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Who's Got MPs' Back? Understanding the Drivers of Specialisation in the Offices of MPs

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Abstract

Being an elected MP comes with numerous time-consuming and work-intensive tasks that exceed the capacity of a single individual. While not universal, in many parliamentary democracies, MPs receive funds to employ personal staff, who take on substantial portions of this workload by advising and supporting MPs in their daily political activities. Although the role of parliamentary administrations has received growing scholarly attention, the question of how tasks are divided within MPs' offices—particularly what drives the specialisation of staff—remains underexplored. This article addresses this gap by investigating the drivers of task specialisation in MPs' offices through a comparative study of Germany, Luxembourg, and Austria. Drawing on 15 semi-structured expert interviews with staff from the three countries, we show that the main drivers of specialisation in teams of personal staff are team size, party organization, government-opposition dynamics, MPs' working style, and the trustee relationship between MPs and their staff. Our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of organisational diversity among European parliaments more broadly and pave the way for Large-*N* comparative studies on the factors that shape the division of labour within and between staff groups. We highlight the importance of considering both institutional and individual-level factors when studying and comparing parliamentary support structures.

Keywords

administration; advice; assistants; constituency; gender; MPs personal staff; organizational diversity; party group staff

1. Introduction

MPs are responsible for a wide range of representative tasks, including legislating, engaging with constituents, developing policy, scrutinising government, and supporting party strategy (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; McKee, 2023). These tasks are often too extensive for one person to manage. In some parliamentary democracies, MPs therefore receive funds to employ personal staff dedicated to supporting these responsibilities (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; McCrain, 2018). These staffers advise, organise, and manage aspects of the MPs' workload, thereby acting as key players for parliament's daily effectiveness behind the scenes (Guy Peters, 2021; Otjes, 2022).

Despite their relevance for the MPs' daily work, the division of tasks among personal staffers remains understudied. Existing research tends to focus on single-country cases, highlighting various aspects of their function—such as acting as gatekeepers for the MP (McKee, 2023), functioning as independent teams (Lettrari, 2020), or providing information critical to the MP's work (Campbell & Laporte, 1981; Egeberg et al., 2013, 2014; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015; Jágr, 2022; Strøm, 1998). Recent scholarly work on parliamentary staff has increasingly compared countries, especially focusing on the parliamentary administration (Christiansen et al., 2023). These studies examine the size of different staff groups (Otjes, 2022) and provide a common understanding of the roles performed by party parliamentary group (PPG) staff, MPs' personal staff, and plenary or committee staff. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) introduce a matrix with five different roles (ghostwriter, advisor, marketeer, information broker, and compromise facilitator) that sum up the activities of parliamentary staff and may vary across different institutional settings. While these works establish a theoretical basis for systematic cross-parliament comparison, we still know little about what explains the division of labour within MPs' offices. In particular, the drivers of task specialisation among personal staffers remain underexplored. Task specialisation within MPs' offices means that each team member concentrates on a particular type of work to build expertise and improve overall efficiency. This article addresses this gap by asking: What explains the level of task specialisation in MPs' personal offices?

Through a comparative study of the staff of MPs in Germany, Luxembourg, and Austria, three European parliamentary democracies that provide the elected representatives with funds for personal staff but vary in terms of parliamentary administrative support and structure, we explore the drivers that shape specialisation in the teams of MPs. By using semi-structured expert-interviews with staffers, we develop a theoretical framework to investigate and display how task specialisation is shaped by (a) staffing resources such as team size and the availability of party support, (b) MPs' formal role such as the nature of their mandate, the government or opposition status of their party and their overall workload, and (c) MPs' leadership style as well as (d) the relational factor of perceived trustworthiness on a personal level (e.g., discretion) and ideologically (to hold the party line).

By comparing drivers of specialisation within teams across different institutional settings, this article identifies the factors that impact how MPs organise their offices and contributes to a better understanding of how MPs handle their daily activities. In doing so, it sheds light on organisational diversity in European parliaments, calls for greater attention to both institutional and interpersonal factors in the study of legislative support structures, paving the way for further research on how MPs' staff and the division of labour between staff groups affect parliamentary work.

