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Working Behind the Scenes: Roles and Functions of French and German Parliamentary Staff

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Abstract

The work of parliamentary staff is essential for the functioning of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale, which present two distinct national parliaments. Parliamentary employees have various tasks, such as providing and brokering information, advising, ghostwriting, or facilitating compromises. However, their concrete activities have not yet been sufficiently explored. Therefore, this article identifies and compares the predominant roles and functions of French and German parliamentary staff by applying an extended version of the role/type matrix by Brandsma and Otjes (2024). It determines four organisational roles in both parliaments: general administrative staff, committee staff, parliamentary party group staff, and personal staff. The empirical findings suggest that these organisational roles differ largely in size and function between the two legislatures. In general, the Bundestag is much better staffed than the Assemblée nationale. While parliamentary party group and personal staff have similar functions (but not size), there is a striking difference in terms of committee staff. The French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its staff into committee work than the German counterpart. This corresponds to the fact that German committee staff are mainly organisers while the French colleagues fulfil a whole range of functions such as advising, facilitating compromises, and ghostwriting.

Keywords

Assemblée nationale; Bundestag; parliament; parliamentary staff

1. Introduction

Parliaments are places where elected members of parliament meet and carry out their work of representation, legislation, and scrutiny. These essential tasks in a democracy are often supported by a large

machinery of parliamentary staff. Behind the curtains, they ensure the functioning of the legislature. From the preparation of plenary or committee meetings to IT and security services, the parliamentary employees are indispensable for a smooth legislative process. Without them, parliamentarians would not be able to perform their tasks and would have to restrict their parliamentary activities to a minimum in an increasingly complex world. The work of parliamentary staff remains largely invisible to the public (Laube et al., 2020). However, parliamentary staff can have an impact on the quality of laws and on parliamentary control, contributing to ensuring that democratic rules and procedures are observed. Despite their importance for the functioning of parliament, the role of parliamentary staff is under-researched (Laube et al., 2020).

Most studies on parliamentary staff were conducted on the US Congress (e.g., Hammond, 1996) and the European Parliament (e.g., Michon, 2014); this is apparent when searching for parliamentary staff studies in academic journals and websites such as Google Scholar. Studies on parliaments such as the German Bundestag or the French Assemblée nationale, and those that compare parliamentary staff across parliaments, are rare. So far, there are ethnographic and sociological studies that have pioneered research into the work of parliamentary staff and the inner functioning of and social practices in parliaments (e.g., Brichzin et al., 2018), such as the Assemblée nationale (Abélès, 2000; Gardey, 2015; Rozenberg, 2018) and the Bundestag (Brichzin, 2016; Laube et al., 2020). Yet, they fail to give a comprehensive summary of different types of parliamentary staff and of their activities from a political science viewpoint.

A recent exception and seminal comparative study is the *Routledge Handbook of Parliamentary Administrations*, where Christiansen et al. (2023) present a systematic overview of parliamentary administrations worldwide. In this book, Arndt et al. (2023) also explain the structure and tasks of the German parliamentary administration, and Tacea (2023) does it for the French administrative staff. However, these studies focus solely on parliamentary administrations and neglect other types of staff, such as personal staff or staff that work for a parliamentary party group (PPG), although their work can be equally important for parliamentary work. There are studies on other types of parliamentary staff, such as on the role of personal staff in the Assemblée nationale (Beauvallet & Michon, 2022) or on PPG staff in the German Bundestag (Schöne, 2009) and the comparison of the latter with personal staff of German MPs (Dagger, 2009; Stender, 2019).

However, a cartography of all staff categories and their functions in parliament is missing. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) addressed this gap in the literature by developing a role/type matrix. With this matrix, they carve out the different organisational roles that exist in a parliament, such as plenary staff or personal staff to an MP. Different organisational roles are then related to the different functions and tasks that parliamentary staff can have, such as giving advice or brokering information. In doing so, they apply a functionalist approach.

The objectives of this article are to test the matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) and to determine the predominant roles and functions of parliamentary staff working in relation with committees in the German Bundestag and in the French Assemblée nationale. This article aims to provide a better understanding of the role of parliamentary staff in the legislative process in both countries. This is particularly important as political decisions and laws can have far-reaching consequences for the individual citizen. It is therefore important to understand how they are made, who is involved, and how. In addition, the comparative study of parliamentary staff activities in France and Germany allows for disclosing differences and similarities in how the parliaments are staffed, what type of work they assign to their staff, and what role political culture

