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REVIEW

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From Advisor to Interparliamentary Networker: A Typology of Parliamentary Officials in EU Affairs

Anna-Lena Högenauer [1] and Christine Neuhold [2]

[1] Department of Social Sciences, University of Luxembourg, Luxembourg
[2] Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Maastricht University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Christine Neuhold (c.neuhold@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

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Abstract

Parliamentary staff in European affairs is a relatively young field of study. However, a solid understanding of the role these staff members play is important for grasping the political capacity of parliaments. Whether parliaments can exercise their powers effectively depends on their ability to collect and process information, and officials can play a key role in this context. This also holds true within the European arena. Both the European Parliament and national parliaments play a role of increased significance within the system of European governance. The tasks that officials take on within these legislatures then differ as parliaments within the European arena fulfil different functions than parliaments within the domestic arena. The aim of this review article is thus to provide an insight into the specific institutional context of legislatures within the European arena and to further develop a typology of the core functions of staff in EU affairs.

Keywords

administration; bureaucracy; European Union; EU affairs; member of parliament; parliament; parliamentary assistants; staff typology

1. Introduction

Traditionally, in democratic political systems, the ideal of a neutral civil service is seen as a source of legitimacy. The neutrality of civil servants—according to "objective" standards—has thus developed into a key benchmark for evaluating their work. However, these standards have been developed for governmental staff, whereas the situation in parliaments is more complex due to the presence of multiple parties that pursue, at times, opposing goals. The paradox that elected officials of government are held accountable for the behaviour of civil servants that might operate outside their realm of control (Romme et al., 2022) is exacerbated within

parliaments. Directly elected members are held to account at the end of the day by their voters, but the measures undertaken might be a result of staff decisions rather than those of directly elected politicians. Little is known about what the staff working for directly elected members of parliament do: What roles do these "unsung heroes" (McKee, 2023) actually play? What are the implications of the roles they assume on the accountability of directly elected members of parliament?

The tasks that parliamentary officials take on in the context of European governance differ, as parliaments fulfil different functions within the European arena compared to the domestic arena. Due to the distinct multilevel system of the European Union, which has created dense supranational legislation and cooperation across a large number of states, parliaments and their staff have experienced unprecedented adaptational pressures (Christiansen et al., 2021). The functions of these legislatures have also changed over time. The European Parliament, developed from a consultative, unelected assembly to a directly elected co-legislator (Romanyshyn & Neuhold, 2013), is a prime example of this. The role of national parliaments in EU governance has also evolved, including the creation of new committees, national and European procedures, and interparliamentary bodies. National parliaments are seen as having been upgraded to "multi-arena players" being directly involved in the EU's policy processes (Auel & Neuhold, 2017). The evolving roles of parliaments are likely to also have an impact on the work of their staff.

When scrutinising EU legislation, we have little comparative insight into the roles that parliamentary staff can, in fact, play within EU affairs, both within the European Parliament and within national parliaments. This is important, however, as staff might impinge on the roles of directly elected politicians and thus diminish the latter's accountability. On the other hand, we might also uncover that staff could play a key support role and thus enhance the work of directly elected members of parliaments within EU affairs. This is where this contribution comes in: We try to capture the different tasks and roles unelected officials play within parliaments within the EU arena. We do this by building on and expanding a typology developed for officials working for a parliament at the national level—the Dutch parliament (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024).

In this context, we proceed as follows: We first take stock of the academic debate on the role that officials play in the European Parliament and then provide an insight into the literature on the role that staff play within national parliaments in the realm of EU affairs scrutiny. We then introduce the typology developed for the Dutch parliament and apply and adapt it to parliaments in the realm of European affairs. In the conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our insights for the legitimacy of the functioning of parliaments.

2. The Role of Staff Within the European Parliament: What Tasks They Take On and Why

The role of staff in the European Parliament has been researched much more thoroughly than that of national parliaments (cf. Costa, 2003; Elomäki & Haapala, 2024; Jacobs & De Feo, 2023; Neuhold & Radulova, 2006; Neunreither, 2002; Winzen, 2011). This academic debate on the relationship between members of parliament and their assistants (Neunreither, 2002) within the European Parliament is very much influenced by the fact that the role of the European Parliament and the source of its legitimacy within the EU system of governance has undergone a substantial process of transformation.

