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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

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Testing Staff Roles in the Danish Parliament

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Abstract

Investments in parliamentary staff in many countries raise the question: What tasks do they perform in exchange for the public money with which they are paid? So far, academics have mainly described the work of such employees in individual legislatures and have studied them more sophisticatedly in the US and the European Parliament. However, theory-driven empirical comparisons between national parliamentary staff in Europe are mostly missing, especially regarding their partisan side. An exception is the conceptual model developed by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) in a study about all employees of the Dutch lower house. This article applies that tool to another case, the Danish parliament *(Folketing*), with the dual aims of finding patterns by comparing it to the Netherlands and assessing the comprehensiveness of the model. Interviews with almost all political parties and three managers of the non-partisan staff of the *Folketing* suggest that the categorization of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) mostly covers the tasks of their staff, but omits important subroles regarding international diplomacy.

Keywords

Danish parliament; legislatures; parliamentary staff; party staff; political parties

1. Introduction

Parliamentary staffs across the Western world have reported changes in their budgets and their number of employees during the last decade (Christiansen et al., 2023, pp. 5–7). For their non-partisan administrations, increases in such resources are often linked to growing challenges like transparency, digitalization (Christiansen et al., 2021, p. 78), Europeanization (Högenauer, 2023, p. 78), information overload (Jágr, 2022, p. 104), and citizens' requests (Otjes, 2022, p. 392). For partisan staff, a key argument for growth is strengthening the opposition, as it has limited access to information from ministries (Pedersen, 2023, p. 220).

For both types of employees, these developments raise the question of what tasks they fulfil in exchange for these increased investments of public money.

Many academics have written about the roles of such employees in the US Congress (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Yin, 2013) and European Parliament (e.g., Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013; Egeberg et al., 2013; Pegan, 2017). However, an international comparative perspective has mostly been limited to some developing democracies (Pelizzo, 2014), the German-speaking world (Laube et al., 2020), and the effects of bicameralism (Griglio & Lupo, 2021) or Europeanization (e.g., Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015). The handbook of Christiansen et al. (2023) compares the non-partisan administrations of parliaments on various dimensions, but pays little attention to employees of their political parties and individual politicians.

Unlike the aforementioned literature, Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 539–542) present a conceptual model that covers politically relevant (sub)roles of all types of parliamentary staff. Thus, it allows for broad comparisons between the legislatures of various countries. The authors call for such research, as their own work focused on the lower house of the Dutch parliament only. The explicitly comparative aspirations of their model warrant an assessment of its comprehensiveness in different parliaments.

Therefore, this article applies the model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to the *Folketing* (Danish parliament). This is a suitable case to assess its comprehensiveness for various reasons. First, much data about the staff of the Folketing (n.d.) is available online, which can be used to prepare for and verify results from interviews. Second, since the late 19th century, the Danish parliament developed into a relatively strong institution containing 179 seats (Sieberer, 2011, pp. 746–747), controlled by (coalitions of) ideological parties elected via (partly) proportional representation (Persson, 2018, p. 105). This context is similar to the Netherlands, which allows for a detailed comparison with the results of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). The additional aim of that endeavour is to look for patterns in the functioning of parliamentary staff in Western European countries.

The next part of this text explains the model of roles of parliamentary staff of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) and other relevant literature. Section 3 discusses how this article's author collected information about that topic from the Danish parliament's online phonebook (Folketing, n.d.), interviews with three members of its non-partisan staff, and almost all of its political parties. Section 4 summarizes the results about these various types of employees. Section 5 draws conclusions and discusses how the model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) could be improved by adding roles regarding parliamentary diplomacy.

2. Conceptual Model

As explained in the introduction, this article aims to study the staff of the *Folketing* to assess if the conceptual model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 539–542) can indeed be applied comparatively. The main advantage of their matrix is that it includes tasks of all types of staff that support parliamentarians, including the neutral administration and committee employees, as well as professionals working for individual legislators and their parties (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, pp. 543–545). Also, the model provides a clear overview of their activities via both detailed subroles and more general categories. Furthermore, it only includes tasks that are relevant to political science. Thus, it excludes practical roles, like security and cleaning. It is visualized in Table 1 and further explained below.

Table 1. Parliamentary staff model as developed by Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 539–542), with some changes to the "marketeer" role.

Main role	Subrole	Description
Adviser		
	Strategic adviser	Gives advice on strategies to gain support for policy proposals among citizens and politicians
	Policy adviser	Gives advice on which policy proposals to pursue
	Procedural adviser	Gives advice on which procedures inside of parliament to use
	Legal adviser	Gives advice on how to formulate legislative texts
Ghostwriter		
	Motions	Drafts the text for non-binding motions
	Amendments	Drafts the text for amendments to bills
	Written questions	Drafts the text for written questions
	Bills	Drafts the text for private member bills
	Speeches	Drafts the text for parliamentary speeches
	Op-eds	Drafts the text for contributions to newspapers
	Press releases	Drafts the text for press releases
	Inquiry reports	Drafts the text for parliamentary inquiry reports
Information broker		
	Experts	Obtains information from scientific experts
	Archive	Obtains information from the parliamentary archive
	Interest groups	Obtains information from interest groups
Marketeer		
	Journalists	Manages contacts with journalists
	Online	Produces and/or publishes material via digital media
	Citizens	Manages direct contacts with citizens regardless of constituency
	Constituents	Manages direct contacts specific to constituents
Compromise facilitator		
	Within parties	Negotiates within the political party
	Between parties	Negotiates with staff or legislators from other political parties

Source: Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 539–542).

A first main role of parliamentary staff is *advising politicians* who lack certain knowledge (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 540; Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013, p. 378)—*the advisers*. Four different types of such counsel can be identified.

Firstly, parliamentary staff can provide *strategic advice* (Murphy, 2023, p. 90). This involves counselling about tactics to gain votes during election campaigns (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 1334; Pegan, 2017, p. 300), as well as about the most effective arguments to convince citizens or other actors inside or outside the legislature (Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 342). Secondly, it can provide *policy advice* (National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2017, p. 9; Yin, 2013, p. 2304). This involves counselling about how to address specific issues (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 117). Thus, it concerns the content (or "substance") of ideas (Högenauer &

Neuhold, 2015, p. 342; Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015, p. 583; Pegan, 2017, p. 300). Based on interviews in Finland, Aula and Koskimaa (2024, p. 1036) conclude that the expertise of political parties' staff in different policy fields increases their parliamentary group's capacity. Karlsen and Saglie (2017, p. 1346) show that such employees are highly involved in developing policies. Thirdly, parliamentary staff can provide *procedural advice* (Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 340; Pegan, 2017, pp. 300–301). This involves counselling about the correct processes for policy making and other activities, for example, regarding the formal rights of legislators versus the executive (Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015, p. 583). Fourthly, parliamentary staff can provide *legal advice* (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 1; Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 504; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 340; Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015, p. 583; Pegan, 2017, pp. 300–301). This task differs from ghost-writing bills (see below) in that it concerns recommending a politician to formulate a law in a specific way rather than drafting it for them, although these roles can overlap.

Parliamentary work also involves a large number of texts. Since legislators often lack the time to produce all of those themselves, a main role for their staff is *(ghost)writing* them by producing drafts (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, pp. 539–540; Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 504)—*the ghostwriters*.

Most texts related to this task are for use within parliaments. These include motions (Blischke, 1981, p. 548; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 342), amendments (Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013, p. 377; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 338; Winzen, 2011, p. 37), questions (Blischke, 1981, p. 548; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 346), bills (Blischke, 1981, p. 547; Dickin, 2016; Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118; National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2017, p. 10), and speeches (Blischke, 1981, p. 548; Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118; Jones, 2006, p. 648). Other types of texts that parliamentary staff members may ghostwrite are aimed at the media. Those include press releases and editorials (Dickin, 2016), as well as articles in general (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118). Staff members may also draft reports (Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 338), but these were excluded from this study when they merely summarized debates in committees. However, formal inquiry reports were included, as they can allow for substantive creativity.

A third main role of parliamentary staff is "*marketing*": promoting the legislators and/or their organization to citizens (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, pp. 540–541)—*the marketeer*. As Svallfors (2017, p. 556) concludes based on research in Sweden, employees in the political sector often sell ideas in public debates and to voters. In the Benelux, some of them are specifically hired as "communication experts" (Moens, 2021, p. 912). The text below describes four categories of such activities. This is one more than the three that Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 546) list, as the one which they label "citizens" and describe as "manages social media account" was split into two. The reason for that change is that, according to recent literature (e.g., Fitsilis & Costa, 2023, p. 112), producing and spreading texts and visualizations via social media and other digital channels is a task that requires specialized skills, thus making it a role that differs from more direct contact with voters.

Firstly, parliamentary staff can market politicians through various types of media (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118; Jones, 2006, p. 648) by managing contacts with journalists (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 121). For example, it can leak information to such actors and/or answer their questions about press releases and other topics. Secondly, they can market politicians through their own online channels, including social media (Murphy, 2023, p. 96) via sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Dickin, 2016). Due to the trend of digitalization, such communication tools have become essential to reach large parts of society (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 5; Fitsilis & Costa, 2023, p. 110; Moens, 2023, p. 770). Social media also helps non-partisan

parts of parliamentary administrations, like research services, to promote their work to potentially interested users (Rizzoni, 2023, p. 130). Thirdly, this category of staff members can have the role to directly (i.e., without media involvement) manage contacts with the general public (Blischke, 1981, p. 548). For example, they can answer questions or petitions from citizens across the country and give guided tours across their buildings (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 10). Fourthly, in countries that hold elections via districts, staff members can manage more intensive contacts with voters from a politician's specific constituency (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118; Jones, 2006, p. 648; Yin, 2013, p. 2303). For example, this can be done by setting up a local office which people can write to or visit to receive a direct answer to their concerns (Blischke, 1981, p. 550; Dickin, 2016). Such work is often essential to get re-elected (Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019, p. 1).

Parliamentary staffs also gather, forward, and summarize information (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, pp. 541–542; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 348; Selling & Svallfors, 2019, p. 989; Yin, 2013, p. 2303), which they can collect via their own research (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 1; Dickin, 2016; National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2017, p. 10; Pegan, 2017, pp. 300–301)—*the information broker*. Ways to share results of such work with politicians include short notes, papers, consultation documents, policy statements, in-person briefings, and PowerPoint presentations (Murphy, 2023, p. 92; National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2017, p. 29). Parliamentary staff members can collect such information from several sources.

Firstly, they may do so from written or oral contact with scientific expertise (Egeberg et al., 2013, pp. 510–511; Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 120). Such communication between parliamentary staff and academics provides opportunities to enhance knowledge and creates (in)formal communities worldwide (Murphy, 2023, p. 94; Rizzoni, 2023, p. 132). Secondly, parliamentary staff may collect information from archives (Blischke, 1981, pp. 538–540). Increasingly, it does so via digitally managed channels (Fitsilis & Costa, 2023, p. 108). In this study, "archive" is defined broadly to include all written records, policy files, and associated documents stored by legislatures. Thirdly, parliamentary staff may collect information via contacts with interest groups (Blischke, 1981, p. 548; Egeberg et al., 2013, pp. 510–511; Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015, p. 580; Yin, 2013, p. 2303) and other societal stakeholders (Dickin, 2016). Such organizations often contact legislators' employees for lobbying purposes (Fox & Hammond, 1975, p. 118; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019, p. 1; Jones, 2006, p. 648; Winzen, 2011, p. 36).

A final main role that parliamentary staff can fulfil is facilitating compromise (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 542; Dobbels & Neuhold, 2013, p. 382; Egeberg et al., 2013, p. 504; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 339; Jones, 2006, p. 648; Neuhold & Dobbels, 2015, p. 582)—*the compromise facilitator*. For example, it can conceive and negotiate legislative solutions in cases of gridlock (Yin, 2013, p. 2304). Though staff members sometimes have no access to politicians' meetings, they are usually well-informed about them anyway (Blischke, 1981, p. 546) and can thus also support them behind the scenes. The text below describes two subroles regarding facilitating compromises.

Firstly, staff members can fulfil this task within political parties. For example, they can coordinate between legislators to increase the chances that their proposals are in line with the interests of their organization (Pegan, 2017, p. 301), especially when it is unclear who is responsible for an issue at the edge of two parliamentarians' portfolios. Secondly, staff members can facilitate compromises between parties. For example, they can suggest ways to reach consensus in committees (Winzen, 2011, pp. 36–37) or in the plenary, especially in systems where no single group has the majority (Pegan, 2017, p. 301).

3. Methods

3.1. Written Sources and Interviews

The online phonebook of the Folketing (n.d.) shows how many employees work for each unit of its (non)-partisan staff. It also lists their job titles. Almost all political parties publish similar information on their own websites (e.g., Social Democrats, n.d.).

However, such sources have limitations for this research. Firstly, the job titles that they list might not fully reveal what tasks employees perform. Secondly, such online information can be outdated. Thirdly, it lists individuals who are irrelevant to this study, as in Denmark, staff which only works for a political party's headquarters can also have an official e-mail from the legislature (Folketing, n.d.). Fourthly, this digital information includes non-political and temporary employees, which could often be recognized by job titles like "student," "intern," or "office clerk," but not always. Such staff without (semi)permanent contracts had to be excluded from this research, as it changed so quickly that the researcher could not provide up-to-date information about it (for example, the number of interns listed in the phonebook for a party would often be doubled or halved when checked throughout 2024).

Due to these limitations, the online lists were mainly used to prepare for 15 in-depth interviews. During these conversations, the researcher mostly asked the respondents (whose selection is explained in Section 3.2) which employees in their unit or party fulfilled which roles from the conceptual model. For example, the interviewer could ask: "Do any employees of your party manage its contacts with constituents/voters? If so, what are their job titles?" In the minority of cases where a respondent's answer deviated from information from the aforementioned phonebook or websites, the interviewer asked why, to which the usual answer was that specific staff had been hired or fired since the online information was last updated. Follow-up questions to learn more about specific employees were also common.

After the last interview, the researcher inserted all permanent employees who support the *Folketing's* political work into an Excel file. He coded them as 0 for each task that they do not perform and as 1 for each task that they perform. Table 3 in the next section was compiled based on this Excel file. That document is also published as a Supplementary File to this article.

Potential problems with interviews are that respondents sometimes overstate their importance or suffer from faded memories (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 135). However, this study's focus on current numbers of employees and their factual roles mitigated these risks. Moreover, triangulation was used: the phonebook of the Folketing (n.d.) verified much information provided by the interviews, excluding employees who were recently hired/fired.

3.2. Selection of Respondents and Interview Arrangements

The quality of the 15 interviews was also increased by selecting appropriate respondents (see Table 2). Specifically, 80% of these conversations took place with three (deputy) heads of units in the neutral staff and nine heads of staff of the party groups (often officially called head of secretariat, organization, or office). Since these employees bear final responsibility for dividing tasks between their colleagues, they have the

best overview of how many people fulfil which roles in their part of the *Folketing*. For the neutral staff, the three aforementioned interviews took place with the Communication Unit, Library, and International Secretariat. Their heads could describe the other units in sufficient detail, and when needed, the researcher asked extensive follow-up questions about them via e-mail.

For three parties (representing the remaining 20% of the respondents), the head of their staff in parliament rejected or did not reply to repeated interview requests. In these cases, the conversation instead took place with a political adviser or assistant who had worked for their organization in the *Folketing* for years.

Only three parties represented in the *Folketing* in August 2024 did not participate at all. Two of those, the populist Danish People's Party and Denmark Democrats, informed the author that they had no time for research. That reply was in line with the experience of Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 545–546) with the three groups on the right-wing end of the Dutch political spectrum. Another party, Forward (*Siumut*), did not reply to e-mails, probably because its sole representative defected soon afterwards. Since it is no longer part of the Danish parliament, and it only had four permanent staff members in 2024 (Folketing, n.d.), its non-response probably does not significantly affect the results.

Table 2. Overview of respondents.

Respondent type	Interview type	Number of respondents
(Deputy) Head of staff of a political party in parliament	Seven via Microsoft Teams; two via e-mail with extensive follow-up questions	9
Political adviser/assistant	All via Microsoft Teams	3
Head of unit in neutral staff (Communication Unit, Library, and International Secretariat)	All via Microsoft Teams	3

The interviews took place between April and December 2024, mostly via Microsoft Teams. Two parties were only willing to answer via e-mail exchanges, in which they also answered extensive follow-up questions. The interviews usually lasted an hour. However, some were shorter, particularly for the small staffs of parties with just one parliamentarian.

4. Results

Table 3 shows how many permanent employees of the *Folketing* fulfil each role described in the conceptual model. It is based on the Excel file explained in the previous section.

This research excludes temporary staff, as their numbers change too quickly to be of long-term academic value. Repeated checks of the phonebook of the Folketing (n.d.) during 2024 suggested that the number of students plus interns varied between one and 20 per political party, somewhat in proportion to its number of seats. The 15 interviews revealed that the only role from Table 3 that such temporary employees often fulfil is that of marketeer, as they frequently answer basic questions from citizens and manage (social) media. Thus, these numbers are the main ones that are lowered by this choice.

Section 4.1 discusses the non-partisan (plenary and committee) staff. The findings about these employees are mostly in line with those of Pedersen (2023, pp. 212–218). The political staff (of parties and individual legislators) is discussed afterwards in Section 4.2. Unless stated otherwise, the information is based on the interviews described in the previous section.

Table 3. Number of employees per subrole and staff type in the Danish parliament.

Main role	Subrole	Non-partisan (plenary and committee) staff	Political (party and personal) staff	Total
Adviser				
	Strategic adviser	0 (0%)	75 (100%)	75
	Policy adviser	0 (0%)	100 (100%)	100
	Procedural adviser	49 (40.8%)	71 (59.2%)	120
	Legal adviser	47 (36.4%)	82 (63.6%)	129
Ghostwriter				
	Motions	53 (37.9%)	87 (62.1%)	140
	Amendments	53 (46.1%)	62 (53.9%)	115
	Written questions	53 (37.6%)	88 (62.4%)	141
	Bills	47 (43.1%)	62 (56.9%)	109
	Speeches	16 (15.2%)	89 (84.8%)	105
	Op-eds	0 (0%)	62 (100%)	62
	Press releases	2 (4.4%)	43 (95.6%)	45
	Inquiry reports	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0
Information broker				
	Experts	33 (26.6%)	91 (73.4%)	124
	Archive	13 (12.5%)	91 (87.5%)	104
	Interest groups	23 (20.2%)	91 (79.8%)	114
Marketeer				
	Journalists	2 (4.8%)	40 (95.2%)	42
	Online	10 (16.7%)	50 (83.3%)	60
	Citizens	24 (27.0%)	65 (73.0%)	89
	Constituents	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0
Compromise facilitator				
	Within parties	0 (0%)	61 (100%)	61
	Between parties	0 (0%)	88 (100%)	88
Total		*111*	*194*	*305*

Notes: The table excludes three political parties that did not participate in the interviews (described in Section 3.2) and temporary contracts and jobs that do not support political work; data are based on the Supplementary File (described in Section 3.1); percentages belong to rows.

4.1. Non-Partisan Staff Employed by the Folketing

Gianniti and Di Cesare (2023, p. 43) explain that the Danish parliament's speaker, following approval by its Committee on the Rules of Procedure, appoints a secretary-general to head its staff. They also describe that

this process differs from systems in which the legislature as a whole selects the manager of its employees. The secretary-general of the Danish parliament may not have a political background (Gianniti & Di Cesare, 2023, p. 43). They have two deputies, one of whom is also the speaker's clerk (Gianniti & Di Cesare, 2023, p. 46). The interview with the Communication Unit verifies that these three employees and three advisers working for them mainly offer procedural advice and manage the rest of the non-partisan parliamentary administration. That staff is described in detail below.

Speaker's Unit: According to two respondents from the neutral staff, the Speaker's Unit of the Danish parliament employs not just the aforementioned managers, but also two press advisers. They (ghost)write press releases and manage other contacts with journalists. The Speaker's Unit also contains three protocol advisers and their head, who advise on procedures for foreign visits.

Library: Interviews with the Danish parliament's Communication Unit and Library revealed that the latter employs 15 people who support political work: 12 librarians, two advisers, and a manager. With two exceptions, all of them are information brokers, as they provide data from archives and scientific texts; they sometimes summarize the former, but not the latter. Also, with two exceptions, this staff answers citizens' questions about non-partisan and domestic parliamentary matters. In comparison, the Dutch parliament has more employees (including librarians) to manage its archives, but without the additional roles of their Danish counterparts (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 549).

Legal Service Secretariat: According to the interview with the Communication Unit, the Legal Service Secretariat employs nine people who support political work: eight advisers and their head. They counsel parliamentarians about plenary sessions' procedures and coordinate bill readings during those meetings with ministries, committees, and (when relevant) leaders of citizens' initiatives. These tasks are similar to those of the Bureau Legislation of the Dutch parliament described by Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 548). However, while that unit also ghostwrites amendments, in Denmark, that task belongs to the committee staff instead of the Legal Service Secretariat.

Communication Unit: The interview with the Communication Unit reveals that it employs staff who manage the non-partisan social media of the *Folketing*: three graphic designers, one photographer, and three communication advisers. It also includes about five advisers who (part-time) give guided tours in parliament. Furthermore, the Communication Unit employs three "coordinators" who manage the television channel that broadcasts the legislature's meetings. All three of these types of staff are coded as marketeers in Table 3, the latter two for citizens.

Committee Secretariat: Each committee in the Danish parliament is supported by at least a secretary and an assistant (Pedersen, 2023, p. 212). According to two interviews with the neutral staff, these assistants fulfil practical tasks, like booking trips, so they are excluded from the numbers in Table 3. However, the same respondents stated that the 20 committee secretaries and 14 advisers in their unit have several politically relevant roles. First, they advise politicians about procedures and the technical formulation of legislation. Second, they (ghost)write motions, questions, amendments, and bills. However, the latter is only relevant in the rare cases when the Danish parliament uses its right of initiative (Pedersen, 2020, p. 91). Third, the committee secretaries are information brokers, as they invite (scientific) experts and societal actors to hearings and organize excursions to them. Pedersen (2023, p. 216) explains how all this help is especially

useful for parliamentarians who are new and/or opposition members, as they have less experience and information from ministries.

International Secretariat: The interview with the International Secretariat revealed that it employs three committee secretaries and ten advisers. They support the Foreign Affairs Committee and European Affairs Committee of the *Folketing* in all the same ways that their counterparts do for domestic affairs. Additionally, they write speeches for parliamentarians for audiences outside the legislature.