plays. Both national parliaments are intriguing case studies as they differ considerably in their competencies and roles in the respective political systems. The Bundestag is a strong legislator, while the Assemblée nationale is seen as a "rationalised parliament" with limited powers (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 126). Comparing the activities of French and German parliamentary staff reveals important insights that can be related to the institutional design and powers of the two parliaments. To single out the roles and functions of French and German parliamentary staff, this article first introduces the role/type matrix established by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) and develops it further. The data utilised within this study were based on interviews and written answers of French and German parliamentary staff and publicly available data. In the next step, the article compares the French and German parliaments with a focus on their competencies and roles in the respective national political systems. Finally, the results of the empirical study are presented according to the extended role/type matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). The concluding part brings together the detected predominant staff roles and functions and formulates further research propositions regarding the characteristics of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée. In this way, the study also aims to stimulate scientific debate on how the detected roles and functions relate to the specific features and institutional structure of the respective legislatures. Further research can proceed in a similar way to Fasone (2023), who compared parliamentary administrations in presidential and parliamentary systems.

2. Measuring Staff Activity

This qualitative case study applies the role/type matrix by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to determine the different organisational roles and types of functions that staff assume in parliaments. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 539) perceive their proposed instrument as an amalgamation of different role/type conceptualisations that other studies have determined in the past, such as Högenauer and Neuhold (2015), Pegan (2017), or Neuhold and Dobbels (2015). What distinguishes their instrument from other studies is that it incorporates all the different organisational roles in parliaments and gives a more comprehensive picture of staff activity. Former studies have neglected parts of parliamentary staff, such as personal assistants to the MPs or staff who work directly for a PPG.

Within organisational roles, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) identify four distinct categories: plenary staff, committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff. These roles are mainly defined according to the principal who employs the staff (Otjes, 2022). Plenary and committee staff are part of the parliamentary administration, which is a public authority that has its own rules connected to public law. Staff who work exclusively for the committees in parliament are separated from staff who work for the whole parliament and every MP. Committees are crucial bodies in parliament that focus on specific policy areas in the sense of a division of labour, and are often the places where the concrete policy-making takes place. The *committee staff* focuses solely on the work of the committee. In contrast, the plenary staff, according to Brandsma and Otjes, comprises employees working as assistants during plenary sessions but also in the research, legal, press, or IT services, for example. But beware: The name "plenary staff" can be misleading because of the specific staff that assists during plenary sessions (Bundestag, 2011). Therefore, this kind of staff is renamed here as *general administrative staff*.

In the matrix of Brandsma and Otjes, they also single out staff who work for all the members of a PPG. As the large majority of MPs belong to a specific party, they form parliamentary groups in the parliament to facilitate coordination processes and a division of tasks between like-minded MPs. These groupings

significantly increase the efficiency of parliamentary work and give parliamentary groups a stronger impact in the political decision-making process than single MPs can have. *PPG staff* support this coordination process. Finally, there are the *personal assistants* who are employed by a single MP under private law and who assist them personally. A part of the personal assistants has their working place in the office spaces of the MP in the parliamentary building. However, another part is often situated within the electoral constituency of the MP, thereby facilitating direct access for citizens to their elected representative.

These four staff roles engage in different activities and fulfil a variety of functions that can overlap within one role. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) summarise five types of functions. First, there is the *ghostwriter* who helps MPs realise their original tasks, such as speaking in parliament or writing motions and amendments. As the name indicates, the ghostwriter writes and prepares the speeches and parliamentary texts in advance based on the preferences and positions of the MP and their party. Then, there is the *advisor* who has expertise in a specific field, on the basis of which they make recommendations. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 540) distinguish between policy, procedural, legal, and political advice. The advisor is distinct from the *information broker*, who also advises the MP, not on the basis of their own expertise, but on the information they and the MP receive from others. The information broker's essential task is to filter and process the large amount of information that arrives every day in the MP's mailbox from citizens, lobby groups, governmental institutions, media, and research institutes.

Additionally, the information broker actively gathers information on a topic. Due to the filtering of information, the information broker steers and prioritises the information that reaches the MP. Consequently, they can have a high influence on agenda setting for the MP's activities. Fourthly, there is the *marketeer*, whose role is to promote the MP and their activities in different fora such as traditional media, social media, and in the constituency. This task includes creating and maintaining contacts with newspapers and television stations, writing posts and content for social media platforms, and organising events where the MP gets in contact with the voters. The goal is to increase the popularity and generate support for their MP. Finally, Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 542) define the *compromise facilitator*. In this function, the staff's activities focus on organising and finding compromises among the MP and other actors. Importantly, they need to identify common ground as well as diverging preferences of the actors involved, prepare negotiations between them, and ideally find a solution suitable for everyone. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 542) point out that leaving a part of the negotiations to staff can help to depoliticise a difficult issue.

