

Administrators as Drivers of Democratic Innovations

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ABSTRACT

Public servants play a crucial role in initiating and developing public-sector innovations. They offer their expertise when engaging in innovations targeting ordinary policy development or service delivery; however, an open question is which role public servants should – and actually do – play in innovations designed to strengthen democracy. In this article, we explore the administrative premises for democratic innovations. The case study presented is based on data gathered from eight municipalities in Denmark and Norway, which have all implemented different measures to strengthen democracy. By comparing pairs of relatively similar innovations across countries, we are able to illuminate the impact of differences in institutional context, notably the fact that Danish mayors hold a combined political and administrative role compared to the role of mayors in the Norwegian system, where political responsibilities held by the mayor and by the chief municipal executive are formally separate. Furthermore, by comparing the different measures implemented, we are able to distinguish between innovations referring to participatory or deliberative democracy, and innovations that intervene in the relationship between politicians and the administration. Our main finding is that regardless of institutional context and innovation contents, there is little evidence that administrative officers are excluded from or play a merely passive role in processes of innovating democratic practices. On the contrary, administrative officers are generally active drivers of innovation – either on their own account or in close cooperation with the mayor, indicating that, across different contexts, the role of administrative officers is crucial in innovations that seek to strengthen democracy.

Key words: Democratic innovations, administrative role, public innovations, representative democracy

Introduction

In recent years, Western democracies have engaged in numerous initiatives whose aim is to improve the daily workings of the public sector, a practice often referred to as “public-sector innovation” (Bekkers et al., 2011). An overwhelming number of these innovations target the administrative and professional units of local governments. So far, research in the field of innovation has to a lesser extent focused on democracy, political leadership, and the political system (Sørensen, 2017). However, currently we observe an increasing interest in rethinking the institutional setup for democracy, related to the representative system, various participatory arrangements, and the relation between representation and participation (Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015; Røiseland and Vabo, 2016; Herrting and Kugelberg, 2018). This interest has spurred a number of experiments and changes – or *democratic innovations*, in local governments around the world.

Mark Warren (2009) and others have argued that governance is a driver for democratization, and that democratic innovations are often initiated and developed by administrators whose aim is to strengthen governance (see for example Sancino et al., 2018;

Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019). However, empirical studies of the extent to which democratic innovations are actually governance driven are scarce. Our aim in this article is to build knowledge about the role played by administrative leaders in democratic innovation processes. This is crucial knowledge, because if administrators' motives for developing democracy are related to governance, the implications may be that administrators embrace only certain types of democratic innovations. Administrators' motivations may impact the design of democratic innovations, and, because administrators will be involved, they may also impact their implementation.

By innovation, we understand changes characterized by disruptions that represent something new compared to former procedures and actions, introduced to improve or strengthen something – in our case local democracy (Hartley, 2005). Such innovations can take many different forms. In our definition, “democratic innovations” include new types of citizen involvement (Smith, 2009; Geissel and Joas, 2013; Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015), but also all kinds of efforts to strengthen democracy by transforming the representative system (e.g., Lidström et al., 2016; Sørensen and Torfing, 2018; Hertting and Kugelberg, 2018). Thus, democratic innovations may target measures ranging from the recruitment of candidates for elections, the election process itself, the relationship between elected leaders and administrators, to arenas for citizen participation and the use of mini-publics.

Administrators – top leaders, cross-cutting teams, and the like – play a crucial role in initiating and developing public-sector innovations. Current studies strongly suggest that despite a number of public-sector barriers, enthusiastic and clever administrative leaders and professionals are key drivers of innovation in the public sector (Bason, 2010; Eggers and Singh, 2009). In most cases, public servants take initiatives on behalf of political leaders, and administrative leaders and staff members are crucial partners for political leaders and stakeholders in processes where such innovations are developed (Torfing, 2016).

Given the great dependence politicians have on their administrative staffs, we ask how renewal of democracy actually is managed among administrative leaders. That is, what kind of role do administrative officers play in democratic innovations? In the literature, there are many articulations of administrative roles, in general as well as in the specific context of local governments (e.g., Svava, 1991; Jacobsen, 1996; Selden et al., 1999; Peters 2009; Sancino et al., 2018). However, so far, the literature has primarily been concerned with the division between politics and administration and with the various political roles played by administrative officers. Empirically, attention have been given to the question of whether there is correspondence between political and administrative attitudes and preferences. With few exceptions (e.g., Sørensen and Torfing, 2016; Agger and Sørensen, 2018), we find a lack of research on the administrative role in democratic innovations. In this article, therefore, we contribute to filling this knowledge gap in the literature by investigating administrative leaders' role in developing democratic innovations – innovations involving citizen participation and strengthening the role of political leaders who intervene directly in the relationship between politicians and administrators.