The International Secretariat's high number of advisers per committee, which it supports, results from its role in giving parliamentarians independent information (Sousa, 2008, p. 440), which two respondents from the neutral staff explain to be needed to hold the government accountable for its positions in the Council of Ministers and towards other EU institutions. This large staff is in line with the hypothesis that relatively Eurosceptic countries like Denmark have strong European Affairs Committees (Raunio, 2009, p. 321). Also, these employees are needed to communicate with other committees with substantive policy expertise (Högenauer, 2023, p. 79; Pedersen, 2023, pp. 218–219). Furthermore, the interview with the International Secretariat reveals that it employs a liaison officer in Brussels and six delegation secretaries. They give procedural advice and collect information about the EU and interparliamentary organizations. Delegation secretaries also ghost-write questions, speeches, and (amendments to) resolutions that Danish parliamentarians submit to these international institutions and prepare agendas, plus possible compromises for their meetings. According to the same respondent, the International Secretariat also contains an EU Information Centre, which employs three people who answer citizens' questions about that international organization and three others who provide information about it through various channels, including social media. Table 3 includes them under the third and second marketeer roles, respectively.

Some other tasks of the aforementioned employees do not fully fit into the model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). The discussion at the end of this article explains that in detail.

Other Non-Partisan Staff: Because of this article's aforementioned focus on staff that support political work, other parts of the non-partisan Danish parliamentary administration are excluded from the numbers in Table 3. These include the *Folketingstidende*, which produces minutes, and units which fulfil other practical tasks like ICT, human resource management, finances, security, building maintenance, and cleaning. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 547) included such staff in their table summarizing the Dutch parliament (though without attaching them to specific roles), which explains why that institution appears relatively large in their work.

4.2. Staff Employed by Parties With Multiple Seats

Political parties are crucial actors in the *Folketing* (Pedersen, 2020, p. 88). The last detailed academic analyses of their resources to hire employees are based on numbers from 2017 (Pedersen, 2020, p. 96, 2023, p. 211). During that year, the Danish state gave each party in the *Folketing* the equivalent of about $63,000 per month, plus about $10,000 per seat. This was 69% more than in 2007, while the budget for non-partisan units only grew by 18% during that decade. After these changes, the parties' collective staff was 274 full-time equivalent (fte) in 2017, which was about 1,5 fte per politician. When adding all other staff, on average, 4 employees supported each parliamentarian (Pedersen, 2020, p. 96). While the budget for non-partisan staff was three times as large as subsidies for parties in 2007, it was only twice as large in 2017

(Pedersen, 2023, p. 211). The text below describes how the partisan employees support political work in exchange for these increased investments.

Political Advisers: According to the nine interviews with parties with multiple seats in the *Folketing*, political advisers (*politisk konsulenter*) fulfil most of the roles listed in Table 3 for their parliamentary group. Firstly, they advise about policy proposals and usually strategies and parliamentary procedures, the latter with much help from non-partisan staff. Secondly, they (ghost)write questions, motions, speeches, and usually amendments. Thirdly, they collect information via various sources, including archives, (events with) scientific experts, and interest groups. Fourthly, they answer citizens' questions, especially when they are too complex for students or interns, and politicians have no time for them. These findings are similar to what Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 550) found about the Dutch policy advisers (*beleidsmedewerkers*).

The aforementioned nine respondents also explain that almost all Danish political advisers occasionally facilitate consensus in their party and between parties, mostly by preparing agendas and possible compromises for meetings with these aims, though they might not be present during these conversations, and it is almost always politicians who lead negotiations. However, even in this limited form, these tasks appear more common than in the Netherlands (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 547).

The same nine interviews revealed that most Danish political advisers also consider it their task to write drafts of bills and/or offer substantive advice about laws if parliamentarians want to propose those, but rarely do so in practice, because their government introduces most legislation. This is in line with Pedersen's (2020, p. 91) claim that the number of times that the *Folketing* uses its right of initiative is low and has decreased over time. According to two respondents who worked for the ruling coalition, they leave legislative work to the ministries even more often than opposition parties do.

According to the interviews with the nine parties, their number of political advisers varies between six and 17. Their division of tasks is usually based on policy fields. For example, one political adviser tends to fulfil all aforementioned roles for education-related topics and another for all matters concerning transport. One of them is usually called the head adviser or head of politics, and also manages the team.

The respondents from the Red-Green Alliance, The Alternative, and the Liberal Alliance revealed that in their parliamentary groups, a smaller number of advisers counsel about strategy. For the Liberal Alliance, that task is performed by a specialized "values" unit that also handles speechwriting. The Conservative People's Party's leader has their own special adviser for strategies and interparty negotiations and their own speechwriter, while their colleagues mostly draft these texts themselves. Furthermore, some parties have a political adviser in Brussels; the Social Democrats also employ a part-time one for the Nordic Council.

Press Advisers and Heads of Press: According to the nine interviews with parties with multiple seats in the *Folketing*, they employ between one and seven press advisers (*pressekonsulenter*), who are usually led by a head of press (*pressechef*). This staff handles contacts with journalists and drafts press releases and op-eds, with input from colleagues when needed. In one party, an adviser also gives media training to politicians. Some small press units have more support from students and interns.

Brandsma and Otjes (2024, pp. 550–551) found that in the Dutch parliament, the employees who fulfil the press-related roles are usually called spokespersons (*woordvoerders*) and also perform other activities, like

producing online material and offering strategic advice. In the *Folketing*, these tasks mostly belong to the other types of staff described above and below. Thus, the Danish parliament seems to have a higher degree of specialization in the support of its political parties.

Digital Marketeers: According to the nine interviews with parties with multiple seats in the *Folketing*, the staff that promotes their parliamentarians' work via social/digital media (sometimes supported by printed material) varies between two and eight people. Typically, it is about evenly split between employees who produce and/or publish texts and those who support them visually via videos, graphs, pictures, and the like. These groups tend to have a shared manager. Unlike the political and press advisers, their official job titles vary greatly. These staff members often belong to the (sub)unit of their party in parliament that also contains its press advisers. However, only The Alternative party reports that all those employees handle both traditional media and digital marketing. The others mostly separate these roles.

Party Secretaries, Heads of Secretariat, and Campaign Staff: The phonebook of the Folketing (n.d.) lists a party secretary and campaign staff for most political parties. They mainly support these organizations outside of parliament, so Table 3 only includes them when a respondent reported that they also advise politicians in the legislature. Specifically, the party secretaries of the Moderates, Liberals, and Conservative People's Party give such counsel about general strategies and some core policies. Meanwhile, the whole campaign unit of the Social Democrats and heads of campaign and communication of The Alternative party advise about tactics to convince citizens. Similarly, the head of secretariat that most parties hire is solely included in Table 3 for the Liberal Alliance, as only that organization reported that this employee gives strategic counsel. For other parties, that person mainly seems to manage staff that does not directly support political work.

Personal Assistants: Except for some party leaders, almost all members of the *Folketing* share a personal assistant with colleagues, which limits these employees' capacity to provide research and advice (Högenauer, 2023, p. 83). The interviews with the nine parties with multiple seats verify that such staff mostly handle calendar management and other practical work, which is apolitical in nature and thus excluded from the numbers in Table 3. Personal assistants can provide more substantive support when a politician asks them to (like dealing with constituents, see Section 4.4), but this was impossible to map without the ability to interview them all.

The interviews revealed only two parties that structurally deviate from the pattern described above. Firstly, the Moderates have their seven personal assistants frequently write drafts of speeches and op-eds, provided that their politicians want them. This is one of the reasons why that party functioned with only three political advisers when this article was written. Secondly, the Conservative People's Party has a political assistant who actively collects information from various sources for its political leader.

4.3. Staff Employed by Parties With One Seat

The four parties that differ most from the analyzed patterns are those representing the Faroe Islands and Greenland. Article 28 of the Danish constitution gives both of these autonomous territories exactly two seats in the *Folketing* (Gad, 2020, p. 30). Since their citizens tend to elect different parties, four of those deliver a single parliamentarian.

Each of these four parties with one seat has a staff of four to six people. Those include about two to three permanent members: a head of secretariat, an adviser, and sometimes a translator. They are supported by about two to three students or interns (Folketing, n.d.).

Some roles of staff of larger parties are irrelevant for these four smallest ones. Firstly, although representatives of Greenland and the Faroe Islands have the same formal rights as their colleagues, their territories are sovereign on all topics besides the military, the police, the constitution, the supreme court, security, citizenship, and currency (Gad, 2020, pp. 30–31). The interviews with these parties show that they therefore focus only on that small subset of issues, which involve relatively stable legal frameworks. Thus, advising about or drafting (amendments to) bills is rarely or never required of their staff. Secondly, since they support just one politician, these employees are never compromise facilitators within their party.

The interviews with the small parties also revealed that their heads of secretariat need relatively little time for human resource management, so they can fulfil many substantive roles as well. Furthermore, these respondents highlight that in their small teams, tasks are divided relatively fluidly. Thus, their politician and each of their staff members can be involved in most tasks listed in Table 3, as long as they are relevant to their parties.

4.4. Tasks Not Applicable to Any Danish Parliamentary Staff

Table 3 shows that no Danish parliamentary staff drafts formal inquiry reports. The reason for that is that their institution has never formed committees for that purpose, even though it has the right to do so since 1953, according to Article 51 of its country's constitution. Pavy (2020, p. 10) explains that since 1999, such inquiries are instead mostly led by judges, with substantive support from their own staff. However, the author also describes that the *Folketing* can initiate such processes via resolutions and decide what consequences their findings have for ministers. Almost all of the 15 respondents explained that the neutral staff (Legal Service Secretariat) can facilitate these procedures in a practical sense, but does not ghost-write the reports. This situation differs from the Netherlands, where the parliament heads formal inquiries itself and thus involves some of its staff in producing associated files (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 547).

Table 3 also shows that no Danish parliamentary staff member has the role of marketeer towards constituents. That result is identical to the Netherlands (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, p. 551), but unlike that country, Denmark has electoral districts. However, their number is quite low (10), and compensatory seats ensure proportional results (Elklit, 2020, p. 58). Thus, in the words of an interviewed political adviser, "the focus is more on parties than on individual politicians, and parliamentarians are generally not tied to a single constituency." He explained that some politicians ask their assistants to help them build a strong local profile, but that, in general, citizens are treated the same in their contact with representatives, regardless of their district. No other respondent mentioned constituency work as a role.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

This article applied the model of the roles of parliamentary staff of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to the Danish *Folketing*. By doing so, it both assessed the comprehensiveness of that categorization and provided a detailed comparison between the tasks of employees of two Western European legislatures: the Danish and Dutch ones. Unlike much previous research, it paid equal attention to non-partisan and political staff.

The detailed comparison between the countries suggests that the staff of political parties in parliaments primarily divides its tasks by policy field. For example, one Danish political adviser or Dutch policy adviser typically fulfils the majority of roles from the conceptual model for all matters concerning education, while another does so for all issues regarding transport, etc. However, in both countries, this division of tasks does not apply to the minority of roles concerning traditional media (ghost-writing press releases, ghost-writing op-eds, and marketing to journalists) or digital marketing. For Dutch parties, spokespersons fulfil most of those tasks, whereas Danish parties usually delegate them to various kinds of specialized employees. Unlike the political staff, the non-partisan administrations of both parliaments are divided into units where each fulfils one or a few of the roles from the conceptual model (a "functional" task division).

Furthermore, the results support the expectation of Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 539) that not every role is (equally) relevant to each parliament. For example, staff members rarely market a specific parliamentarian in their constituency in Denmark and never in the Netherlands, due to their proportional electoral systems. Similarly, although the Danish legislature is one of the strongest in Europe regarding activities like committee oversight (Pedersen, 2023, p. 211; Sieberer, 2011, pp. 746–747), the interviews showed that the rights of initiative and inquiry, which article 41 and 51 of the constitution give, are respectively rarely and never used by its members, which limits the role of its staff in ghost-writing bills and investigation reports. Thus, a political system can reduce the number of tasks that parliamentary employees fulfil.

Regarding the comprehensiveness of the model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024), this article showed that it covers most roles of Danish parliamentary staff. The interviews occasionally revealed a task of a single staff member that did not fit into it, like giving politicians media training (which is usually done by external actors), but these were too incidental to add. The only tasks with broader relevance that were missing related to parliamentary diplomacy: contact with foreign actors, especially other legislatures (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 10; Murphy, 2023, p. 90).

Sections 4.1 and 4.2 described many employees of the *Folketing* who assist such international interactions: the protocol advisers and their head in the Speaker's Unit, the committee secretaries, advisers, delegation secretaries, and EU liaison officer in the International Secretariat, political advisers located in Brussels for some parties and a part-time adviser for the Nordic Council of the Social Democrats. That overview might be incomplete, as this task was not systematically asked for due to its absence from the conceptual model. Pedersen (2023, p. 218) mentions that these employees support networks in the EU, UN, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe, NATO, Nordic Council, Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians, Baltic Sea Parliamentary Conference, and (passively) Union for the Mediterranean. Murphy (2023, p. 97) estimates that between 40 and 73 of such interparliamentary institutions exist worldwide, all supported by national staff. Thus, employees from other legislatures also fulfil diplomatic roles (Murphy, 2023, pp. 98–99).

Parts of these international activities fit into the model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 546). For example, Murphy (2023, p. 92) states that parliamentary staffers can be advisers to diplomatic missions. The interviews revealed that in the *Folketing*, indeed, delegation secretaries and others counsel politicians about norms of international organizations. Thus, such employees are what Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 546) call procedural advisers. Similarly, the delegation secretaries' and advisers' roles in drafting speeches to and questions for international organizations fit directly into the conceptual model, whereas (amendments to) international resolutions are comparable to motions at the national level.

However, parliamentary diplomacy also includes collecting information about, for example, best practices and opportunities abroad (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 10). Staff members regularly present such facts to legislators during briefings and conferences that they organize before interparliamentary meetings (Murphy, 2023, p. 92; Pedersen, 2023, p. 218). Committee secretaries also filter communication sent by the EU for relevant issues (Högenauer, 2023, p. 85; Pedersen, 2023, pp. 217–218). The information involved in all these activities mostly comes from international organizations (Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015, p. 336), parliamentarians from other countries and their staff (Murphy, 2023, pp. 93–94). Thus, it does not fit into the categories of scientific experts, archive, and interest groups from Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 546). Therefore, it seems useful to add a subrole called "diplomatic" under the main one, information broker.

Parliamentary diplomacy also involves (formal) meetings with foreign actors (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 5). For example, liaison officers from most member states congregate every week in Brussels with each other and EU officials to discuss topics like subsidiarity concerns (Murphy, 2023, p. 93). During such contacts, the Danish representative promotes his country's "reasoned opinions" (Högenauer, 2023, p. 84). Staff members also support visits of and meetings between parliamentarians (Murphy, 2023, p. 92), for example (according to the interviews) by preparing agendas for and attending meetings. These activities include what Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 542) call compromise facilitating. However, since the actors involved (partly) represent a country or international organization rather than themselves or their party during such meetings, these activities do not fit into the subroles "within party" and "between parties." Thus, adding a new category called "international" under the heading of compromise facilitator seems useful.

Table 4 contains the model when updated with both diplomatic subroles. Future research could assess if this expanded version contains all politically relevant tasks, regarding the international dimension and otherwise. It seems especially interesting to study how well it fits in countries with systems that differ greatly from Denmark and the Netherlands. For example, presidential democracies with single-member districts, like the United States, give a much greater role to assistants hired by individual parliamentarians and a smaller one to non-partisan staff (Christiansen et al., 2023, p. 6). It would be interesting to see if such differences cause changes in the proportion of employees who fulfil specific tasks. For example, the attention that constituents require could leave less room for other activities. The model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024), as updated in this article, could contribute to interesting research about such comparative hypotheses.

Table 4. The expanded model of Brandsma and Otjes (2024), based on the results of this article.

Main role	Subrole	Description
Adviser		
	Strategic adviser	Gives advice on strategies to gain support for policy proposals among citizens and politicians
	Policy adviser	Gives advice on which policy proposals to pursue
	Procedural adviser	Gives advice on which procedures inside of parliament to use
	Legal adviser	Gives advice on how to formulate legislative texts
Ghostwriter		
	Motions	Drafts the text for non-binding motions
	Amendments	Drafts the text for amendments to bills
	Written questions	Drafts the text for written questions
	Bills	Drafts the text for private member bills
	Speeches	Drafts the text for parliamentary speeches
	Op-eds	Drafts the text for contributions to newspapers
	Press releases	Drafts the text for press releases
	Inquiry reports	Drafts the text for parliamentary inquiry reports
Information broker		
	Experts	Obtains information from scientific experts
	Archive	Obtains information from the parliamentary archive
	Interest groups	Obtains information from interest groups
	Diplomacy	Obtains information from representatives of other countries or international organizations
Marketeer		
	Journalists	Manages contacts with journalists
	Online	Produces and/or publishes material via digital media
	Citizens	Manages direct contacts with citizens regardless of constituency
	Constituents	Manages direct contacts specific to constituents
Compromise facilitator		
	Within parties	Negotiates within the political party
	Between parties	Negotiates with staff or legislators from other political parties
	International	Negotiates with representatives of other countries or international organizations

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Conflict of Interests

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Supplementary Material

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

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Working Behind the Scenes: Roles and Functions of French and German Parliamentary Staff

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Abstract

The work of parliamentary staff is essential for the functioning of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale, which present two distinct national parliaments. Parliamentary employees have various tasks, such as providing and brokering information, advising, ghostwriting, or facilitating compromises. However, their concrete activities have not yet been sufficiently explored. Therefore, this article identifies and compares the predominant roles and functions of French and German parliamentary staff by applying an extended version of the role/type matrix by Brandsma and Otjes (2024). It determines four organisational roles in both parliaments: general administrative staff, committee staff, parliamentary party group staff, and personal staff. The empirical findings suggest that these organisational roles differ largely in size and function between the two legislatures. In general, the Bundestag is much better staffed than the Assemblée nationale. While parliamentary party group and personal staff have similar functions (but not size), there is a striking difference in terms of committee staff. The French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its staff into committee work than the German counterpart. This corresponds to the fact that German committee staff are mainly organisers while the French colleagues fulfil a whole range of functions such as advising, facilitating compromises, and ghostwriting.

Keywords

Assemblée nationale; Bundestag; parliament; parliamentary staff

1. Introduction

Parliaments are places where elected members of parliament meet and carry out their work of representation, legislation, and scrutiny. These essential tasks in a democracy are often supported by a large

machinery of parliamentary staff. Behind the curtains, they ensure the functioning of the legislature. From the preparation of plenary or committee meetings to IT and security services, the parliamentary employees are indispensable for a smooth legislative process. Without them, parliamentarians would not be able to perform their tasks and would have to restrict their parliamentary activities to a minimum in an increasingly complex world. The work of parliamentary staff remains largely invisible to the public (Laube et al., 2020). However, parliamentary staff can have an impact on the quality of laws and on parliamentary control, contributing to ensuring that democratic rules and procedures are observed. Despite their importance for the functioning of parliament, the role of parliamentary staff is under-researched (Laube et al., 2020).

Most studies on parliamentary staff were conducted on the US Congress (e.g., Hammond, 1996) and the European Parliament (e.g., Michon, 2014); this is apparent when searching for parliamentary staff studies in academic journals and websites such as Google Scholar. Studies on parliaments such as the German Bundestag or the French Assemblée nationale, and those that compare parliamentary staff across parliaments, are rare. So far, there are ethnographic and sociological studies that have pioneered research into the work of parliamentary staff and the inner functioning of and social practices in parliaments (e.g., Brichzin et al., 2018), such as the Assemblée nationale (Abélès, 2000; Gardey, 2015; Rozenberg, 2018) and the Bundestag (Brichzin, 2016; Laube et al., 2020). Yet, they fail to give a comprehensive summary of different types of parliamentary staff and of their activities from a political science viewpoint.

A recent exception and seminal comparative study is the *Routledge Handbook of Parliamentary Administrations*, where Christiansen et al. (2023) present a systematic overview of parliamentary administrations worldwide. In this book, Arndt et al. (2023) also explain the structure and tasks of the German parliamentary administration, and Tacea (2023) does it for the French administrative staff. However, these studies focus solely on parliamentary administrations and neglect other types of staff, such as personal staff or staff that work for a parliamentary party group (PPG), although their work can be equally important for parliamentary work. There are studies on other types of parliamentary staff, such as on the role of personal staff in the Assemblée nationale (Beauvallet & Michon, 2022) or on PPG staff in the German Bundestag (Schöne, 2009) and the comparison of the latter with personal staff of German MPs (Dagger, 2009; Stender, 2019).

However, a cartography of all staff categories and their functions in parliament is missing. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) addressed this gap in the literature by developing a role/type matrix. With this matrix, they carve out the different organisational roles that exist in a parliament, such as plenary staff or personal staff to an MP. Different organisational roles are then related to the different functions and tasks that parliamentary staff can have, such as giving advice or brokering information. In doing so, they apply a functionalist approach.

The objectives of this article are to test the matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024) and to determine the predominant roles and functions of parliamentary staff working in relation with committees in the German Bundestag and in the French Assemblée nationale. This article aims to provide a better understanding of the role of parliamentary staff in the legislative process in both countries. This is particularly important as political decisions and laws can have far-reaching consequences for the individual citizen. It is therefore important to understand how they are made, who is involved, and how. In addition, the comparative study of parliamentary staff activities in France and Germany allows for disclosing differences and similarities in how the parliaments are staffed, what type of work they assign to their staff, and what role political culture

plays. Both national parliaments are intriguing case studies as they differ considerably in their competencies and roles in the respective political systems. The Bundestag is a strong legislator, while the Assemblée nationale is seen as a "rationalised parliament" with limited powers (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 126). Comparing the activities of French and German parliamentary staff reveals important insights that can be related to the institutional design and powers of the two parliaments. To single out the roles and functions of French and German parliamentary staff, this article first introduces the role/type matrix established by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) and develops it further. The data utilised within this study were based on interviews and written answers of French and German parliamentary staff and publicly available data. In the next step, the article compares the French and German parliaments with a focus on their competencies and roles in the respective national political systems. Finally, the results of the empirical study are presented according to the extended role/type matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). The concluding part brings together the detected predominant staff roles and functions and formulates further research propositions regarding the characteristics of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée. In this way, the study also aims to stimulate scientific debate on how the detected roles and functions relate to the specific features and institutional structure of the respective legislatures. Further research can proceed in a similar way to Fasone (2023), who compared parliamentary administrations in presidential and parliamentary systems.

