Autonomous Agencies, Happy Citizens? Challenging the Satisfaction Claim

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Is the delegation of public services to semi-autonomous agencies associated with increased citizen satisfaction? This article assesses three theoretical routes that might link the two: responsiveness, credible commitment, and blame deflection. The article draws on data from the European Social Survey and an expert survey about delegation of tax and police services to semi-autonomous agencies in 15 countries. No supporting evidence was found for the responsiveness and credible commitment theories. Yet semi-autonomous agencies sometimes can absorb or deflect blame for bad performance. In the tax case, dissatisfied service users blame the agency, rather than the government. The presence of an agency worked as a scapegoat for dissatisfied service users and resulted in less dissatisfaction with the government in countries where tax services were delegated.

Citizens' attitudes toward government are an important outcome measure for politicians and administrators, as governments try to render their citizens and voters more satisfied with public services (Boyne 2002; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2008). Structural reforms in the public sector are one of the methods used to enhance satisfaction with the government (Boyne 2003). Politicians claim that "bringing the organizations closer to citizens" will make them more responsive to actual needs, and flexible agencies can adapt more easily to changing requirements (Van Thiel 2001). Behind the scenes, the desire to avoid blame could inform the delegation of service delivery to semi-autonomous agencies as well (Hood 2002). Governments have, indeed, disaggregated the delivery of many core public services from central ministries and created semi-autonomous agencies (Verhoest et al. 2012). Examples of these agencies range from independent market authorities to police forces and tax offices. Despite the widespread proliferation of such semi-autonomous agencies, we know little about the relationship between their presence and the attitudes of citizens they serve. Yet, these reforms are targeting public services in the daily environment of these people, whether it concerns safety on the street or the tax that is collected. Given the abundance of structural changes, and their presence in core government tasks, it is important to gain systematic insight into their relationship with citizens' attitudes toward services, as well as toward government. This article aims to show the relationship between organizational disaggregation and citizens' satisfaction with the service, as well as with the government.

This article tests the claim of increasing satisfaction by focusing on the structural disaggregation of two core functions of government: taxation and policing. Data from the European Social Survey (ESS) is combined with an expert survey on the creation of semi-autonomous agencies (hereafter, agencification) in Europe. The article identifies citizens who have experience with these services and tests differences in attitudes associated with the provider's organizational form (Kelly and Swindell 2003).

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It shows that citizens are equally satisfied with the individual services, regardless of the provider's organizational form (cf. Goodsell 1983; Van De Walle and Van Ryzin 2011). Citizens are not more satisfied when served by semi-autonomous agencies. The organizational form is, however, associated with differences in satisfaction with the government as a whole (see also Tummers, Jilke, and Van De Walle 2014). The analysis shows that citizens who are dissatisfied with individual services are also dissatisfied with government in general. But in the tax case, this effect is moderated by the presence of a semi-autonomous agency. In other words, the agency absorbs dissatisfaction, and creating a tax agency serves as a blame avoidance instrument for governments (cf. Hood 2002). Delegating police tasks to a semi-autonomous agency, however, does not render the same effect. Dissatisfaction with the police remains closely correlated to dissatisfaction with government (cf. Van Ryzin et al. 2004).

Studying citizen satisfaction in relation to organizational reform is important for several reasons. Good governance agendas link satisfaction with the legitimacy of political power; more satisfaction leads to participation in elections (Grönlund and Ferrera 2007). It may, in the long run, lead to political trust (Kampen, Van de Walle, and Bouckaert 2006), and loyalty to a service provider (Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003). Dissatisfaction with the government creates a potential electoral risk for politicians, as it may lead to vote losses for incumbents in the next elections (James and John 2007). A lot has been written about satisfaction with services (Van De Walle and Van Ryzin 2011; Goodsell 1983; Kampen, Van de Walle, and Bouckaert 2006; Van Ryzin et al. 2004). But remarkably little empirical studies are conducted into the association between agencification and citizen satisfaction (an exception is Bertelli 2008). On a practical note, this article contributes to the question: Is worthwhile to disaggregate government organizations to gain citizen satisfaction? Or should policy-makers be more careful with a fragmentation of the public sector to meet future challenges? Theoretically, this article contributes empirical evidence to the debate on agency responsiveness (Bertelli 2006b; Van Thiel 2001), as well as to the debate on blame shifting through the delegation of public tasks (Hood 2002).

