



The Relationship between Politics and Administration at the Flemish Local Level: Intermunicipal Differences Explained

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Abstract

When it comes to political-administrative relations, New Public Management has aimed for a stronger differentiation between political and administrative matters and for an empowerment of the administration towards the political level.

This article investigates the perceived degree of administrative discretion at the municipal level in the Flemish region of Belgium. We use data from a survey with Flemish municipal CEOs from 2019.

The results suggest that the degree of administrative discretion in Flemish municipalities is relatively high during policy preparation. Nevertheless, during other phases of the policy cycle most municipal CEOs perceive a certain political impact on the functioning of their administration, which reaches further than steering on the main policy lines. Second, a majority identifies a lack of mutual trust between the executive board and the administrators.

Furthermore, administrative discretion increases with the size of the municipality and the assessed capacity of the administration. Also in municipalities where the key actors of political-administrative relationships remained unchanged for a longer period, the administration has more leeway to act. Lastly, the results nuance the impact of the municipal financial situation and the composition of the majority on the degree of administrative discretion.

Keywords:

Local government, political-administrative relations, dichotomy, municipalities, Flanders

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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the public sector has undergone substantial changes and transformations (Caulfield and Larsen 2002; Vetter and Kersting 2003). Since the 1970s, the character of “classic bureaucracy” at different levels of government has been challenged, and some of its underlying assumptions have been altered (Ejersbo and Svava 2015). New Public Management (NPM) has been key in this discussion of public sector reforms. NPM posits ideas that imply an openness to private business principles and practices, putting more of an emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness and performance in bureaucracy (Hood 1995). Regarding political-administrative relations, NPM-like reforms have aimed for “a decrease in political control and increasing administrative influence and institutional autonomy” (Christensen and Lægveid 2001, 74). Rather than simply carrying out prescribed duties, administrative bodies instead focus on the tasks to be fulfilled and the outcomes to be reached. Therefore, they are granted freedom in choosing methods, selecting means and interpreting rules; indeed, they are held accountable through incentives and performance systems (Hood 1995).

This (further) empowerment of the administration challenges the traditional model of a dichotomy between politics and administration (Wilson 1887; Weber 1968; Aberbach et al. 1981; Peters 1988) in general and the steep hierarchical relations between both spheres in particular. Because of the need for increasing professional qualifications and training of members of the public bureaucracy, one may expect bureaucrats to have the information and expertise required for effective policy-making. Representative institutions must find a way to acquire this information, even if that means informally allowing administrators to play a significant role in the responsibilities that are traditionally political, for example, policy preparation and policy formulation (Ejersbo and Svava 2015; Peters 2018).

As a consequence, tensions can arise between bureaucratic experience and specialised knowledge on the one hand and democratic accountability and control on the other hand. Most citizens continue to regard elected officials as responsible for the conduct of public business (Peters 2018). However, how to guarantee political accountability when politically sensitive, complex and important questions are left to administrators is a concern. Contrary to political accountability, management accountability mainly focuses on the outputs and performance instead of the processes. As a result, especially when administrators are working at an arm’s length from politicians, administrative discretion may be at the expense of responsivity towards citizenry (Christensen and Lægveid 2015).

Here, the research to date gives mixed signals regarding the autonomy of administrative bodies. In general, studies point to a large heterogeneity in the perceived levels of autonomy among public sector organisations, even among organisations with a similar formal legal status (Verhoest et al. 2004; Yesilkagit and van Thiel

2008). Specifically for the local level, Jacobsen (2006) argues that political-administrative relations differ according to the context and structural and demographic variables. Despite these findings, little is known about the conditions and circumstances under which an administration is being granted more or less discretion and – indirectly – about what may explain the varying impact of NPM reforms on the functioning of an administration. Nevertheless, gaining insights into the variables explaining political-administrative relations is of the utmost importance because policy-making in many public organisations strongly depends on the information provided by the administrative staff, here combined with the politicians’ political ideas and agreements (George et al. 2017). Ejersbo and Svava (2015, 153) describe the nature of the relationships between the administration and the elected officials as a “key issue to explore”.

Therefore, the current article elaborates on the factors that may affect the extent of the discretion being granted to the administration. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, discretion can be defined as “the ability and right to decide exactly what should be done in a particular situation”. Applied to political-administrative relations, the term relates to the freedom of action being granted to the administration by, among other things, the legal framework and politics. Hence, administrative discretion is considered inversely proportional to political control: the more restrained politicians are regarding the administration, the larger the latter’s freedom of action when performing its tasks (De Leemans 1998).