2. Studying Personal Staff Comparatively

The study of personal staff is embedded in the broader, but still quite narrow, field of the study of parliamentary staff. So far, comparative studies that engage with similarities and differences between the work of parliamentary staff in different countries are very few in number and focus on structural or descriptive dimensions (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Christiansen et al., 2023; Otjes, 2022). Christiansen et al. (2023) provide an overview of the organizational differences and similarities of parliamentary administrations by country, but exclude cross-country comparison between specific staff groups. Similarly, Otjes (2022) provides cross-national data on the size of parliamentary administrations and finds the first evidence that population size is the most likely predictor for parliamentary staff size. He specifies between groups of staffers working for the parliament, for the party, for individual MPs, and for committees. To facilitate comparative research designs, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) propose a typology of staff tasks and roles, providing a basis for systematic comparison between groups of staff, but without explaining when and why certain functions, such as specialisation, occur within or between specific staff groups, including MPs' personal teams.

Beyond these major comparative studies, research specifically focusing on parliamentary staff remains similarly scarce: There is scholarly work on EU-focused staff in EU member-states (Högenauer, 2021; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015), on the strategic use of constituency staff by MEPs (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023), and on party staffing in the Netherlands and Belgium (Moens, 2022, 2023, 2024). Further approaches to the study of parliamentary staff focus on the way in which parliamentary architecture determines the internal organization of the parliamentary administration (Griglio & Lupo, 2021) and ethnographic comparative work on how personal and PPG staff advise in Germany and Austria (Laube et al., 2020). However, the question of what explains specialisation among staffers remains largely unaddressed in this strand of literature.

Research on the tasks of personal staff of MPs in European parliamentary democracies consists of case studies that provide insights into their work within specific national contexts, such as the UK (McKee, 2023; Miller, 2021), Austria (Dolezal, 2000), and Germany (Blischke, 1981; Lettrari, 2020). In the German and UK case studies, the authors show that MPs delegate substantial parts of their daily tasks to their personal staff (McKee, 2023), who work with high levels of autonomy (Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023); while for the Austrian case, Dolezal (2000) finds that personal staffers are primarily tasked with administrative duties. Beyond European parliamentary democracies, in a study of personal staff in Canada, the authors find a gendered division of labour between personal staffers who perform administrative work in parliament and those whose main responsibility is to provide political advice to MPs (Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019). These case studies show that personal staffers take on different kinds of tasks across countries, ranging from administrative support to more independent duties. The Canadian case introduces a possible link between staffers' individual characteristics, especially gender, and their areas of responsibility. However, these findings are limited to single-country studies and lack comparative analysis.

Overall, existing research provides valuable insights into the tasks and responsibilities of personal staffers, especially through national case studies. However, it does not yet explain why task division and, therefore, specialisation occur, or whether similar factors drive it across different parliamentary systems. This study addresses that gap.

3. Explaining the Variation of the Division of Labour in MPs' Offices

Drawing on the broader literature on (parliamentary) organizations, we identify several factors which may help explain variation in task specialisation and the division of labour within MPs' teams: availability of resources, MPs' formal role, MPs' informal leadership style, and the relational factor between MPs and their staff. They serve as a starting point for our expert interviews with personal staff and help us develop a theoretically informed framework of factors for staff specialization.

3.1. Resources

The extent to which there are staffing resources available determines which specialisation within the office of MPs is possible. These resources may be the overall team size or the extent to which external support through the parliamentary party group staff exists.

Larger teams allow for a greater division of labour among team members, which in turn fosters specialisation (Häussler & Sauermann, 2014). This mirrors evidence from parliamentary studies: The bigger the parties in parliament, the more likely they are to develop systems of specialisation (Martínez-Cantó et al., 2023; Saalfeld & Strøm, 2014). Based on these results, we expect that a bigger size of an MP's team is associated with more division of labour and thereby specialisation of individual team members. Larger teams create the structural conditions for role differentiation, allowing staffers to specialise in distinct areas such as policy, communication, or constituency service. In contrast, smaller teams often require staffers to take on generalist roles, limiting the degree of possible specialisation. Similarly, existing research shows that in parliamentary administrations with limited institutional resources, MPs must rely more heavily on their personal staff to perform a broad range of tasks (Guy Peters, 2021; Högenauer & Christiansen, 2015). Applying this logic to our research context, structured party support that works closely with MPs' offices, such as pooled policy staff, legal advisors, or communications units, reduces the need for MPs to assign generalist functions to their personal staff. This enables staffers to concentrate on specific responsibilities, whereas in parliaments with limited support structures, MPs depend on personal staff to cover a broad range of tasks, reducing specialisation. Party organization, therefore, plays a key role in shaping task differentiation within an MP's teams.

