

# Organizational stability and resocialization in public administrations: Theory and evidence from Norwegian civil servants (1986–2016)

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## Abstract

The organizational theory approach to public administration emphasizes that organizational features of public bureaucracies shape civil servants' role perceptions and opinions. This study brings forward a novel refinement of this theoretical framework by arguing that such processes of organizational resocialization require *intertemporal* consistency of the organizational environment. We empirically test this proposition by combining individual-level longitudinal data from a panel of Norwegian civil servants (1986–2016;  $N \approx 375$ ) with information about organizational changes in ministerial structures since 1945. Using individuals' task portfolio as our main organizational “influencer” of interest, we confirm that the impact of individuals' task portfolio on their role perceptions *only* strengthens over time for individuals working in ministries with a high level of organizational stability. This finding adds an important scope condition—namely, intertemporal stability—to the traditional organizational theory argument about what shapes civil servants' role perceptions and opinions.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Public Administration (PA) scholarship has recently been characterized as moving toward a “fragmented adhocracy” consisting of at best weakly interdependent subcommunities (Vogel & Hattke, 2022). Even so, several red threads run through PA’s long history. One of these relates to PA scholars’ keen interest in examining how “living” public sector organizations and institutions work in practice, and how “continual ‘experimentation’ with changes in structure, form and functions” affect the civil service—and civil servants—in executing its/their tasks (Elliott et al., 2022, p. 109; Vogel & Hattke, 2022). This article fits in that long-standing tradition by studying how the intertemporal (in)stability of public organizations shapes the development of civil servants’ role perceptions and opinions.<sup>1</sup> We thereby take direct inspiration from one important theoretical contribution to PA scholarship from the 1980s onward: namely, the institutional turn applying an organization theory approach to the study of public administration (Christensen et al., 2021; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; March & Olsen, 1984; Olsen, 2010). A core argument in this literature is that the organizational basis of public administrations is not simply a technical matter, but rather mobilizes staff members’ attention toward (or away from) certain problems and solutions. As a result, the way in which the administrative apparatus is (re-)organized and (re-)structured may bear significant influence over the governance of society by triggering processes of “organizational resocialization” (Lægread & Olsen, 1978, 1988; March & Olsen, 1984, 1989; Trondal et al., 2018). Our study offers a critical refinement to this line of argument by maintaining that any such resocialization processes require the *intertemporal* consistency of the organizational environment.

From a theoretical perspective, we argue that organizational features—such as organizational boundaries and affiliation, task specialization, leadership, or regulations—are more likely to have a (strong) impact on staff members if the organizational environment is stable. The underlying intuition derives from psychological research showing that “a more or less *stable* set of forces that *steadily* push and pull on newcomers” is needed to affect how they behave or think (Ashforth et al., 2007, p. 6; our italics). Stability fosters a routinization of individuals’ attention and offers a predictable target in terms of behavioral expectations or appropriate (“taken-for-granted”) courses of action (Egeberg, 2004; March & Olsen, 1989; Murdoch et al., 2019; Trondal, 2023; Trondal et al., 2021). This line of argument implies a need for sufficient stability in the organizational environment to observe any consistency of the effects of organizational features on individual staff members over time. The ensuing testable proposition is that any influence from organizational features on civil servants’ role perceptions and opinions arises most strongly *under conditions of organizational stability*. We empirically test this proposition by combining individual-level longitudinal data from a panel of Norwegian civil servants (1986–2016;  $N \approx 375$ ) with information about organizational changes in ministerial structures since 1945.

Our study is obviously not the first to address the role of organizational features for organizational resocialization. Nonetheless, we offer two main contributions to this literature. First, from a theoretical perspective, we extend our understanding of the *scope conditions* under which organizational resocialization is more (or less) likely to arise. This is particularly relevant given that the societal and organizational environment in recent years is increasingly in a constant state of turbulence (Ansell et al., 2021; Elliott et al., 2022; Gioia et al., 2000). As such, our analysis also links to growing contemporary debates about whether and how public administration can offer robust governance responses (Ansell et al., 2023), and, particularly, the role organizational factors can play as a basis for robust public governance (Trondal, 2023). Second, from an empirical and methodological perspective, the vast majority of existing studies on organizational resocialization rely on cross-sectional data, or study distinct samples of civil servants surveyed at multiple points in time (i.e., repeated cross-sections). Both approaches cannot capture what determines the role perceptions and opinions of the *same* civil servants at multiple points in time (Murdoch et al., 2023). By building on information from the decennial Norwegian Administration Surveys (1986–2016), we have access to data covering *the same bureaucrats* at multiple stages of their bureaucratic career. Hence, we can assess whether and how organizational features gain (or lose) relevance for their role perceptions and opinions over time.

## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A central question within the vast socialization literature relates to the time in life people acquire their attitudes, perceptions, loyalties, and identifications.<sup>2</sup> One strand of this literature advocates a central role for so-called “pre-socialization,” meaning that individuals’ socialization into specific attitudes and preferences is largely completed in childhood and adolescence (early pre-socialization). Family background is thus understood as a key driver in the socialization process (Franklin, 2004; Hyman, 1959), even though pre-socialization can also occur through higher education and professional training (late pre-socialization) (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2009). A second strand of literature believes in a key role for “organizational resocialization,” meaning that individuals are affected by the characteristics of the organizational environment they find themselves in during their public-, non-profit or private-sector career (Læg Reid & Olsen, 1988; March & Olsen, 1984). We briefly set out the central insights from these lines of argument before developing our own theoretical extension to the latter perspective.