2. Measuring Staff Activity

This qualitative case study applies the role/type matrix by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) to determine the different organisational roles and types of functions that staff assume in parliaments. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 539) perceive their proposed instrument as an amalgamation of different role/type conceptualisations that other studies have determined in the past, such as Högenauer and Neuhold (2015), Pegan (2017), or Neuhold and Dobbels (2015). What distinguishes their instrument from other studies is that it incorporates all the different organisational roles in parliaments and gives a more comprehensive picture of staff activity. Former studies have neglected parts of parliamentary staff, such as personal assistants to the MPs or staff who work directly for a PPG.

Within organisational roles, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) identify four distinct categories: plenary staff, committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff. These roles are mainly defined according to the principal who employs the staff (Otjes, 2022). Plenary and committee staff are part of the parliamentary administration, which is a public authority that has its own rules connected to public law. Staff who work exclusively for the committees in parliament are separated from staff who work for the whole parliament and every MP. Committees are crucial bodies in parliament that focus on specific policy areas in the sense of a division of labour, and are often the places where the concrete policy-making takes place. The *committee staff* focuses solely on the work of the committee. In contrast, the plenary staff, according to Brandsma and Otjes, comprises employees working as assistants during plenary sessions but also in the research, legal, press, or IT services, for example. But beware: The name "plenary staff" can be misleading because of the specific staff that assists during plenary sessions (Bundestag, 2011). Therefore, this kind of staff is renamed here as *general administrative staff*.

In the matrix of Brandsma and Otjes, they also single out staff who work for all the members of a PPG. As the large majority of MPs belong to a specific party, they form parliamentary groups in the parliament to facilitate coordination processes and a division of tasks between like-minded MPs. These groupings

significantly increase the efficiency of parliamentary work and give parliamentary groups a stronger impact in the political decision-making process than single MPs can have. *PPG staff* support this coordination process. Finally, there are the *personal assistants* who are employed by a single MP under private law and who assist them personally. A part of the personal assistants has their working place in the office spaces of the MP in the parliamentary building. However, another part is often situated within the electoral constituency of the MP, thereby facilitating direct access for citizens to their elected representative.

These four staff roles engage in different activities and fulfil a variety of functions that can overlap within one role. Brandsma and Otjes (2024) summarise five types of functions. First, there is the *ghostwriter* who helps MPs realise their original tasks, such as speaking in parliament or writing motions and amendments. As the name indicates, the ghostwriter writes and prepares the speeches and parliamentary texts in advance based on the preferences and positions of the MP and their party. Then, there is the *advisor* who has expertise in a specific field, on the basis of which they make recommendations. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 540) distinguish between policy, procedural, legal, and political advice. The advisor is distinct from the *information broker*, who also advises the MP, not on the basis of their own expertise, but on the information they and the MP receive from others. The information broker's essential task is to filter and process the large amount of information that arrives every day in the MP's mailbox from citizens, lobby groups, governmental institutions, media, and research institutes.

Additionally, the information broker actively gathers information on a topic. Due to the filtering of information, the information broker steers and prioritises the information that reaches the MP. Consequently, they can have a high influence on agenda setting for the MP's activities. Fourthly, there is the *marketeer*, whose role is to promote the MP and their activities in different fora such as traditional media, social media, and in the constituency. This task includes creating and maintaining contacts with newspapers and television stations, writing posts and content for social media platforms, and organising events where the MP gets in contact with the voters. The goal is to increase the popularity and generate support for their MP. Finally, Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 542) define the *compromise facilitator*. In this function, the staff's activities focus on organising and finding compromises among the MP and other actors. Importantly, they need to identify common ground as well as diverging preferences of the actors involved, prepare negotiations between them, and ideally find a solution suitable for everyone. Brandsma and Otjes (2024, p. 542) point out that leaving a part of the negotiations to staff can help to depoliticise a difficult issue.

In Brandsma and Otjes's matrix, one essential function is not considered, namely, the simple organisation and preparation of meetings. Many employees in parliament engage in preparing hearings, plenary and committee sessions, or working group meetings, by, for example, booking rooms, writing and printing organisational documents such as agendas and participant lists, inviting MPs to sessions, or writing protocols and minutes. These secretarial tasks may be less intellectual work, but are equally crucial, without which the parliamentary work and negotiations of MPs would simply not be possible. Högenauer and Neuhold (2015) also identified this type of function in their paper on parliamentary administrations and named it "administrative assistant." In their work, they focus on parliamentary administrations and exclude PPG and personal staff. Within this article, the word *organiser* will be utilised, which applies to general administrative and committee staff, as well as to PPG and personal staff. Organiser is an important function of parliamentary staff that needs to be added to the matrix. Figure 1 summarises the organisational roles and different types of functions.

Roles
General Administrative Staff
Committee Staff
PPG Staff
Personal Staff

Types of Function
Ghostwriter
Advisor
Marketeer
Information Broker
Compromise Facilitator
Organiser

Figure 1. Extended role/type matrix of parliamentary staff activity. Source: Adapted from Brandsma and Otjes (2024).

3. Methodology

This role/type matrix was tested in a qualitative case study and applied to a diverse data set. This case study is a comparative analysis of the parliamentary staff working in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale, both lower houses. For reasons of feasibility, neither the French upper house, the Sénat, nor the German representation of federal states, the Bundesrat, could be considered here. The two cases, Bundestag and Assemblée nationale, were chosen as they differ considerably from each other in terms of competences and parliamentary power (Fish & Kroenig, 2009). Two differing cases, instead of similar cases, were selected to determine whether different institutional designs and powers are associated with different organisational roles and functions of parliamentary staff. The next section describes in detail the differences and commonalities of both chambers.

The collected data comprise publicly available data from the websites of both parliaments, consisting of organisational charts, job descriptions, parliamentary and administrative rules of procedures, budget plans indicating the number of employees, and data sets on personal staff, and personal information from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag. In addition, five interviews were conducted with staff from the parliamentary administrations, two for the Bundestag and three for the Assemblée nationale, who served as committee staff and in one case also as PPG staff. The special feature that unites four of them is that they were exchange officers or worked independently in the other parliament for around a year. Consequently, they got to know both parliaments and gained valuable insights into the differences and commonalities of the activities of parliamentary staff.

To increase the comparability between the two cases regarding the types of function, the study focused on the parliamentary staff who work for the European Affairs Committee and the Economics Committee in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. The two committees were chosen as they differ in their competencies. The Economics Committee has a legislative function in both countries; it discusses and amends legislative proposals, while the European Affairs Committee does not. In the Bundestag, it is seen as

an integration and cross-sectional committee and follows the work of the bodies of the EU, no matter what policy field (Bundestag, 2025b). Similarly, the European Affairs Committee in the Assemblée nationale monitors the activities on the EU level and is not part of the eight standing committees of the French lower chamber, unlike the Economics Committee (Assemblée nationale, 2025a, Art. 151.1-12). The data collected on these committees derived from the interviews mentioned above and from 16 written answers to a questionnaire focusing on the staff tasks and functions in these committees. In sum, the collected data allowed for a comparative analysis of staff activities in both parliaments.

4. Comparing the Staff's Home Parliaments

Staff activities do not occur in a vacuum but are embedded in and linked to the specific institutional framework and powers of the two parliaments in question. Therefore, this section provides a detailed overview of the primary characteristics of the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. This is accomplished through a direct comparison of the political systems, the electoral systems, the committee work, and the role of PPGs.

The German parliament is classified as a strong legislator and working parliament regarding Koß's different types of parliaments, which are working, talking, and hybrid legislatures (Koß, 2018, p. 26). It has many powers, such as the election of the federal chancellor or the authorisation or rejection of military deployments. In addition, the German Bundestag has a strong autonomy in organising its own work regarding its agenda and committees, for example. Its work centres on the parliamentary functions of legislation and oversight. In contrast, the French Assemblée counts as a hybrid parliament (between working and talking parliament) and is seen as a "weak legislator with high responsiveness" (Thomas, 2019, p. 73). While the French MPs attach great importance to representing their constituents, the autonomy of their Assemblée nationale is limited. The internal organisation, such as the number of standing committees or the parliamentary agenda, is largely determined by the French Constitution (Assemblée nationale, 2010). In addition, its area of activity is limited and excludes foreign and defence policy, which is the reserved domain of the French president. This is in stark contrast to the German parliament, which even decides on military missions.

These differences in powers can be explained by the respective national history and political systems of the two parliaments. The strong position of the Bundestag in the German federal and parliamentary system is historically based and relates to the experiences of the Weimar Republic (1919–1933). In 1933, the then semi-presidential system of Germany was abolished by the dictator Adolf Hitler by rendering the parliament powerless and erecting a totalitarian regime in Germany. The defeat of Germany in the Second World War put an end to the dictatorship and led to the separation of Germany into East and West Germany. In West Germany, the founding actors of the German Constitution, the so-called *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law), which was also to become the Constitution for the united Germany after 1989, aimed at preventing a second Weimar. Consequently, they equipped the German parliament with robust competencies such as a strong parliamentary control of the executive. Remarkably, French history had an opposite effect on the role of the parliament in the French political system. The French Third and Fourth Republics (1870–1940, 1946–1958) were marked by parliamentary turbulences, constantly changing majorities, and political instabilities. Therefore, the builders of the Fifth Republic, introduced in 1958, aimed at reducing this instability and opted for restricting the powers of the parliament. They chose to grant the directly elected president important

prerogatives and exempt them from parliamentary influence to create stability. The then-installed semi-presidential system is characterised by a strong president and a "rationalised parliament" (Assemblée nationale, 2023a; Marsch et al., 2015, p. 126). Ultimately, two parliaments evolved from history that differ in their role and functions in the respective national system, which is assumed to shape the roles and functions of MPs and of parliamentary staff.

This article also supposes that the electoral system must have an effect not only on the MPs' role but on the staff activities as well. The German and the French electoral systems diverge significantly. The French Assemblée counts 577 members who are elected in a majority voting system every five years (Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2011). The French voters decide in two ballots about a candidate for their constituency. As the MP is elected in a direct universal vote, this system emphasises the importance of the parliamentarian's personality and local anchoring. Due to the majority voting system, a significant part of the voters who voted for another candidate are not represented in the Assemblée nationale. In contrast, the German electoral system combines direct and list-based proportional representation and has recently undergone electoral reform. In general, German citizens have two votes and elect at least 598 members for four years; 299 seats in the German Bundestag are reserved for the first vote which the Germans use to elect a direct candidate from their constituency. The other 299 seats are distributed according to the results of the second vote. Here, the voters decide for a party list. In the past, the number of direct candidates elected often exceeded the number of seats available for the party gained by the second vote. This caused overhang and equalising mandates which were added to the statutory size of 598 seats in the Bundestag (Bundestag, 2025d). Regularly, this caused a much larger parliament. For example, the Bundestag counted 733 MPs in 2024 (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025). A reform in 2020 and 2023 aimed at reducing the seats and abrogated these mandates. It came into effect with the February 2025 German federal elections (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025). In whole, the German voting system is a complex and somewhat difficult combination of voting for a local candidate and a party. The party plays an important role in Germany. On the other side of the Rhine, the French system is entirely based on direct universal suffrage, where the individual personality has a greater influence.

Moreover, there are significant differences between the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée regarding the role of committees and PPGs in both parliaments. The French Constitution foresees eight standing committees (Assemblée nationale, 2010), which often count a high number of members that need to process a large number of legislative proposals. The limitation to eight committees hinders the effective work of the Assemblée nationale (Sprungk, 2007, p. 134). The committee work, often exercised through a specific rapporteur system, includes legislative activities and parliamentary control. Usually, two MPs, one from the government and one from the opposition, conduct information trips on a specific topic, the so-called *missions d'information* and *missions flash*, and elaborate a joint report. The Bundestag does not know this cross-party rapporteur system.

In comparison, the German parliament can decide alone on the number of committees, which often mirrors the number of ministries. Before the national election in February 2025, the Bundestag comprised 23 permanent committees (Bundestag, 2021). The German MPs put much emphasis on the committee work. Most of them specialise in the policy field because much of the legislation and oversight work takes place here. They are often described as expert-parliamentarians, which can lead to a certain distancing from the electorate (von Oertzen, 2005). In contrast, French MPs are seen rather as generalists and highly responsive

to voter concerns. They often mediate information and interests between different state levels. In sum, the Assemblée nationale assumes the key parliamentary function of representation and interest mediation, while the Bundestag primarily exercises strong legislative control (Thomas, 2019, pp. 73–80). Both types of parliamentarians correspond with the respective electoral system, where the directly elected French MPs need to have a strong local connection. Although half of the German MPs are also elected directly (and the other half on a party ticket), the party is more important here than in France.

Finally, the significance of PPGs differs largely in both parliaments. In the Bundestag, the PPGs play a pivotal role as, for example, the governing groups have a strong impact on policy-making (Thomas, 2019, p. 79). PPGs in the German Bundestag are subdivided into working groups that mirror the committees. Many proposals and amendments in the committees are pre-discussed here. Consequently, the committee work is strongly influenced by the (governing) PPGs in the German Bundestag. In addition, the PPGs are powerful because they can initiate legislative proposals, make amendments, establish commissions of enquiry, and appoint a vice-president of the Council of Elders (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 147). In the Bundestag, 5% of its members can form a parliamentary group, whereas in the French Assemblée nationale, it is approximately half. The threshold in France for implementing a group is 15 MPs. In the French parliament, the PPGs do not have such a prominent role as in the German case. While the PPGs in Germany are relatively stable, the names and compositions of PPGs in the French parliament change frequently. In the Assemblée nationale, PPGs divide into government, opposition, and minority groups. The constitutional reform from 2008 gave the latter two the right to initiate commissions of enquiry and to hold the presidency of the finance committee (Marsch et al., 2015, p. 147), enforcing the parliamentary control function.

In whole, the institutional design and powers of the two parliaments differ largely and are strongly influenced by their respective history. While the French parliament is constitutionally restrained, the German Bundestag is a powerful parliament. As a result, the activities of parliamentary staff most likely correspond to the institutional design and powers of the parliament. The next section presents the findings of the empirical study on the organisational roles and the types of functions performed by the parliamentary staff in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale.

5. Organisational Roles of German and French Parliamentary Staff

The empirical analysis finds that both parliaments are characterised by the presence of all four organisational roles from the role/type matrix of Brandsma and Otjes (2024). However, the figures and the distribution of general administrative staff, committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff differ greatly.

In general, the staffing level in the German Bundestag is nearly three times higher than in the Assemblée nationale (see Table 1). Of course, it must be taken into account that the Bundestag has more MPs with 733 members in early 2025 (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025) than the Assemblée nationale with its fixed 577 members. However, this does not sufficiently explain the different levels of staff, as MP and staff numbers are not directly correlated. This corresponds with more general findings by Otjes (2022), who did not find a clear pattern between the number of MPs and the size of parliamentary staff. Table 1 displays the numbers for the different organisational roles present in both parliaments. Analysing the data gives three major insights.

Table 1. Overview of organisational roles and their staff numbers in the Assemblée nationale and Bundestag.

	Assemblée nationale	Bundestag
General Administrative Staff in 2025	1,093	2,996
Committee Staff in 2025	ca. 285	235
Personal Staff in 2025	2,030	6,056
PPG Staff in 2022	145	1,121
Parliamentary Staff in 2025 (total number without PPG Staff)	3,393	9,287

Sources: Assemblée nationale (2025c, 2025d, 2025e), Bundestag (2025c), Husson (2024), Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances (2024), and a personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag (copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach).

First, when looking at the staff in the parliamentary administration, i.e., general administrative and committee staff, the Bundestag administration is more than double the size of the French administration (Husson, 2024; personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]). The larger size is also reflected in the structure of the Bundestag administration, which is subdivided into six directorates-general: Parliament and Members; External Relations, Europe, and Analysis; Information and Documentation; Digitalisation; Building and Infrastructure; and Central Services (Bundestag, 2023). In comparison, the organisational structure of the Assemblée's administration is leaner with only three main directorates: Legislative Directorate; Administrative Directorate; and Joint Directorate (Assemblée nationale, 2025b). Both parliaments have in common that they define four career groups among their staff that resemble each other according to the function and the education level necessary for the position. In the Assemblée, these are called administrators, assistant administrators, executive and management assistants, and agents. These staff are civil servants, but they differ from other civil servants as they have their own legal status that includes strict professional discretion and political neutrality. To guarantee this neutrality, there is also a proper recruitment process for parliamentary administrative staff, the so-called *concours*, and a one-year obligatory internship. The educational background of the administrators and assistant administrators is often a degree in political science or public policy, according to the interviewees. Consistent with the principle of neutrality is that the external mobility of staff is limited. This means that there are strict conditions for parliamentary civil servants to work temporarily for another public institution, such as a ministry (Assemblée nationale, 2023c).

In contrast, the Bundestag administration staff have the same legal status as civil servants in the ministries, which is regulated in Article 33 of the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany. Consequently, the career groups are senior civil service, higher civil service, intermediate civil service, and elementary civil service, which are oriented towards the educational level of the employees, ranging from a university degree to a secondary school leaving certificate (Bundestag, 2025a). The civil servants in the Bundestag are also subject to neutrality and independence from political and economic influence, but this is not as strict as in the French case. Due to the principle of "active citizens" in the Basic Law, the civil servants can be politically active outside of working hours, such as being a party member, for example (dbb beamtenbund und tarifunion, 2025). This would be perceived as a violation of political neutrality within the French system (Baron, 2013). Unsurprisingly, external mobility is possible for the Bundestag administrative staff. They can even be *loaned* to a PPG for a certain time period, which is usually a highly political position. The recruitment procedure for the Bundestag administrative

staff is based on official job advertisements, which often include legal training or law studies as a requirement for the senior and higher civil service.

Although the Bundestag administration is twice as big as the French administration, the committee staff figures are close to one another. Consequently, the French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its staff into the committee support than the Bundestag does. This is particularly noteworthy considering that the Assemblée nationale has only eight standing committees, whereas the Bundestag generally has more than 20. The reason for this might be found in the type of function performed by the committee staff in each parliament.

Second, another revealing comparison is that of the PPG staff. In both parliaments, this staff category is employed by the PPG itself. They are responsible for recruitment, remuneration, working conditions, and dismissal of their staff. Remarkably, the German PPG staff are far more numerous than the French. The Bundestag had 1,121 employees in 2022 working for the six PPGs at the time (Bundestag, 2025c), while the Assemblée nationale counted only 145 for 11 PPGs in the same year (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances, 2024). The German PPG staff number is eight times higher. This indicates that the PPGs most likely play a bigger role in the German parliament, which fits well with findings in the literature (Arndt et al., 2023).

Third, the comparison of the personal staff roles reveals commonalities but also strong differences when it comes to figures. In both parliaments, the personal staff is employed by the MP her or himself, who defines the tasks and sets up the working contract conditions, which must be based on general labour law. As the PPG staff, the personal staff is not part of the parliamentary administration and its specific work regulations (see Article 12 of the German Members of Parliament Act). In both cases, the personal staff can be situated at the seat of parliament in Berlin or Paris, or in the MP's constituency (Assemblée nationale, 2024). French and German MPs often have personal staff in both locations. Interesting differences occur when analysing the staff numbers, which diverge strongly. German MPs employ eight persons on average (own calculation based on Bundesministerium des Innern, 2025; personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]). In contrast, a French MP can only make use of 3,5 personal staff, which is less than half of what the German counterpart employs (own calculation based on Assemblée nationale, 2025e; Ministère de l'Intérieur, 2011). This serves as a general indicator, as the specific number of personal assistants usually depends on the function and position of the MP in parliament.

In sum, the Bundestag has a higher staffing level than the Assemblée nationale. It also displays a much higher number of PPG staff, which is smaller in the French parliament. In addition, the German MPs can make use of more personal staff. Interestingly, the German Bundestag, with its high number of employees, is an outlier when looking at the table by Otjes (2022, p. 383), which compares the number of parliamentary staff in 48 countries. However, the French parliamentary administration puts a much higher share of its staff into committee work than the Bundestag does. This different weighting of the staff shares is an indication of the priorities of the staff activities. Most likely, they are related to the types of functions the specific parliamentary staff fulfil.

6. Types of Functions of German and French Parliamentary Staff

Regarding the types of functions, the analysis was focused on all staff working around the European Affairs and Economic committees. This includes three organisational roles: committee staff, PPG staff, and personal staff. On the other hand, it excludes general administrative staff from the analysis, as they are not directly involved in committee work. The advantage of this exclusion is that it makes the analysis feasible and more precise, as the general administrative staff is a large category with staff undertaking a diversity of tasks from driving services for MPs to parliamentary press relations. It is important to note that the types of functions selected in this analysis reflect the most predominant tasks of the respective staff category. The employees may also perform other functions and tasks, but to a much lesser extent or on an individual level.

The comparative analysis of the staff activities in the Bundestag and the Assemblée nationale finds major differences regarding the committee staff, while German and French PPG and personal staff have similar tasks, differing only in the weighting of tasks and in the number of respective staff members. To start with the committee staff in both parliaments, the German employees can be described as *organisers* and their French counterparts are *advisers* and *compromise facilitators*, according to the extended role/type matrix in Figure 1. More specifically, the German committee staff mostly takes care of the organisational process (invitations, meeting preparation, minutes) and the formal preparation of motions and amendments for committee meetings. They can give procedural advice but are not involved in terms of political content. According to the interviewees and the low figures on overall committee staff in the Bundestag (personal communication on the number of employees in the Bundestag from the Information and Communication Department of the Bundestag [copy in possession of Henriette Heimbach]), the German European Affairs and Economic committees only count a handful of staff from the parliamentary administration. Moreover, they have a greater distance from the MPs than their French colleagues, who work closely with the members of the respective committee.