The European Parliament has changed significantly from the consultative Common Assembly in the 1950s to a full co-legislator together with the Council that has the right to approve the appointment of the

Commission President (De Feo & Shackleton, 2019). The fact that the ordinary legislative procedure (OLP) was extended to more than 85 treaty articles by the Lisbon Treaty implies that the European Parliament has the right to co-legislate in a vast array of policy fields, which, in turn, requires ample expertise and knowledge. Moreover, the European Parliament is only directly elected as of 1979, whereas before then, members were delegated by national parliaments. This obviously also had an impact on the relationship between MEPs and unelected officials.

There are three main groups of staff supporting MEPs in their work: officials working for the General Secretariat of the European Parliament, the staff of the Parliament's political groups, and the personal assistants of MEPs. In 2020, there were 5,351 Secretariat staff, 1,282 group staff, and 3,287 MEP assistants (Pegan, 2022, p. 513). Secretariat staff are recruited in a competitive fashion by building on the "Weberian ideal" (Pegan, 2022, p. 513; see also Pegan, 2015). However, De Feo and Jacobs (2021) and Jacobs and De Feo (2023) note that this has been changing in recent years. While "the culture of the EP Administration is to be independent from political appointments, and this has been true of most jobs within the Parliament" (Jacobs & De Feo, 2023, p. 729), the authors note that the Bureau of the European Parliament has been closely monitoring the staffing policy of the General Secretariat. There has been political pressure on nominations to top jobs, which has also led to pressure to increase the number of such jobs to accommodate the majority of the party groups. De Feo and Jacobs (2021, p. 563) also argue that "the politicization of EP administration is not limited to the top jobs but it also affects lower grades." Thus, so-called *passerelle* ("bridge") competitions allow the staff of political groups, who have served at least two terms in their group, to enter the main administration and, as such, "cross-over." Political advisors tend to be recruited directly by the political groups, and party affiliation is seen to play a role in this process (Ruiter, 2019, p. 170). Assistants are recruited directly by MEPs and work either in the European Parliament or the respective constituency (Busby & Belkacem, 2013). With regard to the latter, Hermansen and Pegan (2023) show that the number of constituency staff of MEPs increases before European and national elections, and especially in candidate-focused electoral systems, which suggests that constituency staff also play a role in electoral campaigns.

The debate on the role that officials play within the European Parliament can be grouped into three main strands (Pegan, 2022):

1. The debate on the conditions under which MEPs delegate tasks to unelected officials and why they might be prone to delegate these tasks;
2. The debate on the impact of the organisational set-up of the EP on the tasks that officials perform;
3. The debate on what type of expertise officials provide to MEPs and where this advice stems from.

The first strand of this debate (see, e.g., Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013; Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015; Winzen, 2011) examines the conditions under which elected members of parliament delegate tasks to unelected officials and why they may be prone to doing so. Based on what we know thus far, we see that MEPs are more prone to delegate tasks to officials with the General Secretariat of the European Parliament for files that are not attributed great political importance, such as in the realm of delegated and implementing acts (Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015). Within these domains, officials can even be seen as taking on a steering role. MEPs are also more open to delegating tasks to civil servants, for example, within conciliation committee negotiations (Romanyshyn & Neuhold, 2013). The fact that MEPs delegate substantial tasks—albeit in domains that are not attributed great political importance—to a certain group of civil servants working

within the European Parliament can be explained by the following: Civil servants working within the General Secretariat of the EP can be seen to be part of a career system that is highly professionalised (Peters, 2013, p. 17). In line with Weberian ideals, this specific group of civil servants within the General Secretariat of the European Parliament enjoys job tenure and works within a hierarchical setting—the former making them more prone to acquire and build up policy expertise and become highly skilled. Moreover, legislators are in need of this expertise to be able to perform their work (Romanyshyn & Neuhold, 2013). Egeberg et al. (2013) have conducted a comparative study on the tasks that officials take on when working for the political groups of the European Parliament as opposed to the European Parliament General Secretariat. They find that European Parliament officials conduct a multiplicity of tasks, some of which provide "ample potential for exerting influence on MEPs" (Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 504). These include drafting documents, providing advice, and facilitating compromises. Officials employed by the political groups spend a lot of their time crafting compromises within the European Parliament (Egeberg et al., 2013). Nevertheless, MEPs are seen to enjoy a high degree of discretion when delegating tasks, which could, under certain circumstances, reduce officials to "paper keepers" (Winzen, 2011) with Secretariat officials then being in a weak position (Costa, 2003).

