



# Governing a Dual Executive – Agents and Stewards in the Swedish Management Regime

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## Abstract


This article analyses the tension between democratic and constitutional demands for control over delegated mandates and contemporary trust-oriented management policies of the Swedish national executive. Competing management ideals are here analyzed in terms of control-oriented Principal-Agent (PA) models and trust-oriented Principal-Steward (PS) models. The case is studied from within three perspectives that constitute core dimensions of the Swedish management regime: the constitutional preconditions for government-agency relations, the application of formal management instruments, and the role that informal instruments play in the management regime. We find that the Swedish management regime is PA-oriented at its core – constitutionally and in terms of the choice of management model for agencies – but featuring PS-oriented financial and policy autonomy for central government agencies. Informal steering is prohibited but the dominant interpretation of the constitution is that it allows PS-oriented informal contacts that are equal, cooperative exchanges of information, including efforts to clarify formal steering. We question the validity of this conclusion as clarification of steering is too closely related to steering to be reliably something else. Thus, the role of informal contacts is formally and rhetorically reserved for PS-oriented use, that is, interaction on equal and cooperative terms, but in practice also entails PA-oriented top down control.

## Practical Relevance

- Practitioners in any contemporary executive that features extensive delegation to agencies could find this analysis and its results informative.
- This research provides an up-to-date understanding of the Swedish national executive that can be used to educate its (new) politicians and public servants into issues regarding legitimate ways to control and be controlled.
- This research analyzes the (unsolved) constitutional problem of how informal steering/contacts are used between the different parts of the Swedish central government administration.
- Awaiting an introductory course (see above), practitioners are advised to seek guidance from their supervisors.

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## Introduction

### Aim and research questions

This research analyses steering practices of national executives where important tasks are delegated to central government agencies. Delegation to agencies became a popular solution to overload and legitimacy problems in the New Public Management-era, with manifest representation in public management models like Management by Objectives and Results (MBOR) and so called agencification. Such solutions are associated with the need to control the delegated mandates top-down, if only *ex post* and with a focus on performance. How *ex post*-control is applied to control semi-autonomous agencies has been observed to vary in cyclical patterns of escalation and de-escalation (cf. Kristiansen 2015; Kristiansen 2017; Kristiansen, Dahler-Larsen and Moll Ghin 2017; Wockelberg and Ahlbäck Öberg 2021). Regardless of the form and intensity of control, the possibility of establishing a link between the democratic leadership (the elected government) and the operational part of the executive (the agencies) is crucial. While the legitimacy of contemporary government is dependent upon extensive delegation to others, it is also dependent upon the possibility to keep track of performances and enable accountability. At stake is nothing less than the legitimacy of the government, or democracy as such. How governments manage delegation to and control of agencies are thus important issues for political science and public administration scholars alike, and the cyclical nature of government steering mentioned above is spurring renewed interest in these issues.

In terms of thinking about delegation, contemporary public management models are inspired by economic theory, more precisely Principal-Agent theory (PA). Post-NPM, public management ideas proposing that delegation could be defined in equal rather than hierarchical terms and that agencies could operate on trust have gained renewed attention. This has prompted a development in ministry-agency research where analytical concepts from Principal Steward-theory (PS) is used alongside the more established Principal Agent-perspectives on delegation and control. This study contributes to the novel line of research where Principal-Agent- and Principal-Steward-theories respectively are probed for their capacity to capture fundamental traits in ministry-central government agency relations (cf. Bjurstrøm 2020; Schillemans 2013; Schillemans and Bjurstrøm 2020; Van Thiel and Smullen 2021).

PA theory assumes that actions are explained by a logic of consequence and actors' efforts to achieve rationally defined goals. Since all actors are considered equally rational, political principals must find ways to balance necessary delegation to agents with control. PS-perspectives offer a different view of situations where power is delegated, stating that agents can focus on collective goals and thus principals, under some circumstances, enjoy agents that are working with them towards shared goals. If subordinates act as *stewards*, the principal can build a relationship based on trust rather than control. The two perspectives are used here as analytical tools with fundamentally different core assumptions of the costs and benefits associated with delegation, and different ideas about what to control and when. In actual public management, governments are however expected to apply and mix elements from both perspectives. They can also switch from a control-oriented strategy towards agencies to one that is trust-based, perhaps after learning to trust the delegate or simply because they find the costs of *ex post* control too high.

This research contributes to our understanding of multi-dimensional ministry-agency relations by analyzing developments in the Swedish national executive 2000–2020. The research questions to be answered here are, first, what this mix of instruments contains and whether it is predominantly best described as being PA- or PS-oriented. Since the application of public management models such as MBOR is known to change over time (Kristiansen 2015; 2017; for the Swedish case see also Wockelberg and Ahlbäck Öberg 2021), a longitudinal analysis is potentially fruitful. Thus, and second, we ask what, if any, major regime level shifts can be observed during the period 2000–2020?

### Regime-level analysis

While some previous studies have aimed at systematically disaggregating data to capture potential variation across policy areas or agency specific traits (cf Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020), this research aims to describe regime-level ideas and practices over time, a

task that implies the identification of general and fundamental traits of public management policies. The management regime in focus here consists of three main dimensions: its constitutional preconditions and application of formal and informal steering tools respectively. These perspectives are inter-related, as the constitutional doctrine historically frames government practices both when it comes to formal and informal steering (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015; Wockelberg 2003).

Combining constitutional and management perspectives in the analysis is crucial, as these respective dimensions points our expectations in two directions. On the first hand, constitutional requirements relate governments' relationships with agencies to the meta-goal of democratic accountability. In the parliamentary chain of delegation, the principal also has a principal and governments thus apply their management instruments in the shadow of the constitution. Constitutions, including the Swedish one, are more about control and accountability than about trust – governments' referring to their trust in agencies are ultimately not likely to appease a critical Parliament. With delegation thus comes a set of pressing issues, such as determining who is accountable for delegated mandates; how these mandates are to be controlled, and whether the power of appointing agents is linked to the accountability of the appointing principal (cf. Barberis 1998; Denton 2006; Denton and Flinders 2006; Flinders 2011; Molander, Nilsson and Schick 2002). On the other hand, and as is discussed above, contemporary public management ideals such as trust-based management has been rhetorically embraced by policy-makers, supporting the hypothesis that Swedish governments have increasingly cultivated stewardship among central government agencies.

### **The case and contributions**

The Swedish case was selected for the following reasons. First, it is a typical case of an “at arm’s length relationship” between ministries and semi-autonomous central government agencies and as such provides findings of general interest. The need to delegate and the problems involved are issues that permeate the constitutional debate (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015; Wockelberg 2003), are at the core of public management reforms (Ahlbäck Öberg & Wockelberg 2016; Wockelberg & Ahlbäck Öberg 2016; 2021 and 2022) and, as will be shown here, affect the everyday operations of the national executive. This said, the Swedish dual executive also has some features that makes it less typical, such as the small Government Offices (*Regeringskansliet*) and the many (about 360) resourceful central government agencies and a constitution that does not allow ministerial rule (more on this below). Swedish governments and agencies have dealt with delegation and control issues for a very long time (centuries). These institutions have long historical roots and managerial reforms in any direction must thus relate to a robust institutional frame. This feature makes it relevant to discuss Sweden as a critical case when it comes to the possibilities of introducing managerial reforms. Second, this case has undergone, at least rhetorically, changes toward a more trust-oriented application of ministerial steering of agencies (cf. Ehn & Sundström 2020). The idea of a trust-based model was introduced in 2014, in a low-key manner typical for Swedish public management reforms (*Government Budget Bill 2014/15:1*; see also Ministry of Finance 2016). Analyzing the Swedish dual executive during the period 2000–2020 using concepts from PA- and PS-theory respectively adds a new case to this sub-field of public management research. Third, the Swedish case is of general interest as a typical context also in a broader sense. According to Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström (2015), contemporary governments are challenged by globalization, Europeanization, medialization and managerialization, all factors present in the Swedish case (Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström 2015, p. 24). Fourth, while just mentioned work by Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström (2015) is an important point of reference, it builds its theoretical claims on data that is quite different from the data used in this research. Moreover, said publication rests primarily on studies that predate the above-mentioned trust-oriented ideas and other changes of potential importance for ministry-agency relations, such as an increased use of temporary assignments for agencies. In addition, Swedish governments have had the ambition to shift short term formal steering from annual appropriation directives to more stable and long-term agency instructions. Together these factors motivate us to revisit the case.

