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Framing the transition: How consultants shape public energy governance in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The use of consultants in the public sector is a growing field of study, but their influence in the energy sector remains underexplored. Public agencies face significant pressure to design, implement, and coordinate the energy transition. Thus, they increasingly rely on consultants to provide specialised expertise, additional capacity, and external legitimacy. This article examines how consultants provide expertise and shape policy decisions in Sweden's public energy sector. The growing use of consultants raises questions about boundaries, their influence and accountability, and the hollowing out of public capacity. Based on 62 interviews with consultants and public actors, we analysed the roles consultants play and the influence they exert, using an integrated framework that combines four consultancy roles with functionalist and critical perspectives. Consultants mainly act as experts, knowledge brokers, legitimisers, and intermediaries, but rarely serve as channels for stakeholder input. Their influence on decision-making stems less from formal authority than from shaping how problems are defined, how policy options are framed, and how solutions come to seem credible and feasible. These patterns reveal how external expertise can subtly steer public-sector priorities, often in ways difficult to detect. While consultants provide essential expertise in a fast-changing energy sector, their involvement also introduces risks of dependency, opacity, and diminished institutional autonomy. Strengthening internal capacity can help ensure that external expertise adds value without undermining the public sector's ability to shape the energy transition. Consultants exert indirect influence on governance in the public-sector, with implications for accountability, legitimacy, and the governance of external expertise.

1. Introduction

The energy transition is not only a technical but also a political and institutional process that reshapes public-sector priorities towards decarbonisation, expanding agencies' responsibilities for coordinating markets, grids, and climate policy across multiple levels of government. As these demands grow, public agencies face an increasing need for specialised analytical modelling and policy support capacities that may exceed existing in-house expertise [1–3]. Governments are under pressure to design policies, coordinate investments, and steer disputed pathways under uncertainty [4,5]. Within this context, consultants have become increasingly prominent and are widely engaged to provide expertise, strategic support, and legitimacy in complex domains such as climate and energy governance [6,7]. This raises important questions about authority, knowledge, and legitimacy in energy governance studies [3].

The use of consultants in the public sector has received growing attention [8–10]. Research on consultancy in the public sector has, for instance, examined consultants in relation to public management reform, organisational restructuring, firm-level advisory work, and the evolution of policy advisory systems and marketisation [9,11,12]. However, their role in the energy transition remains comparatively under-examined. Research on the energy transition and energy governance has focused mainly on state actors, market actors, civil society organisations, and various intermediaries, while paying limited attention to consultants acting as externally contracted advisers within public decision-making [13–16]. We thus lack micro-level empirical insight into how consultants shape problem definitions, frame policy options, and influence decisions in public energy governance.

This gap is particularly significant because the energy transition is a political process shaped by struggles over power, knowledge, and legitimacy [1,3,17]. Understanding whose expertise is mobilised, how

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authority is constructed, and how legitimacy is secured is therefore central to explaining how decisions are made and whose priorities prevail in the energy transition [18–20]. Sweden provides a useful setting for examining this issue. It combines a strong public sector tradition with an increasing reliance on consultants [21]. The public sector also plays a central role in advancing the energy transition. This makes it a clear setting to see what happens to public energy governance when outside consultants take on a larger role.

The aim is to analyse the roles externally contracted consultants play in public-sector energy governance in Sweden and how their involvement influences decision-making, accountability, and democratic legitimacy. The article primarily contributes to energy governance research and public-sector consultancy research by providing empirical insights into consultants' roles in the energy sector. Empirically, the article draws on 62 interviews with consultants and public actors engaged in Sweden's public energy sector and uses an integrated analytical framework that combines Marciano's [22] framework of consultants' roles with functionalist and critical perspectives on consultancy, as categorised by Armbrüster [23]. The article asks the following research questions:

1. How do consultants operate in public-sector decision-making related to energy transitions?
2. What roles do consultants play in decision-making, and how can these roles be understood using functionalist and critical perspectives on consultancy?
3. What are the implications of consultants' involvement for decision-making, accountability, and legitimacy in public-sector energy transitions?

2. Background and literature review

This section reviews the literature on consultants in three stages. It first examines research on consultants in the public sector, then considers the specific context of the Swedish public sector and finally turns to the emerging literature on consultancy in the energy transition. The section ends by presenting our own analytical framework.

We refer to consultants as private-sector actors externally contracted by public agencies. They provide specialised knowledge, expert analysis, solution recommendations, and technical expertise to support strategic planning, policy formulation, organisational change, and complex sustainability and infrastructure projects [9,24,25]. In the literature, they are commonly referred to as management consultants (e.g. [24,26,27]), as policy consultants (e.g. [22]), or planning consultants (e.g. [28]). Although specific tasks vary between consultants, at its core, all consultants supplement or temporarily substitute for internal capacity at their clients and can influence decision-making, knowledge production, or governance processes [24,29,30]. However, recent research also shows that consultant influence is not uniform but depends on factors such as institutional openness, trust, and the alignment of consultants' framing with policymakers' narratives [31].

2.1. Consultants in the public sector

The consulting industry has expanded significantly, with global revenues rising 7-fold between 1999 and 2021 [32]. This development can be observed in the public sector, where the use of consultants has grown for policy analysis, project implementation, and management [33,34]. In 2018, government-related consulting generated over \$85 billion globally [9,35,36]. Previous research has shown that the consultants derive authority from both specialised expertise and claims of objectivity, enabling them to legitimise policy and management choices [24,37]. Since the quality of consultancy services is often difficult to evaluate directly, clients frequently rely on reputation and trust [24,29]. This positions consultants to influence decision-making by shaping how problems are defined and which solutions appear feasible [26,27]. Over time, extensive reliance on consultants can also weaken internal public-

sector capacity [38]. When consultants gain lasting influence over public decisions in this way, some scholars describe it as a consultocracy [30]. Research offers two contrasting perspectives on consultants. Armbrüster [23] categorised the literature on consultancy into two contrasting strands, a functionalist and a critical perspective. These strands concern how consultancy is interpreted, not what roles consultants perform. The functionalist perspective views consultants as providers of expertise and problem-solving capacity [23,39]. In contrast, the critical perspective emphasises their role in shaping meanings, legitimising decisions, and potentially advancing private interests within public governance [26,30,32,40,41].

To provide insight into the roles that consultants perform, Marciano [22] developed a framework to analyse consultants' roles in policy formulation. Consultants are conceptualised as a type of expert who perform multiple roles, namely (1) experts and knowledge brokers, (2) seeing for the government, (3) legitimisers and validators, and (4) channels for stakeholders' policy preferences [22], shown in Fig. 1.

The framework suggests that consultants can play both substance- and process-intensive roles. Substance concerns the formulation and content of policy options through research and analysis, while process involves mediating policy alternatives to the point of decision [22]. Consultants can also engage in core and linkage work: core refers to developing policy options directly, and linkage to connecting public decision-making with the broader policy field [22]. The framework provides a basis for analysing when and how consultants influence policy processes, as well as the implications of their involvement.

2.2. Swedish public sector and the consulting industry

The Swedish public sector is no exception in the growing global market for consulting services [33]. Sweden is characterised by a strong public sector and state-centric political culture [34,42], with administrative 'dualism' that grants agencies considerable autonomy in decision-making and protects them from ministerial interference [43,44]. The Swedish Parliament ensures this independence, making coordination between ministries and agencies essential [44,45]. Since the 1980s, New Public Management (NPM) reforms have advanced marketisation, transparency, and results-oriented budgeting. Following agency mergers and restructurings that reduced the number of public agencies from 643 to 377 between 2000 and 2011, consultants were increasingly contracted to support organisational change [34]. During this period, annual consultancy spending rose by 275% [46,47].

Swedish labour laws also contribute to the growing use of consultants in the public sector. The Swedish Employment Protection Act emphasises protections for employees and states that if employees are on a specific fixed-term contract for more than 12 months within five years with the same employer, they are entitled to a permanent position [48–50]. Thus, public agencies face difficulties when recruiting to meet short-term or specialised staffing needs. Consultants provide access to expertise and additional capacity without requiring long-term employment commitments [47,51]. This support can take several forms, such as writing or feeding into reports and models, running pilot projects, or carrying out evaluations.

Studies show that the use of consultancy varies widely and is shaped by organisational and leadership factors rather than by NPM reforms alone. Consultants are typically mobilised as flexible external experts to access specialised knowledge and compensate for limited internal capacity [34,52]. Research also emphasises the importance of client control and knowledge-transfer mechanisms to prevent dependency and protect public-sector capacity [52].

The Swedish public energy sector is facing challenges as priorities shift towards energy security and resilience alongside the ongoing energy transition and electrification [53]. This re-examination of Swedish energy priorities, capacities, and limitations has increased the need for knowledge and technical expertise in the field. Consultants become crucial to this process, as public institutions may lack the internal

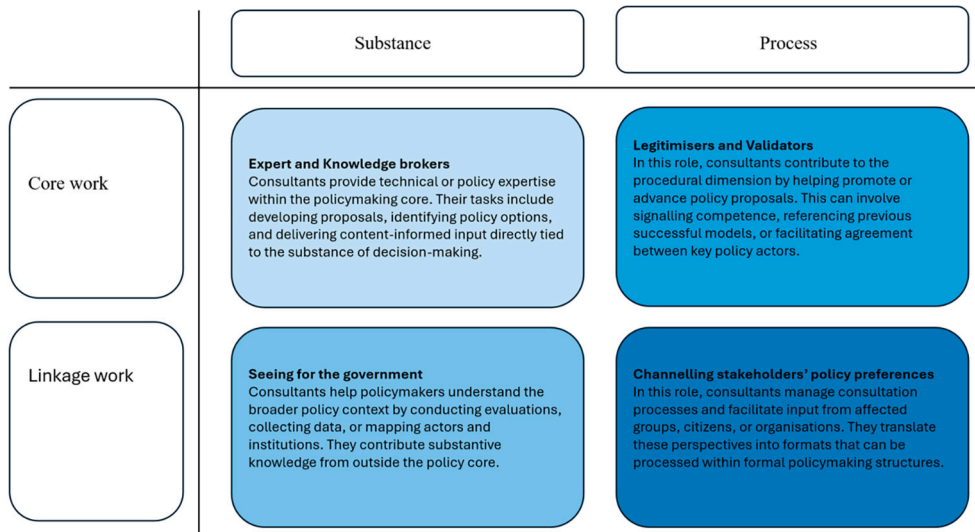


Fig. 1. Conceptualisation of the role of consultants in policy formulation (adapted from Marciano [22]).

capacity or expertise to address these new questions themselves or keep pace with developments in the sector [54,55]. Despite this, little research exists on the role and influence of consultancy in the public energy sector.

