‘Key players’
in Swiss cantonal reforms:
Exploring commitment
to leadership in
NPM implementation

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1 Introduction

NPM-type reforms are generally labelled as administrative reform, even though they often require involvement, support, and leadership of political actors. Especially in Switzerland, where the specific NPM approach includes reforms of steering instruments used by parliamentarians and ministers, engagement of politicians has been necessary. Political leadership and the existence of "political promoters" has repeatedly been cited as success factor or condition for successful NPM reform initiatives (Naschold 1999). Generally, it could be observed that single ministers were heavily promoting NPM reforms in Switzerland, while others have taken a more passive role.

In theory, the necessity of political support and political leadership for the success of reforms and initiatives has been stressed repeatedly. Argumentation and analysis for the importance of political leadership often stem on comparative observation of commonalities in successful reforms from an administrative, managerial perspective. Even though reform concepts address the political level and assign roles to political actors, rationality and logic of reform concepts is dominated by economic, not political reasoning. NPM theory sees the advantages and incentives for politicians to engage for and in reforms in better management possibilities and transparency, e.g. enhanced management information, instruments and division of labour. But how is the perspective of politicians themselves? Do politicians, especially those who might act as promoters, e.g. executive politicians, share the view on proclaimed advantages and incentives by NPM theory? The question why politicians actually engage in those reforms and become their promoters has been largely neglected so far, even though political support has been identified as critical success factor of reforms.

The interdisciplinary discourse in NPM theory has only started while many reforms were already on their way. So, the NPM-classic Reinventing Government has not even included terms like politics, politicians, policy in its index (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). In Switzerland, legal and constitutional aspects have been intensively discussed and integrated during the last years (Schedler and Mastronardi 1998). The challenge to come is the exploration and inclusion of political aspects and elements (Schedler and Kettiger 2003). Only by this, actual engagement, reception and use of NPM on the political level might be rationalised.

First attempts in this direction have been made by some authors. Schedler and Proeller (2003) point to the clash and need of "translation" of rationalities within the NPM-like policy making process. While service delivery and steering of this in the traditional NPM logic follows a management rationality, decision making in this context on the political level follows a political rationality. Thereby contradiction between management and political rationality might arise, e.g. what might be economic rational, must not be political rational and vice
versa. For Peters (1995), political leaders engage in two different strategies with regard to administrative reform. On the one side, they can go for an "external game". Administration in this case is seen as formal structure that can be moulded to fit new objectives and depends heavily on politics. Policies include imposing pressure on concentrated groups in return for long-term collective gains. On the other hand, politicians can play an "internal game" within government by seeking support of existing administrative elites and relying on the civil service. In this setting, neutral competence of administration is stressed and a unified direction of government and administration is preferred. Peters (1995, 133) clearly outlines the interdependence between those two strategies. For France, Bezes (2001) explored that administrative reforms have remained a marginal voting issue, and that approaches prime ministers opted for not only follow some general political rationality, but are further largely determined by the country-specific settings of the state, its bureaucracy, and traditions.

Addressing different aspects and interest of "NPM-politics", the existing analysis indicate very different valuation and stakes of NPM by politicians. The research objective of this paper is to explore the characteristics and circumstances that influence whether politicians, especially ministers, stand in for NPM reforms, and why they do it. The paper is based on a broader, ongoing research project at the University of St. Gallen. Reasoning and perspective of cantonal ministers in the German speaking part of Switzerland who have been "key players" in the reforms of their polity has been analysed by qualitative content analysis based on semi-structured interviews. The goal is to understand behaviour of politicians on the individual level. Since the research question has not been addressed so far by theory or research, an exploratory research design was chosen, e.g. the result of this papers are hypothesis for the explanation of behaviour of politicians derived from analysis of interviews. The paper will first give a short background information on NPM reform in Switzerland. After that, methodological issues are outlined. The following chapters address selected topics of engagement parameters of politicians. The paper concludes with an outlook on the future proceeding of the research project.
2 The Swiss context

