Executive Replacements in Civil Service Systems

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Abstract

In comparative analyses of the modern civil service there is a widespread discussion of differences in the degree of politicization. One claim is that politicization has generally increased as political executives insist on responsive advice and service. There exists, however, considerable uncertainty as to the empirical validity of this position. Moreover, it is far from clear what the determinants of politicization are. In this paper we compare executive replacements in Danish central and local government for appointments to permanent secretaries, agency heads and city managers made since 1970. Through the use of survival analysis techniques we find that top civil servant increasingly risk early retirement but no indications of a formal politicization. We conclude that in spite of the different institutional and political settings in central and local government top civil servants accommodate political executives demand for full service. Thus we see signs of a strong functional rather than a formal politicization of the civil service.
Democratic government is strongly dependent on its administration. This is the case for the execution of policy and for the development of new policy. But this dependence immediately raises the question of how to organize the relationship between the political executive and the civil servants. Several concerns here have to be balanced against each other. One is for appropriate competence; this tilts the balance in favor of the merit civil service. Another concern is for political responsiveness within the civil service; this tilts the balance in favor of a politicized bureaucracy. A third concern is for the control over public policy; this brings other actors (e.g. parties outside the governing coalition, committees, and the media) into the game as the question becomes whether they will tolerate political appointments made by the executive to increase its control over the administration. Fourth, civil servants caring for their re-employability after a shift of government are important players in this game too. So depending on the institutional set up, the distribution of power within it and the norms for interaction between politicians and civil servants this may point in either direction.

What is at issue is the balance between neutral and responsive competence (Jones and Williams 2008). These are classic concerns. They have found different answers at different times and under differing political circumstances. Yet with the growth of democratic institutions the reliance on merit bureaucracy has also been strengthened (Silberman 1993). Nonetheless, the jury is still out in debates over the relative strength of the merit civil service and an administration relying on political appointments (Heclo 1977; Johnson and Libecap 1994; Ingraham 1995; Lewis 2008; Peters 2010). There are even indications that under some circumstances and in some countries politicization may be increasing (Peters and Pierre 2004a). Once again other studies point to the resilience of the merit civil service (Page and Jenkins 2005; Christensen 2006; forthcoming). This resilience is founded on civil servants’ ability to accommodate the demand from political executives for support; it is also furthered by stakeholders’ concern for the credibility of already enacted policies (Horn 1995; Lewis 2008).

In this study we assume political executives to want to maximize their control over the administration. The selection of top civil servants is one strategy serving this purpose. The basic choice is between political appointments and career civil servants. However, a third strategy exists. It is to replace civil servants who do not behave according to the demands of political executives. This strategy represents an interesting option as it allows the political executive to rig the incentives for civil servants to respond positively to their demands. To this comes that it fits into a blame shedding strategy where political executives hold top civil servants accountable for mismanagement. Finally, it emphasizes the executive’s preference for selecting administrative collaborators with whom they can engage in close cooperation not regarding their political background. With the addition of this third strategy the repertoire for filling positions at the top of the
administrative hierarchy is expanded. It is not just a question of choosing between a careerist and a political appointee; functional politicization may be an attractive alternative to political appointments if civil service regulations allow discretionary replacements of civil servants (Mayntz and Derlien 1989). Instead of substituting political criteria for merit in the selection of top civil servants politicians can combine merit and competence in a way that gives civil servants strong incentives to respond to their demands for loyal support and if this not works allows them to replace them with other civil servants. In political control perspective this remains an interesting option. The reason is that a government using this strategy in preference to political appointees may be able to recruit career civil servants to key posts who combine an intimate knowledge of the governmental machinery and current policy with the exposure to incentives that make it painstakingly clear to them what is at stake for themselves if they do not behave.

Which strategy politicians actually pursue is an empirical question. We hypothesize that political and institutional constraints determine their actual choice. To test how and to which extent this holds true we conduct a study of replacements of top civil servants in Danish central and local government. While operating within the same basic setting of civil service regulation, a consensual political culture, and a tradition for civil servants to offer full political service to political executives, the institutional set up is very different in central and local government. Parliamentary government with departmental ministers as unconstrained political executives is the basic organizational principle at the national level; at the local level political and administrative authority rests with the council while the mayor, elected by the council, is responsible for leading the town hall. But these very different institutional provisions have to be seen in connection with a political pattern counterbalancing it. Ministers are normally members of cabinets who do not having a parliamentary majority whereas mayors operate in a highly consensual environment where parties agree on most decisions. Thus as political executives ministers operate within severe political constraints. This often is very different in local government. The mayor typically rely on consensual support from the council, even if his party cannot command a majority of its own. One implication of this is that the mayor is left with quite free hands when it comes to running the city hall. Still, in some municipalities the mayor comes from a party holding a majority in the council, thus freeing him even more of constricting political fetters.

