

# Understanding bureaucratic support for coerced institutional change

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## Abstract

Institutional reform processes can be contested. The more so by those working in the affected institutions. Bureaucracies, in particular, can be resistant to change. To better understand such processes, we study the regional reform in Norway. This reform is interesting as it mixes “voluntary” and “forced” dynamics. Indeed, Norwegian regions (*fylkeskommuner*) can remain unchanged, merge voluntarily, or be forced to merge by central government. This provides an opportunity to better understand support for coerced change. Through a survey of regional bureaucrats, we test different explanations of support for forced mergers. We find that two logics are at play. A “logic of discipline” which appeals to right-wing bureaucrats, advocates larger units, and streamlined bureaucracies, even if this is against the wishes of the main actors involved. And an “identity logic” which recognizes that feelings of attachment are powerful shapers of preferences beyond what efficiency and functionality dictate.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Institutions evolve. Sometimes incrementally, other times more dramatically. Such evolution is key to their survival but also a reflection of the changing nature of their environment. Public

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authorities are submitted to the same evolutionary pressures as any other institutional structure. However, their architects have an array of options when it comes to reform processes and outcomes. Public authorities may be reformed marginally and gradually, just as they may be reformed more profoundly and fundamentally. Thus, democratic political systems are characterized by constant reform processes spanning the whole array from cosmetic changes to more spectacular reforms. In this way, central banks have been granted some autonomy, regulatory agencies have been established, supranational governance structures have been created, and the provision of public goods has been variably outsourced to the private sector (Garriga, 2016; Jordana et al., 2018; Peters, 2018).

Regional authorities too have noticeably changed in the past decades. Many democracies have created new regional bodies, allowed them to be directly elected, and endowed them with growing competences (Dardanelli, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Trinn & Schulte, 2020). However, once created, these regional authorities have also evolved. Competences have been shifted up or down the governance ladder and sometimes jurisdictional boundaries have been redrawn, from merger and amalgamation processes all the way to possible secession from the domestic polity (Tatham & Mbaye, 2018; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017).

In these reforms, policy-makers have a choice. They not only choose the extent and depth of reform, but also the process by which these reforms are taken forward. Such processes may be voluntary, such as cooperation agreements and consensual mergers between neighboring units. But they may also be coercive, such as the creation of new governance structures subsuming existing institutions or forced mergers between unwilling partners. The success of the more forceful types of reforms very much depends on the willingness of those affected to comply and to make the new institutions work (Afonso & Venâncio, 2019: 19). In other words, gaining support from those directly affected by forced reforms is an important element of successful institutional change.

Indeed, bureaucrats are relevant actors within democratic systems. Of course, bureaucrats are neither legislators nor political decision-takers. However, they matter in the shaping of reform proposals as well as in their implementation. They matter from the street-level administrator to the elite civil servant working in the higher echelons of the bureaucracy (Christensen, 2012; Paquet, 2020). Bureaucracies both shape and constrain reforms, especially when the reform directly concerns the public administration itself (Asatryan et al., 2017; Boon & Verhoest, 2018). Obviously, we do not argue that bureaucrats are the main drivers or shapers of reform. Many other actors play leading roles in reform processes, from politicians to the media, from civil society to interest groups. However, just as the role of bureaucrats should not be overstated, it is equally clear that bureaucrats do play a role and that they may hamper or constrain the reform agenda of elected governments. This contribution aims to further our understanding of bureaucratic support for coerced institutional change. Bureaucrats matter to understand reforms, the more so when they themselves are the object of the reform (Gains & John, 2010; Peters & Pierre, 2008).

In this context, the Norwegian case offers an opportunity to gain some insights into the determinants of support for forced territorial mergers. Norway has undergone a significant regional reform culminating in 2020 with a reduction from 19 to 11 regions. This is the most significant redrawing of its regional map since the introduction of absolutism in the 1660s (Flo, 2014). Crucially, the reform process mixed voluntary and forced dynamics. Norwegian regions could remain intact, merge voluntarily, or be forcefully merged by central government. The reform's stated objectives were to increase regional autonomy, improve regional public services, and cut down on bureaucracy. The format and magnitude of the reform represent an

opportunity to better understand the determinants of support for forced mergers by those most directly affected by it, but also by those key to the success of any reform process: the bureaucrats working in the regional authorities themselves.

We here present the results of a large-scale survey of over 1000 regional bureaucrats. This survey enables us to better understand what shapes attitudes towards forced mergers. Focusing on framing effects, merger preferences, political ideology, and identity effects, we find the following. Typical frames hardly affect attitudes towards forced mergers, with the exception of arguments underlining efficiency gains through a reduction of bureaucracy. These arguments resonate particularly strongly with right-wing bureaucrats and those in favor of the voluntary variant of mergers. Indeed, bureaucracy reduction, right-wing ideology, and support for voluntary mergers constitute a golden triangle of support for forced mergers. Inversely, identity effects, as captured by feelings of attachment, trigger opposition towards coerced institutional change.

The rest of this article is structured as follows. We first present our main expectations regarding the shapers of attitudes towards forced mergers. We then discuss data and methodology before turning our attention to both direct and mediated determinants of support. We conclude with some wider reflections outlining the potency of two countervailing logics: a “logic of discipline” advocating economies of scales, larger units, and streamlined bureaucracies, even if this is against the wishes of the main actors involved; and an “identity logic” which recognizes that feelings of belonging and attachment are powerful shapers of preferences beyond what efficiency and functionality dictate.

## 2 | ATTITUDES TOWARDS FORCED TERRITORIAL MERGERS—FOUR EXPLANATIONS

Research on territorial amalgamation has paid little attention forced mergers (Erlingsson et al., 2020; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). And even less on how regional bureaucrats react to them. Attitudes towards forced territorial mergers may be shaped by a variety of factors. We here focus on four such factors: (1) framing effects in terms of the reform increasing regional autonomy, improving regional public services, and reducing bureaucracy; (2) merger preferences in terms of attitudes towards voluntary mergers; (3) ideological preferences in terms of left–right political preferences; and finally (4) identity effects in terms of feelings of attachment to one's region.

Bureaucrats' assessment of the framing of an institutional reform may affect their level of support for the reform in question. Territorial reforms are framed as serving a variety of purposes. These frames are mobilized by their advocates as legitimizing devices. Some arguments may “stick” and have a greater impact than others, although a variety of arguments are inevitably mobilized. Three classes of arguments are usually invoked when reforming existing territorial institutions. Regional reform can be viewed as a means to increase regional autonomy, improve services, or increase efficiency by cutting bureaucracy. All three considerations tend to gravitate around reform debates (Keating, 2017).