### 2.1 | The pre-socialization perspective

The pre-socialization perspective entails that individuals’ attitudes and preferences are developed in (early) childhood and adolescence due to experiences within one’s family and educational environment. The attitudes and preferences that are developed early in life are then assumed to remain largely unchanged afterwards. Public administration scholars within this tradition maintain that one cannot understand how a public organization works without addressing the demography of the individuals who work within it (Meier, 2019; Pfeffer, 1982; Selden, 1997). The theory of representative bureaucracy, for instance, emphasizes that the demographic characteristics of the individuals who work in the bureaucracy have a significant influence on how the bureaucracy works and the decisions it makes. Bureaucrats who share certain social characteristics with citizens (including sex, race, ethnicity, social or geographical background), so the argument goes, are more likely to also share their values and thus make decisions benefiting this social group (Meier, 2019; Selden, 1997). Supporters of late pre-socialization are more occupied with individuals’ professional background as achieved through studies at higher education institutions. Socialization into different professions—such as law, social science, medicine, and engineering—is thereby thought to constrain and enable individuals’ perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018).

The central focus in this pre-socialization argument is thus on where bureaucrats come from, and a public employee’s social background is assumed to affect his or her perceptions, attitudes, and subsequent decisions (Læg Reid & Olsen, 1978). Central preconditions for this type of relationship to arise include a stable and strong group identity, the salience and prestige of the group, long-term relationship to the group, (in)consistency with membership in other social groups, and a strong connection between the identity of the group and bureaucratic tasks and discretion (Thompson, 1976). Naturally, this theoretical perspective still allows for distinct effects from the different social categories that bureaucrats belong to simultaneously (such as sex, race, education, profession, nationality, etc.), or their representation of different social categories under different contextual circumstances (Meier, 2019; Murdoch et al., 2022).

### 2.2 | The organizational resocialization perspective

By contrast, the organizational theory approach to public administration acknowledges how organizational features—such as organizational boundaries and affiliation, task specialization, leadership, or regulations—affect civil servants’ attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. In this theoretical perspective, government institutions are argued to have an independent potential to influence civil servants (Læg Reid & Olsen, 1988; March & Olsen, 1984). In general, civil servants are viewed as defending or representing the organizations and institutions in which they work. They act as

“key players on different teams” (Lægreid & Olsen, 1984). Civil servants’ behavior is both enabled and constrained through hierarchy, specialization, rules, and regulations (cf. Simon, 1957). This also implies that the substitution of one employee with specific characteristics with another employee having different characteristics may *not* have a very significant bearing on how the bureaucracy works. The reason is that roles and positions are defined and specified independently of the people who fill the positions (Christensen & Lægreid, 2013; Egeberg, 2012; Pollitt et al., 2004). The bureaucrat operates more in line with the demands of their position or organization than according to individual preferences. In this theory, bureaucrats’ embeddedness in the formal structure of the organization is assumed to matter more than where bureaucrats come from: that is, “where you stand depends on where you sit” more than on “where you come from” (Christensen & Lægreid, 2021).

A direct implication of this argument is that there will be some degree of resocialization due to individuals’ exposure to specific organizational factors. For instance, it would generally be expected that bureaucrats act in a manner appropriate to their position and that they can be trusted to do so even when there is a temptation to do something else (Lægreid & Olsen, 1978; March & Olsen, 1989). Hence, the room for acceptable behavior as a civil servant will be rather narrow and informed by the procedures and (in)formal rules linked to the tasks and positions at hand. Based on a logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 1989), any such resocialization is thereby mainly informed by the organizational affiliation, positions, and tasks of civil servants within the governmental apparatus.

### 2.3 | Extending the resocialization perspective: The moderating role of organizational (in)stability

The organizational resocialization described in the previous section is unlikely to work equally well under all conditions. We argue that any resocialization process can be expected to materialize predominantly in settings where the organization has high resocialization potential, and that this potential is increased by a high(er) level of organizational *stability*. In such stable settings, the importance of organizational features for civil servants’ attitudes, perceptions and decisions as bureaucrats will be strengthened (relative to a setting with high levels of organizational instability).

More than three decades ago, March and Olsen (1989) observed in the US political system that individual courses of action tend to be influenced by the organization of individuals’ attention, which is linked to power and pre-existing resources. This observation drew directly on an organizational approach, which emphasizes how decision processes and human behavior respond to a set of persistent organizational characteristics and routines (Cyert & March, 1963). Essentially, it is expected that key premises for behavioral choices lie within past experiences encoded in stable rules (Olsen, 2017), and that actors are likely to prioritize the consequences and goals of their actions that are supported by permanent, stable organizational capacities (March, 1988). The same is much less likely to hold in situations characterized by weak and ambiguous mandates as well as a lack of clarity and certainty in terms of behavioral expectations or appropriate courses of action. Civil servants in such settings face decision situations that are less predictable and rule-driven (Selden, 1997), which undermines any constant influence of organizational features on their attitudes, perceptions, and opinions. These arguments imply that the effect of organizational features—such as organizational affiliation, task specialization, leadership, structures, and regulations—on individual civil servants’ preferences and work attitudes will be contingent on the organization’s long-term (in)stability.

A very similar line of argument lies at the heart of recent work suggesting that public administration harbors profound robustness, which rests predominantly on its stable organizational fabric (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; March & Olsen, 1989; Streek & Thelen, 2005). Robustness in this sense refers to someone’s or something’s ability to last over time. This implies that certain patterns of interaction are preserved within or across public organizations over time, though not necessarily coordinated human interaction in organizations (Pfahl, 2005) or any particular role for public administration with regards to societal sustainability broadly conceived (Delmas & Young, 2009; Leuenberger & Bartel, 2009). Essential to this argument, a set of stable organizational rules and routines in the government

apparatus create stable premises for behavioral choices that can bias the role perceptions and attitudes among staff members (Krasner, 1988). This would again imply that the attitudes and preferences of civil servants are particularly likely to be affected by organizational features when “a more or less stable set of forces [exists] that steadily push and pull” on staff members (Ashforth et al., 2007, p. 6; Egeberg, 2004; Murdoch et al., 2019).