In contrast to the German committee staff, the French committee staff's work is more substantive and political. The committee's tasks are twofold, and so are the activities of the French civil servants structured. They support the members of the committee in their legislative activity (this does not apply to the European Affairs Committee) and in parliamentary control activity through the rapporteur system. Regarding the legislative activity, French committee staff draft reports and prepare opinions, amendments, and minutes, which are tasks that correspond with the type of *ghostwriter*. On top of that, they are also *advisors*, as they give procedural, legal, and policy advice. When it comes to the rapporteur activities, French committee staff play an essential role as they organise cross-party information trips, i.e., *missions flash* and *missions d'information*, and they draft the report recording the respective information trip in close collaboration with and in the name of the MP-rapporteurs. More importantly, they are *compromise facilitators* when they search for a common position in the report of the two MP-rapporteurs, who are usually from the government and from the opposition. To be able to carry out this highly political work and be accepted by the members of the government and of the opposition alike, the committee staff must be politically neutral. In addition, to be able to conduct this rich content-related work, the French committee staff is large in numbers. The Economic committee counts 24 employees, and the European Affairs Committee has 15 people. This is much more than in the German parliament. Interestingly, one French interviewee described the administrative structure of the German committee staff as a pyramid with the head of the committee secretariat and one or two higher civil servants at the top and a larger group of assisting staff at the

bottom of the pyramid. In France, the pyramid is turned upside down with administrators and adjoints-administrators forming a large group at the top and assistant staff being a small group at the bottom. Figure 2 illustrates the two staff pyramids, one upright and one upside down, which are a fitting allegory for the differences between French and German committee staff.

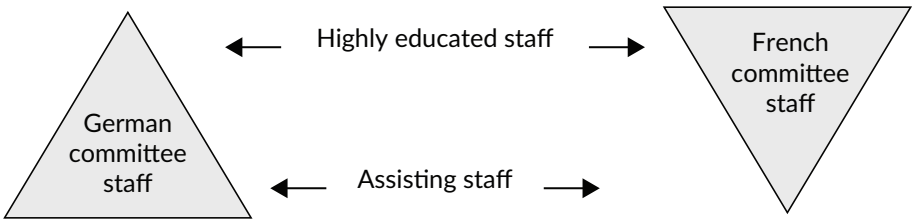

Figure 2. Staff pyramid on the distribution of career groups among French and German committee staff.

In sum, the German committee staff are first and foremost *organisers*, while their French colleagues are more numerous and perform a great variety of tasks. Their main activities are those of *advisors*, *ghostwriters*, and *compromise facilitators*. Abélès (2000, p. 110) even calls them "bricoleurs de la loi," craftsmen and -women of the law.

The PPG staff in the Assemblée nationale and the Bundestag do not differ so much in their tasks as in staff numbers. Both PPG staff can be best characterised as *advisors* and to a lesser degree *compromise facilitators*, following the extended role/type matrix. In France, most of the PPG staff follow one or more areas of legislative activity, namely a specific committee, and they contribute to finding common positions in their parliamentary group (Assemblée nationale, 2023b). This is also true for the German case. Here, the PPG employee is an expert in the respective policy field and advises their group on the matter. They are directly involved in drafting resolutions, political texts, and parliamentary initiatives (Tischner & Churs, 2025). In addition, they facilitate compromises in their own PPG and beyond. However, giving strategic, policy, and procedural advice to the MPs of their group is the most prominent type of function they fulfil.

Despite these similarities between the French and German PPG employees, there are large differences regarding the scope of their activities. The number of French PPG staff is very low compared to other staff roles inside the Assemblée nationale and compared to German PPG staff, which is eight times higher (see Table 1). In fact, there is little information about the French PPGs available on the internet or in the literature. This corresponds to the fact that PPGs have a less prominent position in the French parliament and are more volatile. On the other side of the Rhine, the PPGs are stable and the powerhouses of the Bundestag. German PPG staff play an essential role: They actively follow the working groups and the committee work, give advice to the MPs, and draft parliamentary texts. In whole, the German PPG staff is more numerous and influential than the French counterpart. The reasons can be found in the different institutional design of the two parliaments, which attributes the German PPGs a major role in the policy-making process, whilst the French PPGs play a rather subordinate role.

Finally, the last staff role analysed was the MPs' personal employees. In contrast to committee and PPG staff, the personal employees in both parliaments fulfil functions of *information broker* and *marketeer*. They often need to manage and filter the high amount of information that their MP receives every day. Moreover, most MPs have personal staff who manage social media accounts and contacts with journalists and constituents,

aiming to market the MP. More generally, this staff group is characterised in both countries by a large variety of different activities to support the MP in exercising their mandate. The tasks can range from secretarial and assistant tasks such as agenda planning, making appointments, and answering the telephone, to writing social media posts, drafting speeches, and preparing bills and amendments. The MP decides what kind of functions they need and employs personal staff accordingly (Stender, 2019). The German MPs have more resources at their disposal and can thus employ more staff than their French colleagues. Therefore, the German personal staff can often cover more functions, and the specific weighting of functions depends on the individual MP. The French personal staff concentrate mainly on the functions of *organiser* and *marketeer*, and to a lesser degree *information broker*.

Table 2 summarises the findings on the activities of German and French employees in parliament. More precisely, the analysis focused on the committee work in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. It presents the predominant functions of the three staff roles present in the committee work and indicates a tendency, although the employees might also exercise other functions, but to a lesser degree.

Table 2. Extended role/type matrix of staff roles and functions in the committee work in the Bundestag (BT) and the Assemblée nationale (AN).

	Type of Functions					
Organisational Roles	Ghostwriter	Advisor	Marketeer	Information Broker	Compromise facilitator	Organiser
Committee staff (BT)						X
Committee staff (AN)	X	X			X	
PPG staff (BT)	X	X			X	
PPG staff (AN)		X			X	
Personal staff (BT)			X	X		X
Personal staff (AN)			X			X

7. Conclusion

This article has analysed the predominant organisational roles and functions of parliamentary staff in the German Bundestag and the French Assemblée nationale. It revealed significant differences and similarities in how the two parliaments are staffed and the type of work assigned to their employees. Furthermore, it shed light on the important functions that French and German parliamentary staff fulfil, such as drafting legislation, providing advice, or facilitating compromises. All of these are essential for the functioning of the parliaments and therefore deserve thorough research. Due to this, this study applied an extended version of the role/type matrix developed by Brandsma and Otjes (2024) in order to determine the activities of French and German parliamentary staff. To the five possible types of functions that employees exercise in parliament as defined by Brandsma and Otjes, this article adds the function of *organiser* as a key task of parliamentary employees to the matrix. As far as the four organisational roles elaborated by the two authors are concerned, only the wording for plenary staff was adapted, which is better described as *general administrative staff*. In this way, it cannot be confused with the specific staff for plenary sessions.

In the empirical analysis of the French and German parliaments, all four organisational staff roles were detected: *general administrative staff*, *committee staff*, *PPG staff*, and *personal staff*. Yet, the distribution and numbers of the different staff categories are varied. Firstly, the overall parliamentary staff in the Bundestag is three times higher than in the Assemblée nationale. Remarkably, the French parliamentary administration puts a higher share of its employees into committee work, whilst the German committee staff number is very low compared to the overall parliamentary administration. This indicates that the French parliamentary administration, in contrast to the Bundestag administration, emphasises support for the committees. Another interesting insight is provided by the PPG staff numbers. The employees who work for a PPG in the Bundestag are eight times more numerous than those in the Assemblée nationale. This clearly exemplifies the crucial role that PPGs play in the German case and the minor role they play in the French parliament. Finally, the two parliaments differ when it comes to the presence of personal staff. The German MPs are better staffed than their French counterparts and have more than twice as many employees on average. In sum, the comparative analysis of the organisational roles shows how differently the parliaments are staffed and resourced, and where they set their priorities. It should be noted here that the high number of German parliamentary staff is an outlier in an international comparison.

The study of the types of functions that German and French parliamentary staff exercise provides more insights into the activities of staff in both parliaments. It can also explain some of the diverging staff numbers. For a precise functional analysis, this article has focused on the activities of parliamentary staff regarding committee work. This naturally excludes the *general administrative staff* among the organisational roles. The comparative study revealed commonalities in the activities of *PPG staff* and *personal staff*. PPG staff in both countries are mainly *advisers* and *compromise facilitators*. The low numbers of French PPG staff most likely reduce the impact of this work in comparison to the German PPG staff, which also engages in *ghostwriting* of parliamentary texts. Similarities in activities also exist among the personal staff, which, in contrast to the other staff roles, mainly engage as *organiser* and *marketeer*. The German personal staff, which is more numerous, can also be described as *information broker*. The most striking difference between the French and German parliamentary staff exists in the activities of committee staff. While the German committee staff is mainly engaged in organising activities, the French committee staff takes on three highly political tasks: ghostwriting, advising, and facilitating compromises. This also explains the high share of French and the low share of German committee staff relative to the overall numbers of parliamentary staff. In whole, the comparison of the staff functions reveals interesting differences that are probably linked to the different institutional powers, political culture, and history. The knowledge of these differences can also help the parliaments to cooperate better with each other and learn from each other's best practices.

In the interviews, reasons were considered that can explain the extent and form of staff activities in both parliaments. They clearly suggest looking at the interplay of institutional design, history, and self-perception of staff roles. For example, the low number of French PPG staff is most likely related to the low importance of PPGs in the Assemblée nationale. One reason for this could be the majority voting system in France that favours the individual MP. In contrast, the German proportional voting system, based on a direct vote and a party vote, increases ties and dependence of the individual MP on their party. Clearly, the party groups in the Bundestag play a more important role. Consequently, there is most likely a relation between the voting system, the MPs, and the parliamentary staff numbers and activities. Another example is that of the activities of committee staff. In France, the cross-party rapporteur system allows for a politically neutral committee employee to advise and draft the report. In the Bundestag, the PPG staff assume these tasks and the German

committee staff activities are reduced to organisation (Arndt et al., 2023, p. 261). Moreover, the German parliamentary administration is not recognised as politically neutral, which is in stark contrast to the neutrality ethos of the French parliamentary administration (Abélès, 2000, pp. 114–119). In sum, the institutional design of the rapporteur system, as well as a certain working ethos, most likely has an impact on the staff activities. More generally, this suggests that the specific characteristics of the two parliaments are likely to influence the scale and form of staff activities. Future research on staff activities could explore and test these hypotheses.

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Conflict of Interests

I worked as a personal assistant for a German MP in the Bundestag from 2015 to 2020.

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

2. Studying Personal Staff Comparatively

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.1. Resources

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

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

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

3.2. MPs' Formal Role

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3. MPs' Informal Leadership Style

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

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

3.4. Relational Factor

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

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

4. Research Design

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

Table 1. Staff resources per parliament.

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

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

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

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

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

5. Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 2. Concluding table of results for each country.

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

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

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

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

6. Conclusion

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

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Gijs Jan Brandsma (Radboud University).

Supplementary Material

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REVIEW

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

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Tasks and Roles of Parliamentary Staff: A Typology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conflict of Interests

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ARTICLE

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The Invisible Architects of Public Engagement: Understanding the Different Types of Roles Played by Parliamentary Staff

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Abstract

Although public engagement has become a cornerstone of modern parliamentary functions, the role of parliamentary staff in shaping it remains largely neglected and understudied. Whilst the literature acknowledges that staff have been key in the development of public engagement in legislatures, we do not know in what ways. This oversight neglects a crucial aspect: the administration of parliament is not just a backdrop but the very foundation of a functioning parliament, being particularly noticeable and significant within the realm of public engagement, a relatively recent activity for parliaments beyond their traditional functions of legislation, scrutiny, and representation. This article addresses this gap by uncovering the hidden contributions of parliamentary staff in the development of public engagement. We adopt an interpretive qualitative research approach, drawing on 37 semi-structured elite interviews with officials and MPs of the parliaments of Austria, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Through thematic analysis, we develop a novel typology that identifies six roles staff play in parliamentary public engagement: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor. Our analysis shows the pivotal part these six roles play in navigating the complex interplay between the political and the non-political dimensions of a parliamentary setting, which have been crucial to push forward the agenda of public engagement within legislatures.

Keywords

officials; parliamentary administrations; parliamentary staff; parliaments; public engagement; roles; typology of parliamentary staff

1. Introduction

Parliaments across democracies are increasingly expected to be transparent, responsive, and meaningfully connected to the citizens they represent (Dryzek et al., 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). This expectation has led to a considerable expansion of public engagement initiatives by parliaments in recent years, ranging from accessible information provision to participatory mechanisms such as e-petitions and deliberative forums (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). While scholars have explored how parliaments develop these practices and engage with the public (e.g., Bernardes & Leston-Bandeira, 2016; Odeyemi et al., 2023; Prior & Stirbu, 2023; Serra-Silva, 2022), far less attention has been paid to the role played by administrative actors in developing these initiatives, despite research indicating the crucial role that staff play in the development and implementation of public engagement (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018).

The development of the parliamentary public engagement function has meant an expansion of parliamentary functions beyond legislatures' traditional ones of legislation, scrutiny, and representation (Leston-Bandeira, 2014). This has represented significant institutional development and the need for very different types of skill-sets to the traditional parliamentary ones around the drafting and checking of legislation, such as digital communication skills. Parliamentary public engagement initiatives include five types of activities: information, education, communication, consultation, and participation, all of which are interconnected to provide for meaningful forms of citizen engagement (Inter-Parliamentary Union & United Nations Development Programme, 2022; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). The expansion of parliaments' function of public engagement has, therefore, led to a considerable expansion in the recruitment of very different types of staff, and/or re-training of existing staff, in new competence areas. Yet, the contributions of parliamentary officials to the public engagement role remain largely underexplored and theorized in academic research. As a result, the literature on their role in public engagement remains fragmented and underdeveloped.

Despite often invisible to the public eye, these officials play a key role in operationalizing parliaments' public engagement activity. Officials operate at the nexus of political and institutional interests, navigating the complex interplay between elected members' preferences, institutional mandates, and evolving public expectations—making their role essential to understanding how parliaments connect with the public in practice. This article seeks to uncover and understand the hidden contributions of parliamentary staff, highlighting their pivotal role in fostering, developing, and implementing public engagement activity. Drawing from empirical data, we develop a novel typology that aims to identify the different types of roles played by parliamentary staff in public engagement. It is worth noting that administrative actors are also referred to as officials, staff, administrators, or secretaries; in this article, we adopt the terms staff and officials and use them interchangeably to refer to politically neutral civil servants who ensure parliaments' daily functioning (T. Christiansen et al., 2021), excluding staff employed by MPs and/or party groups. Our analysis focuses, therefore, on institutional roles developed by non-political staff.

The article's research question is: What roles do parliamentary staff play in shaping public engagement activity by legislatures? To answer this, we draw on qualitative data from elite semi-structured interviews with both MPs and officials conducted in three national parliaments: Austria, Portugal, and the UK. These cases were selected not only for their institutional diversity, but also because each parliament was undergoing notable engagement-related reforms at the time of fieldwork. This approach enables us to trace staff contributions

during *critical junctures of institutional change*—key moments of significant institutional reform in how these institutions connect with citizens, when officials' role is likely to be more visible, contested, and consequential for the design of engagement strategies and tools.

Through the narratives of those directly involved in public engagement efforts, we identify six different roles played by staff in public engagement: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor. In doing so, this study contributes to the growing literature on public engagement in representative institutions, advancing our understanding of the central yet often invisible work of those who support and sustain these transformations from within legislative institutions. It also makes a broader contribution towards the understanding of how legislatures work, by spotlighting the critical role played by parliamentary staff, particularly in areas that go beyond the traditional functions of legislation, scrutiny, and representation.

2. Parliamentary Officials and Public Engagement

The body of literature on parliamentary officials within national legislatures remains relatively small but is steadily expanding (e.g., Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; T. Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023), although often concentrated on Anglo-Saxon legislatures (e.g., Crewe, 2017; Geddes & Mulley, 2018). This growing body of work highlights the indispensable role of parliamentary administrations, noting that "it would be practically impossible for parliaments to play a meaningful role within a given political system without the support of a well-resourced and independent administrative structure" (T. Christiansen et al., 2021, p. 480). Despite their central role in supporting democratic institutions, parliamentary officials remain "almost completely concealed from public view" (T. Christiansen et al., 2021, p. 481). Scholars have long addressed the invisibility of legislative staff (e.g., Fox & Hammond, 1978; Laube et al., 2020; Romzek & Utter, 1997). Some have even argued that keeping staff—particularly those who advise elected members—out of sight serves a legitimising function, helping to stabilise the political system by preserving the primacy of elected representatives (Laube et al., 2020). This *structural invisibility* has contributed to the underrepresentation of parliamentary officials in legislative studies, even as their responsibilities have expanded in both scope and complexity. For instance, their growing professionalisation has not only enhanced parliaments' capacity to perform their core functions, but also reduced their dependence on the executive (Egeberg et al., 2015).

The marginalisation of these "background workers"—according to Star and Strauss's (1999) conceptualisation of *invisible work*—can be traced to enduring assumptions about the role of administrative actors. Rooted in the classical theory of neutral competence (Kaufman, 1956), these assumptions portray civil servants as impartial executors of political decisions, rather than as actors who exercise agency, discretion, and strategic influence. Within the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy, these professionals are envisioned as career officials, selected on the basis of objective criteria, and expected to uphold the principles of neutrality (Weber, 1978, as cited in Barberis, 2011). This understanding as a politically neutral apparatus reinforces long-standing methodological and normative biases that perceive elected representatives as the primary or sole agents of institutional action in parliamentary settings, leaving the contributions of staff underexplored and under-theorised.

This conventional understanding of neutrality warrants closer scrutiny. As Öhberg et al. (2017) note, public servants operate in inherently politicised environments and, while not overtly partisan, they influence political processes through their advice and expertise. Baxter (1991) likewise argues that officials shape implicitly

political decisions, exercising subtle forms of agency. P. M. Christiansen et al. (2016) further highlight that besides policy advice, civil servants offer political-tactical guidance—deciding not just what is communicated to elected officials, but how, when, and through which channels, with Yong et al. (2019) pointing to tensions that can develop as a consequence. Though often framed as neutral, such contributions reveal a more strategic role. Acknowledging this complexity moves us beyond idealised bureaucratic models toward a more realistic view of how administrative actors shape parliamentary action, not only in traditional core legislative work, but also in new adjacent areas. As parliaments have become more professionalised and complex institutions (Loewenberg, 2011), they have come to rely on staff managing a broader array of functions—from security to catering—far beyond the traditional domains of legislation, scrutiny, or representation.

One such domain is public engagement: a relatively recent and multifaceted parliamentary activity (Leston-Bandeira, 2014; Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023; Serra-Silva, 2022; Walker et al., 2019), which requires skills and expertise beyond the traditional clerkly profile that supports parliamentary business activity—skills such as communication, digital, facilitation, and teaching, which would not traditionally have been part of parliamentary job descriptions and which consist today the core of sustaining parliaments' attempts to better engage citizens. Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018, p. 168) argue that parliamentary public engagement relies heavily on "non-partisan institutional claim-makers or parliamentary officials." Whereas in other areas of parliamentary work staff may indeed be almost invisible, often in the case of public engagement, staff are the only actors the public has contact with.

A small number of studies have acknowledged the singular importance of officials in supporting the development of parliamentary public engagement (e.g., Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018; Leston-Bandeira, 2014; Pollak & Slominski, 2014; Serra-Silva, 2023), but we still lack systematic analyses of their concrete contributions and institutional influence in shaping these processes. The centrality of officials to public engagement often surfaces indirectly through the methods employed in existing research, with officials emerging as key informants in many studies. Scholars routinely rely on interviews with parliamentary staff (e.g., Dai & Norton, 2007; Feulner & Guéguin, 2023; Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018; Serra-Silva, 2022; Sheldon, 2023) with some using surveys of officials (e.g., Coleman, 2006). These methodological choices suggest a recognition—implicit if not always theoretically developed—of the knowledge and agency officials bring to public engagement processes within parliaments.

Despite this, analysis is rarely centred on the specific role of parliamentary officials in public engagement or the unique challenges they encounter in this capacity. In much of the literature, *officials act as storytellers*, providing crucial insights into parliamentary engagement processes, yet they are rarely positioned as the protagonists of these narratives or the targets of such analysis. As an exception to this, Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) show that through their work on public engagement, parliamentary officials perform a representational role: the institutional representation of parliament, whereby the institution is (re)presented to the public primarily by non-elected officials, due to the nature of public engagement activity which places officials in direct contact with citizens, with MPs often absent. But they do not explore the different facets of this role. Similarly, research focusing on parliamentary officials often neglects this increasingly critical aspect of their work nowadays: engaging citizens. The recent *Routledge Handbook of Parliamentary Administration* (2023) briefly notes that many parliaments are "opening up their proceedings and indeed their buildings to the public," placing new demands on staff and requiring "additional skills and resources" (T. Christiansen, et al., 2023, p. 10). Yet, this dimension remains largely unexplored, both theoretically and empirically.

Parliament's public engagement activity encompasses five types of activities: disseminating information about parliamentary business, educating the public about parliament and its processes, communicating parliamentary business, facilitating consultation mechanisms to bring citizens' views on matters being discussed in parliament, and providing opportunities for participation in decision-making (Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). While elected representatives are often the public face of these initiatives, case studies from the European, Scottish, and UK parliaments suggest that much of this work is carried out by parliamentary staff rather than politicians themselves (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018). It is these non-political institutional figures who often bear the responsibility of fostering public understanding, building trust, and shaping the perception of parliament as an accessible and legitimate institution (Judge & Leston-Bandeira, 2018). In more practical terms, they are often those who deliver public engagement initiatives, not elected representatives. See, for instance, the delivery of a parliamentary education workshop or the consideration of whether to admit a petition and its respective response to the petitioner.

Indeed, emerging studies indicate that parliamentary officials may play a more substantive role in public engagement than is often assumed. Beyond maintaining websites, managing information flows, or handling the data generated by these activities, some evidence suggests they are involved in identifying "possible routes and practices" for engagement, navigating "contested points," and setting internal priorities that can shape the overall direction of public engagement (Serra-Silva, 2023, p. 12). In this view, officials are not merely passive administrators, but may act as *influential architects* of engagement practices, configuring how public engagement is conceived, operationalised, and sustained. Thus, potentially determining how parliaments approach public engagement and build their relationship with the public.

These responsibilities build, partly, on the established role of officials as "information brokers," whose tasks involve filtering, summarising, and synthesising information for use by elected members (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). In other domains, such as European Union affairs, officials have been shown to function as part of an "information network" aimed at enhancing institutional knowledge through the collection, interpretation, and exchange of data across national parliaments (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). Further contributions have hinted at their involvement in monitoring public engagement initiatives in other legislatures, analysing external practices, and exchanging information and best practices with peers (Serra-Silva, 2023).

