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The Parapolitical Path to Parliament: Former Political Support Staff as Parliamentary Members

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Abstract

In Western parliamentary democracies, a growing number of MPs have worked as special advisers, political assistants, and parliamentary aides before their election as members of parliament. They have professional political expertise without being elected officials themselves. We call them parapoliticians, akin to paramedics or paralegals. This exploratory article describes this emerging pathway to the Dutch House of Representatives. The article operationalises the concept, provides theoretical and historical context, and offers insights into the prevalence of parapolitical backgrounds among members of the House of Representatives, and examines variations across political parties. In the 2021 House of Representatives, more than a quarter of MPs had previously worked as political support staff, and these MPs have prominent positions in the parliamentary factions.

Keywords

members of parliament; political careers; political capital; parties; political support staff

1. "Bag-Carriers" at the Binnenhof

In June 2022, VVD parliamentary group leader Sophie Hermans broke down in tears during a heated debate in the Dutch House of Representatives (*Tweede Kamer*) when PVV leader Geert Wilders called her "Mr. Rutte's assistant bag-carrier." Wilders' taunt touched a nerve. For years, Sophie Hermans had served as a political assistant—first to Minister Blok, and then to Prime Minister Rutte—before being elected to parliament in 2017. How credible was she, really, when holding the Rutte government to account? What is the democratic legitimacy of MPs with close prior ties to the executive branch?

Hermans was not the only former "bag-carrier" in the House of Representatives. Nearly a quarter of the new VVD parliamentary group in 2021 consisted of former political assistants to Prime Minister Rutte. Others had worked as staffers for the party's parliamentary group or individual MPs. Bente Becker, for instance—number four on the VVD's candidate list—began working at the Binnenhof immediately after graduating from university. She had been a staff member for an MP, then for the VVD parliamentary group, and served as political assistant to Minister Kamp and later to Prime Minister Rutte before becoming an MP herself. A similar pattern can be observed in other parties. Many members of the Dutch House of Representatives today are recruited from the ranks of political support staff who earn their living in and around the *Binnenhof*—the Houses of Parliament in The Hague—the political heart of the Netherlands.

The rise of former "bag-carriers" in the Dutch House of Representatives is a relatively recent development. It was only around the turn of the century that it became common for ministers to have political assistants. However, the underlying concern about an inward-looking political culture in The Hague goes back much further. As early as the 1980s, J. T. J. van den Berg (1985) described the *Haagse kaasstolp* ("The Hague bubble") a closed world in which politicians, civil servants, lobbyists, and journalists interact with each other, paying little attention to what happens beyond. The growing presence of former political assistants and other political support staff marks a new chapter in this long-standing debate.

This explorative article maps that development. We describe how a new pathway into Parliament has emerged, which we refer to as the parapolitical path. We begin by clarifying and operationalising the concept, and by sketching the broader context. We then map the scope of the phenomenon: To what extent do MPs have a parapolitical background? Are there differences between parties? And are MPs with such backgrounds more prominent within their parliamentary groups? We then provide an agenda for further explanatory and comparative research. Finally, we reflect on the possible consequences. Does the growing number of MPs with parapolitical experience strengthen or weaken the House of Representatives?

2. Parapolitical Roles: Political Support Staff in The Hague

The examples of Sophie Hermans and Bente Becker show that the path to Parliament today increasingly runs through support roles in and around the Houses of Parliament. We refer to these as parapolitical roles—political staff positions that involve supporting political office-holders, but that are not elected political offices themselves.

We include in this category personal staff of members of the House of Representatives and the Senate, staffers, spokespeople, and secretaries of parliamentary groups in both chambers, as well as political assistants, ministerial advisers, and personal spokespersons for ministers. Bente Becker is the most striking example: All her roles fell into this category. Another notable case is that of the Hermans sisters. Sophie Hermans, as we saw in the introduction, served as political assistant to Prime Minister Rutte before becoming a prominent MP; her younger sister, Carolien Hermans, succeeded her as the prime minister's political assistant.

Parapoliticians are typically members of the same political party, and their main task is to directly support MPs or ministers. They are deeply involved in political advising and decision-making, without being elected themselves. They write speeches, they prepare parliamentary questions, motions, and amendments, and

they probe for political sensitivities. Just as paramedics are not doctors but support them in medical practice, parapoliticians are not politicians, yet they are closely involved in political advice and strategy. In a sense, they are the political equivalents of nurse practitioners, surgical assistants, and speech therapists.

Their growing influence is a sign of political professionalisation (Askim et al., 2021; Roberts, 2019; Shaw, 2023). However, their position at the heart of the political realm, while lacking formal electoral legitimacy, also raises pertinent questions about democratic accountability. We will revert to these issues in the final section. Our main objective in this article is to describe how this professional group became so influential within the halls of power at the Binnenhof.

3. Old and New Pathways Into Parliament

New MPs are rarely blank slates. Before entering the House of Representatives, they often follow a long trajectory during which they accumulate political capital (Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020). Over the past 150 years, the nature of this political capital—and the types of career experience associated with it—have changed significantly. Drawing on both international and Dutch literature, we identify four main pathways into Parliament, listed here in roughly historical order. These are "ideal types." In practice, they often exist side by side, and MPs may follow more than one of these routes.

3.1. The Patrician Path

For a long time, politicians were recruited from the social elites through established family networks and based on administrative experience at the local level. In countries like the UK and Belgium, political dynasties were common in the 19th century, and such patterns remain visible today (Geys & Smith, 2017; Van Coppenolle, 2017). In the 18th-century Dutch Republic, family ties were "the glue of the political system" (Prak, 1985, p. 150). Political office often passed from father to son within regent families. This remained true for many MPs well into the 19th century (Sluijter, 2010; J. T. J. van den Berg, 1983, pp. 41–52, 62–71).