The first consideration regards autonomy. In democratic systems, scholars have documented the multiplication of reforms aimed at increasing territorial autonomy, be it at the regional or at the local level (Dardanelli, 2018; Ladner et al., 2016; Trinn & Schulte, 2020). For example, Marks et al. (2008) highlight a preponderance of institutional reforms since the 1970s. These usually increase autonomy from central government by awarding greater self-rule to the regional level. In a dataset covering 42 democracies over 56 years, they underline that greater

autonomy is the norm: “where we see reform over time, it is in the direction of greater, not less, regional authority by a ratio of eight to one” (Marks et al., 2008: 167). These findings were later found to hold for a wider sample of 82 democracies in the 1950–2010 interval, with a peak in decentralization reforms in the 1990s (Hooghe & Marks, 2016: 52).

A second element motivating territorial reform has been the provision of superior public goods. Through the reform of the territorial architecture of government, one could provide better services to citizens. These arguments are commonly found in the consolidation/fragmentation debates regarding metropolitan governance (Norris, 2001) as well as in the “new regionalism” school of thought (Keating, 1997). They mostly have to do with increased pressure for territorial coordination and planning, improved models of public service delivery, as well as cultivating attractiveness for capital investments and territorial competitiveness (Brenner, 2003, 2004). Many of these arguments find their roots in discussions about the changing nature of state spatiality (Keating, 2013: 72) and evolving functional pressures (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

A third argument is less about the quality of services but rather their efficiency, especially in terms of cutting back on bureaucracy, maximizing economies of scale, and streamlining the administration. As in the case of service quality, these arguments are contested (Blom-Hansen et al., 2020). Some studies highlight that while amalgamation may partially improve public service delivery, it very often has negative effects on local democracy, especially in terms of citizen involvement (Roesel, 2017; Steiner & Kaiser, 2017). Overall, the literature highlights that there can be some efficiency gains through amalgamation, but that these are conditioned by a variety of factors (Afonso & Venâncio, 2019; Hanes, 2015). Despite empirical uncertainty, efficiency gains and bureaucratic streamlining represent key narratives mobilized in times of institutional reform—the more so when it comes to mergers (Blom-Hansen et al., 2020; Callanan et al., 2014). These three justificatory frames can be expected to affect bureaucrats' support for forced territorial mergers. They can be formulated in the following way:

**H1.** Framing effects—perceived importance of arguments linked to the reform.

**H1a.** *The more a bureaucrat considers increasing regional autonomy to be important in the reform, the greater the support for forced mergers.*

**H1b.** *The more a bureaucrat considers improving regional services to be important in the reform, the greater the support for forced mergers.*

**H1c.** *The more a bureaucrat considers reducing bureaucracy to be important in the reform, the greater the support for forced mergers.*

The amalgamation literature has underlined the relevance of consultation processes and of consensus building around merger reforms. Be it in terms of sufficient consultation of the affected citizens (Ryan et al., 2016: 385) or of consensus among political actors (Erlingsson et al., 2015). Despite this, debates on amalgamation have usually revolved around the pros and cons of mergers, to the detriment of questions about processes, be they more top-down or bottom-up. The literature's lack of discussion of questions of processes (forced vs. voluntary) means that some of the fundamental problems of enforcing amalgamation through coercion have been overlooked. Such coercive processes can be at odds with self-government values, and to some extent human rights and individual autonomy too (Erlingsson et al., 2020). When understanding attitudes towards forced mergers, it is therefore of essence to factor in attitudes

towards voluntary mergers. Bureaucratic responses to forced mergers may be driven by the idea of merging or not, but also by the nature of the proposed merger process. We expect that preferences towards amalgamation itself (to merge or not to merge) will shed some light over attitudes regarding processes (forced or voluntary). In other words, if a bureaucrat is in favor of a merger, whether it is forced or voluntary may well become secondary. Preferences over the outcome will take precedence over the process. We formalize this hypothesis as follows:

## **H2.** Attitudes towards voluntary mergers.

**H2.** *The more positive a bureaucrat's views towards voluntary mergers, the greater the support for forced mergers.*

Questions of territorial reform often become entangled in party politics. According to Toubeau and Massetti (2013), political parties will push for territorial reforms based on the relative weight of their strategic incentives (esp. electoral gains), their ideological positioning, and their organizational constraints. In theory, this means that reform can be driven by left-wing and right-wing parties alike. However, a large comparative study based on 31 advanced democracies suggests parties on the economic right are more supportive of decentralization reforms than parties on the economic left, and that this left–right effect outperforms other political dimensions such as those pertaining to cultural liberalism and conservatism (Toubeau & Wagner, 2015: 110).

Clearly regional mergers are a very specific type of territorial reform. And forced mergers even more so. Additionally, the political positions and preferences of bureaucrats remain somewhat of a black box, in part because bureaucrats are reluctant to reveal their ideological inclinations (Tatham & Bauer, 2016). The article by Toubeau and Wagner (2015) nonetheless provides a basis for expecting a positive bias from right-wing bureaucrats towards territorial reform. The more so as the few studies exploring political ideology and territorial amalgamation tend to suggest a positive link between right-wing politics and mergers. Indeed, in an analysis of merger projects in Switzerland, Steiner finds that, while the left–right orientation of the local government does not significantly affect inter-municipal cooperation projects, right-wing orientation does significantly affect the likelihood of concrete merger plans (Steiner, 2003: 563).

At a more abstract level, the rhetoric associated with mergers chimes well with more right-wing and indeed maybe neoliberal views of governmental restructuring. Concepts of efficiency gains and reduction of bureaucracy, of economies of scales, and of larger decentralized units resonate with narratives associated with the right-hand-side of the political spectrum. *Forced* mergers additionally entail difficult questions of democracy, community, and legitimacy (Erlingsson et al., 2015; Erlingsson et al., 2020). Their coercive nature fits with a “logic of discipline” originating from economic liberalism (Roberts, 2011). Indeed, Roberts highlights that, when making decisions on the architecture of government, such a “logic of discipline” shifts the emphasis away from democratic practices and is inclined to impose some constraints on elected officials and citizens (2011: 5). We consequently expect that support for *forced* mergers will be more likely among right-wing bureaucrats than among their left-wing colleagues. We express this hypothesis in the following way:

## **H3.** Political ideology.

**H3.** *The more right leaning a bureaucrat, the greater the support for forced mergers.*

The final explanation has to do with identity effects. Beyond efficiency and functionality, identity and community have been shown to shape preferences for the territorial architecture of government (Keating, 2013: 74–90; Rokkan & Urwin, 1983: 135). Such identity and community logics have formed the basis for an overarching “postfunctionalist theory of governance.” This theory posits that one can only understand governance preferences and structures through the analysis of both functional logics (as driven by externalities and economies of scale) and community logics (as driven by identity and feelings of belonging). Both are constitutive of the observable architecture of government. However, they differ in pre-eminence. The authors of this theory argue that community “is decisive for territorial politics within the state (...) whereas efficiency lies far back in the causal chain leading to jurisdictional reform” (Hooghe & Marks, 2016: 158). Indeed, Hooghe and Marks underscore how identity and community shape demands for self-government and that these in turn tend to take precedence over more nitty-gritty discussions about policy or types of public goods. Hence, while functional pressures often trigger questions over *policy preferences*, community or identity pressures ask difficult questions over *polity preferences* (Hooghe & Marks, 2016: 2).