Another part of the debate probes into the question of how the setup and organisation of the European Parliament affects the role of officials in policy-making. How the European Parliament administration is organized is seen to have an effect on the role that officials play within the institution. This implies that staff working for political groups actually find themselves "in an ideologically specialized setting" (Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 510). They have to take the positions of the political groups into account. At the same time, they have more policy specific expertise as this is needed to work for the specialised committees of the European Parliament (Egeberg et al., 2013). Political groups thus significantly shape the work of political group staff. This can also be explained by the fact that political advisors are often recruited by political groups themselves and respond to vacancies by these groups. Embracing the main political stances advocated by these groups is seen as an asset (Ruiter, 2019). European Parliament Secretariat officials, on the other hand, specialise in the provision of sectoral policy expertise (Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 510) due to the fact that the Standing Committees of the European Parliament have been characterised as the legislative backbone of the European Parliament (Westlake, 1994). Context is thus seen to matter and is an important determinant in the work and tasks of European Parliament officials. It also affects who they liaise with outside the parliament: Secretariat staff prioritize experts, whereas party group staff focus on like-minded actors, but also, to some extent, on experts as they are usually required to follow specific committees (Egeberg et al., 2015). In addition, Egeberg et al. (2014) show that the socialization through the role in the European Parliament eclipses the pre-European Parliament socialization of staff, i.e., that the behaviour of staff is primarily determined by their function (group staff, Secretariat staff, etc.) rather than by their nationality, age, or other demographic factors. This diversity of administrative structures is seen as an important factor to "keep a balance" between MEPs and the staff working for the European Parliament and can be seen as "a source of democratic control" (Pegan, 2022, p. 525). Moreover, staff working for the European Parliament General Secretariat can assume a key role in advising MEPs on which stance to take in inter-institutional negotiations (Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013).

And last but not least, another set of authors contributing to this debate on the role of officials within the European Parliament shed light on what type of expertise these officials provide and where this advice stems from. Marshall (2012) finds that officials working for the General Secretariat and, as such, supporting

committees in their work are specialists who are very much dependent on outside input by lobbyists and the European executive, the Commission. As such, they not only filter information but also act as conveyor belts/conduits of information to rapporteurs, key shapers of the EU policy-making process (Marshall, 2012, p. 16). The administration of the European Parliament is also seen as playing a key role in the capacity of processing information in such a way that MEPs can actually embrace their powers, for example, in the field of trade after the Lisbon Treaty (Coremans & Meissner, 2018). When compared to national parliaments, the European Parliament is seen to be strongly reliant on (policy) expertise. In order to be influential in the EU's policy-making process, MEPs need to be "specialized policy experts" (Elomäki & Haapala, 2024, p. 335) and are thus dependent on the professional expertise of their staff.

3. The Role of Staff in EU Affairs Scrutiny of National Parliaments: The Lisbon Treaty as a Gamechanger

Unlike the European Parliament, which has been a central actor in EU policy-making for several decades, national parliaments have played a more limited role. Traditionally, the core means of involvement in EU affairs was the scrutiny of the respective member state government and how it positioned itself in the Council of the European Union and the European Council. However, their effectiveness varied based on their motivation (i.e., how actively they scrutinised government) and on their precise powers, i.e., whether they could issue legally binding mandates for Council negotiations, politically binding mandates, or no mandates (cf. Auel et al., 2015).

From 2006 on, following the failed Constitutional Treaty, the European Commission allowed national parliaments to submit individual opinions on draft EU legislation by way of the Political Dialogue (Jančić, 2012). The Lisbon Treaty then introduced the possibility to collectively object to draft EU legislation by way of the so-called Early Warning System (EWS) with a focus on the violation of the subsidiarity principle (Cooper, 2012). The basis of the EWS is the Protocol on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality: After receiving an EU legislative proposal in their national language, parliaments have eight weeks to review it and—if they find that there is a breach in subsidiarity—adopt a reasoned opinion that explains their objections. Every national parliament has two votes, which are split in the case of bicameral parliaments. If reasoned opinions worth 1/3 or more of the votes are submitted to the European Commission within eight weeks, a so-called "yellow card" can be issued, which means that the Commission should review the proposal and decide whether to withdraw it, change it, or maintain it. If reasoned opinions worth more than half of the votes have been issued, the proposal fails if a majority in the European Parliament or the Council also object to the legislation on grounds of subsidiarity (Högenauer et al., 2016). In addition, national parliaments also ratify new EU treaties, and they can individually veto enlargements and the use of the passerelle clauses, i.e., of treaty articles that allow the Council to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting without a full treaty change. Finally, national parliaments also engage in extensive networking in several interparliamentary conferences where they can exchange views on EU issues.