Children from noble or patrician families were often exposed to politics from an early age, for instance, because their fathers or grandfathers held political office. Many first became active in local government and moved up through municipal or regional positions before entering national politics. This pattern could still be observed in the 20th century among members of some of the "old" political families. These families have produced generations of mayors, waterboard officials, senior civil servants, MPs, and ministers.

Even in the 21st century, some MPs come from "political families" and follow in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, uncles, or aunts (Van den Braak, 2011).

3.2. The Pillarised Path

The rise of mass political parties around the turn of the twentieth century democratized parliamentary recruitment and opened the door for new social groups to enter politics (Cotta & Best, 2007, pp. 13–14). From that point on, the House of Representatives began to change from a "club of notables" into a body that represented the organised segments of society (J. T. J. van den Berg, 1983, p. 198). For mass parties—aimed at mobilising broad voter bases—it was important that MPs were rooted in societal organisations and sectors.

Party members from the working and middle classes could gradually work their way up, learning the political craft on the job and through party training programmes. They would often begin as local leaders within organisations affiliated with their party—such as farmers' unions, labour unions, or education federations—before potentially becoming aldermen, MPs, or even ministers (J. T. J. van den Berg, 1983; J. van den Berg & Van den Braak, 2004).

3.3. The Professional Path

As the traditional pillarised parties evolved into modern catch-all parties in the second half of the twentieth century (Katz & Mair, 1995; Koole, 1992), they became more focused on appealing to voters across societal divisions. New forms of political capital—such as communication skills—became increasingly important for success.

After World War II, professions like law, journalism, the civil service, academia, and the media became key recruitment pools for political talent (Cairney, 2007). These sectors offer professional skills that are highly relevant to politics, such as argumentation, debate, public speaking, and policy expertise.

These traditional pathways are illustrated in Figure 1. A common thread among them is external recruitment: MPs often entered politics laterally, bringing experience from outside the political bubble of The Hague.

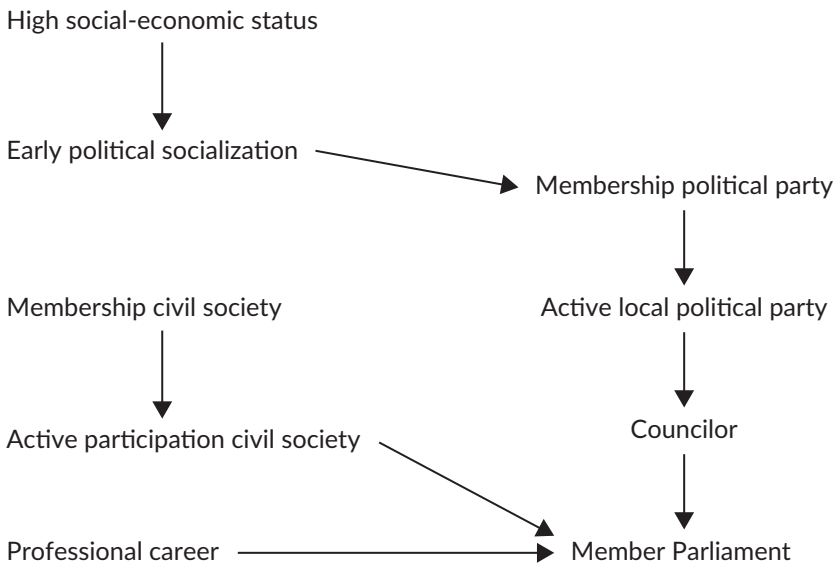

Figure 1. Traditional pathways to parliament. Source: Partially based on Durose et al. (2013, p. 252).

3.4. The Parapolitical Path

By the end of the twentieth century, most political parties had evolved into cadre and cartel parties (Katz & Mair, 1995; Koole, 1992). Party membership declined sharply, and many parties lost their ties to civil society. As a result, external recruitment gave way to more internal recruitment, with new political elites increasingly selected from within political parties or from semi-political institutions. Experience in or around the Binnenhof has become a much more important form of political capital (Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020, pp. 243–244).

This The Hague-based path runs through what we refer to as parapolitical roles. It is shown in the centre of Figure 2. The careers of many MPs today look different from those of MPs in the twentieth century. Aspiring MPs now often become politically active during or after their university studies—for example, as part of a municipal council support team, a political youth wing, or as an intern at a party headquarters.

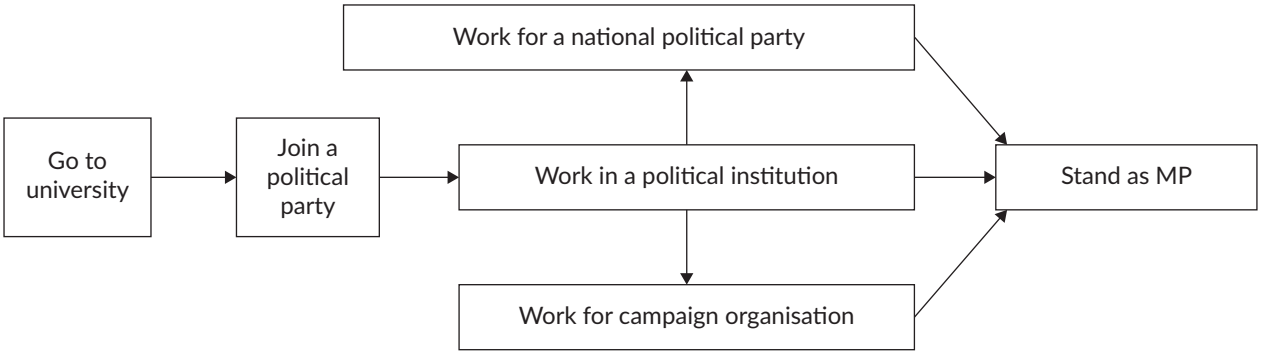

Figure 2. The parapolitical pathway to parliament. Source: Durose et al. (2013, p. 259).