> H1: The availability of staffing resources, through larger team size or external party support, has a positive impact on the degree of specialisation in MPs' offices.

3.2. MPs' Formal Role

We expect that the formal duties of an MP within parliament explain specialisation within MPs' staff teams. This includes the type of mandate an MP has, whether their party is part of the government or the opposition, and their overall workload due to assigned responsibilities, e.g., party leadership position or being the party expert on certain topics.

First, the type of electoral mandate an MP holds, whether directly elected from a geographic district or appointed via a party list, can influence their legislative priorities (Judge & Ilonszki, 1995; Koop & Bittner, 2011; McLeay & Vowles, 2007; Parsons & Rumbul, 2019). MPs may prioritise constituency service to

cultivate a "personal vote" (Docherty, 1997) or their constituency's interests in their legislative output (Soroka et al., 2009). Although prior studies focus mainly on electoral system differences, particularly mixed-member proportional systems, their findings still carry important implications for our argument: if MPs prioritize constituency work, this may condition specialisation in their personal office and, by extension, the kinds of tasks staffers get assigned to. MPs with strong constituency ties—due to their type of mandate or their party's main electorate—often face higher demands for local outreach, casework, and constituency services. This may lead to specialisation in constituency responsibilities, with some members specialising in managing local events, handling constituent requests, or liaising with local organisations. Thus, the nature of the mandate is likely to influence staff specialisation.

Second, elected MPs may vary significantly in their institutional workload, depending on, e.g., the number of parliamentary committees they serve on, whether they are involved in leadership positions for their party or backbenchers, and what responsibilities they have within the party caucus. The division of labour within a PPG entails that some MPs are assigned to specific policy portfolios and sit on specific committees (Andeweg & Thomassen, 2011), which impacts their participation in parliamentary debates (Fernandes et al., 2019), issue attention (Borghetto et al., 2020), and activity level (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). They may also act as policy experts for specific topics within their PPG. The workload linked to these positions may require more intensive delegation: MPs may need specialised support for different policy areas and even committee preparation, prompting specialisation within their teams of staffers.

Third, whether an MP belongs to a governing party or an opposition party may determine specialisation of their staff (Andeweg, 1997; Damgaard, 1997). Research suggests that the duties MPs are tasked with and prioritise differ by their party's governing status in parliament (Andeweg, 1997; Coffé, 2017; Damgaard, 1997; Kroeber & Krauss, 2023; Patzelt, 2013). While government MPs' membership in, e.g., committees may entail regular and intensive policy work and related tasks, for opposition MPs, oversight of the government is more central. Based on these differences in MPs' party status, specialisation of MPs' staff based on these different task profiles may occur. As government MPs are likely to handle a broader range of activities than opposition MPs (Coffé, 2017), their personal staffers will specialise in handling task variation.

> H2: The MP's formal role in the political system, including mandate type, government-opposition status, and assigned responsibilities, shapes the structural demands on their office and creates conditions for staff specialisation.

3.3. MPs' Informal Leadership Style

There may be vast differences in the working style of the MPs, e.g., differences in hierarchy preferences. An MP's personal style of delegation, how much authority they are willing to transfer to staffers, and under what conditions, has a direct impact on the team's internal division of labour. Evidence from management studies shows that in non-hierarchical teams, for example, increased trust corresponds with greater specialisation (Meier et al., 2019). Studies on US congressional staff (Romzek & Utter, 1997) and Austrian (Dolezal, 2000) and German personal staff (Lettrari, 2020) show personal preferences of team organization among representatives. Some MPs, therefore, retain control over key decisions and delegate only logistical or administrative work, whereas others encourage more autonomous team structures in which staffers function as policy specialists in their own right.

H3: The way an MP manages their workload and delegates tasks affects how roles are distributed within the team and whether specialisation occurs.

3.4. Relational Factor

The level of personal trust between the MP and their staffer plays a central role in shaping task delegation (Lettrari, 2020). Personal loyalty, political alignment, and shared ideological commitments are frequently cited as key factors in delegation decisions (Lettrari, 2020; Meier et al., 2019; Moens, 2023; Strøm, 2000). Particularly in systems where staff hiring is informal or at the MP's discretion, these interpersonal dynamics may lead to distinct internal hierarchies and specialisation patterns. Staffers with long-standing personal relationships, shared professional experience, or ideological proximity to their MP may be granted greater autonomy and allowed to specialise in core political responsibilities. Conversely, where trust is lower or less developed because the work relationship between the staffer and the MP has started quite recently, MPs may limit staffers' responsibilities to routine or support tasks, restricting opportunities for deeper specialisation. This trust-based delegation leads to differentiated roles within teams that may not follow formal hierarchies or job descriptions. This variation is often grounded in informal trust.