This research offers new insights to a field of research predominantly focused on the application of formal steering tools, also regarding the Swedish case (cf. Askim, Bjurstrøm and Kjærvik 2019; Dahlstrøm and Holmgren 2017; 2023; Holmgren 2018). This comprehensive analysis builds upon a mixed-methods design and contributes with a unique and updated analysis of the case. It offers new and systematic analyses of the constitutional doctrine as it has developed over the period 2000–2020; a re-interpretation of the most comprehensive prior studies of formal steering tools (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020; Wockelberg and Ahlbäck Öberg 2021) and novel interview data that provide a unique insight into informal steering across parts of the dual executive. The focus on informal relationships in government is a contribution in itself since studies in this field are rare (but see Rommel and Christiaens 2009) and somewhat dated. Prior research describes informal contacts between political and administrative actors in Sweden as common and as including interaction between ministry level and agency level actors. Contacts have been used to reach a common understanding of political goals, in the drafting of appropriation directives and in agency assignments. According to prior research, informal contacts are mainly (but not exclusively) described in terms of exchanges on rather equal terms, rather than as control instruments (de Fine Licht and Pierre 2016; Hwang 2000; Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström 2015). Relying on up-to-date interview data, this study offers insights into the role informal steering plays in national executives and the problems associated with informality. Finally, as recent applications of PA and PS theory feature different views on the role of informal contacts (Schillemans and Bjurstrøm 2020; Van Thiel and Smullen 2021) this study proposes a theoretical clarification on the role of informal contacts in PA- and PS-regimes respectively.

The following sections of this article defines the central concepts and problems to be studied, and presents the methodology applied. The empirical analysis that follows is organized in three parts, dedicated to constitutional prerequisites, application of formal instruments, and use of informal contacts respectively. The concluding section discusses the main findings.

## Theory

This section is dedicated to the main concepts of this study, including the delegation problem and key dimensions in the ministry-agency relationship, here defined in terms of public management tools and decisions. It also presents an analytical framework where government decisions on how to control agencies are defined as aligned with the PA- and PS-perspectives respectively.

### Delegation to semi-autonomous agencies

It is hard to think about political power in operational terms without including elements of delegation (Bendor, Glazer and Hammond 2001). Delegation can affect the costs of decision-making by adding higher quality or credibility to analytical and operative performances, or by lowering risks. It also, as was noted above, raises questions about principal control over decisions. Assumed benefits and costs following from delegation are core features of public management policies such as Management by Objectives and Results (MBOR), which prescribe a dual structure that separates “politics” from “administration”. The risk of losing control is acknowledged and consequently an additional main feature is that delegation must be followed-up with reporting on results and *ex post* evaluation (Moynihan 2006, with reference to Schick 1999).

The concept of delegated governance places extensive operative mandates in organizational forms outside ministries (cf. Denton 2006; Denton and Flinders 2006). This at an arm’s length-strategy requires someone to delegate to, such as central government agencies, i.e., permanent and often publicly financed organizations, structurally separated from ministries (Pollitt et al. 2004). The New Public Management-era spurred agencification of national executives and brought managerial autonomy and *ex post* results control into the design and steering of agencies (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020; Askim, Bjurstrøm and Kjærvik 2019; Hood 1991; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Smullen 2010).

The fact that elected leaders are responsible for central government agencies' activities (to some extent) delimits agency autonomy (Christensen and Lægheid 2006). Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström (2015) describe the balancing act that is inherent in delegated governance as follows:

Even if a sector is organized with great care with the aim of keeping issues at a distance, events occur and unpredicted things happen that force politicians to become more active. [...] [I]t is not possible for politicians to remain at a distance and claim that they cannot interfere in ongoing events. They must act, in one way or another. (Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström 2015, p. 78)

This means that also in a context that relies heavily on delegation to agencies, politicians are still expected to get involved.

### **Formal and informal instruments for managing central government agencies**

The management instruments available to governments can be formal and/or informal. Formal instruments include e.g., agency ordinances, assignments, budget allocation decisions and *ex post* scrutiny. This type of steering is easy to verify for the parties involved and for outsiders. Both the instruments and the mandates needed to use them are law-based. In contrast, informal instruments are applied outside formal processes, making it harder to establish who the decision-maker is or whether a decision has been made. Implementing a system or code for informal interaction can make it more predictable for the organization, but it will not make it formal in the way this concept is understood here. Only lawmakers can formalize steering tools and mandates. To be formal, a steering signal must stem from a legitimate mandate and be decided on in a formal process. To otherwise “manage” informal contacts will not make them formal.

Government choices regarding management instruments is best understood from within a multi-dimensional perspective on steering and autonomy. In the terms of Verhoest et al. (2004), agencies' operational autonomy to make managerial decisions and influence policy making is influenced by constraints in the form of structural, financial, legal and interventional measures applied by the government. How agencies are affected by informal steering is not a well-researched issue, but if informal contact is intense and frequent, it will require agency attention and resources (Rommel and Christiaens 2009), perhaps in ways that undermine agency operations. At the same time, informal steering is opaque and thus easier for agencies to ignore than formal steering signals.

Finally, it is likely that government use of formal and informal steering are interdependent, but exactly how is an empirical question. In theory, a government could choose between formal and informal steering. Moreover, if formal steering is vague, a need for clarification may spur informal messaging or signaling. In such a scenario, informal steering complements but does not replace formal steering. In this latter scenario, the more formal steering, the more informal steering.

### **Managing agents and stewards**

Before taking a closer look at the PA- and PS-perspectives on management tools, it is of relevance to clarify their common ground and thus the relevance of using them to capture ministry-agency relationships. Both perspectives make assumptions about a relationship between two parties that for political scientists commonly are *collective* actors, not individuals. This is also a common feature of public administration research and a way of thinking that informs studies of ministry-agency relations. In addition, both perspectives theorize about how the principal can benefit from delegation and make assumptions about the gains and risks involved. Finally, both perspectives are about trust and distrust, but make different assumptions in this regard. They also, consequently, advocate different ideas about suitable follow-up mechanisms in relation to delegation. PA assumes that delegation carries risks but also that top-down control can reduce these risks. It is not, however, a core assumption in PA that control leads to trust, or, in our understanding, that the possibilities of learning to trust is a factor in the principal's cost-benefit analysis. By comparison, PS is different in both respects: trust is assumed to be possible, and top-down control mechanisms are defined as secondary to collaborative interaction, that is, the preference is for a relationship between equal parties where the delegate is allowed to play an independent role also in *ex post* reporting and evaluation.

PA and PS perspectives on ministry-agency relations identify both formal and informal instruments as important. While the perspectives offered in previous research on these types of regimes are to a high degree similar, there are also some interesting differences. Prior definitions of typical PA and PS instruments echo Verhoest et al.'s (2004) multidimensional conceptualization in the ways that important actions are identified in terms of *ex ante* or *ex post* attempts to control agency autonomy. According to Schillemans and Bjurström (2020)

[w]hen public tasks are delegated to agencies, government departments perform (at least) six different tasks, both *ex ante* and *ex post* [...]. Government departments need to (1) select an agency (who is going to do the job?); they need to (2) transmit their preferences and (3) stipulate additional due procedures in their contracts. *Ex post* measures include (4) monitoring requirements, (5) incentives (how will the agency be rewarded?), and also (6) relationship management. (Schillemans & Bjurström 2020, p. 655)

Governments in a PA-oriented management regime apply instruments designed to minimize the risk of a deviate or slack agent. The relationship is hierarchical. *Ex ante* steering instructs the agency top-down about political goals. Expected results are expressed in detailed contracts and management involves detailed monitoring. In terms of forms of interaction, PA-oriented management is defined as predominantly formal, informal contacts between principal and agents are rare or minimized. In a PS-regime, governments and agencies interact in a way that allows both parties to participate in policy development. *Ex ante* and *ex post* steering is relaxed and allows the agency to decide on means, methods and performance assessment (performance reporting). According to Schillemans and Bjurström, the interaction between governments and agencies in a PS-regime is equal and ongoing. While the authors do not make the formal/informal dimension explicit, the type of interaction described is arguably one that involves informality.