The powers of national parliaments in EU affairs are thus far more limited than in domestic politics and, in addition, the specific procedures mean that some tasks present in domestic politics are absent in EU politics; instead, distinctive tasks arise. Most importantly, national parliaments can neither propose EU laws nor amend them, but only comment on EU laws under the Political Dialogue or on their conformity with the principle of subsidiarity under the EWS. As a result, they have only an embryonic legislative function.

Instead, scrutiny of how the national government positions itself in negotiations holds more potential for influence, which means that the scrutiny role is particularly important. In addition, the networking with other parliaments creates a new layer of information exchange. On the whole, these differences are likely to impact the roles that administrators play in EU affairs compared to national politics.

The special role of national parliaments in EU affairs means that neither the literature on staff in the European Parliament nor that on staff in national parliaments fully captures the role of staff in EU affairs scrutiny. In addition, the literature specifically on staff in EU affairs scrutiny is scarce.

Nevertheless, one of the insights from this literature is that one of the core functions of staff consists of the gathering, filtering, and prioritizing of information, as well as assistance with the technical procedures of the EWS. Christiansen et al. (2014) argued that national parliaments need technical capacity in order to scrutinise and process a large number of draft legislative files with a view to checking for the violation of the subsidiarity principle. Since the EWS requires collective action across national parliaments, within short delays, transnational coordination and networking across national legislatures is also required. At the same time, Högenauer (2021) found that—in many parliaments—low administrative capacity and the inability to provide sectoral committees with specialised support hampered effective EU affairs scrutiny, especially by weak parliaments. Powerful parliaments, by contrast, get even stronger, often being able "to match the political mainstreaming with administrative support" (Högenauer, 2021, p. 550).

Secondly, Neuhold and Högenauer (2016) examined how the networking function of the so-called parliamentary representatives in the European Parliament supports coordination of positions and access to information. National parliaments have sent officials to Brussels even before the Lisbon Treaty came into force and these officials are seen to have formed an information network, thereby fulfilling a bridge-building function across parliaments. This function has, of course, gained in importance after the Lisbon Treaty, as national parliaments can only issue a yellow card under the rules of the EWS if they gather at least one third of votes, for example (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). In addition, the multilevel structure of the EU has led to a growth of interparliamentary structures such as the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs (COSAC) or the interparliamentary conference on CFSP-CSDP (for a detailed discussion, see Hefftler & Gattermann, 2015; see also Cooper, 2019). While parliamentary diplomacy also exists outside the EU context (cf. Murphy, 2023), the EU has led to a growth of institutionalized networks around EU affairs coordination.

Thirdly, Högenauer and Neuhold (2015) used a comparative empirical study to conceptualize the different roles that committee staff can take on, distinguishing five core functions: On the one hand, they identify the function of coordinator, which comprises networking with other parliaments, the government, and the other chamber (in the case of bicameral parliaments). On the other hand, there are administrative assistants who gather, forward, and summarize information and organize meetings. Analysts provide procedural and legal advice and draft minutes after debates. Advisors provide content-related advice or draft documents for meetings, i.e., before their official adoption. And, finally, agenda-shapers pre-select EU documents and assist in the prioritization of issues from the flood of material. The empirical study by Högenauer et al. (2016) showed that the overwhelming majority of parliaments delegate extensively to committee staff, who usually act as agenda-shapers by helping to identify and prioritize key issues and who offer content-related advice on EU draft legislation both for the EWS and as part of the scrutiny of governments. Based on a survey