Our data cover the period from 1970 to 2005 for city managers and 2009 for permanent secretaries and agency heads in central government. With career data covering a period of 35 to 40 years we are also in a position to test whether the trend towards increasing politicization found in other Western countries hold

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1 The municipal reform of 2007 reduced the number of municipalities from 271 to 98. Therefore, it does not make sense to include local government data for the post reform period as they would not be comparable with data for the 1970-2006-period (Blom-Hansen and Heeager 2010). See below.
for the Danish civil service. Here our claim is that political executives actually face civil servants with an increasing demand for responsive advice and proper administration that do not arouse criticism of their own executive behavior. We further claim that this over time has lead to a tougher line towards top civil servants, but this line is pursued without compromising classic merit criteria.

In the following section we first review the literature and discuss the political and institutional setting within which the Danish civil service operates. This is followed by a presentation of our design and data plus a presentation of the event history or survival analysis technique we use in analyzing the changes over time. After a presentation of our analytical results we subject them to discussion. Our argument here is that the long term trends characterizing recruitment and replacement patterns for top civil servants in Danish central and local government demonstrates the viability of the merit civil service, even under conditions where political executives have become more self conscious in their insistence on a full service conception.

Selecting Men of the Right Stuff

Top civil servants occupy key positions in government. They form the organizational link between the political executive and the administrative hierarchy that remains the backbone of the public sector. Their assistance as advisers and managers is indispensable to ministers and mayors who have the legitimate desire to form public policy and control its delivery. Their success in these regards presumes the competent and responsive assistance from the civil service. This places permanent secretaries, city managers, and agency heads in a pivotal position. It is their responsibility to solicit adequate advice from the underlying organization; similarly it is their responsibility to give their political superior advice on how to tackle a particular political challenge. Finally, it is their responsibility to convert political signals into administrative action in a way that does not incur high political costs on the incumbent executive.

This makes the selection of top civil servants essential. Traditionally the issue has been presented as a choice between career civil servants and political appointees. Career officials are recruited on their professional merits and in the ideal type situation they enjoy life tenure; by implication they are not removed from their position if an election brings a new executive into power. The political appointees, to the contrary, are recruited on the basis of their party political background and political connections; they may have a career in the party or in an organization affiliated with the party or the particular politician requesting their services (Peters and Pierre 2004b: 2; Lewis 2008: 2).

From a control perspective it is reasonable to assume that political executives might have a preference for political appointees. But there are two caveats here. First, top civil servants need policy competence, i.e. a combination of relevant education and an insight into the policy field and its organization. To this comes
that an insight into the operation of the governmental machinery is an important asset for effective control over its operation. This corresponds to Max Weber’s distinction between professional or technical insight (Fachwissen) and office or organizational insight (Dienstwissen) (Weber 1918: 352-353). These are qualifications closely connected with the merit civil service (Heclo 1977: 109-112). As indispensable these qualifications are they also may be at the root of an agency problem. Thus political executives are placed in a difficult situation where they have to balance two concerns against each other and where they also have to search for solutions to evade the dilemma that confronts them. Second, the incumbent executive may face institutional and political constraints when they select top civil servants. There may be procedural requirements like open competition and advertisement of openings. To this comes that the political acceptance or at least acquiescence by another political body of their preferred candidate may be essential. Hence there is the risk that they cannot get way with a political appointment because for one reason or another, their candidate is rejected or they are met with opposition from other parties insisting on paying respect to the merit civil service (Horn 1995; Lewis 2008).

This is standard reasoning in politicization research. It is among other things thinking along these lines that points to the difference in the use of political appointments in the American checks-and-balances system and in parliamentary systems. The difference in the number and character of institutional veto points is here of particular interest (Hammond 1996: 149-155). There is even empirical support for the view that institutional and political constraints of the type described above can account for part of the variation in the use of respectively political appointments and career officials in the American federal administration (Lewis 2008). Still, there are problems with a theory keeping an exclusive focus on the choice between political and career appointments. It faces difficulty in accounting for the rather strong variation in the degree of politicization that is found among the European countries, in spite of their sharing of very similar traits (Peters and Pierre 2004a). What is more it does not consider the possibility that systems based on pure merit have cultivated norms for a very close interaction between political executives and their top civil servants that further civil service accommodation to ministerial or mayoral demands for political advice and support (Aberbach and Rockman 1988; Aberbach 2003; Mouritzen and Svara 2002). Here political and administrative culture and tradition is evidently at play both at the central level of government and in local government. This is further emphasized by the subtle differences in the selection of top civil servants that are found in otherwise similar European countries (Christensen forthcoming).