H4: High levels of trust between MPs and their staff enable greater delegation and task ownership, thereby facilitating specialisation.

4. Research Design

This study investigates the factors that shape the division of labour and specialisation in MPs' offices. Our comparative case study design follows a "most different systems" logic that allows us to explore which factors condition specialisation beyond macro-institutional explanations. Austria, Germany, and Luxembourg were selected because even though all Western European parliamentary democracies have special funds for the personal staff of MPs, they differ substantially in electoral system, parliament size, staffing resources, and MP-to-population ratio (see Table 1). Also, the process of hiring differs across the three countries: In Germany and Austria, the individual MP is the central actor in the hiring decision. Whether vacancies are advertised publicly or filled through personal networks is at the MP's discretion. In contrast, in Luxembourg, the party group decides what type of staff is needed and allocates the staff resources accordingly. The variation in hiring practices makes the comparison especially valuable, as it allows us to examine whether similar drivers of task specialisation emerge even under differing recruitment conditions.

Table 1. Staff resources per parliament.

Country	Population (millions)	Number MPs	Citizens per MP	Budget for personal staff per MP per month (€)	Total budget for personal staff per year (millions €)	Total personnel costs in parliament per year (millions €)	Share of personnel budget for personal staff (%)
Austria	9	183	49,180	4722	10.34	123	8.41
Germany	83	630	131,746	25874	195.6	787.68	24.83
Luxembourg	0.666	60	11,107	6495	4.67	19.2	24.32

Note: Compiled by the authors based on published information of the German, Luxembourg, and Austrian parliaments.

As Table 1 shows, Germany has the highest number of citizens per MP and the largest absolute and relative budget for personal staffers, creating favourable conditions for team specialisation. In contrast, Austria operates under tighter constraints, with a lower budget and a smaller share allocated to personal staff, suggesting potential limits to specialisation. The situation is even trickier for Luxembourg: while the staff allowance per MP appears to be much higher than for Austria at first glance, the costs of labour also need to be considered. Whereas the average annual full-time adjusted salary in Germany in 2023 was €50,998, it was €54,508 in Austria and €81,064 in Luxembourg (Eurostat, 2025). From that perspective, the actual "value" of the Austrian and Luxembourgish allowance—i.e., how much staff it can pay for—is actually similar. Notably, the budget for personal staff in Austria represents only 8.41% of the budget, compared to 24.32% in Luxembourg. What this means is that the Austrian budget for *other* staff (committee clerks, legal advisors, etc.) is comparatively generous. This is relevant, as it affects the extent to which MPs might receive support from other staff groups in the parliament (which could reduce the burden on personal staff and facilitate specialisation).

The empirical basis for our analysis consists of expert interviews with 1–2 staffers from most major parties in Austria, Germany, and Luxembourg that we conducted between February and March 2025. Interviews were successfully conducted with staffers from the SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, and the FDP in Germany (GER01–GER04); the SPÖ, ÖVP, DIE GRÜNEN, and NEOS in Austria (AT01–AT05); and with representatives from CSV, DP, LSAP, ADR, Déi Gréng, and déi Lénk in Luxembourg (LU01–LU07). In total, we conducted 15 semi-structured expert interviews that were transcribed with f4x audio transcription and anonymized in the process. The interviews were analysed through Qualitative Content Analysis, with manual coding of all interviews by the authors. In our selection, we focused on experienced staff (at least one legislative term; using information available through LinkedIn or public websites), and/or staff who held central coordinating roles that allowed them to observe the division of tasks. Table A1 of the Supplementary File provides an anonymized overview of interviewees by country, party affiliation, experience, and gender. As the interviews were semi-structured, all questions were formulated in an open way to capture broader patterns of specialisation, independent of the immediate political context. The interview guide in Table A2 of the Supplementary File served as a reminder of the key questions that were to be asked in every interview, but not necessarily in that exact order. In addition, follow-up questions were asked where they arose from the conversation, and the flow of the interview determined the order in which the different topics were discussed.

While the qualitative design does not allow us to fully test the hypotheses, comparing the drivers of specialisation across three structurally contrasting parliamentary systems highlights the institutional conditions that facilitate specialisation. It also identifies the drivers of task division that recur across, or are sensitive to, parliamentary contexts. This approach enables us to theorize specialisation as an outcome shaped by external factors, in a way that could prepare the ground for a large-*N* study.