Agencification and Satisfaction

Citizen satisfaction has become a main target in public performance, especially since New Public Management proponents have championed the introduction of measurable outcomes. In this article, satisfaction is not only the judgment about a product or service (Van Ryzin 2006, 601), but its definition is extended to a positive general evaluative attitude toward objects or services (James 2009, 108). Satisfaction with the government is, therefore, the overall positive attitude toward government and the services it provides, with dissatisfaction meaning a negative attitude. Both citizen's expectations and government performance influence this attitude (James 2009; Van Ryzin 2006). High-performing public services should increase citizen satisfaction, whereas high prior expectations might temper satisfaction in case of similar performance (Poister and Thomas 2011; Van Ryzin 2004). Politicians consider citizen satisfaction an important subjective outcome of public service, as satisfaction could lead to trust (Kampen, Van de Walle, and Bouckaert 2006). And, perhaps equally important for politicians, dissatisfaction with the government can lead to vote losses for incumbents (James and John 2007).

The difference in satisfaction between individual services and government as a whole is long established (Goodsell 1983; Van De Walle and Van Ryzin 2011). Citizens are often satisfied with personal service in a particular public organization, while they may associate government as a whole with negative emotions. Zussmann (1982) finds

that positive attitudes toward services are usually not generalized to a positive attitude to government as a whole. Yet, Van Ryzin et al. (2004) find that satisfaction with the police was a very strong driver of satisfaction with local government as a whole, much more so than, for example, road maintenance or fire control. Therefore, it can be expected that citizens' attitudes are more positive toward individual services than to government in general and that a generalization of this effect is not self-evident.

Nevertheless, increasing citizen satisfaction is an important driver for the creation of semi-autonomous agencies. In a review of 250 articles in public administration journals about public service delegation, 27% refer to the potential positive impacts on citizens: Delegation could increase satisfaction, trust, or political participation (Overman 2015). The relation between increasing agency autonomy and satisfaction is part of a depoliticization of service delivery (Wood and Flinders 2014). The logics of increasing satisfaction are threefold. First, autonomous organizations should be more responsive; they should be better suited to offer tailored and impartial services to their target groups than core government organizations (Van Thiel 2001). Second, the creation of semi-autonomous agencies facilitates blame shifting, protecting governments' reputations from the negative effects of potential bad service outcomes (Hood 2002). And, third, the creation of arm's length bodies reduces the possibility for politicians to interfere in task executions, which should lead to an increase in political credibility (Bertelli 2006b; Majone 2002). This should lead to increased satisfaction with politics and central government. Before discussing structural reforms to enhance satisfaction, the following section discusses the above three logics in more detail.

Three Mechanisms

First, responsiveness theory presumes that delegation of tasks to semi-autonomous agencies will facilitate managerial discretion in policy implementation and execution. In theory, this discretion facilitates more interaction with citizens, as well as more possibilities for locally tailored service delivery (cf. Van Thiel 2001). Bertelli (2006a) empirically confirms the presence of task discretion in Dutch agencies and finds that the rate of discretion was not moderated by political saliency of the policy field or legislative capacity of the agency. Following this logic, discretion or autonomy should lead to increased responsiveness, which, in turn, leads to a more positive evaluation of public services. More responsive performance is, therefore, expected to result in more satisfaction (DeHoog, Lowery, and Lyons 1990; Van Ryzin 2004).

Second, the blame shifting argument is based on the premise that the transfer of a task to another organization is also a means for governments to reduce the damage of potential bad service performance and, consequently, to protect itself from dissatisfaction. Hood (2002) argues that delegation is a strategy for politicians to hide behind autonomous organizations. Citizens who are dissatisfied with a service will not blame government but, instead, will blame the autonomous organization. Bad service outcomes are at best "deflected" by delegation, resulting in the shift of blame from incumbent politicians to the agency; at worst, blame will be reversed or politicians will share the blame (Hood 2002, 19, 25). Blame can result in dissatisfaction and, therefore, be very costly in terms of vote losses (James et al. 2016). Reputations in politics are usually easier lost than built (Kampen, Van de Walle, and Bouckaert 2006), resulting in a negativity bias: Politicians are more inclined to avoid blame than to claim credit (Weaver 1986).

With negativity bias in mind, certain tasks that involve more risk of reputational damage are more attractive for politicians to delegate than others. These tasks include services prone not only to crises or disasters, to which Hood mainly refers (2002), but

also to unpleasant encounters between government and citizens, such as police officers stopping suspects. Citizens, however, might have a tendency to blame government for bad public service (Van Slyke and Roch 2004). Van Slyke and Roch (2004) find in an American study that when citizens evaluate services negatively, they tend to believe the service provider was part of government: when in fact, they dealt with nonprofits. Mortensen (2013), conversely, shows that popular media attribute less blame to the Norwegian state-level authorities for hospital failure, following a delegation of authority to the regional level.