As such, following Peters (2018), the present study considers the role of the bureaucracy as a variable. Indeed, bureaucracy varies as a function of tradition and culture and is also related to more specific structural and political features. Our study focuses on the impact of the latter features.

These assumptions are tested at the Flemish local level. The reason for using the Flemish local level as a case study is twofold. First, the administration at the local-government level is likely to have unique characteristics regarding the roles of administrators and their relationship with elected officials. Especially at the local level, (further) empowerment of the administration challenges the traditional role conceptions of local politicians (Larsen 2005; Liguori et al. 2009), along with the very logic of local politics itself with a high reciprocal influence between politicians and administrators (Ammons and Newell 1988; Jacobsen 2006; Klausen and Magnier 1998; Mouritzen and Svava 2002; Sancino and Turrini 2009; Svava 2006). As such, the study of administrative discretion at the local level may be considered a *least-likely case* (Eckstein 1975). Because of their uniqueness and their limited scale, local governments can be considered “the testing ground for the organisation of the future” (Ejersbo and Svava 2015, 170). Furthermore, the local level in Flanders has traditionally been characterised by high political interference in the administration. In 2007, a new regulatory framework – inspired by NPM ideas – introduced several instruments to strengthen the administration’s role in the policy process and

abolish the steep hierarchy between both spheres. Earlier research has found a large variety regarding the empowerment of the administration in Flemish municipalities (Hennau 2017).

Our study contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the contingency of local political-administrative relationships across municipalities within one country. So far, many studies treat the relationship between local politics and administration as being a constant within one country, focusing on the influence of country-level determinants (Mouritzen and Svava 2002). Only a handful of studies acknowledge the possibility of varying local political-administrative relationships according to the local context (French 2005; Jacobsen 2006) or the municipal department (Liguori et al. 2009). Indirectly, the current article can help produce insights into the factors that need attention when one aims to modify (formally or informally) the way of working between politicians and administrators. In doing so, the current article starts from the ambition of the legislator in different countries to increase administrative discretion by design. However, it is not the present article's ambition to elaborate on the potential normative consequences of growing administrative discretion.

In what follows, we elaborate on our theoretical framework and define several hypotheses to explain the variation in the administration's discretion at the local level. Next, the data collection and empirical context are discussed. After presenting the descriptive and explanatory analyses, the main findings are summarised, and their implications are discussed in the final section of the article.

2. Explaining Intermunicipal variation in local political-administrative relations

In a legal sense, the spheres of politics and administration – at least in Europe – are clearly separated (Mouritzen and Svava 2002). The formal and informal interaction between politics and administration, however, differs to a large extent, not only between but also within states (Jacobsen 2006; March and Olsen 1989; Mouritzen and Svava 2002). Therefore, the current article aims to shed light on the factors affecting the interaction between elected officials and administrators within one country.

To study how certain circumstances influence the discretion of local administrators, we rely on the organisational theory, which recognises explicitly that organisational structure is contingent on external conditions and that organisational performance and processes are contingent on both the structure and environment (Haveman and Wetts 2019). Hence, we consider municipalities as organisations, here defined as “collections of people, material assets, financial resources, and information, whose members have common goals that they cooperate to pursue” (Haveman and Wetts 2019, 2).

Following Jacobsen (2006), we regard the relationship between politicians and administrators as a division of labour between both spheres. Inspired by the structural contingency theory (see Haveman and Wetts 2019), we assume that – next to the structure – administrative discretion depends on the environmental uncertainty of the municipalities and their size. As such, the current paper investigates whether varying environments, resources and sizes result in different political-administrative relationships among the municipalities operating within the same regulatory framework and formal position. In the following sections, we formulate more specific hypotheses based on insights from organisation theory and empirical studies concerning (local) political-administrative relationships. With regard to the latter, we have to keep in mind that it is difficult to generalise findings from studies in other countries to the Flemish local level. Different archetypes underpin the relationship between politics and administration (Jacobsen 2006).

2.1 Administrative discretion and size

In general, larger (public) organisations function in a more decentralised way, with greater horizontal and vertical fragmentation and greater task specialisation. With more people, tasks and activities to monitor, delegation of responsibilities becomes necessary to avoid the top manager becoming a major obstruction in the flow of decisions and information (Mintzberg 1979).