Nevertheless, this literature leaves significant blind spots. First, there is little systematic empirical research on how officials shape and support parliamentary public engagement, how this role is enacted in practice, and with what consequences. Second, existing studies are largely limited to Anglo-Saxon parliaments, with little comparative work. Finally, no typology has yet captured the multiple roles officials perform in this domain. This article addresses these gaps by drawing on original interview data across three contrasting parliamentary settings. To fully understand how parliaments connect with citizens, we expand the analytical focus by examining in detail the often-invisible roles administrative actors play behind the scenes, and by challenging the assumption of bureaucratic neutrality to critically assess how these actors shape public engagement—sometimes reflecting, sometimes transcending political intentions. As stated in the introduction, we focus on institutional staff working for the parliament, not those working for MPs and/or party groups. Drawing inspiration from Brandsma and Otjes' (2024) categorisation of roles played by parliamentary staff, we develop our own typology to capture the specific roles officials play in public engagement. Thus, by centering on administrative actors, this research broadens legislative studies, highlighting how non-elected staff mediate between legislatures and the public, translating abstract engagement norms into concrete organizational practices.

3. Research Design, Methods, and Data

To analyze the role and contributions of parliamentary staff in shaping public engagement, this study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach based on semi-structured elite interviews in three national parliaments (UK, Portugal, and Austria) at *critical junctures of institutional change* in each parliament's approach to public engagement.

In the UK, interviews were conducted in late 2010, early in Speaker Bercow's tenure, which was pivotal to the introduction of significant reforms to enhance public engagement. This period encompasses key milestones in the development of greater accessibility and engagement at the UK Parliament (Leston-Bandeira et al., 2025), constituting therefore a critical moment to examine parliamentary staff's contributions to public engagement. In Austria, interviews were conducted in late 2018, a pivotal moment when the Austrian Parliament was implementing its Media Center, culminating in the launch of the *Mediathek* the subsequent year. This platform introduced a video-on-demand system, providing access to plenary debates, a podcast series, and explanatory videos about parliamentary processes and events. Portugal's interviews took place in 2019, following the work of the Digital Parliament working group, which brought together parliamentary officials and MPs, representing the most significant institutional reform so far on engagement. Thus, these distinct yet significant moments of *institutional change* allow us to capture parliamentary staff's evolving responsibilities and strategic contributions in shaping public engagement.

Furthermore, these cases also reflect variation in how parliaments are structured and operate, including differences in administrative capacity, staff size, and internal organisational arrangements. While the analysis does not aim to provide a systematic comparison across cases, this institutional diversity enhances the study's analytical depth by situating the role of officials within diverse democratic settings. By examining the role of staff across distinct parliamentary contexts—from the larger and more centralised administration of the UK, to the comparatively small-scale structure of the Portuguese parliament, where parliamentary groups rather than MPs are the central unit of organisation—we are able to observe staff involvement in public engagement across different institutional logics and constraints. Such variation allows us to explore how the same role is enacted across contrasting democratic settings and how officials' agency is shaped, thus offering insights that extend beyond a single institutional setting.

We interviewed key actors involved in parliamentary public engagement, using purposive and snowball sampling strategies (Mosley, 2013). This included parliamentary officials working in communication, education, and outreach roles, politicians involved in public engagement reforms or who held official positions within the administrative body, as well as external experts specializing in parliamentary affairs, and staff from inter-parliamentary institutions (IPI) such as the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD), which actively contribute to agenda-setting, benchmarking, and professionalisation in the field of public engagement (Serra-Silva, 2023). Including these perspectives enabled a more comprehensive mapping of the evolving role of officials in the broader institutional ecosystems in which engagement practices are embedded. This selection led to 37 semi-structured interviews across the three parliaments (21 officials, 9 MPs, 5 experts, and 2 IPI's representatives), ensuring a balanced examination of both administrative and political dimensions. This approach avoids a one-sided perspective and enables a deeper contextual understanding. Interviewees were asked about parliamentary public engagement processes, activities, and dynamics, with a particular focus on the role of both political

and non-political actors at different stages of policy development and implementation. The list of interviewees (anonymized) is available in Appendix 2 (in the Supplementary File).

At the beginning of each interview, we assured participants that their anonymity would be preserved. To ensure a natural flow of conversation, the order of topics was adjusted, and follow-up questions were used to obtain deeper insights and clarify meanings (Legard et al., 2003). Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded, and followed an informed consent procedure.

All interviews were fully transcribed either manually or using Sonix software and analyzed using MAXQDA software. We conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), beginning with a careful reading of the transcripts to identify initial themes (or codes) and develop a preliminary coding scheme, allowing for the systematic identification of recurring themes and patterns. A theme, in this context, represents a meaningful segment of text, ranging from a single sentence to a group of sentences. As we progressed, themes were compared, refined, and organized into a hierarchical coding structure, where lower-level themes remained closer to the interviewees' statements (semantic level), while higher-level themes reflected more abstract, conceptual interpretations (latent level; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Findings

The interviews reveal six interrelated roles through which parliamentary officials contribute to public engagement. Inductively identified through qualitative content analysis, these roles reflect the varied ways officials support, design, and implement engagement across settings. They are not mutually exclusive: officials may adopt multiple roles concurrently or shift between them depending on institutional context and the phase of an initiative. Each role, however, captures a distinct facet of administrative practice and is analysed in relation to the structural and institutional conditions that shape how officials perform that role. While parliaments differ in their administrative configurations, we observe no major variation in the types of roles identified. This does not rule out differences in degree, but such variations are not present systematically across contexts. Table 1 summarises the roles in the typical sequence of engagement

Table 1. Summary of key roles of officials in parliamentary public engagement.

Role	Description	Presence
Institutional innovator	Identifies and promotes new tools and strategies for engagement, driving modernization	Less prevalent
Knowledge facilitator	Gathers, synthesizes, and disseminates information, best practices, and research insights	Prevalent
Strategic decision facilitator	Shapes engagement agendas, mediates between actors, and acts as co-producer	Prevalent
Guarantor of institutional legitimacy	Prevents unworkable or harmful reforms, ensuring feasibility and compliance with democratic principles	Less prevalent
Coordinator & operational manager	Delivers public engagement initiatives and ensures efficient management on a daily basis	Prevalent
Evaluator & monitor	Assesses the effectiveness of engagement strategies, tracks impact, and provides recommendations	Prevalent

practices—from ideation to implementation and evaluation—and highlights their relative prevalence in the data, illustrated below (in the text) with representative quotes. The coding scheme used is provided in Appendix 2 (in the Supplementary File).

4.1. Institutional Innovators

The first role identified in the typology is that of *institutional innovator*. Although this role appears less frequently across interviews, it is analytically significant. In this capacity, parliamentary officials act as innovators bringing forward new ideas, advocating for reform, and driving experimentation in public engagement. While not as prevalent as other roles, when present, it plays a critical role in steering parliaments toward more adaptive, modern, and open institutions.

Innovation in parliamentary settings—understood as a deliberate departure from the *status quo*—manifests most visibly through strategic planning, digital transformation, and institutional modernization. Officials have played a central role in steering technological shifts and shaping long-term visions for engagement infrastructure. As one official described: "We're currently launching a completely new five-year strategy, which includes shifting as much as possible to cloud-based and shared services to reduce costs wherever feasible." (official, interview 35). These kinds of forward-looking strategies reflect an ambition not only to modernize internal systems, but to enhance the flexibility and accessibility of public-facing services.

In the field of digital communication, officials have often been at the forefront of efforts to transform parliamentary data into open, user-friendly formats. Recalling the UK Parliament's digital overhaul in 2010, one official emphasized this shift: "Our entire goal now is to produce all content of public interest in XML format, so that anyone can re-analyse it, reuse it, integrate it into other systems, or simply consume it in new ways" (official, interview 35). This statement captures a broader orientation toward transparency and interoperability—core values in the digital governance agenda.

In some cases, administrative proposals for reform even preceded political mandates. In Portugal, for example, officials recall initiating change before the creation of formal working groups. As one noted: "Before the Digital [Parliament] working group was created, our services had already proposed a reform of the website. It might not have been as deep, but it started from within the services" (official, interview 2). A similar pattern can be found in Austria, where officials were instrumental in advocating for the mobile optimisation of the parliamentary website. Yet institutional change was not immediate. As one official recounted: "It took a long time to convince management that we needed mobile optimisation. We started talking about it five or six years ago" (official, interview 9). The delayed uptake notwithstanding, such testimony reflects the persistent efforts of administrative actors to modernize parliamentary infrastructure—often through long-term advocacy and persuasion.

In certain contexts, innovation emerges not from political leadership but from within the administrative teams of parliament. A good example comes from Portugal's Youth Parliament, where the idea to create an Instagram account originated not from elected officials but from staff. As one MP recalled: "It was the administration that proposed the idea of using Instagram for the Youth Parliament" (MP, interview 15). This instance illustrates how administrative actors can act as crucial agents of change, shaping the environment in which innovation becomes possible.

Thus officials themselves initiate change and advocate for novel approaches to public engagement—challenging the notion that parliamentary administrations are merely reactive, peripheral, or even politically neutral actors in democratic practice (Baxter, 1991; P. M. Christiansen et al., 2016). When officials propose new strategies to reach the public or take the lead in advancing engagement initiatives, they do more than demonstrate a proactive approach—they reveal underlying normative understandings of how democratic institutions should relate to citizens. These actions often reflect a commitment to values such as openness, accessibility, responsiveness, and participation. In this sense, officials are not only exercising discretion within existing frameworks, but also articulating a vision of what parliaments ought to be in a democratic society.

However, innovative ideas alone are rarely sufficient to shift institutional practices. Officials are often acutely aware of the limitations they face. As one put it: "We face certain restrictions when trying to implement new things within the architecture of the parliamentary website" (official, interview 6). In such instances, officials often find themselves needing to "make the case" to persuade political actors. As another official put it:

> We need to look closely, listen carefully, and understand the context of the politicians we work with. Sometimes, we know our ideas won't be implemented in full—but what we can do as an administration is explain them, make the case. (official, interview 9)

In doing so, officials do more than propose ideas—they actively and strategically advance the public engagement agenda and shape its direction.

This tension between administrative initiative and political authority is echoed in other settings. In the UK, one senior official explained: "Among certain officials here, there's a lot of frustration. We needed something like the Modernisation Committee to give authority to the principles and the idea" (official, interview 27). The same dynamic is acknowledged in Portugal, where one official noted: "The services can proactively make proposals, but they obviously require political validation and involvement" (official, interview 2). As another put it, "Political will is a very important factor. It's the click—the moment someone presses the button and things move forward" (official, interview 1). This view is not limited to officials. Some MPs recognize the limits of administrative initiative: "We can't expect the official to simply hand me the political and technological solution to a problem that, in the first instance, is political" (MP, interview 5). Ultimately, these accounts reaffirm a key insight from the literature: civil servants operate within politicised institutional environments where their autonomy is shaped—and often constrained—by the need for political buy-in, strategic alignment, and resource availability (Öhberg et al., 2017). Innovation from below may plant the seed, but it is political will that determines whether it takes root.

4.2. Knowledge Facilitators

The longstanding role of parliamentary officials in gathering, synthesizing, and delivering information to MPs is well documented. Traditionally, officials have provided legislators with policy analysis, legal interpretation, and comparative insights. In the realm of public engagement, this role is very prevalent and crucial, having expanded. Officials act as *knowledge facilitators* by identifying best practices, evaluating emerging tools and trends, and advising on the implementation of new strategies. As one official explained, their responsibility includes "providing information on how other parliaments approach these matters" (official, interview 18).

A key aspect of their role involves proactive inquiry: "We sent questions to all parliaments asking how they engage with citizens" (official, interview 2). Parliamentary officials routinely turn to inter-parliamentary networks such as the ECPRD and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) to stay informed and navigate institutional change (Serra-Silva, 2023). This is particularly relevant in the realm of public engagement, which remains a relatively new area for many parliaments (Leston-Bandeira & Siefken, 2023). For instance, they draw extensively on international guidelines to inform their work and ensure alignment with broader democratic norms, as noted by officials: "We rely on the recommendations of the IPU," or "There is also a guide on parliaments and social media that we consulted during the website renewal" (official, interview 2). The platforms offered by these institutions, for example through seminars, support the exchange of experiences and enable officials to "understand the potential of these new tools … and how to translate that understanding into the organization of parliamentary processes" (official, interview 2). This includes technical assistance and advice on the delivery of essential administrative services such as "restructuring the parliamentary website" or "managing social networks" (officials, interviews 18 and 22). Such exchanges also take place through visits to peer institutions: "I went over and met the Swedish team just before the summer" (official, interview 33). Altogether, through these networks and exchanges, officials become equipped with the necessary knowledge and expertise to "build strategies of public engagement" (official, interview 2).

While MPs rely on staff for independent information (Otjes, 2022), parliamentary officials draw on transnational networks to access context-sensitive knowledge about public engagement. These exchanges help them identify and adapt engagement practices, digital tools, and outreach strategies to their own institutional environments—offering, as one put it, "a better picture of what is possible and works" (official, interview 2). Officials act thus as internal knowledge brokers (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024), ensuring that insights from abroad inform domestic engagement efforts, even when outcomes fall short. As a senior Austrian official recalled, staff provided examples from other countries during a 2014 inquiry committee on democratic reform, "but in the end, the essential reform steps…were not translated into legislation" (official, interview 6). Acting as knowledge facilitators involves identifying feasible modes of citizen interaction, anticipating institutional and political constraints, and helping to define priorities for public engagement, even if ultimately the political will does not take these forward.

Moreover, officials actively contribute to the broader ecosystem of democratic innovation within parliaments by cultivating sustained relationships with academic institutions, think tanks, and civil society organizations. In doing so, they function as key nodes within institutional knowledge networks (Neuhold & Högenauer, 2016). These collaborations enrich the knowledge available to parliaments, potentially enhancing the value of public engagement initiatives, particularly during periods of institutional experimentation: "when something is still being created, many contributions come from society" (official, interview 21). Officials also recognize the need for deeper partnerships to better understand public needs: "We need to understand—together with civil society—what people actually need, and what we are doing wrong" (official, interview 36). Drawing on external expertise to support institutional learning, officials increasingly act as knowledge facilitators, integrating evidence and societal input into public engagement strategies and initiatives.

4.3. Strategic Decision Facilitator

In some contexts, officials also contribute meaningfully through their strategic involvement as decision influencers and facilitators. When given a seat at the table—whether formally, through participation in working groups or committees, or informally, through access to senior decision-making spaces—officials act as *strategic decision facilitators*, helping to shape institutional priorities, align administrative actions with political goals, and translate abstract objectives into operational plans.

A notable example is the inclusion of staff as full members of a public engagement working group in Portugal (2016–2018), where heads of parliamentary services participated alongside MPs in strategy development and decision-making. Their involvement, described as "fundamental," "fruitful," and "extremely important" (MPs, interviews 4, 8, 14), was seen as critical to successful implementation: "If only one of the two dimensions, representative or administrative, had been involved, decisions would likely have failed, as has happened before" (MP, interview 4). Similar patterns are evident in the UK parliament, where officials are increasingly recognised as strategic actors: "I've been invited for the first time to a senior management event…so it signals they're starting to realise how essential it is to seek out our contribution" (official, interview 33). These examples illustrate how officials, when engaged as active stakeholders, contribute not only to implementation but also to the early development and strategic direction of parliamentary initiatives.

Such examples reflect the value of integrating the institutional memory, logistical expertise, and practical insights that officials bring into strategic conversations about public engagement. Officials ensure that engagement planning is grounded in operational reality and not confined to purely theoretical or abstract discussions. As one parliamentary official noted: "Bringing both politicians and officials into the same forum diversified and enriched the discussion" (official, interview 2). Similarly, an MP highlighted the pragmatic benefits of this inclusion: "Many times, MPs engage in conversations on these matters that remain purely theoretical. The presence of representatives from all services in every meeting—actively participating and co-developing solutions—allowed us to identify real-life bottlenecks and challenges" (MP, Interview 14). Engaging officials as critical stakeholders also fosters a more collaborative institutional environment. By involving officials from the outset, MPs strengthen their working relationships with staff, improving overall institutional cohesion. As one MP observed: "If staff were not motivated and did not feel part of the solution, they would hardly contribute. This approach fostered an unprecedented relationship between staff—who represent nearly 400 people in this institution—and MPs" (MP, interview 14).

In several cases, regardless of whether officials hold a formal seat at the decision-making table, they lead critical aspects of institutional strategy by defining and coordinating the strategic direction of public engagement. As one senior official explained, "We've been developing a website strategy and an intranet strategy" (official, interview 33), with another reflecting on their involvement in shaping long-term priorities: "I was involved in thinking about web strategy and the origin of the recent push" (official, interview 35).

Once again, when officials exercise discretion in shaping engagement priorities and defining institutional goals, they are actively operationalizing their *own normative understandings of what parliaments ought to do*. This challenges the conventional image of parliamentary administrators as neutral or impartial executors of political decisions (T. Christiansen et al., 2021; Kaufman, 1956), revealing them instead as actors who exercise agency, apply discretion, and exert strategic influence within the institutional sphere. Their ability to do so is rooted

in the longevity and continuity of their roles, which affords them institutional memory and a platform to shape long-term agendas. As one expert put it, "MPs come and go, but officials remain—they are part of the House" (expert, interview 10). A similar view was echoed by a MP, who stressed the importance of having "a technical team that guarantees continuity, regardless of political cycles" (MP, interview 14). Yet officials also acknowledge the limits of their influence, noting that sometimes they feel like they are "following things rather than leading them" and "a bit more remote from the big strategic decisions" (official, interview 36). These dynamics illustrate that access to strategic influence does not always equate to strategic authority.

4.4. Guarantor of Institutional Legitimacy

Beyond initiating or coordinating public engagement strategies, officials also play a quieter but equally essential role: that of guarantor of institutional legitimacy. In this capacity, officials often act as custodians of core democratic principles and institutional values. Drawing on their procedural knowledge and long-term perspective, they work to ensure that engagement practices are legally sound, democratically meaningful, and consistent with the symbolic identity of parliament. They intervene when proposals—even when well-intentioned—risk undermining the legitimacy, accessibility, or neutrality of parliamentary institutions.

This role was made particularly explicit in a case recounted by one Austrian official who intervened when an MP proposed abolishing the right to petition, claiming that citizen initiatives had rendered petitions redundant. The official pushed back, framing petitions as foundational democratic tools: "I had to engage in extensive discussions with many politicians on the committee to explain—both as an official and as a citizen—why petitions are crucial" (official, interview 12). This episode illustrates how, sometimes, officials act as *guarantors of institutional legitimacy*, stepping in to prevent regressions in democratic practice.

Acting as a guarantor also requires navigating subtle institutional risks. Internal debates over the public use of parliamentary video content illustrate this tension: "We've had a big debate about whether MPs or others can embed chamber footage … to maintain the integrity of the House and avoid ridicule or satire" (official, interview 33). Though technical on the surface, such debates reveal how officials balance openness against reputational risk, managing public access while protecting the institution's image in a rapidly evolving media environment. Officials also recognize their communicative role: "To say things that are both interesting but also neutral—that is hard, but … we know how to do that" (official, interview 33). Here, neutrality is not passive—it is strategic, enacted through communicative practices designed to engage the public in a non-partisan manner while preserving and projecting the institution's official identity: "Neutrality is fundamental to ensure that parliament is perceived as legitimate and impartial, especially in the context of social media and digital communication," as noted by a Portuguese oficial (interview 23).

This role involves designing institutional encounters that are open and meaningful. One official described efforts to rethink the visitor experience to avoid passive spectatorship: "Thinking about how the space is organised in a way that makes the public feel … much more like participants in the play rather than just onlookers" (official, interview 33). Acting as guarantors means ensuring engagement spaces are accessible and foster genuine interaction and belonging. In digital settings, similar concerns arise regarding balancing modern engagement with institutional control. As the official noted:

> The core question is how far we can realistically go to ensure we've got a website that is both out there with the world of the web, but also is portraying the institution in the way it wishes to be portrayed. (official, interview 33)

These reflections highlight officials' role in maintaining parliamentary integrity, neutrality, and credibility while adapting to public demands and technology, consequently acting as guarantor of institutional legitimacy.

4.5. Coordinator and Operational Manager

Among the roles identified in the interviews, the most visible and consistently referenced is what could be described as *coordinator and operational manager*. Officials orchestrate public engagement's delivery by ensuring that a wide range of engagement tools, platforms, and services are actively maintained, delivered, adapted, and aligned with institutional priorities. Their work anchors the daily functioning of engagement activities and gives institutional form to the strategic goals defined. This role spans content production to outreach logistics. Officials are frequently responsible for curating and disseminating the institution's public-facing messages. This work is embedded in routine processes, such as generating "news stories for the front page of the website" (official, interview 29) and managing the institutional presence across both physical and digital environments.

Officials are also heavily involved in the development and implementation of bespoke engagement tools and programs. For instance, in the case of the UK interactive online game "MP for a Week," an official recounted: "That took up two members of staff for a considerable amount of time—we did most of the writing and the direction of the content" (official, interview 36). Tool development typically involves procurement oversight as well, for which officials are responsible: "We put an idea out through five or six companies, they then come back with proposals to meet our requirements, and we choose what we think is the best one—they then go out and build it" (official, interview 36). This reflects a highly practical, project-managed mode of engagement delivery, in which officials exercise discretion over contracting and implementation.

As expected, these tasks are performed by staff who often operate with limited visibility, but whose work underpins the smooth functioning of engagement activities: "You need people in the civil service who just do. And if it doesn't interfere with politics—at least at the time—we can seize the moment" (official, interview 6). This understated pragmatism characterises much of the operational work that makes engagement possible. As one Portuguese MP succinctly put it, "The services ensure that [broadcasting and webcasting] function properly" (MP, interview 15). Officials bring ideas—whether initiated by MPs, staff, or citizens—into being. As both officials and MPs repeatedly noted in interviews, these actors are *active stewards* of the everyday mechanisms through which parliaments seek to remain accessible, visible, and responsive to the public. Through daily implementation and ongoing responsiveness, officials act as institutional translators of democratic commitments.

Beyond day-to-day tasks, officials coordinate efforts across services involved in public communication and engagement, reinforcing institutional standards and fostering cross-departmental collaboration. As one official noted, "It's constantly a job to go back and say, "these are the key rules, this is why you need to use this particular language, why introductions are important, why headings are important" (official, interview 30). Coordination also involves building bridges between teams to promote a more integrated

institutional approach. In the UK parliament, for example, outreach staff worked with senior clerks to create secondment opportunities, enabling officials to gain hands-on experience in public-facing roles. As one interviewee recounted:

> From the outset, senior people in the clerks' department asked me to explore the possibility of a secondment, so they could gain experience in outreach and public engagement. It's worked really well—it's created strong links between the teams, and the role has evolved massively. (official, interview 29)

This role is especially visible among directors, who translate institutional priorities into operational plans. Here, the impact of administrative capacity and resources becomes particularly clear. Interviewees widely expressed concern over shortages of time, staff, and financial resources needed to deliver effective engagement: "In a lot of parliaments—especially those with smaller administrations—everybody is responsible for at least three things" (official, interview 6).