Credibility theory puts forward a third mechanism. This theory advances that politicians can improve their credibility by delegating tasks to an agency when they want their heritage to live beyond their own time in office as well as when they want to restrain themselves from interference in policy implementation (Bertelli 2006b; Majone 2002; Van Thiel and Yesilkagit 2011). In parliamentary democracies, such as studied in this article, agencies' fates are largely dependent on politics, and new politicians do terminate previously installed agencies (James et al. 2015). But their termination might be less likely if the rationale to create the agency is based on probity (Greasley and Hanretty 2016). Following that rationale, a decision to charge a task to an agency is seen as the willingness of politicians to refrain from interfering in task execution (Van Thiel and Yesilkagit 2011). In that case, delegation is not considered a credible commitment to a policy, but it is a commitment to probity and independent decision making. Such depoliticization can improve the quality and impartiality of policy implementation, and it should improve political credibility (Batory 2012; Knott and Miller 2006; Majone 2002). Impartiality and fair process are important factors influencing overall satisfaction; some authors argue that process even outweighs outcomes in terms of influence on satisfaction (Braga et al. 2014; Mentovich, Rhee, and Tyler 2014).

The commitment to probity can, equally, bind the hands of future political principals. For both tax authority and police tasks, a commitment to independent decision making is important for citizen satisfaction (Braga et al. 2014). Terminating a semi-autonomous agency, then, involves potential damage to a reputation for stable and credible governance (Greasley and Hanretty 2016), even though the reputation effect is contested as attention fades quickly after agency termination (Bertelli, Sinclair, and Lee 2015). At the same time, the establishment of a semi-autonomous agency facilitates continuity in service delivery, which also positively influences service users. Research in marketing shows that continuity and satisfaction with services are strongly intertwined concepts. On the one hand, service continuity leads to customer satisfaction, while on the other hand, satisfaction enhances loyalty to the provider (Bolton 1998; Hess, Ganesan, and Klein 2003). Public services should not be an exception to these findings.

Hypotheses

The three mentioned logics of delegation all point in the same direction: the transfer of tasks to semi-autonomous agencies leads to an increase in citizen satisfaction, or a decrease in dissatisfaction. The overarching expectation for this article is, therefore: public service delivery through agencies with more autonomy is associated with more satisfied citizens. Based on the three logics, three separate hypotheses are formulated.

*Hypothesis 1: The transfer of tasks to semi-autonomous agencies facilitates a more responsive service delivery and is, therefore, associated with higher satisfaction with **services**.*

Blame-deflection theory implies that a semi-autonomous agency's unsatisfied users are more satisfied with government in general than unsatisfied service users served by government itself. Therefore,

*Hypothesis 2: Semi-autonomous agencies serve as a shield to deflect blame for bad service outcomes, and their unsatisfied users are not dissatisfied with the **government** as a whole.*

The last hypothesis is based on credibility theory. Delegation of task execution confirms a government's commitment to independent policy implementation, which increases citizen satisfaction with their government. Therefore,

*Hypothesis 3: The transfer of public services to semi-autonomous agencies is associated with higher citizen satisfaction with the **government**.*

Task properties could influence the results, although evidence about task or sector effects on performance in agencies is mixed (Pollitt 2006; Van Thiel and Yesilkagit 2014). Experiences with police authorities could lead to more negative attitudes, whereas in most other services, experience had a positive effect on attitudes (Kelly and Swindell 2003). Taxation, for example, is a more administrative task than policing, and experience with this organization takes often place in a less distressing situation for citizens. The Discussion section will go deeper into the role of different tasks and their potential effects.

Research Design

Individual-Level Data

The individual-level data for this article are collected through the ESS Waves 4 and 5, fielded in 2008–2010. Wave 4 had a special set of questions regarding attitudes toward tax collection. Therefore, this wave is used to analyze the taxation case. The police case is studied using Wave 5, which had a particular set of questions regarding attitudes toward policing. The ESS provides data that are gathered according to exceptionally high standards concerning sampling strategy and coverage. Sampling strategy, translation, and administrative details can be found at http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/. Data on citizen satisfaction are studied in 15 European countries where there was information available on the organizational type of the particular service provider. These countries include: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Wave 4 provides data on 30,046 individuals in these countries; Wave 5 provides data on 29,250 individuals.

The analyses were conducted on a subsample of the data that consists of people who have been in contact with the police or the tax authorities. The focus on these two services is informed by three reasons. First, these services represent core government tasks. All governments in the current sample (and, indeed, virtually all governments around the globe) carry out this task. Citizens are also likely to associate these tasks with government (Van Ryzin 2004). Second, there is a relatively even distribution of semi-autonomous agencies versus government units that deliver these services in the sample of countries. This facilitates a comparison between the deliveries by differently structured organizations. See Table 4 in the section "Country-Level Data" for more details on this distribution. Third, the ESS asked respondents specific questions about these two services in the two rounds that were analyzed. The ESS 2010 wave specifically asked respondents whether they had been stopped, approached, or contacted by a police officer. The subsample in the police case consists of respondents