Applying these insights to political-administrative relations, one may expect a stronger administration as the organisational size increases. Because of decentralisation, fragmentation and the delegation of responsibilities, political actors are not able to keep control over all administrative actions and decisions. As a result, politicians from larger municipalities acknowledge the municipal CEO's responsibility regarding personnel management and are more strongly committed to global organisation management than to a detailed and direct steering of the administration (Ackaert 2006).

Second, size gives administrators the managerial capacity to claim their autonomy. Hence, research shows that municipal CEOs serving larger populations are more likely to devote a greater amount of time to their policy role, while their colleagues from smaller municipalities are more likely to devote their time to traditional administrative activities (Newell and Ammons 1987). Similarly, Dunn and Legge (2002) conclude that administrators from larger jurisdictions are less likely than other administrators to identify with the orthodox dichotomy model.

Based on these insights, we hypothesise the following:

H1: Municipal CEOs working in larger municipalities perceive a higher degree of administrative discretion.

2.2 Administrative discretion and resources

Regarding municipal resources, slack resources stimulate the processes of departmentalisation and fragmentation within an organisation. During financially good times, there will be less of a need for tight coordination between units and departments. Mutual contacts and the exchange of expertise between departments will decrease, allowing departments to develop consistent sets of beliefs and to differentiate themselves from one another. On the contrary, as resources decrease, more coordination will be required, and mutual contacts between departments may increase (March and Olsen 1989).

Specifically regarding political-administrative relations – and in line with the abovementioned argument – Jacobsen (2006) concludes that the amount of bargaining between politicians and administrators is higher in low-income municipalities, especially at the beginning of the election term. Similarly, Vallet and De Rynck (2006) find the executive board's position towards the administration is stronger in municipalities with a difficult financial situation. A high debt rate and the associated savings tend to limit the possibilities and content of long-term policy planning, which is frequently revised or replaced by short-term, *ad-hoc* actions. Because these savings are mostly initiated and controlled by the executive board, a difficult financial situation is expected to lower administrative discretion (Vallet and De Rynck 2006).

A similar argument applies to personnel resources: a lack of know-how and capacities hinder the administration from playing an influential role (Vallet and De Rynck 2006). Furthermore, top politicians are more inclined to intervene directly in the administration in case of mismanagement in the department for which they are held responsible (Bovy and De Rynck 2002). As a consequence, we expect the following:

H2a: Municipal CEOs working in municipalities with higher resources perceive a higher degree of administrative discretion.

On the other hand, however, financial stress is said to encourage public sector bodies to change their routines and behaviour (Wynen et al. 2014). Within the context of NPM reforms, financial stress could indirectly stimulate politicians to give administrators more leeway (Hennau 2017). Based on these findings, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H2b: Municipal CEOs working in municipalities with higher resources perceive a lower degree of administrative discretion.

2.3 Administrative discretion and the (political) environment

Regarding the environment, different studies point to the impact of (un)certainity and (in)stability on decision-making within organisations. According to Mintzberg (1979) organisations seem to be inclined to centralise decision-making responsibil-

ities in turbulent environments. Hence, one may expect administrative discretion to be lower in turbulent environments. In line with the above, Mouritzen and Svava (2002) consider political turbulence and conflicts to be important obstructions for municipal CEOs to properly fulfil their jobs. Similarly, Jacobsen (2006) argues that political instability – because of (frequent) elections resulting in new majorities, new policies and new politicians – weakens the effects of formal structure and hierarchy on political-administrative relations. With new political actors not knowing how to approach the other sphere, individual characteristics instead have a stronger impact on the interactions between politics and administration (Jacobsen 2006). Hence, one may expect local politicians to play a more active role and to be more strongly involved in administrative matters in politically unstable municipalities. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H3a: Municipal CEOs working in politically stable municipalities perceive a higher degree of administrative discretion.

On the other hand, political ambiguity and uncertainty occasionally decrease the possibility of political control over the administration. This conclusion works both in nondemocratic (where the strength of the incumbent regime strengthens its grip on bureaucracy) and (some) democratic contexts. Because of increasing competition between political parties, interest groups, advocacy groups, lobbyists and think tanks, political pressures on the public service may increase as politicians expect public servants to promote their agenda (Aucoin 2012; Savoie 2008). We expect that:

H3b: Municipal CEOs working in politically stable municipalities perceive a lower degree of administrative discretion.