In Brandsma and Otjes's matrix, one essential function is not considered, namely, the simple organisation and preparation of meetings. Many employees in parliament engage in preparing hearings, plenary and committee sessions, or working group meetings, by, for example, booking rooms, writing and printing organisational documents such as agendas and participant lists, inviting MPs to sessions, or writing protocols and minutes. These secretarial tasks may be less intellectual work, but are equally crucial, without which the parliamentary work and negotiations of MPs would simply not be possible. Högenauer and Neuhold (2015) also identified this type of function in their paper on parliamentary administrations and named it "administrative assistant." In their work, they focus on parliamentary administrations and exclude PPG and personal staff. Within this article, the word *organiser* will be utilised, which applies to general administrative and committee staff, as well as to PPG and personal staff. Organiser is an important function of parliamentary staff that needs to be added to the matrix. Figure 1 summarises the organisational roles and different types of functions.

Roles	Types of Function
General Administrative Staff	Ghostwriter
Committee Staff	Advisor
PPG Staff	Marketeer
Personal Staff	Information Broker
	Compromise Facilitator
	Organiser

Figure 1. Extended role/type matrix of parliamentary staff activity. Source: Adapted from Brandsma and Otjes (2024).

3. Methodology

This role/type matrix was tested in a qualitative case study and applied to a diverse data set. This case study is a comparative analysis of the parliamentary staff working in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale, both lower houses. For reasons of feasibility, neither the French upper house, the Sénat, nor the German representation of federal states, the Bundesrat, could be considered here. The two cases, Bundestag and Assemblée nationale, were chosen as they differ considerably from each other in terms of competences and parliamentary power (Fish & Kroenig, 2009). Two differing cases, instead of similar cases, were selected to determine whether different institutional designs and powers are associated with different organisational roles and functions of parliamentary staff. The next section describes in detail the differences and commonalities of both chambers.

The collected data comprise publicly available data from the websites of both parliaments, consisting of organisational charts, job descriptions, parliamentary and administrative rules of procedures, budget plans indicating the number of employees, and data sets on personal staff, and personal information from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag. In addition, five interviews were conducted with staff from the parliamentary administrations, two for the Bundestag and three for the Assemblée nationale, who served as committee staff and in one case also as PPG staff. The special feature that unites four of them is that they were exchange officers or worked independently in the other parliament for around a year. Consequently, they got to know both parliaments and gained valuable insights into the differences and commonalities of the activities of parliamentary staff.

To increase the comparability between the two cases regarding the types of function, the study focused on the parliamentary staff who work for the European Affairs Committee and the Economics Committee in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. The two committees were chosen as they differ in their competencies. The Economics Committee has a legislative function in both countries; it discusses and amends legislative proposals, while the European Affairs Committee does not. In the Bundestag, it is seen as

an integration and cross-sectional committee and follows the work of the bodies of the EU, no matter what policy field (Bundestag, 2025b). Similarly, the European Affairs Committee in the Assemblée nationale monitors the activities on the EU level and is not part of the eight standing committees of the French lower chamber, unlike the Economics Committee (Assemblée nationale, 2025a, Art. 151.1-12). The data collected on these committees derived from the interviews mentioned above and from 16 written answers to a questionnaire focusing on the staff tasks and functions in these committees. In sum, the collected data allowed for a comparative analysis of staff activities in both parliaments.

4. Comparing the Staff's Home Parliaments

Staff activities do not occur in a vacuum but are embedded in and linked to the specific institutional framework and powers of the two parliaments in question. Therefore, this section provides a detailed overview of the primary characteristics of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. This is accomplished through a direct comparison of the political systems, the electoral systems, the committee work, and the role of PPGs.

The German parliament is classified as a strong legislator and working parliament regarding Koß's different types of parliaments, which are working, talking, and hybrid legislatures (Koß, 2018, p. 26). It has many powers, such as the election of the federal chancellor or the authorisation or rejection of military deployments. In addition, the German Bundestag has a strong autonomy in organising its own work regarding its agenda and committees, for example. Its work centres on the parliamentary functions of legislation and oversight. In contrast, the French Assemblée counts as a hybrid parliament (between working and talking parliament) and is seen as a "weak legislator with high responsiveness" (Thomas, 2019, p. 73). While the French MPs attach great importance to representing their constituents, the autonomy of their Assemblée nationale is limited. The internal organisation, such as the number of standing committees or the parliamentary agenda, is largely determined by the French Constitution (Assemblée nationale, 2010). In addition, its area of activity is limited and excludes foreign and defence policy, which is the reserved domain of the French president. This is in stark contrast to the German parliament, which even decides on military missions.