The New Public Management (NPM) wave has reached Switzerland in the mid 1990s. Typical for a federal state (Pollitt and Bouckaert 1999) reform projects have been started by various polities building on a common set of ideas but developing rather independently from each other. Reforms first started at the cantonal level. Despite multitude of actors a rather homogenous Swiss variant of NPM emerged, called *Wirkungsorientierte Verwaltungsführung* (WoV) (results-oriented public management). WoV primarily emphasises the management of performance contracts and global budgets (Schedler 2001) and includes a performance management system for the administration, which is supposed to deliver management information for administrative and political management.

Particularities of the Swiss politico-administrative system have been absorbed and reflect in Swiss reform approaches. So, on the cantonal level governments are based on a coalition of all major political parties, consisting of five to seven institutionally equally powerful members elected by popular vote. Majorities in parliament do not have a direct effect on the composition of government. In this system no constant party-dependent, but task-related oppositions form. So checks and balances regarding oversight and control of performance contracts are institutionalised between government and parliament due to lack of a true opposition. Swiss parliaments, also the federal, are militia parliaments, meaning there are no full-time parliamentarians in Switzerland. This has consequence on the problem-solving and policy preparation capacities. Parliaments heavily rely on proposals prepared by government and in fact by the administration. Accordingly, for example WoV-instruments have been developed and are drafted mainly by the administration, even the agencies themselves, and presented to parliament. Swiss democratic traditions, but also the relative small size of polities might have fostered the peculiarity in the international context that NPM-reforms and specific projects proceeded by inclusion of the political levels (Schedler and Mastronardi 2003). So WoV in Switzerland - different to Germany for example - is explicitly pronounced to be not only an *administrative*, but *also a state reform approach*, since it had effects on the instruments, interaction and processes of administration, government and parliament (Rieder and Lehmann 2002). Despite loss of initial enthusiasm and partial disenchantment, WoV has found vast reception and adoption in Switzerland (24 out of 26 cantons are pursuing NPM) and is part of the politico-administrative system today.
3 Methodology

With exception of some case studies (for example Bezes 2001), so far little is known and has been researched on the motivation of politicians to engage for NPM. The research question of this paper aims at formulating hypothesis that might explain or identify factors influencing and determining this engagement. By learning more about the individual perspectives and reasoning of ministers who themselves stood in for NPM reforms, relevant factors, characteristics, or circumstances should be identified. The objective is explicitly not only to confirm or evaluate those aspects addressed by NPM-rationality, but also to find out about aspects so far neglected or "not rationalized". To meet these requirements, an exploratory, qualitative research design was chosen. As mentioned, the results presented in this paper are part of an ongoing research project. The methods described here apply to the first phase of this project. Further detailing and validating methods are planned for the next phases.

Semi-standardized interviews were chosen as method for data collection. This method allowed to leave room for the interview partner to bring up aspects not foreseen by the researcher in advance, and on the same time to gather information on different, structured topics in all interviews. The sample was defined as consisting of "key players" in cantonal NPM reforms throughout the last ten years. To qualify as key player an actor had to meet the following prerequisites:

- At the time (s)he had engaged for NPM, (s)he had to hold a political, elected office. In general, (s)he was minister.
- (S)he noticeable and substantially took effect beyond her/his area of duties with respect to NPM reforms
- (S)he was acting as "reform promoter" in the sense of Naschold (1999)
- (S)he has shaped the emergence and evolvement of WoV in Switzerland

Applying those criteria, a sample of 15 potential candidates, all (former) ministers, was identified. Most of those candidates do not hold their ministers office any more, and were minister in a canton of the German speaking part of Switzerland, which is explained by the fact that German speaking cantons started earlier to engage in NPM reforms and therefore had a much more shaping role in the development of WoV. Out of the 15 candidates ten agreed to participate in the study. The final sample of ten "key players" is well distributed among