Second, the composition of the political majority may also affect the degree of administrative discretion. On the one hand, a greater degree of administrative discretion can be expected in municipalities with a clear and large majority. Because of a stronger consensus concerning local policy, the top administrators in these municipalities may have more discretion during the different phases of the policy cycle (Stillman 1977). In coalition-led municipalities, on the contrary, policy agreements are expected to be guarded more closely by politicians. Thus, a political executive that consists of multiple parties will be more strongly involved in the day-to-day administration and will hold a closer watch on decisions concerning municipal policy and resources (Craeghs et al. 2001). This results in the following hypothesis:

H4a: Municipal CEOs working in one-party majority municipalities perceive a larger degree of administrative discretion than municipal CEOs working in a coalition-led municipality.

On the other hand, stronger concentration in the political board may narrow the number of contacts between politicians and administrators as a strong and sta-

ble political majority may use its power to steer the interaction with the administration (Jacobsen 2006).

H4b: Municipal CEOs working in one-party majority municipalities perceive a lower degree of administrative discretion than municipal CEOs working in a coalition-led municipality.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Research context

The research context are the political-administrative relations at the municipal level in the Flemish region of Belgium.

From a methodological point of view, studying the local level is interesting for different reasons. A first advantage is what John (2006) describes as *numerosity*: nation-states generally have a relatively large number of local governments, certainly compared with the other units in which political scientists are interested, such as the institutions of nation-states or subnational cases. This large number allows conventional statistical analyses to be applied to institutional forms, behaviours and policy outcomes. As such, diversity among the structures and processes can be investigated within one country. A second characteristic of local authorities is their proximity: the relatively small size of local authorities compared with other levels of decision-making means that local political and administrative actors are close to each other and to the social process (John 2006).

In particular, the Flemish local context is relevant for multiple reasons. First, the 300 Flemish municipalities share the same basic form of political and administrative organisation, with a municipal council whose members are directly elected every six years. Local elections are being organised on the same day for all Belgian municipalities. Among its members, the council elects the aldermen, who, together with the mayor, constitute the executive board of the municipality. The board members usually belong to the political (single-party or coalition) majority in the council. Regarding the administration, the Flemish local government traditionally resembles the classic Weberian organisation, with departments established according to policy domains and department heads being hierarchically subordinate to the municipal CEO. The municipal CEO is the formal head of the administration. Over the years his function shifted from a traditional notary role towards the role of a municipal CEO who is responsible for the preparation of policy presented in the different political bodies within local government (Ackaert 2005; Craeghs et al. 2001). This general institutional context is basically identical for the 300 Flemish municipalities, which allows us to investigate diversity in administrative discretion within one form of government and to exclude several institutional variables.

Second, in 2007, a new regulatory framework – inspired by NPM ideas – came into power. One of the aims was to increase administrative discretion at the Flemish local level – which is traditionally considered very limited (Plees 1997; Van Gool 2005) – and to lower political control over the administration. Traditionally, Flemish aldermen have extensive discretion to develop policy within “their” domains and give direct instructions to “their” heads of department and services (De Rynck 2006). Furthermore, personal assistance from mayors and aldermen to citizens has been very common in the past (Ackaert 2006). This way of working hinders the municipal CEO in coordinating the highly fragmented municipal administration (Craeghs et al. 2001; Plees and De Leemans 1997; Vallet and De Rynck 2006).

In 2007 the legislator introduced multiple reforms to strengthen the administration’s role in the different phases of the policy cycle. Examples are the obligation for municipalities to create a management team and to set up an internal control system, the introduction of an external audit system and the possibility to delegate responsibilities from the political to the administrative level. As such, municipalities disposed of various instruments to strengthen administrative discretion. Despite these reforms, recent studies and audits point to an implementation gap in the legislation in Flemish municipalities and large differences regarding the organisation of political-administrative relationships (Audit Vlaanderen 2015; Hennau 2017). Nevertheless, since 2007, Flemish legislation concerning local government has undergone only marginal changes when it comes to political-administrative relationships (Hennau et al. 2018).

3.2 Data collection

To draw valid conclusions, we rely on data from a survey sent to the municipal CEOs of Flemish municipalities in the autumn of 2019. The survey targeted the entire population of the 300 municipal CEOs in Flanders. Standing at the nexus of politics and administration, we consider municipal CEOs to be in a unique position to assess the degree of administrative discretion in their municipalities. Indeed, studies show that the mutual contacts between politics and administration are mainly situated at the top and that political backbenchers have significantly fewer contacts with the administration (Mouritzen and Svava 2002). A similar observation can be made regarding the administration: interactions between politicians and civil servants become less frequent as one descends in the administration hierarchy (Plees and Laurent 1998; Self 1972).