spanning all 11 Upper Houses and 23/27 Lower Houses, Högenauer (2021) showed that EU affairs scrutiny not only involved the committee staff of European Affairs Committees (EACs), but also of the sectoral committees. A majority of parliaments involved the staff of sectoral committees regularly in EU affairs scrutiny, and the remainder involved them at least occasionally. Only the Slovenian Upper House relied exclusively on EAC staff. However, Högenauer (2023) showed that the role of the staff of sectoral committees is often limited to procedural advice and drafting for their committee. Finally, a comparative analysis of how the Lisbon Treaty impacted parliamentary administrations in bicameral systems of Europe revealed different levels of cooperation between the administrations of the two chambers across the EU (Griglio & Lupo, 2021). One of the limitations of the existing literature is that it looks primarily at committee staff, although Högenauer (2023) has begun to include legal and research units in her analysis. What is almost entirely missing is political staff, i.e., the personal assistants of MPs (where those exist) and party group staff. In the absence of a literature on these groups in EU affairs (beyond the European Parliament), it is difficult to determine whether their role would be different from that in domestic affairs. However, we would expect at least one difference—a stronger emphasis on coordination and networking: Given the high degree of technicality of many EU polices, we would expect national party groups to occasionally reach out to their MEPs for advice. The personal assistants and group staff confronted with EU questions would thus have a stronger emphasis on networking and coordination.

In terms of accountability, party staff and assistants serve a politically homogenous master or a single person whose positions they should be able to reproduce, and they often have temporary contracts (as their numbers fluctuate in line with election results). This means that it is easier for the principal to act, and the threat of sanctions is particularly credible.

4. Tasks and Roles of Parliamentary Staff: A Typology

As mentioned above, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) have developed a typology for domestic politics, i.e., for the Dutch lower house. This is a typology of roles based on individual tasks that can be used to study the roles of the main parliamentary administration, party group staff, and assistants in a comparative perspective. In this context, they have identified five different main roles ranging from advisor, ghostwriter, information broker, and marketeer to compromise facilitator (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 546). The task of the advisor is vast; it reaches from advice on policy content to political advice (for example, to get support for a certain amendment from a political group). The ghostwriter prepares speeches, motions, and amendments. The marketeer is key in "selling" the work of Members of Parliament via the media, for example. The information broker processes all the information that comes from external sources (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, pp. 539–542). The compromise facilitator can try to facilitate the compromises in a plethora of for a, ranging from political parties to within committees, within the governing coalition, and parliament as a whole. Each role has a number of subroles. The advisor, for example, reaches from strategic advisor to legal advisor. The compromise facilitator works on compromises both within and across parliamentary party groups. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) unsurprisingly show that tasks that are politically sensitive are most typically undertaken by assistants or party staff (e.g., strategic and policy advice, the drafting of motions, speeches, and op-eds, and the negotiation of compromises between and within party groups). By contrast, tasks that involve very technical skills and that are less likely to require a political positioning are more prone to fall to the main administration (e.g., procedural and legal advice, the drafting of amendments, and archiving). Other tasks are more evenly divided, such as the provision of expertise or meeting with stakeholders.

In order to advance the study of parliamentary administrations, we try to adapt it to the specific context of EU affairs (scrutiny). We thus apply the typology of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to the work of both officials working within the European Parliament General Secretariat and to officials working on EU affairs scrutiny within national parliaments. We do so based on the relevant literature. We have chosen to focus on General Secretariat officials as this is the biggest and most stable category of officials within the European Parliament. For national parliaments, we focus on the work and tasks of officials within EU affairs scrutiny after the Lisbon Treaty (cf. Table 1).

We also add one main role that was not included by Brandsma and Otjes (2024): that of networker/coordinator. We do so in order to extend the roles of staff in EU affairs conceptually, based on empirical observations. Parliaments also have a networking function, with many parliaments having a unit in charge of external relations. As mentioned above, several interparliamentary conferences make networking a part of the work of all national parliaments in the EU. In the realm of EU affairs, a network of liaison officers/officials that were sent to Brussels by national parliaments has started to develop since the early 1990s. Officials part of this information network can be seen as playing an important role in coordinating information across parliaments and to the EU institutions. They also function as an information relay to their respective national legislature (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). Within the European Parliament, officials assume the inter-institutional coordinator role in order to coordinate positions with the other institutions involved under the OLP: for example, the Council and the EP (Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013).

Table 1. Application of staff roles to officials working with EU affairs.