This theoretical proposition finds *prima facie* corroboration in empirical research illustrating that civil servants working in public organizations facing repeated structural reforms have different attitudes regarding their work situation compared to civil servants in stable organizational settings (Verlinden et al., 2023; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). In contrast, routinization of individuals’ attention appears to become less likely whenever organizational capacities are less solidly structured, such as when temporary and/or ad hoc organizational capacities are staffed with short-term contracted personnel (Murdoch et al., 2016; Murdoch & Trondal, 2013; Trondal et al., 2018). These theoretical arguments and previous empirical findings lead us to formulate the following proposition:

**Proposition 1.** *The impact of organizational features (in our setting: task portfolio) on civil servants’ role perceptions and opinions increases over time in stable—but not in unstable—organizational settings.*

Before continuing, it is important to note that our focus on “organizational tasks”—in the formulation of this theoretical proposition, as well as our empirical assessment—is not meant to imply that individuals’ tasks capture the full set of potentially relevant organizational features. In effect, we expect the impact of (in)stability on organizational (re)socialization to manifest itself for a broader range of organizational features. From that perspective, our focus on “tasks” in the empirical analysis is best viewed as an illustration, driven predominantly by data availability. Naturally, future research should explore to what extent similar effects arise for other organizational features, which would allow pertinent new insights into the scope conditions of our theoretical argument.

### 3 | DATA AND METHOD

#### 3.1 | Dataset

Our analysis builds on data from the Norwegian Administration Surveys, which have been conducted every 10 years from 1976 to 2016 among all civil servants with at least 1 year of service in all Norwegian ministries. The data were originally collected by a project group encompassing several Norwegian universities and are currently maintained by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt). Response rates for each survey wave have consistently been above 60% (Christensen et al., 2018), which implies that the representativeness of the data is very good.

Since we are interested in whether the impact of civil servants’ organizational tasks on their role perceptions and opinions increases over time in stable—but not in unstable—organizational settings, we require repeated observations of the same individuals across multiple surveys. As the Norwegian Administration Surveys were originally developed as a set of repeated cross-sections, the data do not include individual identifiers that allow linking the surveys at the individual level over time. This is a common issue with similar repeated cross-section data collection efforts in other settings (Fernandez et al., 2015; Murdoch et al., 2023; Stritch, 2017; Yackee & Yackee, 2021). We therefore rely on the methodology pioneered in Murdoch et al. (2019) to construct a panel dataset including only those civil servants who answered two consecutive surveys while working in the same ministry.

In practice, this methodology implies that we characterize individual respondents using a large set of background characteristics and look for respondents sharing those exact characteristics across two consecutive survey waves (Geys, 2023). More specifically, we verify whether respondents across two survey waves share the same sex, education, language, education of parents, occupation of parents, municipality of birth, employment history, and ministry of employment, and who furthermore increase their age and length of employment by exactly 10 years between

both waves.<sup>3</sup> The probability of observing a specific value on *all* these characteristics at the same time is extremely low given the distributions in our dataset (i.e., below 0.00001%), which makes it extremely likely that it concerns the same individual when we observe this exact combination across two survey waves.

In total, we are able to uncover 461 civil servants who answer at least two consecutive surveys: that is, 398 respondents who answer exactly twice, 48 whom we can follow across three surveys, and 15 whom we observe in four surveys. Still, throughout the current analysis we focus on the answers provided during the first and second survey participations of a given individual ( $N = 461$ ). The reason is that respondents answering more than twice ( $N = 63$ ) are not only a highly (self-)selected sample, but also constitute too small a group to engage in credible regression analyses. Since our main dependent variable is only available for the 1986–2016 period (see below), our final estimation sample consists of 374 unique respondents whom we can observe across two consecutive survey waves. Descriptive statistics for this sample are provided in Column (3) of Appendix Table A1. The remainder of this table also displays the results of balancing tests verifying the representativeness of our estimation sample relative to respondents in any of the available survey waves whom we do *not* observe again 10 years later. This illustrates that entry into our panel dataset is orthogonal to civil servants' education, hierarchical position, length of organizational experience, and main task portfolio, as well as—with some minor exceptions—their attitudes at the initial point of measurement. Still, since our sample includes more men (due to strong male dominance within ministerial staff up to the mid-1990s) and is younger than the overall population of respondents in the original surveys (due to retirements among older staff), we will control for a wide set of individual background characteristics throughout the analysis below.

### 3.2 | Empirical approach

To assess whether and how (un)stable organizational settings affect the impact of organizational features—in our case, individuals' task portfolio—on individuals' role perceptions, we take the following regression model as our point of departure (with subscript  $i$  for individuals):

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{Org Tasks}_i + \delta \text{Controls}_i + \varepsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

In Equation (1),  $Y_i$  represents a set of six dependent variables based on asking survey respondents how much importance they attach during the execution of their work to various sets of actors or concerns within their policy field: “What weight do you attach to [signals from the political leadership] [loyalty to your direct superior] [professional standards] [signals from stakeholders] [productivity and cost effectiveness] [transparency and openness] when performing your work tasks?” Answers are recorded on a scale from 1 (“Very important”) to 5 (“Very unimportant”). While three of these aspects represent political, organizational, and external principals, the remaining three could be viewed as proxies of various types of professional standards. Observe also that this question makes explicit reference to respondents' occupation without mentioning their organizational setting or work environment. This is important since it makes salient their activities within the organization without inducing unwarranted bias toward intra-organizational factors. Appendix Figure A1 illustrates how the importance attached to these various sets of actors and concerns changes over time within our sample (i.e., between individuals' first response to the survey and their second response 10 years later). This indicates that, on average, signals from political leaders are deemed equally important during both survey participations, whereas all other actors and concerns tend to gain in importance during later survey participations (particularly signals from stakeholders, productivity concerns and transparency concerns). Yet, it is variation in this development across individuals affiliated to distinct ministries with more or less stable organizational environments that interests us most in the remainder of the analysis.

