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EDITORIAL

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Understanding the Role of Political Staff and Parliamentary Administrations

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Abstract

The staff working in parliaments represent a highly relevant, yet significantly understudied group of actors. While political scientists have sought to understand the activities of elected representatives in parliaments, the role of the administration and political staff is understudied. However, the sparse case studies that exist underscore the key role played by political staff in brokering information, advising, preparing and exercising legislative oversight, preparing and in part conducting legislative compromise-seeking, and interacting with various actors such as lobby groups, citizens, and the media. Yet, such roles may well vary between political systems. In addition, some staff later pursue a political career, further blurring the lines between politics and administration. This issue seeks to provide cutting-edge research in this emerging field, bridging the disciplines of political science and public administration.

Keywords

bargaining; expertise; legislatures; oversight; parliamentary administrations; parliamentary committees; parties; political staff

1. Introduction

The staff working in parliaments represent a highly relevant, yet understudied group of actors. While there is a long tradition of political scientists seeking to understand the activities of elected representatives in parliaments, research into the key role played by staff has long focused on the US Congress (e.g., Huber & McCarty, 2004; McCubbins & Page, 1987). Research on the role of parliamentary staff in Europe is both sparse and fragmented. However, the few existing studies underscore the relevance of political staff in

brokering information, advising, preparing, and exercising legislative oversight, preparing and in part conducting legislative compromise-seeking, and interacting with various actors such as lobby groups, citizens, and the media. Yet, such roles may well vary between political systems (cf. Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Egeberg et al., 2013; Högenauer et al., 2016; Winzen, 2011).

Fragmented as studies into political staff are, so are definitions of political staff. We pragmatically define political staff as personnel of parliaments or political groups who—in any capacity—support MPs in the fulfillment of legislative roles (such as policy making, exercising oversight, seeking re-election, or representing a selectorate). The concept thus may refer to staff working for individual MPs, for political groups, for parliaments as an institution, or for parliamentary committees. Admittedly, our definition encompasses a broad range of very different types of staff members, and it also covers a broad range of staff activities.

This thematic issue seeks to bring together cutting-edge research in this emerging field, bridging the disciplines of political science and public administration. Depending on the focus of each contribution, different political staff types or activities were singled out. Overall, this issue includes two sets of articles: articles that focus on the role of staff and their contribution to the political process and articles that focus on the relationship between MPs and staff.

2. Mapping and Understanding Staff Activities

The first set of articles aims to map out the activities undertaken by political staff. Van Voorst (2026), Heimbach (2026), and Stephan and Högenauer (2026) explore the roles played by staff in the context of the Danish, French, German, Austrian, and Luxembourgish parliaments. To facilitate comparison, they all use the same typology as proposed by Brandsma and Otjes (2024). The articles find the typology to be largely complete, but find variation in the roles of staff across countries, and add a new role of networker in paradiplomacy. Van Voorst (2026) finds that party staff in both Denmark and the Netherlands are typically thematically specialized but then take on a broad range of tasks within that policy area. The exceptions are communications-related tasks, for which party groups employ specialized staff. The core parliamentary administration, by contrast, has a much more functional division of labour. Van Voorst (2026) adds an additional role to the model by Brandsma and Otjes: paradiplomacy, as he finds that a number of staff members work on relations with international actors.

While Van Voorst (2026) found many similarities between the Dutch and Danish models, Heimbach (2026) emphasizes the existence of substantial differences between European parliaments. Thus, the Bundestag and its MPs and party groups are much better staffed than their French counterparts. In the case of party group staff and personal assistants, the different staffing levels do not impact the role of staff, which is similar in both parliaments. However, the role of committee staff differs, with the Bundestag treating committee staff as organizers, whereas French committee staff also play the roles of ghostwriters, compromise facilitators, and advisors.

Stephan and Högenauer (2026) zoom in on the role of assistants in the cases of Germany, Austria, and Luxembourg and on the key drivers of the specialization of staff. They explain differences in specialization with team size, party organization, MPs' working style, and trust, but also highlight the impact of opposition

versus government roles of MPs. This last aspect had so far been overlooked by the literature, but the interviews showed that the impact of the being in government on MPs and party groups was so substantial in terms of their responsibilities in the legislative process and the need to coordinate across parties and with committee staff, that it also had a major impact on the amount of coordination and writing tasks that fell to the assistants.