Van Thiel and Smullen (2021) also define PA-regimes in terms of hierarchical relationships. Typically, the instruments used are those that limit the autonomy of agency management and agency influence over financial matters and policy. Moreover, PA is “an intense regime of reporting, for example using multiple performance indicators, frequent contacts and detailed legislation” (Van Thiel and Smullen 2021, p. 762). In contrast, PS-instruments aim to grant agencies a high degree of autonomy, for example by appointing a board to lead the agency and by using framework legislation instead of detailed formal steering. *Ex post* control is less frequent than in the PA-regime and focused on results rather than input-factors. Importantly, agencies are able to influence how performance is reported. Regarding contacts between ministries and agencies, Van Thiel and Smullen (2021) define frequent contacts as a feature typical for PA-oriented management and as motivated by a lack of trust between the parties. According to the same logic, PS-regimes feature moderate contacts “in [a] trusting atmosphere” (p. 763, Table 1). The theoretical frame for the up-coming analysis is a synthesis of prior theorizing on management instruments that shape ministry-agency relationships and how. Its definition of management instruments builds upon Verhoest et al.'s (2004; for an empirical application on the Swedish case see Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020) conceptualization of agency autonomy, which is here supplemented with informal contacts. It thus theorizes about instruments in a way that is similar, but not identical, to Van Thiel and Smullen's (2021) framework. The ambition of the conceptualizations in Table 1 (below) is to chisel out the basic logic in the proposals made in previous research.

*Table 1. Ministry-agency relationships in terms of management instruments and regimes*

Instrument	PA	PS
Choice of agency management model	Delegate to few, sole Director General.	Delegate to many, agency board.
Monitoring and performance management	Intense hierarchical monitoring, pre-set indicators.	Indicators concern output; agency involved in developing indicators.
Informal Contacts	To instruct, controlling, hierarchical.	To exchange information, cooperative, on equal terms.
Financial issues	State budget revenue, inflexible agency budgeting.	Alternative revenue allowed, flexible agency budgeting.
Policy influence	Low	High
Quality of legislation	Detailed	Framework legislation

Sources: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020; Van Thiel and Smullen 2021; Verhoest et al. 2004.

The choice of agency management model is in essence the choice between delegating to one or many, or to a sole Director General (DG) or an agency board. According to Verhoest et al.s' (2004) theory, to choose a sole DG allows the government more control over the agency than choosing a management board does, thus a sole DG here represents the PA-model. In the Swedish case, this line of thought is also official policy (*Vägledning för statliga myndighetsstyrelser*, Regeringskansliet 2016). Even if it is theoretically possible for a Swedish government to change the management model to increase or enhance control over a specific agency, perhaps due to underperformance or scandal, such an invasive measure is not expected. Rather, the government would replace individual managers, e.g., the DG.

*Ex post* monitoring in performance management models is a core feature of contemporary ministry-agency relationships. Governments differ in terms of how much performance information they request and what type of indicators they prefer (Kristiansen, Dahler-Larsen and Moll Ghin 2017). It is here assumed that all else equal, the more performance information that is demanded from agencies, the more controlling this type of steering is. Reporting is one task among others and consumes agency resources. At the same time, reporting on performance can be more or less controlled top-down – there is a qualitative element to reporting. If an agency is invited to present its activities in ways of its own choice, it is less controlled than an agency that is being told what to report and how. If the government seeks to impose hard top-down control, it asks for many precise indicators. In a PA-regime, performance indicators are used to control operations from the top down while a PS-regime is focused on agencies' own understanding of outcomes.

Previous theorizing about steering in ministry-agency relations also includes government decisions about two types of delegation. One is the possibility of delegating financial decisions to agencies, for example in terms of possibilities to collect fees and thus extract revenue outside the state budget. An agency that is allowed this type of financing is considered, all else equal, to be less controlled by the government than an agency that is not allowed to extract its own revenues. This variation here translates to the PS and PA-perspectives respectively. Another delegation decision concerns whether agencies are allowed to issue regulations. This choice is assumed to be between imposing regulations on to the agency – a top-down control mechanism – and allowing the agency to issue regulations. It is assumed that even if it is demanding to issue regulations, it is more demanding to be regulated top-down.

For each agency, there are theoretically a multitude of possible combinations of PA- and PS-oriented use of the formal steering tools discussed above. However, at the aggregated regime-level, which is in focus here, it is hard to define *a priori* e.g., how many performance indicators that makes a regime PA- or PS-oriented. This means that when interpreting measures and results,

only clear findings should be considered as valid indicators of respective type. According to the same principle, while the longitudinal perspective introduces a relative element to the analysis, only major shifts from one type of steering to another over time will be defined as the regime changing from one perspective to the other.

Turning to informal contacts, these equal informal interaction, and not formal exchanges of steering signals, reports etc. Previous research offers different views on the type and frequency of contacts that are expected in respective management regime. Schillemans and Bjurström (2020) associate PA-regimes with few or no contacts and PS-regimes with “ongoing” contacts. Van Thiel and Smullen (2021) offer opposite expectations, associating frequent contact with the control-oriented PA-regime. In this research, which develops the theory further, we propose a definition in which the frequency is considered less important than the content or purpose of informal contacts in distinguishing PA and PS characteristics. Contacts that represent top-down attempts to control agencies are seen as a PA feature – they are made in order to underline or complement other types of steering. In contrast, contacts that are made to exchange information and/or establish relationships on equal terms are here seen as a PS instrument. This latter type of contact can be initiated by either party.

Finally, given that the relationship between ministries and agencies is here defined as multi-dimensional, the issue of how to interpret the observations comes to the surface. The regime is probably not best described by the PA- or PS-model exclusively, but rather by a mix of both perspectives. Variation is expected, both over time and between different types of steering at the same point in time.

## Data and Methodology

This research is organized in three main parts and is based on a mixed-methods design. The first part analyzes the constitutional preconditions for ministry-agency relations in the Swedish national executive, with a focus on doctrinal developments 2000–2020. The second part analyzes the formal instruments applied in the management regime. The last part focuses on the role of informal contacts. In the following the different types of data and methodology used are presented.

The study of constitutional preconditions focuses both on stable parts of the legal framework and on issues that are the subject to debate and possibly reinterpretation. In this type of analysis, the debate itself is interesting as an indication of unclear rules or political conflict. This is true even if the debate confirms rather than challenges the constitutional frame. In this research, the preconditions are studied as they are expressed in *the Instrument of Government* (IG) and in the doctrinal statements of the Parliamentary Committee on the Constitution (*Konstitutionsutskottet*). The Committee on the Constitution initiates scrutiny of the government, including its steering of the central government agencies. For this part of the empirical analysis, the annual scrutiny reports from the committee for the period of 2000/01 to 2019/20 were analyzed. These reports are public and easily accessed for anyone interested on the Swedish Parliament’s website ([www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se)).

Regarding the formal management instruments applied, this research used a subset of *the Performance Information Demand Dataset: Swedish Governments’ Request for Performance Information from Central Government Agencies 1993 – 2017* (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2022). This dataset provides objective, longitudinal, data on several of the variables identified in the theory section (above): type of management model chosen for agencies; number and quality of performance indicators, and the financial and policy autonomy of agencies. The population of Swedish agencies is very large, due to the fact that the semi-autonomous agency form is used for *all* types of tasks and not as in other similar contexts, only for certain types of activities. The subsample used in this research represents a broad variation of agency tasks (such as decision-making in individual cases; research; judicial tasks, supervision and inspection etc.), size and other agency specific traits (see *Appendix* for a list of the agencies included).



**Table 2. Ministry-agency relationships in terms of management instruments, measures and data**

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Measures and Data</b>
Choice of agency management model: Director General high control/Board low control	Number of agencies with board or Director General/year (V20, dichotomized) PIDDS* 2003–2017.
Monitoring and performance management High demand for performance indicators, equals high level of control.	Number of performance indicators/year (means) V5A PIDDS 2003–2017.
Precision of indicators requested, low precision equals low levels of control and <i>vice versa</i> .	Imprecise performance indicators (V5b) and precise performance indicators (V5c)/year (means) PIDDS 2003–2017.
Informal contacts are used to instruct/control or to exchange information on equal terms.	Interviews Policy documents
Financial issues	Agency allowed to collect fees (V13a) PIDDS 2003–2017.
Policy influence	Policy influence as regulatory power delegated to agency (V21a) PIDDS 2003–2017.

Comments: The quality of legislation-variable identified in the theory section is not explored in this study, in general terms, however, the type of framework legislation that entails a large room for agency level interpretation dominates the Swedish legal tradition. \**The Performance Information Demand Dataset: Swedish Governments' Request for Performance Information from Central Government Agencies 1993 – 2017* (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022).