The variable  $\text{Org Tasks}_i$  captures the type of main tasks respondents perform in their day-to-day work. It is operationalized using the following survey question: “Which category of tasks comprise the majority of your work?”

Answer options include three main types of tasks: that is, policy-relevant tasks (e.g., development of laws and regulations, budgeting, and planning;  $N = 195$ ), organizational tasks (e.g., human resources management, organizational development, and coordination;  $N = 112$ ), and communication tasks (e.g., information, communication, and feedback on decisions;  $N = 60$ ). We include dummy variables for the latter two types of tasks, such that individuals working on policy-relevant tasks—which are the largest group in our setting—constitute the omitted reference category. To test our central theoretical proposition, we estimate Equation (1) separately for the first and the second time people answer the survey. Then we compare the results of both estimations to assess differences in the explanatory power of *Org Tasks*; ( $\beta_1$ ) over time. As we restrict the sample for each estimation to *the exact same set of respondents*, this allows us to compare the influence of organizational tasks on the *same* civil servants' role perceptions and attitudes during their first and second survey participations.

Observe that setting civil servants with policy tasks as our reference category directly implies that we compare them to all other respondents executing different types of tasks. We consider this an appropriate approach since policy tasks arguably bear higher relevance to citizens and other external stakeholders of public organizations compared to, for instance, organizational and communication tasks. Note also that organizations set the rules and regulations describing the content of individual employees' task portfolio (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2013; Egeberg, 2012; Pollitt, 2008) and thereby determine the decision-making of the involved units (Pollitt et al., 2004; Verhoest et al., 2010; Wilson, 1989). This does not mean that there may not be some degree of individual-level autonomy when executing their tasks. Yet, and crucially, the general framework for a specific task portfolio is set by the organization. As such, a task portfolio constitutes an organizational feature that can, we argue, have the ability to influence individual behaviors in stable—but not in unstable—organizational settings.

Crucially, when participating in the survey for the second time, civil servants have built up at least 11 years of service within the same ministry, and thus represent bureaucrats with a long tenure within the same organization. Furthermore, they have exactly 10 years more experience compared to their first survey participation a decade earlier. Based on our theoretical discussion, we therefore expect that the effect of organizational features on individual role perceptions and opinions becomes *stronger* during the second survey participation. In technical terms, a statistically insignificant relation between tasks and role perceptions ( $\beta_1$ ) in the first survey wave followed by a significant relation in the next survey wave implies that tasks have gained in explanatory power for individual-level role perceptions—and vice versa.

Still, the approach described thus far would not yet account for the potential role of organizational (in)stability, which lies at the heart of our theoretical argumentation. To accommodate this, we implement the analysis for two subsets of respondents depending on the historical organizational stability of the ministry they are employed in. This central variable of interest is operationalized using detailed information about major organizational changes—such as reorganizations, mergers, splits or name changes—at the level of the Norwegian ministries over the period 1945–2015 (Læg Reid & Rolland, 2017).<sup>4</sup> Some ministries have been subject to frequent organizational changes over this time period, with the least stable ministries witnessing more than 20 major changes (e.g., industry and administration). Other ministries have remained highly stable entities, witnessing only one major change in 70 years (e.g., defense and agriculture). We then define an indicator variable equal to 1 for the five (out of 18) most stable ministries in Norway in the period 1945–2015, 0 otherwise. These ministries are agriculture, defense, fisheries, finance, and foreign affairs, and have witnessed at most four major changes since 1945 (Læg Reid & Rolland, 2017). In terms of our regression specification in Equation (1), we expect that the explanatory power of organizational tasks for individuals' role perceptions and attitudes increases between wave 1 and wave 2 answers more *for respondents in these five stable ministries*. Hence, our main test of the theoretical proposition developed above assesses whether (or not) the statistical significance of the coefficient for *Org Tasks* ( $\beta_1$ ) increases between wave 1 and wave 2 answers for respondents in stable ministries, but *not* for respondents in all other ministries.

Before we turn to the results, we should mention that the individual-level *Controls* included in the model capture individuals' age (in three age categories), sex (dummy for male respondents), education (i.e., dummies for a degree in law, economic or political science; all other degrees constitute the excluded reference category) as well as dummies

for holding a managerial position and executing the same tasks across both survey waves.<sup>5</sup> We furthermore control for the length of individuals' embeddedness in the organization at the first measurement point (measured in eight categories: i.e., 0–2 years, 2–4 years, 4–6 years, 6–8 years, 8–10 years, 10–15 years, 15–20 years, more than 20 years). These variables are intended to capture potential influences from early (e.g., sex) and late (e.g., education) pre-socialization. Observe that individual respondents' organizational affiliation thus is not explicitly included in our empirical specification. The reason is that all civil servants in our panel dataset by construction work in the same ministry over time, and thus face no variation in this organizational affiliation between survey waves.

## 4 | RESULTS

Our main findings are summarized in Table 1. We report on the six outcome variables presented above: that is, signals from the political leadership (Panel I), loyalty to one's direct superior (Panel II), professional standards (Panel III), signals from stakeholders (Panel IV), productivity and cost effectiveness (Panel V) and, finally, transparency and openness (Panel VI). In each case, we provide three sets of results. The first of these exploits the entire available sample of respondents (Columns 1 and 2), whereas the remaining sets of results differentiate between respondents working in historically stable (Columns 3 and 4) or unstable (Columns 5 and 6) ministries. As mentioned, we estimate Equation (1) separately for the first time and the second time people answer the survey, presented in the uneven and even columns in Table 1. We should also note that due to the coding of our outcome variables, a positive coefficient in Table 1 means that a certain actor or concern is given *less* weight by civil servants executing certain types of tasks relative to the reference group—and vice versa for negative coefficients. Remember, however, that our theoretical argument and proposition do *not* relate to the direction of the relationships under analysis (i.e., the sign of the regression coefficients), but to the strength of the relationships under analysis (i.e., the size and statistical significance of the regression coefficients).

