Centralization of Power in Danish Cabinet Governments

Paper for the Ph.D. Course Qualitative Research Methods in the Social Sciences, by Peter Heyn Nielsen.

Introduction to my Dissertation

My dissertation investigates leadership and coordination in Danish cabinet governments in a historical and organizational perspective. This is done through a series of different qualitative and quantitative studies. The dissertation is article based compiled of seven peer reviewed articles on the subject, where several of them are already published. In this particular paper I will focus on my research on Danish cabinet committees, aiming to explore which methodological challenges studies of this particular subject faces. My dissertation is in Danish and this paper is translated to English only for the purpose of this particular Ph.D.-course.

In a broader sense my dissertation subscribes thematically to the literature on cabinet governments in western parliamentary democracies. As in this literature my studies cover, that Danish cabinet governments no longer are the units of relatively equal ministers with large autonomy between them that they used to. Over time Danish cabinet governments have developed to units with ever more institutionalized hierarchy, where the core ministers surrounding the prime ministers have taken the power to intervene in the remaining ministers affairs. Ultimately, this can undermine the ressortprinzip, that defines Danish governments constitutionally, which further can lead to political decisions that are drawn on a less professional basis in terms of the input from the bureaucracy. Cabinet committees and the stronger institutionalization of these in the work of Danish governments is a central part of this development.

The development described above has long historical traces and consist of many different elements, which haven’t been studied thoroughly in a Danish context. Thus, the dissertations overall questions of research are:

- Why have there been a stronger central coordination in Danish Cabinet Governments over time?
- How can this development of stronger coordination be seen?
- Which consequences does this have for the leadership of the cabinet in general and for ministers leading their ministries individually?

1. Chapter on Methodological Issues

In this particular paper I’ve chosen to focus on the methodological challenges, that I face in the research of Danish cabinet committees. I’ve already published a paper on Danish cabinet committees (Nielsen 2017), whereas this paper concerns issues relating to an upcoming paper partly on the same topic, that is a study of the central cabinet committees in Danish governments from 2011 to 2019. In this paper I will first describe the research design of this paper and then elaborate on the methodological challenges, that I’m facing in this study. Following that, I will address and discuss the methodological issues regarding the application of elite interview and document analysis in the research of this particular subject.

1.1 Research Design

In this section I will describe the research design of the study of Danish cabinet committees 2011-2019. The article contains two separate but intertwined parts. First, it has a literature review of the international literature on the subject and the theoretical implications concerning the article’s subject plus a thorough review of how leadership and collectivity of Danish governments has developed from 1848 to 2011. Following up on that, the second part is a comparative study of the role of cabinet committees in the last
two election terms under two different prime ministers. The theme of this particular paper is the methodological issues concerning the second part.

1.1.1 Case Studies in Political Science
The empirical study in this article is a case study. The case study is considered the research design in political science in which the researcher is allowed to go most in depth with the research topic at hand and where there is no manipulation with the independent variable as oppose to experiments (Andersen, Binderkrantz & Hansen 2012: 83). The main focus of this analysis is to deliver in depth knowledge about the central cabinet committees in the given period. The case study is particularly well fit for research that operates with questions of “how” and “why” as it is the case in this part of my dissertation (Johnson & Reynolds 2008: 150). Table 1 shows the units of analysis and the cases in this article (cf. Andersen, Binderkrantz & Hansen 2012: 85).

Table 1. Unit of Analysis and Cases in this Article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit of analysis</th>
<th>Central cabinet committees</th>
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| **Cases**        | • Governments of Helle Thorning-Schmidt 2011-2015  
                   | • Governments of Lars Løkke Rasmussen 2015-2019 |

Thus, the study is a case study with two cases. The unit of analysis is the central cabinet committees. A unit of analysis is defined as a phenomena, that is spatially demarcated (e.g. state, revolution, political party, election) (Andersen, Binderkrantz & Hansen 2012: 85). The question is, what role the central cabinet committees have played in terms of coordination and leadership in Danish Governments.