5. Analysis

In the following, we present the results of our analysis and assess to what extent the evidence supports the causal mechanisms outlined in the theory section. An overview of our cross—and single-country results may be found in Table 2.

With regard to the impact of staffing resources on specialisation (H1), we proposed that team size and party staff support may shape the extent to which personal staffers specialise in their tasks. Results from the Austrian case suggest that larger teams increase the likelihood of specialisation. Across all parties, MPs receive a fixed budget equivalent to one full-time position, but how this is allocated varies (AT01, AT02, AT03, AT04, AT05). When MPs employ only one or two staffers, as reported mostly by experts on the SPÖ (AT01) and ÖVP (AT02), staffers perform generalist roles, covering a wide range of tasks from administration to constituency work, with limited scope for specialisation. In contrast, while these generalist positions also exist, Die Grünen (AT03) and NEOS (AT04) illustrate that when MPs strategically divide their staffing budget to hire more people, for example, part-time, specialisation becomes more feasible. In these cases, tasks such as social media, administrative, or policy work are assigned to specific individuals, indicating that increasing team size can facilitate task differentiation. These findings show that while formal staff entitlements are equal, actual team size is a key condition enabling specialisation in the Austrian case.

In comparison, the German case provides clear evidence in support of H1, showing that larger teams enable greater specialisation among MPs' staff. Across all parties (GER01, GER02, GER03, GER04), interviewees highlight that when MPs allocate their staffing budget to create larger teams, often combining full-time, part-time, and student positions, staff members are more likely to take on distinct, specialised roles. In offices with three or more staffers, responsibilities are often clearly divided between policy areas, communications, and organisational tasks. For example, staffers may focus exclusively on committee work, manage social media, or serve as dedicated constituency contacts. The flexibility of the German staffing model allows MPs to tailor their team structures, and the evidence suggests that those who build larger teams use this capacity to introduce clearer divisions of labour, which enables specialisation.

When compared to both Germany and Austria, the Luxembourg case is distinct in that a tradition of pooling resources has emerged. The view was that the hiring of personal staff would lead to inefficiencies, such as an excess of administrative and generalist staff and not enough substantive support. Thus, MPs traditionally voluntarily pool their personal staff allowances to hire a team at the party group level, which allows specialisation. This also confirms H1 and mirrors to some extent the results of the German and Austrian cases, where MPs used part-time staff to increase the size of their teams and facilitate specialisation. In larger party groups such as CSV and LSAP, where staff-to-MP ratios are high, roles are functionally differentiated across administration, communication, and political advice, with political advisors typically covering two or three committees each (LU02, LU05, LU06, LU07). In smaller groups like déi Lénk or ADR (LU01, LU04), where total staff numbers are lower, advisors cover a broader range of tasks and committees, sometimes up to seven, indicating reduced specialisation due to workload pressure. While hierarchies remain flat across groups, the distribution of tasks and the presence or absence of dedicated tasks for communication and administration reflect the degree to which higher staff capacity facilitates functional specialisation within party group offices.

With regard to external party support, the Austrian case shows a dynamic opposite to what we theorized. Structured support from party organizations does influence the extent of specialisation among personal staff, but in the opposite direction.

In larger parties such as SPÖ and ÖVP, MPs often receive substantive assistance from central party or club structures, such as club secretaries (AT01; AT02) or affiliated organizations like the farmers union

(*Bauernbund*) in the case of the ÖVP (AT02), which reduces the need for MPs' personal staff to specialise, leading instead to more generalist roles. In contrast, in smaller and more agile parties like the Die Grünen and NEOS, where centralized support is limited, staffers are more likely to assume specialised roles out of necessity, particularly in policy areas where they have expertise or professional training (AT03; AT04). These findings suggest that where party infrastructure takes over these tasks, MPs rely less on personal staff for policy work, whereas in less resourced parties, specialisation within MPs' teams emerges as a response to limited organizational support (AT02, AT03, AT04). Contrary to the results of the Austrian case, the German case shows that strong party support structures enable greater specialisation among MPs' personal staff. Across all interviewed parties, parliamentary group staff (*Fraktionsreferenten*) carry out much of the substantive policy work, thereby reducing the need for personal staff to cover a broad range of tasks (GER01, GER02, GER03, GER04). This division of labour between party and personal staff allows MPs' in-house teams to specialise in specific roles such as communication, scheduling, or constituency management. Particularly in larger parties like CDU/CSU (GER01) and SPD (GER04), this structured external support contributes to specialisation within MPs' offices. Evidence from the Luxembourg case further refines our overall results for H1 by showing that in systems where MPs pool their personal staff allowances, this staff becomes the primary and not complementary structure that specialises. This pooling not only addresses the problem that each MP has a limited allowance but also responds to the problem that the party groups themselves have small budgets. Thus, instead of having understaffed MPs and understaffed groups, the pooling is meant to create a critical mass of staff that allows for meaningful specialisation. As such, the Luxembourg case suggests that party-related support structures can substitute for personal staffing altogether, underscoring the primacy of party structures in shaping the division of labour in parliamentary work (LU01, LU02, LU03, LU04, LU05, LU06, LU07).