Our main theoretical proposition on the importance of organizational stability can be assessed by comparing the results in Columns (3) and (4) with those in Columns (5) and (6). That is, we expect the association between tasks and civil servants' role perceptions (i.e.,  $\beta_1$ ) to strengthen over time in stable ministries—that is, more statistically significant results in Column (4) relative to Column (3)—while this should not be the case in less stable ministries—that is, the same or fewer statistically significant results in Column (6) relative to Column (5). This pattern is exactly what we observe in Table 1. In stable ministries, individuals' task portfolio becomes a more important predictor of civil servants' role perceptions as operationalized by the (self-perceived) influence of political leadership, professional standards, cost effectiveness and transparency concerns. In other words, we observe results in line with our theoretical predictions for four out of the six outcome variables included in Table 1 (and fall just short of statistical significance at the 10% level in Panel IV, Column (4)). In sharp contrast, individuals' tasks are never a statistically significant predictor during respondents' second survey wave in the case of less stable ministries (see Column 6). In fact, individuals' task portfolio even becomes a *less* important predictor of civil servants' role perceptions in Panels I and II (i.e., losing significance at conventional levels from wave 1 to wave 2). Hence, unlike in stable ministries, the respondents' task portfolio in unstable ministries does not appear to exert a stronger influence on their role perceptions after a longer stay in the organization.

Overall, the results in Table 1 are consistent with our main theoretical argument that civil servants' task portfolio affects the amount of attention they award to different signals in their daily work to a greater extent in stable ministries—as compared to ministries that have been subject to more frequent organizational changes. This finding arises in much the same way for several types of stakeholders and concerns. Furthermore, our results suggest that task stability in itself displays statistically significant point estimates mainly in the subsample of unstable ministries (i.e., Panels I, II and V in Table 1). Although this observation would require further verification in future research, it raises the interesting possibility that task stability gains importance for staff members in otherwise turbulent organizational environments (consistent with the main tenor of our theoretical argument).



**TABLE 1** Main results.

	(1) All Wave 1	(2) All Wave 2	(3) Stable Wave 1	(4) Stable Wave 2	(5) Unstable Wave 1	(6) Unstable Wave 2
<b>Panel I: Signals from the political leadership</b>						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	0.507 (0.467)	−0.208 (0.462)	−0.520 (0.843)	−0.735 (1.040)	1.369* (0.710)	−0.120 (0.557)
Tasks—Communication	−0.316 (0.462)	−0.922** (0.430)	−1.278 (0.831)	−2.351** (1.052)	0.511 (0.707)	−0.526 (0.502)
Task stability (dummy)	0.099 (0.324)	−0.515* (0.305)	0.580 (0.711)	−0.581 (0.704)	−0.002 (0.406)	−0.630* (0.368)
Observations	320	320	103	103	205	205
<b>Panel II: Loyalty to your direct superior</b>						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	−0.441 (0.442)	−0.204 (0.539)	0.743 (0.767)	0.164 (0.913)	−1.317** (0.620)	0.246 (0.719)
Tasks—Communication	−0.276 (0.436)	0.052 (0.519)	0.735 (0.813)	−0.532 (0.865)	−0.697 (0.584)	0.648 (0.688)
Task stability (dummy)	0.058 (0.293)	−0.342 (0.280)	−0.526 (0.549)	−0.886* (0.535)	0.294 (0.385)	−0.226 (0.370)
Observations	251	251	89	89	151	151
<b>Panel III: Professional standards</b>						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	0.383 (0.402)	−0.140 (0.483)	0.257 (0.833)	−2.746** (1.181)	0.495 (0.519)	0.182 (0.581)
Tasks—Communication	−0.105 (0.381)	0.406 (0.434)	−0.641 (0.827)	−1.997* (1.025)	0.193 (0.486)	0.845 (0.521)
Task stability (dummy)	0.350 (0.279)	0.370 (0.305)	−0.514 (0.612)	−0.304 (0.635)	0.810** (0.347)	0.769** (0.390)
Observations	319	319	102	102	205	205
<b>Panel IV: Signals from stakeholders</b>						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	−0.277 (0.380)	0.162 (0.405)	−0.323 (0.690)	0.568 (0.868)	−0.305 (0.476)	0.026 (0.489)
Tasks—Communication	0.104 (0.364)	0.425 (0.371)	−0.267 (0.678)	1.245 (0.781)	0.125 (0.448)	0.246 (0.447)
Task stability (dummy)	0.031 (0.248)	−0.307 (0.240)	−0.328 (0.498)	−0.576 (0.450)	0.174 (0.296)	−0.253 (0.298)
Observations	314	314	101	101	202	202