When a unit is observed at a given time (e.g. Denmark 2011), it denotes a case (ibid.). In this part of the article the central cabinet committees in Danish governments is observed at two distinct points in time – respectively the election term from 2011 to 2015 where Helle Thorning-Schmidt was prime minister and from 2015 to 2019 where Lars Løkke Rasmussen is prime minister. In Denmark there is no legal definition to separate governments, so this is done by 1) prime minister and 2) election term.

The design is a comparative case study in the sense that it contains to kinds of comparisons. On the one hand comparisons is made between the two cases (Andersen, Binderkrantz & Hansen 2012: 85) and on the other hand comparisons is made between the two cases and the aforementioned literature review. In analysis in political science the theory often works as a mirror, which gives the study at hand an implicit comparative dimension (ibid.: 83). In a case study with relatively few cases, it is obvious to test an existing theory, which is what I do in this instance, where the theory and history is the starting point for analysis of the period 2011-2019 (Johnson & Reynolds 2008: 151). The theory helps to narrow down the area of investigation and to show a way in which one can study a given topic in a manageable way (Klemmensen, Andersen & Hansen 2012: 26).

1.1.2 Criteria for doing Research
This case study subscribes to the field of qualitative research. Only in few instances are points of analysis being made, which is based on logics of quantitative research. The criteria for responsible research of this character are transparency, systematics, reliability and validity (Klemmensen, Andersen & Hansen 2012: 37).
In terms of transparency the research is conducted in way, that I consequently explains how I’ve drawn my conclusions. Systematics is upheld by the selection of data, which is described right below. With regard to systematics in terms of conducting interviews and chose informants, one has to be realistic in expectations of who wants to and who is able to participate. Validity is defined as the criteria, where the researcher is concerned with actually measuring, what one wants to measure (Andersen 2012: 100). With the theory as the starting point, I seek to operationalize valid measurements for the attributes, which I am investigating. Reliability concerns consistency in ones research, which practically means, that repeated studies would give the same results as my studies (Andersen 2012: 102). In the largest extend possible I try to be absolutely clear about, what I’ve been searching for in data and by doing so showing the terms of which I’ve been making my conclusions and what reservations there might be for these conclusions. Thus, other researchers who might study this particular topic and issue would reach the same conclusions.

1.2 Problems concerning Access to relevant Sources
A researcher is confronted by a series of challenges when he is about to study core executive politics in Denmark whether the focus is bureaucracy or political matters. Thus, this is also the case for a study of cabinet committees. One crucial challenge that several researchers of this topic raises, is that there is relatively few sources. A very limited amount of people have actually taken part in the work of the Danish government at a central level and may in many ways have a monopoly of knowledge (Knudsen 2000: 37).

When key political decisions and discussions are being made, they might often be bilateral or at least between relatively few people (Christensen 2005: 33).

Thereto it will not necessarily be easy to get an appointment for an interview with these relatively few people. On the one part, current cabinet members (e.g. a minister of finance) is under a constant pressure of work overload (Knudsen 2007: 192). They might not spent their precious spare time on talking to researchers. On the other part, former cabinet members – especially those who have retired completely – have of course better time as well as they might be more free and open to speak their mind, as the topics becomes less controversial over time. But in these instances the value of the given cabinet members statements and memory weakens, as specific administrative events might be difficult to remember only a few years apart. Several former cabinet members have stated in interviews with me, that they had limited or no memory of the functions of certain cabinet committees in the cabinets of which they were themselves members (Nielsen 2017: 366).

This particular article is especially challenged by the fact, that most of the involved persons are still active politicians. Former cabinet member Holger K. Nielsen stated to me in interviews, that he would only elaborate on topics like this in maybe ten or fifteen years from now.¹

In the most thorough study of cabinet committees in Denmark Lotte Jensen distinguishes between an “inside out” and an “outside in” perspective in studying this particular theme (Jensen 2003: 398-399). This means basically a choice between interviewing regular members of cabinet committees in a given cabinet or interviewing non-members about their perception of the role, which these cabinet committees have. She chooses the first option. I choose to do both, partly to compensate for the fact, that very few regular members might be willing to participate.