In our analysis, we will pay attention to two variables assumed to be important for explaining how administrative leaders behave: *Innovation contents* and the *political-administrative relationship*. Regarding the first, we argue that administrative officers have different interests in different kinds of democratic innovation. When developing innovations referring to participatory or deliberative democracy, administrative leaders will, to a large extent, share the interests of elected leaders (e.g., Rutgers and Oveem, 2014; Nabatchi, 2012),

turning these innovations into fertile ground for administrative contributions. Probably more difficult are innovations that intervene in the relationship between politicians and the administration, potentially creating a zero-sum game where administrative actors lose whatever elected leaders gain. Regarding the political-administrative relationship, we know that different countries have different traditions about how much politics is separated from administration, and this relationship varies in line with specific models described in the scholarly literature (e.g., Aberbach et al., 1991; Mouritzen and Svava, 2002; Heinelt et al., 2018). We assume that the relationship between politicians and administrators will impact on how administrative leaders involve in democratic innovations.

The article proceeds as follows: In the next section, we argue that being a “democratic innovator” is a new role for administrative leaders, and that the complexity of and the difficulty in playing this role will depend on the context, understood in terms of both the type of democratic innovation implemented and the institutional framework defining the political-administrative relations. The assumptions made in section two will be analyzed based on qualitative data gathered in Danish and Norwegian local governments where a variety of democratic innovations have been implemented. In addition, the two national contexts are ideally suited for our analysis because the overall model for local government is very similar, whereas the relationship between politicians and administrators and the formal role of top administrative leaders differ. In the empirical analysis, we briefly explain the eight innovations and retell what role administrative leaders play in initiating the ideas as well as in developing these ideas into democratic innovations. In the concluding section, the analysis is summarized, followed by some suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is based on the literature addressing the role of administrative leaders in political organizations. First, we briefly introduce some of the approaches to administrative roles found in the scholarly literature and argue that it is timely to introduce a new role for administrators, as *innovators*. Because our main focus is on administrative leaders’ approach to innovation processes, we further argue that administrative leaders, depending on innovation contents and institutional context, can be passive or active, and in favor of, as well as resistant to, the democratic innovations in question.

Administrative leaders and innovations

Administrative leaders in political organizations such as local governments are embedded in a complex political-administrative system rife with ambiguities and tensions (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007; Pierre et al., 2015). Consequently, the position of administrative leaders cannot be condensed into a single role. We must see the overall role played by administrators as a set of possible, and to some degree mutually exclusive, operational roles. The literature offers a range of different approaches to the roles public-sector administrators should – and actually do – play (e.g., Svava, 1991; Jacobsen, 1996; Selden et al., 1999; Peters, 2009).

Typical for these contributions is the emphasis put on the bureaucratic role, referring to the classical Weberian relationship between elected representatives and administrative officers, where the administrators emphasize their subordinate role and are reluctant to engage in any kind of policy development initiative (Peters, 2009). Emphasis is placed on the balance between political loyalty and administrative autonomy (e.g., Svava, 1991; Jacobsen, 1996;

Selden et al., 1999). Reference is also made to the administrative officer's role as a policymaker or advisor to political leaders. Although subordinate to the role of elected representatives, this role has historically been acknowledged as essential to the policymaking process (Peters, 2009). Elected representatives, especially at the local level where they normally are lay politicians, do not have the specialized knowledge to make appropriate policies. Also in innovations, administrators are considered important participants (Eggers and Singh, 2009). Their administrative expertise is crucial in formulating disruptive ideas and initiatives, and therefore most innovations are developed in a collaborative setting where administrative actors are deeply involved (Torfing, 2016). Consequently, one can hardly imagine public-sector innovations without strong contributions and support from professionals, administrative staff, and their administrative leaders.

The role as *innovator* has gained relevancy during the past decade. This relatively new role departs from the innovation agenda that has gained ground in the public sector, establishing where innovation has been established as a conceptual reference for reform. Even though we cannot claim that public-sector innovation is a completely new phenomenon (Pollitt, 2011), local governments are increasingly expected to take on a role as innovators who are continuously in search of better, more efficient, or "smarter" ways to provide services and solve problems (Torfing, 2016). While the public sector has traditionally been associated with values such as inertia, monopoly, bureaucratic culture, and short-term orientation (Bekkers et al., 2011:18), the innovation agenda represents a new value and a new role for both elected and hired leaders in local governments (Jørgensen and Bozeman, 2007).

The question then is what role administrative leaders play in innovations aimed at enhancing democracy. To a varying extent, administrators may take on the role as innovator and be actively involved. However, in playing the roles of bureaucrat and policymaker, mentioned above, administrative leaders may not only limit their involvement, but may also show resistance to democratic innovations – especially in cases where such innovations are seen to interfere with these administrative roles.