The survey was administered electronically and used closed questions to gauge the municipal CEOs’ perceptions about the degree of administrative discretion. Here, 53 % of the municipal CEOs completed the survey. The data set is rep-

representative by size², the municipalities' socio-economic profile³ and composition of the majority (single party majority or coalition majority)⁴.

The collected data largely reflect the personal opinions and attitudes of the respondents and are not objective observations of administrative discretion. Still, measurements of the perceptions and attitudes are particularly interesting. After all, the information provided by the respondents over the course of the survey can provide a picture of the experienced reality of the respondents, to which they attune their actions and behaviour (Greenstein 1969). As such, perceptions may be good predictors of behaviour. In addition, research with local politicians has shown that survey results in general are closely related to the results from more sophisticated, objective analyses (Denters 2007).

Nevertheless, we have to be aware that survey data are susceptible to certain sources of bias. To avoid common method variance (i.e. variance attributable to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures represent), the questionnaire was developed with the greatest care. We controlled for common method variance by separating the measurement of the dependent (at the beginning of the survey) and independent variables (at the end of the survey). Furthermore, the questionnaire consisted of a large variety of scale formats, anchors, scale values and positively and negatively formulated questions. We also aimed to reduce method biases by allowing the respondents to fill out the questionnaire anonymously. All of these measurements should reduce biases in the response process by making prior responses less salient or relevant, thus diminishing the respondent's ability to fall back on prior responses to answer subsequent questions (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Furthermore, the large majority of independent variables has not been measured in the survey, but has been collected from external sources. Especially the municipalities' websites and the "Municipality and City Monitor"⁵ were valuable sources of information.

3.3 Dependent variable

Our dependent variable analyses the degree of administrative discretion during policy preparation and execution. The extent of local administrative discretion was measured by asking the municipal CEOs to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following statements:

2 $\text{Chi}^2 = 2.188$, $\text{df} = 2$, $p = 0.3550$.

3 $\text{Chi}^2 = 1.324$, $\text{df} = 5$, $p = 0.9324$.

4 $\text{Chi}^2 = 0.880$, $\text{df} = 1$, $p = 0.3481$.

5 The Municipality and City Monitor has been developed by the Flemish Agency of Domestic Administration and the Flemish Department of Chancellery and Administrations – Statistics Flanders. The monitor collects more than 300 indicators or numbers on both the external and internal environment of the 300 Flemish municipalities and cities.

- The members of the board of mayor and aldermen and the administrators trust each other.
- Local administrators are not being influenced by the members of the board of mayor and aldermen.
- The board members leave the preparation of the board's and the council's decisions to the municipal CEO and his services.
- The board members only capture the main points of the policy to be pursued; the administration decides on policy implementation.
- Local administrators are being granted maximum freedom during policy preparation and execution.

The respondents could answer using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (0) "Not at all" to (4) "To a considerable extent". The different items load on a single factor (% of variance: 52.06%) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.76. The five items were added up into a new index on the degree of administrative discretion. A higher index score implies higher administrative discretion.

3.4 Independent variables

The number of inhabitants within the municipality, as registered on 1 January 2019, is used as a proxy for the size of the municipality. The resources variable captures the debt ratio of the municipality per inhabitant.⁶ Regarding the personnel resources of the municipality, we asked the respondents to evaluate the capacity of the administration. Therefore, they were asked to what extent they agreed (5-point Likert scale from 0 = totally disagree to 4 = totally agree) with the following statement: "Within my municipality, there is a lack of capacity in order to fulfil all tasks properly." The last item captures a qualitative evaluation of the personnel resources within the municipality.

We identified the municipal CEO's organisational tenure and the political majority's continuity before and after the 2018 local elections as proxies for the stability of the municipality. The latter variable is coded 0 if the political majority and mayor changed in a municipality after the 2018 local elections, 1 if the majority or mayor changed after the 2018 elections, and 2 if the majority and mayor remained the same before and after the 2018 local elections. Organisational tenure was operationalised as the number of years the municipal CEO was working as the head of the administration in the municipality.