These differences in powers can be explained by the respective national history and political systems of the two parliaments. The strong position of the Bundestag in the German federal and parliamentary system is historically based and relates to the experiences of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933). In 1933, the then semi-presidential system of Germany was abolished by the dictator Adolf Hitler by rendering the parliament powerless and erecting a totalitarian regime in Germany. The defeat of Germany in the Second World War put an end to the dictatorship and led to the separation of Germany into East and West Germany. In West Germany, the founding actors of the German Constitution, the so-called *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), which was also to become the Constitution for the united Germany after 1989, aimed at preventing a second Weimar. Consequently, they equipped the German parliament with robust competencies such as a strong parliamentary control of the executive. Remarkably, French history had an opposite effect on the role of the parliament in the French political system. The French Third and Fourth Republics (1870–1940, 1946–1958) were marked by parliamentary turbulences, constantly changing majorities, and political instabilities. Therefore, the builders of the Fifth Republic, introduced in 1958, aimed at reducing this instability and opted for restricting the powers of the parliament. They chose to grant the directly elected president important

prerogatives and exempt them from parliamentary influence to create stability. The then-installed semi-presidential system is characterised by a strong president and a "rationalised parliament" (Assemblée nationale, 2023a; Marsch et al., 2015, p. 126). Ultimately, two parliaments evolved from history that differ in their role and functions in the respective national system, which is assumed to shape the roles and functions of MPs and of parliamentary staff.

This article also supposes that the electoral system must have an effect not only on the MPs' role but on the staff activities as well. The German and the French electoral systems diverge significantly. The French Assemblée counts 577 members who are elected in a majority voting system every five years (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2011). The French voters decide in two ballots about a candidate for their constituency. As the MP is elected in a direct universal vote, this system emphasises the importance of the parliamentarian's personality and local anchoring. Due to the majority voting system, a significant part of the voters who voted for another candidate are not represented in the Assemblée nationale. In contrast, the German electoral system combines direct and list-based proportional representation and has recently undergone electoral reform. In general, German citizens have two votes and elect at least 598 members for four years; 299 seats in the German Bundestag are reserved for the first vote which the Germans use to elect a direct candidate from their constituency. The other 299 seats are distributed according to the results of the second vote. Here, the voters decide for a party list. In the past, the number of direct candidates elected often exceeded the number of seats available for the party gained by the second vote. This caused overhang and equalising mandates which were added to the statutory size of 598 seats in the Bundestag (Bundestag, 2025d). Regularly, this caused a much larger parliament. For example, the Bundestag counted 733 MPs in 2024 (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025). A reform in 2020 and 2023 aimed at reducing the seats and abrogated these mandates. It came into effect with the February 2025 German federal elections (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025). In whole, the German voting system is a complex and somewhat difficult combination of voting for a local candidate and a party. The party plays an important role in Germany. On the other side of the Rhine, the French system is entirely based on direct universal suffrage, where the individual personality has a greater influence.

Moreover, there are significant differences between the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée regarding the role of committees and PPGs in both parliaments. The French Constitution foresees eight standing committees (Assemblée nationale, 2010), which often count a high number of members that need to process a large number of legislative proposals. The limitation to eight committees hinders the effective work of the Assemblée nationale (Sprungk, 2007, p. 134). The committee work, often exercised through a specific rapporteur system, includes legislative activities and parliamentary control. Usually, two MPs, one from the government and one from the opposition, conduct information trips on a specific topic, the so-called *missions d'information* and *missions flash*, and elaborate a joint report. The Bundestag does not know this cross-party rapporteur system.

In comparison, the German parliament can decide alone on the number of committees, which often mirrors the number of ministries. Before the national election in February 2025, the Bundestag comprised 23 permanent committees (Bundestag, 2021). The German MPs put much emphasis on the committee work. Most of them specialise in the policy field because much of the legislation and oversight work takes place here. They are often described as expert-parliamentarians, which can lead to a certain distancing from the electorate (von Oertzen, 2005). In contrast, French MPs are seen rather as generalists and highly responsive

to voter concerns. They often mediate information and interests between different state levels. In sum, the Assemblée nationale assumes the key parliamentary function of representation and interest mediation, while the Bundestag primarily exercises strong legislative control (Thomas, 2019, pp. 73–80). Both types of parliamentarians correspond with the respective electoral system, where the directly elected French MPs need to have a strong local connection. Although half of the German MPs are also elected directly (and the other half on a party ticket), the party is more important here than in France.

Finally, the significance of PPGs differs largely in both parliaments. In the Bundestag, the PPGs play a pivotal role as, for example, the governing groups have a strong impact on policy-making (Thomas, 2019, p. 79). PPGs in the German Bundestag are subdivided into working groups that mirror the committees. Many proposals and amendments in the committees are pre-discussed here. Consequently, the committee work is strongly influenced by the (governing) PPGs in the German Bundestag. In addition, the PPGs are powerful because they can initiate legislative proposals, make amendments, establish commissions of enquiry, and appoint a vice-president of the Council of Elders (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 147). In the Bundestag, 5% of its members can form a parliamentary group, whereas in the French Assemblée nationale, it is approximately half. The threshold in France for implementing a group is 15 MPs. In the French parliament, the PPGs do not have such a prominent role as in the German case. While the PPGs in Germany are relatively stable, the names and compositions of PPGs in the French parliament change frequently. In the Assemblée nationale, PPGs divide into government, opposition, and minority groups. The constitutional reform from 2008 gave the latter two the right to initiate commissions of enquiry and to hold the presidency of the finance committee (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 147), enforcing the parliamentary control function.