Others pointed to the growing gap between political ambition and administrative capacity: "The back office needs to have the capacity to respond to the challenges set by the political side" (official, interview 1). The pressure is palpable: "We are investigating [how to engage more effectively] in a very small amount of time" (official, interview 17). This institutional strain is recognised by everyone from MPs to officials to experts, as illustrated by the following quotes: "I think they're working at the very limit of their competencies and capacities. And beyond that, we need other kinds of resources that simply don't exist within Parliament" (MP, interview 14); "Resources are limited and scarce" (official, interview 2); "Parliaments have tightly allocated resources" (expert, interview 11). These observations resonate with long-standing insights from the literature: "Effective public engagement requires considerable resources and financial investment" (Leston-Bandeira, 2014, p. 432).

4.6. Evaluators and Monitors

Finally, the role of officials as *evaluators and monitors* emerges as a crucial dimension of how parliaments learn from and adjust their public engagement efforts. In this role, officials are tasked with assessing the effectiveness, usability, and public reach of engagement strategies. They attempt to generate feedback loops, identify barriers to access, and track whether institutional offerings meet citizens' needs.

This role was particularly developed in the UK parliament back in 2010, where systematic user tracking, surveys, and internal consultation processes were starting to become regularly integrated into engagement planning. One official described the use of light-touch but continuous tools: "At the moment we've been doing one survey a month, which is sort of a pop-up—it's only under ten questions" (official, interview 30). These monthly surveys were part of a wider evaluation infrastructure, where feedback was collected, reviewed, and acted upon: "They produced a six-month review of all those surveys, and the other information—that's been really useful" (official, interview 30).

Not all parliaments have established streamlined processes for collecting and assessing public engagement data, even though such processes are essential for reflecting on practice and fostering institutional learning (Sheldon, 2023). In the Portuguese parliament, for instance, regular evaluation procedures had yet to be

formalised by 2019 when interviews were undertaken. As one official acknowledged: "We once had a survey, but we received very few responses" (official, interview 2). Nevertheless, the importance of monitoring and evaluation was widely recognized as part of staff's role. Reflecting on the mixed success of different engagement initiatives, one MP remarked: "Sometimes strange ideas work well, and good ideas don't. So in this case, the criterion has to be results—concrete functioning and implementation. If the services and their staff evaluate the experience positively, that should carry weight" (MP, interview 14). Also, a newly appointed director of a communications service expressed a clear commitment to building evaluative practices: "What I would like to do is, after a year of the website being live, to begin a re-evaluation process with both internal and external users" (official, interview 23). These examples suggest that even in the absence of formalised structures, a culture of evaluation was beginning to take shape—driven primarily by officials' pragmatic need to learn from experience and recalibrate engagement strategies accordingly.

Although formal evaluation frameworks are not consistently in place across the three parliaments studied, this does not mean that assessment is absent. Officials often engage in informal, experience-based evaluation, drawing on internal feedback to guide their work. As one official put it: "It's learning all the time and getting better and better" (official, interview 9). Others highlighted the importance of having administrative staff who can engage directly with citizens, noting that "we get a lot of emails…and having someone in the administration who can respond, encourage dialogue, and draw out new ideas is very important" (official, interview 6). In Portugal, a staff-led initiative illustrates this approach: "In 2016, new recruits and interns were asked for website suggestions—and we clearly took some into account" (official, interview 22). Informal feedback loops are not limited to parliaments without formal mechanisms; in the UK parliament, where structured monitoring already existed, officials still relied on day-to-day signals: "We get information from people ringing in…or someone will say, 'we've had loads of calls about this' " (official, interview 30). These everyday interactions help staff recalibrate communication priorities and adjust engagement efforts in real time.

However, it is worth mentioning that officials also voiced frustration about the limitations of evaluation when political or institutional follow-through is lacking. One summed up this disconnection bluntly: "That's our job—collecting the data, compiling the report, delivering it….What happens after? I don't know" (official, interview 18). While officials may act as evaluators and monitors, their ability to close the feedback loop (Leston-Bandeira, 2022; Sheldon, 2023), and to ensure that learning leads to change inside the institution, is often constrained by political will. As one senior official from the Austrian parliament clearly put it: "Political commitment cannot be substituted by civil servants." They went on to emphasise that "all participatory approaches, consultation practices, and activities involving citizens require a certain degree of political commitment behind them" (official, interview 9). This insight holds true across all phases of public engagement in parliamentary contexts—from the initial design and political endorsement of engagement strategies, to their implementation and subsequent evaluation.

5. Conclusion

As parliaments expand their public engagement function, they also require staff with new specialized skills in areas beyond traditional ones (e.g., clerking legislation), such as communication. In this article, we set out to understand the type of roles performed by staff involved in the development and implementation of public

engagement in parliaments. Previous literature has demonstrated the critical part played by staff in the delivery of public engagement in legislatures, but had not identified the different roles they play. Drawing from 37 semi-structured elite interviews across three parliaments (Austria, Portugal, and UK), we established a typology of six different but interrelated roles: institutional innovator, knowledge facilitator, strategic decision facilitator, guarantor of institutional legitimacy, coordinator and operational manager, and evaluator and monitor.

The six roles help to identify processes and actions that are often invisible to the outsider, but which are critical if parliaments are to develop meaningful public engagement. Crucially, our analysis challenges the traditional perspective of the civil servant as a neutral executor of political decisions (T. Christiansen et al., 2021; Kaufman, 1956), showing that staff not only have agency but also that this is often recognized and welcomed by MPs, who may not feel as confident in their expertise and skills within the area of engagement. Our typology also unveils the way officials navigate between the political and the operational realms, through suggesting new ideas, whilst acting as guarantors of the institution's reputation and evaluating ongoing practice, but never quite making the final decision on any of these, always dependent on the political will. This becomes particularly challenging within the roles of institutional innovator and evaluator and monitor, both key for public engagement, where staff may identify paths for development, which may not be taken forward by MPs. As we stated before, access to strategic influence does not always equate to strategic authority.

Although some of the roles identified in our analysis—most notably the knowledge facilitator—may also apply to other domains of parliamentary work, several others appear to be specific to the sphere of public engagement. For example, while innovation within the legislative process is typically top-down and driven by MPs or party leadership, in the realm of engagement, staff play a particularly significant role as *initiators of change*, occasionally leading transformative practices from within the institution. This happens in great part because public engagement practices are well established outside parliaments; they are not a traditional parliamentary function. Innovation, therefore, enters through multiple pathways, with specialized or motivated parliamentary staff playing a key role in facilitating the adoption of new ideas and tools. Moreover, public engagement roles require staff to mediate between the internal workings of parliament and the broader public sphere, thereby shaping how the institution is perceived by citizens. This outward-facing, reputational function contrasts with the more internally oriented nature of legislative support. In this context, parliamentary staff also take on a vital gatekeeping role—defining and enforcing the limits of institutional openness. This function, largely absent in their legislative duties, is particularly significant in an era marked by declining trust in political elites and the erosion of political parties.

This study contributes thus to the expanding literature on citizen engagement and representative institutions, as well as to our broader understanding of how legislatures work by spotlighting the key role performed by staff in what is often seen as a critical activity to sustain the health of our modern democracies. It shows that in order to understand how representative institutions can strengthen the citizens' voice in the political process, one needs to adopt a more holistic approach that goes beyond the actions of individual politicians. Democratic renewal, in this view, rests not only on political will, but also on the often-invisible actions of those who make engagement possible from within—even as they navigate persistent constraints in the form of limited resources, insufficient training, time pressures, or lack of political will.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, our article has significant practical implications. As demands for transparency, accessibility, and meaningful participation in democratic decision-making continue to grow (Dryzek et al., 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019), so too does the need for parliaments to invest in the skills, capacities, and institutional infrastructures necessary to support robust engagement. Our findings underscore that public engagement depends on sustained investment in administrative capacity and institutional buy-in. Without adequate staffing, resources, and internal commitment, engagement initiatives risk becoming ad hoc, tokenistic, or unsustainable. This is especially urgent in an increasingly mediated political environment (Hendricks et al., 2020), where expectations regarding how parliaments communicate with and respond to citizens are higher than ever (Leston-Bandeira, 2016). Our evidence also illustrates the importance of embedding officials in the early stages of engagement planning—rather than limiting them to back-end implementation. Parliaments must learn to draw strength from their own: from those who remain through changing political tides, who carry institutional memory, and who quietly sustain the daily work of democracy. In this light, the typology we offer provides timely and actionable insights to inform institutional reform and support democratic renewal. These are not peripheral observations—they speak to the core of how parliaments can rebuild public trust from the inside out.

Finally, as with any study, certain limitations should be acknowledged. While the analysis spans three distinct parliamentary contexts, which makes it possible to examine how the roles of staff are practised and understood across different institutional settings, we may not fully capture variation across other institutional settings. Moreover, the typology developed here is most applicable to professionalised parliamentary administrations with a formal commitment to public engagement; its relevance may be more limited in legislatures with minimal administrative capacity, highly politicised bureaucracies, or weaker institutional frameworks. While we document the multiplicity of roles officials play, future research could explore how these roles interact, how staff navigate potential tensions between them, and how role performance varies across seniority levels and institutional cultures. Such questions are essential to furthering our understanding of how administrative actors shape democratic practices from within. Recognising their contribution is not simply a matter of academic interest—it is central to strengthening the democratic capacities of parliaments in an era of growing public scrutiny and institutional strain.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Solo, Group, or Team Effort? Work Dynamics of Parliamentary Offices for Parliamentarians' Political Communications

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Abstract

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) to parliamentarians are recognised as a critical part of the parliamentary machinery. Despite their relevance in supporting parliamentarians' work, the literature has shown little interest in them or their practices. Even less is known about the dynamics within parliamentary offices, or how PAs and their interactions shape parliamentarians' political communication. The mediated character of parliamentarians' public communication (e.g., on social media) is very often not even acknowledged. This article aims to address a research gap by exploring PAs' work arrangements and interactions and how these shape parliamentarians' political communication. The article utilises a comparative approach, focusing on Scotland-based Members of the House of Commons (MPs) and Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). Fifty-three interviews with former and recent PAs and M(S)Ps were conducted and analysed to illuminate the "black box" of parliamentary offices' inner workings. The article will address the following research questions: (a) How do parliamentarians organise communication-related tasks among their employed assistants? and (b) How is social media embedded in the political communication work processes of M(S)Ps' staff members? This article identifies three approaches to creating political communication in these offices (solo, group, and team effort). The findings suggest that the implications of utilising these approaches are far-reaching, affecting individual learning and professionalisation processes, agency, workload, staff turnover, and even the office's capacity to perform. The study also shows that M(S)Ps' parliamentary offices are remarkably similar in terms of organisation, challenges, and overall setup.

Keywords

communication practices; group effort; House of Commons; parliamentary assistants; parliamentary offices; parliamentary staff; political communication; Scottish Parliament; social media; team effort

1. Introduction

Parliamentary assistants (PAs) work for individual parliamentarians; they research, provide policy briefings, arrange meetings, organise the diary, plan events, undertake casework, communicate with constituents, and handle media requests (Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023; Pegan, 2017). Their increasingly important role is closely tied to the increasing complexities of legislators' duties and responsibilities. This is reflected in the significant rise in Members of the House of Commons' (MPs) annual staff allowance in the UK House of Commons from £8,000 in 1981 to £236,170 (MPs outside London) and £252,870 (MPs from London) in 2023 (cf. Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2023; Ryle, 1981). The budget designated to MPs' and Members of the Scottish Parliament's (MSPs) staff is about 70% (House of Commons) and 60% (Scottish Parliament) of the budget allocated to other legislative staff (such as clerks). Despite PAs' importance for the parliamentary capacity of their respective legislatures, there is very limited knowledge of their roles, political influence, practices, and work routines. In the British context, this is partly due to the flexibility and autonomy afforded to parliamentarians: they are comparatively free to determine salaries, enter into contracts (e.g., full-time and part-time), and allocate tasks and responsibilities to their staff as they see fit (McKee, 2023). Consequently, it has even been challenging to determine the actual staff numbers of PAs employed by MPs (Otjes, 2023), due to the combination of high staff turnover (McKee, 2023) and the aforementioned freedoms of MPs and MSPs to recruit and manage their employees. More recently, parliamentarians' treatment of their staff and the underlying (lack of) managerial professionalism have been discussed in broader public debates and inquiries into the (mis-)treatment of PAs by their employers (Sawer & Maley, 2024).

The limitations of the literature on PAs are problematic, not only because of their substantial contributions and support to parliamentarians, but also because of their role as the interface between the (individual) parliamentarian and the wider public and media. Constituents usually do not have direct contact with their elected representatives (Blackwell et al., 2019), but if they get in touch with their office (e.g., by email or on social media), it may not always be possible for them to identify whether they communicated with their elected representative or with one of their staff members (Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021). Communication between individual constituents and their respective representatives is, at best, rare, and usually mediated by their PAs (e.g., by drafting columns or Facebook posts) and third parties (e.g., journalists). However, the mediated character of parliamentarians' communication is often not even acknowledged (Lev-On et al., 2017). Considering that communication on behalf of parliamentarians potentially impacts constituents' perceptions and attitudes, the question of communication ownership and PAs' influence is crucial: Parliamentarians' communications, created by their staff, contribute to the politician's public image. This is particularly relevant in political systems where voters can vote for individual candidates, since voters' "personal vote" would be shaped by their staff members' communication efforts rather than the parliamentarian's communication. Therefore, it is essential to establish who has ownership and control over the parliamentarians' communication output.

To date, the political communication practices and routines within parliamentary offices (e.g., drafting speeches or press releases) have been largely neglected in scholarly debate (Lev-On et al., 2017; McKee, 2023). Given the increase in MPs' staff allowances, which enable them to employ several staff members, even the interactions among those PAs themselves can affect communication output. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining the dynamics and arrangements of parliamentary offices in relation to political

communication. It explores how PAs involved in communication-related tasks interact and how those interactions shape communication output. The article will also examine how the utilisation of social media is integrated into the arrangements surrounding parliamentarians' political communication efforts. The findings demonstrate that it is not just the individual PA's work that matters, but also the office's working arrangements and the interactions fostered among staff members.

2. PAs: The Hidden Communicators Behind Parliamentarians' Communications

While there has been an increased interest in PAs (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023; Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023), this area remains under-researched (Otjes, 2023). The available literature is often focused on the United States Congress (Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017; Shepherd & You, 2020) and the European Parliament (Hermansen & Pegan, 2023; Pegan, 2017). The literature on PAs in other contexts, such as Canada (Dickin, 2016), Germany (Lettrari, 2020), Israel (Lev-On et al., 2017; Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020), or the UK (Dale, 2015; McKee, 2023), is relatively limited and sometimes even outdated. Given that the European Parliament and the United States Congress have far more resources, research focused on them arguably has limited transferability. Research on PAs' role in parliamentarians' political communication is even scarcer; only a very few attempts have been made to explore their routines and practices (notable exceptions: Fisher, 2014, 2017; Lev-On et al., 2017; Sabag Ben-Porat & Lehman-Wilzig, 2021; Sabag Ben-Porat et al., 2020).

Particularly relevant is the research undertaken by Sabag Ben-Porat et al. (2020) and Lev-On et al. (2017) on PA's role in communicating on behalf of Knesset MPs on social media (i.e., Facebook). Both articles draw attention to the mediated nature of online communication, challenging the perception of social media as a platform for direct communication between politicians and citizens. They differ from most of the available literature, which focuses on politicians' social media use without acknowledging its highly mediated character (Baxter et al., 2016; Peng, 2021). Lev-On et al. (2017) explored the factors shaping the process of creating social media posts. They particularly highlight the time- and labour-intensive nature of these communication efforts, suggesting that this may lead to the emergence of PAs whose roles are explicitly dedicated to social media management and communication. Interestingly, Sabag Ben-Porat et al. (2020) find that communication-related skills and experiences are rarely considered in the hiring process for PAs, even though they are a primary responsibility. This finding is mirrored in McKee's (2023) findings, noting that MPs' staff have limited work experience. Necessary skills and experience are usually acquired on the job rather than being prerequisites for entering the role.

Sabag Ben-Porat and Lehman-Wilzig (2021) examined the impact of structural factors on MPs' engagement in social media communication. They found that contextual factors are particularly important, shaping MPs' involvement in communication processes and their task delegation. Trust has also been identified as a determinant of the PA's autonomy in social media management in the US context, mirroring earlier research on the role of trust in the relationship between elected representatives and their staff (Abbott et al., 2020; Dale, 2015). However, it is worth noting that the outlined literature does not provide a comprehensive view of political communication practices and interactions. In particular, engagement with media representatives, drafting press releases, speechwriting, blogging, writing columns, and giving interviews has attracted too little attention. It also fails to discuss whether and how different political communication practices, routines, and activities are managed and integrated. For instance, it is unclear whether and how interactions with the mass media (e.g., requests from journalists, writing columns) align with work processes for political

communication on social media on behalf of the parliamentarian. Political communication, in this context, refers primarily to communication that is directed to the wider public, such as speeches, publicly available messaging on social media, interacting with media stakeholders (e.g., local journalists) to promote news coverage of the parliamentarian (or the causes they support).

While parts of the available literature examine PAs' activities (McKee, 2023), it remains unclear how communication-related tasks are integrated into the relevant workflows of parliamentary offices. This is problematic, as rising staff budgets for parliamentarians enable MPs to employ small teams of assistants, allowing them to delegate a broader range of tasks, e.g., in the UK (House of Commons and devolved legislatures) and Germany (Lettrari, 2020; McKee, 2023). Unsurprisingly, the staff's interaction with those performing delegated tasks attracted little debate (notable exceptions include Lettrari, 2020, on the German Bundestag). To the author's knowledge, little is known about PAs' interactions in political communication processes undertaken on behalf of parliamentarians, due to the absence of systematic investigations on this topic. This is particularly problematic, given that the quality and preferred means of communication for UK MPs vary, depending on their priorities and interest in media engagement and political communication. Consequently, organisational arrangements within those offices are characterised by a comparatively high degree of flexibility (Dale, 2015; Flynn, 2012). That said, while parliamentarians are flexible in their staffing arrangements and recruitment, the staff allowance can only be used for activities that need to be performed by the parliamentarian to fulfil their responsibilities as elected representatives (Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, 2023; Scottish Parliament, 2023). However, spending on dual-use activities that support M(S)Ps' efforts to fulfil their duties as legislators and are advantageous for their re-election campaigns is not prohibited. For example, Carman and Shephard (2007) found that MSPs tend to locate their constituency offices to support their electoral endeavours strategically.

3. Scotland as a Typical Case?

Scotland is particularly suitable for studying the role of PAs. Broader trends, such as mediatisation and professionalisation, that could potentially affect their work and those found in other developed democracies, have been identified in the Scottish context (Downs, 2012; Schlesinger et al., 2001). There have also been several investigations into Scottish parliamentarians' utilisation of social media platforms during and outside campaigning periods, indicating that this means of communication has been well established but is often underutilised and limited to broadcasting messages rather than interacting with constituents and voters (Baxter & Marcella, 2013; Baxter et al., 2016). However, the findings may be dated and require further investigation to determine whether the results remain valid.

Besides mirroring increasingly important developments in political communication, Scotland offers a unique opportunity to study the impact of different mandate types (list and constituency mandates) associated with the Scottish electoral system (mixed-member proportional representation; MMP) on political communication processes and associated staffing arrangements by MSPs. Adding to this, the Scottish political system allows for comparing the influence of arrangements of parliamentarians of a sub-state parliament (MSPs) with parliamentarians of the national parliament (MPs), as well as different types of electoral systems (FPTP vs MMP) on parliamentarians' staffing arrangements.

One potential difference in the political communication processes in M(S)Ps' parliamentary offices may stem from different approaches parliamentarians take to seeking votes (i.e., party-vote-seeking and personal-vote-seeking). The literature (Carey & Shugart, 1995; Crisp et al., 2007; Poole, 2019) suggests that party-vote-seeking behaviour is more likely in proportional electoral systems, whereas personal-vote-seeking behaviour is more common in majoritarian and plurality electoral systems. While ongoing debates about these approaches usually focus on electoral campaigns, they can arguably be used to understand broader political communication efforts by parliamentarians. For instance, Carman and Shephard (2007) noted that list MSPs tend to target individual constituency seats to become constituency-based MSPs. This approach also suggested that other contextual factors, such as political culture, may play a significant role. Arguably, this behaviour mirrors a tendency towards a Westminster-type understanding of their role, preferring constituency-based mandates over list mandates, which aligns with Lundberg's (2014) findings on the tensions between list- and constituency-based MSPs. However, the list mandate may cause PAs to focus on national issues relevant to the wider electoral region or party to secure a favourable place on the list and promote party votes. This may shape work arrangements compared to those of the more "local" parliamentarian with a constituency mandate.

The aforementioned tensions between constituency-based parliamentarians and those elected through a regional party list underscore the disparity between the initial intention to establish a distinct political system in Scotland from Westminster ("new politics") and the limitations of such an endeavour. Scholars largely agree that it failed to achieve its ambitious goals of making politics in Scotland more consensual and less adversarial (Lundberg, 2014; Mitchell, 2010). Consequently, exploring how different institutional arrangements, electoral systems, and broader systemic factors influence work dynamics in parliamentary offices at the individual level could contribute to the "new politics" debate with a unique angle, while also yielding findings transferable to other contexts.

4. Solo, Group, and Team Effort: What Is the Difference, and Why Does It Matter?

Although little is known about the interplay between PAs of the same office, in principle, several types of arrangements concerning communication-related tasks are possible. Those arrangements will centre on the extent to which communication tasks are allocated among staff members, the parliamentarian's involvement, whether communication processes are fixed, and how staff interactions influence those processes. This article aims to address those questions by trying to answer:

(a) How are communication-related tasks organised among PAs employed by parliamentarians?
(b) How is social media embedded in the political communication work processes of M(S)Ps' staff members?