TABLE 1
Satisfaction with Government

| | 2008 | | 2010 | |
Wave	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Belgium	4.82	2.04	4.46	2.32
Denmark	6.49	2.41	5.51	2.33
Estonia	4.49	2.26	5.37	2.36
Finland	7.07	1.77	6.45	2.05
Germany	5.13	2.12	4.56	2.22
Hungary	2.72	2.01	5.30	2.55
Ireland	3.70	2.17	4.49	2.31
Israel	4.70	2.36	4.60	2.37
The Netherlands	6.57	1.74	6.18	1.84
Norway	6.23	2.01	6.23	1.94
Portugal	4.29	2.23	3.15	1.92
Spain	4.99	2.23	3.72	2.14
Sweden	6.17	2.17	7.10	2.07
Switzerland	6.90	1.81	6.81	2.00
United Kingdom	4.51	2.19	5.01	2.39

Note: Based on ESS 2008-2010 subsets, multiply imputed data. Variable measured on a 11-point ordinal scale. $N = 16{,}204$ (2008); 10,856 (2010).

who positively answered this question. The ESS 2008 wave asked respondents about their attitude toward the tax authorities. People who report to do paid work were selected for the subsample in the tax case. It is assumed that all workers who receive salary are in contact with the tax authorities in the respective countries.

The ESS measures a respondent's satisfaction with the government by asking respondents: "Now thinking about the [country] government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?" to measure this variable. Answer options range from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied) or "don't know." Satisfaction levels are somewhat left-skewed, indicating that respondents in these subsamples are generally reporting satisfaction levels under the middle category. In this article, the answers on the 11-point scale are treated as an interval variable. Table 1 presents average satisfaction levels per country for both questionnaires.

The 2008 version of ESS included a section on taxation and a question on the tax authorities, asking respondents about their attitude toward the tax authorities. The phrasing of the question was: "And how efficient do you think the tax authorities are at things like handling queries on time, avoiding mistakes and preventing fraud?" The question does not explicitly state satisfaction, but the attitude that is probed falls within the definition of a positive general evaluative attitude toward the service. Respondents could answer the question on a 11-point ordinal scale, ranging from extremely inefficient to extremely efficient; see Table 2 for country averages. In 2010, ESS measured satisfaction with the police for those respondents indicating they had been stopped, approached, or contacted by the police during the past two years. The question was: "How dissatisfied or satisfied were you with the way the police treated you the last time this happened?" Answer possibilities ranged from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, on a five-point ordinal scale. Like the scale for satisfaction with the government, this scale is treated as an interval scale. Both variables are somewhat right-skewed.

Table 3 presents further individual-level variables included in the models. These include gender, educational background, income, and age, as older people tend to be more satisfied with government (Christensen and Lægreid 2005). Age is measured in

TABLE 2
Attitude Toward Public Service Provision

	Tax		Police	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Belgium	6.07	2.01	3.67	1.14
Denmark	6.93	2.10	3.70	1.46
Estonia	6.90	2.06	3.78	1.03
Finland	7.78	1.80	3.94	1.12
Germany	6.28	2.21	3.55	1.25
Hungary	5.86	2.67	3.17	1.19
Ireland	6.20	2.17	3.76	1.29
Israel	6.67	2.35	2.95	1.36
The Netherlands	6.08	2.02	3.64	1.20
Norway	6.51	1.81	3.66	1.34
Portugal	5.67	2.15	3.55	1.03
Spain	6.82	2.34	3.63	1.13
Sweden	6.99	1.89	4.03	1.06
Switzerland	7.09	2.12	3.61	1.27
United Kingdom	5.77	2.20	3.68	1.32

Note: Based on ESS 2008 (tax) and 2010 (police) subsets, multiply imputed data. Variable measured on a 11-point ordinal scale (tax) and a 5-point ordinal scale (police). $N = 16,204$ (tax); 10,856 (police).

years; education represents the number of years of education that a respondent indicates to have enjoyed. For gender, male respondents are dummy-coded with female respondents as a reference category. For income, the ESS applies a 12-point ordinal scale to measure household income in 500 euro increments. Political orientation is measured on a 10-point ordinal scale, with higher numbers representing a more right-wing orientation. This measure is treated as a continuous variable.

Most of the items in the data have a nonresponse under 1%, but more than 7% of the answers on income are missing. Missing data from respondents on specific items may lead to biased model estimates when the nonresponse is not at random. Deleting the respondents with missing items is the default routine, but this might seriously bias the model outcomes (Allison 2002). Multiple imputation of missing data is used to solve this problem (Van Buuren 2007). The missing values are generated, based on a regression model using the values for the observed variables, and refined in following iterations, thereby realizing a Gibbs sampler (Van Buuren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn 2011).