The variable "composition of the majority" is coded as 0 for coalition and 1 for single-party majority. In a coalition municipality, multiple parties collaborate to obtain a majority of seats within the municipal council. In a single-party majority

⁶ We prefer this index over the absolute number of FTEs in order to avoid problems of multicollinearity with the number of inhabitants.

one party obtained a majority of seats within the municipal council and therefore is able to govern without other parties. In single-party-majority municipalities the executive board is composed of members from one political party.

4. Descriptive findings: administrative discretion in the Flemish municipalities

We first present the descriptive statistics of the degree of administrative discretion in the Flemish municipalities as perceived by the municipal CEOs. Table 1 shows the distributions of different statements concerning the degree of administrative discretion based on the mean score (Mean), standard deviation (Std. Dev.) and the median (Med.) of the different variables, along with the percentage of respondents agreeing with the statement (% Agree) and the total number of respondents answering the question (N). As discussed above, the items were added into a new index summing up the different items, with values ranging from 0 to 20. The distribution of the constructed index has been described in the last row.

Table 1
Perceived administrative discretion

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Med.	% Agree	N
The members of the board of mayor and aldermen and the administrators trust each other	2.26	0.84	2	40.1	152
Local administrators are not being influenced by the members of the board of mayor and aldermen	1.90	0.96	2	27.8	151
The board members leave the preparation of the board's and the council's decisions to the municipal CEO and his services	2.97	0.84	3	74.2	151
The board members only capture the main points of the policy to be pursued; the administration decides on policy implementation	1.64	0.93	2	17.8	152
Local administrators are being granted maximum freedom during policy preparation and execution	2.11	0.96	2	41.5	152
Index on administrative discretion	10.87	3.25	11		151

Almost three out of four municipal CEOs perceived a certain degree of administrative discretion regarding the preparation of political decisions. In general, however, administrative discretion is being assessed relatively low at the Flemish local level. First, the municipal CEOs perceive a rather strong political influence on the administration. A relatively small share of four out of ten municipal CEOs agree

that local administrators are being granted maximum freedom during policy preparation and execution. In addition, less than one out of five municipal CEOs were convinced that the board of mayor and aldermen only captures the main points of the policy to be pursued. According to a majority of the respondents, politicians hold a close watch on the administration: more than seven out of ten respondents perceived political influence on local administrators.

With 40% of the municipal CEOs agreeing with the statement that the members of the executive board and the administrators trust each other, mutual trust between the mayor and aldermen on the one hand and the administrators on the other hand seems an area of attention at the Flemish local level.

5. Analysis: explaining intermunicipal variation in the degree of administrative discretion

The second objective of the current paper is to assess how variance in the degree of administrative discretion can be explained by organisational characteristics. For that purpose, we ran a linear regression analysis with perceived administrative discretion as the dependent variable. The findings are reported in Table 2. Given the relatively small sample size, we use 0.1 as the significance level. There were no indications for multicollinearity problems based on the variance inflation factors, nor for common method bias based on Harman's single-factor test.⁷

Table 2
Linear regression on perceived administrative discretion

	β	Sig.
Number of inhabitants	0.172	0.061
Debt ratio/inhabitant	-0.048	0.585
Lack of local capacity	-0.198	0.022
Political continuity	0.182	0.045
Continuity CEO	0.190	0.028
Absolute majority	-0.038	0.681
(Constant)		0.000
N	126	
Adjusted R square	0.104	

⁷ We loaded all of the variables into an exploratory factor analysis and examined the unrotated factor solution. This factor explains 22.77% of the variance and, thus, accounts only for a minority of the covariance among the measures.

In general, the explanatory power of the model is low (adjusted R square = 0.104). Nevertheless, we do find some significant relationships. The municipal size correlates with the degree of administrative discretion. As expected, municipal CEOs working in larger municipalities perceived administrative discretion to be larger.

Furthermore, resources were hypothesised to be positively correlated with the degree of administrative discretion. Municipal CEOs who perceived a lack of capacity in their municipality to fulfil all tasks properly perceived higher political influence on the functioning of the administration, offering support for H2a. However, contrary to H2a and H2b, the municipality's debt ratio does not influence the degree of administrative discretion.

Third, the hypotheses concerning the impact of the environmental context can only be confirmed partially. In line with H3a, the political influence on the administration is perceived to be lower if the composition of the majority and/or the mayor remained the same after the 2018 local elections. The same holds true regarding the continuity of the municipal CEO. As expected, the perceived administrative discretion increases with the organisational tenure of the municipal CEOs. More experienced municipal CEOs seem to have the managerial capacity to claim their and the administration's autonomy.