2.3. Research on energy consultants

Climate and renewable energy policy, a new and increasingly important policy area, is a rapidly growing market for consultancy [56,57]. Despite extensive research on public-sector consultants, comparatively little work examines consultancy in the energy transition. Most research on energy-related consultancy examines advisory work, such as energy audits for public buildings or guidance to households on improving efficiency [58–62]. Mignon and Winberg [14] examine how industrial firms engage energy consultants to improve internal energy efficiency, offering insights into consultants' roles at the firm level rather than in public-sector policymaking. Articles focusing on energy consultants often take a forward-looking perspective, highlighting consultants' potential as integral energy sector transition actors [54,56].

However, previous research lacks an in-depth examination of how consultants fit into the current decision-making process for public-sector-led sustainable energy policy and transitions. As governments intensify efforts to implement the energy transition, the influence of external advice grows, making it necessary to assess consultants' roles in the public energy sector. Such research can be found in related areas such as environmental policy and sustainability, but empirical work specifically on consultants in public energy governance remains limited.

Research on climate, sustainability and environmental consulting shows that consultants play more complex roles than simply providing technical advice. Keele [63] argues that the turn to climate services has pushed consultants towards client-focused, market-oriented knowledge, shifting effort away from publicly accessible climate information. Owen [64] similarly portrays environmental consultants as regulatory intermediaries who facilitate between regulators and firms and, at times, support the public values behind regulation. Systematic work on environmental and water-governance consultancy shows that firms act as trusted facilitators, policy shapers, market drivers and managers of participation, but face tensions around bias, decontextualised “best practices” and commercial interests [65,66]. Studies of sustainability consultants and professionals further describe them as “hidden” corporate change agents and knowledge brokers who engineer metrics, translate issues, and discretely steer organisational sustainability strategies and climate action from the outside-in [67–71]. These studies

suggest that consultants can actively shape governance processes.

Despite growing interest in consultancy in public governance and in closely related fields such as climate, sustainability, and environmental consulting, empirical research on how consultants operate within public energy governance remains limited. Existing work on energy consultants either focuses on firm-level advisory roles, takes a forward-looking perspective on consultants' potential, or examines adjacent governance contexts. We lack empirical insight into how consultants' roles unfold across decision-making processes in public energy transitions and what this means for accountability and legitimacy. This study addresses that gap.

2.4. Analytical framework: Understanding consultants in the energy transition

Drawing on Marciano's [22] conceptualisation of consultants' roles in policy formulation, this article examines how energy consultants influence decision-making in Sweden's public energy sector, investigating when and how they are influential in the decision-making process. To the four roles, we add insights from previous literature on functionalist and critical perspectives on consultants in the public sector [23]. While Marciano's [22] framework identifies what consultants do in policy processes, the functionalist and critical perspectives provide analytical lenses for understanding why these roles matter and how they may simultaneously strengthen and challenge public-sector governance. The resulting analytical framework, shown in Fig. 2, enables us to examine both consultants' roles in decision-making processes and the opportunities and risks associated with their growing involvement in energy governance.

2.4.1. Experts and knowledge brokers (core-substance work)

Consultants may act as experts and knowledge brokers by providing specialised knowledge and analytical capacity that client organisations lack [72]. From a functionalist perspective, consultants are viewed as necessary to provide knowledge and expertise when in-house capacity is lacking [23,73]. Consultants are also valued for the experience they carry across many organisations and projects, which a single public body finds hard to build up on its own [74].

Critical perspectives highlight that the increasing use of consultants for knowledge-based services may lead to dependency, and the continued demand for external consultancy services may lead to rent-seeking behaviour by firms, i.e. strategies that sustain demand for their own consultancy and ultimately contribute to the hollowing out of

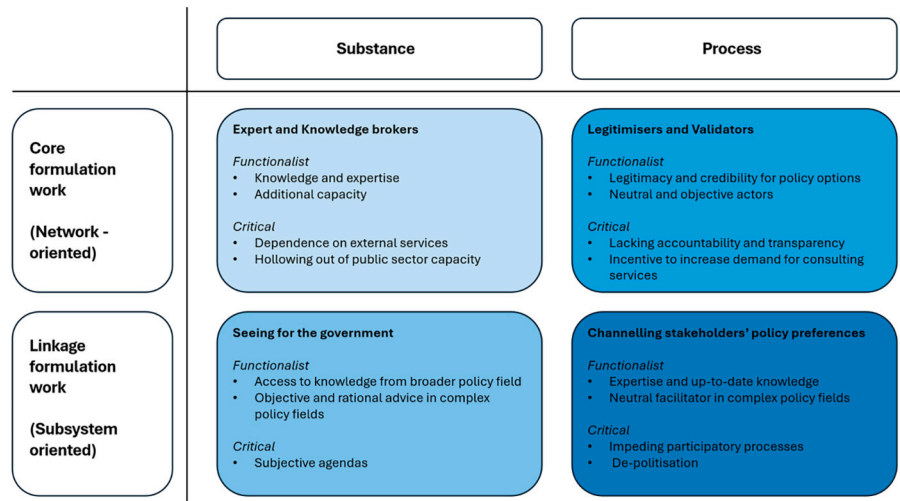


Fig. 2. Understanding the role of public sector consultants in the energy transition (based on Marciano [22]).

public sector internal capacity and knowledge necessary for decision-making [9,30,55,75].

2.4.2. Seeing for the government (Linkage- substance work)

This role refers to consultants acting as intermediaries between the government and the broader policy environment, for example through evaluations, benchmarking and assessments that shape how policy preferences are understood and conveyed to decision-makers [22]. From a functionalist perspective, consultants help clients navigate complex policy fields and provide independent assessments of policy alternatives [23,25,73,76]. From a critical perspective, however, consultants' commercial incentives and intermediary position may influence how information is collected, framed and communicated, potentially embedding private-sector logics in public-sector decision-making [41,77].

2.4.3. Legitimisers and validators (Core- process work)

This role refers to consultants lending credibility to proposed policy options, particularly in contexts where evidence-based policymaking requires external expertise and validation [22]. From a functionalist perspective, consultants are valued for their expertise, perceived neutrality, and ability to assess policy options independently, thereby helping to legitimise decisions in complex or contested policy fields [22,34,78,79].

From a critical perspective, however, consultants may lack the accountability and public obligations of civil servants, while commercial incentives can shape their advice, raising questions about the independence of their analysis and whether it serves the public interest or client preferences [26,30].

2.4.4. Channelling stakeholders' positions for the government (Linkage- process work)

This role refers to consultants mediating the preferences of citizens and other stakeholders and communicating them to public decision-makers through participatory processes [22]. From a functionalist perspective, consultants can contribute specialised knowledge and act as neutral facilitators in complex policy settings [28]. From a critical perspective, however, consultants may influence participatory processes by shaping agendas, structuring debates, and framing issues as technical rather than political, potentially contributing to the depoliticisation of policymaking [22,26,80].

Together, these roles provide a framework for analysing how consultants influence public energy decision-making in Sweden and for examining both the opportunities and challenges associated with their growing involvement in the energy transition.

3. Method and material

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews to investigate the role of consultants in public-sector energy transitions. This approach enables an in-depth, context-sensitive analysis of how consultants shape governance and policy processes in practice while maintaining alignment between research questions, data, and analytical strategy [81–83].

3.1. Data collection, method and material

In total, 62 semi-structured interviews were conducted in spring 2024. Under Swedish legislation, the study did not require approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee because it did not involve processing sensitive personal data, including data concerning health, political opinions, ethnic origin, or criminal offences.

This setting is also examined in a companion study [84] that analyses the same fieldwork through a qualitative system-dynamics lens, focusing on the feedback mechanisms through which consultancy becomes institutionally embedded over time. That study applies a narrower system-level inclusion frame that accounts for minor differences in reported sample sizes and category boundaries between the two articles. The present article instead analyses the roles consultants play and how their influence operates in decision-making. The sample was designed to capture variation across different types of consultants and public-sector actors involved in Sweden's energy transition. We interviewed different types of consultants, including architectural, engineering, and construction consultants as well as policy research firms. These actors include management, policy, and planning consultants, as described in section 2. In the Swedish context, architectural, engineering, and construction consultancies are often involved in sustainability and energy-related advisory work, providing external expert advice, problem framing, and organisational change support that can influence strategic decisions in public agencies [26,37,68]. Inclusion was based on whether the consultant's role involved advisory, analytical, or strategic input into client decision processes. We excluded consultants who only carry out technical tasks and do not shape decisions, give advice, or design change [22,29]. For example, we excluded technical consultants who do hands-on work, such as electrical or heating and ventilation installations, who perform the physical work but do not advise on decisions. We approached theoretical saturation, as additional interviews yielded limited new insights [85]. A detailed overview of the interviewees is available in Appendix A.