In whole, the institutional design and powers of the two parliaments differ largely and are strongly influenced by their respective history. While the French parliament is constitutionally restrained, the German Bundestag is a powerful parliament. As a result, the activities of parliamentary staff most likely correspond to the institutional design and powers of the parliament. The next section presents the findings of the empirical study on the organisational roles and the types of functions performed by the parliamentary staff in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale.

5. Organisational Roles of German and French Parliamentary Staff

The empirical analysis finds that both parliaments are characterised by the presence of all four organisational roles from the role/type matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). However, the figures and the distribution of general administrative staff, committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff differ greatly.

In general, the staffing level in the German Bundestag is nearly three times higher than in the Assemblée nationale (see Table 1). Of course, it must be taken into account that the Bundestag has more MPs with 733 members in early 2025 (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025) than the Assemblée nationale with its fixed 577 members. However, this does not sufficiently explain the different levels of staff, as MP and staff numbers are not directly correlated. This corresponds with more general findings by Otjes (2022), who did not find a clear pattern between the number of MPs and the size of parliamentary staff. Table 1 displays the numbers for the different organisational roles present in both parliaments. Analysing the data gives three major insights.

Table 1. Overview of organisational roles and their staff numbers in the Assemblée nationale and Bundestag.

	Assemblée nationale	Bundestag
General Administrative Staff in 2025	1,093	2,996
Committee Staff in 2025	ca. 285	235
Personal Staff in 2025	2,030	6,056
PPG Staff in 2022	145	1,121
Parliamentary Staff in 2025 (total number without PPG Staff)	3,393	9,287

Sources: Assemblée nationale (2025c, 2025d, 2025e), Bundestag (2025c), Husson (2024), Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances (2024), and a personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag (copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach).

First, when looking at the staff in the parliamentary administration, i.e., general administrative and committee staff, the Bundestag administration is more than double the size of the French administration (Husson, 2024; personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]). The larger size is also reflected in the structure of the Bundestag administration, which is subdivided into six directorates-general: Parliament and Members; External Relations, Europe, and Analysis; Information and Documentation; Digitalisation; Building and Infrastructure; and Central Services (Bundestag, 2023). In comparison, the organisational structure of the Assemblée's administration is leaner with only three main directorates: Legislative Directorate; Administrative Directorate; and Joint Directorate (Assemblée nationale, 2025b). Both parliaments have in common that they define four career groups among their staff that resemble each other according to the function and the education level necessary for the position. In the Assemblée, these are called administrators, assistant administrators, executive and management assistants, and agents. These staff are civil servants, but they differ from other civil servants as they have their own legal status that includes strict professional discretion and political neutrality. To guarantee this neutrality, there is also a proper recruitment process for parliamentary administrative staff, the so-called *concours*, and a one-year obligatory internship. The educational background of the administrators and assistant administrators is often a degree in political science or public policy, according to the interviewees. Consistent with the principle of neutrality is that the external mobility of staff is limited. This means that there are strict conditions for parliamentary civil servants to work temporarily for another public institution, such as a ministry (Assemblée nationale, 2023c).

In contrast, the Bundestag administration staff have the same legal status as civil servants in the ministries, which is regulated in Article 33 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany. Consequently, the career groups are senior civil service, higher civil service, intermediate civil service, and elementary civil service, which are oriented towards the educational level of the employees, ranging from a university degree to a secondary school leaving certificate (Bundestag, 2025a). The civil servants in the Bundestag are also subject to neutrality and independence from political and economic influence, but this is not as strict as in the French case. Due to the principle of "active citizens" in the Basic Law, the civil servants can be politically active outside of working hours, such as being a party member, for example (dbb beamtenbund und tarifunion, 2025). This would be perceived as a violation of political neutrality within the French system (Baron, 2013). Unsurprisingly, external mobility is possible for the Bundestag administrative staff. They can even be *loaned* to a PPG for a certain time period, which is usually a highly political position. The recruitment procedure for the Bundestag administrative

staff is based on official job advertisements, which often include legal training or law studies as a requirement for the senior and higher civil service.

Although the Bundestag administration is twice as big as the French administration, the committee staff figures are close to one another. Consequently, the French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its staff into the committee support than the Bundestag does. This is particularly noteworthy considering that the Assemblée nationale has only eight standing committees, whereas the Bundestag generally has more than 20. The reason for this might be found in the type of function performed by the committee staff in each parliament.