TABLE 3
Individual-Level Variables, Descriptive Statistics

		2008		2010	
	Range	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Male	0–1	0.52	–	0.57	–
Education	0–50	13.65	3.93	13.26	3.98
Income	1–10	6.38	2.55	5.66	2.82
Age	15–123[a]	42.35	12.59	43.76	16.62
Right-wing orientation	1–11	6.11	2.06	6.21	2.10

Note: Based on ESS 2008–2010 subsets, multiply imputed data.

[a]One respondent in the 2008 data has a calculated age of 123 years, based on the reported year of birth; one respondent in the 2010 data has a calculated age of 101. All others reported a year of birth associated with an age under 95 years.

TABLE 4
Descriptive Statistics of Country Characteristics

	Range	N	Mean	SD
Tax authorities as semi-autonomous agency	0–1	15	0.47	—
Police forces as semi-autonomous agency	0–1	12	0.58	—
Income tax level	17.01–42.72	15	27.12	8.22

Note: Sources in text.

This pattern is repeated five times to create five data sets. The estimates from the analyses based on these data can be combined and interpreted, and form the basis of the further analyses (Rubin 1987; Stegmueller et al. 2012).

Country-Level Data

As mentioned, autonomy is supposed to link agencification to citizen satisfaction. Yet, the extent of autonomy varies greatly between agencies—among other things, because of organizational type and form (Verhoest et al. 2012). There is a plethora of organizational forms of semi-autonomous agencies; they cover a broad type of organizations between the central government and the private sector. There are three important features that distinguish them from other organizations (Talbot 2004): Agencies (1) are structurally disaggregated from a ministry, (2) carry out public tasks, and (3) operate under contractual conditions. Other features of autonomy depend on the legal conditions and politico-administrative traditions of a country. Consequently, there is no single form of agencies; internationally, many different kinds and types have been set up (Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Ongaro 2010; Pollitt and Talbot 2004; Verhoest et al. 2012). This article is limited to the effects of legal autonomy. Other sources of autonomy are, for example, agencies' strategic resources (Overman, Van Thiel, and Lafarge 2014; Verhoest et al. 2010).

Van Thiel (2012) categorizes the organizations into three types based on agencies' organizational structure as compared to central government. These types vary somewhat over countries, but are a useful taxonomy. Type 1 agencies have no legal entity, and some autonomy from their parent ministry, such as the Nordic State Agencies or British Next Steps agencies. Their budgets are separate from the parent ministry's budget and they often practice accrual accounting. Type 2 agencies are legally independent, based on statutes, such as British NDPBs or statutory bodies. These organizations can have public or private legal entities. Type 3 agencies are private-law-based organizations, established by, or on behalf of, the government, such as state-owned enterprises and foundations (cf. Greve, Flinders, and Van Thiel 1999). In this article, semi-autonomous agencies (Type 1) are compared to central ministries as units of government.

The two sectors that will be highlighted in this article are the police authorities and tax collection. These sectors both represent core government functions: policing and taxation. Table 4 shows agencification patterns and additional country-level variables per country. Data are collected by Van Thiel et al. (2009) using an expert survey and relies, therefore, on expert judgments rather than objective data. This survey was sent out to scientists in all countries that were included in this article. These experts were asked to indicate the organizational form that was used to deliver specific public services, including police and tax authorities. The organizational form was categorized and explained by the expert-respondent, using the typology described above. In case of uncertainty, Van Thiel contacted the respondent to clarify and, if needed, to adjust the responses (personal communication, August 18, 2015).

Police authorities generally have a small legal distance to the central government. In two of the countries studied here, the United Kingdom and Sweden, the police force is a subnational government task. In all other countries in this article, the police are either a government unit or a Type 1 agency. There are five countries where the police is a government unit and seven where the police are a Type 1 agency. In most countries, tax is collected by organizations that are close to central government; taxes are collected either by government itself or by a semi-autonomous agency (Type 1). No countries have organized their national tax collection services in agencies that are more distant to central government. In total, seven countries have a government unit collecting tax, while nine countries have established a semi-autonomous tax agency.

In the tax case, the models control for income tax, as well as corporate tax levels. These levels could influence respondents attitude toward the tax authority and government in general. Moreover, these levels are a proxy for the type of welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). OECD measures these levels at various wage levels and for a number of family compositions. In this article, the income tax rates for single-person households at 100% were used, as well as the combined corporate income tax rate. All figures are for 2010 and available through http://stats.oecd.org/.

Analytical Strategy

The combined individual-level and country-level data were analyzed in two steps. In the first step, the goal was to explain the satisfaction with services. Results support or reject Hypothesis 1, which stated that satisfaction with individual services would be positively influenced by agencification. A multilevel regression model explained satisfaction with tax authorities for wage receivers and police treatment for respondents that were contacted by a police officer.