The interviewees work in the energy sector on topics including smart grid development and energy infrastructure and systems more broadly.

Of the 62 interviews, 39 were conducted with consultants from 16 different organisations. Among these, 31 interviewees worked in consulting firms and eight in research-consulting organisations. 19 participants came from nine public agencies, and four had roles as both clients and researchers or consultants. Among consultants, four had worked in the public sector; among public actors, three had been researchers and four consultants. These overlaps indicate fluid boundaries between consulting, research, and public administration, with some movement across sectors.

LinkedIn served as a main gateway for identifying relevant interviewees, which allowed access to a wide range of professionals; however, this approach may favour well-networked or publicly visible consultants and officials. As a result, perspectives from actors with less institutional visibility may be underrepresented. Thus, we also used a snowball sampling method, in which some interviewees provided additional contacts for participants. Additionally, consultants' reports were used to identify consultants and relevant public agencies.

Our interview guide included questions about the interviewee's professional background and roles, consulting work and practices, the client-consultant relationships, the consultant's knowledge/expertise, capacity building, perceived impact and influence, challenges and ethical considerations, consultants' role in decision-making processes, consultants' contribution to the energy transition as well as smart grids (if applicable) and future energy systems. The interview guides for consultants and clients are in [Appendices B and C](#).

All interviews were conducted via Teams and recorded with participants' consent. They were transcribed and analysed using the data analysis software NVivo [\[86\]](#).

3.2. Data analysis

The interview material was analysed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns [\[87\]](#). The coding followed an abductive logic, meaning we started inductively to allow patterns to emerge from the data, then moved to deduction, informed by our developed analytical framework. Abductive analysis involves an iterative movement between empirical observations and existing theory and research, where theoretical frameworks are not simply applied to data but are refined and extended through engagement with it [\[88\]](#). This approach allowed the analytical framework to be developed in dialogue with the empirical material rather than imposed upon it, enabling us to both integrate existing scholarly debates on consultants in the public sector and generate new insights from the data.

Following the inductive coding, we examined the identified patterns through the analytical framework. This involved both a theoretically informed interpretation of the inductively derived patterns and a further round of more specific coding informed by the four roles identified by Marciano [\[22\]](#) and the functionalist and critical perspectives defined by Armbrüster [\[23\]](#). This allowed us to assess where empirical patterns aligned with, extended, or challenged existing theoretical categories [\[88\]](#). In a final step, we produced a visual summary of the main empirical patterns across the four roles ([Fig. 3](#)).

To strengthen analytical rigour, we employed strategies such as rich description, attention to disconfirming evidence, and peer debriefing [\[82\]](#), while ensuring careful alignment between research design, data, and interpretation [\[83\]](#).

4. Empirical findings: The role of consultants in the energy transition

This section presents the findings based on Marciano's [\[22\]](#) four consultancy roles. Each subsection explores one of these roles through interviews with public actors as clients and consultants, analysing both how consultants describe their work and how clients perceive it. The different subsection lengths reflect the extent to which the roles appeared in the interview material. Two closing subsections then bring

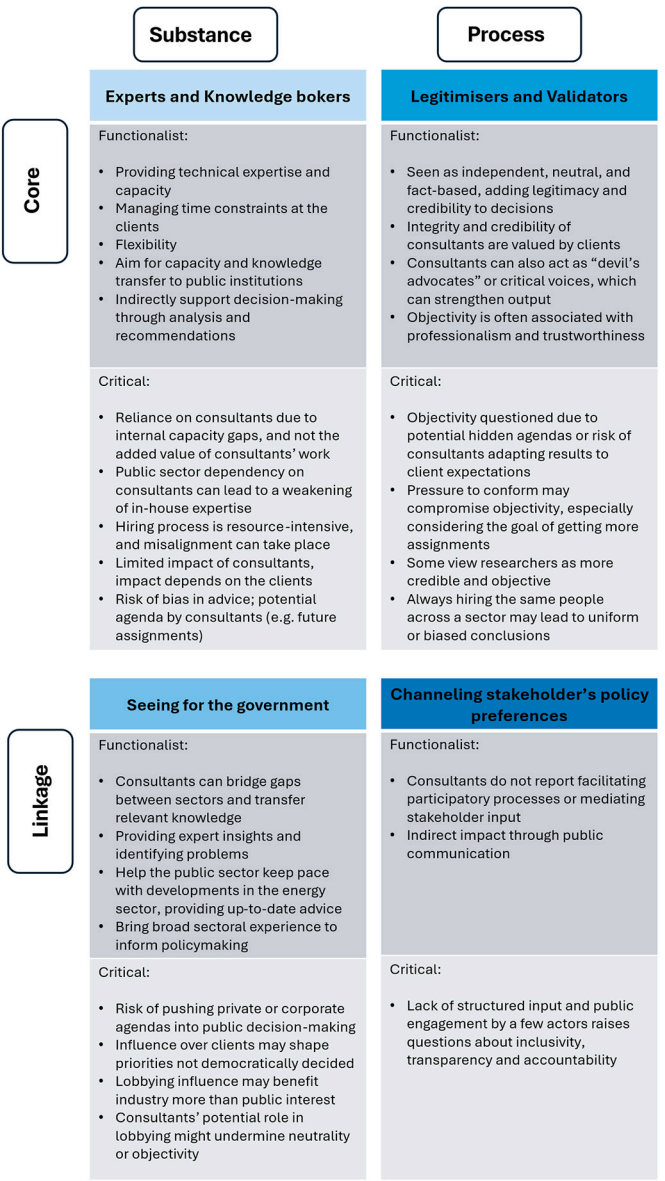


Fig. 3. Summary of the main empirical patterns across consultants' roles in the Swedish public energy sector, organised based on Marciano's [\[22\]](#) framework and interpreted through functional and critical perspectives.

the findings together: one comparing consultant and public actor perspectives across the four roles, and one situating the findings in relation to functionalist and critical perspectives on consultancy. Interpretive implications are developed further in the discussion.

4.1. Substance

4.1.1. Core work: Experts and knowledge brokers

Our findings show that providing knowledge and expertise is one of the key roles consultants embody. This includes the transfer of explicit knowledge or the fulfilment of a specific task, but the interviews also showed a clear commitment to transferring capacity from consultants to clients' organisations. This entails a commitment to embed expertise gained from consultants and to build internal capacity towards self-sufficiency in the future. However, while many consultants describe capacity transfer as a goal, clients rarely mention it, instead describing it as a by-product of collaboration.

The clients had three interconnected reasons for contracting

consultants: time constraints, lack of internal capacity, and the need for expertise. One interviewee summarises:

“One [reason] is simply not having the time. We could do this ourselves, but we don't have the time. The next [reason] is when you have a question you know we need to shed light on, but we don't really have the internal capacity. And then the third [reason] is the unknown unknowns: we want to explore this area, but we don't know enough”. (Interview 14).

Firstly, clients often highlight time constraints as a key reason for contracting external consultants. This could relate to a short deadline for a government mission or internal staff already being fully occupied. A related finding is that many clients believed that a substantial proportion of consultants' tasks could, in principle, be undertaken in-house, and, in some cases, more efficiently or to a higher standard.

Secondly, clients often cite a lack of internal capacity. Some tasks, such as compiling background information for projects, could be covered by internal staff if they had time or more employees. However, a few clients also note that the public agencies' limited internal capacity for the energy transition, in terms of staff availability and expertise, is making institutions less responsive in their roles to the government's agenda, as they need to seek external support for core tasks.

Thirdly, more specialised tasks, such as modelling or calculations, that require technical expertise that may not be commonly needed in the public organisation are sourced externally on an as-needed basis. A client explained that public agencies often lack the internal capacity for this kind of specialised task, as it is not commonly needed and would require constant use and practice to maintain. This would require significant investments from the public organisation.

Overall, our findings from client interviews indicate a clearer need for the services and expertise that consultants provide; however, some clients also expressed that consultants are more of a necessity than an advantage for public agencies. Clients highlight the significant resources required to contract consultants as a challenge in this context. Specifying the assignment and procuring the appropriate consultant require considerable time and effort from the client organisation. Miscommunications during commissions can result in delays and/or outputs that do not fully meet the organisation's needs.

Beyond the reasons for contracting consultants, the interviews also shed light on how consultants influence decision-making in practice.

The interview material suggests that defining the role of consultants in decision-making and their impact on the energy transition is complex. Both groups recognise the difficulty of determining consultants' influence, given the complex nature of decision-making boundaries. However, clients generally view consultants' impact as indirect, shaping the transition's direction and pace through their expertise, namely, analyses and recommendations.

“Our job is to provide information, provide knowledge, recommendations, facts, and say that ‘okay, this is what we think based on what we know’. But you don't immediately see the impact of it. There's no quantifiable way of defining your impact. If they change one policy because of a recommendation from your end, the impact of that policy, do you assign that to yourself?” (Interview 23).

The interview material also highlights the different tasks consultants work on, from practical deliverables such as technical specifications or modelling to broader advisory roles. Interviewees highlight the stage at which they enter a project (early vs late), different client demands, the consultant's position and “seniority”, and cooperation between client and consultant as factors that can influence the consultant's role in decision-making. Advisory roles bring consultants closer to decision-making than technical deliverables. Earlier involvement also allows consultants to be present for and influence the problem definition and boundaries of a project. The client's needs matter too: sometimes requiring fact-finding, sometimes closer cooperation. Both clients and consultants explained that while most tasks have some influence, strategic research, such as market analysis and senior advisory roles, tends to have more impact than evaluations or fact-finding by junior consultants.

Furthermore, many of the interviewed clients said that they don't inherently trust consultants' material. Instead, they approach consultants' work from a position of authority, critically assessing if the material is of sufficient quality and valuable for their projects. If not, consultants' work may be redone or discarded entirely. Clients emphasise that consultants' impact on the energy transition is ultimately determined by public-sector decision-makers, based on the usefulness and quality of their analyses and recommendations.