The role of informal contacts in the management regime was examined through policy documents, memos and material for internal use in the Government Offices. However, the main source for this part of the analysis was semi-structured interviews with former and/or current civil servants in the Government Offices. Together, these sources provided access to information that is not usually made public or openly discussed. The interviewees were mainly senior Government Office employees with experience from serving as case officers responsible for a specific government agency (*myndighetshandläggare*), including day-to-day contacts between their respective ministry and the specific central government agency. The pool of interviewees also includes individuals with experience of working with internal guidelines and policies on management issues. The interview sampling relied on snowballing, ending up with ten interviewees that have specialist-knowledge about internal policy as well as above average knowledge about practical problems and possibilities. The interviewees are to be regarded as experts, centrally placed informants and not as a representative sample of all employees of the Government Offices. The empirical results on informal steering presented below to a large extent build upon statements and descriptions offered by the interviewees. As a group, the interviewees presented many shared views on issues discussed during the interviews, but also offered alternative perspectives. The identities of the interviewees are not revealed; instead a code is used in the analysis (IP1; IP2; IP3 etc.). An anonymized list of our interviewees is provided in the list of references. All interviewees were informed in advance about the conditions of their participation and their informed and voluntary consent to participate was secured.

## Constitutional Preconditions

In this section, the Swedish national executive is analyzed from within a constitutional perspective, identifying factors of importance, including grey areas in the doctrine. The constitutional framework is, as expected, compatible with the control-oriented management associated with the PA-perspective, but contemporary demands for informal information exchange between ministries and agencies have introduced elements associated with the PS-

perspective, i.e., a cooperative, equal, mode of operation. This said, the constitutional rules discussed here were historically created for other reasons than to fit contemporary public management models or to support democratic rule. Their prolonged relevance and compatibility with modern practice is not accidental, they have been reinterpreted to fit the needs of contemporary government, but not entirely successfully so (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015; Wockelberg 2003).

### **Collective government, formal steering and independence of administration**

In the case studied here, three main principles regulate government control and delegation to agencies. Firstly, the Swedish Constitution prohibits ministerial control, i.e., it prohibits individual ministers from giving instructions to administrative agencies. The Cabinet of Ministers acts and is accountable collectively (IG ch. 7, art. 3). This is a feature that stands out from other comparable contexts, including the other Nordic countries except Finland, and makes it reasonable to speak about a West and East Nordic model of administration respectively. Denmark, Iceland and Norway (West Nordic) have executive systems built around ministerial responsibility and organize national agencies as units within ministries. These units lack the kind of regulatory tasks and independent, court-like mandate to apply the law that agencies in the Swedish dual system have. In contrast, and formally speaking, individual ministers in the East Nordic countries do not have the kind of individual ministerial powers and responsibilities associated with the ministerial model of administration (laid down in the respective country's constitution). In addition, an organizational divide between relatively small ministries and autonomous civil service departments and independent state agencies is the main form of organization. The main difference between these administrative traditions is that the West Nordic model implies a significant ministerial administration (the "ministerial model"), which allows for a high degree of spontaneous individual ministerial steering of the state authorities, while such preconditions are not apparent in the East Nordic countries (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016).

Secondly, in particular cases the Swedish Constitution guarantees the independence of the state administration (IG ch. 12, art. 2):

#### *Independence of administration*

Art. 2. No public authority, including the Riksdag, or decision-making body of any local authority, may determine how an administrative authority shall decide in a particular case relating to the exercise of public authority vis-à-vis an individual or a local authority, or relating to the application of law.

As a result, members of the Cabinet cannot—not even collectively—intervene in an agency's decisions in particular cases relating to the exercise of public authority vis-à-vis an individual or a local authority, or relating to the application of law. This condition predates parliamentary democracy and contemporary human rights principles, but the intent of clear mandates and responsibility translates well to the current context. At the same time, it should, thirdly, be noted that the Instrument of Government stipulates that it is the Government that governs "the Realm" (IG ch. 1, art. 6) and that the Chancellor of Justice and other state administrative authorities are subordinate to the Government (IG ch. 12, art. 1). The intended governing is to be executed with the help of formal instruments. Together, these provisions are commonly interpreted as allowing the Government as a collective to steer its agencies in general and formal terms but not in particular cases when the agency is about to exercise public authority. Naturally, agency decisions are subject to review by a higher authority in the event of an appeal.

The system that protects certain types of decision-making from ministerial rule and from spontaneous and informal steering is intended to strengthen the rule of law by making the delegated mandates and the responsibility for agency-level decisions clear (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015). As the doctrine has developed, agency management are responsible for any unlawful decision, even if e.g., the agency head in question has informed (members of) the government about such actions (Ds 2018:6, p. 20, with reference to *Statens ansvarsnämnd*, [The Government Disciplinary Board for Higher Officials]; see also Billinger 2014). Agency heads need to be well educated about the constitutional basis for their mandate and know what to do when they receive illegitimate instructions, as well as when they receive no instructions at all.

Agency heads who respond to illegitimate steering signals to please their political principals will find it difficult to transfer the responsibility for their decisions to the political level. In sum, this constitutional design is in theoretical terms PA-oriented – aimed at top-down delegation, clear mandates and accountability.

### Ministerial rule and informal steering

As been noted above, the Swedish Constitution requires that government decisions be made collectively, and ministerial rule is thus prohibited. This, consequently, limits the scope for ministerial responsibility, and shifts the formal responsibility to the government as a collective. However, as in other countries, ministers in Sweden have portfolios and many of them serve as the head of a ministry. Despite the collective government, individuals will occasionally take, or be pushed to, center stage as the “responsible minister”. Ministerial action is also likely to be spurred by a narrative that identifies informal contacts with agencies as crucial components of successful policy-making, even though both informal *steering* and ministerial rule are prohibited.

The constitutional debate on these issues is an interesting exercise in finding an acceptable balance between informality on the one hand, and the demands for collective and formal governing of central government agencies on the other. A critical reflection is that the solution to this problem involves conceptual stretching, visible in a change of vocabulary and a shift of focus from informal steering (*informell styrning*) to the much less challenging concept of informal contacts (*informella kontakter*). Contemporary ideas on how to apply informal steering in a constitutionally sound way can be traced back to (at least) the 1980s. At that time, the government’s need for informal contacts to make government work efficiently was seen as more important than the potential risk of undermining the agencies’ independence (as laid down in the constitution). However, it was suggested that informal contacts should be established mainly between ministry and agency officials (i.e. not including political appointees) and should mostly concern matters other than the area protected by the constitution (the so called “forbidden area”). No absolute boundaries were drawn, and the political parties reached an understanding that seemed stable but somewhat unclear (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015; Wockelberg 2003).

In the new millennium, the Committee on the Constitution has reaffirmed informal contacts as a crucial part of governing, but it is apparent that the concept of informal steering is still sensitive. The Committee has stated that informal contacts should be “more dedicated to information than to steering” (Committee on the Constitution, 2012/13:10, p. 3) and to be used to *clarify* formal steering (Committee on the Constitution, 2011/12:20; 2012/13:10; 2015/16:10; 2015/16:20 and 2016/17:10). In some Committee statements, this clarification of steering is limited to being made in *general* terms (Committee on the Constitution 2015/16:10; 2016/17:10). This explicit limitation can be interpreted as an attempt to place informal contacts within the constitutional frame that requires steering to be general, as opposed to considering individual cases. A hesitant stance towards informal contacts can be found in the Committee on the Constitution’s demands for documentation and its views on problems related to transparency and accountability (Committee on the Constitution 2014/15:10; 2015/16:10; 2015/16:20).

In summary, the Swedish Constitution is a rather straightforward, control-oriented affair, aimed at clear mandates and accountability, which poses a challenge when it comes to the government’s need for informal steering tools. The period under consideration here, 2000–2020, does not offer any substantial reinterpretation of the ways in which informal steering is discussed. The same ideas, and problematic vagueness, that were established in the 1980’s permeate the contemporary debate. While “informal steering” is not allowed, “informal contacts” between the Government Offices and the central government agencies are encouraged and identified as crucial. The doctrine prohibits informal steering but allows informal contacts to be used to clarify steering signals. However, and from a critical point of view, the validity of this narrative is not apparent. To clarify steering is an activity that is closely associated with steering as such. In terms of the theoretical perspectives on management regimes, the constitution prescribes a PA-compatible hierarchical chain of delegation, formal steering and accountability. The PA-oriented use of informal steering is not allowed but the constitutional debate recognizes that informal contacts can be used for information which is in line with the

PS-perspective. Moreover, the demand for documentation of informal contacts is a typical PA-oriented requirement.