Such identity effects become particularly relevant in the context of territorial mergers. If identity triggers a discussion about polity shaping rather than policy shaping, then identity will be of prime importance when discussing the territorial boundaries of the polity. One will expect identity to kick-in particularly strongly when territorial jurisdictions are being redrawn on the map (Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013). As Hooghe and Marks indicate, “contestation about the boundaries of the polity has a way of upstaging contestation about policy” (2016: 158). Identity logics are usually driven by ethnic, linguistic, historical, cultural, or geographical factors. They translate into feelings of belonging and attachment, which in turn affect preferences for the territorial architecture of government. We therefore expect that bureaucrats exhibiting a strong feeling of attachment to their region will react rather adversely to proposals to redraw their territory, especially in a forceful, coercive way. We express this hypothesis in the following way:

#### **H4.** Feeling of attachment.

**H4.** *The stronger the feeling of attachment of a bureaucrat to their region, the weaker the support for forced mergers.*

Clearly, the above hypotheses only cover a fragment of the possible explanations of bureaucratic support for forced mergers. However, we do think that framing effects regarding the goals of the reform, support for the voluntary variant of mergers, left–right ideology, and attachment to one’s region are important avenues of research within this field of study. Our theoretical focus is therefore limited to these explanatory factors. Nonetheless, we submit our main explanatory variables to a series of controls. Overall, we include 33 additional variables. These comprise regional factors such as the geographical clustering of regions, population size, unemployment levels, the extent of existing municipal mergers, and center-periphery status. Controls also include individual factors such as a bureaucrat’s educational background, employment domain, status, and experience, as well as previous professional experiences at different levels of government or outside of the public sector (see “Controls” section below and Supplementary Material, Table S1). Finally, we also test for the effect of belonging to forced-merged regions (see Supplementary Material, Figure S2).

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS

We test the above expectations on the Norwegian case. This case is particularly relevant in the study of coerced territorial amalgamations as Norway had hardly changed its regional borders since the 1660s. We here provide some background on the Norwegian reform, some information on how we collected our data, and finally on how we analyze these data.

#### 3.1 | The Norwegian case

In 2017 the Norwegian government announced the merger of its 19 regions (*fylkeskommuner*) into 11 by 2020. This territorial merger process is accompanied by a reform of the competences and tasks of the new regional entities. Both processes have been contested but have nonetheless been implemented.

By the end of the merger process, four regions have remained intact. These are the regions of Rogaland, Oslo (which has a peculiar status, see below), Møre og Romsdal, and Nordland. These regions were unwilling to merge in the first place and central government respected this. The remaining 15 regions merged. Six of them did so willingly. These are Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag (merging into Trøndelag), Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder (merging into Agder), and finally Buskerud and Troms. These two regions were willing to merge but with unwilling partners: with Akershus and Østfold in the case of Buskerud (merging into Viken) and with Finnmark in the case of Troms (merging into Troms og Finnmark). Hence, 10 of the 19 regions either did not merge or merged willingly. Four regions were willing to merge but did not get the merger they identified as acceptable. They were forced into a different merger. These are Vestfold and Telemark (merging into Vestfold og Telemark) and Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane (merging into Vestland). The remaining five regions were unwilling to merge but were nonetheless forced to. These are the Akershus and the Østfold regions which were forced to merge with Buskerud (into the new region of Viken), Hedmark and Oppland (forced into the new region of Innlandet), and finally the Finnmark region. This last region was forced to merge with Troms (into Troms og Finnmark). Overall, 10 regions had their preferences respected (i.e., no merger or a voluntary merger) while nine regions ended up in forced marriage (i.e., a merger with forced partners, or a forced merger *tout court*). Table 1 summarizes this information.

TABLE 1 Regional mergers in Norway

	Central government's merger decision:	
	Respects the preference of the region (i.e., willing merger or did not merge)	Does not respect the preference of the region (i.e., merger with forced partners or forced merger <i>tout court</i> )
Region willing to merge	Nord-Trøndelag, Sør-Trøndelag, Aust-Agder, Vest-Agder, Buskerud, Troms	Vestfold, Telemark, Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane
Region unwilling to merge	Oslo, Rogaland, Møre og Romsdal, Nordland	Akershus, Østfold, Hedmark, Oppland, Finnmark

Note: Authors' compilation based on parliamentary documentation detailing the regions' assessment and review of mergers with neighboring regions (see: Prop. 84 S (2016–2017), 2017).

Norway's regions do not have any constitutional or other legal protection against top-down institutional change. Hence, throughout the process, they could only state their preferences towards the central government, which had signaled its intent to carry out the amalgamation reform even in the absence of agreement. The decision to merge regions by force has been controversial. The parliamentary opposition regularly called for reversals of some or all mergers, while regional politicians have boycotted, tried to halt, and legally challenged the merger processes. Norwegian history has witnessed instances of regional consolidation (and fragmentation) and of periodic institutional reforms in the past (Selstad, 2003). However, the current regional reform constitutes the single largest transformation of regional borders since the 17th century (Flo, 2014).

### 3.2 | Data collection and operationalization

In order to test the above hypotheses, we conducted a survey of regional bureaucrats. The survey ran from November 2017 to January 2018. It covered all of Norway's regions (*fylkeskommuner*) except the Oslo region. Indeed, Norway's capital combines municipal and regional statuses. Hence, the city does not have a separate regional government of its own. Instead, regional matters are directly managed by its local government.

Prior to receiving the survey, each regional administration's management was informed of the forthcoming study. Data collection was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). The survey was run via a web-based survey tool (SurveyXact). Contact details for bureaucrats was collected from the regional governments' websites. 3628 individuals were identified. Those who had not responded to the initial invitation received two reminders at two-week intervals. Of the initial recipients, 1107 responded to the survey in full, yielding a response rate of about 30.5%.

Respondents were on average 49 years old, equally balanced between men and women (52% vs. 48%), having usually completed 4–5 years of higher education, and with about 10 years' experience in the regional administration. Across the three main hierarchical ranks in regional government, 77% of them occupied the lower ranks (advisor/"consultant"), 15% occupied middle management positions, and about 8% occupied top-level management positions. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first and largest Norway-wide survey of regional bureaucrats ever conducted.