Innovation contents

First, there is a basic need to distinguish between different forms of democratic innovations because administrative officers may have varying interests depending on what the innovations' contents are. On the one hand, democratic innovations may target the representative system by aiming to strengthen the role of elected political leaders vis-à-vis hired administrative leaders (Steyvers et al., 2016:234). The classical literature on public administration, as we have mentioned above, pinpoints the idea that elected representatives, justifying their superiority based on the support gained from citizens in democratic elections, control the administrative officers. It may, however, be difficult to engage administrative leaders in innovations that intervene in the relationship between politicians and administrators, possibly creating a zero-sum game where administrative actors lose the power and influence that elected leaders gain. If administrators engage in democratization mainly to improve or strengthen governance (Warren, 2009), it seems rather unlikely that administrative leaders will take the lead in these innovation processes.

On the other hand, democratic innovations may be rooted in what the more recent academic literature highlights as deliberation, participation, and interactive governance developing networks and alliances between government and citizens (Borraz and John, 2004). According to Moore (1995) and other writers on public value, administrative employees play a role that relates to citizens, not only to elected representatives (e.g., Rutgers and Oveem,

2014). In this literature, it is argued that because different public values may conflict with each other on specific issues, administrative officers need a direct line to citizens from whom they can seek guidance (Nabatchi, 2012). When developing governance-driven innovations referring to participatory or deliberative democracy, administrative leaders will, to a large extent, share interests with elected leaders – turning these innovations into fertile ground for administrative contributions (Warren, 2009; Eckerd and Heidelberg, 2019). It is likely, therefore, that administrative leaders engage in democratic innovations that introduce new types of citizen involvement.

Political-Administrative relations

The institutionalization of the relationship between political and administrative actors varies significantly between states. Such differences in institutional setup may be highly relevant for the role played by administrative leaders in democratic innovations. On the one hand, the relationship between political and administrative actors may be institutionalized in ways that promote a clear division between political and administrative actors, resembling a Wilsonian model still serving as the intellectual foundation for thinking about governing (Hood, 1991; Peters, 2009). On the other hand, however relevant the idea of separating roles still is, even early contributors to the field of public administration acknowledged a role for bureaucrats in policymaking. Weber, who endorsed the ideal of a division between politicians as policymakers and administrators as implementers, realized that every problem, no matter how technical it might seem, can assume political significance (Aberbach et al., 1981:5). Thus, attempting to identify possible models for political-administrative relations, Svava (2006; 2014) favors the concept of complementarity based on the premise that elected officials and administrators should interact extensively, but in a way that preserves the unique contributions of each set of actors.

Following from the above logic, administrative leaders may be more engaged in democratic innovations within an institutional setup that enables some degree of complementarity between roles than they are within contexts where the roles are more separated. Furthermore, the closer to the political agenda administrative leaders are, the more likely they may be to engage in democratic innovations. Thus, to investigate the relevance of the political-administrative context, we compare the role administrative leaders play in the Norwegian system, which features a clear separation of responsibility between top administrative and top political leaders, with the role such leaders play in the Danish system, where the political-administrative relationship is formally integrated in the administrative role held by the mayor (for further details, see below). Because of the role complementarity in the Danish cases, we assume that administrative leaders will be more active there than they are in the Norwegian cases.

Methods and Data

The empirical analysis is based on a comparison between Norway and Denmark, two countries often regarded as “most similar systems”. Both countries belong to a common governance tradition in which municipalities are core welfare providers under a universal and national welfare state regime (Knutsen, 2017). They represent a Nordic type of local government system that features a high level of decentralization to multi-purpose entities that enjoy considerable local autonomy (Ladner et al., 2016). With few exceptions, local government functions are similar in the two countries. However, they differ significantly in the institutional context defining the formal role of the mayor in relation to that of the

municipal administration. While we find a clear separation of responsibility between top administrative and top political leaders in the Norwegian system, the political-administrative relationship is formally integrated into the administrative role held by the mayor in the Danish system. Thus, our design resembles a “most similar systems design”, presupposing inter-system similarity between two or more cases and variation in a key intra-system variable (Przeworski, 1987; Gerring, 2007).

That is, the key intra-system variable refers to the major difference in institutional context between the two countries, where Norwegian mayors chair the council and can instruct the municipal administration only through formal decisions taken in the council, while their Danish colleagues not only chair the council, they are also the formal heads of the administration. In the Norwegian case, a hired chief municipal executive (CME) must, by law, be the formal leader of the administration. Consequently, the Norwegian legislation frames a relationship between politicians and administration wherein the mayor relates to the administrative part of the organization only through the CME. Conversely, the Danish institutional setup allows for a higher degree of complementarity between the two spheres. As argued above, we suggest that this institutional difference has important consequences for administrative approaches to democratic innovations, both regarding initiatives pertaining to democratic innovation and regarding their implementation.