After graduation, they may join a campaign team as a volunteer, and then become a paid parliamentary assistant, a party staffer, or a political adviser to a minister. Some then leap directly onto the national candidates list, while others first spend time working at a ministry, a lobbying organisation, or a public affairs or communications firm. After years of experience in The Hague, they eventually enter Parliament or even the Cabinet. Many of these parapolitical figures accumulate political capital through frequent job hopping. By switching roles often—across advisory, party, and policy-related positions—they build experience, knowledge, and networks (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2020).

This shift towards parapolitical recruitment is not unique to the Netherlands. Similar patterns have emerged in other Western European democracies (Bovens & Wille, 2017, p. 129). In Belgium, for instance, the share of federal MPs with a background in trade unions dropped from 20% in the 1960s to nearly zero in the 2010s. Meanwhile, the share of MPs who had worked as parliamentary or ministerial staff rose significantly—from about 10% in 1970 to 35% in 2010 (Verleden, 2014, pp. 64–65). These candidates enjoy a competitive advantage over those from other professional backgrounds (Put & Maddens, 2013, p. 59).

4. Context: The Academisation, Professionalisation, and Relocation of Politics

The rise of the parapolitical path into Parliament is closely tied to broader changes in the environment surrounding political parties in Western parliamentary democracies (Borchert & Stolz, 2011). Below, we outline three major developments and formulate expectations based on them.

4.1. The Academisation of Politics

All politics is, to some extent, demography. The post-war expansion of higher education made academic degrees accessible to much wider segments of the population. In the early 1960s, only about 1% of the Dutch workforce held a university degree (Bovens, 2012, p. 13). By 2020, that figure had risen to 12% of all residents aged 15 and over with a completed master's or doctoral degree (CBS, 2023).

This shift significantly widened the pool of academically trained candidates available to political parties. But it also narrowed the path to political office: A university degree became a conditio sine qua non for entering national politics. Today, university education is a crucial gateway on the path to public office (Bovens & Wille, 2017; Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020, p. 237).

Just as in the broader job market (Hartmann, 2000), this shift created a crowding-out effect. Candidates with lower or middle-level educational qualifications now have virtually no chance of making it onto national party lists—they are pushed to the back of the line in what is essentially a political labour market. Since the turn of the century, around 90% of MPs in the Netherlands have attended university, and over 80% have completed a full academic degree.

The rise of parapolitical careers is thus also a clear symptom of what has been called the diploma democracy (Bovens & Wille, 2017). Based on this, we expect that nearly all parapolitical figures will have followed a university-level education.

4.2. The Professionalisation of Politics

The development of modern parliamentary systems has made it possible to turn politics into a profession (Weber, 1919). In most Western democracies, it is now possible to spend an entire career in politics, with a distinct professional group of career politicians (Borchert & Zeiss, 2003; King, 1981, pp. 284–285). Moreover, the distinction between political and civil service careers has become increasingly blurred (Dowding & Taflaga, 2020).

In the 20th century, there was a clear separation between the careers of civil servants and elected politicians. Politicians decided on the policy direction they wanted to pursue, while civil servants advised, designed, and implemented policies. Over time, however, the source of policy advice for politicians has shifted from professional civil servants to a growing group of political advisers, external experts, and lobbyists. These positions have increasingly become stepping stones to further political careers (Askim et al., 2021; Roberts, 2019). Policy officials, lobbyists, and political advisers often have a lot of contact with each other and frequently change positions throughout their careers (Dowding & Taflaga, 2020, p. 304).

For political parties, it is more functional to place political insiders higher on the candidate lists than outsiders. Parliamentary assistants and political advisers now have a comparative advantage over the "career changers" of the past. They know how the system works and how to navigate the corridors of power. This is evident in the UK, for example, where MPs with experience in the halls of Westminster tend to rise faster and go further than those coming from outside Westminster (Allen, 2013). Particularly, the so-called "special advisers," the personal political assistants, tend to go far. Notable British political leaders like David Cameron, Nick Clegg, and Ed Miliband all served as political assistants before becoming MPs (Goplerud, 2015). Similar patterns can be observed in the European Parliament (Beauvallet-Haddad et al., 2016).

We therefore expect that candidates with a parapolitical background will be placed relatively high on political party candidate lists.

4.3. The Relocation of Political Parties: From Civil Society to the State

MPs are primarily party politicians. In parliamentary democracies, political parties form the crucial link between the state and society. The role of parties has evolved over recent decades (Van Biezen et al., 2012). Mair (2013, pp. 83–89) described this shift as a "withdrawal into institutions," where parties have increasingly focused on political institutions rather than being rooted in local communities. Political parties have become more integrated into the state apparatus. A significant portion of their funding now comes from the government.

Support for MPs and parliamentary groups has expanded in recent decades, as has the team of assistants, spokespeople, and advisers surrounding government officials. This development is part of a broader international trend where governments and politicians are increasingly surrounded by advisers, including professional analysts, think tanks, lobbyists, and scientific, technical, and legal experts (Craft & Howlett, 2013; Halligan, 1995). The political advisory system has grown significantly (Askim et al., 2017, 2021; Hustedt, 2022; Hustedt et al., 2017; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018; Yong & Hazell, 2014).