Information to test our hypotheses was collected through the survey instrument. Support for forced mergers was operationalized through a simple question enquiring about bureaucrats' stance towards forced mergers on a five-point scale ranging from "very negative" (=1) to "very positive" (=5). Framing effects were captured by three questions enquiring about how important the respondent finds a series of factors regarding the new regional division and governance structure Norway will have through the reform. Three factors were then detailed. They concerned increased regional autonomy, improved public services from the region, and efficiency gains through a reduction of bureaucracy. All were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "not at all important" (=1) to "very important" (=5). Bureaucrats' support towards voluntary mergers was measured on the same scale as that of forced mergers, from a "very negative" view (=1) to a "very positive" view (=5). Political ideology was measured through self-placement on a five-point left–right scale comprising the "left"



(=1), “center-left” (=2), “center” (=3), “center-right” (=4), and “right” (=5). Finally, regarding feelings of attachment, respondents were asked to what degree they feel attached to the region where they are employed, from 1 (no attachment) to 10 (very strong attachment). A translation of the survey questions is provided in the supplementary material (Box S1).

### 3.3 | Controls

Bureaucratic attitudes may be affected by a plurality of factors beyond those of interest in this study. Although we are not theoretically interested in their effects, we nonetheless control for some of them and assess to what extent they affect our variables of interest. We therefore collected additional survey and non-survey data. We distinguish between two broad groups of controls.

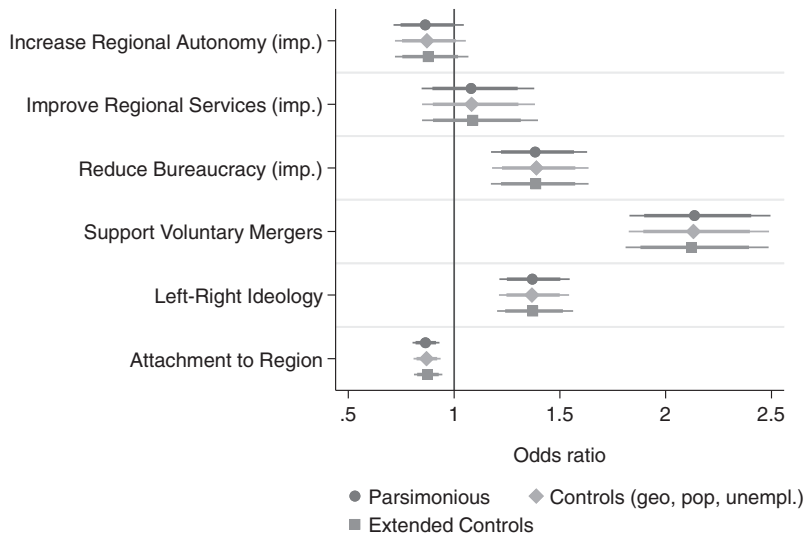
The first group concerns basic demographic, economic, and cultural factors at the regional level. These include regional unemployment levels and demographic weight. They also include broad geographical clustering, more specifically whether the region is situated in the Eastern (Østfold, Akershus, Buskerud, Hedmark, Oppland, Telemark, Vestfold), Southern (Aust-Agder, Vest-Agder), Western (Rogaland, Hordaland, Sogn og Fjordane, Møre og Romsdal), or Central (Sør-Trøndelag, Nord-Trøndelag) part of Norway (with the Northern area of Nordland, Troms, Finnmark serving as reference category). These five geographical areas correspond to the traditional cultural regions of Norway (*landsdel*). Finally, we include an indicator of whether the bureaucrat works in a forcefully merged region or not (see Supplementary Material, Figure S2).

The second group is far broader. It includes the bureaucrat's educational background. This regards the highest educational level achieved (six-point scale, from elementary to PhD-degree), the educational field (Law, Economics, Social Sciences, Humanities, Natural Sciences, with “other” serving as a reference category), and whether education has taken place in Oslo (three-point scale: no, partly, yes). This group of controls also includes employment information. Whether the bureaucrat works in a unit dealing with the environment, planning, the economy, legal services, information technology, culture, education, business enterprise and industry, regional development, or traffic (with “other” serving as reference category). We also collected information on the hierarchical position of the bureaucrat (three-point scale, from advisor/consultant, to middle management, to top management), as well as their length of employment in the regional administration. This group of controls also includes information on past work experience, especially in terms of whether the bureaucrat has experience of working for the state apparatus (be it at the local, regional, or central levels), in local government, and outside of the public sector (all dummies). Finally, we coded information as to the extent to which the respondent's region had been exposed to local government reform (where a merger process has also been underway, dummy for limited vs. larger extent) and the center-periphery status of the region itself within the newly created region (dummy for whether the “old” regional center will serve as the new region's headquarters). The last control is that of the (self-reported) gender of the bureaucrat. Data sources and descriptive statistics for all controls are detailed in the supplementary material (Table S1).

### 3.4 | Methods

The data are analyzed through a series of multilevel models. We employ multilevel methods as we do not expect our data to be independently and identically distributed. Regional bureaucrats are embedded within distinct regions and hence share a number of (observed and unobserved) properties within their regional administration. We explore this expectation empirically by measuring the amount of regional clustering on the outcome variable. The level of intraclass correlation is estimated at around 8.8%. In other words, 8.8% of variation on attitudes towards forced mergers is attributable to regional clustering. We therefore run two-level models with the 18 regions defined as upper-level groups. As our dependent variable takes the form of an ordinal scale, we ran the ordered logit version of our hierarchical model.

Since some variables correlate within our dataset we also check for possible multicollinearity. The variance inflation factor (VIF) for the parsimonious and full models returns overall and individual values which indicate that multicollinearity is not an issue in this study. In the parsimonious model, the average VIF is at 1.19 while the maximum VIF is at 1.39 (Improve regional services). In the full model with all controls, the average VIF is at 1.60 while the maximum VIFs are at 3.91, 3.70, and 3.16, respectively (East, West, and Population). The different multilevel ordered logit models are reported in table format in the supplementary materials (Tables S2–S4).