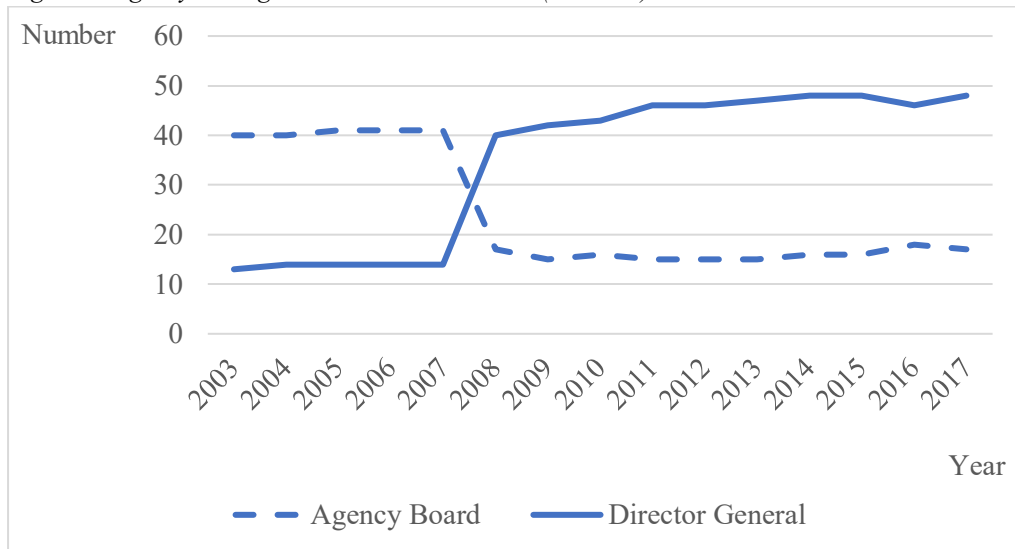
## Formal Instruments Applied

While the constitutional analysis failed to reveal any important changes during the period analyzed, this section shows that major shifts have occurred in the actual application of formal steering tools.

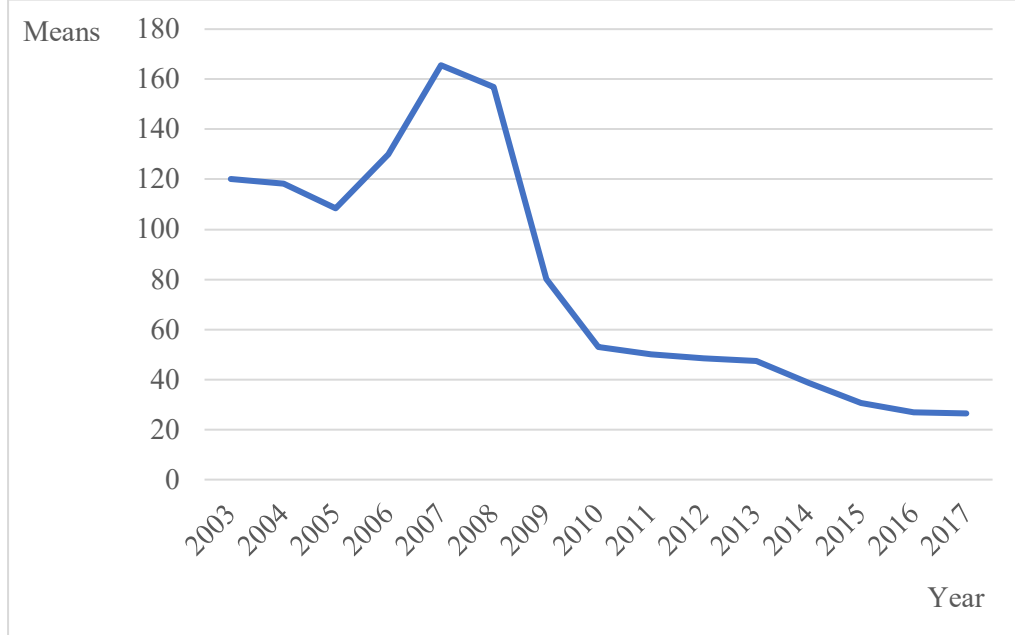
The toolbox of formal steering tools at the disposal of the Swedish government includes classic features such as regulatory instruments, appropriations, agency instructions, assignments, *ex post* controls and choice of management model for agencies. Swedish governments mix formal instruments in a systematic manner (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2020) and adapt their *ex post* control to agency-specific factors (Wockelberg and Ahlbäck Öberg 2021). In this section, the focus is on whether these instruments are applied in PA- or PS-oriented ways and on developments over time.

Starting with the choice of management models for central government agencies, a major shift took place in the 2000s when the control-oriented DG-model became more prominent than the trust-oriented model with a management board (see Figure 1). Theoretically this represents a shift from a predominantly PS-regime to a PA-regime in this dimension. Around the same time, a shift in the application of the Swedish performance management regime occurred in the opposite direction, as the number of requested performance indicators decreased (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Agency management model 2003–2017 (numbers)

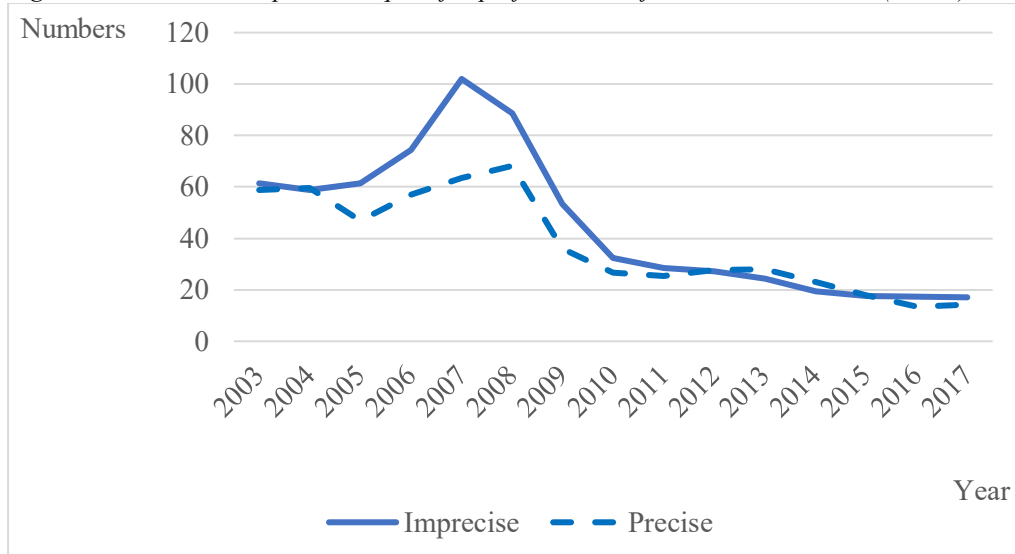


Comments: N 2003=53; 2004=54; 2005=55; 2006=55; 2007=55; 2008=57; 2009=57; 2010=59; 2011=61; 2012=61; 2013=62; 2014=64; 2015=64; 2016=64; 2017=65. Source: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022). Variables V2a (year) and V20 (management model, recoded).

*Figure 2. Performance information requests from government to agencies 2003–2017 (means)*

Comments: N 2003=54; 2004=54; 2005=55; 2006=55; 2007=55; 2008=57; 2009=58; 2010=59; 2011=61; 2012=61; 2013=62; 2014=64; 2015=64; 2016=64; 2017=65. Source: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022). Variables V2a (year) and V5a (Regular activities, total number of performance information requests).

In *quantitative* terms, the declining demand for performance reporting represents a shift from a PA- to a PS-oriented regime. However, when analyzing the *quality* of performance reporting, governments have become relatively less willing to allow agencies to decide how to report on performance (Figure 3). In this latter respect, the regime becomes increasingly PA-oriented.