In the Dutch House of Representatives, for example, the political support staff for MPs and parliamentary factions has grown from about 75 staffers in the early nineteen seventies to over 400 in the past decade (Otjes et al., 2022, p. 15). Political assistants to ministers were first appointed in the 1970s. Their numbers remained very limited initially, but this changed after the turn of the century with the Balkenende cabinets. As of the Rutte cabinets, every government official has had at least one political assistant (C. F. van den Berg, 2018), and since the Rutte IV cabinet, the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister may have two political assistants.

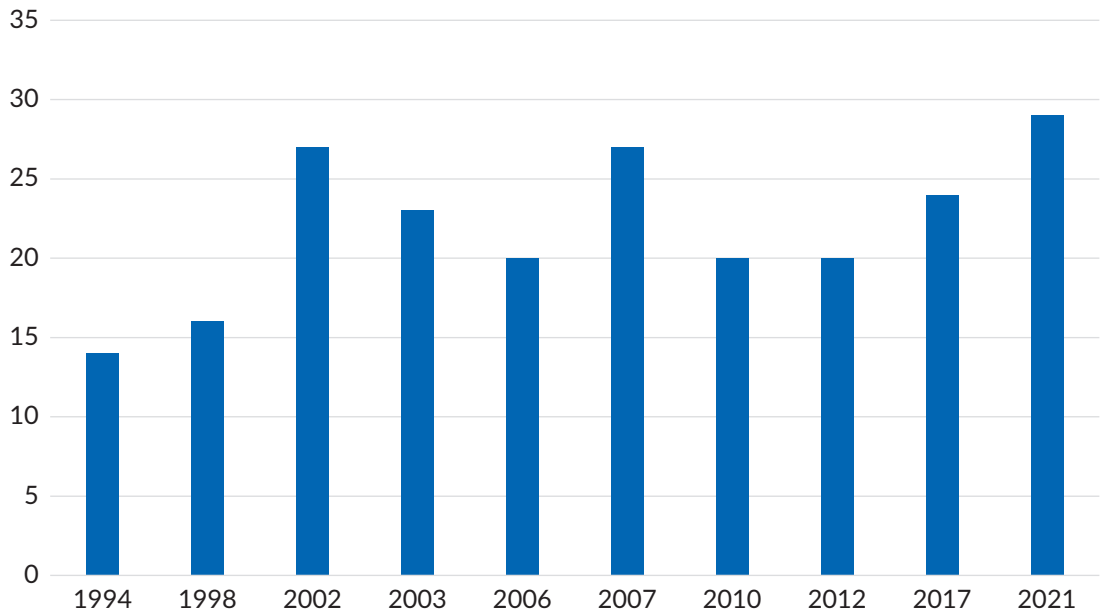

Figure 3. Number of ministerial political assistants. Sources: C. F. van den Berg (2018); from 2017 onward own estimates.

As a result, the number of paid parapolitical positions has grown, and the pool from which parties can recruit has expanded. At the same time, the demand for such support has increased. Most political parties now have fewer members and almost no ties with trade unions or other civil society organisations (Krouwel, 2012; Van Biezen & Kopecky, 2014; Van Biezen et al., 2012; Van Biezen & Poguntke, 2014). Volunteer support

from grassroots within the party or from civil society organisations is far less available (Moens, 2022). This is particularly true for new, less-established political parties.

We therefore expect that parties with roots in the pillarised system, such as the PvdA and CDA, will have relatively fewer parapoliticians than parties that emerged after the end of pillarisation. Additionally, we anticipate that new "challenger" parties (De Vries & Hobolt, 2020) that are participating in elections for the first time will have few, if any, candidates with a parapolitical background. These parties still need to establish their footing within the political institutions.

5. Research Design

5.1. Questions and Expectations

Based on the literature, we expect to observe certain patterns. Specifically, we expect that the number of members of the Dutch House of Representatives with a parapolitical background will be relatively high. We also expect this number to have increased over the past decades.

Secondly, we expect differences between parties. The established parties with roots in the pillarised society and in civil society, such as the PvdA and CDA, are expected to have fewer MPs with a parapolitical background compared to post-pillarisation parties such as GroenLinks, D66, and SP. We also expect new parliamentary parties to have fewer parapoliticians in their factions than parties that have been represented in Parliament for a longer time. New parties do not yet have state-financed staff positions that can act as stepping stones to parliamentary positions. Only after a party has been in Parliament for at least one term will there be the necessary resources for parapolitical functions.

Thirdly, based on international literature, we expect candidates with a parapolitical background to be more successful in advancing their careers than other candidates (Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020). They are familiar with how the system works. Allen (2012) states that in the UK, MPs who had worked around Westminster before their election not only dominated the House of Commons but also held key roles in politics. UK parliamentarians with an insider background were more likely to be promoted during their first term. We, therefore, expect that parapoliticians will be more likely to be "frontbenchers" than "backbenchers" and to be positioned higher on party lists.

Our exploratory study will therefore focus on four key questions:

1. How many members of the Dutch House of Representatives have a parapolitical background?
2. Has this number increased over time?
3. Are there differences between parties in the extent to which their MPs have a parapolitical background?
4. Do MPs with a parapolitical background hold prominent positions within their factions?

5.2. Parapolitical Functions: Operationalisation

How do we measure a parapolitical background? To determine this, we look at all paid positions held by members of the House of Representatives before their parliamentary careers. These positions are considered

parapolitical if they are part of the political support staff at the national level in The Hague. We include the following roles:

- Political assistants to government ministers
- Personal staff members of MPs
- Parliamentary group staff members
- Political spokespersons for ministers and parliamentary groups

This means we do not count political offices, as these are political positions. Additionally, we only consider positions within national politics; parapolitical roles in local politics are excluded as they belong to more traditional pathways. Parapolitical positions within the European Union, such as those in the European Parliament or European Commission, are also not included, as they are not considered "Hague-based" support staff.