Roles officials play within the Dutch parliament and subroles (see Brandsma & Otjes, 2024)	Adaptation of roles to officials working within the European Parliament General Secretariat (Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013; Egeberg et al., 2013; Marshall, 2012)	Application of roles to officials working within national parliaments on EU affairs (Högenauer, 2021; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015; Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016)
Advisor	Advisor	Advisor
Strategic advisor	Political advisor to MEPs	Content-related advice
Policy advisor	Scientific, technical, legal advisor to MEPs	Procedural and legal advice
Procedural advisor		
Legal advisor		
Ghostwriter	Ghostwriter	Ghostwriter
Motions	Drafts documents for MEPs (such as reports, amendments to Commission proposals)	Prepares drafts before debates
Amendments		Prepares (parts) of reasoned opinions (EWS)
Written questions	Provides background information for MEPs (such as background and briefing notes)	Prepares parliamentary questions
Bills		
Speeches		
Op-eds		
Press releases		
Reports		

Table 1. (Cont.) Application of staff roles to officials working with EU affairs.

Information broker Expertise Archive Interest groups	Information broker Information conveyor belts to MEPs from, e.g.: Lobbyists The European Commission	Information broker Gathers, forwards, and summarises information from, e.g.: National government European Commission
Marketeer Journalists Citizens Constituents	Marketeer Meeting/contacting people such as journalists on behalf of MEPs	Marketeer Seems less relevant for EU affairs scrutiny
Compromise facilitator Within political party groups Between political party groups	Compromise facilitator Facilitates compromises within the EP (across and within political groups) Facilitates compromises with the Commission and/or the Council	Compromise facilitator Facilitates agreement within parliament to get political backing for draft reasoned opinions for EWS (for example) Facilitates inter- and intra-group (and committee) discussions of mandates
	Additional role identified by authors	
Networker/coordinator Interparliamentary coordinator Interinstitutional coordinator	Coordination with other EU institutions (especially Council and Commission) Inter-parliamentary cooperation (e.g., Franco-German Assembly)	Coordination with other parliaments Coordination with the national executive Coordination with EU institutions

We see that the roles of officials within the national parliamentary context, also "travel," i.e., can be applied to the European context. Some roles are rather stable across parliamentary contexts, such as the one of the advisor. The latter is important both at the national level and within EU affairs, and the tasks overlap.

We see that within the European Parliament, however, the role of compromise facilitator within the EU system of governance takes on an extra dimension. Achieving compromises with the Commission and/or the Council has gained in salience with the introduction of the OLP (Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013). The role of information broker is important both for national officials working on EU affairs scrutiny and the EP. The source of information differs, however: While for the European Parliament, lobbyists and the EU executive are key, national parliaments obtain key information such as the negotiation position of the respective member state in the Council from their national government (Auel & Neuhold, 2017). "Ghostwriting" is apparent both within the European Parliament and national parliaments, but the nature of documents drafted differs according to the institutional context. Within EU affairs scrutiny, the role of marketeer seems less relevant than within the EP, whereas the role of interparliamentary coordinator has gained in importance since the Lisbon Treaty. These officials can be seen to take on an important relay function between the respective parliament and the EU system of governance by coordinating positions across national parliaments (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016).

It is difficult to predict how the tasks in the table above would be divided across different staff groups within national parliaments, as staffing levels between parliaments vary strongly in general and also in EU affairs in particular. Högenauer (2023) showed that over 14 chambers had less than 10 EU experts in their main administration, but the German Bundestag had over 70. At the same time, the size of generalist units such as external relations, research, and legal advice varies as well. Finally, there are very few studies on party group staff and assistants in general and practically none in combination with EU affairs. This is a problem, as political staff is also unevenly distributed: whereas German MPs have eight staff members on average, Luxembourg's MPs have no personal assistants (Stephan & Högenauer, 2026). Similarly, the staffing of political groups varies. Who does what may not just depend on whether certain kinds of tasks are "logically" more suitable for a specific staff group, but also on what kind of staff is available and in what quantities. Generally speaking, personal assistants are most likely to write speeches, resolutions, and op-eds for their MPs as they know their views and style best—but only where assistants exist. In other cases, group staff are likely to take on that role. With regard to the agenda-setting role, committee staff are likely to advise on what policies might be salient for the country (because of poor regulatory fit, because they affect a key sector, etc.), whereas party staff or assistants might focus on policies that resonate with the ideological stance of their masters. Indeed, Stephan and Högenauer (2026) show that party group staff are often expected to monitor the news and flag up relevant ideas for political initiatives.

