountability would have a positive effect on control perceptions, the effect of social accountability would be negative.

Again, we find contradicting results, namely that social accountability mechanisms positively affected elected officials' sense of control. In municipalities with many participatory arrangements, councillors had a stronger sense of control over the administration. However, the relationships between delegation, social accountability, and control are not straightforward. When assessing the interactions between these variables, we find that the negative effect of short-term delegation is greater in municipalities with many participatory arrangements than in municipalities with few participatory arrangements. In other words, the lack of control owing to short-term delegation appears to be more acutely felt when councillors are expected to interact with citizens. Again, this might result from the role perceptions of politicians and their wishes to engage in single cases. Delegation prevents elected representatives from directly engaging with the issues and demands that citizens make through the various participatory arrangements. Two different mechanisms simultaneously at play may contribute to explaining the complex relationships between social accountability, delegation, and control. In line with NPG literature, citizen contact may strengthen the politicians in their representative role. Possessing updated information about the needs and wishes of the citizens enhances politicians' perceived ability to perform their role as the citizens' representatives, vis-à-vis the administration. The positive effect of social accountability mechanisms on perceived control corroborates the claim that such mechanisms are present. However, regular citizen contact would also activate the agent role of politicians towards the citizens qua principals and increase politicians' need for being able to fulfil this role. In cases of extensive delegation, the politicians' room of manoeuvre is limited. They are hence made aware of their obligation to fulfil the wishes of their principals but are deprived of the means to do so; they are armed with potentially control-enhancing information of the citizens' wishes but are obstructed in their endeavour to make these wishes come true. Therefore, although the independent effect of social accountability mechanisms on control perceptions may be positive, coupled with short-term delegation, such mechanisms may also contribute to a decrease the politicians' sense of control, as they are barred from fulfilling their role as agents.

Our analysis illustrates how the institutional context may contribute to activating conflicting ideas about control and how management tools derived from different types of management logics may interact in ways that decrease control perceptions. In the current local governance context in Norway, management tools supporting the hands-off kind of steering associated with NPM are combined with NPG-inspired social accountability mechanisms that would require a more involved type of steering by the politicians. From the NPM perspective, governance at arm's length bolstered by managerial surveillance would give the elected officials control over long-time strategical considerations. This idea of control, however, is challenged by the social accountability mechanisms inherent in the ideas of NPG about governance. First, NPG assumes that agents are motivated to act in the interest of the principal and therefore does not come with particular instruments of control. Second, NPG prescribes wide inclusion of different societal groups, which activates the democratic accountability relationship between citizens and representatives. Social accountability mechanisms, therefore, constantly hold politicians to account. In situations

where the politicians cannot answer to the immediate demands of the citizens because their hands are tied through short-term delegation prescribed by NPM, social accountability mechanisms may therefore negatively affect control perceptions. Thus, social accountability mechanisms may make politicians aware that their control with the administration is wanting. In the case of no citizen dialogue, in contrast, politicians' need for control might not be activated. Further research would likely contribute by studying the relationship between social accountability mechanisms and politicians' sense of control in general and the effectiveness of NPG approaches in particular.

Notes

1. The Municipal Organization Database is a collection and systematization of data on the political and administrative management of Norwegian municipalities and covers topics such as political organization, administrative organization, auditing and financial management, exposure to competition, and the use of market mechanisms. Data are collected in the aftermath of municipal elections, and surveys have been conducted with four-year intervals since 1995.
2. A subsequent reform has, as of 1 January 2020, reduced the number of Norwegian municipalities to 356.

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Appendix

Table A1. Delegation practices. Percentage of municipalities in sample.

		Percentage of municipalities in sample	Percentage of municipalities in Norway
This year	The CA can redistribute resources within this year's budget	68	65
	The CA can make budget adjustments at the expenditure side when this is matched by increased revenues	67	60
	The CA can approve the outcome of local wage negotiations.	78	81
Next year	The CA can transfer surplus to the next year's budget	25	21
	The CA has the opportunity to hire all staff	88	76
	The CA has the opportunity to make internal reorganizations	95	91
	N	40	343

Table A2. Control perceptions. Factor analysis. N = 950.

	Factor loading	Uniqueness
The administration is responsive to political signals	0.7306	0.4650
Information about administrative units at all levels of the municipal organization is easily accessible	0.7236	0.4235
The division of responsibility between politics and administration is clear	0.6992	0.4560
The elected officials' control with administrative implementation works well	0.7313	0.4637

Table A3. Benchmarking practices. Percentage of municipalities.

Administrative services	64
Schools	70
Kindergartens	66
Activities for children and youth	39
Health care institutions	66
Homecare for the elderly	65
Housing	34
Maintenance of municipal roads	47
Water supply	46
Renovation	41
Library	48
Cinema and culture	34
Maintenance of buildings	49
General maintenance	48

Table A4. Items in index of citizen information. Percentage of municipalities.

Information employee working with external information	54
Information newsletter to citizens	30
Municipal information column in local newspaper	22
Streaming of council meetings	49
Regular information meetings	54
Citizen information in several languages	38
Information for the visually impaired	18

Table A5. Items in index of participatory arrangements. Percentage of municipalities in sample.

Assigned time slots/meeting places where citizens can contact councillors	25
Citizen surveys about political participation and democracy	38
Citizen surveys about welfare services	68
Measures to strengthen the participation of underrepresented groups	48
Formal channels for citizen participation in the budget process	11
Formal channels for citizen consultation in other areas (not budget)	5
Participatory budgeting	2