

There is little evidence that Norway has undergone a process of ‘presidentialisation’, but power has become more concentrated in Norwegian cabinets.

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/08/14/there-is-little-evidence-that-norway-has-undergone-a-process-of-presidentialisation-but-power-has-become-more-concentrated-in-norwegian-cabinets/

14/08/2013

*The notion that some European parliamentary democracies might have become more ‘presidentialised’, with power focused around a Prime Minister, has received significant attention in certain countries, such as the UK. Ahead of the Norwegian elections in September, **Kristoffer Kolltveit** assesses how convincing this account is in the case of Norway. He notes that while there is little evidence that Norway has become presidentialised during the government of Jens Stoltenberg, power does appear to have become more concentrated in Norwegian cabinets.*



Questions of presidentialisation and increased prime ministerial power have been thoroughly investigated and discussed over several decades in the United Kingdom. The style and appearance of recent prime ministers in Sweden and Denmark, such as Göran Persson and Anders Fogh Rasmussen, have also sparked a debate about centralisation of authority in the Scandinavian countries.

Prime ministerial empowerment and presidentialisation are long-standing subjects in political science. Recently, **Poguntke and Webb’s conceptualisation** has provided a popular framework for comparative analysis. The gist of their argument is that state leaders in parliamentary democracies have increased their political power, resources and autonomy, pushing parliamentary democracies from their different starting points towards a presidentialised form of government.

This development is apparent in different parts of society, and Poguntke and Webb suggest several indicators of change related to cabinet decision-making. Based on their conceptualisation of the presidentialisation thesis, one would empirically expect weaker ministers, more cabinet reshuffles, impaired collegial decision-making arenas, and stronger prime ministers with increased resources. These changes would enable prime ministers to decide more policy issues at the expense of the full cabinet.

Little scholarly attention has been devoted to the question of prime ministerial empowerment and presidentialisation in Norway. The strong egalitarian characteristics of Norwegian society have traditionally also been manifested in cabinet: The prime minister’s position has been comparatively weak, and cabinets have traditionally had strong collegial features, favouring consensus in cabinet decision-making.

The president-term briefly entered the public debate in 2009 when a new coordination minister was appointed at the Prime Minister’s Office. Opposition and media commentators discussed the new role, and one party leader



Jens Stoltenberg, Prime Minister of Norway (Credit: Håkan Dahlström, CC-BY-SA-3.0)

questioned whether the new minister would do all the 'dirty work', while Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg would turn into a president.

Looking at some of the various indicators of change, there is little to suggest a presidentialisation process in Norway. Over the last 30 years, there has not been a growing tendency by Norwegian prime ministers to appoint weak ministers with limited experience from parliament or party organisation. Nor has there been a general trend of increased reshuffles in cabinet, as one would expect from Poguntke and Webb's thesis.

The presidentialisation thesis seems to get more support regarding the expected strengthening of the Prime Minister's Office. The Norwegian Prime Minister's Office has traditionally been relatively small, and the role as facilitator has been most important. Over the last 30 years, however, the number of political and administrative employees has more than doubled. Interviews conducted with secretaries general from six Norwegian ministries support the notion that these developments have clearly strengthened the capacity to coordinate cabinet policy in Norway.

The coordination capacity was further enhanced after the 2009 elections where the [red-green coalition](#) kept a slim majority, and the chief of staff was made coordination minister 'without portfolio'. In the present Stoltenberg II cabinet, a division of labour has evolved between the coordination minister and the so-called cabinet subcommittee, consisting of Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg and the other coalition party leaders, to solve cabinet issues and disagreements.

These changes have also affected the collegiality in cabinet. Although Norwegian cabinets still meet quite often, there is evidence that the cabinet meeting has lost influence as the decision-making arena it once was. The number of issues discussed at these weekly meetings has grown clearly over the last thirty years, suggesting that the cabinet's workload has increased. Controversies between ministerial areas or between parties are therefore seldom resolved at the cabinet meetings, but rather discussed further by smaller groups in other arenas.

It is well documented in the political science literature that large cabinets reduce their decisiveness and enforce arrangements with inner cabinets. In the Norwegian case, the number of cabinet ministers has been around average during the post war period compared to other European countries. There has not been a dramatic growth over the last 30 years, and 18–19 ministers has long been seen as a figure that is too high to develop close cooperation in the cabinet collegium, suggesting that there is an underlying need for a mechanism like the cabinet subcommittee and a coordination minister to solve a growing number of cabinet disagreements.

Although presidentialisation does not seem to be a fitting description of recent changes, there seems to have been a concentration of decision-making power in recent Norwegian cabinets. It remains unclear, however, how permanent these changes are.

New elections will be held in Norway on 9 September. All polls indicate a new government, and the Conservative Party leader Erna Solberg is the favourite to become the new prime minister. In the Norwegian press, much attention has been drawn to the likely policies of a new government. However, changes might also happen in the Norwegian executive centre. Solberg has already advocated fewer ministries and fewer ministers, and argued in favour of a stronger Prime Minister's Office. The new government might thus also have a coordination minister, despite the opposition parties ridiculing the post when it was first introduced in 2009.

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