Second, another revealing comparison is that of the PPG staff. In both parliaments, this staff category is employed by the PPG itself. They are responsible for recruitment, remuneration, working conditions, and dismissal of their staff. Remarkably, the German PPG staff are far more numerous than the French. The Bundestag had 1,121 employees in 2022 working for the six PPGs at the time (Bundestag, 2025c), while the Assemblée nationale counted only 145 for 11 PPGs in the same year (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances, 2024). The German PPG staff number is eight times higher. This indicates that the PPGs most likely play a bigger role in the German parliament, which fits well with findings in the literature (Arndt et al., 2023).

Third, the comparison of the personal staff roles reveals commonalities but also strong differences when it comes to figures. In both parliaments, the personal staff is employed by the MP her or himself, who defines the tasks and sets up the working contract conditions, which must be based on general labour law. As the PPG staff, the personal staff is not part of the parliamentary administration and its specific work regulations (see Article 12 of the German Members of Parliament Act). In both cases, the personal staff can be situated at the seat of parliament in Berlin or Paris, or in the MP's constituency (Assemblée nationale, 2024). French and German MPs often have personal staff in both locations. Interesting differences occur when analysing the staff numbers, which diverge strongly. German MPs employ eight persons on average (own calculation based on Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025; personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]). In contrast, a French MP can only make use of 3,5 personal staff, which is less than half of what the German counterpart employs (own calculation based on Assemblée nationale, 2025e; Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2011). This serves as a general indicator, as the specific number of personal assistants usually depends on the function and position of the MP in parliament.

In sum, the Bundestag has a higher staffing level than the Assemblée nationale. It also displays a much higher number of PPG staff, which is smaller in the French parliament. In addition, the German MPs can make use of more personal staff. Interestingly, the German Bundestag, with its high number of employees, is an outlier when looking at the table by Otjes (2022, p. 383), which compares the number of parliamentary staff in 48 countries. However, the French parliamentary administration puts a much higher share of its staff into committee work than the Bundestag does. This different weighting of the staff shares is an indication of the priorities of the staff activities. Most likely, they are related to the types of functions the specific parliamentary staff fulfil.

6. Types of Functions of German and French Parliamentary Staff

Regarding the types of functions, the analysis was focused on all staff working around the European Affairs and Economic committees. This includes three organisational roles: committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff. On the other hand, it excludes general administrative staff from the analysis, as they are not directly involved in committee work. The advantage of this exclusion is that it makes the analysis feasible and more precise, as the general administrative staff is a large category with staff undertaking a diversity of tasks from driving services for MPs to parliamentary press relations. It is important to note that the types of functions selected in this analysis reflect the most predominant tasks of the respective staff category. The employees may also perform other functions and tasks, but to a much lesser extent or on an individual level.

The comparative analysis of the staff activities in the Bundestag and the Assemblée nationale finds major differences regarding the committee staff, while German and French PPG and personal staff have similar tasks, differing only in the weighting of tasks and in the number of respective staff members. To start with the committee staff in both parliaments, the German employees can be described as *organisers* and their French counterparts are *advisers* and *compromise facilitators*, according to the extended role/type matrix in Figure 1. More specifically, the German committee staff mostly takes care of the organisational process (invitations, meeting preparation, minutes) and the formal preparation of motions and amendments for committee meetings. They can give procedural advice but are not involved in terms of political content. According to the interviewees and the low figures on overall committee staff in the Bundestag (personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]), the German European Affairs and Economic committees only count a handful of staff from the parliamentary administration. Moreover, they have a greater distance from the MPs than their French colleagues, who work closely with the members of the respective committee.

In contrast to the German committee staff, the French committee staff's work is more substantive and political. The committee's tasks are twofold, and so are the activities of the French civil servants structured. They support the members of the committee in their legislative activity (this does not apply to the European Affairs Committee) and in parliamentary control activity through the rapporteur system. Regarding the legislative activity, French committee staff draft reports and prepare opinions, amendments, and minutes, which are tasks that correspond with the type of *ghostwriter*. On top of that, they are also *advisors*, as they give procedural, legal, and policy advice. When it comes to the rapporteur activities, French committee staff play an essential role as they organise cross-party information trips, i.e., *missions flash* and *missions d'information*, and they draft the report recording the respective information trip in close collaboration with and in the name of the MP-rapporteurs. More importantly, they are *compromise facilitators* when they search for a common position in the report of the two MP-rapporteurs, who are usually from the government and from the opposition. To be able to carry out this highly political work and be accepted by the members of the government and of the opposition alike, the committee staff must be politically neutral. In addition, to be able to conduct this rich content-related work, the French committee staff is large in numbers. The Economic committee counts 24 employees, and the European Affairs Committee has 15 people. This is much more than in the German parliament. Interestingly, one French interviewee described the administrative structure of the German committee staff as a pyramid with the head of the committee secretariat and one or two higher civil servants at the top and a larger group of assisting staff at the