Högenauer and Neuhold (2026) apply the typology of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to the staff working on scrutiny of EU affairs. They argue that the typology generally works well, but some tasks are less relevant than in domestic politics (e.g., the task of marketeer), while the additional role of networker/coordinator is particularly important as national parliaments need to coordinate with each other and the European Parliament. This finding is similar to Van Voorst's (2026) argument on paradiplomacy. However, the authors also argue that the small number of EU experts per parliament, in combination with the broad range of tasks, constitutes a challenge.

Serra-Silva and Leston-Bandeira (2026) investigated the public engagement activities of a variety of staff across three parliaments (Portugal, Austria, and the UK). Although all staff investigated have a neutral position and primarily carry out operational and/or administrative tasks, the authors document how staff often are the initiators of a changing approach to public engagement of parliaments, even though they themselves are not the decisive actors. Their neutral position in a political institution demands that they carefully navigate between carrying out operational work and being responsive to the political environment.

Finally, Ludwicki-Ziegler (2026) investigates in the Scottish and British parliaments how communication work is organized. Given that these parliaments largely organize their political staff by MP rather than by party group, organizational differences between members' offices could be expected. The article, however, demonstrates rather similar factors shaping organizational setups, and that the lines between allocated tasks may be blurred in practice. The creation of communication outputs is typically organized as a group activity or a solo activity of a communications official, but in practice is more of a group endeavor.

3. MP and Party-Staff Relations

The second set of articles focuses on the relationship between staff and MPs. Kuokkanen and Weide (2026) argue that the close relationship between parliamentary staff and politicians makes parliaments an arena where the spheres of politics and administration blur. As they see the expectations of politicians as a source of legitimacy for staff, they examine how Finnish politicians perceive and normatively assess the roles of different staff groups. They found that staff groups that were the furthest away from politics received the most positive appraisal, whereas staff groups close to politics—such as committee staff or personal assistants—were both respected for their expertise and seen critically when meddling too much in politics. The study highlights the challenge of the political neutrality of staff and the careful balance between staff being allies versus rivals of politicians.

Otjes and Brandsma (2026) empirically assess the assumption underlying many studies into political staff, namely that staff matters for legislative activity. Using their earlier study of Dutch staff as a basis (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024), they investigate to what degree the availability of specific types of staff to Dutch MPs impacts their production—i.e., number of resolutions, written questions, amendments, and legislative

proposals submitted. Overall, the authors do find a positive effect between staff availability and legislative production, but call for a cautious understanding of this effect, as several key indicators suggest that party group size, in part, may drive some of the results.

Cloutier (2026) investigates the approach taken by Canadian federal MP staffers towards constituency work. Analyzing this through a constructivist lens, she finds that these staffers enjoy considerable discretion in filtering and amplifying constituent concerns, and therefore that they significantly shape the representative relationship between MPs and their constituents. Staffers should thus not merely be understood as passive agents following the will of their political masters, but rather as active agents in their own right.

Wille and Bovens (2026), finally, document how in the Dutch lower house, staff positions have increasingly become a stepping stone for a political career. The share of MPs who have prior held a political staff position has increased considerably over time, at the expense of the share of MPs who have been recruited from elsewhere. Although the exact share of "parapolitical" career pathways varies between parties, the authors see a trade-off between efficiency and representation. On the one hand, MPs with prior experience as political staff may need less time to learn to play the political game, but on the other hand, the dominance of the parapolitical career pathway signals an increasing detachment of political parties from society.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, the thematic issue expands our understanding of the role of staff in parliamentary processes by adding comparative studies and case studies on parliamentary staff, party group staff, and personal assistants to a small but growing field of research. The contributions critically engage with existing typologies of staff roles in domestic and EU policymaking and discuss the factors that shape which roles are taken on by what types of staff and the variation across countries. In addition, several contributions shed light on the interaction between politicians and staff, including the question of how and when staff embark on a political career.

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Conflict of Interests

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