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1 In Switzerland it is very uncommon that ministers get elected out of their office, so most of the candidates have opted for not running for office at some point of time.
German speaking cantons (maximum 2 of the same canton, but at different times). With respect to party-attachment the sample consists of four members of the liberal party (FDP), three of the conservative party (CVP), two socialist party members (SP) and one member of the nationalist-republican party (SVP). Due to the selection criteria for the sample and rank of potential interview partner, the size of the sample is relatively small. Nevertheless, for the research question at stake at this point of the study, a focus on this group seemed adequate. The next stages of the study and based on the results gained by this first round of interview, the range of interview partners will be widened to parliamentarians and ministers with more passive or ambivalent roles regarding NPM reform efforts.

Throughout 2003 each of the key players in the sample was interviewed for about one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data exploitation was conducted as qualitative, software-supported content analysis. For this, statements of key players have been classified and clustered.
4 Results and Hypotheses

In this chapter results of interviews for selected categories are presented. Discussion of results leads to formulation of summarizing and concluding hypothesis.

Prescriptive literature on leadership, management, and change is full of attitudes and values, a successful leader in change processes, especially in public management should have. The visionary and mission-driven public sector leader is the basic component of “how to manage” prescriptions, but indeed, those leaders have to deal with very demanding, ambiguous and often contradictory expectations – the typical political aspect of management in the public sector (Pollitt 1993). Lynn (1996) summarized the various approaches as the “What counts?” literature.

We asked the participants what they think characterised them personally as be a highly exposed promotor of change, or what they think a successful reformer would have to be like, assuming that they would project their own attitudes and experiences. The statements were obviously in accordance with the well-known and often-heard management prescriptions.

First of all, all he key players were sceptic regarding the operativeness of government institutions and optimistic considering the chances of changing them. One crucial issue was the lack of transparency, especially concerning the costs and results of government.

Nevertheless, pragmatism seems to better explanation for the commitment to change than ideology would. The key players were just not content with the information and tools given to them to do their jobs. That is no neo-liberal attitude, it is actually common sense.

Key Players are pragmatic, not ideological. They want to solve problems of governing, applying new management instruments.

Some statements illustrate how close management prescriptions and the key players’ self-perceptions come:

“Leadership and change will only work, if there is somebody standing up with joy and passion.”

“I am a mover, leaving behind a trace of unresolved problems.”

“It’s a matter of personality and arguments”

“No, it’s about whether you like the change. It’s a question of the personality.”
More or less explicitly all of the participants expressed their assumption that, basically, everybody can and must learn, including the readiness to change fundamental structures and processes. They considered it as their very personal role and obligation to feel and show responsibility for NPM implementation. There would be nobody else to blame. That even more applies to the more strategic concern of cultural change. Technical or instrumental were considered to means in terms of achieving this long-term goal. All of the key players were convinced that the state has to be run better and more efficient, and this rather simple goal would not be achieved without rather complex processes of change, meaning change most of all: changing the minds.

Key players consider change as a chance, and as something they are responsible for.

Personally, the key players look on themselves as open-minded, ready to experiment, and conscious for problems. They rely on intuition and on ‘trial and error’ rather than ‘master plans’. Statements show a clear managerial self-assessment:

“In the beginning, it’s important to orientate oneself what it’s really about”.

“It has always been clear to me that I want to set clear goals.”

“In every government, there needs to be a majority of people, thinking dynamically and entrepreneurially.”

More generally, key players consider the state as a mean, not an end. It seems to be a logical conclusion that, following this understanding, they pursue a reflexive approach on how things have to go in government institutions: if structures and processes of administration do not work in the expected way, they have to be changed in order bring the state ‘back on track’. Nevertheless, the key players can be characterized by their positive and respectful attitude towards public service and civil servants in general. The public sector is worth to be changes on the one hand, and has to changed on the other, in order to become more effective and cost-efficient.