In the second step, a model was designed to explain satisfaction with the government in general, using the presence of semi-autonomous agencies as a predictor. This strategy facilitates testing Hypothesis 3: The positive attitude that arises from the positive service evaluation will trickle down to satisfaction with government in general. The blame deflection argument predicts that negative evaluations of specific services will not translate into a negative attitude toward government in general, but instead the effect is moderated by the presence of a semi-autonomous agency (Hypothesis 2). To test this hypothesis, a dummy variable was included for dissatisfied service users. In the tax case, this concerned respondents with an answer score of 6 or lower. In the police case, this concerned all respondents with an answer score ranging from very dissatisfied to neither dissatisfied nor satisfied. The dummy specification divides the scales in two parts, including the middle answer category in the group of dissatisfied service users as the distributions were right-skewed.[1]

The models were tested using multilevel regression analysis (Snijders and Bosker 2012). This method of analysis is appropriate because individual respondents are nested in countries. The multilevel model accounts for heterogeneity across countries (Gelman and Hill 2007). Moreover, multilevel analysis facilitates testing the interaction between individual-level characteristics and country-level characteristics. The models that were tested included varying intercepts for all countries in the analysis. Multilevel regression modeling was, indeed, originally developed for relatively large numbers of groups (Snijders and Bosker 2012). It should be noted that this article uses a relatively low number of countries to test the model, which limits the statistical power of the current model (Scherbaum and Ferreter 2009).

TABLE 5
Multilevel Regression Results, Satisfaction with Service

	Tax	Police
(Intercept)	5.99 (0.84)**	2.81 (0.13)**
Income tax	−0.02 (0.02)	—
Corporate tax	0.02 (0.04)	—
Male	0.05 (0.03)	−0.12 (0.03)**
Age	0.01 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)**
Education	0.02 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.00)*
Income	−0.02 (0.01)**	0.03 (0.01)**
Right wing	0.01 (0.01)	0.02 (0.01)**
Semi-autonomous agency	0.16 (0.30)	0.09 (0.15)
Deviance	70,518.99	27,146.74
AIC	70,540.99	27,164.74
AIC difference	20.38	7,888.49

Note: Unstandardized estimates; standard errors in parentheses. AIC differences compared to model with country intercepts only.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$.

Results

Satisfaction with Services

The first part of the analysis focuses on satisfaction with service delivery by the tax authorities and police. Table 5 shows that in general, older and more educated respondents in the current sample are somewhat more satisfied, which is generally in line with prior studies (Christensen and Lægreid 2005). Men are less satisfied with the police than women, which is in contrast to the findings by Braga et al. (2014). This finding might be due to the nature for which they were contacted, as men are more often criminal suspects than women (Stolzenberg and D'Alessio 2004). Of the people who were contacted by the police, those who consider themselves as more right wing have a more positive attitude toward their encounter. Respondents with a higher income tend to be less satisfied with the tax authorities. In both cases, respondents are, on average, neutral to satisfied with the service delivery. This is consistent with prior findings on satisfaction with individual service delivery (Goodsell 1983; Kelly and Swindell 2003; Van De Walle and Van Ryzin 2011). There is hardly a difference between the service delivered by a semi-autonomous agency or by a government unit. In both cases, satisfaction does not have a statistically significant effect on satisfaction with the service. These findings reject Hypothesis 1.

Satisfaction with the Government

Table 6 shows the estimated effect sizes and standard errors of the three models with satisfaction with the government as a whole as a dependent variable. Models 1 and 2 estimate the effects of the presence of a semi-autonomous tax agency on satisfaction with the government. Models 3 and 4 show a similar model for the presence of semi-autonomous police authorities. These models show the mostly similar effects of age, education, political orientation, and income on the attitude toward government as in the previous analysis. The tax levels in the countries under study do not influence satisfaction with the government.

TABLE 6
Multilevel Regression Results, Satisfaction with Government

	Tax		Police	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(Intercept)	3.59 (1.60)**	3.63 (1.60)**	3.64 (0.45)**	3.62 (0.45)**
Income tax	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	—	—
Corporate tax	0.06 (0.07)	0.06 (0.07)	—	—
Male	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	0.08 (0.05)*	0.08 (0.05)*
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)**	−0.00 (0.00)**
Education	0.02 (0.00)**	0.02 (0.00)**	0.01 (0.01)*	0.01 (0.01)
Income	0.06 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**
Right wing	0.06 (0.01)**	0.06 (0.01)**	0.13 (0.01)**	0.13 (0.01)**
Semi-autonomous agency	−0.60 (0.58)	−0.67 (0.58)	0.59 (0.56)	0.62 (0.56)
Dissatisfaction with service	−0.71 (0.03)**	−0.78 (0.06)**	−0.49 (0.05)**	−0.43 (0.08)**
Dissatisfaction * agency	—	0.12 (0.07)*	—	−0.10 (0.11)
Deviance	69,721.07	69,718.20	37,236.57	37,235.72
AIC	69,745.07	69,744.20	37,256.57	37,257.72
AIC difference	583.06	1.13	294.74	−1.15

Note: Unstandardized estimates; standard errors in parentheses. AIC differences in Models 1 and 3 compared with model with country intercepts only.
** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$.