To understand and distinguish among possible arrangements, this article adopts the debate over group versus team differences as an analytical framework. There has been substantial discussion in the literature about whether groups and teams should be distinguished. Emerging scholarly opinions can be clustered into three schools of thought: Authors like Kozlowski and Bell (2003) use both terms synonymously. In contrast, scholars such as Spector (2012) argue that teams are a distinct type of group; hence, they share the outlined characteristics but also possess features beyond those characteristics that set them apart from other group subtypes. Unlike the aforementioned two schools of thought, Katzenbach and Smith (2015) argue that groups and teams are two distinct concepts. While they agree that both concepts share similar

characteristics, they emphasise that their differences, such as the quality of interaction among group members compared to team members, are more significant. Consequently, they characterise groups and teams as different types of collectives.

The analytical framework of this article utilises the differentiation between groups and teams put forward by Katzenbach and Smith (2015) and approaches both concepts as ideal types. The empirical realities of different parliamentary offices may approximate a group or team, but are unlikely to exhibit all the characteristics of a group or team. Instead, the working arrangements in parliamentary offices are expected to occupy a position in the continuum between a group and a team, featuring characteristics of both.

Katzenbach and Smith (2015) identify several dimensions to differentiate groups and teams. They characterise leadership in a group as fixed, whereas teams would approach leadership more flexibly (i.e., situational adjustments and rotation). Evaluating the configuration of leadership roles in political communication within the context of parliamentarians' offices will also help clarify the extent of parliamentarians' involvement or leadership in communication efforts, or whether leadership is delegated to PAs. The greater flexibility teams typically feature is mirrored in their goal-setting process, which would be characterised by deliberation and collective decision-making. In contrast, group goal-setting is typically conducted by the designated leader, who may or may not consult with members of the work collective. Another critical dimension for differentiating groups and teams is accountability for work output within the work collective. In groups, contributions by individual members of the collective are identifiable; individuals are therefore accountable for their work output. In teams, the whole team is accountable, while the individual's accountability is limited. Consequently, teamwork is characterised by a joint effort, while groupwork is the sum of individual members' efforts. Another critical dimension addresses the stability of roles within groups and teams: fixed roles are characteristic of groups, while relatively flexible roles are typical of teams.

The conceptualisation of the differences between groups and teams helps to understand the quality of interaction within parliamentary offices for communication-related tasks. For instances where communication-related tasks are highly centralised and almost exclusively undertaken by one PA, the "solo effort" category has been added. This category is to be understood as an ideal type as well, like groups and teams. Consequently, in practice, even the "solo effort" might include some form of interaction with other parliamentary office staff members, which can directly or indirectly contribute to communication-related work.

To conclude, the categories of solo, team, and group effort will be applied to analyse PAs' activities on political communication-related tasks. While differentiation between groups and teams is used when more than one person is assigned to those tasks, solo effort refers to arrangements with a single designated communication officer. Overall, those ideal-type categories will be distinguished to determine the quality of interaction between involved PAs and the embedding of communication-related activities in the communication efforts (e.g., compartmentalisation of responsibilities versus integrated approach).

5. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive elements. I conducted 53 semi-structured expert interviews with former and current PAs and parliamentarians between

August 2019 and June 2022. Several sampling strategies (Bogner et al., 2014) were employed to ensure broad representation of interviewees from different parties, parliaments, mandate types, tenure, seniority, age, and gender, including staff from front and backbenchers. Existing private contacts were initially used to access interviewees. Thereafter, I emailed each parliamentary office in Scotland, asking whether PAs or M(S)Ps would be willing to participate. After conducting the first interviews, newly established contacts with interviewees and already-known contacts were used to distribute the call for participants.

The main challenges encountered were typical for interviews with experts and political elites. Hence, I adjusted my approach towards potential participants and utilised different sampling strategies to mitigate accessibility and ethical problems (Bogner et al., 2014; Bryman, 2012). Interviewees have been informed in advance and shortly before the interview about the purpose, scope, and details of this research to obtain their informed consent; they were also offered confidentiality and anonymity for their accounts. In this article, interviewed parliamentarians were anonymised using two letters (e.g., Interviewee CA), while interviewed PAs were quoted using one letter (e.g., Interviewee O). References to parliamentarians that could be used to identify interviewees were anonymised using a letter-number combination (e.g., K1's diary). The research project successfully underwent the ethical review process at the researcher's home institution, providing further assurance to interviewees that their data would be handled with discretion. Participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw at any time, providing them with additional protection (Lancaster, 2017). The interviews were conducted in a setting most accommodating to participants, and different formats (in-person or online) were offered. The duration and timing of the interviews were adjusted to meet the needs of the interviewees (Bogner et al., 2014). To increase the accuracy of the information collected from the interviews, I decided relatively early in the fieldwork to reach out to former PAs, as they are less constrained by work relationships with their former employers.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the participants' permission. I employed qualitative content analysis to gain insight into their accounts (Gläser & Laudel, 2009; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analysis was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, during the interviews, notes were taken to document key processes and main factors discussed, which informed the coding of the interviews in later stages. The coding has been undertaken in stages 2 and 3 of the analysis using NVivo. In the second stage, I utilised the notes I made during the interview and initial coding to identify relevant categories and themes. In the third stage, I revised the coding and the initially identified themes and categories by utilising the analytical framework of differentiating solo, group, and team effort.

6. Findings I: Communication as Solo, Group, and Team Effort

While interviewees often described working arrangements in parliamentary offices as idiosyncratic and flexible, they commonly characterised communication-related tasks as team effort. Typically, interviewees evidenced this by outlining that several PAs would contribute ideas and elements to communication outputs (such as press releases or Facebook posts), or by being involved in proofreading and editing. One of the interviewees, a case worker to an MSP, described such an interaction:

> Sometimes [colleagues] will [ask], "Is there any casework that is maybe newsworthy?"…Other times…I am…researching…stuff like that, I can easily say to the rest of the team, "Here's what's happening. Here is how we can promote it." (Interviewee O)

It was common for interviewees, particularly those working for MSPs, to note that there was no clear designation of a communication officer in parliamentary offices, highlighting the informality and flexibility of the role. For MPs and MSPs alike, it was not unusual to assign communication tasks ad hoc, considering their PAs' workload and availability. However, on balance, communication tasks were allocated based on staff's pre-existing experience and (presumed) familiarity with the topic:

> R1 has…two full-time staff…myself and my colleague…and if it is [issue 1 related], which is part of R1's portfolio, it tends to be [colleague] that will write it. If it's [issue 2 related], it'll be myself….And then there is a series of sign-offs and proofread [sic] before we post it. (Interviewee R)

Typically, PAs collaborate on communication tasks, though only to a very limited extent. Very often, there is an identifiable lead on a specific task; other staff members have a supportive function, e.g., proofreading and providing ideas. The recurring theme of task allocation based on perceived competence, leading over time to relatively fixed arrangements, also indicates a tendency to approach communication tasks within the staff collective as group work rather than a joint effort. However, the emphasis on the flexibility of these arrangements—it "tends to be" the colleague rather than a clear designation—and the extent of the proofreading adjustments undertaken by PAs may alter the original text beyond linguistic modifications, transforming the character and angle of the communication. In those cases, which have been frequently mentioned in interviews, individual accountability is replaced by shared accountability, characterising a team effort rather than a group effort.

In issue-based campaigns that require additional communication effort, PAs' interplay may also become crucial to the final shape of the communication output. Interviewee M noted that in the context of a specific campaign, communication-related tasks were dispersed, requiring collaboration and joint effort by staff members:

> [T]he [prominent issue] survey [and] subsequent campaign…took everyone, so we had the office manager…getting diary appointments that T1 could speak to people involved with the companies that provide the…infrastructure, we had interns…help[ing] us [to] get the stuff out…and help[ing] [to do] local press….There's not really anything that we do that is 100% a solo effort. (Interviewee M)

Whether this office has a group arrangement for communication-related duties also depends on the degree of integration among staff members' activities. The example describes the integration of a formally designated communication officer into a group project that aimed at advancing the M(S)P's policy priorities. The M(S)P provided the aims and objectives of that project, and tasks were allocated based on experience and skill sets. The work on this specific project involves group work with individual accountability, a larger number of participants, leadership by the parliamentarian, and fixed roles. However, the interviewed PA noted that projects like this are comparatively rare, accounting for only a small proportion of parliamentary offices' communication. Consequently, at large, this office still tended to organise communication as a solo effort, given the concentration of communication-related tasks on one PA. While campaign involvement is part of the role, responding to parliamentary business and issues arising in the constituency accounted for most of the communication-related work. Therefore, describing this PA's role as a solo effort rather than a team or group effort would be more accurate, even if his role includes elements of group effort (due to integration into wider campaigns and projects).

Some M(S)Ps conduct long-term campaigns on matters they are interested in (e.g., housing) and invest significant resources in them. When those long-term campaigns account for a substantial proportion of the communication output and require PAs to dedicate considerable work time, communication-related duties often qualify as either group or team efforts. Interviewee F provided an example of how the campaigning-related tasks have been divided and coordinated between colleagues in her parliamentary office:

> X1's involved in several campaigns….[Prominent issue] caused quite a lot of severe injury, [affected individuals] who've been left in terrible condition….We'll work with journalists, [another PA] will send…freedom of information inquiries, letters to the government…and if it were…issues that we want to get on social media, or…put that in a graphic or put that in a video, we would work together to see…how best we get the message across. (Interviewee F)

The interviewee described their parliamentarian's campaign, identified the different tasks that needed to be done, and explained how they contributed to the communication output. The various activities during this campaign were integrated and linked rather than compartmentalised or detached. These activities, such as conducting freedom of information inquiries, were directly related to the communication efforts. Consequently, the communication should be considered a group or team effort, as the output resulted from coordinated activities within the parliamentary office. PAs responsible for drafting the output depended on these activities in the communication process.

Overall, group work is a dominant form of organising work within the parliamentary office, and there has been no indication that the arrangements between MPs and list MSPs or constituency MSPs differ significantly. This is, insofar, surprising, since list MSPs are—in theory—responsible for much larger areas, which should have impacted the organisation of the offices. However, list MSPs from medium and large-sized parties (i.e., Conservatives, SNP, Labour) tend to shadow selected constituencies in their work. Those constituencies, as noted by Carman and Shephard (2007), are targeted seats by those list MSPs to challenge incumbent constituency MSPs. Consequently, the electoral system has a minimal effect on the internal organisation of parliamentary offices in the Scottish context—list MSPs tend to behave and communicate like constituency MSPs.

While there is a high degree of interaction and relative flexibility in the designation of roles, most interviewees described arrangements in which specific tasks and responsibilities are typically allocated to the same persons and, in some cases, concentrated on a single person. However, significant interactions with staff members are common, blurring the distinction between solo and group efforts and between group and team efforts. It also needs to be noted that interviewees emphasised the relevance of those interactions beyond their immediate contribution to complete communication-related tasks:

> There is camaraderie and friendship among colleagues that certainly doesn't exist in the private sector. Because you have a sort of shared sense of endeavour…you have lots of fun with people who support and believe what you believe in….I have friends now…we haven't worked together for years, [and] these guys are still pretty good friends and those friendships were forged in that environment. (Interviewee W)

Interviewed PAs mentioned those experiences throughout, highlighting that this shared sense of purpose is a motivating factor and adds meaning to the tasks they undertake. Given the very high staff turnover, as noted by interviewed PAs and parliamentarians, interactions have the potential to create bonds among staff that offset problematic aspects of their roles (e.g., high stress, relatively low pay). In this context, it is also worth noting that leadership approaches tend to evolve over time. Interviewees explained that as they gained experience and trust, they were given more responsibility and autonomy. While parliamentarians or their designated deputies (i.e., typically their office managers) are very involved and assume an active leadership role over inexperienced staff members undertaking communication tasks, they usually become less involved over time—provided the communication officers earn their trust. However, interests, political sensitivities, and priorities remain relevant factors that may lead to greater involvement by parliamentarians under particular (but increasingly rare) circumstances. Consequently, communication efforts can often start as a team effort involving the office manager or the parliamentarian. Still, it is envisaged and expected that with increasing trust (and experience), leadership itself is delegated—at least to some extent—to the designated communication staff. The underlying drivers are structural constraints related to parliamentarians' responsibilities and budgetary limitations, which are experienced independently of mandate type, electoral system, or even seniority. Active leadership and involvement are time- and labour-intensive, and therefore problematic; reducing these costs by delegating communication responsibilities and allowing greater autonomy is a solution. Consequently, the M(S)P or their office manager shifts from a proactive leadership role to a more passive one, focusing on monitoring outgoing communication and adopting a less invasive signing-off process.

In this context, it is worth noting that the electoral system did not appear to have a visible impact on staffing arrangements. Furthermore, PAs who were involved in communication-related tasks for MPs and MSPs, when interviewed, explained that they did not find any difference between their approaches based on whether their employers were elected representatives in a sub-state or national parliament. They explained that list MPs (from large and medium-sized parties) shadow constituency MSPs to position themselves as their competitor in the next election. In other words, they behave at large like constituency MSPs, enabling them to challenge the actual constituency MSPs, which mirrors the findings of earlier studies that the differences between the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament are very limited. However, in the case of small-sized parties, the accounts of interviewees indicated an interesting exception with consequences for staffing arrangements and dynamics. In contrast to staff in parliamentarians' offices of larger parliamentary party groups, there is greater interaction among staff in different MSPs' offices. Interviewed PAs explained that they are more inclined to collaborate, e.g., on projects or when opportunities for media exposure arise. An example of this is the "Christmas pack" for journalists provided by Scottish Liberal Democrats. Staff members of MSPs collaborate to develop news stories which they can use to attract media attention during the Christmas period:

> We're aware that [in] the Christmas period…there is less news produced…there's space in the newspapers….So, what we do is every year around October time…we get it together as a big team…we'll research [a couple of stories and do] whatever that requires. Whether it is parliamentary questions, FOIs, letters to ministers, so that by mid-November we have a huge amount of data that we can…turn…into press releases…not every avenue [is] newsworthy…but I would say…50%, enough to create 15 news stories…what we call a Christmas pack which we then send to journalists. (Interviewee D)

The interviewee described not just an expansion of communication capacity beyond the parliamentarians' office, but also a team-based approach that provides PAs with some autonomy in finding and writing up a suitable story. Given that the Scottish electoral system is more proportional than the FPTP system used in Westminster elections, it can be identified as an important factor, as it increases the likelihood of the emergence of smaller parliamentary party groups that adopt collaborative approaches to enhance their ability to attract (party) votes.

7. Findings II: Work Arrangements for Social Media Communication—Integrated Approach or Afterthought?

The integration of PAs responsible for undertaking communication tasks into other activities of the parliamentary office (such as campaigns) can significantly affect whether the communication is understood as a solo, group, or team effort. Beyond their integration, it also needs to be considered that most interviewed PAs considered themselves as "Jacks of all trades." While some interviewees confirmed that they are responsible for communications, they are also expected to undertake various other tasks (e.g., casework, research). Although those tasks may not directly create communication output, working results can still feed into content-creation processes. Interviewee K outlined the variety of tasks that are expected to be undertaken:

> I usually start with K1's diary….Each appointment needs to have either a background briefing on the person themselves or the stuff that K1's going to discuss….I'll be writing a briefing[s] [for] K1 [and] we'll be doing stuff like…writing questions that K1 wants to raise in the chamber…one to two speeches I need to write for K1 per week. (Interviewee K)

Beyond the circumstantial allocation of communication-related tasks, whether for training or due to workload peaks, interviewees also described how these duties might be permanently divided among several PAs. The division of communication-related tasks has been suggested by the type of media channel (e.g., social media, website, or press), the reach of media outlets (e.g., local media and national media), or the type of content (e.g., specialisation in particular policies), effectively dividing the role of the communication officer into several specialised communication officers. The focus on a specific communication-related task (e.g., speech writing) limits their exposure to other communication tasks. Individual communication officers, under those conditions, have fewer opportunities to learn on the job in areas of political communication entrusted to other PAs. Reducing workload by delegating communication-related tasks to several PAs increases each communication officer's capacity to undertake tasks across different areas.

Interviewees did not always provide a rationale for dividing the communication officer role into several positions in their parliamentary offices. However, workload-related reasons have been given, and the specialisations and experiences of available PAs have been identified as drivers of this division of labour, e.g., (presumed) familiarity with communication platforms:

> As a young person, I often get trusted with the social media stuff….I would often make…suggestions on how to make these things better, how to communicate effectively. (Interviewee N)

While political communication processes are typically integrated into the broader activities of the parliamentary office, such as research and constituency casework, there is a clear emphasis on engagement with local media outlets. For instance, by writing columns or press releases targeting local newspapers. While social media has been noted as an important platform for communication in overall communication efforts, interviewees explained that it is often used to broadcast messages and, with limited resources, to create dedicated content. Interviewees outlined that communication output produced for other contexts (e.g., speeches, press releases) would usually serve as the foundation for content presented on social media. Interactions between PAs have been described as crucial, e.g., the speechwriting usually includes elements that are "shareable," the editing and cutting of short videos (from speeches or events), as well as the (limited) use of analytics, is also often done by several staff members rather than one individual. However, although interviewees noted that parliamentarians increasingly utilise social media to communicate, there is still a tendency to treat it as an afterthought, "recycling" and modifying existing content to suit the needs of different social media platforms:

> There is a quite close connection between press releases and what goes on social media. Slightly more goes on social media….If Q1's supporting a campaign from charity or a non-profit organisation, mostly put that on Facebook, it wouldn't necessarily go out into the media. But generally, everything that goes to the media is recycled and put on Facebook. (Interviewee Z)

The interviewee noted that content that could not be published in local media would be used for social media, while content published by the local press would typically be shared. The aim was to attract journalists' attention to the content and invest substantial resources to achieve this. At the same time, social media has been used to "recycle" content that was not covered by journalists or amplify news coverage that utilised content provided by the parliamentary office. While some parliamentary offices had a PA responsible for social media, very often PAs described an ad hoc allocation of tasks or a team-based approach.

Furthermore, interviewees reported that, particularly, M(S)Ps' Facebook accounts are usually run by PAs with little to no involvement of the parliamentarians. Even the sign-off process was described as more relaxed; PAs noted that the content presented was usually not controversial, such as coverage of the parliamentarian's activities and announcements of surgeries for constituents. At the same time, there was a tendency for parliamentarians to communicate on Twitter themselves, rather than through their staff. Consequently, the leadership and involvement of parliamentarians in content production are largely dependent on the social media platform itself:

> W1 is the only one with access to his Twitter because he thinks even though he trusts us, even though we can sign off press releases and write quotes in his name, he thinks that Twitter is quite an authentic medium. And he writes in his own voice, and he thinks that if somebody else came in to try that, people would know. [H]e's the only one with access to that. He has access to his Instagram and his Facebook, as do [another PA] and I, so the three of us will upload to Facebook and Instagram. Most of the time, it's the staff that do both of those, and he will dip in and out if he's been on a visit, so he's taking photos right away….But otherwise, it's us. (Interviewee X)

Similarly, other PAs described how M(S)Ps use social media to share more personal information about themselves, underscoring the perceived need for greater authenticity, which in turn leads to greater

involvement of parliamentarians on specific platforms. Some PAs suggested that this is also due to social media providing the opportunity of unfiltered self-presentation to prospective voters, indicating a personal-vote-seeking approach.

However, in general, interviewed PAs described that political communication would be just one task among others, and that communication on social media is usually not seen as a priority among communication-related activities. Consequently, there is typically no further investment of resources to recruit or train PAs to undertake relevant tasks. Social media activities are often allocated ad hoc and approached as a team effort with shared ownership and a high degree of interdependence among staff members. Similarly to the overall communication approach, this reflects parliamentarians' priorities and (limited) interests in social media. However, PAs—particularly those who were younger—emphasised the importance of social media and even indicated disagreement with their employer. It is also worth noting that M(S)Ps who appear to invest more staff resources in social media are typically younger:

> I think Q1 and I disagree on how best to do that. Q1, you know, does have a preference for traditional media, so papers and radio. I would rather utilise social media. (Interviewee Z)

This reinforces the finding that M(S)Ps' individual priorities and interests are the key determinants of how communication arrangements are organised. The differences in office structures and communication processes, determined and shaped by parliamentarians, significantly impact the communication output and media management practices of their staff. Those staff members are typically involved in a broader range of tasks, not just communication responsibilities. Those activities and accompanying interactions with other staff members feed into communication processes and content creation. In some instances, there has been no role for a communication officer, but rather ad-hoc assignments to communication-related tasks. One parliamentarian explained that creating the role of a designated communication officer would be problematic in the context of their parliamentary office:

> I don't have anyone who works for me specifically in the area of communications….[My staff members] will do various different elements of the role of being responsible for assisting me in my parliamentary responsibilities. (Interviewee CA)

At large, M(S)Ps' communication tasks are allocated to specific staff members and do not generally utilise team approaches or ad hoc allocation. However, among those communication-relevant arrangements, communication on social media has typically been of secondary importance, reflected in a greater tendency towards team-based approaches and ad hoc allocation.

8. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that parliamentary offices usually organise their communication-related tasks as a group effort. Team efforts were utilised to a limited extent, primarily in campaigns and for creating social media content. However, typically, communication-related tasks are assigned to the same staff members. Communication as a solo effort has been identified among a minority of interviewed PAs, but it has been more frequently used than team efforts. Despite the prevalence of group efforts and solo efforts, parliamentary offices usually foster a more collaborative environment and are characterised by a degree of

flexibility. Consequently, rather than having fixed responsibilities and a clear division of labour, areas of activity tend to blur, and it is not unusual that contributions by several staff members feed into the creation of communication outputs. Therefore, most communication arrangements approximate the ideal types of solo and group effort without meeting all the criteria.

Although PAs highlighted that every office would be differently organised, the findings demonstrate that similar factors shape the organisation of parliamentary offices. Office arrangements are shaped by the M(S)P's preferences, priorities, and practical considerations in a fast-paced and high-stress environment with only limited resources available. The article did not identify any significant or systematic differences in how parliamentarians approach communication, irrespective of party affiliation, mandate type, or whether they are MP or MSP. However, there is some indication that party group size—due to the more proportional electoral system utilised in the Scottish Parliament—and the age of the M(S)P shape their approaches to collaboration with other offices and to staff arrangements for social media communication.

The setup has also been found relevant to PAs' professional development, affecting the quality of communication in parliamentary offices and the leadership dimension. Solo and group efforts provide staff members with reasonably clear task assignments, allowing them to develop their skills through "learning by doing." The exposure to specific communication-related tasks also helps to understand media stakeholders' expectations and how they operate: Solo and group efforts facilitate mediatisation (i.e., adopting and utilising media logic in their work) and professionalisation (i.e., allowing them to collect experience and skills on dealing with particular tasks and helping to learn on the job). As a consequence, increased work experience of PAs and trust in their abilities promotes a shift in the leadership dimension from the parliamentarian (or their deputy) towards the communication officers—effectively reducing their involvement in communication processes.