By comparing the analysis of the three country cases with regard to the impact of available resources on specialisation of personal staff, we find that specialisation depends both on the size of the team and on how parties organize and structure that staff. While our results for team size are similar across cases, findings are mixed when it comes to how party group support structures may influence specialisation within teams. In Austria, structured party staff support seems to substitute rather than complement personal staff, which may reduce the perceived need for specialisation within MPs' personal teams. This may be due to the fact that Austrian MPs have smaller teams of personal staffers overall than, e.g., Germany. Interviewees mainly saw the need to specialise and become experts on policy topics when external support was lacking (AT02, AT03, AT04). In the case of Luxembourg, the limited amount of available resources means that "pooled" party group staff completely replaces the individual staff of MPs. In contrast, in e.g., Germany, party structures appear to function more as a complement to personal staff, enabling personal teams to specialise by covering broader coordination and support tasks. The overall findings highlight that resources matter for personal staff specialisation: Larger teams lead to specialised and smaller teams to generalist roles. Further, the importance of studying party group staff and personal staff together is evident, as (a) it is the sum of these staff groups that determines the available support and (b) it is the relative distribution of resources across these two groups that determines the tasks of one or the other.

In H2, we theorize that the formal role of the MP—which mandates they hold, whether their party is part of the government or opposition, and their overall workload is dependent on, e.g., committee membership or party leadership positions—determines specialisation within their teams.

Mandate-type is particularly important in the German case. Overall, German MPs have personal staff both in parliament and the constituency (GER01, GER02, GER03, GER04). Interviews indicate that MPs with direct mandates, particularly in the SPD and CDU, regularly maintain a distinction between staff in Berlin and in the constituency, assigning dedicated personnel to constituency offices to handle local coordination and support (GER01, GER04). This staffing pattern reflects the institutional relevance of constituency representation within the German mixed-member proportional system. In contrast, interviews from the FDP and BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN suggest that especially list MPs often concentrate their staff in Berlin, with less presence in constituency offices (GER03). This also happens for strategic reasons, as some parties do not typically win direct mandates (GER03). These findings demonstrate that specialisation in constituency work is closely tied to mandate type and varies systematically across parties depending on their MPs' typical paths to parliamentary entry. In contrast, the Austrian case only offers partial support for the relevance of the mandate-type: SPÖ and ÖVP MPs often assign one staffer to the constituency and one to parliament, but this follows party routine rather than mandate dependency (AT01, AT02). In smaller parties like the Die Grünen and NEOS, constituency staffing is rare and considered less relevant (AT03, AT04). Luxembourg has an open list system, which means that MPs need to be individually popular, but it has no constituency staff due to its geography, which allows MPs to commute from their usual place of residence. Overall, the importance of the mandate type differs significantly across the three country cases. While the mandate type clearly drives specialisation in Germany's mixed-member proportional system, Austria's proportional system without direct mandates leads to less pronounced constituency specialisation. Due to the electoral system and country size, it does not matter for Luxembourg.

The government-opposition status of the party of the MPs is highly relevant across all country cases. It consistently emerges as a relevant contextual factor shaping patterns of staff specialisation (AT01, AT02, AT03, GER01, GER03, GER04, LU02, LU03, LU04, LU05, LU06). The interviews show that being part of the governing coalition structurally increases a party's access to institutional processes and information (AT03, GER03, GER04, LU02, LU03, LU04, LU07), which in turn enables a clearer division of labour between political and administrative roles. However, governing obligations also entail that staff may need to factor in coalition compromises. Thereby, both resources that MPs may rely on change when their party is in government, as well as the tasks they allocate to their personal staff. In contrast, opposition parties operate at a structural distance from decision-making processes (GER01, GER04, LU02, LU04, LU05, LU06), often under more uncertain or reactive conditions. They can be firmer on the ideological positioning of the MP's party in their work and focus on scrutiny of the government. This institutional positioning constrains the degree of functional differentiation possible within opposition MPs' staff teams and contributes to more generalized role profiles. Thus, an MP's formal role in government participation creates organisational conditions that foster specialisation.