Therefore the selection of top civil servants is a decision involving more than the preferential choice of political appointees if institutional and political constraints do not get into the way. Our claim is that the actual choice also depends on the possibility of developing the career civil service in a way that allows for
the smooth accommodation to demands by political executives for very close and over time closer and closer assistance to the development and implementation of policy. To this comes that civil service regulations must be sufficiently flexible for political executives to shed blame on top civil servants in cases of mismanagement and policy failure otherwise risking to come down on political executives. According to classical understandings of the relationship between politicians and civil servants this is violating a tacit civil service bargain where politicians bear the blunt for mistakes. It is, however, also claimed that under modern circumstances where mistakes risk exploding in media scandal exposed politicians increasingly take resort to preventive firings involving the replacement of top civil servants with other career civil servants (Hood and Lodge 2006).

However, politicization of the civil service is an option. But we argue that whether it is brought to bear on actual practice depends on the interaction between the institutional set up prevailing in decisions on hiring and firing top civil servants and on the extent to which political power is concentrated with the incumbent executive. Danish central and local government offer an excellent testing ground for an empirical study of this problem. First, the institutional set up differs. Ministers in central government have wide ranging authority to run their portfolios according to their own and the government’s political program. This is fully in accordance with parliamentary principles. However, in local government parliamentary principles do not prevail. Rather executive authority rests with the council, with the mayor being responsible for running the municipal administration including the preparation of draft decisions to be presented to the council or one of its standing committees. Second, political constraints differ. Formally strong departmental ministers can move nowhere if they face opposition from a majority in parliament, and with rare and brief exceptions governments are minority coalitions. This is different in local politics; it is highly consensual, based as it is on cooperation between all or nearly all parties represented on the council. Still, there are municipalities who have seen periods of one party majorities, implying concentration of considerable political power with the mayor (Berg and Kjær 2005: 38-42). Third, a full service conception applies to the relationship between political executives and top civil servants in central and local government. This conception implies the provision of policy and political advice by top civil servants to ministers and mayors as well as wide delegation of tasks to these civil servants from their political superiors. This full service conception rests on strong consensual norms that underplay partisan disagreement while emphasizing the value of merit as the basic principle of recruitment and promotion. It also rests on civil servants’ keen interest in securing their re-employability in case of a change of government or mayor; so over time top civil servants have demonstrated their willingness to accommodate executive demands for closer and closer involvement in the provision of advice and support to the incumbent executive. To the extent this third interpretation holds the party political aspect of top civil service replacements vanishes and recruitment and replacement
becomes a matter of setting a top management team that can get along with the incumbent political executive.

The above argumentation leads to three propositions to be tested:

1. Due to their strong executive authority ministers are more inclined to make party political replacements of top civil servants than mayors.
2. Mayors holding a one party majority in the municipal council are more inclined to make party political replacements than other mayors and ministers.
3. Discretionary replacement of top civil servants has increased over time in both central and local government, but it is unrelated to partisan politics.

**Design and Data**

The analysis is based on biographical career data. They cover the most basic information on the careers of top civil servants in Danish central and local government. As individual level data are more difficult to retrieve for civil servants in local government information on their careers have constrained the type of data used in the present analysis. Table 1 presents an overview of the data collected and used in this analysis. The dependent variable is the length of service in their present job. We already know that length of service has declined over time and that this applies to top civil servants in both central and local government. But we have insufficient insight into the causes behind this development. Therefore, we conduct an analysis based on relatively long time series. It is here possible to get data for a longer period for central government than for local government. The reason is that it was first with the local government reform of 1970 that many local governments got a professional civil service and that data on this civil service is available. Moreover, in 2007 a new and comprehensive local government reform completely redrew the local government map. Therefore, data on top civil servants in local government are only collected for 1970-2005 while for central government we have career data up to 2009.

The international literature has kept focus on a possible trend towards increasing politicization of the civil service. The independent variable therefore is politicization. However, it is impossible to get information on the party political affiliation, if any, of individual civil servants. Therefore, we have used the party political affiliation of political executives as an indicator. We argue that if the hiring and firing executive belong to different parties or party political coalitions and correlate with the replacement of top civil servant then we have an indication of politicization of appointments. For central government we have coded whether the appointing or dismissing ministers belong to the same party political coalition. For the local level we instead
focus on replacement of individual mayors. We have coded three different types of change: a new mayor from the same party as the predecessor, a new mayor from a different party than the predecessor and finally we have also coded whether a shift of mayoral party has involved the winning or losing a controlling one party majority in the council. This difference in operationalization between the two levels of government is due to differences in there institutional setup. Danish local government operates with fixed terms; once elected the mayor cannot be forced to resign during the period. Ministers on the other hand can be replaced by the prime minister or forced to resign by a majority of parliament. Moreover the prime minister can call a new election at any time during the electoral period.