5.3. Data Collection

To answer our research questions, we used biographical data collected by the Parliamentary Documentation Centre (PDC) on MPs. Based on this data, we mapped the careers of all MPs who were installed directly after the 2021 elections, representing the full range of Dutch political parties. An overview and description of all parties included can be found in the supplementary file. All paid positions and professions they held prior to these elections were coded. For the longitudinal trend, we relied on earlier research conducted by the PDC for the Parliamentary System Review Committee (Staatscommissie Parlementair Stelsel, 2018). To assess the prominence of MPs, we looked at their placement in the top 25% of the party lists. We chose the top 25% as several Dutch parliamentary parties have fewer than 10 seats, so the top 10% would have been too small. The top 50% is too large, as this may already include backbenchers.

6. Results

6.1. Many Parapoliticians in the House of Representatives

We begin with the size of the parapolitical pathway. Of all the MPs elected in March 2021, 42 (28%) had previously worked as political support staff (see Table 1). For example, party leaders such as Wilders (PVV) and Segers (CU) had both worked for many years as parliamentary group staff members. Renske Leijten, the second on the SP list, became active in the party's youth organisation during her studies, then worked as a staff member for Jan Marijnissen before entering the House of Representatives. Similarly, Bente Becker (VVD), Ockje Tellegen (VVD), Pieter Heerma (CDA), Bart Snels (GL), and Bart van Kent (SP) have all primarily worked in and around the Binnenhof after their studies. Of the 42 parapoliticians, 37 (88%) studied at a university, and 33 (79%) hold a master's or doctoral degree.

Table 1. Former political support staff by party (House of Representatives 2021; absolute numbers and percentage).

	Number of seats	Number of parapoliticians	Share of parapoliticians (%)
VVD	34	12	35
D66	24	5	21
PVV	17	6	35
CDA	15	1	7
SP	9	6	67
PvdA	9	0	0
GL	8	3	38
FvD	8	2	25
PvdD	6	2	33
CU	5	4	80
SGP	3	0	0
DENK	3	1	33
JA21	3	0	0
Volt	3	0	0
50PLUS	1	0	0
BIJ1	1	0	0
BBB	1	0	0
Total	150	42	28

6.2. More Parapoliticians Over Time

The next question is whether the number of parapoliticians has increased over the past decades. To answer this, we were able to use research conducted by the PDC for the Parliamentary System Review Commission. The PDC mapped out how many MPs had held a paid position as a political assistant or parliamentary group staff member between 1966 and 2018 (Staatscommissie Parlementair Stelsel, 2018, Appendix 6, p. 15). Their reference date was 1 January, with an interval of four years. We added our own data for 2021, counted on 31 March 2021, the date the new House of Representatives was installed.

The trend is unmistakable, as shown in Figure 4. The first MPs with a parapolitical background entered around 1970. Former parliamentary journalist Piet van der Sande first worked as a press officer and general secretary of the KVP parliamentary group before becoming a member of the House of Representatives in 1971. Up until the first Kok Cabinet in 1994, the number of parapoliticians in the House remained relatively low, but from 1998 onwards, the number of MPs with a parapolitical background has increased significantly.

6.3. Fewer in Pillarised Parties and Newcomers

How are they distributed across the factions? Figure 5 shows that after the 2021 elections, CU, SP, GroenLinks, VVD, PvdD, PVV, and Denk had the most parapoliticians among their MPs. These are parties that, in recent years, have had many positions available as political assistants or parliamentary group staff members. About

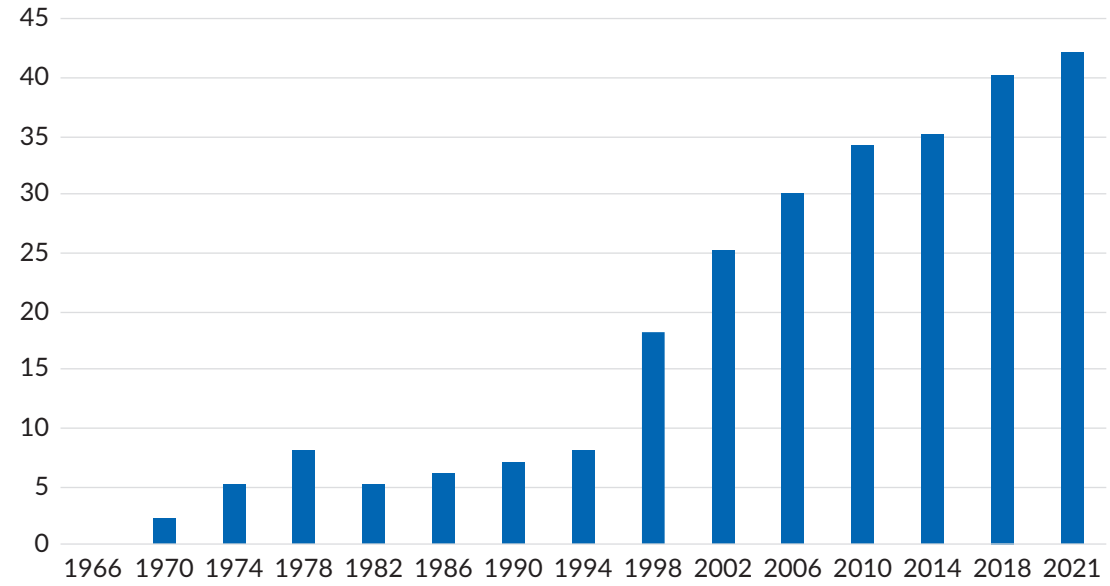

Figure 4. Number of MPs with a background as political support staff, 1966–2021 (absolute).