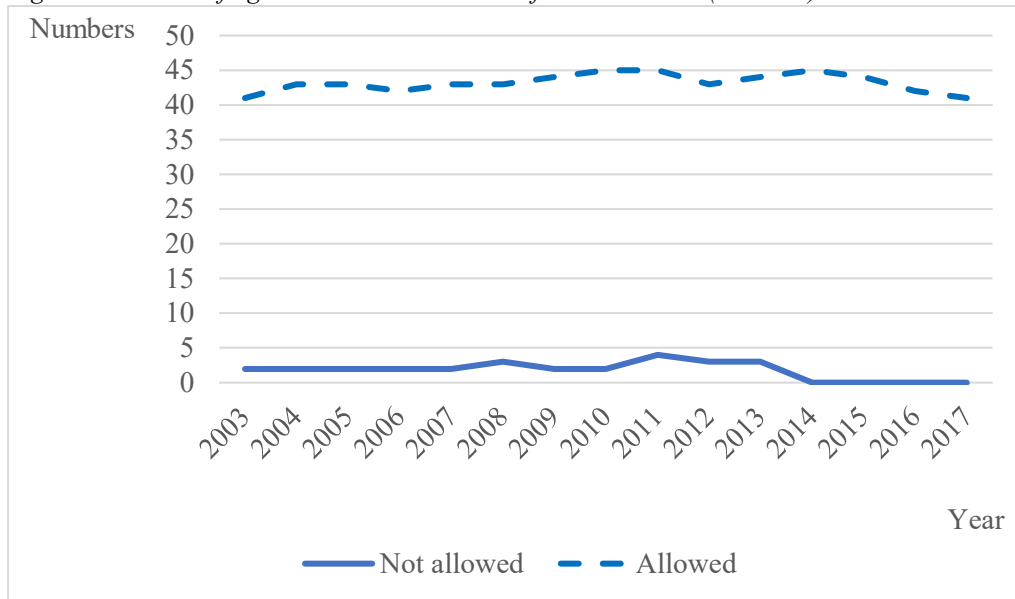
*Figure 3. Precise and imprecise request for performance information 2003–2017 (means)*

Comments: N 2003=54; 2004=54; 2005=55; 2006=55; 2007=55; 2008=57; 2009=52; 2010=53; 2011=56; 2012=54; 2013=56; 2014=58; 2015=55; 2016=56; 2017=56. Source: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022). Variables V2a (year); V5b (Regular activities, number of imprecise performance information requests) and V5c (Regular activities, number of requests for performance information that are precise).

In terms of financial autonomy, the agencies in the sample, with very few exceptions, are allowed to extract fees to finance their operations. This PS-oriented regime is stable over time (Figure 4). Finally, a large and over time increasing majority (60 percent and above) of all

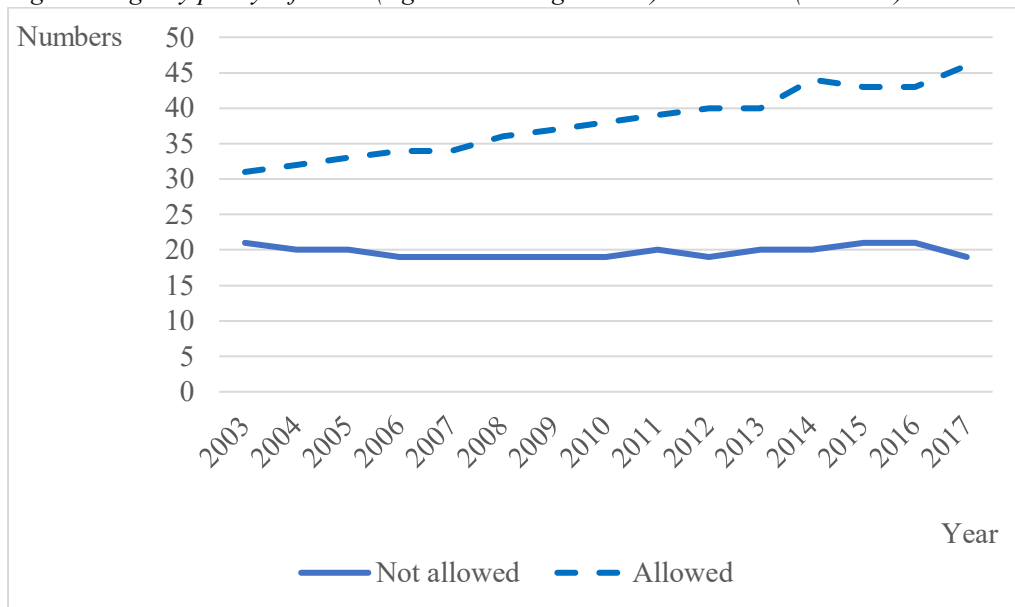
agencies have received delegated powers to issue formal policy in the form of regulations. Again, the observed regime is PS-oriented (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Number of agencies allowed to extract fees 2003–2017 (numbers)



Comments: N 2003=43; 2004=45; 2005=45; 2006=44; 2007=45; 2008=46; 2009=46; 2010=47; 2011=49; 2012=46; 2013=47; 2014=45; 2015=44; 2016=42; 2017=41. Source: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022). Variables V2a (year) and V13a (agency allowed to collect fees).

Figure 5. Agency policy influence (right to issue regulations) 2003–2017 (numbers)



Comments: N 2003=52; 2004=52; 2005=53; 2006=53; 2007=53; 2008=55; 2009=56; 2010=57; 2011=59; 2012=59; 2013=60; 2014=64; 2015=64; 2016=64; 2017=65. Source: Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg (2022). Variables V2a (year) and V21a (Regulatory power).

This analysis of the use of formal management instruments reveals shifting trends in terms of how the PS-oriented selection of management boards is replaced over time by single Directors General. There is also a shift from PS to PA as governments over time give agencies less room to decide for themselves how to report on performance. However, the *ex post*-control in terms of number of performance indicators is relaxed during this period in a way that is consistent

with a PS-oriented regime. Finally, the regime is more stable and PS-oriented in terms of delegation of financial and policy decisions.

## Informal Contacts

This, third, part of the empirical analysis, relies mainly on interview data to analyze the use of informal contacts in the Swedish national executive. The interviewees describe how informal contacts are used to control and instruct agencies in a top-down-manner, as well as to exchange information on a cooperative and equal basis. Each type of use is associated with specific problems. Interestingly, even when informal contacts are used in a typical PS-manner, they can be perceived as *de facto* steering signals, i.e., as PA-oriented control instruments.

### Informal contacts, why and how?

In general terms, and confirming prior research, informal contacts are described as necessary to make government steering efficient (IP1), and as essential (IP6; IP9). At the same time, the risk of doing something wrong is a factor holding civil servants back when it comes to making informal contacts across the dual executive.

Agency-specific characteristics such as political salience (the importance of specific policy issues, the size or weight of the agency) affect the use of informal contacts (IP1; IP2; IP3; IP4; IP5 and IP6). Not unexpectedly, this is a positive relationship, with high salience leading to a high number of contacts. In addition, the interest of individual ministers in specific issues is described as affecting the interest in informal contacts (IP2), as are individual level traits (personality) (IP3; IP8), indicating that the informal relationship between ministries and agencies may change over time. Yet other agency specific features inhibit informality. If an agency's operation is mainly controlled by formal laws and regulations, informal contacts are relatively uncommon (IP3). Furthermore, and possibly related to the previous observation, one respondent points out that when an agency's main task is to process individual cases of the type protected by the Instrument of Government (IG ch. 12, art. 2), informal contacts will be more carefully designed (IP5).

A main use of informal contacts is to communicate or exchange information, indicating a PS-oriented regime. This conclusion is supported by a stable narrative stating that there is no such thing as informal steering (IP1 and IP5), which rules out the possibility of using informal instruments to control agencies. Another PS-oriented feature is that contacts are not exclusively top-down initiatives. Central government agencies use these channels in a bottom-up manner to communicate ideas for assignments, deliver input to upcoming appropriation directives, discuss priorities, or confirm their interpretation of steering signals (IP6; IP7 and IP9).

A closer look at the data reveals that ministries do use informal contacts in a controlling manner, to supplement and clarify steering signals and to ensure that agencies are well informed about upcoming steering, including the political intention behind specific steering signals. The drafting of appropriation directives and decisions to give an agency a special assignment is mentioned as regular processes in which informal contacts are used to clarify, and follow up on, steering (IP1; IP2; IP3; IP5; IP6; IP7 and IP8b). According to the theoretical framework of this study, clarifying and informing about steering signals are control-related activities of the kind that is associated with PA-regimes. This said, the narrative described here seems to foster another perspective in which clarifying steering is not seen as steering *per se*. However, some interviewees express that the difference between discussing things with agencies on the one hand, and overstepping the constitutional limits on ministerial rule on the other is rather small (IP5; IP6 and IP7).

### Problems

The previous section established that informal contacts are used both in a top-down manner to control agencies as well as in a cooperative, equal way. This subsection focuses on problems that interviewees associate with informality. A main problem identified by the interviewees is that even though informal steering is unconstitutional, steering is sometimes the intended or unintended effect of informal contacts.