Several clients highlighted the greater influence of public agencies, describing themselves as enablers of the energy transition. While national politics has the strongest impact on its shape and pace, public agencies see their role as vital in managing electricity grids, reporting on and regulating new infrastructure, and advising the government on opportunities and barriers. Consultants are considered part of this work by providing underlying support, but they themselves are seen as having little agency, as they are not involved in decision-making.

“They are never involved in making decisions for us. They're not. They kind of help us with organisational idea development or something like that. They are never part of the decision-making phase”. (Interview 50).

In line with this thinking, some consultants were also explicit that their role in decision-making ends with their recommendations, stating that they do not make political decisions and that the client is the determining factor.

Nevertheless, one client, a former consultant, critically reflected on how consultants' direct involvement in strategic decisions and argued that consultants should provide facts, and organisations should make their own decisions. Today, many organisations depend on consultants, raising concerns about bias, especially if proposed solutions could secure future work. He believes most consultants strive for objectivity, but this is not always the case, making decision-making less transparent.

Our interview material shows that consultants are widely relied upon for their technical knowledge, capacity, and strategic advice. Still, their influence on public decision-making is shaped by task type, timing, and client control, and ultimately depends on how clients receive and use their work.

This tension between consultants as necessary providers of expertise and the risks of dependency and hollowing out reflects the broader divide between functionalist and critical readings of consultancy in the public sector.

4.1.2. Linking work: Seeing for the government

The interview material showed that consultants act as intermediaries, moving between organisations, sectors, and knowledge domains. The nature of consultancy as a job, moving between clients and learning from different areas of the energy sector, enables them to transfer knowledge between private clients. Their mobility allows them to identify patterns, transfer practices, and anticipate developments across the wider energy system. This sentiment is echoed in the interviews as clients emphasise that they often rely on consultants to identify developments and bring insights from other sectors. At the same time, this intermediary position can also give consultants agenda-setting power, enabling them to shape project framing before mandates are fully defined. This role blurs the line between technical support and strategic steering in decision-making. Some consultants reflected that they can shape the direction of a project by leading discussions and suggesting what the client should focus on, seeing or identifying needs before the client does.

“Well, you often lead the dialogue because you are the expert. You sit in the driver's seat and lead the dialogue about what to look at and so on. And often, if you are a bit ahead with solutions, it's not always the customer themselves who identifies the need, but it's me who does it and sells it to them, like ‘You should look at this, you need to do this,’ kind of. And then you get an assignment there.” (Interview 22).

As intermediaries moving between the public and private sectors, consultants are often portrayed as neutral, objective advisers. However, the interviews revealed a recurring tension between this claimed

neutrality and the personal or corporate agendas that shape their work. As part of their intermediary role, consultants are often presented by themselves and by clients as neutral, fact-based providers of insights. However, several interviewees reflected more critically on this assumption, noting that personal and organisational agendas can influence what is presented as objective analysis. Most of the consultants interviewed claimed neutrality and no agenda. Their attitude in relation to clients' needs is to remain impartial and independent, offering fact-based, unbiased information. Integrity and trustworthiness were seen as essential for the firm, achieved through neutrality and objectivity.

"We are very clear that we are independent consultants, we are owned by ourselves, and we do not take a clear position on an issue, but rather we want to provide a knowledge base." (Interview 3).

Secondly, some consultants acknowledged personal agendas influencing their work or client choices. Many mentioned that they want to contribute to sustainability or the energy transition to make a difference in the world.

"In a way, you always have an agenda. For example, I wouldn't want to work at a coal-fired power plant. Since I work in energy, it's clear that I want to make the world a little better and a little more sustainable." (Interview 4).

Thirdly, some interviewees work for a firm with a clear corporate agenda, with an outspoken goal of contributing to a more sustainable world or energy system. Having a corporate agenda guiding their work manifests in different ways. Consultants may push clients on sustainability issues or encourage further sustainability work: *"We want to influence... we want to challenge our customers on sustainability"* (Interview 12). The firm's agenda may guide client selection: *"If we see that 'they are after greenwashing', then we do not take that assignment"* (Interview 8). Additionally, some interviewees avoid working with the fossil industry, while others choose projects that deliver the greatest CO₂ savings (Interview 29).

However, regardless of their agenda, interviewees emphasised the importance of objective, fact-based analyses. Whilst most consultants positioned themselves as neutral intermediaries, several interviewees with a more critical perspective noted that this very positioning can enable subtle forms of agenda-setting. Consultants are involved in all parts of the energy sector, and some might lobby for actors whose interests do not align with the overall goals of the energy transition. The need for external expertise and the inherent exposure to corporate agendas, whether strategically aligned with the energy transition or opposed to it, can expose public agencies to private-sector agendas.

"You can participate as an expert in government investigations. Or investigations that are not governmental but are still public. So, you can have a direct influence there, or how should I put it? And you can, as mentioned, deliver products to industry companies or organisations, which, in turn, shape their lobbying in certain ways." (Interview 26).

One interviewee contrasted technical consultants with lobbyists and industry representatives who serve business rather than societal interests. Overall, our findings indicate that consultants are often perceived and sought after as neutral intermediaries; however, the complex interplay among corporate and personal agendas, client expectations, and project scope influences client selection, project scope, and the framing of recommendations.

From a functionalist perspective, this intermediary role is valuable because it bridges sectors and facilitates knowledge transfer. From a critical perspective, the same positioning gives consultants subtle agenda-setting power that is difficult to see from the outside.

4.2. Process

4.2.1. Core work: Legitimisers and validators

While the previous section highlighted that consultants may bring personal or organisational perspectives to their work, the interviews also show that objectivity and neutrality are central to their professional identity and to the credibility and legitimacy of their work with clients. When consultants and clients work together, clients might also have an

agenda or expectations of the results. This could pressure consultants to present results or recommendations aligned with the client's wishes. However, most consultants emphasised that they do not give in to pressure to make results fit a client's wishes. They also concluded that clients usually appreciate this and it is integral to maintaining credibility in the field.

"There is the short-term and the long-term gain. I could come in, have this conversation with the client, who wants to see a result, and then we would tweak the numbers. Maybe that will give you a short-term gain, since they pay you very well for doing that. But then you ruin your reputation." (Interview 32).

Additionally, the role of the devil's advocate, or being critical of clients, was seen by some of the interviewees as especially important and appreciated.

"Yes, I think that's what made them like us so much. Some people in the firm were like, 'Oh no, what are they saying now?' [laughs] 'You can't say that to the client!' But then, after about half a week, the client comes back and says, 'It was good that you spoke up, yes, we really...' So, I think in the long run, we gained from having integrity..." (Interview 6).

While the consultants interviewed aspire to be objective and neutral in their analyses, some suggested that this may not be the case across the industry at large; other consultancies may not always be objective or may tailor results to fit a desired outcome or engage in greenwashing (e.g., Interview 6).

Nevertheless, a few consultants also discussed a more nuanced balancing act when working with a client: some adjustments may be needed to accommodate the client's wishes, but staying objective throughout the process is crucial to maintain credibility.

"It's on assignment, and then it might be, e.g., a trade organisation that has an agenda, a reason for wanting to show something in a certain way. So, in that sense, you're somewhat guided by that. At the same time, as a consultant, you need to maintain some level of credibility, so you can't draw just any conclusions. So, you must find a balance... but that's usually not a problem. As a consultant, you just must try to be somewhat objective." (Interview 7).

Most of these examples illustrate the delicate, nuanced dynamics between consultants and clients. Consultants highlighted the need to remain responsive to client needs while maintaining integrity and credibility, providing fact-based analysis, and being flexible and diplomatic with clients. In more difficult situations, some would take on the role of the devil's advocate, benefiting long-term client relationships and their professional reputations. In contrast, others seem more fluid in adapting to clients' expectations.

Similarly, many clients highlight that consultants are, and should be, objective and neutral, yet they also acknowledge the inherent difficulty of providing truly independent advice. One client noted that while consultants may risk biased analyses, clients also have the responsibility to verify their work. If quality falls short, clients often exclude it from reports or set new demands. Consultants are valued for expertise and quick, actionable results, but several clients voiced scepticism about their objectivity, questioning their credibility as legitimisers and validators.

Another concern is that, while consultants are often seen as neutral experts, several interviewees noted that client relationships shape their work. Since they rely on repeated business and move between organisations, their analysis may align with what clients want or expect to hear. This becomes more pronounced when the same firms are repeatedly contracted across the sector, reinforcing dominant assumptions or narratives. Rather than reflecting independent analysis, such claims may reproduce the interests and expectations of those funding the work. Commercial incentives can subtly shape the boundaries of consultants' work. When future contracts depend on client satisfaction, consultants may avoid going beyond the scope of an assignment or delivering uncomfortable findings, even without explicitly compromising their analysis.

"Well, of course, we were also interested in keeping the client happy, and

we wanted to be able to build on that to sell more projects. Often you didn't want to go beyond the scope of the assignment, partly to stay within your own budget, but also because there was potential for additional sales to the same client or to others." (Interview 18).

This example shows how commercial incentives could quietly constrain consultants' independence in practice.

Difficulties can also arise at the intersection of the public and private spheres, as consultants move between them. One client noted that consultants working in regulated sectors are seen as having potential conflicts of interest. Even when firms say they maintain internal barriers, this may not be enough to protect public agencies' credibility from accusations of leaning into private interests or lobbying.

The findings suggest that consultants play a central role in shaping and legitimising public sector decisions in the energy transition. While they are often positioned as neutral and objective experts, their work is shaped by client relationships, organisational goals, and personal values. Neutrality is suggested to be a negotiated and situated practice rather than a fixed position. The credibility of consultants rests not only on technical expertise, but also on their ability to navigate expectations, maintain trust, and balance commercial realities with professional integrity.