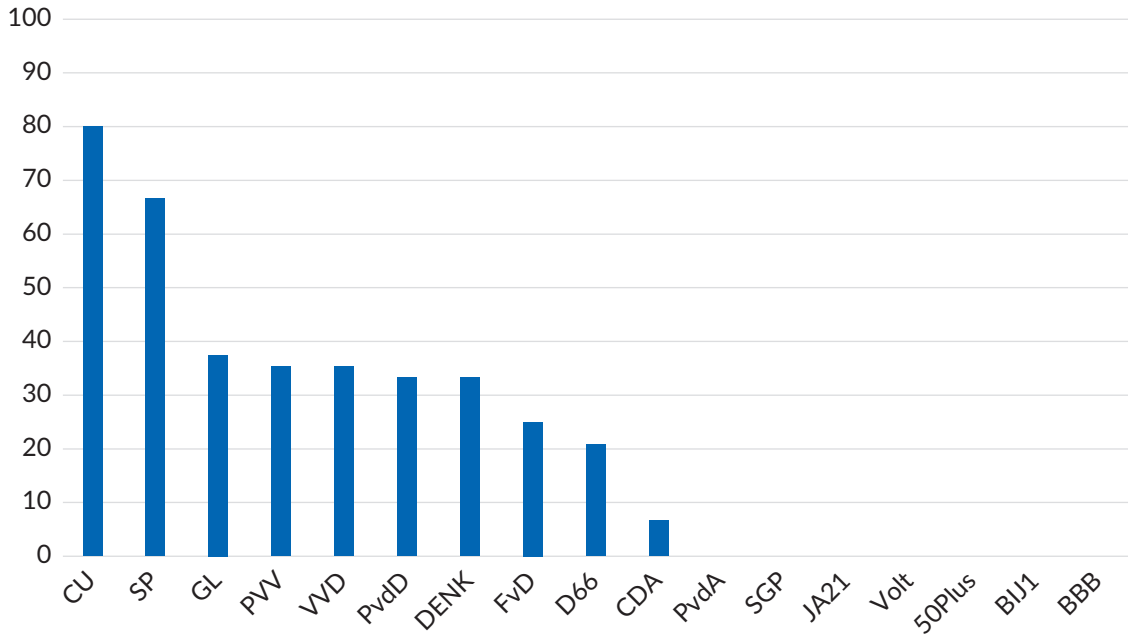

Figure 5. Share of MPs in factions with a background as political support staff in the newly elected House of Representatives, 31 March 2021 (percentage).

a third of the MPs in the relatively large VVD and PVV factions have held a parapolitical position, and for CU and SP, more than two-thirds of the faction members have held such positions. The traditional pillarised parties CDA and PvdA had few or no MPs with a parapolitical background. This was also true for newcomers such as JA21, Volt, BIJ1, and BBB: They had not yet had paid positions to offer.

6.4. Prominent Positions

Parapoliticians rank high on the list. Figure 6 shows the percentage of parapoliticians in the top 25% of the candidate lists of each party. In the CU and PVV, the party leaders had a parapolitical background. In the SP, PVV, PvdD, and VVD, nearly half of the top 25% of the candidate list have worked as political support staff. Only the CDA had no politicians with parapolitical experience in the top 25% of their candidate list. During the Rutte-3 cabinet, three of the four coalition parties had a former political staffer as party leader (Hermans, Segers, and Heerma).

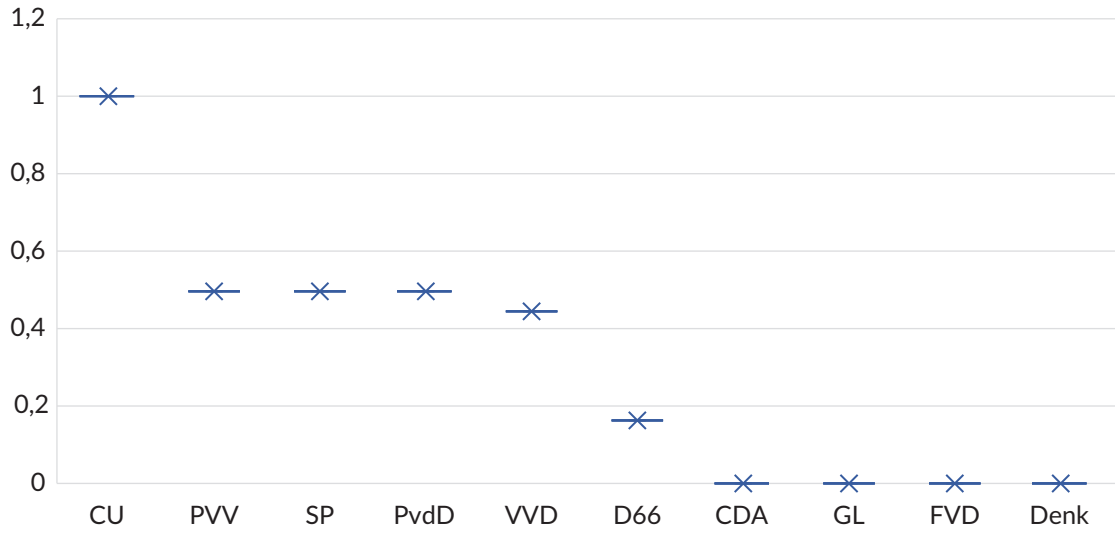

Figure 6. Proportion of parapoliticians in the top 25% of political party lists.

7. A Career in "The Hague Bubble"

As shown in Figure 2, the parapolitical path also has side paths that partly overlap with, for example, the pillarised or professional paths. Many political assistants and faction employees have also worked at some point as party officials, public affairs consultants, lobbyists, or policy officials before becoming MPs. These are not parapolitical roles according to our definition, as they are not partisan political support staff for MPs or ministers. However, this professional experience strengthens their "The Hague" political capital and reinforces the "The Hague bubble" character of Dutch politics.