The impact of the workload of MPs on specialisation differs across country cases. The Austrian case provides only limited support, as the Interviewees indicate that MPs with higher task loads, such as serving as party spokespersons or holding additional responsibilities, may require more staff capacity (AT02, AT04), but specialisation within the team does not consistently follow. In many cases, external parties or organizational structures absorb parts of the task load, particularly for communication or coordination tasks (AT01, AT02). As a result, even though the overall workload increases, task distribution within the MP's personal team remains broad rather than functionally divided. On the contrary, across parties, German interviewees report that higher parliamentary workload, such as multiple committee assignments, policy

specialisation, or leadership functions, leads to more clearly defined task distributions among personal staff. In several cases, staffers were assigned to individual committees or policy areas, creating a functional division of labour within MPs' offices (GER01, GER02, GER03). MPs with broader or more complex responsibilities, which may also vary by the importance of their committee, rely on staffers who specialise accordingly, particularly in larger teams (GER03, GER04). The Luxembourg case provides indirect support: in larger party groups, staffers cover fewer committees and specialise more; in smaller groups, a higher individual workload leads to broader, less specialised task profiles.

With regard to the impact of MPs' formal role on specialisation (H2), findings from our expert interviews show that MPs' formal role impacts the specialisation of personal staff most when MPs need to manage the tasks that accompany their roles internally within their teams. Whenever external structures absorb tasks linked to the MP's formal position, the specialisation of personal staff is needed less. While the mandate type seems to be important, dependent on the electoral system, and is thereby mostly true for Germany, the link between workload and staff specialisation holds across cases only when MPs must manage their workload within their own teams. In Germany and Luxembourg, where personal staff absorb most of the task load, a higher workload leads to clearer specialisation. In Austria, however, external party structures often take over specific key tasks, so even a high workload does not consistently result in internal specialisation. The most consistent finding for the impact of MPs' formal role on specialisation of personal staff is the government or opposition status of the MP. The fact that the status of the party decides what tasks MPs have to handle in their daily work drives specialisation within MPs' teams and also beyond them.

In H3, we theorize that an MP's individual leadership style influences whether and how personal staff specialise. Findings from all three cases strongly support this: interviewees across all major parties (AT01, AT02, AT03, AT04, GER01, GER02, GER03, GER04, LU01, LU02, LU03, LU04, LU05, LU06) emphasized that the degree and type of staff specialisation depend heavily on the MP's personal working style. This can affect how individual tasks are performed, for example, whether MPs write their own plenary speeches on topics where they have high levels of expertise, whether they want some talking points, or whether they want a full draft provided by their staff. MPs also differ in how they delegate tasks, ranging from approaches where the MP retains most responsibilities to more distributed models where specific staffers take over distinct tasks such as policy research, social media, or coordination. This variation occurs both within and across parties, highlighting that it is not only institutional rules or party affiliation, but the MP's own preferences with regard to their working style that shape specialisation in personal staff teams (AT01–AT04; GER01–GER04).

In our final hypothesis (H4), we theorize that the relationship between MPs and their personal staff determines the extent of specialisation. The Austrian case strongly supports this relational factor: across parties, interviewees described trust as a central condition for task delegation and specialisation (AT01, AT02, AT03, AT04). Recruitment practices based on personal networks (especially in SPÖ and ÖVP) and long-term collaboration (e.g., former roles in party organizations) were highlighted as important for building trust (AT01, AT02). In contrast, parties with more formal recruitment procedures (e.g., NEOS, Die Grünen) noted that trust developed progressively, often expanding staffers' responsibilities over time (AT03, AT04). These findings confirm that trust shapes the internal division of tasks and enables greater specialisation. This is also evident in Germany: across parties, higher levels of trust between MPs and staff enable greater specialisation. Trusted staff, who are often through long-standing relationships or shared political ideology,

Table 2. Concluding table of results for each country.