The following analysis is based on data from four local governments in each of the two countries. The cases were identified in a rigorous mapping of Norwegian and Danish local governments that had taken extraordinary actions to strengthen political leadership and democracy. The mapping identified a total of 23 Danish and 20 Norwegian local governments. From the complete list, the project team selected four cases in each country for closer study. The cases were selected to display variation in innovation contents. We understand these local governments as *influential* cases (Seawright and Gerring, 2008), displaying local governments’ systemic capacity to develop democratic innovations.

As illustrated in Table 1 below, where the organizational setup in each municipality is mapped, the democratic innovations in the eight cases differs significantly. In four of the eight cases, the representative system is addressed by changes in the organization of political work among councilors. The remaining four cases pertain to citizens and the way in which they are linked to local government policy development or service production. Furthermore, one of the selected municipalities in each country has implemented relatively similar innovations, giving us the opportunity to analyze the cases in pairs, where not only the national context is almost similar, but also the democratic innovations to be compared across countries are almost similar.

Choosing eight cases for qualitative research has some obvious costs, because we will not be able to analyze the cases in depth. On the other hand, having eight cases allows us to compare the administrators’ approaches to democratic innovations dependent *both* on innovation contents (comparing across target/subject) *and* on the type of political-administrative relation (comparing Denmark (DK) and Norway (NO)). Thus, methodologically the two independent variables are analyzed using a combination of inter- and intra-pair variation. The inter-pair variation allows us to explore the relevance of innovation contents to administrative approaches to democratic innovations, while the intra-pair variation between cases that have implemented similar innovations enables us to sort out the relevance of the two types of institutional contexts shaped by the differing relationship between political and administrative actors.

Table 1: Innovation Contents, Organizational Setups and Municipalities

Innovation contents		Organizational setups	Name of municipality	Country
Target	Subject			
Political versus administrative actors	Emphasizing the separation between political and administrative leadership	Mayor and committee leaders make proposals	Fredrikstad	NO
		Finance committee consists of leaders of standing committees	Esbjerg	DK
Political versus administrative actors	Holistic policy development	Facilitating councilors' active participation in budget processes	Hjartdal	NO
		Common pre-meeting for members of standing committees	Hedensted	DK
Citizen participation	Co-creation strategies	Team of resource persons set up to deal with specific local issues	Steinkjer	NO
		Co-creation projects	Guldborgsund	DK
Citizen participation + Political versus administrative actors	Interactive governance	Ad hoc committees with councilors and citizens	Svelvik	NO
		Ad hoc committees with councilors and citizens	Gentofte	DK

The data, collected in 2018, are partly based on information about the innovations gathered via phone calls to the political secretariats in all eight municipalities. The political secretariat is the administrative unit that serves the political bodies and politicians, and is responsible for setting up political meetings and distributing case documents. Primarily, however, data consist of interviews with the mayor and CME in each of the eight case municipalities. Because some respondents were interviewed several times, the total number of interviews amounts to 24. The semi-structured interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim in their entirety. NVivo software was used to systematically categorize and analyze the interviews.

Analysis

In the following, we briefly explain the eight innovations, highlighting what role administrative leaders play in initiating the ideas as well as in developing those ideas into a democratic innovation. The section is concluded with a discussion of the main findings. The eight democratic innovations and the basic characteristics of the pairs of cases we compare are listed in Table 1 above.

Pair one: Innovating the relationship between politicians and administrators by emphasizing the separation between political and administrative leadership

Both Norwegian *Fredrikstad* and Danish *Esbjerg* have introduced innovations aimed at strengthening the role of top political leaders. In the Norwegian case, the mayor and committee leaders have been given the right to propose decisions in the case documents that are distributed to councilors or committee members prior to meetings. In the Danish case, the role of the finance committee has been strengthened by permitting leaders of a set of standing

committees to become finance committee members. The change has made it possible for the finance committee to become the main arena for coordination and policy development.

The two innovations both involve a redesign of the political-administrative relationship, but in somewhat different ways: in the Norwegian case by transferring the right to propose decisions from administrative actors to top political leaders; and in the Danish case by promoting coordination among political committees, rather than letting administrative actors provide inputs about coordination.

In the Norwegian case, the innovation was a compromise between councilors who were in favor of a major institutional reform aiming to introduce a parliamentary model, an option available to Norwegian local governments, and those who opposed such a change. Clearly, the effort to introduce the parliamentary model was driven by political leaders, whereas there was considerable skepticism among administrative leaders. The council never agreed on a parliamentary model and compromised on a minor element – the mayor's and committee leaders' right to propose decisions.

