Fifth International Workshop on Business Data Collection Methodology

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Background paper

Designing an instrument for collecting data from political organisations

Once a year, Statistics Norway (SSB) collects income and expenditure data from all political parties in Norway on behalf of the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. The goal is openness about the political parties' funding, to ensure the public's right to access such information and to prevent corruption and undesirable bonds.

Party financing, accounts per political party. Per cent., [1]

	2016										
	Total	Christian Democratic Party	Liberal Party	Socialist Left Party	Labour Party	Progress Party	Conservative Party	Centre Party	The Red party of Norway	The Pensioners' Party	Democratic Party of Norway
Income, total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
Government subsidy, total	74.4	73.3	75.8	75.1	73.7	84.5	71.7	72.5	61.8	83.6	51.1
Own business, total	17.7	25.1	16.3	13.6	18.7	10.6	17.9	23.0	16.6	15.9	48.9
Contributions, total	7.9	1.6	7.9	11.3	7.6	5.0	10.5	4.6	21.7	0.5	-
Total costs	86.8	99.9	86.1	88.3	90.2	65.4	86.2	97.5	95.4	74.2	104.6
Salary costs	39.4	56.6	35.8	46.7	45.2	22.9	31.7	50.0	46.0	5.6	8.5
Other operating costs	47.1	43.3	50.0	41.3	44.6	42.1	54.4	47.4	49.3	68.3	95.5
Finance costs	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.6
Result	13.2	0.1	13.9	11.7	9.8	34.6	13.8	2.5	4.6	25.8	-4.6

Figure 1 Example of a published table, taken from https://www.ssb.no/en/valg/statistikker/partifin

The data collection includes all organisational levels of the registered political parties in Norway, i.e. central, county and municipal level, as well as the central youth level and the youth organisations at county level. The party organisations are obliged to report according to Norway's Political Party Act[1] and report income and costs based on their annual accounts.

The information is now collected electronically through Altinn, the Norwegian public reporting portal[2], by the use of a specific questionnaire, "Political parties' financing (RA-0604)".

The questionnaire is prefilled with government subsidy amounts, and in election years (every second year) with election campaign contribution amounts which are collected through another Altinn questionnaire.

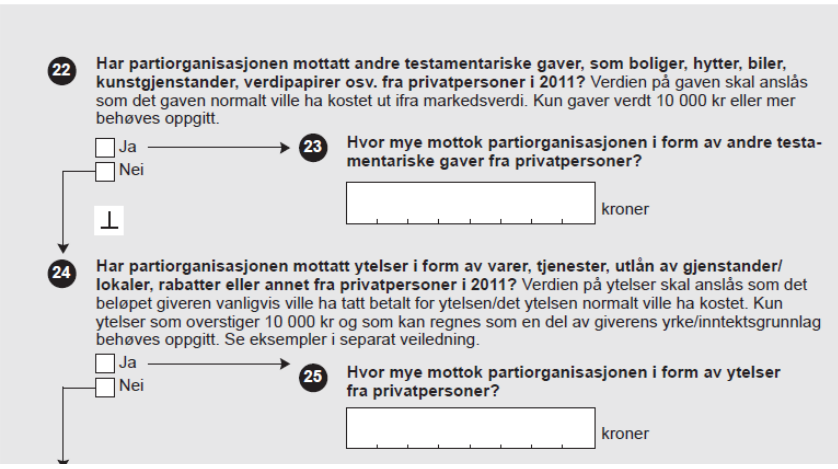
The statistics was first published in 2006, for the fiscal year 2005. From 2006 to 2013 the survey was conducted on paper, mainly because the law demands that the economic report is signed by the party's leader and another member of the board. As soon as Altinn could provide functionality for digital signing, we designed and applied an electronic solution.

The initial design process

Before the survey was conducted for the first time, we set out to talk to representatives from political parties on all three levels, including the youth organisations. We wanted as much knowledge as we could get about the population and aimed to find out which concepts and formulations to use. There are huge differences between the different types of party organisations, among other things when it comes to accounting competence. Most central party organisations have many millions in income, their own accountant and other full-time employees, whereas the smallest party organisations consist of a group of volunteers who use their spare time on political activity in their local community. Quite often the latter do not even keep accounts.