In addition to the political variables we have coded a number of control variables. They provide basic information on top civil servants age and careers. They are listed in table 1.

There is a fundamental institutional difference between central and local government. In central government the executive is embedded in the principles of parliamentary government with ministers endowed with hierarchical authority but operating within the political constraints defined by the majority in parliament (Christensen 2006; forthcoming). In local government the institutional setup is more ambiguous with the mayor chairing the council and the finance committee as well as acting as political executive for the municipal administration; however, mayoral authority in this model is constrained by committees being responsible for the day-to-day administration within their portfolio (Mouritzen and Svara 2002: 60-61). The implication is that in formal institutional terms the position of the mayor formally is weaker and more ambiguous than that of a departmental minister whose authority within her (his) portfolio is unconstrained. In addition there are quite fundamental political differences between local and national level politics. National politics is entirely dominated by minority governments, either of one party or more likely as a coalition of two or more parties. In local government political decisions on e.g. the annual budget are normally based on consensus or at least broad coalitions. Similarly the allocation of offices as mayor, committee chairs etc. rests on multi-party agreements comprising all or nearly all party groups in the council. Still, it happens that one party commands a majority placing considerable and unconstrained authority with the mayor (Serritzlew, Skjæveland and Blom-Hansen 2008). We have included this data in the analysis.

We handle the institutional and political variables in two different ways. First, we conduct separate analyses of central and local government; in this way we are able to unravel whether the institutional difference between the two levels of government result in different career patterns and in particular different degrees of politicization. Second, the party political dominance variable is handled in the same...
way making it possible for us to see whether the exceptional prevalence of a one party majority makes a difference when it comes to political appointments.

Moreover, there is a difference in the types of civil servants included in the analysis. For local government we only have data for city managers being responsible for the administrative coordination of the city hall while also being the prime advisers to the mayor. Given the tasks of local government they are also heavily involved in managerial activities like the running of schools, institutions delivering social welfare, the maintaining of roads and other infrastructure. Permanent secretaries assume the same position in departmental ministries being responsible for administrative coordination within the portfolio and again acting as the prime advisers to ministers. But due to the tasks of central government the weight of policy making, e.g. the planning and preparation of new legislation, is a much more important task than the coordination of policy implementation that is often highly decentralized. Agency heads having no direct equivalent in local government are also included in the analysis. They have delegated managerial authority to lead an agency responsible for the implementation of ministerial policy within a normally strictly defined policy field (e.g. food safety, workers’ health and safety or primary and secondary education). Their responsibilities may be heavy, but they are generally not involved in the same close political interaction with ministers as permanent secretaries are and as local city managers are with mayors; therefore, by comparing their careers with the careers of the two former groups we are able to get somewhat closer in understanding the dramatic change in top civil service careers observed.

**Methodology**

To estimate the impact of party political changes on the replacement of top civil servants we rely on event history analysis (survival analysis). The reason is that while some civil servants have left their positions other remain in office at the time where our period of analysis ends. Therefore, we do not know the precise length of tenure but only that it at least amounts to x years. This statistical technique has among other things been widely used in the study of cabinet survival and is designed to estimate the effects of variables on the duration of a phenomenon. In the literature on government survival, there has been a debate concerning the correct specification of the underlying hazard function that is the rate at which termination events occur. The key question has been how to model the underlying baseline hazard function and thus whether it should be theorized as constant or rising over time (Diermeier and Stevenson 1999). Using a competing risk model, Diermeier and Stevenson argue that whether the hazard rate is constant or rising depends on the type of government under investigation. In the present paper we face the same problem because it addresses which expectations we should have concerning the underlying risk involved with being a top civil servant in central or local government who operate in close interaction with political executives.
(ministers and mayors) who may shift and even belong to different parties or governing coalitions. In this article, however, the issue is first the more general whether party political differences between political executives influence the risk of replacement for top civil servants. Second the more specific issue is whether the different institutional setup in central government and local government leads to a difference in replacement risks for top civil servants at either level of government. We rely on the Cox proportional hazard model in order to investigate the timing of top civil servant dismissals. The advantage of the Cox model is that it makes no assumptions concerning the functional form of the hazard function. This makes the model useful for our purposes, since we do not have any a priori reasons for a particular functional form (Box-Steppensmeier and Jones 2004: 49).