In the tradition of research in Danish political history autobiographies is a common source of information (e.g. Thorsen 1967). The article at hand is on this part challenged by the fact, that the events of interest are of contemporary nature, so that few of the involved persons have actually reached an age or a point in

¹ Interview august 20th 2014.
their career, where it would make sense to write ones autobiography. Further, it has been stated, that autobiographies only on few occasions will actually describe administrative aspects. Instead, they will focus on policy and the author’s major political results. As opposed to this, a detailed description of the functions of cabinet committees does have a quite administrative character and is seldom depicted in autobiographies from relevant cabinet members.

In my former research on Danish cabinet committees, I have requested access to official internal government documents (aktindsigter). This could be the rules or guidelines for the work of certain cabinet committees or summaries from meetings held in certain cabinet committees. So far this has proven to be more difficult in my work with this particular paper, even though I knew, that everything that has to do with the Danish Prime Minister’s Office historically have been shrouded by an hysterical secrecy (Nielsen 2017: 366).

1.3 Choice of Methods
The study of the core cabinet committees from 2011 to 2019 is primarily based on two types of qualitative data: Elite interview and document analysis of new media sources. Document analysis goes before the interviewing even though the interviews are of greatest value for research in this particular subject.
Unrelated to this particular paper, the study draws on few types of quantitative data. The adaption of elite interview and document analysis are discussed in the following.

1.3.1 Elite Interview
As mentioned, I am aware of the fact, that it might be difficult to get access to relevant informants, that will be willing to participate in an interview for the purpose of this article. In this regard it is firstly relevant to point out, that when doing elite interview, a researcher should only resort to this, when it is the absolutely only way to get information (Elklit & Jensen 2012: 133). The sources that are relevant for this particular study are busy people with whom it is important to get a constructive and good relationship with (Ibid.). They should not be bothered with irrelevant questions, which is accessible elsewhere – that could reduce their willingness to participate.

Elite interview is a distinct type of method, which in certain ways is different from other types of interviews. When it comes to research questions, that requires elite interview to answer, there will seldom be any actor who knows “the whole story” (Elklit & Jensen 2012: 133). On the contrary, a limited set of actors will know different parts, that all together have to be sampled to a compiled analysis. Because of this it will make limited sense to make a common interview guide to follow strictly (Ibid.). The very point of doing elite interview might be to ask different actors different questions. Furthermore, these persons are self reliant and typically well off people, who are used to being interviewed, so interviewing them differs from interviewing “regular” people as in other parts of social sciences and political science.

The special nature of elite interview being said, the interviews in this study can still be said to follow the form of semi structured interviews (Harrits, Pedersen & Halkier 2012: 149). Thus, the interview guide is open and the interviewed persons can on their own initiative come across subjects that they find relevant as the interview develops (Ibid.). Compared to other types of interviews it is particularly important to be well prepared for interviews like these to benefit the most from of the interview (Harrits, Pedersen & Halkier 2012: 166-167). In some instances I have to know exactly what are still the questions of doubt in relation to my research question. This is part of the reason why the interview will be held in the very last part of the research process.
I record every single interview digitally. In that way it is easier to stay focused and concentrated during the interview and it also secures that I can be absolutely sure of what was being said (Harrits, Pedersen & Halkier 2012: 169). In any instance where my analysis and conclusions are drawn from information gathered from these interviews, the exact quotes will be presented in the text (Harrits, Pedersen & Halkier 2012: 171). This is done to secure transparency and reliability.