This reflects the tension between functionalist and critical perspectives: neutrality and credibility are genuinely valuable to public sector clients, but they are also shaped by commercial incentives and professional self-interest.

4.2.2. Linkage work: Channels for stakeholders' policy preferences

In contrast to Marciano's [22] framework, consultants in the Swedish energy sector rarely acted as channels for stakeholder preferences. This suggests a form of technocratic governance in which expertise and analytical support are prioritised over participatory mediation.

Although the interview guide was not originally structured around Marciano's [22] framework, the interviews explored consultants' tasks, roles, and interactions in depth, and participatory facilitation did not emerge as part of their reported work. The absence itself is therefore notable and suggests that participatory mediation is not an essential component of energy consultants' self-perception or everyday work in the Swedish energy sector.

Consultants see themselves as intermediaries, but not in the sense of mediating stakeholder preferences or facilitating participatory processes. Instead, for them, being an intermediary means translating between technical and policy domains, transferring knowledge between sectors, or connecting clients to trends, tools, or expertise.

Even though external participatory processes are not central to consultants' roles in the Swedish energy sector, consultants may still play a subtle role in aligning policy work with stakeholder preferences through their broader public engagement in the energy transition debates. While this example of broader engagement does not involve structured stakeholder input, it shares some features with the role of "seeing for the government," in that consultants seek to interpret and communicate aspects of the policy field, albeit towards a public audience rather than directly to policymakers.

A few consultants highlight their wish to contribute to the broader public debate on the energy transition and sustainability. These are mainly senior partners who participate actively through debate articles, media commentary, or public events such as Almedalen Week (Almedalenveckan), Sweden's major annual political forum, where parties and organisations meet for speeches, debates, and seminars. For those who did engage publicly, this work may be seen as surfacing or amplifying particular perspectives in policy discourse.

While this does not align directly with the description Marciano [22] presents as the role of channelling stakeholder preferences, it may reflect a more informal and unstructured form of agenda setting. These cases suggest that consultants can influence which ideas or framings gain visibility, even outside formal client deliberation.

Most consultants, however, were more cautious, referring to

concerns about neutrality, time constraints, or strategic positioning. For them, communication was a responsibility to clients rather than to the broader public. Several respondents emphasised that while consultants may have valuable insights, they are rarely the visible voice in public discourse; instead, their analyses are used by clients or industry actors who then take the lead. Thus, while the potential to influence exists, actual participation in shaping the public narrative appears to be concentrated among a relatively small subset of consultants.

Closely tied to the discussion of corporate and personal agendas, public engagement in the energy transition often requires taking a position, such as promoting a particular energy source or defending specific environmental metrics. In a fast-paced, increasingly politicised sector, these agendas can make it difficult to declare positions openly. It is challenging to balance neutrality and influence, as actors often struggle to stay impartial while shaping debates. Taking a position also affects legitimacy and can change how they are viewed in terms of authority and independence.

From a functionalist perspective, the absence of participatory mediation reflects a division of labour where consultants focus on technical and analytical work. From a critical perspective, it raises questions about whose voices shape the energy transition and whether governance is becoming increasingly technocratic.

4.3. Consultant and public actor perspectives

Overall, consultants and public actors shared a broadly consistent understanding of how consultancy works in practice, but several differences in emphasis and perspective are worth noting.

On the reasons for contracting consultants, clients were clear and pragmatic: time constraints, limited internal capacity, and the need for specialised expertise were the main drivers. Consultants, by contrast, often framed the relationship more ambitiously, emphasising capacity transfer and knowledge building as goals. Clients rarely described capacity transfer as an explicit aim, instead treating it as an occasional by-product of collaboration.

On influence and decision-making, clients consistently described consultants' influence as indirect and limited, emphasising that final decisions always rest with public actors. Consultants broadly agreed, but several described their role in more active terms, noting that they often shape project direction, identify client needs before clients themselves do, and lead discussions from an early stage. This suggests that while both groups agree on the formal boundaries of decision-making authority, they perceive the practical dynamics of influence differently.

On neutrality, both groups valued it, but for different reasons and with different degrees of scepticism. Consultants strongly claimed neutrality as a professional norm and a commercial necessity, though many then complicated this by acknowledging personal commitments or corporate agendas. Clients valued neutrality but were more openly sceptical, sometimes questioning whether truly independent advice is possible given consultants' commercial interests and repeated client relationships.

On critical perspectives more broadly, public actors spoke more openly about risks of dependency, quality concerns, and potential bias. Consultants rarely questioned their own work directly, but several acknowledged systemic problems in the field by distancing themselves from unnamed others. This pattern of indirect critique suggests awareness of the concerns documented in the literature while protecting individual reputation and client relationships.

Taken together, these differences reflect the structural positions of the two groups. Clients manage risk and retain authority; consultants navigate commercial incentives and professional credibility. Both perspectives are necessary to understand how consultancy influence operates in practice.

4.4. Functionalist and critical perspectives: A synthesis

Fig. 3 brings together the main empirical findings and shows how the same consultant-client interactions can be read differently depending on perspective. It is intended as an overview of the empirical results ahead of the discussion.

These perspectives are not fixed positions but capture the ambiguous role of consultants in public energy governance. From a functionalist perspective, consultants provide important expertise, flexibility, and legitimacy in a fast-changing sector, filling genuine capacity gaps that public agencies cannot easily address internally. From a critical perspective, however, the same involvement raises concerns about dependency, lack of transparency, and the growing influence of private sector thinking in public decisions, particularly when consultants shape how problems are defined before mandates are fully established. Looking at both perspectives together is useful because neither captures the full picture on its own. The empirical material repeatedly showed both dynamics operating simultaneously: consultants are valued and needed, and their involvement carries real risks. This approach helps show that complexity rather than forcing a simple judgement about whether consultants are good or bad for public energy governance.

5. Discussion

This discussion situates our empirical findings within broader debates on governance expertise and legitimacy in energy transitions. Previous research on consultants has examined their roles in public sectors and identified dynamics such as dependency, framing effects, and consultocracy in public governance. This has rarely been studied in the context of energy transitions so far. We address this gap by investigating the role of consultants [22] and analysing both the value they bring and the risks their involvement poses to accountability and democratic legitimacy, in line with Armbrüster's functionalist and critical perspectives on the consultants' literature [23]. Our analysis examines the implications of consultants' expanding role in energy transition governance.

Our findings reveal ambiguity in consultants' roles in the energy transition. They add value to the public sector through expertise, flexibility and efficiency. Yet there is also a risk of dependency and loss of internal expertise, as well as practical challenges in contracting consultants that may undermine their value, as grounded in previous research [27,68].

5.1. Consultants' role in the energy transition

As shown in the empirical analysis, consultants are primarily engaged to address capacity constraints, time pressures, and specialised knowledge needs. The reasons behind their contracting shape both their positioning and the way their influence unfolds in the energy transition.

Marciano's [22] typology is analytically useful. The analysis shows that consultants in the Swedish energy sector show elements of all roles described by Marciano [22]. However, there was one important exception, namely the role of channelling stakeholder perspectives was largely missing from our findings. This absence is interesting, indicating that energy governance in Sweden is mainly expert-driven, with consultants serving as technical and strategic advisers rather than facilitators of broader public participation and diverse stakeholders.

The work of consultants relies less on formal decision authority and more on making processes appear credible, timely, and feasible. Consultants are both essential facilitators and possible gatekeepers of the energy transition. These findings connect to broader debates in energy governance, where legitimacy, accountability, and expertise are key concerns [3,4,89]. While consultants provide much-needed capacity, their influence raises questions about who defines transition problems and how authority is redistributed [20,90,91].

For public actors, consultants provide a flexible resource that can be

adapted to a specific task at hand, which is one reason to explain why they are so deeply embedded in energy governance [22,73]. This flexibility is one factor allowing consultants to maintain long-term relationships with clients and establish themselves as important advisers in the energy transition. At the same time, this makes their influence hard to trace, because their contributions often blend with internal work and are not always visible as direct decision-making, providing analysis and reports in the background.

From a functionalist perspective, consultants are especially valuable in the fast-changing energy sector, where knowledge is widely dispersed [54,56]. However, taking a more critical perspective, their increased involvement also raises concerns about dependency, opacity, and the redistribution of authority in the energy transition. Our interviewed clients recognised both the need for external expertise and the risks of allowing private sector agendas into public decision-making [26,30,32,41]. It is this ambiguity that shows the need for reflective governance to ensure that consultants add value without replacing in-house expertise or undermining democratic accountability [20,90,91].

5.2. Capacity gaps and dependency

Clients consistently name lack of time, internal staff constraints, or the need for specialised expertise as reasons for contracting consultants. Consultants provide temporary capacity that enables agencies to deliver on demanding government mandates without permanently expanding their staff [34]. This flexibility is important in Sweden, where labour regulations make short-term hiring difficult and where agencies are expected to manage fluctuating workloads with limited resources [46,51].

From a functionalist perspective, this arrangement is rational. Consultants enable agencies to access expertise on demand, meet deadlines, and deliver outputs that would otherwise be unfeasible. However, from a critical perspective, reliance on consultants creates risks of dependency and hollowing out [9,30,55]. Several interviewees noted that tasks once performed in-house are now routinely outsourced, and that institutional memory can be lost when consultants rather than civil servants carry projects forward. In the long term, this may weaken the public sector's ability to act independently [54,55].

One risk that clients raised is that consultants may lack sufficient knowledge of specific complexities of a topic or of institutional or regulatory contexts. This can lead clients to perform quality checks, make significant revisions, or discard consultants' work entirely, which runs counter to the argument for efficiency gains from using consultants.