In constitutional terms, steering must be collective and formal and cannot target agencies' decision-making in individual cases. One problem with informality, as one interviewee points out, is that it neglects the principle of collective decision-making in government (IP4). Political officials sometimes pursue their own or their ministry's pet projects or policy goals outside the formal processes, without the support of the (collective) government. In the examples given, this is a habit of some high-ranking political officials, who are not well educated about the constitutional principles, or who simply disrespect them (IP2 and IP4). Staying clear of the "forbidden area" that protects agencies from outside interference in individual cases is not the main problem; rather, the challenge is to meet the demand that the government operates based on the basis of collective decision-making. In the words of one of the respondents: "That is what makes them trip [...]. Civil servants working with a silo mentality [...] 'I work for the Ministry of ...,' and the agencies 'I listen to the Minister of ...'" (IP4, authors' translation). The risk of informal contacts being used to advance individual agendas that are not anchored in the government as a whole is not limited to the level of political officials. It is also identified as a problem at the level of the merit-based public service (IP3; IP4; IP6; IP7 and IP9). The fact that the careers of the merit-based staff often involve moving between agency and ministry level employment creates personal networks that are used for informal interaction (IP4 and IP6).

Another risk of using informal contacts is that agencies may be overly interested in any initiative or signal coming from the ministry level and end up being too receptive or misunderstanding cooperative communication as being a steering signal (IP7). If agencies perceive, or choose to perceive, the regime as control-oriented, ministries will fail to establish a PS-oriented informal relationship.

Finally, a general problem with informal contacts is their potential to disrupt or blur the information flow (IP2). Knowing where informal messages come from and what they mean is thus important. This is also true when the government and the Government Offices receive information from agencies: One of the interviewees describes that it is not always clear whether ideas communicated informally represent the formal position of the agency or that of individual officials at the agency level (IP6). Moreover, informal contacts leave those involved with the challenge of remembering what was discussed or decided. Documentation would formalize informal contacts but at the same time make them less relevant (IP4; IP5; IP7 and IP8). Adding to this problem is the fact that the Government Offices is an organization with little continuity, in terms of staff and political leadership. The use of informal contacts requires knowledge of the Swedish constitution, the skill to identify illegitimate steering and the courage to ignore it (IP2; IP3, IP4 and IP8). The practice of informal contacts is described as something that civil servants need to learn along the way, sometimes guided by senior colleagues or supported by policies that specify whom to contact about what and when. Such strategies are the topic of the next subsection.

### **Strategies – how to be informal**

Informal contacts are seen as crucial to the effective functioning of the national executive, but in order to be constitutionally legitimate they must not constitute top-down control (or steering). While PA-oriented use of informal contacts is thus to be avoided, suggestions on how best to manage informal contacts are mainly of a kind inspired by PA features such as clear mandates and hierarchical relationships.

Ministries deal with informal contacts in different ways, including how they train staff and whether they issue actual policies to guide this part of the work. Knowledge of constitutional and practical aspects seems to be developed through learning by doing at the individual level (IP2; IP7 and IP9). Efforts to increase knowledge about the legitimate use of informal contacts within the Government Office have been sporadic and local.<sup>1</sup>

Some ministries impose order in the form of explicit policies on how informal contacts should be managed. Some of these agreements describe contacts in terms of specific individuals, while others aim to increase management skills and develop general ideas about how to practice informal contacts. Among the measures taken we also find the appointment of a gate keeper to manage all contacts between a ministry and a particular agency, with the instructions to alert higher level managers if a tricky situation arises (IP1; IP2; IP3; IP6; IP7 and IP9).



In the debate on informal contacts in the 1980s, the level at which informal contacts take place was identified as a key issue for the legitimacy of this type of interaction. As noted above, informal contacts should be located to the level of civil servants, and at an as low level as possible (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2015; Wockelberg 2003). While the issue of who it is that are in contact is still considered important, there is no evidence in our data that the strategy to keep informal contacts between low echelons of civil servants is recognized or considered important today. When asked who is involved or in contact, interviewees collectively describe contacts at most levels of the respective ministry and agency hierarchies. High-level contacts are not common and typically involve state secretaries or sometimes ministers on the one hand and agency heads on the other. Contacts between merit-based civil servants in respective organizations are very frequent in some parts of the executive. In large organizations there are many potential areas of interaction, and more people may be involved (IP3; IP5; IP7; IP8 and IP9). This is described as potentially problematic because the government runs the risk of losing control over the signals sent and received in these exchanges (IP5). This type of situation can also be problematic from the agency's perspective, leading agency heads to protest that the agreed channels of contact are not honored by ministry level civil servants who break down the hierarchy, making phone calls directly to the agency head (IP2).

That informality as such challenges memory has been described above. Informality also undermines transparency, which in turn challenges democratic claims to accountability. This problem was acknowledged by the Committee on the Constitution, which concluded that informal contacts should be documented. While the interview data show that the Committee's demands for documentation are known and discussed in the Government Offices, there is little evidence of any systematic efforts dedicated to meet these demands. Notes are taken, but not in a formal way. In the words of one interviewee: "There are napkins to write on." (IP8) The strategy seems to be to avoid documentation that can be traced by outsiders, relying instead on personal notes and phone calls to validate one's recollection of informal exchanges. The reasons given for this strategy are that documenting informal contacts would formalize them, making them less effective and less relevant as a tool; that documentation would be cryptic at best, and that documentation is very time-consuming (IP2; IP6 and IP9).

## Conclusions

Using a mixed-methods design, the main aim of this research was to analyze steering practices in national executives where important tasks are delegated to central government agencies. The case of the dual Swedish executive was analyzed to answer two research questions. The first concerns the mix of instruments used by Swedish governments and whether it is best described as predominantly PA- or PS-oriented. As the application of public management models such as MBOR is known to vary over time (Kristiansen 2015; 2017; for the Swedish case see also Wockelberg and Ahlbäck Öberg 2021), a longitudinal analysis was included, asking what, if any, major shifts that can be observed during the period 2000–2020?

The case was studied from within three perspectives that constitute core dimensions of the Swedish management regime: the constitutional preconditions for government-agency relations; the use of formal management instruments, and the role that informal instruments play in the management regime. Regarding the first research question, the Swedish management regime is found to be predominantly PA-oriented. Constitutional demands on clear mandates and hierarchical control cast a long shadow over the contemporary mix of instruments. The mandated high level of agency autonomy supports a delegated mandate within a hierarchy, the aim being to ensure accountable decision-making at the agency level. In addition, the constitution requires that steering is general and formal, making the informal elements of the management regime potentially problematic. The constitutional narrative describes informal interaction between ministries and agencies as necessary but risky. Informal steering is prohibited but the constitutional doctrine allows PS-oriented informal contacts that are equal, cooperative exchanges of information including informal contacts that are used to *clarify* steering. The validity of this conclusion has been questioned in this research, as clarifying steering is too closely related to steering to be reliably something else. Moreover, the Committee

on the Constitution's demand that informal contacts must be documented is a PA-oriented attempt to establish transparency, clarify mandates and enable accountability. Thus, a PS-oriented use of contacts seems to be tolerated but not evidently compatible with the constitution.

The somewhat unclear constitutional doctrine affects how informal contacts are used. Using the quality, or content, of informal interaction as indicators of PA- and PS-regimes, this study defines informal contacts used for top-down ministerial control of agencies as PA-oriented, and informal contacts aimed at cooperation on equal terms as PS-oriented. Both controlling and cooperative uses of informal contacts are present in the case studied here, although the constitutional requirements preclude the use of informal contacts for steering. Informal interaction is not exclusively initiated by actors at the ministerial level, but also by those in agencies. Extensive and well-functioning informal interaction at the interface between ministries and agencies is considered essential for the efficiency of the national executive. However, the importance ascribed to informal contacts varies – it is positively related to the political salience of government agencies. Informality is also perceived as a double-edged sword. Used in the wrong way by the wrong actors, informality can lead to confusing or even illegitimate steering. Importantly, even when informal contacts are used in a typical PS-manner, they can be perceived as *de facto* steering signals, that is as PA-oriented control instruments.

Regarding the second research question, this study finds that the constitutional requirements and, in part, the practices and problems associated with informal steering have remained stable over the period under study. However, the application of formal instruments has undergone some significant changes. Regarding the choice of management model for central government agencies, the regime has undergone a clear shift from PS to PA since the mid-2000s. During the same period, Swedish governments have relaxed their *ex post* control by asking for less performance indicators, indicating that contemporary, PS-oriented, ideas are adopted. However, while reducing the number of indicators, governments have become relatively more controlling in how agencies are to report on performance. In the latter respect, the trend is thus PA-oriented. While the use of management models and *ex post* controls shifts over the period, governments delegate financial decisions and policy influence to agencies in a stable, PS-oriented, manner.