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	(1) All Wave 1	(2) All Wave 2	(3) Stable Wave 1	(4) Stable Wave 2	(5) Unstable Wave 1	(6) Unstable Wave 2
Panel V: Productivity and cost effectiveness						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	−0.538 (0.471)	−0.265 (0.534)	0.439 (0.753)	−2.131** (0.910)	−1.016 (0.638)	0.977 (0.690)
Tasks—Communication	−0.609 (0.468)	−0.736 (0.515)	0.664 (0.799)	−2.180** (0.856)	−1.005 (0.617)	0.401 (0.664)
Task stability (dummy)	0.260 (0.277)	0.108 (0.266)	−0.179 (0.526)	−0.306 (0.484)	0.362 (0.344)	0.596* (0.348)
Observations	251	251	90	90	151	151
Panel VI: Transparency and openness						
Tasks—Policy (reference group)						
Tasks—Organizational	−0.560 (0.440)	1.360** (0.544)	−1.006 (0.734)	2.324** (1.040)	−0.570 (0.572)	0.848 (0.697)
Tasks—Communication	−0.260 (0.433)	0.983* (0.529)	−1.198 (0.800)	2.084** (1.003)	−0.148 (0.542)	0.410 (0.675)
Task stability (dummy)	−0.146 (0.275)	0.111 (0.275)	0.214 (0.547)	0.319 (0.510)	−0.464 (0.341)	−0.007 (0.349)
Observations	251	251	90	90	150	150
Individual controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Survey dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: The table displays the result from ordered logistic regression models with the dependent variable reflecting respondents' answers to the question: "What weight do you attach to [...] when performing your work tasks?" Answers are recorded on a scale from 1 ("Very important") to 5 ("Very unimportant"). The question is asked regarding six distinct elements, covered in the six panels: that is, Signals from the political leadership (Panel I); Loyalty to your direct superior (Panel II); Professional standards (Panel III); Signals from stakeholders (Panel IV); Productivity and cost effectiveness (Panel V); Transparency and openness (Panel VI). The variable *Tasks* relates to the type of tasks the respondent works on, where the omitted reference group are policy-related tasks. *Task Stability* equals 1 if respondents' self-reported tasks are stable across both survey waves (0 otherwise). All models include individual-level controls and survey dummies. *t*-values between brackets. The exact number of observations varies due to non-response and differences in the questions included in the surveys across the 30-year period under analysis.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ .

Taken together, these findings are consistent with the notion that processes of organizational resocialization are regulated by the intertemporal consistency of the organizational environment within which civil servants operate. Stability is critical to develop a routinization of individuals' attention and generate a proper understanding of the role one plays—or is expected to play—within an organization. It allows for organizational roles to become "taken-for-granted" (March & Olsen, 1989) and avoid the doubt and/or uncertainty that persists in situations characterized by frequent changes and reforms (Elliott et al., 2022; Verlinden et al., 2023; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). As a result, embeddedness in a stable organizational setting can be expected to increase the influence of organizational features (in our setting, individuals' task portfolio) on their role perceptions much more than in unstable and turbulent organizational settings.<sup>6</sup>

These findings increase our understanding of the connection between organizational structures and their effects on civil servants' role perceptions, attitudes, perceptions, loyalties, and identifications (Egeberg & Trondal, 2018;

Christensen et al., 2021). As such, they can have important implications for organizational design choices and public sector reform processes, because knowledge of how organizations affect role perceptions, attitudes and so on, is key to successful institutional design attempts (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2004; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018, 2020; Olsen, 1982, 2018). Indeed, empirical analyses and experience-based learning about how organizational arrangements may be deliberately changed or sustained, and how such (lack of) reforms influence governance processes, is an important precondition for making the “right” decisions regarding institutional design (Christensen et al., 2021; Elliott et al., 2022; Olsen, 2010).

## 5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this article, we studied to what extent and how processes of organizational resocialization depend on the extent of organizational (in)stability. This contributes important new insights to the organization theory approach to public administration, which has a long and illustrious pedigree in PA scholarship dating back at least to the work by James G. March and Johan P. Olsen in the 1980s and Morten Egeberg in the 1990s (e.g., Egeberg, 1999; March & Olsen, 1989). It also continues to hold considerable importance for the study of public organizations within the field of public administration to this day (Charbonneau et al., 2020; Christensen et al., 2021; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; Murdoch, 2015; Røiseland, 2011; Verhoest et al., 2023). A central tenet in the organization theory of public administration is that organizational features play a critical role in shaping the role perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making behavior of civil servants (Egeberg, 1999, 2004; Gulick, 1937; Læg Reid & Olsen, 1978; Olsen, 2018; Trondal, 2023). In this study, we have argued that such an impact of organizational features is not an automaticity, but rather hinges upon the intertemporal stability of the organizational environment. Without such stability, there can be little consistency in the influence of organizational features, which undermines the development of taken-for-granted roles and routines. As a result, any influence from the organizational features of public administrations on individual civil servants is expected to arise predominantly when organizational stability is high.

The insight that organizational (in)stability represents a critical qualification for individual-level resocialization processes within public organizations has important implications given that the global policy and societal environment has become increasingly “turbulent” (Ansell et al., 2021; Trondal et al., 2022). Theorists and empiricists should no longer focus on “the study of a durable organizational identity, but also [develop] a concern for the implications of a mutable identity” (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 79). Existing research may indeed be “too static to capture the pace of change of modern organizations” (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 76) since accounting for instability requires longitudinal approaches and theoretical openness to complexity and dynamism in order to keep up with the continuously changing character and form of modern society (Murdoch et al., 2023). Our theoretical argument and empirical analysis take one step in this direction. As such, our analysis contributes to recently developing debates on robust public governance in public administration scholarship. Specifically, we provide further (theoretical and empirical) substantiation to recent work underlining the importance of organizational robustness and stability to address the increasing turbulence that public organizations face in our time (Ansell et al., 2023; Trondal, 2023).

From the perspective of practitioners, our argument and findings also point to a potential Catch-22 inherent in the perceived need for continuous public sector reforms in a changing world (Bevir et al., 2003; Elliott et al., 2022). Many organizational reform trajectories of New Public Management and New Public Governance are implemented with the stated aim to improve individual- and/or organization-level performance. Yet, recent research has pointed to the negative effects of frequent changes of organizational structures on staff members (Elliott et al., 2022; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). Our analysis adds to such contemporary studies about the effects of structural (in)stability in public organizations. That is, we show that by undermining organizational stability, repeated reforms may limit staff resocialization into the dominant roles and tasks of public sector organizations—even though such (re)socialization processes have long been known to have a critical influence on the functioning and performance of the organization and its members (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Chao et al., 1994; Dufour et al., 2021). This raises important questions about

previously unrecognized trade-offs in organizational reforms. Indeed, a main lesson from our work is that frequent structural changes might affect the perceptions of employees, but not always as intended by the reformers. As such, reformers should be aware of these unintended consequences for civil servants caused by (in)stability in the structure of their organization(s).