It took a lot of work trying to find the best definitions, expressions and formulations; achieving the right balance between precise and exact on one side and simple and self-explanatory on the other, was not easy.

We found it necessary to design three different versions of the paper questionnaire, one for each level of party organisation. They ended up rather text-heavy, mainly consisting of yes/no- and follow-up questions asking for an amount.



22 **Har partiorganisasjonen mottatt andre testamentariske gaver, som boliger, hytter, biler, kunstgjenstander, verdipapirer osv. fra privatpersoner i 2011?** Verdien på gaven skal anslås som det gaven normalt ville ha kostet ut ifra markedsverdi. Kun gaver verdt 10 000 kr eller mer behøves oppgitt.

☐ Ja → 23 **Hvor mye mottok partiorganisasjonen i form av andre testamentariske gaver fra privatpersoner?** ____ kroner

☐ Nei

24 **Har partiorganisasjonen mottatt ytelser i form av varer, tjenester, utlån av gjenstander/lokaler, rabatter eller annet fra privatpersoner i 2011?** Verdien på ytelser skal anslås som det beløpet giveren vanligvis ville ha tatt betalt for ytelsen/det ytelsen normalt ville ha kostet. Kun ytelser som overstiger 10 000 kr og som kan regnes som en del av giverens yrke/inntektsgrunnlag behøves oppgitt. Se eksempler i separat veiledning.

☐ Ja → 25 **Hvor mye mottok partiorganisasjonen i form av ytelser fra privatpersoner?** ____ kroner

☐ Nei

Figure 2 Two of the yes/no- and follow-up questions from the paper questionnaire.

[1] The Political Parties Act, see https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/fad/vedlegg/partifinansiering/political_parties_act.pdf for more info

[2] More about Altinn on https://altinn.no/en/about-altinn/what-is-altinn/

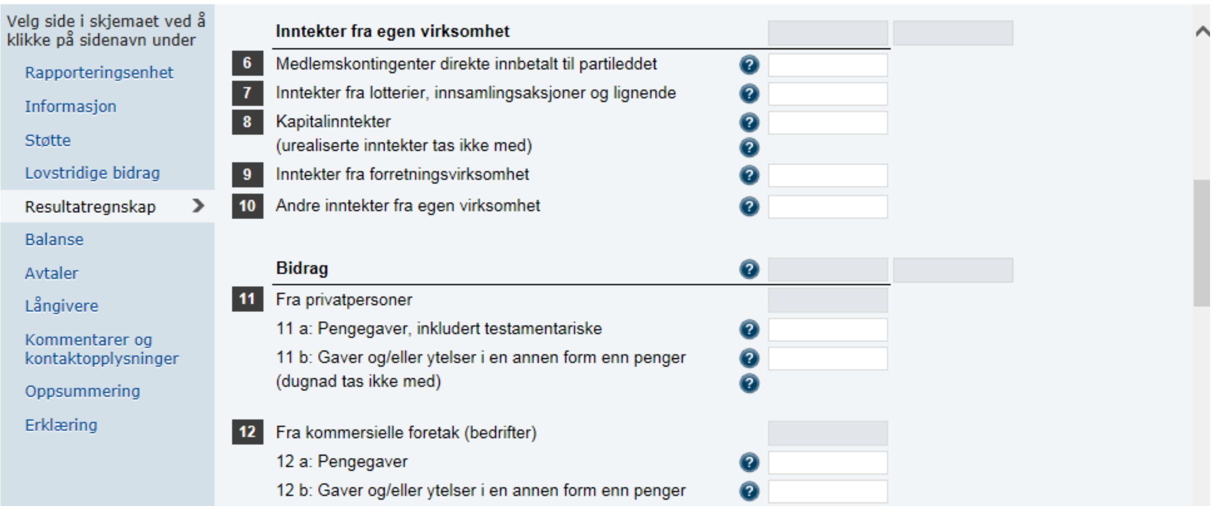
Altering and improving the questionnaire

The data quality was not always satisfactory. For example we saw that some respondents confused internal transfers with public subsidy. The subject matter division, as well as the user service people in SSB, have contact with many of the respondents during each data collection period and receive valuable feedback on the quality of the questionnaire. Every year people from SSB take part in large meetings where representatives from most political parties participate and give their opinions on the data collection instrument. The questionnaire has thus been evaluated and attempted adjusted and improved, year by year.