Strategic thinking – interpreted as a open-mindedness, orientation on goals and results, readiness for experiments, venturing trial and learning from error, and a vision of how government can be run in a better way – makes actors more apt to play a leading role in the change process.
Claiming a leading role does not necessarily mean that it is accepted by those who are supposed to follow. What makes the key players accepted role-models as successful managers and executive politicians? The interviews showed that philanthropy and optimism are typical for them. Fairness would be considered as a condition of motivation, as well as the willingness to co-operate:

“I don’t like military-like leadership, I hate staffs. (...) I say: you must be able to lead 3500 people without big staffs (...) In fact, that is a leadership characteristic of myself, none of my colleagues has it.”

Summarizing those self-perceptions it can be said:

Accepting the rules and changing the rules of the game is not necessarily a contradiction. Rather, it is a typical paradox of the key players’ minds.

The most of the participants were members of the government for a period of at least years. Consequently, the most relevant professional experience is their job in government. Three of them had relevant experience in senior civil service. One of them was a professor for public finance at a top business school, another one spent seven years in business administration research. By education, there were lawyers as well public or business administrators, but also a natural scientist.

In Switzerland, mobility between sectors is much higher than, for instance, in Germany or Austria. That is due to the fact that members of parliament at all levels of government are not paid in the sense that one could live from the compensation. So, no political class could ever really establish. So, members of government often already have experienced management and leadership roles in the private sector or senior civil service, or in various professions. A typical statement in these terms is:

“I have done this in the private sector, too, and was exactly the same.”

NPM de facto often means bringing private sector management tools to public sector organisations. Obviously, having got to them in the private sector diminished reservation against those instruments, or even convinced the key players to apply them in the public sector, too. Nevertheless, none of them would have underestimated the problems of transfer across sectors, as the specific circumstances and their implications were known.

As the professional background varies, the question raises, how experiences in the previous working life have effected attitudes towards fundamental change and innovation.
Statements imply that having experienced large-scale organisational change reduces uncertainty of according decisions. In some cases they were reactions to a fundamental crisis. In others, the approach followed a general style of leadership:

“From the first moment in office, I have implemented precursors of NPM, in a sense that I have set and reviewing goals and objectives. Result-orientation was not yet an issue. (...) Soon, I have created a mission statement for my department.”

More generally, it is obvious that the participants had no illusions about the nature of public administration and the intention of transforming it. It is exactly this practical experience with the shortcomings of the old public management that made them play a leading role in the implementation process of NPM: “This was certainly the most promising project off all those I have undergone and which partially ended in talk after a short period of time.”

The majority of the key players has experienced management and organisational change before, in the private or public sector, affecting the attitude to pro-change. They know how organisations work, how they will respond to change efforts, and which desired results can be considered as realistic.

Getting the job in government, the key players either considered this as a chance to change those things they had been unsatisfied before but were never able to do anything against, or they were surprised by the lack of an effective management toolkit and tried to fill this gap.

The NPM concept spread across Switzerland around the year 1995. The key players underlined the role of science promoting the concept on conferences and with publications. Some participants also went to role-model governments abroad, such as in the Netherlands or the U.S. Consulting companies had an impact, too. In one case the initiative came from the legislation.

There is a wide range of source for conceptual inputs in terms of the NPM. Obviously, the key players have been influenced by management science, successful inbound and outbound examples in practice, and through policy advisors such as the administration or external consultants.

In theory, advantages and success factors of NPM are seen in possibilities for more effective, outcome and results orientated management and steering (Schedler and Proeller 2003). More transparency, enhanced cost-service information and systematic controlling and reporting information are considered as improvement and desired means.
Better and more effective steering possibilities were actually also cited as motivation to introduce NPM reforms by all key players interviewed. Transparency and incentives for efficiency were sought for. Flexibility of administration is seen as mean to make politics faster and more adaptive. Key players were convinced that NPM could improve certain deficits of administration.