Clearly, however, our study also faces limitations. First, Norway belongs to the Nordic family of stable, representative parliamentary systems with high trust, low levels of polarization and corruption, and a consensual policy-making style. The Norwegian central government apparatus is characterized by merit-based professionalism, while the administrative reform style has been agile and adaptive by combining both elements of stability and change (Greve et al., 2020). The possibilities for generalization of our findings thus are best when it concerns other countries with similar characteristics. We caution, however, against a generic approach to public administration that fails to analyze public organizations as part of a larger political-democratic order and system of governance. History and context will matter for how political-administrative systems are organized, how they change, and how they work in practice. Although this naturally limits the possibilities to generalize findings to countries with very different administrative traditions and contexts, it also highlights the critical and growing need for increased comparative data collection and analysis. This is vital to strengthen the possibilities to get better knowledge about similarities and differences between public administrative systems operating in different contexts (Geys et al., 2023).

Second, our dataset by construction only includes civil servants with a relatively long tenure in the (same) ministry. Naturally, this sample restriction limits our study's potential for generalization to other civil servants (such as those with shorter tenures). Our findings thus trigger a call for further research in order to establish the presence (or absence) of similar effects among broader and different sets of civil servants. Similarly, future studies should explore whether, and, if so, to what extent similar observations arise when looking at different outcome variables including individual decision-making behavior, employee satisfaction and well-being, as well as organizational performance and culture (Verlinden et al., 2023; Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). Indeed, a direct corollary of our theoretical argument is that stable organizational environments benefit the development of a well-defined organizational culture with clear rules and strong premises for behavioral choices (cf. Weick, 1985). This makes it easier for individual staff members to integrate into the team and take actions consistent with organizational goals, which may in turn benefit staff well-being and organizational performance (Sørensen, 2002).

Another direction for future research relates to the organizational “influencer” of interest, which in our case was operationalized as individuals’ task portfolio. One should study to what extent our findings generalize to other organizational features, such as civil servants’ organizational affiliation or (hierarchical) position within their organization. Similarly, our analysis could be fruitfully extended to other public sector organizations, including central government agencies, public authorities at regional and local levels of government, state owned companies and enterprises, as well as international organizations and their bureaucracies. Based on our findings, it is also important to gain a deeper understanding of the normative standards and foundations of public organizations, and how such criteria are linked to organizational design parameters. Finally, our findings raise the interesting possibility that organizational resocialization effects are conditional on the exact nature of individuals’ task portfolio. That is, if different individuals execute different tasks and are influenced by the nature of these tasks, should we expect any resocialization occurring within organizations to be conditional on the tasks performed? Although answering this question falls outside the scope of our analysis, we consider such investigation into potential sources of conditional resocialization effects an interesting and fruitful avenue for further research.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/padm.12968>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The analyses presented in the paper exploit individual-level survey data managed by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (Sikt), and our confidentiality agreement with the data provider does not allow us to make the dataset available to other users. Researchers in approved research institutions can apply for access to the relevant data (see <https://www.nsd.no/finn-data/sentraladministrasjonsundersokelsene>), subject to signing a data confidentiality agreement.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Civil servants' role perceptions and opinions have long been a central object of study in PA research because they are likely to have a direct influence on on-the-job behavior and decision-making (March & Olsen, 1989; Meier, 2019). This on-the-job decision-making behavior can, in turn, have substantial policy implications since civil servants are “responsible for the vast majority of policy initiatives taken by governments” (Putnam, 1973, p. 257) and “work to formulate and implement public policy” (Huber, 2000, p. 397; Murdoch et al., 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> We maintain a broad conception of individual attitudes as “the way that people think and feel about somebody/something,” whereas perceptions reflect the “idea, belief or image they have as a result of how they see or understand something,” and identification refers to the “(strong) feeling of sympathy, understanding or support for somebody/something” (as defined in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary). In an organizational setting, these concepts capture the various dimensions of how respondents perceive themselves within—and with respect to—their organization, their colleagues, and their work. This includes, but is not limited to, their role perceptions with respect to political, organizational, and external principals as well as professional standards (our dependent variables in the empirical analysis below).
- <sup>3</sup> We follow Murdoch et al. (2019) in excluding individuals moving between ministries as this introduces self-selection concerns (such moves may be a choice by the staff member) and makes it harder to ascertain whether it really concerns the same individual. Nonetheless, since this naturally constrains the sample to “non-movers,” it is important to point out that mobility between ministries is limited in the Norwegian setting. Official data obtained from Statistics Norway, for instance, illustrate that staff turnover between ministries in the period 2012–2017 was on average 1.6% on an annual basis (<https://www.ssb.no/en/statbank/list/regsys>).
- <sup>4</sup> Wynen et al. (2019, 2020) rely on the same publicly accessible database to study the implications of structural (in)stability in Norwegian public agencies (rather than ministries) at the national government level.
- <sup>5</sup> Individual-specific events—such as taking up a different role or promotion to higher positions within the organization's hierarchy—might change one's task portfolio over time. Even though most individuals included in our dataset self-report

the same type of tasks as being central to their occupation across both survey waves (i.e., 73%), it is important to control for this potential source of “instability” at the individual level in our analysis.

- <sup>6</sup> An alternative line of argument might entail that civil servants simply “professionalize” over time in stable organizational environments (but fail to do so to the same extent in less stable environments). Such a “professionalization” could be reflected in their giving more weight to professional standards, productivity, and transparency as time progresses. Figure A1 provides some suggestive evidence that this may be happening in our setting since signals from stakeholders, productivity concerns, and transparency concerns gain particularly in importance during later survey participations. Yet, from our perspective, such a development toward an ethic of professional integrity and administrative duty would best be viewed as one possible *outcome* of a more general resocialization *process*. Crucially, it does not cover all our outcome variables, and is inconsistent with the mix of positive and negative point estimates in Panels II, V, and VI of Table 1.