First of all, the effect of the presence of a semi-autonomous agencies is not statistically significant in any of the models. Whether a service is delivered by government itself or by a semi-autonomous agency does not influence respondents' opinions about government in these two cases. These results do not offer support for the credible commitment hypothesis (Hypothesis 3). Based on these results, it is not possible to conclude that the presence of a semi-autonomous agency is associated with higher satisfaction levels for service users.

The effect of dissatisfaction with a specific service on satisfaction with the government is, however, clear and statistically significant. Service users who indicate dissatisfaction with either tax authorities or police authorities are less satisfied with the government as a whole. The models show a 6% decrease in satisfaction with government when citizens are unsatisfied with the tax authorities. Citizens who are unsatisfied about an encounter with the police report 4% less satisfaction with their government. In other words, the dissatisfaction with any of these two individual services is associated with a decrease in satisfaction with the government.

An important finding is the statistically significant interaction effect in Model 2. The blame avoidance logic is, indeed, supported in the tax case. The dissatisfaction effect is positively moderated by the presence of an agency. The dissatisfaction effect is 15% lower for taxpayers who are in contact with a semi-autonomous tax authority, compared to their counterparts in countries where the tax authority is part of government. This shows that part of the negative attitude that dissatisfied people bear against the tax authority is deflected by the agency and does not trickle down to central government. But this effect is only visible in the tax case, not in the police case. There, the interaction effect is statistically nonsignificant (Model 4). This is in line with the findings by Van Ryzin et al. (2004), who show that attitudes toward the

police have strong implications for people's opinions of government in general. The next section will discuss the results in further detail.

Discussion

Some limitations should be appreciated when interpreting the results from this article. First, this article did not employ longitudinal data. It remains, therefore, impossible to draw conclusions about causes and effects. Second, the results are based on the analysis of two cases in 15 European countries. Therefore, the possibilities to generalize beyond the current data remain limited and generalizations should be made with caution. Both tax authorities and police are functions that usually remain closely held by governments, in particular as a result of the security matters with which the police are dealing (Wood 2014). Other public services, such as health, education, and cultural organizations might be granted more de facto autonomy if organized as a semi-autonomous agency. The low number of countries also yield limited statistical power to the model. Here, this article is bound to data limitations, which is an unfortunate consequence of using secondary data. But future research should explore the effects of agency creation in these sectors and beyond the current countries. Third, citizens' attitudes were measured using perception data from a survey. This could potentially threaten measurement validity, especially in case of satisfaction reports. The ESS, however, relies on exceptionally high standards regarding measurement strategy. Future studies should investigate the complexity of citizens' attitudes in individual cases within their respective context. With these limitations in mind, let us turn to discussing results and conclusions.

Looking at citizens' attitudes toward public services, this study finds that citizens are generally neutral to satisfied with individual contact and services, based on their experiences. This is in line with earlier findings on satisfaction with public services (Goodsell 1983; Kelly and Swindell 2003). In contrast to NPM proponents' expectations, however, there is hardly a difference between attitudes to services delivered by semi-autonomous agencies or by government units. These findings refute claims about agencification, such as formulated in Hypotheses 1 and 3. The organizational disaggregation is not associated with more satisfied service users. There might be two explanations. Performance and responsiveness could be equal in semi-autonomous agencies and government units, unlike NPM proponents claimed (see Van Thiel 2001). This would imply that satisfaction would not be a valid reason for politicians to disaggregate public service delivery. Another explanation could be that citizens increased their expectations (James 2009; Van Ryzin 2004). Semi-autonomous agencies might brand themselves differently, raising their own performance bar. Future research could tease out the potential differences in expectations by citizens from semi-autonomous agencies. As most citizens are not aware of the type of organization that serves them (Van Slyke and Roch 2004), the most likely explanation is that organizational autonomy does not help to satisfy citizens.

The present article provides some evidence for blame deflection through the delegation of services (cf. Mortensen 2013). In both cases, there was a strong correlation between dissatisfaction with the service and dissatisfaction with government (cf. Zussman 1982). But in each of the two cases, alternative patterns were identified. Dissatisfied taxpayers who are served by semi-autonomous tax authorities are associated with a moderate decrease in the negative attitude toward the government than those served by a unit of government. Dissatisfaction with tax authorities, thus, has a somewhat stronger impact (about 15%) on satisfaction with government in countries where this service is not delegated to a semi-autonomous agency. In other words, delegating

tax collection can be slightly favorable for governments wanting to protect themselves from blame for bad performance. Experience with semi-autonomous police authorities, on the other hand, is not associated with differences in satisfaction with the government. Instead, there might be an inverse effect, even if that effect was statistically insignificant in the current model. These results raise new questions. Why are these patterns different from one another? The tasks these organizations perform could explain some differences. Attitudes toward the police showed to be important for citizens to determine their attitude toward government as a whole (Van Ryzin et al. 2004). Van Ryzin et al. (2004, 338–339) suggest that dissatisfaction with a basic need such as personal safety might engender corresponding feelings with the government. Future research should focus on a larger group of tasks to increase our understanding of these effects.