Several public actors noted that while external modelling or technical input is valuable, they could do much of it themselves but lack the time or internal capacity. This is the key motivator for contracting consultants, rather than expertise alone. This suggests that the often-highlighted knowledge advantage of contracting consultants is not always present.

The trade-off between short-term efficiency and long-term capacity building is not limited to Sweden; it reflects wider challenges in public management [9,30]. In energy governance, however, the implications are especially significant; the transition requires sustained expertise and stable institutions, not just temporary technical support. If consultants hold most of the knowledge about the transition, public agencies may lose the ability to assess advice, handle competing priorities, or guide policy on their own.

5.3. Neutrality, credibility, and the performance of expertise

Consultants present themselves as neutral and credible experts who present objective facts. Neutrality is presented as a professional goal but also functions to position and present themselves. Such claims may reflect professional norms and incentives, since consultants have reasons to present their work as neutral and credible [26,78,79]. Interviewed consultants emphasise objectivity, avoid overt political positions, and

commit to fact-based analysis.

Our material shows that neutrality is never absolute, showing that personal commitments to sustainability, corporate agendas, and sensitivity to client relationships shape consultants' work. The question that arises then is how objective and fact-based the work of consultants truly is. Some of the consultants also stated that they choose projects aligned with their values or their firm's environmental profile, and a few even said that they sometimes need to adjust analyses to meet client expectations. Clients recognise these tensions. While they value consultants' expertise, they also exercise caution, sometimes discarding or redoing reports when they appear biased or inadequate [41,92]. Some clients described consultants' neutrality as something to be evaluated rather than assumed. This difference in how the two groups approached neutrality was evident throughout the interviews: consultants strongly asserted it as a professional norm. At the same time, clients valued it but remained openly sceptical about whether truly independent advice is possible given commercial incentives and repeated client relationships.

This raises an interesting point about objectivity itself. Neutrality and objectivity are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct. Neutrality means not taking sides, while objectivity refers to the quality and independence of the analysis. Our findings suggest that neither is clear-cut in practice. Some consultants claimed no agenda at all, positioning themselves as purely fact-based and objective advisers. Others acknowledged personal or corporate sustainability commitments while still insisting their work is objective. The question is whether personal or organisational priorities shape which projects are undertaken, which questions are asked, which solutions are proposed, and to what extent consultancy can be considered fully objective, even when undertaken in good faith? In the energy transition, this matters for governance. The direction of the energy transition may be shaped not by bias or corruption, but by the cumulative effect of expert judgements that are never fully neutral or objective [26,63].

The performance of neutrality thus becomes a key mechanism for legitimacy. Consultants may not be formally part of the decision-making process, but our interviews indicate that their perceived impartiality lends weight to their recommendations. This is in line with other studies on expertise in governance, which show that claims to neutrality are often political acts that shape whose knowledge is seen as authoritative or legitimate [26,28]. In the energy transition, where contested interests and rapid technological change make credibility essential, the role of consultants as performers of neutrality becomes particularly salient. Consultants move between clients and sectors, which gives them a broad view of the energy transition that public actors seldom have. However, this can also work against their claimed neutrality. Solutions that worked for one client may be carried over to the next, even when they do not fit the new context. [27]. Neutrality and objectivity do not guarantee a fair or effective analysis, especially given the private sector's incentives to increase revenue.

5.4. Influence through framing rather than authority

A central finding of this study is that consultants' influence does not derive from formal authority but from their ability to shape how problems are defined and solutions framed. Consultants rarely make final decisions, and both they and their clients emphasise that responsibility for decision-making rests with public actors. Yet the interviews also reveal many instances in which consultants indirectly guided project focus, structured timelines, or introduced frameworks that shaped subsequent decisions.

Interestingly, the two groups perceived this dynamic differently. Clients mostly described consultants' influence as indirect and limited, emphasising that public actors always make the final decision(s). Consultants largely agreed, but several also described their role in more active terms, stating that they often shape project direction, identify client needs before clients themselves do, and lead discussions from an early stage. This gap in perception matters analytically, as the influence

of framing may be difficult to see from the client side precisely because it operates through preparatory and background work rather than through visible decision-making. Their indirect influence is particularly powerful at early stages of policymaking. Consultants involved in scoping or preparatory work help define what counts as a relevant question, what options are viable, and what trade-offs are acceptable. Even when clients critically assess consultant reports, the initial framing can structure the debate in ways that are difficult to reverse. As such, consultants influence not only the content of decisions but also the boundaries within which decisions are made [26,28,41]. Framing influence seems to build up through repeated contracting rather than happening just once [84].

This finding resonates with more critical studies that highlight the political nature of expertise. Framing problems as technical rather than political, or privileging certain forms of evidence over others, can depoliticise contested issues and narrow the scope of democratic debate [26,30].

Our material also suggests that consultants' work often centres on modelling, technical feasibility, and market-oriented solutions. This emphasis may narrow the scope of governance processes by foregrounding technological and efficiency-based priorities over social or distributive concerns. In the Swedish energy transition, consultants' role in framing is particularly significant, as policy debates often revolve around technical feasibility, system integration, and modelling, areas where consultants' expertise carries weight [93–95].

5.5. Implications for energy transition governance

The findings point to broader implications for energy transition governance. While some reflect Sweden's specific institutional context, others are likely to be relevant to public energy governance more broadly.

In the Swedish context specifically, the dualistic governance model (where ministries steer, but autonomous agencies implement) complicates coordination across organisational boundaries. In this setting, consultants may serve as informal brokers, facilitating the exchange of expertise and communication among actors. This highlights how administrative design shapes not only the demand for consultancy but also the roles consultants assume.

The work of consultants reinforces technocratically driven transition processes. In our material, consultants primarily contributed expert analysis, modelling, evaluation, and strategic input, and participatory mediation was either absent or limited. This means that important issues are shaped by technical perspectives rather than broader societal discussion, a pattern that is likely also relevant to other governance contexts where consultants play similar roles. Research on smart grid governance and energy justice has shown that such technocratic framings can sideline issues such as affordability, digital literacy, data ethics, or the environmental implications of smart technologies. If users are assumed to adapt smoothly to market signals or digital infrastructures, existing inequalities may be reproduced, and public legitimacy weakened [93,95–98]. Thus, the risk is not only inaccurate advice but also a structurally limited perspective on the energy transition that focuses solely on technology- or market-driven priorities and marginalises justice-oriented and community-driven approaches, which are essential for resilience and inclusive engagement.

Consultant influence operates primarily through framing rather than formal authority, as they rarely make final decisions. However, their role in defining problems, delimiting options, and structuring timelines gives them indirect influence over policy trajectories [26,28,41]. As their influence is based on preparatory and analytical work, it may be less visible and harder to analyse or even pinpoint than formal decision-making power, raising accountability concerns that extend beyond Sweden.

Relying on consultants to cover capacity gaps over time may reduce public agencies' ability to work independently. Contracting external expertise offers flexibility and short-term efficiency; our interviewees

also highlighted risks of dependence and the loss of internal expertise. If core analytical and strategic functions increasingly rely on external actors, public agencies may find it more difficult to assess advice or steer transition processes independently and critically [9,30,55].

These implications suggest that consultants function not only as supplementary capacity but as embedded actors in the governance of energy transitions, a position that a companion analysis traces as a set of self-reinforcing feedback loops [84], with consequences for legitimacy, accountability, and long-term capacity within public agencies. Thus, we also want to point to several practical considerations for public agencies working with consultants in energy transition governance. Building internal capacity alongside consultant use, through knowledge transfer, shared tools, and documentation, helps ensure expertise remains within the organisation rather than leaving with the consultant. Transparency can be strengthened by requiring consultants to clearly document assumptions, methodological choices, data sources, and excluded alternatives. Role conflicts should be avoided by not allowing the same consultancy to both design and later evaluate the same intervention. Finally, creating structured opportunities for staff, stakeholders, and affected users to respond to consultant analyses, particularly at early stages of problem definition, can help counteract the narrowing of governance processes identified in this study. These measures cannot eliminate the structural tensions identified here, but they may help ensure that consultants complement, rather than substitute for, public-sector capacity.

5.6. Limitations and future research

This study also has several limitations that we want to acknowledge. The analysis is based on interviews conducted in Sweden, and some findings reflect its specific institutional context, including a strong public-sector tradition, administrative dualism, and an established market for consulting services. The core dynamics identified, including framing influence, capacity-driven reliance, and tensions around neutrality, are likely relevant in other governance contexts; however, one should be cautious about direct transferability. In our study, we also use only interview material and do not observe decision-making processes directly, so consultants' influence on specific decisions cannot be traced or pinpointed in detail. Finally, the use of LinkedIn for recruitment may have favoured well-networked or publicly visible consultants and officials, meaning that perspectives from actors with less institutional visibility may be underrepresented.

We also want to highlight some avenues for future research. Comparing different national contexts could show whether these dynamics also apply beyond Sweden and, if so, in what ways. Studies focusing on specific policy areas or projects within energy transitions could provide more detailed insights into how consultants' roles and influence operate at different stages of decision-making. Further, since there is limited research on consultancy in energy governance, similar studies in other national or regional contexts would help build a more comprehensive understanding of how external expertise shapes the energy transition. Furthermore, research that directly observes decision-making processes, rather than relying on interviews, would allow for more concrete analysis of consultants' influence at specific moments in policy processes.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the roles externally contracted consultants play in public-sector energy governance in Sweden and how their involvement influences decision-making, accountability, and

democratic legitimacy.

This study advances research on consultants and energy transitions in four ways. First, it provides rare micro-level empirical insight into how consultants operate within public-sector energy governance. Second, it shows that one of Marciano's [22] four roles, channelling stakeholder perspectives, was largely absent from consultants' work in the Swedish energy sector, suggesting that energy governance is predominantly expert-driven with limited participatory mediation. Third, it identifies framing as a central mechanism through which consultants shape transition governance without formal decision-making authority. Fourth, it shows that claims to neutrality and objectivity are not the same, and that both are contested in practice in ways with real implications for how the energy transition is governed.