Hypothesis	Austria	Germany	Luxembourg	Cross-case result
H1: Resources	Partial support: Some MPs (e.g., NEOS, Greens) use part-time hiring to expand teams and specialise roles. Others (SPÖ, ÖVP) rely on party structures, leading to more generalist staff	Strong support: Flexible staffing (incl. students, part-timers) used to build larger, specialised teams. Clear task divisions (e.g., policy, media, admin) common	Strong Support: Staff pooling at the party group level allows functional specialisation. Small parties with fewer pooled resources show more generalist patterns	Specialisation depends on how staff resources are deployed, which leaves room for strategic use
H2: MP's formal role	Partial support: Government MPs and those with spokesperson roles face greater task demands, but party support often buffers this, limiting the need for internal specialisation. Mandate type plays a minor role	Strong support: Direct MPs typically staff both Berlin and the constituency; gov MPs have greater task clarity and role division. Mandate type and gov–opp status clearly shape staff structure	Strong support: Government MPs in have access to more coordination resources and structured support, opposite for opposition parties. Geography removes constituency differentiation	MPs' formal role influences staff specialisation when MPs must manage demands internally (party, parliamentary or geographic factors may absorb pressure)
H3: MP's individual leadership style	Strong support: MPs differ widely in how they delegate, with some retaining control and others enabling distinct staff roles, regardless of formal position	Strong support: Leadership style consistently affects task division; even MPs with similar resources organise staff differently	Strong support: Despite the pooled staff, MPs' preferences still shape how responsibilities are assigned within the group team	MPs' individual leadership styles are a consistent driver of specialisation across contexts
H4: Relational factor	Strong support: Trust, often built through party networks or long-term ties, enables delegation and clear task ownership	Strong support: High-trust relationships allow autonomy; low trust limits delegation and creates generalist roles	Indirect support: Trust develops over time in party group teams and facilitates specialisation, especially where staff are ideologically aligned	Trust is an enabler of specialisation

Notes: Compiled by the authors based on the analysis of the expert interviews.

are granted autonomy to filter information, manage stakeholders, and lead on policy files (GER01, GER03, GER04). This fosters a clearer division of labour. In contrast, low-trust environments are characterized by tighter control, reduced delegation, and limited task specialisation, often leading to dissatisfaction and high turnover (GER02, GER04). In the Luxembourg case, interviewees describe trust between MPs and party staff as essential. It develops over time through demonstrated loyalty and competence, which may then enable greater task specialisation, particularly among politically aligned staffers (LU01, LU02, LU03, LU04, LU05, LU06). Across all country cases, we find strong evidence that trust between MPs and their staff is a key enabling factor of specialisation. As this holds across all settings, we find that trust is a key mechanism

for the effective task division within the MP's office. The capacity for specialisation of MPs' personal staff is thereby relational—they depend heavily on interpersonal dynamics between MPs and their staff.

6. Conclusion

This comparative study of personal staff in Austria, Germany, and Luxembourg demonstrates that task specialisation within MPs' offices is shaped by varying drivers: resources (H1), MPs' formal role (H2), MPs' leadership style (H3), and the relational factor between MPs and their team (H4). Team size and party-provided support are consistent drivers of specialisation across all cases: larger teams and well-developed party infrastructures enable clearer task differentiation, whereas smaller or less structured environments foster generalist staffing. Overall, specialisation depends on the strategic use of the staffing resources provided. The formal role of the MP determines specialisation further; high workloads lead to specialisation when MPs must manage tasks within their teams, but not where party structures absorb them. Most importantly, the government-opposition status conditions specialisation effects by altering access to institutional processes and information, and decisively impacts which tasks MPs and their teams have to deal with daily. The individual working style preferences of the MP, meanwhile, prove to be a cross-cutting explanatory factor for specialisation within teams of personal staff. Trust-based delegation strongly correlates with specialisation in all cases—when MPs trust their staff, they delegate them tasks to work on as specialists regularly. Contrary to some previous research, gender did not emerge as a consistent factor in the division of labour in our expert interviews. However, this absence may reflect the limits of the interview method in capturing such dynamics. It suggests a need for alternative methodological strategies, e.g., surveys, to explore the role of gender in parliamentary staffing. While our findings are not generalizable across all political systems, their recurrence across three institutionally diverse cases underscores their relevance. Our analysis contributes to scholarship on parliamentary staff by offering a more nuanced understanding of variation in the division of labour within MPs' teams. These findings also lay the groundwork for future large-N comparative studies, in which the identified factors can be tested systematically across countries, parties, or staff groups.

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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