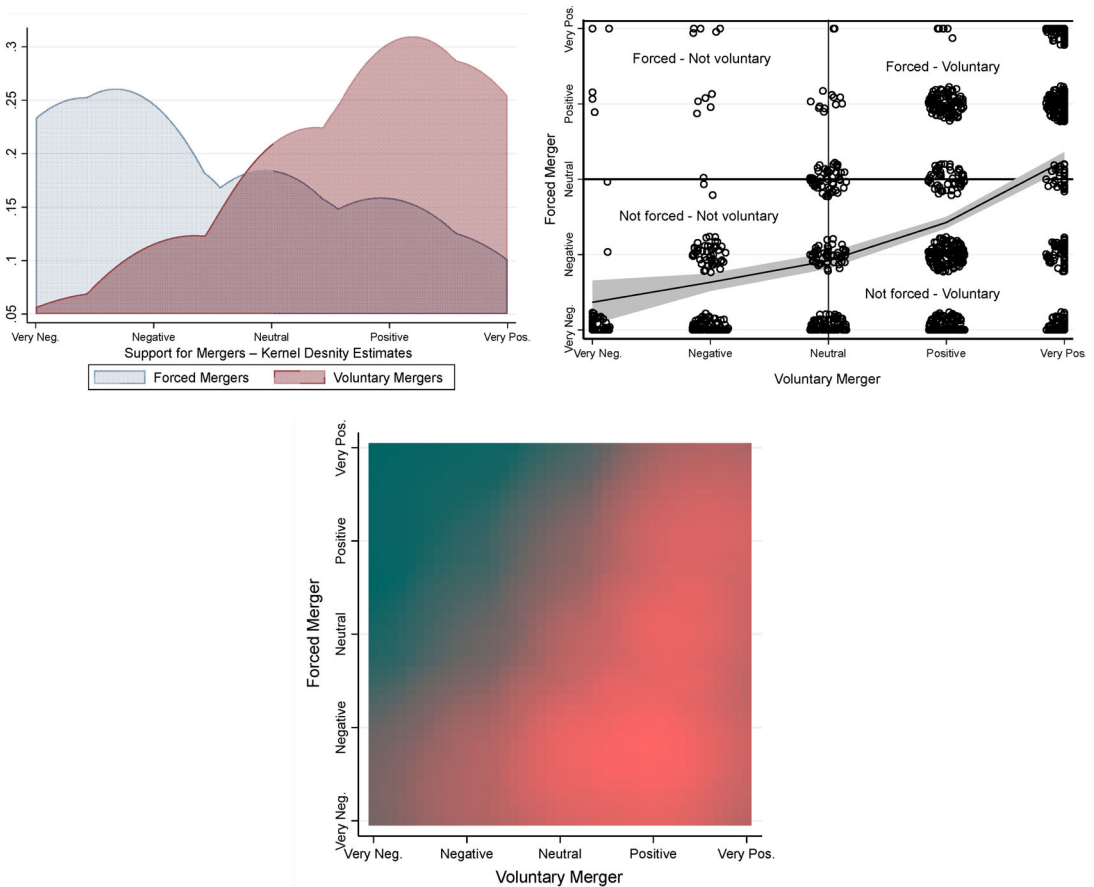


**FIGURE 1** The effect of framing, voluntary merger preferences, left–right ideology, and attachment on support for forced mergers.

Note: Results from multilevel ordered logit models, with regions defined as the upper level ( $n = 18$ ) and bureaucrats defined as the lower level ( $n = 1107$ , except in the final model where  $n = 1105$ ). Odds ratios with 99% and 95% confidence intervals are displayed for three models: (a) a “parsimonious” model including only the variables of theoretical interest, (b) a model with geographical, population size, and unemployment controls, and (c) an “extended controls” model with a 33 individual and regional-level controls. The three models are reported in the supplementary material (Table S2)

### 4 | UNDERSTANDING SUPPORT FOR FORCED MERGERS

Norwegian regional bureaucrats are not in favor of forced mergers. Among the 1107 respondents over half report a negative view. About 33% are “very negative” and 25% are “negative,” representing 58% of respondents. This is a clear majority against. The rest are “neutral” (11%), “positive” (22%), and “very positive” (9%). Hence, while a majority of bureaucrats are against the reform, the average bureaucrat is somewhere between negative (coded 2) and neutral (coded 3) ( $\bar{x} = 2.50$ ). If bureaucrats are generally against the forced variant of the reform, they are far more supportive of a voluntary process. Indeed, less than 17% are against voluntary mergers (“very negative” = 5% and “negative” = 12%). There is a clear majority in favor with about 68% of respondent being either “positive” or “very positive” (evenly split, about 34% each). Overall, the average respondent is situated relatively close to a “positive” attitude (coded



**FIGURE 2** Relation between forced and voluntary mergers.  
 Note: Top-left panel represents kernel density estimates of support for mergers. Light blue shows estimates for forced mergers, dark red for voluntary mergers. Top-right panel represents the bivariate relationship between forced mergers (y) and voluntary mergers (x). The two-by-two matrix classifies observations along the (not) forced-(not)voluntary quadrotomy. Line displays the fractional-polynomial predicted values of forced mergers with 95% confidence interval. Observations jittered. Bottom-middle panel displays a density heat map. Lighter shades of red represent higher densities, darker shades of green represent lower densities

TABLE 2 Summary of dependent and explanatory variables

Explanatory factor	Variable description	Min-max	Mean (SD)	Exp. sign
Dependent variable	Support for forced mergers	1–5	2.50 (1.37)	
Framing effects	Importance of increasing regional autonomy	1–5	4.21 (.93)	+
	Importance of improved regional public services	1–5	4.53 (.75)	+
	Importance of reducing bureaucracy	1–5	3.89 (1.06)	+
Voluntary mergers	Support for voluntary mergers	1–5	3.81 (1.17)	+
Left–right ideology	Self-positioning on the political left–right axis	1–5	2.50 (1.30)	+
Feeling of attachment	Feeling of attachment (to region of employment)	1–10	7.81 (2.11)	–

Note:  $n = 1107$ . Data collected through the survey instrument. Controls reported in the supplementary material. Abbreviation: SD, standard deviation.

4) ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ). Despite their contrasted distributions (see Figure 2, top-left panel) attitudes towards forced and voluntary mergers are nonetheless significantly and positively related ( $r = .44$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This represents an important finding: bureaucrats have opposite views regarding forced and voluntary mergers, resulting in mirror-like distributions, but these attitudes are nonetheless positively associated. Bureaucrats who are enthusiastic about voluntary mergers will dislike forced mergers a little less.

Within the framework of the regional reform, bureaucrats find that improving regional public services is most important ( $\bar{x} = 4.53$ ) followed by increasing regional autonomy ( $\bar{x} = 4.21$ ). Reducing the bureaucracy is still considered as important ( $\bar{x} = 3.89$ ) but only in a tertiary position. Finally, regional bureaucrats come across as somewhat left-wing, placing themselves between the center-left and the center ( $\bar{x} = 2.50$ ). Indeed, about 60% of respondents locate themselves on the left side, while 25% place themselves on the right side. However, irrespective of left–right affinities ( $r = -.04$ ,  $p = .23$ ), Norwegian bureaucrats tend to feel very attached to their region of employment. On a 10-point scale, mean attachment is at 7.81 while the median is at 8. These descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 2.