bottom of the pyramid. In France, the pyramid is turned upside down with administrators and adjoints-administrators forming a large group at the top and assistant staff being a small group at the bottom. Figure 2 illustrates the two staff pyramids, one upright and one upside down, which are a fitting allegory for the differences between French and German committee staff.
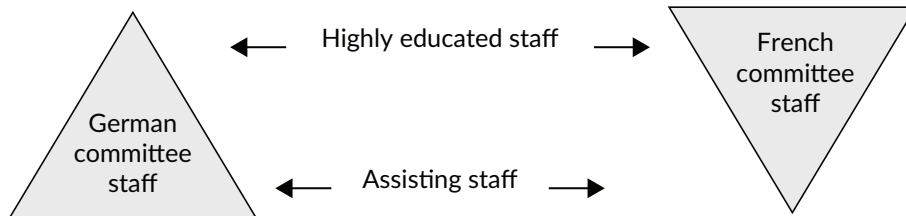
Figure 2. Staff pyramid on the distribution of career groups among French and German committee staff.

In sum, the German committee staff are first and foremost *organisers*, while their French colleagues are more numerous and perform a great variety of tasks. Their main activities are those of *advisors*, *ghostwriters*, and *compromise facilitators*. Abélès (2000, p. 110) even calls them "bricoleurs de la loi," craftsmen and -women of the law.

The PPG staff in the Assemblée nationale and the Bundestag do not differ so much in their tasks as in staff numbers. Both PPG staff can be best characterised as *advisors* and to a lesser degree *compromise facilitators*, following the extended role/type matrix. In France, most of the PPG staff follow one or more areas of legislative activity, namely a specific committee, and they contribute to finding common positions in their parliamentary group (Assemblée nationale, 2023b). This is also true for the German case. Here, the PPG employee is an expert in the respective policy field and advises their group on the matter. They are directly involved in drafting resolutions, political texts, and parliamentary initiatives (Tischner & Churs, 2025). In addition, they facilitate compromises in their own PPG and beyond. However, giving strategic, policy, and procedural advice to the MPs of their group is the most prominent type of function they fulfil.

Despite these similarities between the French and German PPG employees, there are large differences regarding the scope of their activities. The number of French PPG staff is very low compared to other staff roles inside the Assemblée nationale and compared to German PPG staff, which is eight times higher (see Table 1). In fact, there is little information about the French PPGs available on the internet or in the literature. This corresponds to the fact that PPGs have a less prominent position in the French parliament and are more volatile. On the other side of the Rhine, the PPGs are stable and the powerhouses of the Bundestag. German PPG staff play an essential role: They actively follow the working groups and the committee work, give advice to the MPs, and draft parliamentary texts. In whole, the German PPG staff is more numerous and influential than the French counterpart. The reasons can be found in the different institutional design of the two parliaments, which attributes the German PPGs a major role in the policy-making process, whilst the French PPGs play a rather subordinate role.

Finally, the last staff role analysed was the MPs' personal employees. In contrast to committee and PPG staff, the personal employees in both parliaments fulfil functions of *information broker* and *marketeer*. They often need to manage and filter the high amount of information that their MP receives every day. Moreover, most MPs have personal staff who manage social media accounts and contacts with journalists and constituents,

aiming to market the MP. More generally, this staff group is characterised in both countries by a large variety of different activities to support the MP in exercising their mandate. The tasks can range from secretarial and assistant tasks such as agenda planning, making appointments, and answering the telephone, to writing social media posts, drafting speeches, and preparing bills and amendments. The MP decides what kind of functions they need and employs personal staff accordingly (Stender, 2019). The German MPs have more resources at their disposal and can thus employ more staff than their French colleagues. Therefore, the German personal staff can often cover more functions, and the specific weighting of functions depends on the individual MP. The French personal staff concentrate mainly on the functions of *organiser* and *marketeer*, and to a lesser degree *information broker*.

Table 2 summarises the findings on the activities of German and French employees in parliament. More precisely, the analysis focused on the committee work in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. It presents the predominant functions of the three staff roles present in the committee work and indicates a tendency, although the employees might also exercise other functions, but to a lesser degree.

Table 2. Extended role/type matrix of staff roles and functions in the committee work in the Bundestag (BT) and the Assemblée nationale (AN).