"I had been convinced that NPM was the best integrated model around which adopted to Swiss situations was the most appropriate."

The need and therefore the motivation to introduce NPM was fostered by financial distress. Most key players interviewed were facing tight budgets and saving requirements. Impetus to look for reforms and to turn to NPM-type reforms in most cases came from necessity to find new ways of financial control, since traditional mechanisms were insufficient to cope with the new situation. NPM was seen as most adequate and best alternative around not just to save expenditures, but to allocate money effectively.

"The central element is controllability of administration by government. It is much easier for me to interfere. If you always have to control for details to manage, you are not done in 24 hours seven days of week. You need mechanisms by which you can steer without going down all to the bottom."

"There is nothing more rational than allocating resources with respect to their effects."

But motivation went beyond financial interests and is rooted in a broader dissatisfaction with structures of administration and their attitude towards change. Key players did not want to accept shortcomings of administrative systems like opacity, inflexibility and lack of entrepreneurial elements. Knowing bureaucratic traits of big organisations and particularities of the public sector, they were convinced that administration needed to overcome some of its inherited structures and adapt to modern organisational standards.

"We considered it as absolutely urgent to free administration of its biographic cramp and to bring it to a new dimension - a more entrepreneurial dimension."

Key players have vital interest in effectively steering the administration, and they consider traditional steering instruments and incentive structures as insufficient. They see themselves in an executive position responsible to effectively run public administration.

Key players have a positive attitude to change. They get their motivation by accomplishing and following their further objectives and do not bother with hurdles on the way.
"I am convinced that any organisation is profiting by change. To move big things, you have to reorganise, rearrange and reorientate."

"Openness and conviction that something has to happen and that you are ready and willing to do it, not for the sake of the career - there are few people who will make a career due to administrative reform."

Key players have a preference for change. They consider change, in general, as positive. They are convinced that they can change and improve.

As Weber (1992) argues politicians seek for power either for the sake of power itself or for the prestige coming along with it. Therefore, it is interesting to explore in what respect ministers might seek for power by pushing NPM-reforms. The most general and simple assumption would be that ministers - since they are directly elected - engage for reasons of vote maximation. As one key player stated:

"Due to administrative reform very few of us are going to make a career."

Key players do not consider administrative reform as suitable issue for political profiling towards interest groups, or even citizens. So, they all agreed on not having engaged for NPM reforms out of election purposes. Administrative reform as such is hardly perceived outside administrative and political institutions. For political profiling towards the citizenry, reform efforts and initiatives take too long to show effects and results. And even when effects and results of reforms become effective, they are seldom attributed to those reforms from an outside perspective. Even though, administrative reform does not create direct profits and advantages for citizens, it does not harm anybody either. So, in an election perspective engagement for reform is neither prosperous nor disadvantageous.

When looking for other power-related motivation factors, it became obvious that key players were building up something like an "expert role" and identification of their person with the reforms within the politico-administrative system. With one exception, key players mentioned that at the time when they decided to engage for NPM they were acting within a rather closed circle of persons:

"At the time, we were thinking on how to reform our administration in a very closed circle."

When publicly standing in for the reforms, they had an advance of knowledge and took the lead within government and "occupied" this issue. Administrative reform could therefore be used to profile within administration and political institutions. Key players realized this role and even wanted to take that role as the following statement illustrates:
"No doubt, I was the initiator of reform. Government only did it on my request."

Engagement for NPM reforms is not driven by motives of vote maximization. It allows, though, to profile and distinguish within the politico-administrative system.

Changing institutions means dealing with conflicts. The key players reported about various issues as objects of controversies within government, between government and legislation, within and within the administration, about goals, strategies and effects. Surprisingly, the most fundamental opposition came from the legislation, not from the administration where it had been suspected. The legislation would not agree with the NPM’s basic assumption that the administrative agencies need more freedom to manage and the concentration on global and strategic issues, e.g. in the budgetary process. That is why the question of how the key players manage conflicts is important. Two aspects could be found out in the study: First, the key players use long-term persuasion and step-by-step strategies. Second, they are well connected, also and especially in the legislation, where core networks of NPM-promotors would support corresponding decision-making, creating informal pro-NPM advocacy coalitions.