We evaluate our main expectations in three different models. In a first model, we test our core hypotheses: the three framing effects (regional autonomy, regional services, and reduction of bureaucracy), support for voluntary mergers, left–right ideology, and feeling of attachment. In a second model, we add some regional controls, namely, the region's demographic weight, it is unemployment levels, and it is cultural-traditional *landsdel*. In a third model, we add all remaining controls (see “Controls” section). Figure 1 displays the results of all three models for the variables of theoretical interest. Table-format results are reported in the supplementary material (Table S2), where we also rerun all the analyses controlling for whether the bureaucrat works in a forcefully merged region (Supplementary Material, Figure S2). Our findings are robust throughout.

The first result of note is that the variables of theoretical interest are hardly affected by the inclusion of numerous individual and regional controls. Second, framing effects, on the whole, fare rather poorly. Although bureaucrats consider increasing regional autonomy and improving regional public services of upmost importance in the reform process ( $\bar{x} = 4.21$  and  $\bar{x} = 4.53$ , on a 1–5 scale), these two elements do not buy support for forced mergers. Neither variable has a

stable or significant effect on support for forced merger. While greater autonomy and better public services top the wish-list of bureaucrats going through the territorial reform process, these preferences do not affect their attitudes towards the forced nature of such a process. Regional authority and spatial rescaling may be on the rise (Brenner, 2004; Dardanelli, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Keating, 2013), but they will not generate support for an unconsented redrawing of regional boundaries.

One argument, however, does boost support for forced mergers: that of cutting back on bureaucracy. This relationship comes across as particularly robust. In its bivariate expression, it is quite clear ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ). In a multivariate setting, the returned odds ratios indicate that, with each unit increase on the five-point scale, a respondent is about 38% more likely to support forced mergers. Hence, despite some skepticism in the academic literature as to the extent to which mergers trigger real efficiency gains, arguments about bureaucratic streamlining still hold purchase among bureaucrats themselves (Afonso & Venâncio, 2019; Blom-Hansen et al., 2020; Steiner & Kaiser, 2017). Those who believe in its importance in reform processes are more likely to support forced mergers. Those who value less such arguments are in turn a lot more skeptical of forceful amalgamations between unwilling partners.

One of the most powerful *explanans* of support for forced mergers, however, can be found in attitudes towards voluntary mergers. The literature has highlighted that merger debates tend to overlook the question of the process through which mergers are achieved (Erlingsson et al., 2015; Erlingsson et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2016). The vices and virtues of mergers are discussed while obscuring issues of procedure and method. Following this line of argument, we expected that, when faced with a reform process mixing voluntary and forced mergers, the main dividing line between bureaucrats would be about outcome (merging or not) rather than process (forced or voluntary). Figure 2 provides further information on the relationship between voluntary and forced mergers. Preferences for these two types of mergers are distributed as mirror opposites, with bureaucrats skeptical towards forced mergers and more enthusiastic about voluntary ones (Figure 2, top-left panel). Nonetheless, these preferences correlate positively and significantly (top-right panel,  $r = .44, p < .001$ ). The more one likes voluntary mergers, the less one dislikes forced mergers. This is further illustrated by the density heatmap where the brighter red areas indicate the stronger association patterns (bottom panel). The overall odds ratios are strikingly high. Supporters of voluntary mergers are more than two times as likely to support forced mergers too. Hence, while bureaucrats dislike forced mergers, their enthusiasm for voluntary mergers can lessen such an aversion. We further analyze the differences in support between forced and voluntary mergers in the online Supplementary Material (see Figure S1).

A bureaucrat's left-right placement on the political spectrum also matters. As expected from the literature on the partisan dynamics of territorial reform and municipal mergers (Steiner, 2003; Toubeau & Wagner, 2015), we find that right-wing bureaucrats are more likely to support forced mergers than their left-wing colleagues. This relationship comes across equally in bivariate ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) and in multivariate settings. The effect is of comparable magnitude to that of bureaucratic streamlining. With each right-hand move on the left-right continuum, a bureaucrat is about 37% more likely to support forced mergers.

Finally, as expected from postfunctionalist approaches (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Keating, 2013), we find that identity effects are powerful shapers of preferences towards governance structures. Feelings of belonging express themselves in a variety of ways. However, attachment to one's region will nourish resistance towards its forceful redrawing. Again, this effect is significant in both bivariate ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ) and multivariate settings and its magnitude is not to be belittled. Measured on a 10-point scale, each move up the attachment ladder

decreases the likelihood of supporting forced mergers by 13%. As Zimmerbauer and Paasi had noted in the Finnish case, when under threat from reform processes “regional identity, borders, and symbols become significant, since amalgamations shake the attachments or identities of citizens who have possibly participated in the institutionalization of the regional unit” (2013: 39). Clearly, and probably to a greater degree than ordinary citizens, regional bureaucrats will be particularly sensitive to threats towards the regional milieu they belong to and identify with.