Although the innovation was not instigated by the Norwegian CME, the change influenced his daily work. Still, the initiative was met with considerable pragmatism:

Yes, only a few local governments practice “political proposals” and they have both advantages and disadvantages. For us (the administration), I can see only one drawback – we have a week less to prepare our cases. [...] The extent to which a mayor or committee leader disagrees with the administrative advice will become visible during the process anyway (CME, Fredrikstad).

In the Danish case, unlike the Norwegian, the very initiative to turn the steering committee into a coordination arena was launched administratively via a plan called “Vision 2020.” The vision defines the overarching framework for political priorities and contains a set of sector-crossing input areas, such as “Energy Metropolis and Center for Growth,” “Citizenship and Quality of Life,” and “Education and Attractive Jobs”. By using the steering committee as a coordination arena, the goal was to strengthen political leadership through more coherent and competent political processes.

The Danish CME explained:

In the beginning, Vision 2020 was strongly driven by the administrative directors, who made some suggestions, but shortly thereafter we succeeded in engaging the elected politicians. [...] From my point of view, it is almost unbelievable how they have embraced the vision. Maybe it's because as a politician you need some solid visions, something that can easily be communicated, and here it was. [...] (CME, Esbjerg).

The CME further explained that a new vision was underway, initiated by the administration.

Summing up, we find the top administrative leader to be remote from the innovation in the Norwegian case, whilst the innovative administrative role is highly present in initiating as well as developing the new coordinating arenas in the Danish case.

Pair two: Innovating the relationship between politicians and administrators by promoting holistic policy development

Both the Norwegian local government of Hjartdal and the Danish local government of Hedensted have introduced innovations designed to promote a holistic style of policy development that encourages politicians to adopt a cross-sectorial outlook in all policy processes. In the Danish case, a dialogue meeting held prior to the ordinary committee meetings has been introduced, allowing all council members across the different permanent committees to discuss whatever issue they wish to put on the agenda. Meetings are closed to the public, but administrative leaders are invited in, allowing for an informal political-administrative dialogue. In the Norwegian case, the investigated practice is limited to the role played by executive committee members in the annual budget discussions. Traditionally, the CME shares his recommendations with the executive committee before the political discussions begin and the budget is finalized. To allow for a holistic discussion and to empower the politicians, however, the CME has withdrawn from such a role as policy advisor in the process of deciding on the annual budget. A user-friendly spread sheet has been developed, helping the executive committee members to convert political priorities into budget numbers.

Like the pair of innovations compared above, the innovations in the two present cases involve a redesign of the political-administrative relationship – but in a somewhat different way. While in the Norwegian case the traditional role of the CME of submitting a balanced budget has been transferred to the executive committee, in the Danish case the closed political dialogue meetings allow for new political initiatives to emerge, either from the mayor or from the CME.

Although the innovations intruded on their administrative domain, the top administrative officers in both countries encouraged the new practices. The CME in the Norwegian case seemed to be even more involved in initiating and developing the innovation than was the Danish CME.

In the Norwegian case, the initiative to develop a spread sheet, making it possible for executive committee members to discuss and propose a balanced budget themselves, was clearly taken by the CME. Although the mayor was involved in the initial discussions, the initiative came from an innovative administrative officer. As the mayor put it: “The background is simply that our present finance manager loves Excel sheets” (Mayor, Hjartdal).

The council members were positive about the initiative, but during the first budget process the budget assumptions were changed, limiting the room for political maneuver. The politicians wanted the CME back in the role as policy advisor once again. The executive committee had only had responsibility for balancing the budget for two years, but was not comfortable with taking political responsibility for discussing and agreeing on budget priorities, the main argument being that:

... the CME and his administrative staff have the knowledge. Both professional [knowledge] about the different service sectors and about what is economically sustainable for the local council (CME, Hjartdal).

While the top administrative officer in the Norwegian case was an active innovator, the initiative in the Danish case seems to have resulted from a long and cooperative process

between political and administrative actors. Due to the need to deal with an economic crisis, the top administrative leader initiated an innovation program that challenged the traditional way of working both among elected politicians and among administrative staff. The dialogue meetings were in many ways a spin-off from the work style that emerged during these innovation processes, and they represented the mayor's heartfelt wish to promote the holistic idea of discussing the new ideas with politicians across sector borders in order to mobilize as many elected representatives as possible in innovative endeavors. As underlined by the mayor himself, this kind of initiative spread the agenda-setting power among councilors and would not be possible without a mayor's goodwill:

And it is clear that I am the one who sets the agenda. In my position as mayor. And I think if this is not appreciated, it is me – the mayor – that will have to put it to an end (Mayor, Hedensted).