Consultants are often seen as neutral technical problem-solvers, but they indirectly shape public decision-making by defining problems, setting boundaries, and framing solutions. Their influence stems less from formal authority than from expertise, credibility, and framing. Consultants and public actors largely shared an understanding of how consultancy operates in practice but differed in how openly they expressed critical views and in how they perceived the boundaries of consultants' influence. This reflects the structural positions of the two groups: public actors have authority and are not commercially dependent on consultants, so they can afford to be openly critical, whereas consultants depend on client relationships and tend to deflect criticism onto unnamed others rather than question their own work. In contrast, consultants depend on client relationships and tend to deflect criticism onto unnamed others rather than question their own work.

Consultants can help fill capacity gaps and contribute expertise, efficiency, and flexibility in a complex and fast-changing policy field. At the same time, reliance on external expertise may create dependency, reduce transparency, and raise concerns about democratic accountability. Claims of neutrality and objectivity are not fixed attributes but are shaped by commercial incentives, personal values, and client expectations. The challenge is therefore not whether consultants should be involved in the public sector, but how their involvement is governed. Public sector strategies for transparency, knowledge transfer, and critical oversight are important to ensure that external expertise complements rather than substitutes for in-house capacity.

This study focuses on Sweden, and some findings reflect its institutional context, including a strong public sector and established use of consultants. However, dynamics such as framing influence, capacity-driven reliance, and tensions around neutrality and objectivity are relevant beyond Sweden. Similar pressures exist in other countries facing complex energy transitions. The Swedish case, therefore, offers relevant insights.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Katharina Reindl: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ella Alfredsson Jofs:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Jenny Palm:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Overview of the interviewees

Nr	Interview	Firm information and role	Role	Categorisation	Time
1	Interview 1	Research, knowledge and consulting firm with a focus on energy, waste, transport and climate	Partner and senior consultant	Consultant	Mars 2024
2	Interview 2	Energy consulting firm	Energy Market Consultant, Co-founder	Consultant	Mars 2024
3	Interview 3	Research and consulting firm with a focus on energy, waste, transport and climate	Energy systems analyst, co-owner	Consultant	April 2024
4	Interview 4	Architectural, construction and engineering consulting firm	Energy consultant	Consultant	Mars 2024
5	Interview 5	Real estate and energy consulting firm	CEO and co-founder, energy specialist	Consultant	Mars 2024
6	Interview 6	Real estate and energy consulting firm	Head of product and marketing, senior consultant	Consultant	Mars 2024
7	Interview 7	Industry organisation	Director of energy policy recently. For many years, consulting at an architectural and engineering consulting firm	Consultant	Mars 2024
8	Interview 8	Institute working with research and consultancy assignments on environmental and sustainability issues; University	Part-time work as a professor, part-time work as a researcher and consultant	Consultant	April 2024
9	Interview 9	Analysis and technology consulting firm	Sustainability and environmental consultant	Consultant (since the time of the interview client)	April 2024
10	Interview 10	Institute working with research and consultancy assignments on environmental and sustainability issues	Group manager for energy	Consultant	March 2024
11	Interview 11	Own consultancy firm	Self-employed consultant (worked previously at other consulting firms with project management and installation coordination in consultancy and construction settings)	Consultant	April 2024
12	Interview 12	Architectural, construction and engineering consulting firm	Head of sustainability, energy and industry division and project Manager, Sustainable Industry	Consultant	April 2024
13	Interview 13	Research, knowledge and consulting firm with a focus on energy, waste, transport and climate	Co-founder and senior consultant	Consultant	April 2024
14	Interview 14	Architecture, engineering and consulting firm	Department head (experience from other consulting firms as well as governmental agencies)	Consultant, previously also a client	April 2024
15	Interview 15	Architectural, construction and engineering consulting firm	Group Manager for Electric Power	Consultant	April 2024
16	Interview 16	Engineering consulting firm in the field of energy and climate change	Senior consultant	Consultant	April 2024
17	Interview 17	An engineering consulting firm to achieve a sustainable society	Head of Division Energy	Consultant	April 2024
18	Interview 18	Financial consulting firm	Analyst and economist	Previously a consultant, now a client	May 2024
19	Interview 19	Architecture, engineering and consulting firm	Market director energy-intensive industries, with a focus on the energy transition	Consultant	May 2024
20	Interview 20	Architecture, engineering and consulting firm	Energy and sustainability consultant	Consultant	May 2024
21	Interview 21	An engineering consulting firm to achieve a sustainable society	Expert in electrical engineering	Consultant	May 2024
22	Interview 22	An engineering consulting firm to achieve a sustainable society	Consultant on energy issues (e.g. renewables, flexibility), planning, strategy and business development	Consultant	May 2024
23	Interview 23	Engineering consulting firm in the field of energy and climate change	Senior consultant, Energy Systems Analyst	Consultant	May 2024
24	Interview 24	Own consulting firm	Independent Economist and consultant	Consultant	May 2024
25	Interview 25	Business management consulting firm with a focus on the energy sector and sustainability transitions	Senior consultant	Consultant	May 2024
26	Interview 26	Consultancy and advisory services focused on the energy transition, e.g. global energy markets, policy developments, political risks	Senior consultant	Consultant	May 2024
27	Interview 27	Research, innovation and consulting institute	Product development and SME-support, senior researcher and consulting	Consultant	May 2024
28	Interview 28	Own consulting firm working with fast-tracking the energy transition	Firm director and founder	Consultant	May 2024
29	Interview 29	International classification society, registrar and risk management, assurance and consulting organisation	Principal Researcher	Consultant	May 2024
30	Interview 30	Consultancy and advisory services focused on the energy transition, e.g. global energy markets, policy developments, political risks	Firm director and founder	Consultant, previously also a client	May 2024
31	Interview 31	Architecture, engineering and consulting firm	Senior consultant, team lead, energy systems	Consultant	June 2024
32	Interview 32	Engineering consulting firm in the field of energy and climate change	Senior consultant	Consultant	June 2024
33	Interview 33	Engineering, design, and advisory services	Business unit manager: Environment and Sustainability	Consultant	June 2024
34	Interview 34	International classification society, registrar and risk management, assurance and consulting organisation	Business director	Consultant	June 2024

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Nr	Interview	Firm information and role	Role	Categorisation	Time
35	Interview 35	Engineering consulting firm in the field of energy and climate change	Energy Market Analyst	Consultant	June 2024
36	Interview 36	Institute working with research and consultancy assignments on environmental and sustainability issues	Consultant	Consultant	June 2024
37	Interview 37	Research, innovation and consulting institute	Research and Development Engineer	Consultant	June 2024
38	Interview 38	Nonprofit organisation focused on electrification and the power system transition	Vice President, Power Systems Expert	Consultant	June 2024
39	Interview 39	Business management consulting firm with a focus on the energy sector and sustainability transitions	Manager and senior consultant	Consultant	June 2024
40	Interview 40	Swedish Energy Agency	Analyst	Client	April 2024
41	Interview 41	National regulatory authority	Economist	Client	April 2024
42	Interview 42	National regulatory authority	Economist	Client	April 2024
43	Interview 43	Own firm	Expert in international Energy Markets	Client	Mars 2024
44	Interview 44	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency	Economist	Client	May 2024
45	Interview 45	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency	Analyst	Client	May 2024
46	Interview 46	Swedish Energy Agency	Senior Advisor	Client	May 2024
47	Interview 47	County administration Stockholm	Energy and Climate Strategist	Client	June 2024
48	Interview 48	Swedish Transport Administration,	Investigator	Client (previously also consultant and different client)	June 2024
49	Interview 49	Electricity transmission	Vice president	Client	June 2024
50	Interview 50	Energy company	Senior strategist	Client	June 2024
51	Interview 51	Scania County (Skåne län)	Environmental strategist	Client	June 2024
52	Interview 52	Swedish Energy Agency	Project and investigation manager	Client	June 2024
53	Interview 53	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency	Senior climate analyst	Client	June 2024
54	Interview 54	Swedish Energy Agency	Analyst	Client	June 2024
55	Interview 55	Electricity transmission	Senior Vice President, Power System	Client	June 2024
56	Interview 56	Swedish Energy Agency	Investigator	Client	June 2024
57	Interview 57	National regulatory authority	Expert	Client	June 2024
58	Interview 58	Swedish Energy Agency	Programme manager	Client	June 2024
59	Interview 59	Research and coordination platform	Programme Manager	Coordinator and project leadership, hybrid	May 2024
60	Interview 60	Research and coordination platform	Project Manager, Research and Development	Coordinator and project leadership, hybrid	June 2024
61	Interview 61	Research and coordination platform	Programme Manager	Coordinator and project leadership, hybrid	June 2024
62	Interview 62	Research and coordination platform	Programme Manager	Coordinator and project leadership, hybrid	June 2024

Appendix B. Interview guide for the consultants

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself? Your background and what you do.
 - What is your title/role?
 - What tasks do you have?
 - How long have you been working with these?
 - What is your role in the organisation?
 - What experience do you have as a consultant?

Job, role and knowledge of consultants

2. Tell us a little about your job as a consultant. About their job
 - What does your work look like? What does it consist of? Can you describe a typical working day?
 - How does a project application work?
 - What methods do you use in your work?
3. Do you meet other consultants regularly at events such as conferences, workshops or forums?
4. Do you (you?) compete with other consultants?
5. Do you often work with other consulting firms?
6. Are there often events/functions held to disseminate results, such as lectures, seminars or webinars?