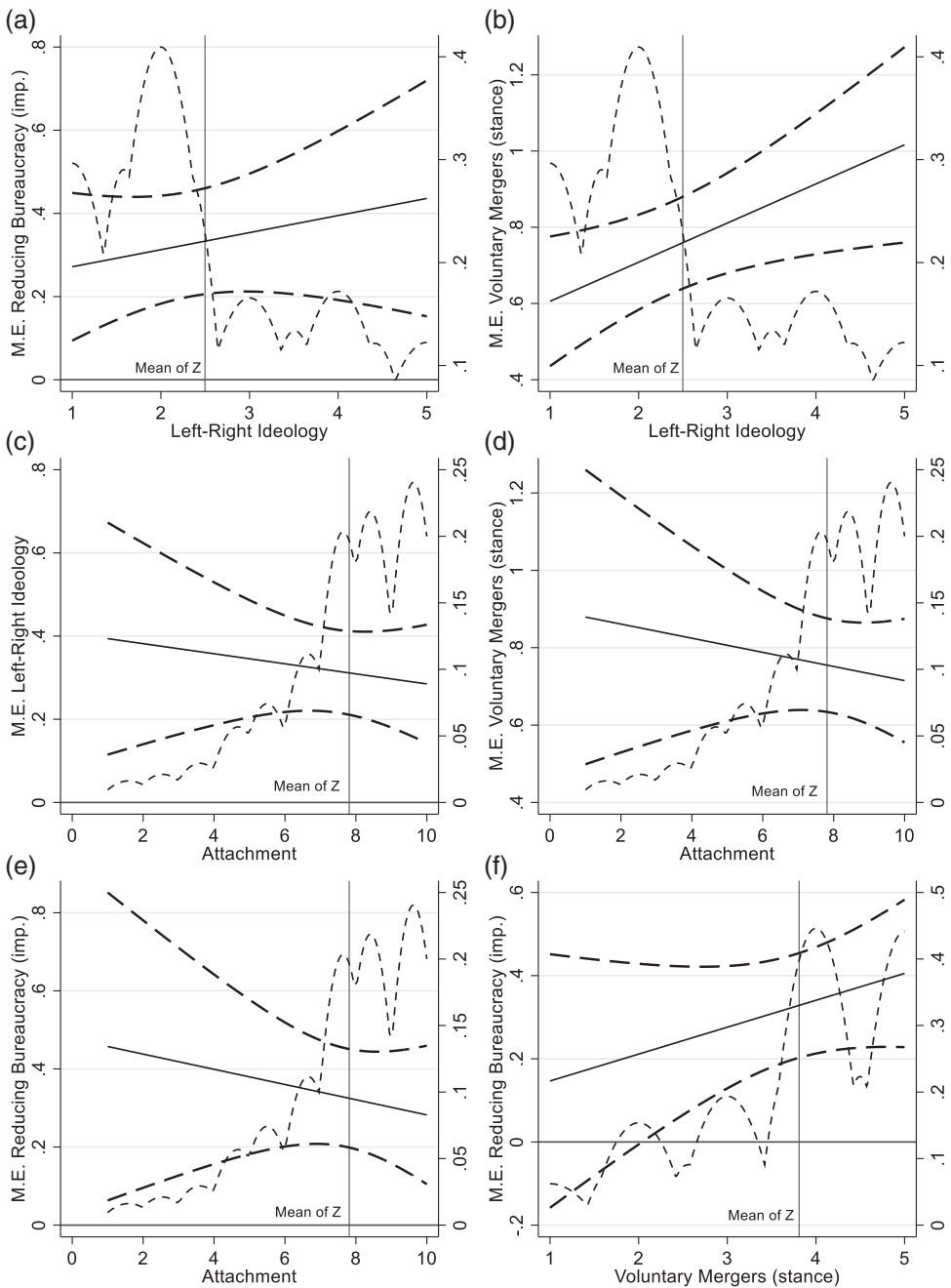
## 5 | INTERACTION EFFECTS AND THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF SUPPORT

While the above effects provide some insights, one cannot help but wonder how the different explanatory variables interact when shaping support for forced mergers. Does attachment mediate the effect of right-wing ideology? Does support for voluntary mergers moderate the impact of preferences for bureaucracy reduction? The study of interactive effects can shed some light on these questions. Multivariate analysis provides an understanding of the direct effect of a given variable while holding all other variables constant. However, in real-world situations, different factors sometimes interact with one another in ways which may boost or dampen their discrete effects. To model this, we run two-way and three-way interaction terms (Berry et al., 2012). These analyses are reported in table format in the supplementary material (Tables S3 and S4).

We assess how the four significant explanatory variables—reduction of bureaucracy, voluntary mergers, left–right ideology, and attachment—interact with one another. Two-way interaction models tell us to what extent the effect of X on Y is conditioned by values on a third variable Z. The two-way interactions reported in Figure 3 enlighten us on a number of conditional dynamics. Our first finding is that attachment dampens the impact of all three other significant variables. Attachment decreases the effect of left–right ideology (panel C), of voluntary merger support (panel D), and of bureaucracy reduction (panel E). In other words, none of these variables are immune to the countervailing effect of identity, as expressed through feelings of attachment. Second, right-wing ideology tends to boost factors of support. While attachment weakens the “supportive” effect of other variables, moving to the right of the political spectrum magnifies the effect of bureaucracy arguments (panel A) and of voluntary mergers (panel B). Finally, we find that the bureaucratic reduction argument gains in potency as support for voluntary mergers increases (panel F).

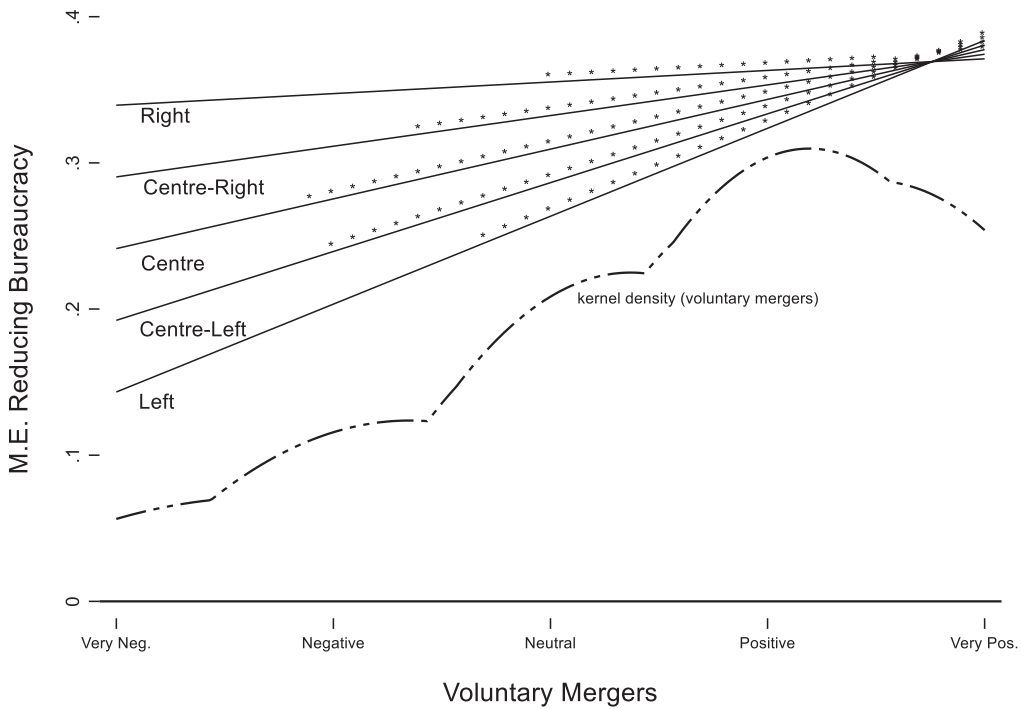
Overall, the two-way interaction analysis brings home two main insights. First, the literature on identity and community has argued that preferences regarding the territorial architecture of government are strongly affected by feelings of belonging and attachment (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Keating, 2013; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013). We here find that feelings of attachment not only have a negative effect on forced merger support, but that this variable also weakens the effect of variables otherwise boosting support for coerced amalgamation. Put otherwise, feelings of attachment trump other considerations when a jurisdiction's borders are being redrawn. Second, factors conducive to greater support tend to magnify one another. In that sense, bureaucratic streamlining, voluntary merger support, and right-wing ideology seem to constitute a “golden triangle” of support for forced mergers.