Therefore, we also investigated whether the MPs who took office in 2021 had held other positions in "The Hague." We made a distinction between (a) party political positions—former party executives, staff at party offices and scientific bureaus, and campaign leaders—and (b) non-party political support positions—former civil servants, employees at public affairs and communication agencies, and employees of lobby groups. In both cases, these are not parapolitical functions as we have defined them here, but they are paid professional roles that provide relevant political capital at the national level. For each party, we examined whether, in addition to candidates with a background as political staff, there were also candidates who had worked as party officials or non-party-political staff at ministries, or as lobbyists or public affairs advisers. This is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Parapoliticians and other "The Hague" backgrounds by party (House of Representatives 2021; absolute).

	Number of seats in 2021	Number of parapoliticians	Number with a political party background	Number with a non-political background
VVD	34	12	0	6
D66	24	5	1	5
PVV	17	6	2	2
CDA	15	1	0	0
SP	9	6	2	1
PvdA	9	0	2	3
GroenLinks	8	3	0	3
FvD	8	2	0	0
PvdD	6	2	2	0
CU	5	4	0	0
SGP	3	0	0	1
DENK	3	1	0	1
JA21	3	0	1	1
Volt	3	0	1	1
50PLUS	1	0	0	0
BIJ1	1	0	0	0
BBB	1	0	0	0
Total	150	42	11	24

When we add these MPs to the parapoliticians, it turns out that 77 MPs, more than half, have worked in some way in supporting positions in the political world of The Hague before becoming an MP. Figure 7 shows the distribution per party. It is striking that all SP members have a "The Hague" background. Also, nearly all MPs of the Party for the Animals and the Christian Union have worked in some way in "The Hague" before becoming an MP. Very striking, on the other hand, is the CDA, which only had one MP, Pieter Heerma, with experience in The Hague.

These results show that there are no longer many outsiders at the Binnenhof. In the last century, representatives were elected "because they meant something in society," as the Dutch sociologist Jacques van Doorn (Van Doorn, 2002, p. 44) once said. In the 21st century, being an MP is, for more than half of MPs, a step in a career in The Hague. There are hardly any trade union leaders, teachers, ministers, or farmers among the members of the House of Representatives. Their place has been taken by political-administrative professionals with predominantly "The Hague" experience.

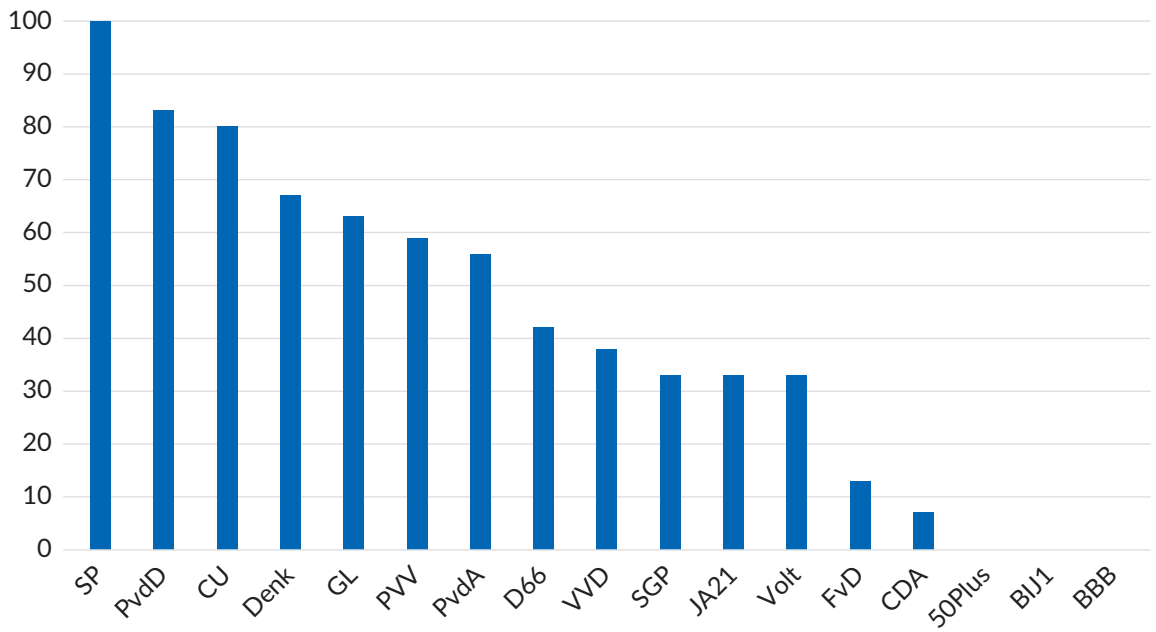

Figure 7. Members of the House of Representatives with a "The Hague" background by party, 31 March 2021 (percentage).

8. Discussion and Reflection: Parapoliticians—Concern or Blessing?

8.1. The Parapolitical Path is Clearly Visible

The results show that the path to Parliament increasingly runs through The Hague. Before candidates appear on party lists, they often already work in or around The Hague as political assistants or parliamentary staff. Of the members of the House of Representatives installed in 2021, 42 (28%) had had one or more parapolitical positions. We also saw that, in almost all cases, this path begins at university. Nearly 90% of parapoliticians have studied at a university.

The smaller, longer-established parties, such as the CU, SP, GroenLinks, and PVV, score the highest. The VVD also has relatively significant parapolitical capital. Interestingly, MPs of the PvdA and CDA, traditional parties with roots in pillarisation, almost entirely lack a parapolitical background. These parties still have many MPs who come from civil society or local politics. Newcomers like BIJ1 and BBB did not yet have parapoliticians in 2021—they had not yet assigned any paid positions.