*Table 3. Formal and informal instruments in the Swedish management regime 2000–2020*

Instrument	Swedish management regime
Choice of agency management model	Shift from PS to PA in mid-2000s.
Monitoring and performance management	PS-trend in terms of number of indicators but PA-trend in terms of allowing agencies less influence over how to report.
Informal contacts	PA-oriented as used/perceived as instructions and control, PS-oriented exchange of information on equal terms.
Financial issues	PS-oriented.
Policy autonomy	PS-oriented, increasingly so.

Contemporary governments face challenges that underline both the need to delegate important tasks to parts of the public administration and the need to secure the necessary means of control and accountability that democratic legitimacy requires (cf. Jacobsson, Pierre and Sundström 2015). In this respect, the Swedish case is comparable to other Western, parliamentary

democracies. It is also a typical case of extensive delegation and agencification. Together, these features increase the general relevance of the reported findings. In a parliamentary democracy, constitutions are expected to require unbroken chains of delegation in order to establish accountability for delegated mandates. Given these demands, PA-oriented regimes are likely to dominate even in times when PS-ideas reach the reform agenda. The use of public management tools applied can vary over time, but there are limits. These limits are in part narrower in the Swedish case than in other comparable countries. In the absence of ministerial responsibility, there is relatively little scope for spontaneous adjustment and flexibility in ministry-agency relations. If, as suggested in the introduction, we regard Sweden as a critical case for public management reforms, developments such as those observed in this study are likely to be found in countries with weaker institutional traditions as well.

## Acknowledgements/Funding

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## Declaration of interest

The authors have no interests to declare.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> However, during 2011 to 2015, a program in the Government Offices, exceptional in its educational ambition, identified informal contacts as a major problem and source of uncertainty (IP10). An internal memo from the Government Offices originating from this program lists a number of things to consider when informal contacts are made between ministries and agencies. The memo describes the difference between formal steering and informal contacts as follows: Informal contacts are not steering, but should be used to exchange information and clarify formal steering. (As been discussed above, clarification is here regarded as associated with steering, a perspective apparently not embraced by Swedish policy-makers.) The memo reminds the reader of the constitutional principle of collective decision-making in government, stating that ‘Government Office civil servants represent the Government, not the ministry or minister’ (Billinger 2014, p. 17, authors’ translation). The memo also declares that too much informal contact can be a sign of problems (in terms of underperforming agency management), but can also cause problems for the agency. One piece of advice is to make the actors involved and the topics that are to be discussed explicit in agreements.

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### List of interviewees

- IP1, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-09-17.
- IP2, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-10-28.
- IP3, formerly civil servant in Swedish government offices with experience from two different ministries, 2020-11-03.
- IP4, formerly civil servant in Swedish government offices, at the time for the interview Head of Agency, 2020-11-03.
- IP5, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-11-05.
- IP6, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-11-06
- IP7, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-11-30.
- IP8a, formerly civil servant in Swedish government offices and Head of Agency, interview 2020-12-02.
- IP8b, formerly civil servant in Swedish government offices and Head of Agency, email 2020-12-01.
- IP9, civil servant in Swedish government offices, 2020-12-04.
- IP10, formerly civil servant in Swedish government offices, at the time for the interview top management at government agency, 2020-12-11.

## Appendix

Number	Agency name in Swedish	Agency name in English
1.	<i>Arbetsdomstolen</i>	Labour Court
2.	<i>Arbetsförmedlingen</i>	Swedish Public Employment Service
3.	<i>Arbetsmiljöverket</i>	Swedish Work Environment Authority
4.	<i>Barnombudsmannen</i>	Office of the Ombudsman for Children
5.	<i>Boverket</i>	National Board of Housing, Building and Planning
6.	<i>Centrala Studiestödsnämnden</i>	Swedish Board of Student Finance
7.	<i>Datainspektionen</i>	The Swedish Data Protection Authority
8.	<i>Domstolsverket</i>	The Swedish National Courts Administration
9.	<i>Ekobrottsmyndigheten</i>	Swedish Economic Crime Authority
10.	<i>Ekonomistyrningsverket</i>	National Financial Management Authority
11.	<i>Exportkreditnämnden</i>	Swedish Export Credit Agency
12.	<i>Folke Bernadotteakademin</i>	Folke Bernadotte Academy
13.	<i>Folkhälsomyndigheten</i>	Public Health Agency of Sweden
14.	<i>Forskningsrådet för miljö, areella näringar och samhällsbyggande</i>	Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning
15.	<i>Försvarets materielverk</i>	Defence Materiel Administration
16.	<i>Försvarmakten (ÖB)</i>	Swedish Armed Forces
17.	<i>Försäkringskassan</i>	Swedish Social Insurance Agency
18.	<i>Havs- och vattenmyndigheten</i>	Swedish Agency for Marine and Water Management
19.	<i>Inspektionen för arbetslöshetsförsäkring</i>	Swedish Unemployment Insurance Inspectorate
20.	<i>Institutet för rymdfysik</i>	Swedish Institute of Space Physics
21.	<i>Institutet för språk och folkminnen</i>	Institute for Language and Folklore
22.	<i>Kemikalieinspektionen</i>	National Chemicals Inspectorate
23.	<i>Kommerskollegium</i>	National Board of Trade
24.	<i>Konkurrensverket</i>	Swedish Competition Authority
25.	<i>Konsumentverket</i>	Swedish Consumer Agency
26.	<i>Kriminalvården</i>	Swedish Prison and Probation Service

27.	<i>Kronofogdemyndigheten</i>	Swedish Enforcement Authority
28.	<i>Lantmäteriet</i>	Swedish Mapping, Cadastral and Land Registration Authority
29.	<i>Livsmedelsverket</i>	Swedish Food Agency
30.	<i>Läkemedelsverket</i>	Medical Products Agency
31.	<i>Migrationsverket</i>	Swedish Migration Agency
32.	<i>Moderna museet</i>	Museum of Modern Art
33.	<i>Myndigheten för kulturanalys</i>	Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis
34.	<i>Myndigheten för tillväxtpolitiska utvärderingar och analyser</i>	Swedish Agency for Growth Policy Analysis
35.	<i>Naturvårdsverket</i>	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
36.	<i>Nordiska Afrikainstitutet</i>	Nordic Africa Institute
37.	<i>Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund</i>	Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities
38.	<i>Patent- och registreringsverket</i>	Swedish Intellectual Property Office
39.	<i>Post- och telestyrelsen</i>	National Post and Telecom Agency
40.	<i>Premiepensionsmyndigheten</i>	Swedish Pensions Agency
41.	<i>Riksantikvarieämbetet</i>	Swedish National Heritage Board
42.	<i>Sametinget</i>	Sami Parliament
43.	<i>Skatteverket</i>	Swedish Tax Agency
44.	<i>Skolverket</i>	National Agency for Education
45.	<i>Socialstyrelsen</i>	National Board of Health and Welfare
46.	<i>Statens jordbruksverk</i>	Swedish Board of Agriculture
47.	<i>Statens kulturråd</i>	National Council for Cultural Affairs
48.	<i>Statens skolinspektion</i>	Swedish Schools Inspectorate
49.	<i>Statistiska centralbyrån</i>	Statistics Sweden
50.	<i>Statskontoret</i>	Swedish Agency for Public Management
51.	<i>Styrelsen för internationellt utvecklingssamarbete (SIDA)</i>	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
52.	<i>Sveriges geologiska undersökning</i>	Geological Survey of Sweden
53.	<i>Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet</i>	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences



54.	<i>Sveriges meteorologiska och hydrologiska institut</i>	Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute
55.	<i>Säkerhetspolisen</i>	Swedish Security Service
56.	<i>Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut</i>	Swedish Defence Research Agency
57.	<i>Trafikanalys</i>	Transport Analysis
58.	<i>Trafikverket</i>	Swedish Transport Administration
59.	<i>Transportstyrelsen</i>	Swedish Transport Agency
60.	<i>Tullverket</i>	Swedish Customs
61.	<i>Ungdomsstyrelsen</i>	Swedish Agency for Youth and Society
62.	<i>Universitets- och högskolerådet</i>	Swedish Council for Higher Education
63.	<i>Universitetskanslersämbetet</i>	Swedish Higher Education Authority
64.	<i>Valmyndigheten</i>	Election Authority
65.	<i>Vetenskapsrådet</i>	Swedish Research Council
66.	<i>Åklagarmyndigheten</i>	Swedish Prosecution Authority

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