Contrary to H4a and H4b, the composition of the majority does not affect the degree of perceived administrative discretion. In other words: political control over the administration in municipalities with a single party majority does not differ significantly from political control over the administration in coalition municipalities.

6. Conclusion and discussion

Drawing on a survey with municipal CEOs, the current paper investigated the perceived administrative discretion in Flemish municipalities. Contrary to a large body of studies, the present article does not consider the political-administrative relationships at the local level as a constant but instead opens the possibility of intermunicipal diversity in political-administrative relationships despite the same formal status and regulatory framework.

Despite regulatory reforms aiming for a (further) empowerment of the administration, the degree of administrative discretion in Flemish municipalities seems to be relatively low according to municipal CEOs. A large share of the municipal CEOs perceive a certain influence of the board of mayor and aldermen on local administrators, with more than eight out of ten respondents sharing the opinion that this influence goes further than capturing the main points of local policy. Mutual trust between executive politicians and local administrators seems to be an area of attention as well in the Flemish municipalities.

Second, the explanatory analysis confirms the hypothesis that administrative discretion increases with the size of the municipality and supports the assumption that the perceived capacity of the administration contributes to a more independent position of the administration towards the political level. In pursuit of the (further) empowerment of the administration towards the political level, a thorough human resources policy towards the administration and a substantiated organisation chart seem to be of utmost importance.

In general, the municipal financial situation does not have a significant impact on the degree of administrative discretion. This rather surprising finding is likely explained by the potential opposite relations between the municipal financial situation and the political control over the administration. On the one hand, limited financial resources and budgetary constraints could increase political interference in the administration. On the other hand, financial stress is said to encourage public sector bodies to change routines and behaviour (Wynen et al. 2014). In the context of NPM reforms in Flemish municipalities, this would mean that politicians from municipalities with limited financial resources give more leeway to local administrators.

Finally, the political context seems to partially affect the degree of perceived administrative discretion. We do not find a significant relation between the perceived degree of administrative discretion and the composition of the majority. An explanation for the lack of a strong impact may be that two potentially competing processes are at work within the municipalities. On the one hand, studies point to a stronger involvement of the politicians in day-to-day administration in coalition-led municipalities because of a more vulnerable consensus concerning local policy (Stillman 1977; Craeghs et al. 2001). On the other hand, Jacobsen (2006) states that a strong and stable (single-party) majority may be inclined to dominate the interaction with the administration.

Nevertheless, administrative discretion at the local level correlates with the stability of the environment, both at the political and administrative levels. In municipalities where the key actors of political-administrative relationships remain the same for a longer period, the administration has more leeway to act and to decide independently from the political level.

Despite these findings, the current study suffers some limitations. The low explanatory power of the model indicates that the model may be underspecified. It goes without saying that many factors potentially affect municipal CEOs' assessment of administrative discretion and that it is impossible to include all of them in the analysis. Nevertheless, we have to be aware of the risk that relevant variables are excluded from the model when interpreting the results. Therefore, we call upon future research to (further) investigate the impact of organisational and individual characteristics and personal relations on the relationship between elected officials and administrators.

Second, the present study only measured perceived administrative discretion in a general organisation-wide way. In doing so, we looked beyond the formal dimensions of administrative autonomy and captured administrative discretion as it is experienced in real life by municipal CEOs. Nevertheless, perceived, self-reported administrative discretion may differ 1) from actual administrative discretion, 2) among administrators and politicians within the same organisation and 3) from one policy domain to the next. As a consequence, future research should consider measuring administrative discretion by inquiring about the concrete actions of the administration and involving administrators from lower echelons (e.g. heads of departments) to assess the degree of administrative discretion in a more refined way.

Hence, qualitative thematic research and/or case studies could add complementary insights to the academic debate on administrative discretion because they allow us to better examine the question of how institutional norms regarding political-administrative relations are understood, applied and negotiated by the people performing these roles on a day-to-day basis (Van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). Therefore, a qualitative approach facilitates a more diversified analysis of political-administrative relationships, for example, according to policy domains. Additionally, qualitative studies can help explain some of the (non)significant relationships from the present study.

Specifically for Flanders, further (qualitative) research should also consider paying attention to the role of local cabinets in local political-administrative relations and to the impact of recent (and potentially future) municipal mergers on this topic.

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