When using duration models the main interest is to estimate the time that elapse until an event occurs. This in our case is the termination of holding a top civil service position. This probability is given by equation 1 which states that the probability that a civil servant survives until time $t$ is given by:

$$\lambda(t; Z) = \lim_{\Delta t \to 0} \frac{P \{t \leq T \leq t + \Delta t \mid T \geq t, Z\}}{\Delta t}$$

(1)

Here $Z$ is the number of covariates we are interested in and $t$ the probability that a top civil servant survives until time $t$, given that he has not left the position prior to that moment in time. Here we are interested in estimating the hazard ratio in a Cox model which is given by:

$$\lambda_i(t; Z_i) = \exp(\beta'Z_i) \lambda_0(t)$$

(2)

Here $\beta$ denotes a vector of parameters to be estimated and $\lambda_0$ is the baseline hazard function. In the Cox model, the underlying hazard function is not parameterized, entailing that we do not specify whether or not the failure process follows a particular distribution.

In the analysis below we report the hazard ratios, which have consequences for the interpretation of the term. A hazard ratio above 1 indicates that there is an increasing probability to observe a failure given that the variable under consideration is increasing. A hazard ratio below 1 thus indicates that the risk involved is decreasing as the variable under consideration is increasing or as we compare groups.
Analysis

The traditional career civil service involved appointment to top positions at the age of 45-50 and continuous service at the same level often in the same position until the official age of retirement. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics documenting a dramatic change in their career pattern. This change has taken place since the 1980s. For top civil servants in central government the pattern was strikingly similar for appointments undertaken during the 1950s and 1960s with mean lengths of service around 15-16 years (Christensen 2006; forthcoming). This started to change for appointments made during the 1970s, and for appointments made since 1980 the average length of service has decreased to 7-9 years. For city managers in local government data are not available for appointments made between 1950 and 1969. However, for the period starting with appointments made between 1970 and 1989 the pattern is strikingly similar to that found for central government. Then something dramatic happens for city managers. For those who were appointed from 1990 and onwards and have left their positions the mean length of service decreases to 6.0 years; in central government we also see a further decrease but it is modest in comparison with local government. This indicates that something is special to local government. Yet, here it is important to note that the period of observation ends in 2005 for city managers and in 2009 for permanent secretaries; in either case some of those appointed from 1990 and onwards therefore still held their positions at the end of the period. But this period was four years shorter for city managers. At the same time the relatively high standard deviations seen in both central and local government also tell us that entering and ending a career in the top civil service is not programmed. It involves considerable discretion both when a civil servant is promoted and when employment is brought to an end.

The decrease in the length of service for top civil servants raises two questions. One question is to what extent top civil servants leave their posts before reaching the official or normal age of retirement. We call these civil servants early leavers. Another is whether this decrease is the result of changing career patterns in a much more dynamic labor market where executives move from one to another position at the same or even a higher or a more prestigious level. Even if the availability of detailed and valid information is somewhat lower for careers in local government it is possible to give an approximately precise picture of what has happened in either sector.

Table 3 shows a dramatic difference between the retirement patterns for top civil servants in central and local government. City managers have generally left their positions before they approached the official age
of retirement at the Danish labor market. For city managers appointed during the 1970s this was the case for 64.5%; this share increased further during the 1980s so that it became an exception for a city manager to continue in office after the age of 65. But, for appointments made since 1990 the pattern has reversed with only 39.2% being early leavers. Again, this change may be exaggerated due to the shorter period of analysis. In central government developments have been less dramatic. Still, table 3 shows a radical increase in the share of early leavers. It starts with permanent secretaries appointed during the 1960s, but for appointments made from 1970 and onwards there is a parallel increase to first 17.9, respective 18.4% for permanent secretaries and agency heads and then for appointments after from 1980 and onwards to more than 20% for either group of executives. But even with this increase and the apparent decrease in the share of early leavers among city managers it remains much more common for city managers to leave their office before they approach the official age of retirement. No less than 15% of city managers have left their position within the first two years after their appointment; for permanent secretaries and agency heads the corresponding figures are less than 2 and less than 4% respectively. We return to this difference in the discussion below.