Summing up, the role played by the top administrative officer in innovating the political practice in the Danish case is somewhat hands-off. These new, holistic practices did not target the role of the top administrative officers as directly as in the Norwegian case – rather, they targeted it only indirectly as a consequence of the holistic approach introduced in the political section of the organization. However, the CME in the Norwegian case played an active role in initiating as well as in developing and pursuing the innovative idea.

Pair three: Innovating arrangements for citizen participation through co-creation

The Norwegian municipality of *Steinkjer* and the Danish municipality of *Guldborgsund* have both introduced innovations aimed at promoting processes of co-creation between the municipal organization and local communities. In the Norwegian case, the local council wants distinct local communities to organize and activate existing networks and voluntary organizations. Once an issue is raised by the local community, and it becomes clear that there is a local network to follow up on the issue, a team of administrative staff and local resource persons is organized in a project to collaborate in order to tackle the challenge. In the Danish case, the question is not so much about using existing community networks as it is about promoting the establishment of new networks to decrease the financial burden on the local government. Here the local council offers limited grants to encourage co-financing and engagement in local communities in order to solve what are regarded as important issues.

In the Norwegian case, the idea started to develop after a contact made by representatives from a local community. The mayor, together with relevant administrative staff, met with community representatives in order to solve a specific problem. The meeting represented an experience of a successful way of dealing with local problems raised by the citizens themselves. This event coincided with an idea, on the part of the administration, to develop a project because of a national funding opportunity that arose. The basic way of thinking was shared by the mayor, who described the exchange of ideas with the administrative officers like this:

And she contacted me. And we discussed ... Because I was also thinking about it. That we should have had a bit more coordinated local communities to talk with. It would have been nice if the local communities organized themselves a bit, that we could relate to. Not as a counterpart, or a receiver, but as a teammate (Mayor, Steinkjer).

Although encouraged by the CME, the Norwegian scheme was initiated by a subordinate administrative officer. The project has been incorporated as a permanent change in administrative practice, and administrative officers clearly acted as drivers both in initiating and in developing the new interactive practice.

The same was true in the Danish case, but there the CME played a more central role in the process. There, the story goes that during a deep economic crisis around ten years ago, the current mayor realized the need for a radical change, and chose to replace the CME to encourage innovation. A project to enhance efficiency and cut budgets was then launched by the new CME. The specific idea of using limited funds to inspire co-creation emerged from political-administrative discussions:

And it started, really, when some of us discussed the matter, OK where you want something to happen, we may also have some funds we are able to fork out, so that you have something to start to work with, and maybe as a basis for additional funding ... and based on that we have to sort out if it is possible to let 2 + 2 equal 6 (Mayor, Guldborgsund).

In addition, we find an extraordinarily active and positive CME in the Danish case, involved not only in initiating the innovation, but also in eagerly implementing what was regarded as a cultural change in governance form. The CME's role, as both policymaker and innovator, is eloquently expressed by the mayor as follows:

But the CME is responsible for the whole process, and it is very much thanks to him that we have reached as far as we have today. And he appointed some key figures within our organization to implement the changes. And always informed me beforehand about [them], that is before we went to the economy committee to tell them that now we are going in this or that particular direction (CME, Guldborgsund).

Summing up, unlike the innovations in the two pairs of cases compared above, these innovations involve the development and strengthening of arrangements for citizen participation. Interestingly, top administrative officers seem to be drivers in both cases. While the administrative officers involved played the roles of policymakers and innovators, the initiatives seemed to emerge in close cooperation with various actors, including the mayor. However, we did not register any differences between the Norwegian and Danish cases as regards administrative involvement in, and enthusiasm for, the introduced innovations.

Pair four: Innovating arrangements for citizen participation through interactive governance

Both the Norwegian municipality of *Svelvik* and the Danish municipality of *Gentofte* have developed democratic innovations bringing politicians in at stages of policy development processes that usually mainly involve administrative actors, and involving citizens directly in the process of developing, assessing, and proposing policy alternatives. Normally, administrative actors would take the first steps in a formal policy process, for example by explaining a challenge in a case document, or by developing alternative solutions from which political leaders can choose. By introducing ad hoc committees, these two municipalities have partly set aside administrative actors in the early stages of a policy development process.

As in the pairs of cases compared above, these new practices involve the development and strengthening of arrangements for citizen participation. In the Danish case, ad hoc committees were developed some years ago as replacements for the ordinary standing committees. The main idea of ad hoc committees is to engage citizens in policy development, and each committee consists of ten selected citizens and five elected councilors, while administrative personnel serve on the secretariat and as facilitators. The establishment of ad hoc committees represents a change in the political-administrative relationship, because elected leaders become deeply involved in the early stages of a policy development process. Each committee is given a mandate explaining a challenge to discuss, and a delivery they must achieve. In the Danish case, the report from each ad hoc committee is delivered to the council, who then defines the next step.