Consultant and client

7. Which clients do you usually work for? (Have you usually worked for)
 - Are they similar clients or are they different?
 - Which clients do you often work with?
8. How is the final result of a project presented? Is it always in the form of a report?
 - What role do these reports play? What happens after you have submitted a report (to a client)?
9. Has client feedback ever influenced the design of your services/results?
10. How do you handle resistance or sceptical attitudes from clients or within project groups?
11. How do you work to build long-term relationships with your clients?
12. Do you believe that you contribute to capacity building and knowledge transfer within the organisations you work with?
13. Would you say that you only provide factual information to your clients, or can you be involved in influencing them? For example, if you are investigating whether a motorway should be built or not, how do you see your role in that decision-making process?
14. Do you have to be critical of the client in certain situations? Does that happen?
15. Do you sometimes play devil's advocate? Does that happen? In what situations?

Consultant and their influence

16. ((When comparing the roles of consultant and researcher, what would you say is the main difference in what you do? Is it more than a consultant applies research, or how do you see it?
17. Do you think you contribute to the broader debate about energy transition and sustainability, and in what way?
18. For example, do you participate in public discussions, policy development or research collaborations?
19. Do you also work as some kind of bridge builder (intermediary), e.g. facilitating cooperation between different actors, such as energy companies, technology suppliers, authorities and consumers?
 - Or as a "bridge builder" between different stakeholders?
 - Can you give one or more examples of when you have mediated between the different actors? And how?
20. Would you like to say that you are involved in influencing how future society will be shaped?
21. Are you neutral or normative in your assignments? Do you ever have an agenda?
22. Do you think you can make a difference in the energy transition, and if so, how?
23. How do you see your contribution/impact?

Smart grids (if applicable)

24. Do you work with smart grid issues?
 - How/In what way do you work with smart grids?
 - How many projects related to future electricity issues and smart grids are you working on?
25. What does smart grids mean to you? How would you define smart grids?
26. What do you think about the electricity system of the future? What would an ideal future look like for you?
27. What do you think our future electricity system or smart grid looks like?
28. Will it be more centralised or decentralised?

Appendix C. Interview guide for the clients*Introduction*

1. What is your title/role?
 - What tasks do you have?
 - How long have you been working with these?
 - What is your role in the organisation?

Work with consultants – their role and knowledge

2. Do you often work with consultants?
 - I saw consultant XX in the report XYZ. Do you regularly work with this consultant?

- When, on what occasions?
- 3. Are there particular consulting firms that you usually work with?
 - Do you always work with the same consultants?
- 4. How do you contract consultants? Do you know? How does procurement work?
- 5. How is the result of a project where consultants have worked presented, is it always in the form of a report? Or are there other outputs?
 - What role do these reports play? What happens after you have received a report?
 - How are the consultants' work and recommendations integrated?

The consultants' expertise, knowledge and way of working

- 6. How do you assess the consultants' expertise (in smart grids) compared to internal knowledge within your organisation?
- 7. Do consultants have any unique knowledge/perspectives? What unique knowledge or perspectives do the consultants contribute that you don't already have?
- 8. Given the complex technical nature of smart grids or energy transitions, how do consultants fill knowledge gaps within your organisation?

The influence of consultants

- 9. Do the consultants contribute to innovation and strategic planning within your (smart grid) project?
- 10. Are there any examples of how the consultants' work/results/insights have influenced decision-making processes or the direction of the project?
 - Or has the consultants' work ever led to any significant changes in how you plan or implement projects?
 - Can you give examples of where consultants have played a crucial role in a project?
- 11. How would you evaluate the effectiveness of consultants' contributions to your projects?
- 12. Is it common for consultants' work and their insights to shape future work for your organisation?
- 13. Do you think consultants can contribute to the development of policies and regulations related to energy issues (smart grids and renewable energy integration)?
 - Are there specific cases where consultants have played a crucial role in shaping the regulatory framework (for smart grids)?
- 14. Are there specific scenario analyses or futures studies conducted by consultants that have had a major impact on policy or strategic decisions?
- 15. Can you tell us about any groundbreaking recommendations from consultants that have significantly influenced the strategy or implementation of (smart grid) projects?
- 16. Would you say that consultants play a role in helping to envision and plan for the future energy system (smart grids)?
- 17. Have consultants helped facilitate collaboration between your organisation, the public, and other stakeholders?

Challenges and lessons learned

- 18. Does it happen that you disagree with the work a consultant delivers, and if so, how do you resolve it?
- 19. What have been the biggest challenges in working with consultants, and how have these been addressed?
- 20. Are there any lessons learned or best practice cases that have emerged from your organisation's collaboration with consultants?

About the organisation

- 21. Do you also work as some kind of bridge builder (intermediary), e.g. facilitating cooperation between different actors, such as energy companies, technology suppliers, authorities and consumers?
 - Or as a "bridge builder" between different stakeholders?
 - Can you give one or more examples of when you have mediated between the different actors? And how?

Smart grids (if applicable)

- 22. Do you work with smart grid issues?
- 23. How/In what way do you work with smart grids?
- 24. What do smart grids mean to you?
- 25. How would you define smart grids?
- 26. How many projects related to future electricity issues and smart grids are you working on?
- 27. What do you think about the electricity system of the future? What would an ideal future look like for you?
- 28. What do you think our future electricity system or smart grid looks like? Will it be more centralised or decentralised?

Appendix D. Codebook

Background data	
Code	Description
Consultant, client or both	
Gender	Male or female
Firm	Refers to the firm that currently employs them. Or in cases where they have retired, the firm that last employed them.
Experience level	Very experienced – experienced – less experienced
Smart Grids	If the interviewee works with smart grids in some way- Yes/No

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Background data	
Area of expertise	What field the consultant/client is working in
Previous work	Information on interviewees' backgrounds (previous jobs)
Education	Information on interviewees' education (level of education, area of studies)
Title	Title of interviewee
Code themes	
Code	Description
Capacity transfer	
Capacity transfer between consultants and clients	If and how the interviewee works with capacity transfer
Consultancy and research	
Consultancy in relation to research	Umbrella code for the relationship/differences/characteristics of consultancy in relation to research
Consultancy and/vs research	Description of the difference between consultancy and research from the perspective of consultants/clients
Intermediary between research and industry	Consultants as an intermediary (in different versions)
Consultants/clients' role in the energy transition	
Consultants' role in the energy transition	Umbrella code for consultants/clients' thoughts on/role of consultants in the energy transition
Being part of the wider discussion on energy transition	Refers to recurring reference to consultants who stay out of/avoid the public debate on the energy transition (connected to code on agenda/neutrality)
Being part of the wider discussion on energy transition	A recurring theme is that consultants believe that they should be heard more in the debate on the energy transition
Belief that they have an impact	Being part of vs. avoiding the public debate on the energy transition
Direct impact	
Indirect impact	
Clients' role in the energy transition	Coded if the interviewee believes that consultants have an impact on the energy transition
	Recurring question in the interviews with clients
Risks and critique in relation to consultants	
Challenges	Challenges associated with working with consultants
Credibility and legitimacy	Refers to questions of credibility and legitimacy in relation to the consultant's work
Critical of other consultants	Consultants expressing criticism against other consultants
Rent- seeking behaviour	Recurring theme in some interviews where consultants/clients claim consultants mostly share economic motives
Knowledge drain	If outsourcing work to consultants leads to less knowledge in the organisation
Quality of consultants	Issues relating to the quality of work consultants do
Ethical considerations, agenda and legitimacy	
Ethical considerations	Umbrella code for ethical considerations regarding consultancy
Agenda	If and how consultants work with their own or their firm's agenda. How clients see the agenda of consultants.
Agenda as a business strategy	Reflections on agenda as a business strategy, i.e. working with sustainability to gain clients
Corporate agenda	The agenda set by the firm and how it influences the type of work they do
Personal agenda	Agenda set by the interviewee and how it affects their work
Neutrality	Refers to discussions on neutrality in relation to the firm's stance on its own agenda
Conflicting results (Client)	How to deal with conflicting/negative results from a client's perspective
Conflicting results (Consultant)	How to deal with conflicting/negative results from a consultant's perspective
Objectivity	Refers to objectivity in relation to their own work/results
Transparency of results	How transparent the work of consultants is or should be
Intermediary	
Capabilities of a successful intermediary	What capabilities are needed to succeed as an intermediary
Characteristics of intermediaries	Which characteristics are associated with intermediaries
In relation to industry	
In relation to other actors (network)	
In relation to research	
In relation to the energy transition	
Intermediary (Client)	Recurring question in interviews with clients, if they see themselves as intermediaries
Not intermediary	Only referenced a few times, interviewees specifically not seeing themselves as intermediaries
Reasons to hire consultants and how consultants are hired	
Capacity	
Knowledge	
Time	
Documentation/reports	Refers specifically to interviewees who state that their role is to create documentation/reports and not be part of the decision-making process in the public sector.
Recruitment (Client)	How do clients hire consultants? Long- term contracts, word of mouth, etc.
Recruitment (Consultants)	How do consultants get assignments? Do they have long-standing client contracts? "Looking" for assignments?
Collaboration with other firms	Emergent theme that collaboration between consultants is more common than I thought

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Code themes	
Competition with other firms	Do firms compete for assignments, and how does that manifest?
Role in decision- making	
Role in decision-making (unspecified public-private)	
Direct impact	
Indirect impact	
Role private	Role and influence of consultants in private sphere decision- making
Direct impact	
Indirect impact	
Role public	Role and influence of consultants in public sphere decision- making
Direct impact	
Indirect impact	
Deliverables of consultants	
Types of end products	What types of end-products do consultants deliver?
Modelling	
Presentation	
Report	
Survey	
Other	
Publication of results	Are the results public, and how do you spread knowledge of your results
Miscellaneous	
Others	

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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