Organisational Roles	*Type of Functions*					
	Ghostwriter	Advisor	Marketeer	Information Broker	Compromise facilitator	Organiser
Committee staff (BT)						X
Committee staff (AN)	X	X			X	
PPG staff (BT)	X	X			X	
PPG staff (AN)		X			X	
Personal staff (BT)			X	X		X
Personal staff (AN)			X			X

7. Conclusion

This article has analysed the predominant organisational roles and functions of parliamentary staff in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. It revealed significant differences and similarities in how the two parliaments are staffed and the type of work assigned to their employees. Furthermore, it shed light on the important functions that French and German parliamentary staff fulfil, such as drafting legislation, providing advice, or facilitating compromises. All of these are essential for the functioning of the parliaments and therefore deserve thorough research. Due to this, this study applied an extended version of the role/type matrix developed by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) in order to determine the activities of French and German parliamentary staff. To the five possible types of functions that employees exercise in parliament as defined by Brandsma and Otjes, this article adds the function of *organiser* as a key task of parliamentary employees to the matrix. As far as the four organisational roles elaborated by the two authors are concerned, only the wording for plenary staff was adapted, which is better described as *general administrative staff*. In this way, it cannot be confused with the specific staff for plenary sessions.

In the empirical analysis of the French and German parliaments, all four organisational staff roles were detected: *general administrative staff*, *committee staff*, *PPG staff*, and *personal staff*. Yet, the distribution and numbers of the different staff categories are varied. Firstly, the overall parliamentary staff in the Bundestag is three times higher than in the Assemblée nationale. Remarkably, the French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its employees into committee work, whilst the German committee staff number is very low compared to the overall parliamentary administration. This indicates that the French parliamentary administration, in contrast to the Bundestag administration, emphasises support for the committees. Another interesting insight is provided by the PPG staff numbers. The employees who work for a PPG in the Bundestag are eight times more numerous than those in the Assemblée nationale. This clearly exemplifies the crucial role that PPGs play in the German case and the minor role they play in the French parliament. Finally, the two parliaments differ when it comes to the presence of personal staff. The German MPs are better staffed than their French counterparts and have more than twice as many employees on average. In sum, the comparative analysis of the organisational roles shows how differently the parliaments are staffed and resourced, and where they set their priorities. It should be noted here that the high number of German parliamentary staff is an outlier in an international comparison.

The study of the types of functions that German and French parliamentary staff exercise provides more insights into the activities of staff in both parliaments. It can also explain some of the diverging staff numbers. For a precise functional analysis, this article has focused on the activities of parliamentary staff regarding committee work. This naturally excludes the *general administrative staff* among the organisational roles. The comparative study revealed commonalities in the activities of *PPG staff* and *personal staff*. PPG staff in both countries are mainly *advisers* and *compromise facilitators*. The low numbers of French PPG staff most likely reduce the impact of this work in comparison to the German PPG staff, which also engages in *ghostwriting* of parliamentary texts. Similarities in activities also exist among the personal staff, which, in contrast to the other staff roles, mainly engage as *organiser* and *marketeer*. The German personal staff, which is more numerous, can also be described as *information broker*. The most striking difference between the French and German parliamentary staff exists in the activities of committee staff. While the German committee staff is mainly engaged in organising activities, the French committee staff takes on three highly political tasks: ghostwriting, advising, and facilitating compromises. This also explains the high share of French and the low share of German committee staff relative to the overall numbers of parliamentary staff. In whole, the comparison of the staff functions reveals interesting differences that are probably linked to the different institutional powers, political culture, and history. The knowledge of these differences can also help the parliaments to cooperate better with each other and learn from each other's best practices.

In the interviews, reasons were considered that can explain the extent and form of staff activities in both parliaments. They clearly suggest looking at the interplay of institutional design, history, and self-perception of staff roles. For example, the low number of French PPG staff is most likely related to the low importance of PPGs in the Assemblée nationale. One reason for this could be the majority voting system in France that favours the individual MP. In contrast, the German proportional voting system, based on a direct vote and a party vote, increases ties and dependence of the individual MP on their party. Clearly, the party groups in the Bundestag play a more important role. Consequently, there is most likely a relation between the voting system, the MPs, and the parliamentary staff numbers and activities. Another example is that of the activities of committee staff. In France, the cross-party rapporteur system allows for a politically neutral committee employee to advise and draft the report. In the Bundestag, the PPG staff assume these tasks and the German

committee staff activities are reduced to organisation (Arndt et al., 2023, p. 261). Moreover, the German parliamentary administration is not recognised as politically neutral, which is in stark contrast to the neutrality ethos of the French parliamentary administration (Abélès, 2000, pp. 114–119). In sum, the institutional design of the rapporteur system, as well as a certain working ethos, most likely has an impact on the staff activities. More generally, this suggests that the specific characteristics of the two parliaments are likely to influence the scale and form of staff activities. Future research on staff activities could explore and test these hypotheses.

Conflict of Interests

I worked as a personal assistant for a German MP in the Bundestag from 2015 to 2020.

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