Commenting on the initiating phase of the innovation, the Danish CME explains:

It is my role to dare to raise critical questions and to express my view, and I said, “Are you politicians happy with the conditions we are offering you now, do you believe the present role of elected leaders is the most effective, and the most supportive to your mandate, or are there things that we could do differently” (CME, Gentofte).

He further explained:

The idea of the ad hoc committees was launched by the mayor and me. It was a long maturation process, which is also the main reason why this has been a success (CME, Gentofte).

Clearly, the Danish CME had an active role as an innovator in the initial processes, focusing mainly on the ad hoc committees as instruments for political leadership, and to a lesser extent as instruments for citizen participation.

The Norwegian municipality adopted the idea from the Danish case, but in a more modest form. There the standing committees are kept, and reports from the ad hoc committees are delivered to the administration, not to the council, as in the Danish case. The background for introducing ad hoc committees in the Norwegian case was also different. After years of financial challenges, a political conflict developed over the question of school structure, leading to tensions between the administration and the council, and also leading to significant political turbulence. During this period, the Norwegian CME expressed a strong vision about what the role of the councilors and their political leadership should be. The municipality had a long tradition in innovating its relationship with citizens. Hardly surprising, it was the CME, together with other administrative leaders, who initiated a visit to the Danish municipality to learn more about the type of ad hoc committees developed there. The delegation comprised a mix of administrative and political leaders, and all members of the council were invited. Referring to the turbulent times, the CME explains:

Those [politicians] attending the study visit were very positive. They had been part of the political leadership, as leader of the opposition and as party group leaders, and so on. They had taken great responsibility during these turbulent times of redirection. They had great experiences, and were very competent to engage in the debate [about new forms of political leadership] (CME, Svelvik).

Shortly after the visit, the elected representatives agreed to create three ad hoc committees, each consisting of five councilors and ten citizens.

Summing up, although supported by the politicians, both the Norwegian and the Danish CMEs were active and prime movers in initiating and further developing political leadership. In both cases, and especially in the Norwegian case, it seems that giving elected politicians a leading role in the initial stages of a policy process was not only a strategic adaptation; instead, it reflected the CMEs' views of how elected leaders are expected to work.

Main findings

The main findings are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Main Findings

Innovation targeting	Municipality	Country	Differences in administrative role in innovation
Political versus administrative actors	Fredrikstad	NO	Politically initiated innovation/ administrative pragmatism in developing the idea
	Esbjerg	DK	Administratively initiated and developed innovation/ enthusiastic political support in developing the idea
	Hjartdal	NO	Administratively initiated and developed/ political skepticism/resistance in developing the idea
	Hedensted	DK	Political-administrative (shared) initiative/ remote administrative role in developing the idea
Citizen participation	Steinkjer	NO	Political-administrative (shared) initiative/ active administrative role in developing the idea
	Guldborgsund	DK	
Citizen participation + Political versus administrative actors	Svelvik	NO	Eager administrative initiative/ active administrative role in developing the idea
	Gentofte	DK	Political-administrative (shared) initiative/ active administrative and political role in developing the idea

Our analysis demonstrates that in most cases, administrative leaders are initiating as well as developing democratic innovations. Regardless of innovation content and institutional context, we find very little evidence in our eight case studies that administrative officers are excluded, or play a merely passive role, in the process of innovating democratic practices. The only case where we find considerable skepticism among administrative leaders is in the Norwegian municipality of Fredrikstad, where a parliamentary political-administrative model was introduced. The Fredrikstad case represents a politically initiated innovation in which the top administrative leader was hardly involved. In all other cases, top administrative leaders and subordinate administrators were not only deeply involved, but also enthusiastic about the change. Even in the two cases where arrangements were made to enhance citizen participation through interactive governance, and thereby effectively reduce the role of the administrative staff, we found enthusiastic administrative leaders as a driving force.

The Norwegian case of Fredrikstad, where the innovations' content changed the relationship between politicians and administrators, is also exceptional in the sense that the innovation there was clearly initiated by political leaders. In all other cases, the initiatives to promote democratic innovations seem to assign a rather active role to the administrative units

of the organizations in question. In some cases, the initiatives are clearly administrative. This was the case, for example in introducing interactive governance in Svelvik, Norway. There the CME challenged politicians about their role, seeking to enhance their knowledge through selected field visits and encouraging them to change the way they enacted their role. In other cases, the basic ideas seemed to be shared by the mayor and relevant administrative actors, and after a process of informal discussions, innovative initiatives were administratively formulated and prepared before they were introduced to the council. A good example here is the Danish case of Hedensted, where an arena for holistic policy development, for discussing politics across sector borders, was introduced. The underlying idea had already been embraced, and the initiative was therefore highly appreciated and welcomed by the mayor. But the new practice was concretized and promoted by the CME, who launched an innovation program that challenged the traditional way of working both among elected politicians and among administrative staff.