The second question is what this tells us about the labor market at which top civil servants are employed. As noted above one possibility is that it mirrors a change towards a much more dynamic civil service. Appointment to an executive position at the top of the administrative hierarchy does not exclude moves to more attractive positions at the same or a higher level. Such mobility actually takes place. This is seen from the middle column in table 3. This has always been the case in central government, and for city managers appointed from 1980 and onwards it is the case for approximately a fourth of early leavers; this is a pattern similar to that of central government. However, the interesting observation is that for most early leavers there has been no access to a career at the same high level. For early leavers among permanent secretaries we know that they are often offered positions as high level advisers while for agency heads the dominant pattern is official retirement (Christensen forthcoming). For city managers such information is not available, but the best guess is that early leavers officially retire from public service.2

In tables 4 and 5 we have presented the results of a series of Cox proportional hazard models allowing us to estimate the survival chances or replacement risks for top civil servants in central government service (Table 4) and in local government service (Table 5)3. In either case we use three different models: a simple

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2 There is only one case within the period where a city manager has moved to a top civil service position in central government. However, promotion to a position as city manager is clearly an option for ministerial officials in mid-level managerial positions.

3 The analysis covers all permanent secretaries, agency heads and city managers who left their position before the age of 65. They have for one reason or other been replaced before they reached the official retirement age.
model focusing on the effect of political change, a more complex model including other political-institutional covariates, and finally a model including first of all the year of appointment to the present position plus a few covariates that we deem to be of particular relevance at either the local or the central level of government.

Insert Table 4 about here

For top civil servants in central government table 4 shows that a difference in the party affiliation between the appointing and dismissing minister does not increase the hazard ratio for permanent secretaries and agency heads. This holds across the models. A further result is that the dismissing minister’s party affiliation does not influence the risk of being fired for a top civil servant. What is more there is no difference in the hazard ratios for permanent secretaries and agency heads. However, for year of appointment we find a hazard ratio of 1.05 that is highly statistically significant. The implication is that ministerial top civil servants appointed since 1970 have experienced an annual increase in the risk of early dismissal at 5%. It is even more interesting that this applies to both permanent secretaries in spite of their rather different tasks and their very different interaction with the incumbent minister. This fundamental change in the civil service system also characterizes local government.

Insert Table 5 about here

Table 5 generally shows much higher hazard ratios for city managers than for permanent secretaries and agency heads. At the same time it is seen that there are differences. So, a shift of mayor can increase the risk of dismissal. But whether this happens depends on the precise character of the shift. While the election of a mayor from another party is unimportant a new mayor from the same party involves a hazard ratio of 1,658 that is strongly significant. But the pattern is complex. If a new mayor represents another party and her or his election is accompanied by a change in the majority in city council the hazard ratio increases to 2,673; this ratio again is strongly significant (model 1). Model 2 includes year of appointment as a covariate, while model 3 also includes municipal size. The reason is that the relationship between mayors and city managers might be rather different in small and large municipalities. However, as table 5 shows, it is unimportant. More interesting the inclusion of year of appointment as covariate shows a highly significant hazard ratio of 1,127 that at the same time reduces the level of significance for the new mayor, different party and change of majority variable. The implication is that all other things equal the risk of early replacement has increased by an annual 12-13 % for appointments made later than 1970. The general conclusion therefore is that in local government city managers risk of dismissal has increased
significantly over the years and that this risk is particular strong in cases where a new mayor succeeds a mayor from the same party.

Above we set up three hypotheses. The first was that the strong hierarchical position of ministers would allow them rather than mayors to replace their top civil servants. This hypothesis clearly is rejected as the risk of dismissal is higher for city managers than for permanent secretaries and agency heads. But it is doubtful whether there is any partisan bias in this. This is seen from the fact that a new mayor representing the same party as her or his predecessor is much more likely to dismiss the city manager than when the new mayor was representing another party. This leads to hypothesis 2 stating that mayors holding a one party majority in the council are more inclined to make a party political replacement of top civil servants than other mayors and ministers. Tables 4 and 5 lend some support to this proposition, but there are two caveats. One is that we have no indication of partisan bias in these replacements; so, there has not been any critical debate of the issue. The other is that the ratio loses its significance when year of appointment is included as a covariate. This brings us to hypothesis 3 stating that discretionary replacement of top civil servants has increased over time in both central and local government but that this is unrelated to partisan politics. As was seen above this hypothesis is strongly supported by our data.

Discussion

The starting point for this paper was double. We know that modern political executives insist on receiving close and responsive advice from their closest collaborators within the civil service. We also know that in some countries top civil servants are increasingly leaving their posts before reaching the official age of retirement. Both apply to Danish civil servants and non-regarding their employment with central or local government.