Enter the web survey

As the web version was built, during 2013-2014, we were determined to try and take advantage of the possibilities the technology and electronic format gave us. We chose to continue using yes/no-questions with follow-ups like in the paper version, but took care so that each respondent is only exposed to the questions that are relevant to him, according to what organisational level his party belongs to and what he answers to the different filter questions. All three versions were now built into one and we made use of prefill and code lists to route the different types of respondents through the different parts of the questionnaire. Most of the separate user guide used with the paper questionnaires was incorporated in the web questionnaire, either as part of the question wording itself, as explicit help text right next to the question or as hidden help text available to the respondent by clicking a question mark icon placed by the relevant question.

Up until 2014 focus was on income and funding. From 2015, questions about costs were added. We first laid out the expenditure questions the same way we had designed the income and funding questions, i.e. as yes/no-questions with follow-ups. This way we made sure to avoid two questions in one and – since the questions were made obligatory – we eliminated the chance of item nonresponse. This single-questions-approach also made room for explanations and definitions and sometimes even examples with every question, something we deemed necessary. This did not sit well with many of the respondents, though. They found it circumstantial and hard to get a good overview and understanding of how the different sums relate to each other. For the more professional and bookkeeping accustomed, the lack of a proper annual account setup was not at all advantageous. We therefore changed the design before the survey was done again in 2016:


Velg side i skjemaet ved å klikke på sidenavn under
Rapporteringsenhet
Informasjon
Støtte
Lovstridige bidrag
Resultatregnskap
Balanse
Avtaler
Långivere
Kommentarer og kontaktopplysninger
Oppsummering
Erklæring

Inntekter fra egen virksomhet
6 Medlemskontingenter direkte innbetalt til partileddet
7 Inntekter fra lotterier, innsamlingsaksjoner og lignende
8 Kapitalinntekter (urealiserte inntekter tas ikke med)
9 Inntekter fra forretningsvirksomhet
10 Andre inntekter fra egen virksomhet

Bidrag
11 Fra privatpersoner
11 a: Pengegaver, inkludert testamentariske
11 b: Gaver og/eller ytelser i en annen form enn penger (dugnad tas ikke med)
12 Fra kommersielle foretak (bedrifter)
12 a: Pengegaver
12 b: Gaver og/eller ytelser i en annen form enn penger

Figure 3 Part of the income statement page in the web questionnaire anno 2018.

Validations and controls

Validations and controls are useful and necessary, but should be used with care. We experienced that some of the controls we used in the early version of the electronic questionnaire were too strict. For instance, a control checking the sum of costs by activity with the sum of costs by type said that the two sums had to be exactly the same, i.e. the rest amount had to be 0. This led to trouble for some respondents and was therefore later altered. Now the rest sum can be between -10 and 10 NOK and one can still send inn the questionnaire. If the rest sum is smaller than -10 or bigger than 10, one will get a message explaining what is wrong, why its wrong and where one can find more information and help. Since many of the respondents are not accustomed to accounts it is particularly important that we try to help and guide them through the cost-part of the questionnaire.

The introduction of a summary

As the first electronic version was developed we added a summary at the end of the questionnaire. This was done to compensate for the slightly fragmented yes/no-question-approach used in the income part of the questionnaire, and to give the respondent an overview of all the main amounts and/or sums reported. The respondent is asked to check if all is correct and to go back and change the particular responses if not.

To be continued

If possible, we would like to ease the response burden further by enabling the respondents to upload their income and expenses records to the questionnaire. This can only be achieved if they have used the standard bookkeeping template provided by the public authorities.

In stead of prefilling the questionnaire by copying and uploading the existing data that we have, we might be able to provide the user with a view of what he has already reported by looking it up in the original source. This way we can avoid duplicating data and sending data back and forth the way we do today, and thus decrease the risk for error related to this.

The signing functionality is a chapter of it’s own. There is still some work to be done on this before we can call it user friendly and straight forward.