This study did not find evidence for the credible commitment argument (cf. Bertelli 2008). This could be due to the actual absence of such an effect in these two cases. Neither tax collection nor policing are policies or services that a future government is likely to abolish, nor are the organizational forms of these two services highly politicized in the countries under study. Moreover, citizens might not be aware of a structural disaggregation and continue to consider these services as core government services. Credible commitment to the two *tasks* is, therefore, unlikely to be a driver for the decision to disaggregate these services. But the impartial and fair *task execution* remains important in both policy fields. The absence of an effect can, therefore, also point to satisfaction with the status quo in the sample under study. Potential (dis)satisfaction effects may occur only as specific events, such as agency creation or termination. Yet future research should further attempt to tease out these possible effects by looking at effects of agency creation and termination, also in other policy sectors, and including the alignment between individual preferences and political circumstances. Supporters and opponents of a government could have different opinions about the desirability of a commitment to a policy and independent policy implementation. This might, in particular, be the case with other tasks, such as science, education, and the arts, for which tasks a semi-autonomous agency is in place in many of the countries in this study. A government's decision to restrain themselves from interference in these areas might be reflected in citizens' attitudes toward government following a delegation of such a specific service or policy.

Concluding Remarks

This study has tested the relationship between the creation of semi-autonomous agencies and citizen satisfaction. Overall, the organizational form of public service delivery, at best, explains a small part of citizen satisfaction. It found support, albeit limited, for the blame-shifting logic in the case of delegation to semi-autonomous agencies (Hood 2002). Semi-autonomous tax authorities absorb some of the blame for bad performance for the government. These results imply that a blame-shifting strategy can work in some cases, but not in all (cf. James et al. 2016). The police case showed that citizens who are dissatisfied with the police are equally negative about the government, whether or not policing is delegated to a semi-autonomous agency. The empirical support for blame shifting has important consequences. Semi-autonomous agencies that shield politicians from blame can serve as a political instrument to protect an incumbent's reputation. Negativity bias provides politicians with an incentive to create or keep semi-autonomous agencies as a potential scapegoat, in case problems arise in service delivery. That conclusion would be an additional explanation for the weak explanatory power that service performance has on agency death

(James et al. 2015). As James et al. (2015) notes, "politics trumps performance" in agency politics.

This study's findings did not support responsiveness theory (cf. Van Thiel 2001): There were no statistically significant differences in the satisfaction with service delivery between semi-autonomous agencies and government units. This could be the result of equal responsiveness, irrespective of the organizational form in which a public service is offered. If so, then bringing services closer to citizens would not help to increase service responsiveness to citizen needs.

The political credibility argument, lastly, was not supported by the current findings (cf. Bertelli 2008). These conclusions fit in a wider discourse that compares the credible commitment argument to the blame shifting logic, as Bertelli et al. (2015, 1179) note about parliamentary systems: "We see that the story is more compatible with blame shifting rather than solidifying commitments to extend beyond the tenure of a sitting government." Nevertheless, this is not a call for abandoning credibility theory in the study of semi-autonomous agencies in parliamentary democracies, which would throw out the baby with the bath water. As Greasley and Hanretty (2016) show, credible commitments to regulation and probity in policy implementation remain important in our understanding of agency politics. Effects of credible governance might well protrude into citizens' attitudes toward public service delivery, in particular at times of agency creation or agency termination. Future studies should focus on how citizens develop their attitudes toward to determine the applicability of credibility theory.

Even though it is difficult to generalize beyond the tasks that were studied in this article, there are some practical implications of the findings in this article for policymakers. The structural disaggregation of agencies to deliver public services is no simple solution to enhance citizen satisfaction per se. It should be thoroughly evaluated whether disaggregating a specific task will have a positive effect on citizens' attitudes toward the government. In some cases, such as in the tax case in this study, blame deflection can be observed, but this does not seem to work in the police case. Combined with the notion that agencification is associated with negative effects on public sector efficiency (Overman and Van Thiel 2016), the decision to set up a semi-autonomous agency to deliver public tasks could be costly and might yield less than expected.

Acknowledgments

Note

1. Additional specifications were tested for robustness. Including the middle answer category in the satisfied service users group did not influence the results, nor did a specification that treated the dissatisfaction variable as continuous.

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