The question is how we explain this. An obvious hypothesis would be that appointments have been politicized, i.e. that party political criteria have been substituted for merit criteria when it comes to selecting top civil servants. One reason for such a trend towards increasing politicization is that increasing pressure on political executives have made them more dependent on responsive advice and assistance in the making and implementation of public policy. At the same time it is apparent that the very complexity of public policy and administration still may tip the balance in favor of merit recruitment and promotion. The question therefore is whether political executives can assure themselves the same degree of responsiveness without giving up or at least modifying the merit civil service. For this reason they might have a preference for a functional politicization rather than a partisan one. This functional politicization

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4 The exception is the debate ensuing from the first mayor of Copenhagen’s decision to create a secretariat staffed by political appointees after the local elections in 2009 (Davidsen-Nielsen 2010).
involves the provision of full political services to the incumbent political executive by professional civil servants who stay in their job in case of a political change. For civil servants this is attractive because it improves their chances of reemployment after a shift of government. For political executives it is equally attractive because they can rig the incentives for civil servants to deliver by the discretionary dismissal of top civil servants who do not meet their demand for responsive and competent service.

Still, politicization of appointments might be attractive for political executives because it maximizes their control over staffing at the top of the governmental hierarchy. It is therefore logical to take into consideration that under certain institutional and political conditions executive control of appointments and dismissals is much stronger than under other conditions. Our three hypotheses mirrored this.

The empirical results presented above generally confirm the rather dramatic changes that over recent decades have been seen in the Danish civil service. This applies to both central and local government although changes are more dramatic in local government. The intriguing question is whether this results from a politicization of the top civil service. The problem is that we have no data telling us whether individual civil servants are members of or otherwise affiliated with specific political parties (Christensen 2006; forthcoming). However, with this caveat in mind it is evident from our analyses above that discretionary dismissal of permanent secretaries, agency heads and city managers before the official age of retirement does not follow a pattern that indicates a partisan bias. For top civil servants in central government there is no indication of this and for city managers the opposite pattern was found: The risk of early replacement was increased with the change of mayor, but this risk was significantly stronger when the new mayor came from the same party as the predecessor. Another intriguing fact in this respect is that the risk of dismissal is the same for agency heads as for permanent secretaries where the latter are much more engaged in constant interaction and collaboration with the incumbent minister.

A further observation of relevance for this discussion is the fact that changes are more dramatic in local than in central government. This is most clearly seen from the high proportion of early leavers (top civil servants leaving their position before the age of 65). Some of them move to a similar managerial position at the same or a higher, alternatively more prestigious level. But this does not differentiate between top civil servants at the two levels of government because even when accounting for this there are surprisingly many early leavers in the city halls. At the same time we saw that at both levels of government there was considerable spread in tenure. A conspicuous aspect of this is the comparatively frequent cases where city managers who leave their posts within the first two years following upon their appointment.
We can only speculate about the reasons for this. One tentative explanation may stem from the very
different conditions under which political executives select top civil servants. In central government
recruits to posts as permanent secretary and agency head come from ministerial departments. Here they
have occupied positions as deputy permanent secretaries and in some cases chief of section. But even in
the latter case their prior work has involved them in the provision of services to and regular interaction
with political executives. In other words they combine task related experience with the mutual
acquaintance to the minister looking for a replacement in a top ministerial position. Thus the adverse
selection problem is minimized. It is further reduced through the formal and informal screening procedures
preceding the nomination to the cabinet of a civil servant for a top managerial position (Christensen
forthcoming; Hegelund and Mose 2011: 63-67). This is very different in local government. In the seventies
city managers were predominantly recruited from within the municipality, but internal recruitment
dropped during the period and especially since the late eighties. Now the mayor, typically assisted by the
finance committee, is presented to a choice of external candidates (Ejersbo, Hansen and Mouritzen 1998:
100-101). Even if they will often have a background in another municipality nobody has experience from
close and personal cooperation with the recruit. They therefore have to rely on the impressions they can
form through interviews and references, including nowadays assistance from executive search consultants.
This is a much more risky situation in the perspective of both the recruiting executive and the recruit.
Hence the first and second year after appointment may work as a mutual trial period for both parties.