For the European Parliament, we depart from the observation that assistants to MEPs, as opposed to General Secretariat officials, carry out a wide range of office tasks. They are generally less prone to give policy advice but carry out (social) media tasks such as writing press releases and blogging on behalf of "their" MEPs (Busby & Belkacem, 2013). Political Group Advisors can be seen to participate extensively in crafting compromises within the European Parliament, especially within the intra-European Parliament mandating process preceding trilogues. They even do so without specific instructions from MEPs (Ruiter, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The study of parliamentary staff in EU affairs is a nascent field of research that is still plagued by gaps. Looking forward, there is a need to conduct more comparative work that includes both parliamentary administrations and political staff, such as assistants and party group staff.

This is important for three reasons: firstly, to understand the resources available to parliaments, parties, and MPs and to gauge their capacity to follow and scrutinize EU affairs effectively. Secondly, it helps us to understand to what extent parliaments have access to information beyond EU/government sources. And, thirdly, knowledge of which tasks are typically performed by which staff groups is necessary to discuss what an adequately staffed parliament would look like and how many staffers a parliament should aim to employ in the different categories.

As a first step in this direction, this review article has summarized the core functions of staff in EU affairs based on a typology adapted from Brandsma and Otjes (2024). We have also highlighted the fact that some of these tasks provide staff with considerable influence over the agenda of parliament and the content of decisions. The question of the type of staff—political or main administration—is relevant here, as the political staff is under a much tighter control by a more united principal, while also being in a more precarious position that makes them reliant on the continued goodwill of the principal. By contrast, the main administration is supposed

to be politically neutral and at the service of all, but if an administrator were to overstep, the possibilities of sanctioning them would be more restricted: Firstly, the main administration tends to consist of permanent staff, often with a civil service status. Secondly, the principal, the politicians, are ideologically divided, and a person who offends one party might please another.

From the perspective of accountability, activities performed by party staff carry a low risk, as those staff members are usually hired for their ability to think following the party line (or the line of the MP), typically have a precarious status based on fixed-term contracts and face an ideologically homogeneous principal with a clear hierarchy within the party group (or a single individual in the case of assistants). Thus, while we know from Brandsma and Otjes (2024) that they can have considerable influence, drafting speeches and political texts, they are also tightly controlled. On the other hand, the main administration is more difficult to keep in check for politicians, given their usually permanent contracts, civil service status, and the ideological divisions between the party groups. At the same time, they are more active in technical, legal, and procedural tasks, and it is less likely that they will be asked to formulate a concrete position without input. One also needs to take into account that drafting, for example, does not happen in isolation. Where committee staff are asked to draft an opinion, this is often based on input from the different parties and thus—at the very least—an understanding of what the majority expects. In addition, these drafts usually still require adoption by a political body (e.g., a political group, committee, or plenary) and can be modified in the course of the political negotiations.

Nevertheless, the risks of civil servants taking decisions that are in fact to be taken by politicians are comparatively low, as the nature of parliaments means that politicians always have the final say over a decision. Thus, while there might be room to influence them by highlighting certain issues or deemphasizing them (agenda-setting), when it comes to the concrete positions taken by parliament, those are likely to be ideologically determined by the political majorities in cooperation with their political staff. We thus come to the conclusion that the work of officials does not diminish the legitimacy of Members of Parliament. This also holds true within the EU context. Officials take on important roles that support elected politicians and thus contribute to the functioning of parliaments. As we have shown, the institutional context matters and has an impact on tasks and roles assumed by staffers.

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Conflict of Interests

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About the Authors

Anna-Lena Högenauer is an associate professor at the University of Luxembourg and director of the master's in European governance. She works on questions of legitimacy, democracy, and parliamentarism in EU politics. She currently holds a Marie Speyer Excellence Grant that funds her research into women in politics in Luxembourg.

Christine Neuhold is a professor of EU democratic governance. She is currently the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS) at Maastricht University. Her research focuses on questions of accountability within networked systems of governance. She has participated in and coordinated several international research projects on issues of governance within the EU multi-level system, with a particular focus on the role of parliaments.