Parapoliticians also occupy prominent positions in many parliamentary factions. In the CU, SP, PVV, PvdD, and VVD, half or more of the top 25% on the party lists had previously worked as political staff. During the Rutte-3 government, three of the four coalition parties had a former political staffer as faction leader.

8.2. Research Agenda

Our research primarily mapped out the extent and nature of this new parapolitical pathway to Parliament and put it in historical perspective. However, this exploration raises several follow-up questions. What are the mechanisms behind this trend? What are the "pull" factors, the considerations of the selection committees

that create the candidate lists? Is there a homophylic mechanism at play—the idea that "like chooses like" (McPherson et al., 2001)? And what are the "push" factors for the candidates? Why do they find it attractive to apply? Is it because after a few years of "carrying bags" and advising, they want to take the reins themselves? This requires more extensive qualitative research into the motives of candidates and selection committees.

Another important question is which other paths have been displaced by the rise of the parapolitical path. This calls for more longitudinal quantitative research. Considering the international literature we discussed, it seems likely that the pillarisation path (Put & Maddens, 2013; Verleden, 2014) and the professional path have become somewhat less prominent. One hypothesis could be that societal, external professionals have been replaced by other kinds of professionals: political, internal professionals (Allen, 2013). Also, it would be interesting to find out whether these parapoliticians differ from MPs who have followed other political career paths (Ohmura et al., 2018; Turner-Zwinkels & Mills, 2020). This could reveal special features or similarities in the career paths. For example, are they increasingly female compared to the proportion of women in parliament (Taflaga & Kerby, 2019)? Are they younger when they first enter parliament compared to the average age of all MPs? Is the career path of parapoliticians a fast track to public office? Turner-Zwinkels and Mills (2020), for example, show that pre-parliamentary political capital at the national level enhances the chances of becoming a cabinet member. It would also be interesting to find out whether they have also taken on party offices at the local or national level. This may show that professionalisation within the local or national party structures remains significant for this career path.

To better understand the implications of the parapolitical pathway, it would also be useful to undertake a comparative analysis with other parliamentary democracies. Countries such as the UK, Belgium, and the Scandinavian countries have also seen a rise in political professionalisation and the emergence of career politicians. By systematically comparing these developments, we can determine whether the Dutch pattern is unique or reflects a broader international trend.

8.3. Blessing: Political Professionalisation

How should we assess the rise of this parapolitical path? Does it strengthen parliamentary democracy? In many ways, the rise of the parapolitical path is a blessing for parliamentary factions. Former political staffers are, after all, political professionals. For political parties, recruiting them is highly functional. These candidates are "insiders." They have been socialised into the norms and values of the political world. They know what faction discipline is, and they already understand the political craft. They are also highly loyal to the party, which prevents organisational mishaps. Furthermore, they have already been "on the job" for several years, so they require less training. They already know how "The Hague" works. They are familiar with parliamentary procedures and the routes to the media, they possess relevant networks, and have a good sense of political-administrative relationships.

This political professionalisation can be well understood as a response to the greater challenges that politicians and political parties face. Due to the emancipation of the voter, political volatility has increased significantly in the Netherlands. At every election, large numbers of seats change hands between parties. As a result, MPs are less secure in their seats, and the turnover rate of MPs is higher. This makes it harder for outsiders to learn the trade "on the job." After one term, their political career might already be over. Additionally, there has been a strong increase in media attention to the Binnenhof. The number of parliamentary journalists has risen

sharply, and their attitude towards politicians is far more critical than in the era of pillarisation. This demands specific competencies in political sensitivity and political communication. MPs with experience in or around The Hague know what to expect. They understand the rules of the game and ensure continuity in an extremely volatile environment.

8.4. Concerns: Fewer Outsiders in the Binnenhof

The rise of the parapolitical path also has its downsides. MPs who follow the parapolitical path typically gain little professional experience in other sectors of society after their studies. Much of their career has been spent within the world of highly educated political "junkies."

This makes them effective within the walls of the Binnenhof, but vulnerable outside the boundaries of The Hague. Do they even know what is happening in the rest of society? Moreover, there are risks for the reputation of Parliament if there are few outsiders in the Binnenhof. Many MPs seem to have more in common with each other than with the voters. This makes them vulnerable to accusations of being an insular political class. It could reinforce the perception that political institutions are becoming detached from the public.

An important follow-up question is whether the parapolitical background of MPs also leads to different policy outcomes, and whether they are less responsive to certain concerns (Binderkrantz et al., 2020; Schakel & van der Pas, 2021). Moens (2022) shows that, in Flanders, there is little difference between parliamentarians with a parapolitical background and those with a more "grassroots" background. On the other hand, Snagovsky et al. (2022) do find differences. Legislators with previous political staff experience are more likely to prioritise the interests of their party and their own views over the desires of their voters. If political careers are increasingly shaped by a narrow set of experiences within "The Hague bubble," this could erode the diversity of political opinion and experience in Parliament. What happens when alternative paths to political office (e.g., through grassroots activism, local government) become less viable? The diminished presence of these figures might lead to a narrowing of perspectives and an underrepresentation of certain societal groups.

The prominent position of former political staff within many factions eventually also raises questions about dualism. Can Parliament effectively and credibly fulfill its oversight role when a large portion of prominent MPs come from the inner world of the cabinet itself? It is worth discussing the dynamics of accountability when so many elected representatives come from the same "insider" networks. Do these individuals feel accountable to their parties, their colleagues, or their voters? Can Sophie Hermans and Bente Becker credibly challenge Mark Rutte, the man whose briefcase they carried for years?

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Supplementary Material

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