As illustrated in Table 2, there is no systematic variation between the compared countries as regards the innovative role played by administrators. That is, in opposition to our theoretical argument, administrators seem to play an active role as democratic innovators, independent on how the relation between politics and administration is institutionalized. We do not, furthermore, find support for our second theoretical assumption, that administrative involvement would vary dependent on the content of the innovation. Top administrative leaders are crucial. This is true not only in innovations targeting the daily service delivery and workings of local governments, confirming well-established findings in contemporary research. Administrators also play a decisive role in innovations that aim to strengthen democracy, even though these innovations tend to interfere in their own power base and roles.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the role played by administrative leaders in democratic innovations, and how the renewal of democracy is managed in local governments. Comparing eight cases in Denmark and Norway, we find weak support for our assumptions that contents of democratic innovations as well as the closeness in political-administrative relations would affect the roles played by the administrative leaders. Our conclusion is that administrators play a decisive role in all the kinds of democratic innovations studied, and regardless of the context of political-administrative relations within which they take place. In this final section we reflect on the implications of that conclusion for future research.

It is a surprising finding that the role of administrative leaders is almost identical, despite the significant institutional difference related to the roles of mayor and of CME. The two national contexts, Norway and Denmark, belong to different traditions, and the scholarly literature referred to above would argue that such an institutional difference significantly affects both role expectations and role behavior. The analysis indicates that this is not the case. Rather, administrative leaders are, independent of their formal role and position, willing to initiate and implement any kind of democratic innovations – even when these innovations intervene with their own domain and power base. To some extent, this finding contradicts the suggestion that administrators' engagement in democratic innovations is driven by their need to improve and strengthen the process of governance (Warren, 2009). In that respect, these observations are good news for anyone arguing for the need to renew democratic participation and democratic governance. However, this study is too limited to draw any general conclusion. Additional studies must explore the attitudes and conceptions among

administrative leaders in relation to democracy and governance. It is possible to imagine, on the one hand, that administrative leaders' motives were rooted in instrumental ideas about governance, for example that participation improved policy or lubricated decision making. On the other hand, taking departure in literature on public value, it is possible to imagine that democracy and participation represent deeper values among administrative leaders and exist independently of administrative leaders' everyday struggles with governance.

The observations above also raise questions about how politics versus administration is conceptualized in the theoretical literature. One possible interpretation is that the personal characteristics of the CME and the character of the interpersonal relationship between the mayor and the CME are more decisive for role performance than the institutional framework is. Such a conclusion invites a rethinking of the relationship between politics and administration. Most theoretical literature assumes that politics and administration, in principle, are separated by a line, and the typologies developed in the comparative literature point to different systems depending on where the line is drawn. An alternative conceptualization suggested by Alford et al. (2017) understands the interplay between politicians and the administration as a "purple zone" where the "red" of politics mixes with the "blue" of administration. Their empirical analysis, based on data from Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, illustrates the analytical potential of such a perspective in the context of Westminster systems. Our analysis above, dealing with Norwegian and Danish local governments, indicates that the perspective may apply to the Nordic context as well, implying that Nordic local governments should be understood in terms of three different sections: politics – purple zone – administration.

The conceptual change from "line" to "zone" may seem unimportant, but it raises several questions for future research. One relates to recruitment of administrative leaders and their necessary skills. After several decades with New Public Management, celebrating professional leadership clearly separated from politics (Pierre 2011), we may see a new generation of leaders fitted for the "purple zone" – leaders who, to a larger extent, are seeing themselves as facilitators and constructors of platforms and arenas for innovation and democratic renewal (Agger and Sørensen, 2018; Sancion et al., 2018). Research must explore how important these skills are, to what extent they are entering local governments, and the drivers and barriers for applying these skills in innovating democracy.

Furthermore, relating to the daily work among administrative and top political leaders, a "purple zone" must be organized and institutionalized. Practical matters like the physical design of city halls, the location of offices for political and administrative leaders, the practical tools for communication, and physical and virtual meeting points would be possibly important resources when organizing the "purple zone." For scholars studying democratic innovations, these attributes may be as important as formal differences in legal regulation, and they therefore must be considered in future research.

The data for this article did not allow us to explore administrative leaders' skills or the practicalities mentioned above. In addition, data were collected in only eight municipalities, and among local governments that have taken extraordinary steps to strengthen democracy through innovations. Therefore, data are not representative of attitudes and role perceptions among administrative leaders in local governments as such – constituting an important area for future studies.

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