If these three variables constitute a “golden triangle” of support for forced mergers, how can we better understand the nature of their triangular interaction? How do bureaucratic streamlining, voluntary mergers, and right-wing ideology mutually affect each other on the



**FIGURE 3** The conditional effects of bureaucracy, ideology, voluntary mergers, and attachment on forced mergers.

Note: Conditional marginal effects modeled through two-way interaction terms. Thick dashed lines provide 95% confidence intervals. Thin dashed line is a kernel density estimate of the conditioning variable (*Z*). Vertical straight line is the mean of the conditioning variable (*Z*). M.E. = marginal effects of *X* on *Y*, depending on values of *Z*. All other variables held at their mean. Based on full models reported in the supplementary material (Table S3)



**FIGURE 4** The “golden triangle” of support for forced mergers.

Note: Conditional marginal effects modeled through a three-way interaction analysis. Stars indicate  $p$ -value < .05. M.E. = marginal effects of X (bureaucracy reduction) on Y (support for forced mergers), depending on values of Z (voluntary mergers) and W (left–right ideology). All other variables held at their mean. Based on full the model reported in the supplementary material (Table S4)

question of forced mergers? We explore this more complex relationship by running a three-way interaction effect. Figure 4 shows the effect of bureaucracy reduction (X) on support for forced mergers (Y) as conditioned by support for voluntary mergers (Z) and left–right ideology (W). The results indicate that all three factors positively affect one another to enhance their overall impact. Even in the extreme scenario of a left-wing bureaucrat having a “very negative” view of voluntary mergers, bureaucracy reduction arguments still increase support for forced mergers. However, the views of left-wing bureaucrats will converge with those of right-wing bureaucrats as their support for voluntary mergers increase. In this sense, strong support for voluntary mergers gradually erases partisan differences and amplifies the impact of bureaucratic streamlining arguments. In contrast, strong opposition to voluntary mergers magnifies partisan differences and somewhat dilutes the effect of streamlining arguments.

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

Institutions are living organisms. Once created, they tend to take a life of their own. Path dependencies, sunk costs, institutional stickiness, and barriers to change all highlight the difficulties of reforming existing institutions. Territorial institutions are no different. They can be notably difficult to reform. Nonetheless, reforms do take place. They tend to take one of two



forms. Regional authorities can be empowered/disempowered (Dardanelli, 2018; Hooghe & Marks, 2016) or they can be redrawn through amalgamation/fragmentation processes (Blom-Hansen et al., 2011; Bourdin & Torre, 2021; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017).

In this context, the Norwegian regional reform is both typical and atypical. It is typical in the sense that the reform regards both geography and competences. It is atypical in two ways at least. First, this merger reform is historically unprecedented in that regional borders had been almost unchanged since the 1660s. Second, the merger process came in two variants: voluntary mergers and forced ones. This provides an unusual opportunity for researchers to better understand attitudes towards forced mergers.

We here bring five key findings to the discussion. First, bureaucrats sensitive to efficiency gains through bureaucratic streamlining will be most likely to support forced mergers. Other concerns such as improved regional public services or increased regional autonomy are not relevant to understand support for such coercive processes. Second, those in favor of voluntary mergers are also less likely to oppose forced mergers. Bureaucrats may dislike forced mergers, but eagerness for voluntary mergers may attenuate aversion to the forced variant. Third, right-wing bureaucrats are least averse to coercive processes. Fourth, identity, and especially feelings of attachment to one's region, generate resistance towards forced mergers. This factor is particularly interesting as it has a significant direct effect, but also weakens the effect of variables otherwise increasing support for forced mergers. Fifth and finally, one can identify a "golden triangle" of support for forced mergers consisting of right-wing ideology, a fondness for voluntary mergers, and enthusiasm for bureaucracy reduction.

At a more general level two conclusions seem particularly relevant. First, identity matters. As highlighted by the postfunctionalist literature, identity is a powerful shaper of preferences when it comes to the institutional architecture of government (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Keating, 2021). Identity may be constructed and contested but it nonetheless constitutes a formidable mobiliser (Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013). It will trigger demands for change (such as secession requests in the cases of Catalonia and Scotland) just as it will impede reform processes perceived as a threat (such as the proposed merger of the Brittany region into the larger Pays de la Loire region). This study shows that attachment—as an expression of identity—will generate resistance towards coercive territorial reforms. Policymakers are ill-advised to push for jurisdictional reforms where territorial identity is strong. Second, the analysis of the "golden triangle" of support for forced mergers underscores the linkages between right-wing ideology, beliefs about bureaucratic streamlining, and preferences for mergers. At a certain level, claims about amalgamation, larger units, economies of scale, and bureaucratic reform all echo a broader narrative often circulated by neoliberal discourses of governmental restructuring. Roberts (2011) has commented on the rise of a "logic of discipline" influencing the architecture of government. This logic of discipline tends to be associated with right-wing ideology (economic liberalism more particularly) and beliefs about the necessary rationalization of public authorities. This worldview also tends to be less averse to more coercive, forceful, or constraining measures (Roberts, 2011: 5). Hence, when understanding attitudes towards forced territorial mergers, two logics seem to be at play. A community, identity logic which will generate resistance towards forced change. And a logic of discipline which is more sensitive to neoliberal arguments of bureaucratic efficiency and amalgamation into broader units.

Clearly, this research has limitations and we invite scholars to further explore the contested land of coerced institutional change. We here contribute with an analysis of one type of institutional change: forced territorial mergers. The Norwegian case brings many elements to the debate, in the context of a reform of historic magnitude which mixes voluntary and forced

elements. We invite our colleagues to further study these dynamics on different questions such as other instances of coerced institutional change (e.g., institutional abolition) and on comparable questions of forced mergers but in a different setting (e.g., outside of the Nordic countries). Indeed, Norway remains an instance of “consensus democracy” with high levels of trust in public authorities, of citizen participation in its polity, of transparency, and of accountability (Lijphart, 1999; Narud & Strøm, 2004). Future research will have to establish the extent to which factors affecting support for forced mergers are also at play in other national and cultural settings. Our expectation is that these findings will travel to some degree at least. Indeed, they have already been found to have an impact in country-specific studies as well as in larger comparative analyses. Other studies have highlighted the effects of bureaucratic streamlining arguments (Blom-Hansen et al., 2020; Callanan et al., 2014; Steiner & Kaiser, 2017), of forced versus voluntary processes (Erlingsson et al., 2015; Erlingsson et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2016), of right-wing ideology on territorial reform (Steiner, 2003; Toubeau & Wagner, 2015), and of attachment and feelings of belonging (Hooghe & Marks, 2016; Tatham & Bauer, 2021; Zimmerbauer & Paasi, 2013). We nonetheless encourage further and more diverse research into the determinants of support for coerced institutional change.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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