1.3.2 Document Analysis of News Media Sources

As stated above, one should only turn to eliteinterview when there is absolutely no other way to gather the information, that you seek. This is why I do a systematic review of news media in regard to this topic before turning to interviewing. In this part I am searching for exact quotations from relevant actors that are of relevance for my study or perhaps might inspire questions for the interviews. In regard to this, I have experienced in interviews with former cabinet members, that the person interviewed stated, that they would not elaborate further on given topics of which, they have already stated their view in the news media. This should be interpreted in the way, that they stood by their statements, but that they did not feel any need to repeat them. In a case like this a researcher has to rely on the quotation in the news media or to neglect the given point.

Document analysis of news media sources has both strengths and shortcomings for this study. Journalists in Denmark have way better access to politicians than a Ph.D.-fellow has, which can help compensate for the central problem of studying this topic: The problem of getting access to relevant sources of information. On the other hand the news media articles fall short for the same reasons as was the case of autobiographies mentioned in section 1.2. Cabinet committees might not be big news to an extend that a news article would deliver detailed information about the inner workings of these. Cabinet members might be more interested in talking about their new policy initiatives (or perhaps personal things) than administrative aspects of government work.

The news media articles I include in this study are found through the Infomedia database. This raises the questions of how limit the collection of news paper articles and how to do it systematically. In a database such as this lies a potentially enormous amount of data if every type of printed and online media should be included. So the selection of data has to be limited in a meaningful way, where articles of value for this particular purpose are taken into account (Elkit & Jensen 2012: 122) and on the other hand it is realistic to go through all the collected articles. In appendix 1 an example is shown of how one of the searches have been made.

It requires clear and well defined categories of selection and searching in order to secure the general criteria for research integrity are being upheld. These are described in the following.

First, I have chosen only to include national newspapers, that publishes on a daily basis. This appear natural because they are the ones with the largest editorial offices and with the most journalist on Christiansborg. This choice is not without disadvantages. Both local (weekly) newspapers and even magazines like Euroman or Alt for damerne have relevant interviews with prominent cabinet members. Perhaps the more cozy vibe of the setting in these interviews allow the interviewed persons to relax more and thus reveal aspects of their political career, that they would not come across in more “political” interviews. One example could be the interview with Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen in Amager Bladet april 12th 2018 (see also Nielsen 2016: 314).

Secondly, this part of the study requires a selection of keywords to search for in Infomedia. A number of searches are being made, where one example is shown in appendix 1. As I am searching for information about the Coordination committee (koordinationsudvalget) and the Committee on economic affairs
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(Økonomiudvalget) one of these words have to appear in the articles in order for them to be included. As they are often referred to as respectively “K-udvalget” and “Ø-udvalget” in short, separate searches has to be made where these expressions are used.

In a separate line of keywords names of relevant actors are written. In combination with the committees explicit quotations from a participant from a meeting in one of these committees is mandatory. Here I have chosen only to search for the names of the chairmen of the different committees, which respectively is the Prime minister and the minister of Finance. A mention of a cabinet committee would seldom be made without reference to the chairman of the committee and their role as chairman of the committee is also perhaps the most important part of functioning of the committees. By including these names I also exclude articles of more historical interest – e.g. af interview with a minister who where a member of a relevant cabinet committee under a former prime minister – and articles concerning a committee on economic affairs in a municipality or perhaps some sort of public organization.

The third and last criteria are of more substantial nature. This concerns the fact that I am only looking for explicit quotations about the work and functioning of the different cabinet committees – as oppose to indirect mentions from perhaps anonymous sources. Thus, a third line of keywords is added, where at least one of the words “interview” or “says” has to be included (in Danish “interview”, “siger” and “udtaler”). This secures the fact the articles have explicit quotations, even though this can be quotes from a pundit or some kind of expert. In the last instance these articles will be excluded.

With the explained criteria for searching in Infomedia I on the one side capture relevant articles while on the other side avoid a complete information overload. It also secures reliability and transparency. As can be seen in appendix 1 a search for articles concerning the Coordination committee during the Helle Thorning-Schmidt governments results in 225 articles. These articles thus has to be red through for passages relevant for my research questions.

**Literature**


Appendix 1: