

Article

The Organization of Professional Expertise in the European Commission

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Abstract

What kind of professional experts dominate within the European Commission—lawyers, economists or others? Driven by the notion that the role of professional experts is shaped by organizational features, the article examines how different kinds of expertise are inscribed in the Commission’s recruitment system and organizational structure. The analysis shows that while economics may have overtaken law as the most common educational background in the Commission, neither the recruitment system nor the departmental structure appears to encourage the development of economic expertise. The proportion of staff hired through economics competitions has dropped markedly, and there are few specialized units for economic analysis in the organization. More generally, the Commission’s hiring policies and organizational hierarchy do not seem conducive to strong expert roles. The picture that emerges is that of an organization where expert knowledge is neither tied to a particular profession nor firmly rooted in the departmental structure.

Keywords

economic experts; European Commission; expertise; organization of expertise

Issue

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1. Introduction

The top civil service in Britain is dominated by generalists educated at Oxford and Cambridge. In France, the most important government ministries are populated by officials with broad training in politics, law and economics from the *École nationale d’administration* (ENA). The German and Italian government administrations are staffed mainly by lawyers. And in the Scandinavian countries, the earlier monopoly of lawyers on civil service positions has been upended by the rise of economists and political scientists.

The permanent administration of the European Union (EU) is frequently described as a “technocracy” where power and legitimacy is based on expertise. But what kind of expertise dominates within the European bureaucracy is far from obvious. The EU administration is often believed to be the exclusive territory of legal

experts, skilled at navigating the complex body of treaties and directives. Yet, surveys of the European Commission services have revealed that lawyers are outnumbered by economists (or by social scientists in general) both in top administrative positions and among the rank and file (Page, 1997, p. 77; Georgakakis & De Lassalle, 2008; Kassim et al., 2013, p. 40).

At the same time, some scholars have argued that professional expertise—be that in law or economics—has little salience in the Commission. The professional background of administrators is less important than their specific institutional capital, such as experience in various *cabinets* and directorates (Georgakakis & De Lassalle, 2008). Other studies also indicate that the emphasis on specialist expertise in the Commission has declined, as a result of changes in recruitment policies and requirements for greater staff mobility (Ban, 2010; Wille, 2013; Christensen, forthcoming).

This brief discussion highlights that the role of professional expertise in the European bureaucracy is a multifaceted issue. It is not only a matter of how many lawyers, economists or natural scientists there are in the administration, but also of the extent to which officials identify with their discipline and bring their professional expertise to bear in their daily work. In other words, professional knowledge has both an objective and a subjective side (Fourcade, 2009). Recognizing this dual nature of expertise is important because administrative behavior is closely related to officials' identification with different roles (cf., March & Olsen, 1989). Whether administrators identify as professional experts, civil servants or representatives of particular outside interests will influence their approach to the formulation of policies. As such, the kind of professional expertise that dominates within a bureaucracy can have major implications both for the direction of policy and the quality of decisions (Babb, 2004; Chwioroth, 2009; Christensen, 2013).

As we know from organizational sociology, the salience of different kinds of professional expertise in administrative organizations depends on features of those institutions (Fourcade, 2009). Organizational structures, cultures and policies for recruiting and promoting staff can shape the role of experts by either stimulating or eroding professional identities. For instance, organizations specialized along professional lines may accentuate distinctions between officials with different educational backgrounds, whereas specialization along sectoral lines may erase such distinctions (Gulick, 1937). Thus, while some bureaucracies are organized in ways that are conducive to strong expert roles, others are structured in ways that put professional expertise in the background.

Based on this insight, the article seeks to explore the salience of different kinds of expertise in the European Commission by examining the organization of expertise. It thus poses two questions: (1) *How are different kinds of professional expertise inscribed in the organization of the Commission?* (2) *What can this tell us about the position of professional knowledge in the Commission?* To answer these questions, the article analyzes new empirical data on the recruitment policies and departmental structure of the organization.

Important to note, the analysis is restricted to *professional* expertise, that is, knowledge acquired through extensive formal education in a specific academic discipline (e.g., Abbott, 1988). One can of course imagine other types of expertise that are relevant in public administration, such as knowledge about how to get proposals through the policy process. Yet, what we are interested in here is not so much the institutional know-how of officials as the influence of bodies of knowledge defined outside the Commission, be that in the economics discipline, the legal profession or some other professional group.

The analysis shows that while economics may have overtaken law as the most common educational background in the Commission, neither the recruitment system nor the departmental structure seems to encourage the development of economic expertise. The proportion of staff recruited as economists equals that of law recruits and has dropped steadily since the 1970s. And the creation of specialized units for economic analysis has so far been restricted to a small number of departments—and does not match the many legal units scattered around the Commission.

More generally, the Commission's recruitment policies and organizational structure do not seem conducive to strong expert roles. In recruitment, low educational requirements and a marked shift towards hiring generalists undercut the image of the Commission as an "expert organization". Also, the Commission's departments are generally not structured along professional lines or organized in ways that promote the generation of in-house expertise. The picture that emerges of the Commission is that of an organization where expert knowledge is neither tied to a particular profession nor firmly rooted in the departmental hierarchy.

These findings challenge the conventional narrative about the Commission as a "technocracy"—at least if we understand a technocracy as a system where expert knowledge is the primary basis of power and legitimacy. In fact, compared to other international bureaucracies, the Commission organization places remarkably little emphasis on professional expertise. The findings also provide some comfort to those who fear that economists are taking over the Commission, as there are few indications that the organization is becoming similar to economist-dominated international bodies like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD).

To be sure, the type of organizational analysis employed here has clear limits, as it tells us more about the structures that may shape the use of professional expertise than about how this knowledge actually is used. Yet, it may provide a useful method for comparing the organization of knowledge across different national and international bureaucracies, since it relies on data that in many cases are readily available.

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature about the role of professional experts in the Commission. Section 3 introduces the notion of professional expertise and discusses theoretically how organizational features can shape the role of professional experts. Section 4 presents empirical data on the role of professional expertise in the recruitment system and organizational structure of the Commission. The final section discusses how the findings speak to common narratives about the role of expert knowledge in the Commission.

2. Expertise in the European Commission

The European Commission is by far the largest and most important executive institution of the EU, with a staff of more than 23,000. It is the principal initiator and preparer of policy in a decision-making system that includes the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament and the European Council. The Commission is a supranational body, formally independent from the Council, which represents the member states. The Commission is led by a college of politically appointed Commissioners and their political secretariats (*cabinets*). The permanent bureaucracy of the Commission (the “Services”) is divided into departments (“directorates-general” or DGs), which are again divided into departments, units and sections.

The Commission is frequently characterized as a “technocracy”, that is, as a body that “recognises expertise as the sole basis for authority and power” (Radaelli, 1999, p. 758). The technocratic character of the Commission is usually linked to its extensive engagement in regulatory policy-making, where “[k]nowledge, rather than budget, is the critical resource” (Radaelli, 1999, p. 759; Majone, 1996). Boswell similarly argues that expertise is the basis for the *legitimacy* of the Commission, as “the institutional structure of the Commission [implies] a strong propensity to value knowledge as a source of legitimation” (Boswell, 2008, p. 472). The idea of a European “technocracy” can of course be interpreted to mean a number of things, ranging from the kind of corporatist policy-making instituted by Jean Monnet to the fact that member states are represented mainly by experts to the central role of knowledge in EU policy-making (Radaelli, 1999, p. 759). But it is the latter interpretation we are most interested in here.

If the Commission is a technocracy, what kind of “technicians” dominates? It is commonly thought that the Commission is an organization dominated by lawyers. Given the law-based character of the European Union and the Commission’s legal functions (e.g., as “guardian of the treaties”) that seems like a reasonable inference. Yet, a number of studies indicate that this is no longer the case. Georgakakis and de Lassalle (2008) show that legal training dominated among top officials in the early decades of the Commission’s history, with lawyers occupying Director-General positions in most DGs, including Economic Affairs and External Relations. However, economists took over many of these positions in the 1990s, replacing lawyers as the largest professional group in the top echelon of the Commission services.

The rise of economists and the relative decline of lawyers also show up in surveys of Commission administrators at all levels. Based on biographical data from 1991–1993 (n = 622), Page finds that 39 percent of Commission officials had training in the social sciences (including economics), 26 percent in law, 26 percent in the natural sciences and 9 percent in the arts (Page,

1997, p. 77). A smaller survey conducted in 2005–2006 (n = 179) finds that 41 percent of officials had their main training in the social sciences, 28 percent in law, 24 percent in the natural sciences and 6 percent in law (Ellinas & Suleiman, 2012, p. 53). And a large recent survey (n = 1793) shows that 29 percent of Commission administrators had their main educational qualification in economics or business, 26 percent in the “hard” sciences (such as math, engineering and life sciences), 24 percent in law, 15 percent in politics and other social sciences and 5 percent in the arts and humanities (Kassim et al., 2013, p. 40).

Kassim and colleagues also find great variation across departments in the educational background of officials. The proportion of lawyers was highest in the Legal Service (92%), DG Justice, Freedom and Security (46%) and DG Competition (44%), while the presence of economists (including business and statistics) was greatest in DG Economic and Financial Affairs (87%), Eurostat (63%) and DG Budget (59%). They conclude that “[w]hile lawyers are concentrated in a relatively small number of medium-size Directorates-General, mostly concerned with compliance, enforcement and regulation, economists are found in significant numbers across several Directorates-General that perform a variety of functions” (Kassim et al., 2013, pp. 40–42). Taken together, these surveys do not single out one professional group as dominant within the Commission, but they do suggest that legal expertise has been complemented with—and partly replaced by—other types of expertise, in particular from economics and related areas.

Yet the educational composition of staff can only tell us so much about the salience of different kinds of professional knowledge. Georgakakis and de Lassalle argue that while many top officials in the early decades had legal training, they were not “pure jurists” exclusively devoted to legal knowledge and conceptions of the world (2008, p. 3). Rather, having legal training was instrumental to building general bureaucratic capital, defined *within* the organization rather than with respect to external professional groups. One example is that top Commission bureaucrats in their CVs put little emphasis on their external educational achievements as compared to their internal work experience in departments and *cabinets* (Georgakakis & De Lassalle, 2008, p. 2). The authors also suggest that economists are “involved in similar strategies of accumulation of a specific institutional capital” (p. 7), in the sense that their economics background *per se* is less important than their acquired experience inside the Commission.

More generally, this argument suggests that while Commission officials may have an educational background in law or economics, they do not necessarily identify closely with these disciplines or act mainly based on ideas or norms rooted in the profession. For Commission officials, the role as a “professional ex-

pert” may be less salient than other roles, such as the role of the “administrator” devoted solely to the organization or department. And indeed, Trondal and colleagues have found that expert or “epistemic” roles are much less prominent in the European Commission than in the secretariats of other international organizations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the OECD. In the Commission, they observe, hierarchy trumps expertise and officials “do not identify with their scholarly discipline” (Trondal, Marcussen, Larsson, & Veggeland, 2010, p. 167).

Moreover, some scholars point out that new requirements that staff rotate frequently between positions have weakened the position of specialist experts in the Commission: “The new mobility system”, argues Wille, “has clearly favored the generalist over the specialist. Specialization tends to diminish promotion aspects, as it restricts departmental mobility. Generalists are a lot more likely to be considered for a wider range of senior positions than officials with a highly specialized technical background” (Ban, 2010, p. 18; Wille, 2013, p. 129). It has also been argued that changes to the system for selecting staff have put specialists at a disadvantage, as the current selection procedure puts primary emphasis on very general skills (Ban, 2010; Christensen, forthcoming).

However, while these scattered arguments suggest that expert roles have organizational underpinnings, EU scholars have not systematically investigated the factors that condition the salience of professional knowledge in the European Commission. To be sure, the role of professional knowledge in the Commission is influenced by a broad range of factors, including the institution’s demand for expertise and the supply of professionals from the education systems of a changing set of member countries. Yet, this article focuses specifically on the *organizational* features of the Commission that may shape the role of different types of expertise in the administration. To put some flesh on this notion, the next section provides a theoretical argument about professional expertise and the organizational factors that condition it.

3. Professional Expertise and Organizations

Professions are exclusive occupational groups that possess special skills acquired through extensive formal training. These skills are rooted in an abstract system of knowledge that is inaccessible to outsiders (Abbott, 1988, p. 8). Medical doctors have exclusive knowledge about how the body works and how to treat illnesses, just as lawyers have unique expertise in interpreting the law. This special expertise is the very basis for the position and power of professions in society. Importantly, professional knowledge is defined within professions, that is, in specialized academic departments or in professional associations. As such, it is to a

significant degree insulated from political, administrative or corporate demands. For instance, politicians cannot at will intervene in how doctors treat cancer. (If they did, it would severely discredit the treatment.) This autonomy distinguishes professional expertise from other types of knowledge one could identify as expertise. For instance, knowledge about how an organization works, amassed through long experience in the organization, is certainly an asset for those who possess it. So is the training one gets on the job in how to carry out particular tasks. Yet these kinds of expertise are defined within the bounds of the organization and are thus of a different nature than expertise defined in external professional groups. In this article, we are concerned only with professional expertise, since this kind of knowledge in many cases has been shown to have a profound impact on public policies, perhaps most prominently in the case of economic knowledge (e.g., Babb, 2004; Chwieroth, 2009; Fourcade, 2006; Reay, 2012).

The position of different types of professional expertise varies between public bureaucracies, both across countries and across departments. For instance, the role of lawyers in the British civil service differs from the position of lawyers in the German administration or in the French bureaucracy. As the sociologist Marion Fourcade argues in the book *Economists and Societies* (2009), these differences are intimately linked to the character of administrative institutions. Fourcade demonstrates how the variation in the role and practice of economists in the U.S., the U.K. and France was intimately related to historically determined differences in their “administrative orders”, that is, in the “organization and exercise of ‘government’” (p. 247). For instance, the central role of economists as top bureaucrats and advisers in the U.S. was partly the result of the porous and specialist nature of the American state, whereas the marginal role of economists in the British bureaucracy was linked to its closed and generalist civil service. Central to Fourcade’s argument is the point that administrative institutions not only filter the access of economists to bureaucratic positions (cf., Weir & Skocpol, 1985), but also construct the role of economic experts within the state: “By defining the terms under which economic knowledge is incorporated into public policy, public administrations have implicitly contributed to *construct* the professional role of the economist” (Fourcade, 2009, p. 25, original emphasis).

Building on Fourcade’s insight about the dual impact of administrative institutions, this article argues that two organizational factors can be seen as particularly important in shaping the role of professional experts in public bureaucracies: recruitment systems and organizational structures. *Recruitment systems* vary in terms of the type of knowledge and skills that is emphasized in hiring. Officials can be selected on the basis of qualifications and skills in specialist fields, such as academic credentials in the fields of economics or law.

Strongly specialist recruitment is found for instance in the top U.S. civil service and in the Scandinavian public administrations (Peters, 2010, p. 90). There is also variation in what type of specialist expertise is emphasized in recruitment to the civil service, whether legal, economic, political or in the natural and technical sciences. Alternatively, officials can be recruited based on general skills, such as intelligence or the ability to analyze or communicate. In this case officials are expected to be able to cover any kind of position and receive any specific training on the job. Examples of generalist systems are the traditional British civil service, staffed by bright amateurs trained in the liberal arts, and the French administration, where top bureaucrats have broad training from the *grandes écoles*.

Recruitment systems shape the role of professional experts in part by filtering access to bureaucratic positions. For instance, hiring based on advanced specialist credentials in economics—say, a Ph.D. degree and proven quantitative skills—reserves positions for this particular professional group. By contrast, selection on general skills renders professional credentials irrelevant and favors a different type of candidate. But recruitment policies also contribute to constructing the role of the official. Selection procedures and recruitment categories signal to candidates which qualities are valued by the organization, thereby shaping officials' perception of their own role. Job advertisements for "economists" that ask for a Ph.D. and quantitative method skills send the message that officials will be valued as economic experts, reinforcing this professional identity. By contrast, a general advertisement for "administrators" signals to officials that their professional background is unimportant for the job and instead supports a general civil service identity.

The second organizational factor that conditions the role of professional experts is the degree of *organizational specialization along professional lines*. All complex organizations have highly specialized organizational structures, which allow the organizations to carry out their tasks. Public administrations can be horizontally specialized along a number of dimensions, including geography, purpose (sector), process or clientele (Gulick, 1937). Structures are never neutral: by bundling some issues together and keeping others apart they direct attention, structure contact patterns, establish cleavages and mobilize bias (Egeberg, 2003, p. 117; Schattschneider, 1960). Organizational specialization along *professional lines* is a form of process specialization. Specialization along professional lines means that tasks are divided between different kinds of expertise rather than according to the issue at hand. An example is a competition agency that is divided into an economic division and a legal division rather than into issue-based divisions for, say, cartels, mergers and state aid. A closely related practice is the institutional "licensing" of professional jurisdiction through the reservation of positions for particular pro-

fessions (Fourcade, 2006, p. 151). Examples are job titles such as "chief economist" or "legal adviser".

Specialization along disciplinary lines concentrates professional expertise in one place, thereby stimulating further development of professional knowledge and closer links to the academic discipline. A professionally specialized unit can become almost like an academic department, with seminars, paper series and regular interaction with the outside academic discipline (Froeb, Pautler, & Röller, 2009, p. 577). But specialization along professional boundaries also establishes cleavages that reinforce disciplinary identities. The division of work into "economic" and "legal" questions reifies this professional distinction, signaling to officials that professional frames are the most relevant for addressing any issue. This is likely to increase the emphasis on professional values at the expense of other administrative norms. By contrast, specialization along other dimensions (sector, territory) may imply a fragmentation of professional expertise, which hinders the further development of professional knowledge and privileges other organizational identities over disciplinary ones.

To summarize, the key message of the theoretical discussion is that organizational features not only reflect but also shape the role of professions. Recruitment systems and organizational structures are durable features of organizations that condition the role of different types of professional experts. These organizational features are not, however, unchangeable. For instance, a professional group may well instigate changes in recruitment policies or further organizational specialization along professional lines that cements its position within the organization.

4. The Organization of Expertise in the European Commission

How is professional expertise "organized" in the European Commission? This section surveys the role of different types of professional experts in the Commission's recruitment system and organizational structure.

4.1. Recruitment System

Since the 1960s, the European Commission has relied on open competitions for recruiting permanent staff. These competitions—often referred to with the French term *concours*—are essentially civil service examinations that are either general or restricted to a specific field (see e.g., Coombes, 1970; Spence, 1997; Stevens, 2001). The *concours* has changed significantly over time, going from *ad hoc* competitions for few posts in the 1960s to regular mass competitions to recruit hundreds of officials in the 2000s. The largest waves of recruitment have been connected to the successive enlargements of the European Union. Recruitment was previously the responsibility of the single European insti-

tutions. But on the eve of the Eastern enlargement in 2004, a special agency—the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO)—was set up to administer open competitions for all the European institutions (Ban, 2010).

From which fields has the European Commission selected its staff, and how has this changed over time? This is examined by analyzing the notices for the European Commission’s recruitment competitions for “administrators”—that is, staff with policy tasks—over the period 1956 to 2013.¹ The competition notices are collected from the online archives of the *Official Journal of the European Union*.

Figure 1 maps out the main fields in which the Commission has organized recruitment competitions from 1960 until today. The categories listed (“economics”, “general administration”, etc.) are drawn directly from the competition notices, which means that they are the fields of recruitment *as defined by* the Commission. The figure shows the period during which the Commission recruited administrators under a certain heading.

As we can see, the Commission instituted competitions in a core set of specialist fields following the Commission merger in 1967. These included “law”, “economics” (often accompanied by “statistics”), “financial

management” and “agriculture”. Recruitment competitions in the fields of law and economics/statistics have been organized regularly ever since. Recruitment in the field of financial management was first complemented with and eventually replaced by competitions in the “audit” field. Similarly, competitions in agriculture were supplanted by recruitment in the fields of “food safety” and “public health” in the 1990s. Perhaps more remarkable was the emergence and transformation of competitions in public administration. This field was not part of the initial recruitment categories, and competitions in “general administration” were first introduced in the late 1970s. The category was later changed into “general administration, public administration and management” and finally re-labeled as “European public administration” in 1998, becoming the most important field of recruitment to the Commission (as we will see below). It should also be noted that completely general competitions have been organized intermittently. Such competitions were first organized in the early 1960s and then revived in the first half of the 1990s and used occasionally since then.

How has the relative importance of these fields changed over time? This is assessed by looking at the number of officials recruited through competitions in the various fields in different periods. Figure 2 shows the changes in the distribution of recruited officials by field of competition.

¹ The analysis comprises *all* the administrator competitions in this period that were aimed at selecting multiple officials (a total of 284 competitions) while leaving out competitions for single positions.

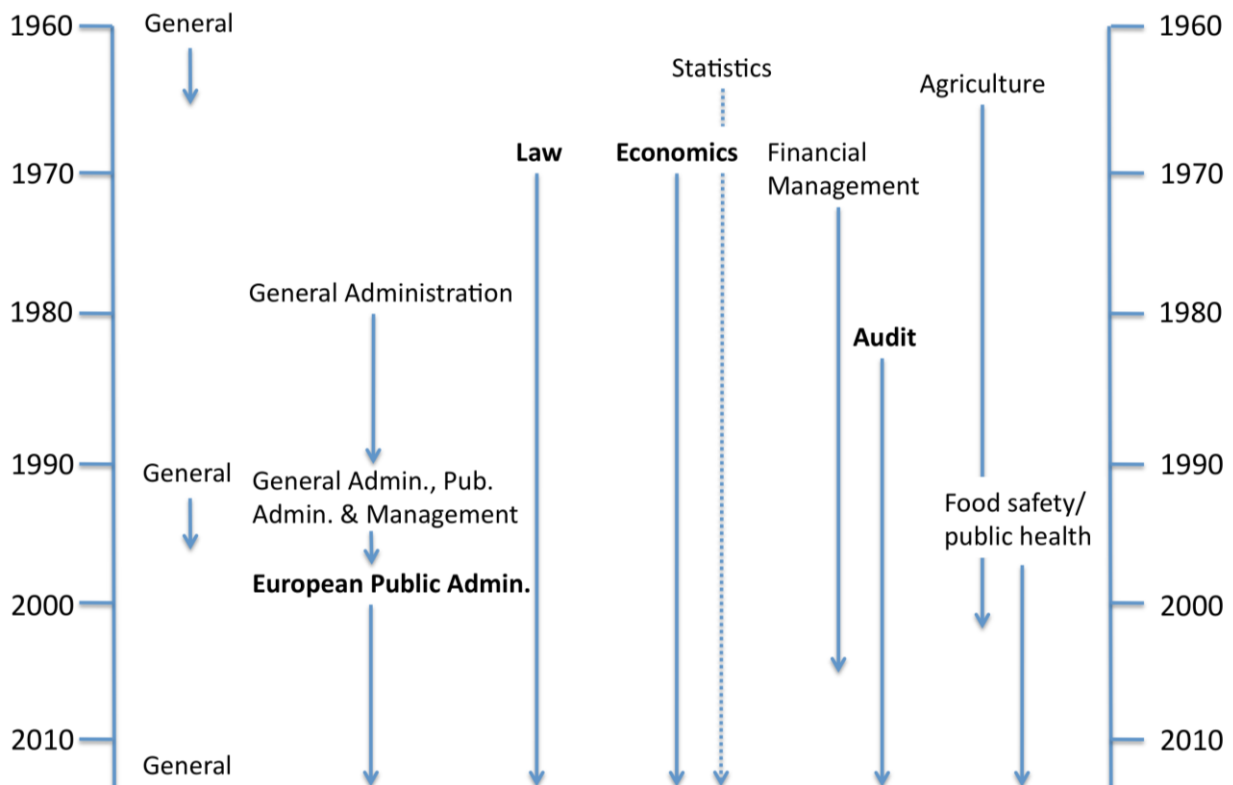


Figure 1. Fields of recruitment to the European Commission. Source: Author’s illustration based on competition notices compiled from the *Official Journal of the European Union*.

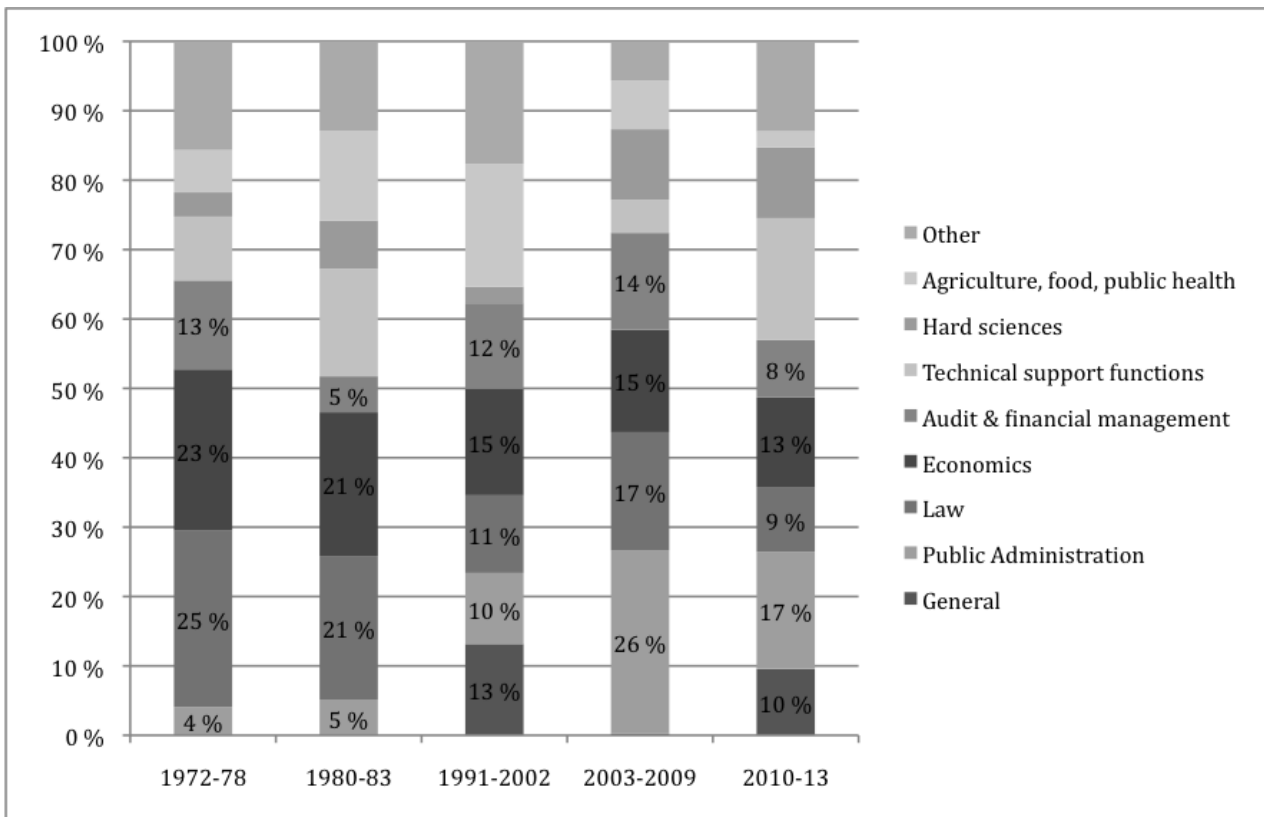


Figure 2. Officials recruited by field in different periods, percent. Source: Adapted from Christensen (forthcoming), based on data compiled from the *Official Journal of the European Union*. Note: Before 1991, complete data on the number of administrators to be recruited is available only for the periods 1972–1978 and 1980–1983.

First of all, the figure does not show a dominance of either lawyers or economists in recruitment to the Commission. The number of recruits from the two fields has been roughly similar throughout the organization’s history. From 1972 to 1983 the Commission recruited 332 administrators through law competitions and 315 through economics competitions; since 1991 it has recruited 1,773 administrators in law and 1,847 in economics. We also see that competitions in law and economics—arguably the two core specialist fields in the Commission—have declined in importance over time. While these fields together accounted for nearly half of recruited officials in the 1970s and early 1980s, they account for only between 20 and 30 percent of recruits in the period after 1990.

At the same time, competitions in the field of general public administration have become increasingly important. The proportion of recruits coming from public administration competitions increased from around 5 percent in the 1970s and 80s to 26 percent during the eastern enlargement from 2003 to 2009. Public administration was the largest field of recruitment over the period 1991–2013: the 2,472 administrators selected in the field easily surpassed the number of recruits from law or economics. On top of this came the 720 administrators hired through completely general competitions. The growing importance of the field of “audit” is also noteworthy: since 1991 the

Commission has recruited almost as many officials in the audit field—1,716—as in law and economics.

What emerges is a picture of a Commission that in recruiting civil servants seeks knowledge in four major fields—law, economics, audit and public administration—and that over time has shifted its emphasis from the first two fields towards the latter two. But to what extent is recruitment in these fields tied to specific professions and professional qualifications? This is examined by looking at the educational requirements for participating in the competitions. Higher and more specific educational requirements indicate that a competition is restricted to a certain profession. In the Commission, the minimum education required to take part in competitions has consistently been low: until 1998 a university diploma or degree of unspecified length was required; from 1998 to 2004 a degree that “gives access to doctoral studies” was needed; and since 2004 the requirements have been a 3-year university degree for lower-level policy administrators and a 4-year degree for officials in higher grades.

Whether applicants’ degrees have to be in a specific discipline or not has varied over time and across fields of competition. Figure 3 shows the specificity of the degree required for Commission competitions in different fields, with a higher value indicating a more specific degree required.

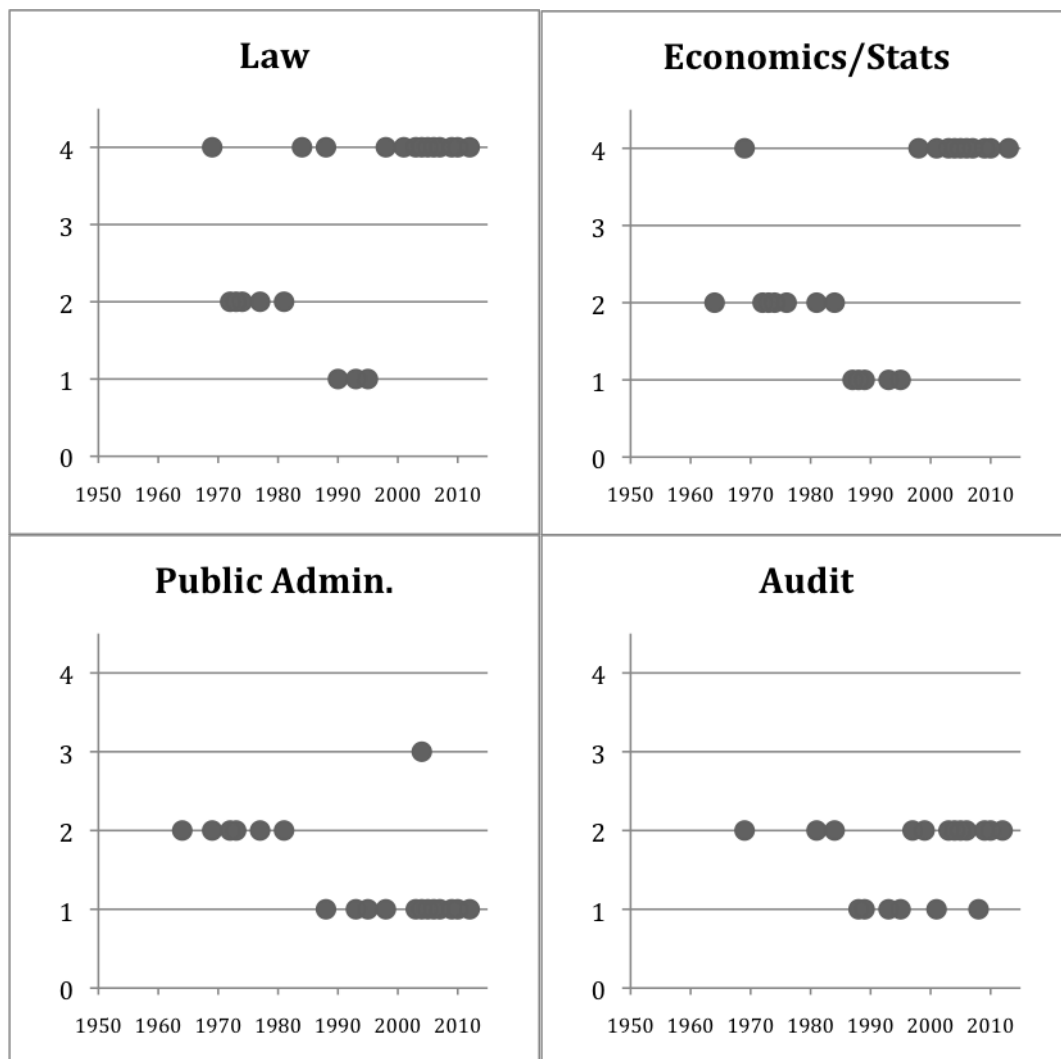


Figure 3. Specificity of degree required to participate in competition, by field of competition, 1958–2013. Note: 1: Degree in any field; 2: Degree in “relevant field”; 3: Degree in any of a wide range of fields; 4: Degree in one specific field. Source: Adapted from Christensen (forthcoming).

The figure shows that up until the late 1980s competitions in all of these fields usually required only a “relevant degree”, even for competitions in law or economics. The requirements were even less specific from 1988 to 1995: in this period a degree in any field was sufficient to take part in any competition. Since 1998 the requirements have been differentiated across competition fields: Competitions in law and economics require degrees in those specific disciplines, while competitions in “European public administration” are open to graduates from any field. Audit is in a middle position, requiring university education in a “relevant” field. In other words, whereas recruitment in the fields of law and economics is linked to a specific professional background, recruitment in the buoyant field of “European public administration” is *not* tied to any specific professional profile.

Finally, it should be noted that the recruitment tests in themselves have become more general over time. As Carolyn Ban points out, the first stage of the tests introduced in 2010 assess a set of very general competences,

such as verbal, numerical and abstract reasoning (Ban, 2010). Christensen (forthcoming) also shows that the emphasis on specialist skills in the competition tests has dropped over time. While the assessment of specialist knowledge constituted 50 percent of the tests in the 1970s, it only accounted for 28 percent of the tests in the periods 1990–2002 and 2003–2013. This trend is similar across the main fields of competition.

To summarize, the European Commission’s recruitment system shapes the organizational role of different kinds of professional expertise by defining the categories/fields of knowledge, by linking these categories to specific professions (or not), and by determining the relative importance of these fields. The Commission’s recruitment regime has defined some clear professional categories, in particular law and economics, which sets it apart from completely generalist recruitment systems like the traditional British or Irish system. At the same time, the professional content of these categories has been weak (e.g., low and generic

degree requirements and generic tests). The more specialist fields have also lost ground relative to a public administration category that is not rooted in any particular type of professional expertise.

4.2. Organizational Structure

The role of professional expertise in bureaucratic organizations is not only shaped by recruitment systems, but also by organizational structures. To what extent is the European Commission specialized along professional lines? To what extent have professions “claimed” parts of the organization as their exclusive jurisdiction? The ambition here is to draw a “professional map” of the Commission services to get at the role of different expert disciplines in the organization, with a special focus on law and economics. What we are looking for is departments, units or positions that are defined in professional terms, such as a division of economic analysis or a position as legal adviser. The data presented is drawn from the online *Commission Directory*, which list all the units and positions in the Commission, as well as from organizational charts and other information available on the websites of the various Directorates-General and Services.

The institutional position of legal experts is most strongly expressed in the Commission’s Legal Service, which is the only truly professional department of the organization. The Legal Service is an internal horizontal department charged with providing legal advice to the Commission and its services. The Legal Service must be consulted—and provides a legal opinion—on all documents put before the Commission. The service reports directly to the President of the Commission, giving it a more independent position than the regular departments. Almost all officials have a legal background (92%), and most positions are defined as “member of the Legal Service” (268 of approximately 350 positions). The Legal Service is thus a textbook example of professional jurisdiction: concentrating legal expertise in a dedicated department with special prerogatives rather than spreading it out across the regular departments gives legal knowledge a privileged status within the organization.

Other Commission departments also have dedicated legal units and positions. This is illustrated in Figure 4, which shows the number of organizational units specialized in legal (and economic) analysis, and Figure 5, which shows the number of designated legal (and economic) positions per department.

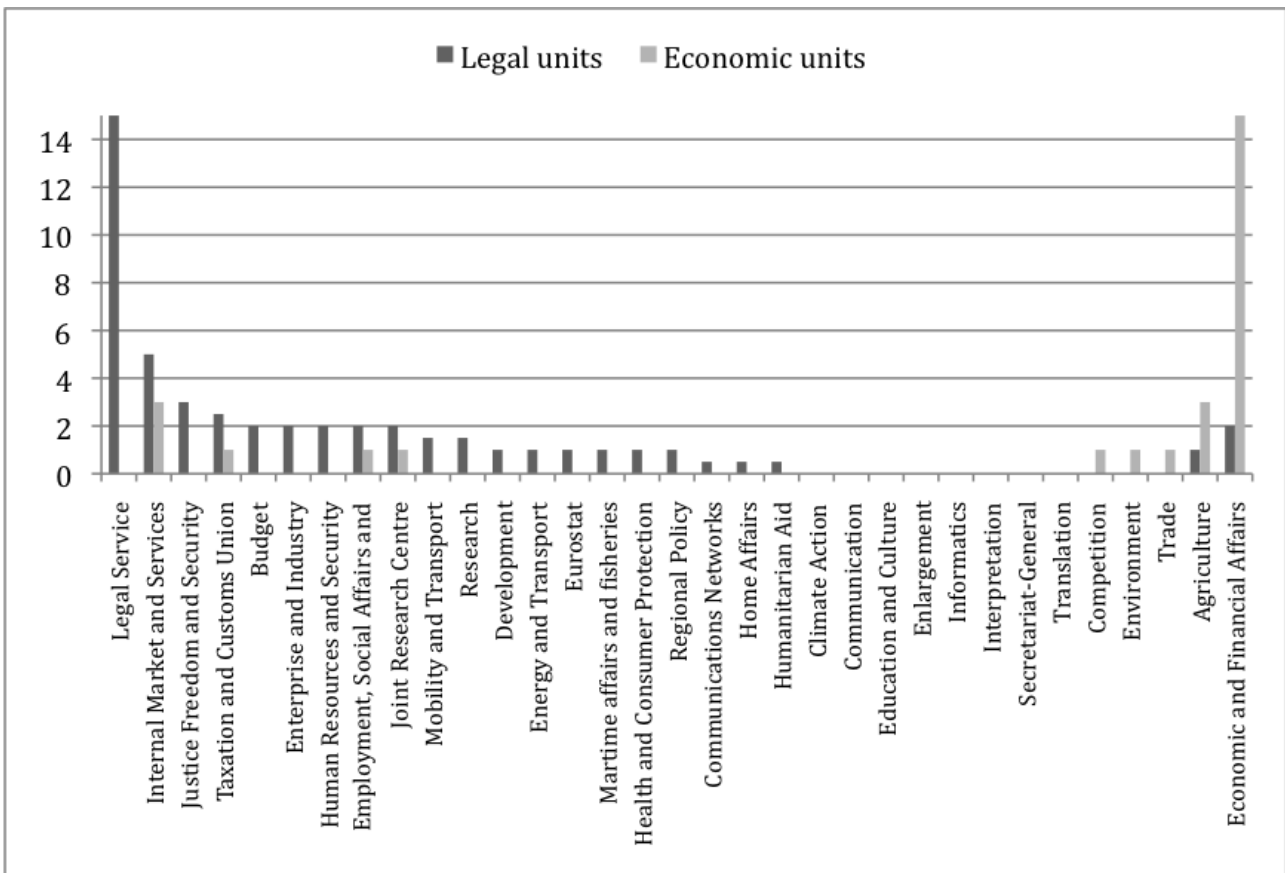


Figure 4. Number of organizational units dominated by lawyers or economists in the departments of the European Commission. Note: A unit is classified as legal (economic) if the majority of the positions in the unit are legal (economic) positions. In the Commission, a “unit” is the organizational entity below a “directorate” and above a “section”. Sections are here coded as half a unit. Source: Author’s illustration based on data collected from the online *Commission Directory*.

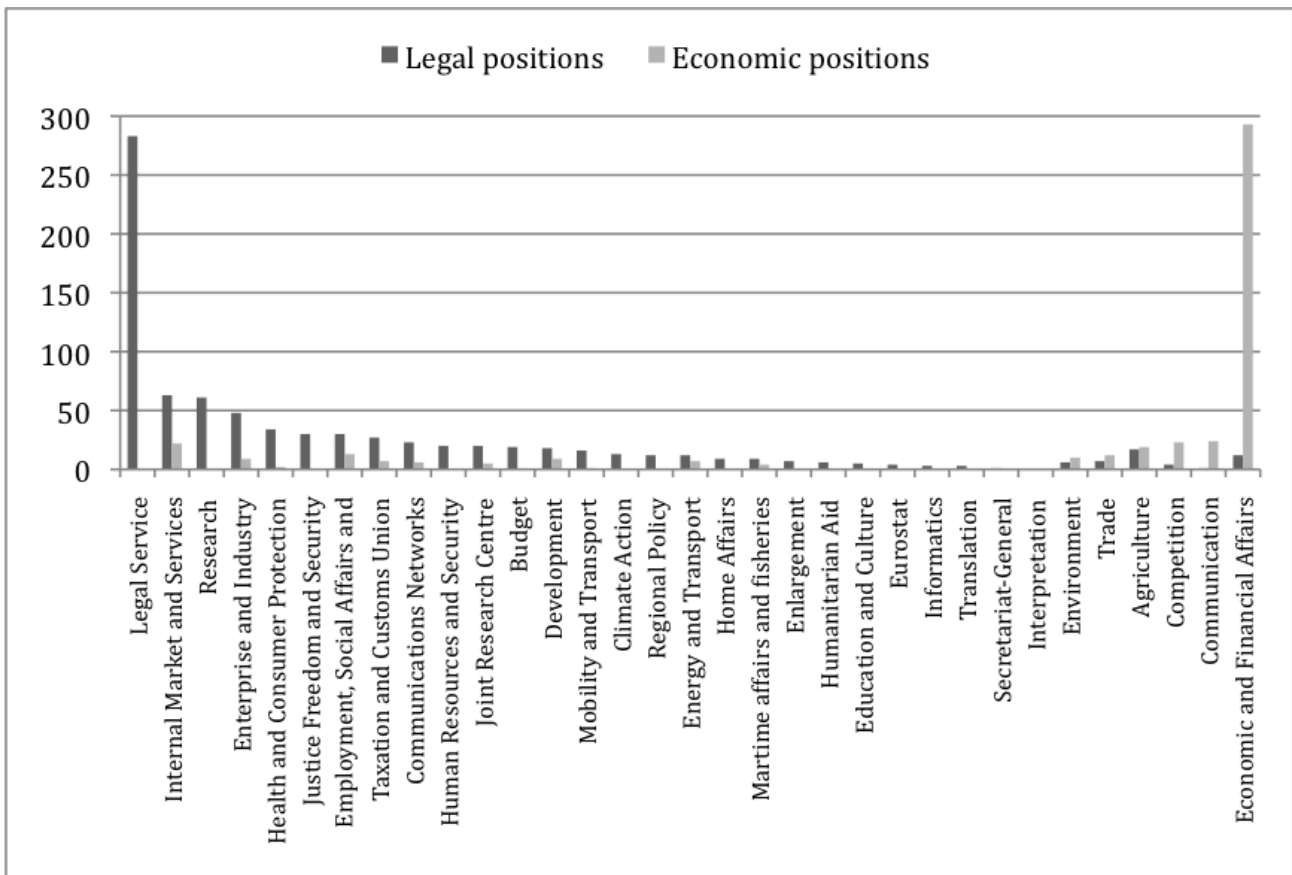


Figure 5. Number of designated positions for lawyers and economists in the departments of the European Commission. Note: Legal positions include the position titles “legal officer”, “legal assistant” and “member of the legal service”. Economic positions encompass the position titles “economist”, “economic analyst” and “socio-economic analyst”. Source: Author’s illustration based on data collected from the online *Commission Directory*.

In total, there are 51 legal units and 828 positions as “legal officer” or “legal assistant” in the Commission. As we see in the figures, legal expertise has a prominent position in some departments beyond the Legal Service: DG Internal Market and Services has five predominantly legal units (e.g., “Application of Single Market law and relations to Parliament” and “Public procurement legislation I”) and 63 positions as “legal officer” or “legal assistant”; DG Justice, Freedom and Security has three legal units (e.g., “Consumer and marketing law”) and 30 designated legal positions; and DG Enterprise and Industry has two legal units and 48 legal positions. We also see that there is a legal presence in a majority of the departments: 22 of the Directorates-General and Services have at least one legal unit or section, and 19 departments have at least 10 designated positions for legal experts. These units are usually labeled “Legal matters” or “Legal affairs” and provide inside-the-department legal advice. Thus, in organizational terms, we see that legal expertise in the Commission is both *concentrated*—in the Legal Service—and *widespread*—with legal units in most departments.

Moving on to economic expertise, there are in total 39 predominantly economic units and 467 positions as

“economist”, “economic analyst” or “socio-economic analyst” in the Commission. The greatest concentration of economic expertise is found in DG Economic and Financial Affairs (ECFIN). In the strictest sense, DG ECFIN is not a professionally specialized department: it does *not* provide economic advice to the Commission departments like the Legal Service offers legal advice. It is instead a functionally organized department heavily dominated by officials with training in economics. 87 percent of its policy staff have a background in economics or similar fields, and it has 293 dedicated positions as “economic analyst” or “economist”. The department carries out some economic research in-house, which involves development of economic models and analysis of data, and publishes economic working papers written by staff and collaborators (e.g., in the “European Economy Economic Papers” series). It is also part of the department’s mission to interact with the academic community of economists in the development of policy.

There are specialized economic units in some other departments too. Most notable in this regard is the Chief Competition Economist in DG Competition. The Chief Competition Economist was established in 2003 with the objective of boosting the Commission’s capac-

ity to apply economic and econometric analysis to competition cases (Röller & Buigues, 2005). The Chief Economist is appointed for a fixed term and is usually a prominent academic in the field. He leads a team of about twenty economists with Ph.D.s in the specialized field of Industrial Organization (Röller & Buigues, 2005, p. 6). The Chief Economist's Office is organized separately from the regular department and reports directly to the Director-General. Its role is to provide independent economic advice on cases and policy, both by supporting the case handlers with technical economic analyses and by providing an independent opinion on particular cases or policy issues based on economic knowledge. As such, the Chief Economist's Office plays much the same role within DG Competition as the Legal Service does across the departments: its role is to provide an independent opinion rooted in a particular body of professional knowledge on the work of the regular bureaucracy. The Chief Economist's office also serves as a center for economic debate on competition issues, organizing seminars with prominent competition economists, producing working papers and regularly consulting outside academics on policy questions (Röller & Buigues, 2005). In some respect, the office thus bears stronger resemblances to an academic department than a regular bureaucratic unit.

The European Commission also has a Chief Trade Economist inside DG Trade. But this office is smaller—with a staff of seven economists—and is tucked away deep down in the departmental hierarchy. It thus does not have the same institutional position as the chief economist in the competition area. Beyond the areas of competition and trade, economists have a sizeable presence in agriculture and internal market regulation. Both DG Agriculture and DG Internal Markets and Services have three predominantly economic units (such as “Economic analysis of EU agriculture” and “Analysis of financial market issues”) and around 20 designated economist positions. In addition, Eurostat is heavily dominated by *statisticians*, whose knowledge borders closely on economic expertise. Yet specialized economics units and positions are far less widespread in the departmental structure than legal ones. Only nine Directorates-General or Services have at least one economics section or unit, and only eight departments have more than ten economist positions.

It thus seems that while economists have surpassed lawyers both in top positions and in the rank and file of the Commission, economic expertise does not have the same broad organizational entrenchment as legal knowledge. Compared to law, economics is less clearly defined as an independent form of expertise worthy of specialized organizational units. In other words, there may be more officials with economic than legal background in the Commission, but fewer economists *qua* economists than lawyers working in legal positions.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical data presented above sheds light on the role of professional expertise in the European Commission. Yet, there are clear limits to what the data can tell us. Most importantly, it does not tell us how many economists or lawyers there are in the Commission, only how many economists or lawyers were recruited *as such* and how many work in positions or units defined as economic or legal. For instance, the analysis does not pick up economists or lawyers who are recruited as public administrators and work in general administrator positions. But, as argued in the theoretical section, whether an economist is recruited as an economist and works in a position/unit defined as economic is highly significant for his or her identification with a professional expert role. And that is what this article has tried to examine.

With this caveat in mind, how do the empirical findings speak to common narratives about experts in the Commission? In an often-repeated narrative the Commission is portrayed as a “technocracy”, that is, an organization where expertise is the basis for power and legitimacy (Boswell, 2008; Radaelli, 1999). This narrative is also popular with journalists, who rarely mention the European Commission without alluding to its technocratic character. Against this backdrop it is interesting to note that neither the Commission's recruitment system nor its organizational structure seem conducive to strong expert roles. Recruitment to the Commission does include competitions for specialists in fields such as law and economics. But the recruitment of specialists in these fields has dropped relative to hiring within more generalist categories like “European public administration”. And the generally low educational qualifications required to participate in law and economics competitions do not seem geared to attract high-skilled experts. The Commission's organizational structure contains some departments and units organized around particular forms of expertise, such as the Legal Service, DG Economic and Financial Affairs or the Chief Competition Economist. The latter is an example of an organizational unit that explicitly encourages the use and further refinement of expertise and that is bound to reinforce identification with professional knowledge and expert roles. But units like this remain the exception. The vast majority of Commission departments are not structured along professional lines or designed in ways that promote the generation of in-house expertise. The fact that the Commission bears few resemblances to an “expert organization” in terms of how it selects its staff and structures its tasks should lead us to reconsider the claims about its technocratic character.

A second account suggests that economists play a growing role in the organization. In part this is based on surveys which show that the number of officials with a background in economics has surpassed the

number of law graduates (Georgakakis & De Lassalle, 2008; Kassim et al., 2013, pp. 40-42). But it is also part of a broader narrative about the rise of economists within public bureaucracies worldwide (Fourcade, 2006). Is the European Commission turning into an economist-dominated institution like other international organizations? Looking at recruitment and organizational structures there are few signs that this is the case. The analysis of the Commission's open competitions did *not* show an increase in the number of economists recruited or in the economics qualifications demanded of candidates. On the contrary, the proportion of officials recruited through economics competitions has dropped steadily since the 1970s. This does not necessarily imply that fewer economists have been hired, but it does mean that fewer economists have been hired *as such*. In the Commission's organizational structure some specialized economics units have popped up since 2000, including the Chief Competition Economist and the Chief Trade Economist. This institutionalization of an independent economic advice function expands the professional jurisdiction of economists at the expense of lawyers. But this trend does not extend across the Commission: so far the creation of economic analysis units has been limited to a small number of departments. Economists do not have the same broad organizational "license" that lawyers have, neither in terms of specialized units nor earmarked positions. Speaking of economists dominating the Commission thus seems premature.

Where does this leave the question of professional expertise in the Commission? The picture is decidedly blurry: while a few departments are clearly dominated by one profession or the other, most are unclaimed territory in professional terms. The role of legal expertise is supposed to be waning but remains firmly rooted in the organization; economists are said to be on the rise but are not broadly entrenched organizationally; and in the meantime public administrators with generalist knowledge are pouring in through the recruitment competitions. More fundamentally, professional background may have little relevance for explaining administrative behavior in the Commission: professional cleavages and distinctions appear to be less important in organizing the Commission's daily activities than for instance departmental boundaries (Egeberg, 2007, p. 149).

The ongoing eurozone crisis does, however, illustrate well that the type and extent of professional expertise matters for how policy-making bureaucracies tackle important policy issues. To some, the handling of the crisis has revealed a wide gap in economic competence between the heavily professionalized European Central Bank (ECB) and the European Commission. In an opinion piece in the *New York Times* entitled "Crisis of the Eurocrats", Paul Krugman, Nobel Prize winner in economics, drew a clear distinction between the "gen-

uine technocrats" in the ECB and the "fake technocrats" in other European institutions (Krugman, 2014). Surely, this is an over-simplification. But concerns about boosting the capacity for economic management may well spur greater interest in cultivating expertise in economics within the Commission. And recently, there have been signs of renewed efforts to hire highly educated economic specialists to the organization. Investigating how the crisis influences the role of professional expertise in the organization is certainly an interesting topic for further research.

More generally, in order to further pursue the questions raised in this article we need to know more about how Commission officials perceive their roles (as professional experts or otherwise) and how the issue of expertise plays out in concrete policy processes. To be sure, the present analysis only scratches at the surface of a very complex set of issues. Discarding the stereotype of the European "technocrat" seems overdue, but whether to replace this image with that of the rule-oriented lawyer, the economist concerned about efficiency or the administrative all-rounder remains an open question.

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