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## APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Descriptive statistics and representativeness of matched sample.

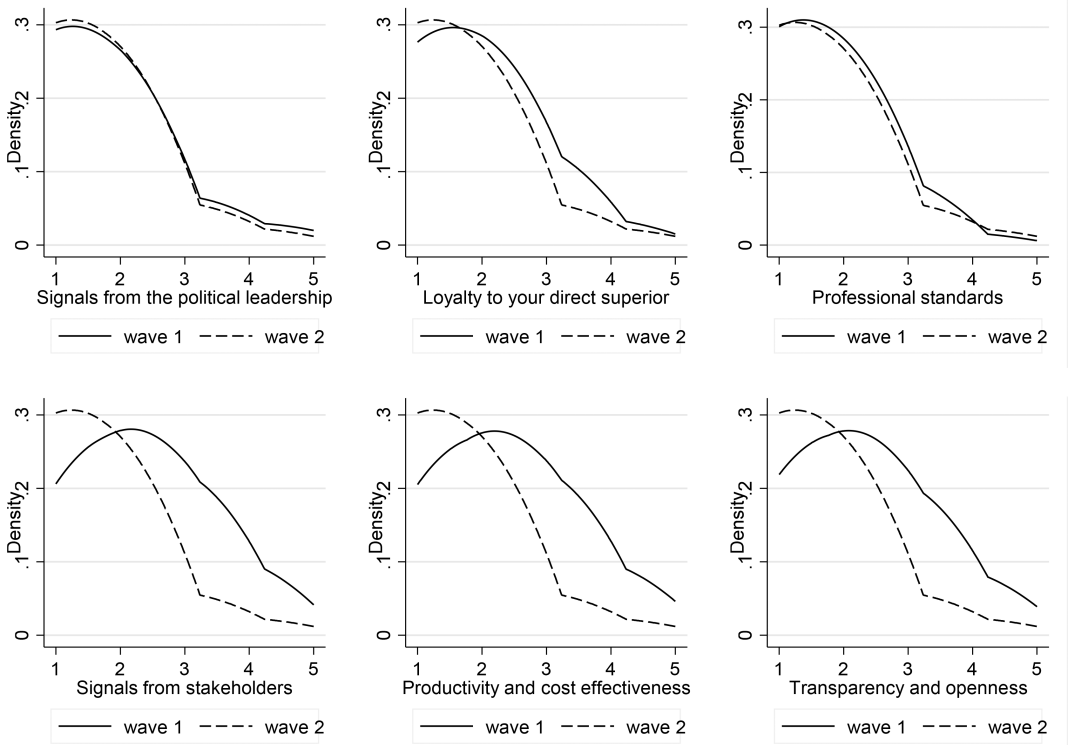
	(1) Full sample	(2) Non-matched sample on first occurrence	(3) Matched sample on first occurrence	(4) p-value of difference (2) versus (3)
Political signals (1–5)	1.435	1.450	1.336	0.027**
Loyalty leadership (1–5)	1.637	1.636	1.619	0.748
Professional standards (1–5)	1.396	1.396	1.438	0.248
Stakeholders (1–5)	2.241	2.231	2.288	0.286
Effectiveness (1–5)	2.268	2.267	2.398	0.031**
Transparency (1–5)	2.140	2.139	2.188	0.419
Tasks—Policy (0–1)	0.528	0.531	0.525	0.823
Tasks—Organizational (0–1)	0.295	0.295	0.305	0.675
Tasks—Communication (0–1)	0.177	0.180	0.163	0.430
Stable ministry (0–1)	0.374	0.381	0.316	0.011**
Male (0–1)	0.566	0.551	0.635	0.000***
Age (in three categories) (1–3)	1.681	1.662	1.364	0.000***
Law degree (0–1)	0.228	0.219	0.253	0.138
Economics degree (0–1)	0.181	0.179	0.198	0.356
Politics degree (0–1)	0.138	0.136	0.158	0.247
Management (0–1)	0.184	0.176	0.145	0.125

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

	(1) Full sample	(2) Non-matched sample on first occurrence	(3) Matched sample on first occurrence	(4) p-value of difference (2) versus (3)
Length department (in eight categories)	3.270 (0–7)	3.057	2.963	0.453
Number of observations	≈5400	≈5000	≈370	

Note: *Political Signals, Loyalty Leadership, Professional Standards, Stakeholders, Effectiveness, and Transparency* reflect respondents' answer to the question "What weight do you attach to [signals from the political leadership][loyalty to your direct superior][professional standards][signals from stakeholders][productivity and cost effectiveness][transparency and openness][openness and transparency] when performing your work tasks?" Answers are recorded on a scale from 1 ("Very important") to 5 ("Very unimportant"). Column (1) includes the entire sample of ministerial staff covered by both survey waves. Columns (2) and (3) focus on the 2006 (pre-event) survey, and provides separate results for respondents we can (column (3)) and cannot (column (2)) match in the 2016 wave. Column (4) contains the *p*-value of a formal test evaluating whether the respondents in column (3) differ along a number of background characteristics from the respondents in column (2). The exact number of observations varies across variables due to non-response and differences in the questions included in the surveys across the 30-year period under analysis.



**FIGURE A1** Role perceptions over time. Each diagram displays the distribution of respondents' answer to the question “What weight do you attach to [signals from the political leadership][loyalty to your direct superior] [professional standards][signals from stakeholders][productivity and cost effectiveness] [openness and transparency] when performing your work tasks?” Answers are recorded on a scale from 1 (“Very important”) to 5 (“Very unimportant”), and we separate between responses provided during the first time respondents participate in the survey (“wave 1,” solid line) and the second time they participate 10 years later (“wave 2,” dashed line). Due to the coding of the outcome variables, a shift in the distribution toward left (right) between wave 1 and wave 2 signals increasing (decreasing) importance awarded to a specific actor or concern.