At a more general level this comparison of executive replacements in the national and the local civil service
has provided strong evidence for the resilience of the merit civil service. We ascribe the persistence of the
merit civil service to political executives’ demand for a mix of competence and responsiveness. A
professional civil service is uniquely qualified to meet this demand if as has been the case with the Danish
civil servants it is possible to make discretionary dismissals. This sends a clear signal to hopeful recruits,
incumbent managers and allows the executive to get rid of the less competent or just those whose
personal chemistry is at odds with the mayor or the minister of the day (Aberbach and Rockman 1998;
Campbell and Peters 1988; Hood 1998). But it is not just a question of meeting a well-specified demand for
competent and responsive service. It is also so that the members of the civil service caring about their
reemployment in case of a political shift and about prospective promotion for junior and mid-level civil
servants through these de facto changes in the merit civil service have an extremely strong incentive to
accommodate to the demands of incumbent political executives.
Conclusions

Three conclusions follow from this analysis of executive replacements within the Danish civil service. First, the conditions under which top civil servants (permanent secretaries, agency heads and city managers) work have changed quite dramatically over recent decades. Second, this radical change has been enacted without being accompanied by any politicization of the civil service where party political criteria are substituted for merit when one top civil servant is replaced by another. Moreover, this conclusion applies to both central and local government in spite of the very different institutional and political conditions that prevail at the two levels of government. Third, these results demonstrate, much in line with other recent studies, the adaptability and capacity of the merit civil service.

However, the exclusion of politicization as a driving or facilitating factor behind the dramatic changes in the conditions on which top civil servants are employed open for other research questions. Most important here is that can see that some civil servants survive at the top for very long while others only manage to stay in office for very few years. So, the question remains what are qualifications of the more successful top civil servants and what are the deficiencies of their less successful peers. The question also is what characterizes the interaction between political and administrative executives and how this does influence the chances of survival in high public office.
References


Hegelund, Susanne, and Peter Mose. 2011. JAVEL, HR. MINISTER. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.


### Tables

#### Table 1: Overview of data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Local Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of top civil servant</td>
<td>Name of permanent secretary</td>
<td>Name of local government CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name of agency head</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of political executive</td>
<td>Name of incumbent minister</td>
<td>Name of incumbent mayor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party affiliation</td>
<td>Party of incumbent minister</td>
<td>Party of incumbent mayor</td>
</tr>
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<td>Political strength</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Absolute majority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Replacement of top civil servants</td>
<td>Change of permanent secretary</td>
<td>Change of local government CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change of agency head</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Appointing/dismissing political executive</td>
<td>Ministers belonging to same or different coalition (center-right/center-left)</td>
<td>Mayor belonging to same or different party</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New mayor belonging to different party and loosing/winning absolute majority in the council</td>
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<td>Former job</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Any subsequent career</td>
<td>New job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of birth</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of appointment</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data sources: Central Government: The official government handbook (Hof- og Statskalenderen) and the Danish Who Is Who (Kraks Blå Bog). Local Government: The official local government yearbook (Kommunalårbojen) and survey data based on a questionnaire sent to all municipalities.
Table 2. Year of appointment and length of service

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<th>Year of appointment</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Mean length of service</td>
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<td>4,12269</td>
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<td>1990-</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>3,00334</td>
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Table 3. Retirement pattern for top civil servants. Percentages

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year of appointment</th>
<th>Early leavers (=&lt;65)¹</th>
<th>Early leavers in retirement</th>
<th>Position at same or higher level</th>
<th>N: Total /Early leavers</th>
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<td>1970-79</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Central government</td>
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<tr>
<td>PS</td>
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<td>6.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22/15</td>
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<td>AH</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>62/30</td>
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<td>64.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>377/243</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>PS</td>
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<td>25/21</td>
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<td>37.8</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>49/39</td>
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<td>21.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>185/138</td>
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<td>12.5</td>
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<td>24.1</td>
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<td>370/145</td>
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¹ We have defined an early leaver as a top civil who left his present position who did not die in office and who left her or his position before the age of 65.
Table 4. The hazard ratios for permanent secretaries and agency heads 1970-2009. Cox Proportional Hazard Model with time-varying covariates

<table>
<thead>
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<th>VARIABLES</th>
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<tr>
<td>Party difference between appointing and</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>0.92</td>
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<tr>
<td>dismissing minister</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
<td>(0.16)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Centre-right (dismissing)</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.05</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
<td>(0.15)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Permanent secretary</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of appointment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.05***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.00)</td>
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Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 5. The hazard ratios for city managers 1970-2005. Cox Proportional Hazard Model with time-varying covariates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLES</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>New mayor, same party</td>
<td>1,658***</td>
<td>1,796***</td>
<td>1,789***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.184)</td>
<td>(0.184)</td>
<td>(0.184)</td>
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<tr>
<td>New mayor, different party</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td>0.839</td>
<td>0.843</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>(0.235)</td>
<td>(0.235)</td>
<td>(0.235)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New mayor, different party and win/loss of absolute majority</td>
<td>2,673**</td>
<td>2,277*</td>
<td>2,307*</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.469)</td>
<td>(0.469)</td>
<td>(0.469)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year of appointment</td>
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<td>1,127***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.008)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
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Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1