Networking and patient persuasion are essential tools to manage conflicts in the change process.

Another factor to be analyzed is the role of the political parties and related ideological backgrounds. In fact, all of the key players articulated explicitly that parties did not matter concerning support or opposition of the introduction of NPM. Typical statements were for instance:

“In terms party politics, it has equally been welcomed and questioned”

“There were no party-political limits. (...) It’s the question of wether you understand it or you don’t.”

Similarly, the role of interest groups is relatively indifferent, as there was no resistance on the side of unions and employees’ associations, and no strong support from industrial and commercial organizations.

There is an obvious correlation with the role of the public. There were no public discussions about NPM, not at least because of its hard-to-communicate complexity:

“I must admit that we did not have a broad public discussion about this issue.”
“This is no issue that suits well for the media.”

“Nobody is interested in it. (...) The citizens don’t care. By the way, I think that’s normal. (...) The public is not able to see the connections.”

The pro-NPM commitment is not apt to sharpen a leaders profile in the public and within party politics.

As it comes to the results of NPM in the view of those who promoted it, unsurprisingly, disillusionment has taken place. Asked whether NPM could meet the expectations, the statements illustrate, most of all, underestimations of the necessary efforts:

“The whole process takes a long time, and if you don’t push it, nothings going to happen.”

“The concept is not as good as assumed originally.”

“I still believe that what we did was right. But the euphoria in that days has been replaced by realistic assessments, and it has led to critical reflections. (...) Finally, it’s the problem of the cultural change and the sustainability of these developments.”

“The work that has to be done is huge. That is underestimated by many. (...) But we have achieved our major objectives (...). Nobody wanted to go back, not the critical ones, too.”
5 Conclusion

The paper has been exploring characteristics and driving factors of active engagement of government politicians, e.g. ministers, for NPM reform. The underlying intention was to find out more about why politicians actually engage for those kind of reforms. It is often suggested that politicians primarily seek reelection and act accordingly. Results presented in this paper - as well as other authors concluded similarly (Bezes 2001) - show that motives to gain elections do not explain engagement for NPM reforms neither out of the politician's self-perspective nor due to the suitability of the issue as campaigning topic. A number of personal and situational elements seem to be more relevant: personal attitude and experience as senior executive, attitude to change processes, as well as the chance to occupy this topic, gain influence beyond one's actual area of competence and extend visibility and profile within the politico-administrative system. So far, the study only revealed potential explaining elements and gave insights into the self-perception of key players. Continuation of the project and further research will have to explore single elements, relationships, effects and actual mechanisms in more detail.

When interpreting or transferring results presented in this paper certain restrictions must be beard in mind. Besides the limited scope of the sample used for data collection peculiarities of context might be of great importance, especially with respect to international transferability. Swiss cantonal ministers are directly elected by popular vote. In comparison to other countries, for example Germany, they are more loosely tied to their parties, and in effect, for their career rely much more on their ministry than on the party. The duality of being a politician in a collective government board and being executive head of a ministry is more developed in this system. The results suggest that engagement for NPM reforms stem to a greater extent out of the function as executive than as a politician.

So far, results only present self-perception of key players. Continuation of the project will need to extent the scope of interview partner to other actors and institutions. Thereby, statements given by key players should be validated for example by interviewing staff of the minister, project management, and college ministers. Further insights to the actual research question might be gained by interviewing politicians who have a more ambiguous attitude to administrative reform.

When having expanded the scope of interview partner, it will be interesting to analyse data with respect to development of the reform process, e.g. explore the question whether the phase or status of the reform project had an influence on the engagement of politicians.
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