However, given the high staff turnover and the limited experience and skills of new entrants, offices that utilise solo or group efforts for communication-related tasks are more exposed to problems caused by resigning communication officers. Team arrangements make it easier to replace staff members but more challenging to facilitate "learning on the job," since staff members have very little regular, systematic exposure to communication tasks. The lack of continuity and consistency in quality in communication-related tasks is less pronounced when offices utilise group efforts rather than solo efforts. Still, group efforts make it more challenging to facilitate "learning on the job," since staff members are exposed only to a selected range of communication-related tasks.

The limited interest in having fully professionalised communication experts might be due to competing priorities of M(S)Ps: political communication is essential, but just one task among others, which disincentivises the employment of a dedicated communication officer; this is even more pronounced for communication on social media. This finding is surprising, as it contrasts with the notion that politics is increasingly professionalising and mediatising. It also puts the relevance of social media in the communication arrangements of M(S)Ps into perspective, as they, at large, do not yet prioritise it. However, it is worth noting that communication efforts, particularly social media communication, are—although not necessarily a priority—well-integrated into the workflow and communication practices of parliamentary offices.

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Conflict of Interests

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Data Availability

To ensure the anonymity of research participants and the confidentiality of their accounts, the interview data used for this study are not made publicly available.

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About the Author

Sebastian Ludwicki-Ziegler completed his PhD at the University of Stirling. The doctoral research project focused on the political communication practices of parliamentary assistants to MPs and MSPs. The areas of research interest comprise parliaments, political communication, policy narratives, and political staff, as well as British and Scottish politics.

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Role Conceptualisations and the Purple Zone: Parliamentary Staff Through the Eyes of Former MPs

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Abstract

We analyse how former MPs describe and assess the various staff groups when talking about the daily work of the Finnish parliament. Our theoretical framework draws on the politics/administration divide and the concept of a "purple zone" blending the "blue" of politics and the "red" of administration (Bellò & Spano, 2015), as well as on role conceptualisations produced by elected politicians as a source of administrative legitimacy (Stout, 2013). The analysis is based on textual material comprising 49 semi-structured interviews from the Oral History Archive of the Finnish parliament. The general picture of the MP–staff relations in the material is one of respect and gratitude, but also differentiation, emanating from both the parliamentary hierarchy and the politics/administration divide. The institutional staff, particularly the porters, receive exceptionally positive appraisals. The committee staff, formally neutral but directly involved in the legislative preparation, are admired for their status and expertise, but sometimes criticised for entering too deeply into the "blue" area. Parliamentary assistants are more likely to receive mixed accounts related to their proximity to the MPs' political work and their "low" position in the parliamentary hierarchy when compared to the committee staff. Parliamentary party group staff and parliamentary assistants also come up in system-oriented accounts regarding the reorganisation of the parliamentary work. Although many in the parliamentary staff can be situated in the purple zone, the former MPs conceptualise their roles rather traditionally. The study broadens the concept of the purple zone beyond previous research dominated by policy implementation.

Keywords

committees; Finland; parliamentary assistants; parliamentary party groups; parliamentary staff; parliaments; purple zone; role conceptualisations

1. Introduction

Parliamentary work involves continuous encounters between MPs and staff members (Kontula, 2018; Niemi, 2010; White, 2024). These contacts, both personal and systemic (Crewe, 2018), simultaneously construct and are shaped by the parliamentary institution and workplace (Busby, 2013), roles perceived as legitimate for the various staff groups (Stout, 2013), and the relationship between politics and administration (Bellò & Spano, 2015; Overeem, 2005; Svara, 1999). Yet, the role of the staff has been subjected to relatively little analysis in studies on parliaments, political science, and public administration overall.

In this study, we understand the staff–MP relations as a source of administrative legitimacy and thus linked to the quality of democracy (Stout, 2013). While the traditional model of the politics/administration divide is based on the separateness of the two (Overeem, 2005; Rutgers, 2000; Weber, 1922/1978), later studies have acknowledged their complementarity (Svara, 1999) and the existence of a "purple zone" (Bellò & Spano, 2015) that challenges the idea of entirely mutually exclusive and distinguishable spheres of administration ("red") and politics ("blue"). These views on politics and administration are partly reflected in the research on parliamentary staff, who see the bureaucratic influence of the staff on politics in a less positive light (Becker & Bauer, 2021) or emphasise the role of the personnel as allies of the MPs (Peters, 2021). The perceptions are further included in the roles perceived as legitimate for politicians and administrators when undertaking their work (Stout, 2013).

We concentrate on the roles that the political and administrative actors have in the parliamentary context and approach the staff through the eyes of the MPs, inspired by the idea of role conceptualisations by elected politicians as a source of administrative legitimacy (Stout, 2013). Our research questions are thus: How do former MPs describe and normatively assess the roles of the parliamentary staff of the Finnish parliament? How do these role conceptualisations vary between staff groups (if at all), and which institutional and social features may the potential differences relate to? What do these findings tell us about the separation or complementarity between politics and administration and the potential tensions involved?

The analysis is based on a textual material comprising 49 semi-structured interviews from the Oral History Archive of the Finnish parliament. Because of the extensive length of the interviews, the relevant passages for the analysis were located by keyword searches, covering the parliamentary personnel as a whole and the various staff categories (the search terms are provided in the Supplementary File).

We first introduce the state-of-the-art of the research on parliamentary staff and the literature on the relationship between politics and administration relevant for our analysis, before describing the features of the Finnish case. In the next section, we present the empirical material and the methods applied in the study. We then turn to our findings, presenting the role conceptualisations of the MPs regarding the main staff groups. Finally, we conclude by discussing our findings in the light of the theoretical framework and posing questions for further work.

2. Parliamentary Staff, Their Zones, and Roles

Parliaments, the core of legislative power, are crucial for studying the relationship between politics and administration, but parliamentary administration remains understudied. This section starts with a description

of the state-of-the-art in the research on parliamentary staff. We then introduce the theoretical framework of the study, building on the literature on the relationship between politics and administration (including the notion of "purple zone" blending the two) and on the concept of role conceptualisation (Stout, 2013).

2.1. Parliamentary Staff in the Scholarly Literature

Research on parliamentary staff belongs to the research tradition of parliamentary studies. Recently, interpretive parliamentary studies have gained ground alongside the conventional institutionalist and rational choice perspectives (see Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018; Mannevuo et al., 2021). In parallel and sometimes overlapping with the former, parliamentary studies have widened their reach, including the social, emotional, and material contexts in which parliamentarians conduct their work and the various roles of the staff in the parliamentary institution.

Parliamentary staff have traditionally been studied more in the United States than in Europe (DeGregorio, 1988; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Romzek & Utter, 1997), where the focus has primarily been on the European Parliament (Busby, 2013; Egeberg et al., 2013; Pegan, 2017). However, recent European studies include research on national parliamentary administrations (e.g., Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Geddes, 2021; Jágr, 2022; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018), including multi-country anthologies, special issues (Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023), or explicitly comparative studies (Griglio & Lupo, 2021; Högenauer & Neuhold, 2015; Otjes, 2022).

The proliferation and professionalisation of the staff have contributed to parliaments becoming more independent of the executive and thus strengthened parliamentary democracy (Christiansen et al., 2021; Egeberg et al., 2013; Otjes, 2022; Peters, 2021). The parliamentary staff play a crucial role in helping MPs with various tasks (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Pegan, 2017). The parliamentary staff play a crucial role in helping MPs with various tasks (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Pegan, 2017). However, despite the importance of their support to the MPs' work, the staff tends to remain invisible to the general public (Christiansen et al., 2021; Meakin, 2024).

Brandsma and Otjes (2024) distinguish between institutional staff working for the parliament, committee staff, parliamentary party group (PPG) personnel, and staff employed by individual MPs—a classification that we also follow in this study. Other studies have focused on specific staff groups such as parliamentary assistants (PAs; Pegan, 2017), political staff in parliamentary and ministerial offices (Moens, 2023), research and library staff (Jágr, 2022), and committee personnel (DeGregorio, 1988; Geddes, 2021). The staff have also been classified according to their informal roles vis-à-vis the MPs, such as those of advisors, ghostwriters, information brokers, and alike (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2022). Moreover, the literature distinguishes between the parliamentary staff whom the MPs meet in their everyday work and the upper-level leadership of the parliamentary institution (White, 2024; Yong, 2024). Although the research on the views of the MPs on the staff—the topic of this study—is scarce, Peplow and Pivatto (2020) have summarised extensive oral history material from former British MPs, like the one used in our research. While the role of the staff in the study remains marginal, the authors report that former MPs praised the professionalism and helpfulness of the staff.

2.2. The Relationship Between Politics and Administration Impacting the Role Conceptualisations for the Staff

In contrast to the earlier research, which has largely been descriptive of the parliamentary administration (Christiansen et al., 2021, 2023) or its specific tasks (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; see also Otjes, 2022), we position our study in the broader literature on the relationship between politics and administration, at the core of democratic political systems (Rosenbloom, 1983; Rutgers, 2000). Furthermore, our research represents interpretive parliamentary studies (Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018), and we maintain a relational perspective on public administration (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020), seeing that relations between politicians and public administrators both construct political institutions and are shaped by them. We focus on the specific staff roles perceived as legitimate, analysed through the concept of role conceptualisation, which emphasises the expectations attached to legitimate roles (also) set by people other than those performing the roles, such as politicians in the case of public administrators (Stout, 2013).

In the study of politics and administration, particularly the Weberian model (Weber, 1922/1978) builds on a separation between the legislative power and administration, emphasising the administration's expertise, neutrality, and subordination to politics as a source of legitimacy in a legal-rational sense (Overeem, 2005; Rutgers, 2000). However, a strict politics/administration dichotomy has been perceived as being a theoretical construct (Demir & Nyhan, 2008; Rosenbloom, 1983), and scholars, such as Svara (1999), have highlighted complementarity rather than dichotomy in the relation between politics and administration. Recent studies have also focused on the border area between politics and administration, conceptualised as the "purple zone," blending the blue of politics and the red of administration (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015).

Most studies on the relation between politics and administration (including those on the purple zone; see Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015) have scrutinised policy implementation on the output side of the political process, paying less attention to the input side and the supporting role of the administration in political decision-making (see Easton, 1957). Some studies on parliamentary staff nevertheless acknowledge the role of staff between politics and administration (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Egeberg et al., 2013; Peters, 2021; Romzek & Utter, 1997; White, 2024). In general, the parliament is characterised by a hierarchical relationship between the elected MPs and non-elected personnel, and a further divide between the political/partisan and non-political/non-partisan staff (Niemi, 2010; White, 2024). While the parliamentary hierarchy can produce gendered work roles (Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018) and allow for discrimination and improper behaviour (Niemi, 2010; White, 2024), it does not render the staff powerless. The power wielded by the parliamentary staff relates to facilitating political processes in the dynamic and heterogeneous environment of the legislature, including support for reaching compromises (Becker & Bauer, 2021; see also Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Egeberg et al., 2013). While some scholars hold a critical view on bureaucratic influence on politics (Becker & Bauer, 2021), others see the staff as allies of the MPs (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; DeGregorio, 1988; Peters, 2021) or note the ambivalent role of party-political staff working in parliaments (Moens, 2023). This echoes the division between a Weberian politics/administration dichotomy and a model based on complementarity, or a shared sphere between politics and administration.

The relationship between politics and administration is not only built on institutional arrangements or formal hierarchies, but it is also reproduced in more subtle relations between politicians and administrators (Bartels

& Turnbull, 2020), including the roles they are expected to play in their everyday work (Stout, 2013). Here, a role refers to a social position and both internal and external expectations regarding appropriate behaviour in it (Biddle, 1986). In her study of public administration, Stout (2013) distinguishes between these internal and external views by referring to "role conceptions" and "role conceptualisations": the former denotes the descriptions and assessments by the administrators themselves about their own roles, while the latter refers to the beliefs and ideas about a specific role's place and purpose by external actors, particularly elected politicians, citizens, and other administrators.

In this study, we examine the role conceptualisations of former MPs about the various parliamentary staff groups. Such conceptualisations include a normative assessment regarding appropriate roles and the ways in which they are performed in practice (Stout, 2013). In this way, role conceptualisations of public administration relate to its legitimacy, and more specifically, the positions which public administrators can legitimately occupy in relation to politics. The conceptualisations vary depending on the ideal model of the politics/administration relation in the background and whether it leans towards the classical Weberian model or more blended models between politics and administration (Stout, 2013). This is also a dimension we consider in our analysis.

3. The Context of the Study: The Finnish Parliament and Its Staff

Constitutional principles regarding the separation of powers impact the role and number of parliamentary staff (Egeberg et al., 2013). Finland, a former semi-presidential system, can now be described as a parliamentary one (Raunio, 2023). The Finnish parliament comprises 200 members representing often as many as nine parties, an effect of the proportional electoral system (see Heidar & Rasch, 2017). It is a continental and, more specifically, a Nordic parliament, characterised by unicameralism, professionalism, simple majority rules, strong PPGs, and the significant status of standing committees (Arter, 2008; Esaiasson & Heidar, 2000; Heidar & Rasch, 2017). It is also a "working parliament" (in contrast to "debating parliaments" such as Westminster), in which a notable part of the work is conducted in the 17 standing committees and the PPGs instead of the plenary (Arter, 2008; Mannevuo et al., 2021). The number of staff working for the Finnish parliament at the end of 2024 was 487 (Eduskunta, 2025). These figures do not cover the PPG staff, PAs employed by the PPGs (Raunio, 2023), nor the café staff (Kontula, 2018).

Finnish studies have reiterated the findings of international research about the workload of the MPs, resulting in a need for assistance (Aula & Konttinen, 2020; Mannevuo et al., 2021), and the observations about the hierarchical nature of the parliamentary institution in which politics reigns over administration (Niemi, 2010). Studies on the Finnish parliament as a work environment are ambivalent. On the one hand, they underline the hierarchy and rigidity of the organisation and instances of improper behaviour and harassment towards the staff (with staff groups such as the PAs and cleaners being in a particularly vulnerable position; Björk et al., 2018; Niemi, 2010). On the other hand, they report about the collegiality and friendly atmosphere of the institution (Kontula, 2018; Rinne, 2020) and the prestige, stability, resources, and inspiring content of the work (Niemi, 2010).

The most significant change in the staff structure at the Finnish parliament took place in the 1990s with the introduction of PAs as a new staff category. The first part-time assistants started in 1997 and the full-time ones in 2000 (Ollila, 2007). The PAs were originally recruited by individual MPs, although they were formally working for parliament. In the early 2010s, the social democratic PPG introduced a group office model in

which the PPG recruits the PAs and allocates their work among the group's MPs (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). Currently, most PPGs organise PA work according to the group office model, which illustrates a strengthening of the PPGs both within parliament and in relation to party offices (Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023). The staff group most often addressed in the Finnish research is, nevertheless, the personnel of the standing committees, who embody significant authority and expertise, playing a central role in the legislative process (Helander et al., 2007; Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2023; Rinne, 2020).

In addition to the changes implied by the introduction and restructuring of the assistant system, a more general institutional feature to note is that the institutional administration led by the parliamentary office and the political work conducted in PPGs remain separate (Raunio, 2023). This divide is amplified by the recent strengthening of PPGs and the transfer of most PAs under their direction (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). Aula and Koskimaa (2023) nevertheless see this development as a welcome one, as it helps to consolidate the power of politicians vis-à-vis external actors, such as experts, consultants, and lobbyists.

4. Methods and Materials

The study is based on a selection of texts from the Oral History Archive of Finnish parliament, which comprises, in total, almost 500 extensive semi-structured interviews with former MPs, collected by the Library of Parliament since the late 1980s. With counterparts in countries such as the United Kingdom (Peplow & Pivatto, 2020), the material combines traits of oral history (Krekola, 2022) and elite interviews (Mykkänen, 2001). For this analysis, the selection was restricted to recent interviews, with the interviewees having been elected at the 2011, 2015, or 2019 parliamentary elections. Those with the longest careers had started as MPs in the 1970s, and the more junior ones in the 2010s. Out of the 49 interviewees in the selection, 16 were identified as women and 33 as men.

The distribution of the interviewees by political party is given in Table 1. It does not follow the power relations in the Finnish parliament. This is likely to be partly incidental and partly to reflect the 2017 split of the Finns Party (so that also the Blue Reform splinter group was covered). Generally, the aim of the collection of interviews is to cover the parliamentary parties, electoral districts, and genders in a balanced manner (Krekola, 2022). The slight party bias is unlikely to affect the results due to the character of the research approach and the method of close reading.

Table 1. Number of interviewees by party.

The Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP)	10
The Finns Party (FP; including Blue Reform)	10
The Greens (G)	7
The National Coalition Party (NCP)	6
The Centre Party of Finland (CPF)	6
Swedish People's Party of Finland (SPP)	5
The Left Alliance (LA)	3
Christian Democrats of Finland (CD)	2
Total	49

Note: If the MP had represented more than one party during their career, they were here categorised according to their party when elected.

The thematic interview guide used by the Library of Parliament includes a question pertaining to the parliamentary staff and the PAs, but references to the staff were also found in other parts of the material. Due to the extensive length of the interviews, we identified the relevant passages by text searches in the ATLAS.ti software programme, using approximately 30 terms in Finnish or Swedish (the other official language of Finland; these are available in the Supplementary File). An overview of the Finnish scholarly and grey literature on the topic helped to confirm that all staff groups were included in the searches. A Finnish-Scottish comparison of specific features of the relationship between the MPs and PAs, also drawing on this material, will be published separately (see Ludwicki-Ziegler et al., 2024).

We applied a qualitative and interpretive approach (Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018) and an abductive logic of inference, as the precise research questions and their theoretical underpinnings were sharpened after an initial reading of the rich and multifaceted research material. At the beginning of the analysis, we distinguished between non-political institutional staff supporting the parliamentary institution, committee personnel, and staff connected to PPGs or individual MPs (Arter, 2008; Brandsma & Otjes, 2024); we addressed the last category jointly, as they largely overlap in the Finnish case (Aula & Konttinen, 2020). As our first reading of the material showed differences in the ways in which the former MPs talked about the various staff groups, our research assistants classified the passages in terms of whether they included an evaluative assessment of the specific staff group, and if so, whether this evaluation was positive, negative, or ambivalent. Later in the analysis, this rough coding helped us to identify the normative underpinnings of the role conceptualisations of the various staff groups (Stout, 2013).

The initial analysis was followed by a close reading and an analysis by the authors, during which the various normative expectations and assessments of the staff and how they reflected the politics/administration divide were in focus. We used the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous sections as an interpretive lens (Stout, 2013) guiding the empirical analysis. We assessed the role conceptualisations produced by the former MPs for the various staff groups regarding roles perceived as legitimate for each of them. Furthermore, we reflected on how these conceptualisations were related to the relationship between politics and administration broadly understood, including whether the model of a clear-cut politics/administration dichotomy or the more fluidly defined concept of the purple zone is better suited to describe the work of the different parliamentary staff groups and what tensions emanate from this relationship. We categorised our findings along the axes of political–non-political positions and expert/high social status–support/low social status jobs (while nevertheless acknowledging a certain fluidity in the categories).

The research followed the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, according to which studies such as the current one do not require a separate ethical review (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019). We did not seek access to interviews requiring special permission from the interviewee and used only those for which we had received permission from the Library of Parliament, out of which two required notifying the interviewee about the use of their interview. As our study focused on a cross-cutting theme in the material rather than delving into specific MPs' careers, we deemed it in line with general research ethics that it was unnecessary to disclose the names of the interviewees, even though the consent given by the interviewees allows for it. To keep the interviews distinguishable from each other when quoting the material in the following section, an interview number and the abbreviation of the interviewee's party are given.

5. Empirical Analysis

The following section reports on the role conceptualisations which the former MPs provide for each staff group found in the material. We begin with the institutional administrative staff. After that, we focus on the committee staff (committee counsels), who play a crucial role in the Finnish legislative system, and finally, jointly address the staff employed by the PPGs and directly working with individual MPs, particularly the PAs. The final section summarises and elaborates on our central findings.

5.1. Institutional Staff in a Non-Political but Symbolically Prestigious Role

The institutional staff of the Finnish parliament comprises employees in administrative, expert, and support functions. When evaluating them, the interviewees tended to praise the employees. Their assessments remain astonishingly positive, even after taking into consideration moderating factors such as the fact that the interviews were commissioned by the Library of Parliament (Krekola & Latvala, 2014). Wordings related to friendliness or kindness, commitment, and professionalism are recurrent in the material (see the quotation I16 below). So is a language of helpfulness and service, indirectly referring to the assisting role of the staff in the parliamentary work. The special status of legislative work and the prestige of the parliamentary institution often set the scene for the positive accounts: with the MPs always relying on a fixed-term mandate for their position, the staff represent the long-term perspective of the parliamentary institution. This is particularly apparent for new MPs:

> I would like to mention many really exceptionally nice people with whom I have worked. There has been such a huge number of them in Parliament, starting from the porters, really amazing staff. They know how to take care of things for you there. (I16, CPF)

The positive accounts cover a variety of staff groups and functions, for instance, the information and library services (see also Jágr, 2022). Yet it is clearly the figure of the porter that crystallises the positive side of the symbolic and social character of the MP–staff relationship. The porters stand out as a group, with special meaning attached to their role. Although they did appear in accounts of exceptional events, such as removing someone or reminding an MP about the dress code, it was mostly their sheer familiarity and presence that was noted in the interviews. The porters would advise the new MPs on a variety of practical matters, contributing to their introduction to the institution. Compared to the (mostly male) porters, the interview material contains next to nothing about the (mostly female) staff groups such as cleaners or café workers. While both the café and the sauna of the parliament are recognised in many interviews as traditionally significant parts of the institution with specific social codes attached, the mostly female employees running them are mentioned only a few times (see quotation I46 below). Although this material does not allow for strong conclusions about the gendered character of the staff roles, it does imply that gender matters for the role conceptualisations of the parliamentary staff (see Niemi, 2010; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018):

> [T]he sense of community throughout the house. This is perhaps the greatest thing. Of course, there was this [being addressed as] "Honourable Representative [last name]," but we were still somehow friends with the civil servants, especially with the porters. You could always get help when you needed it, as you should of course. I don't know how the cleaners and office assistants experienced it. (I46, LA)

In addition to the overwhelmingly positive accounts about the institutional staff, the material included some, often rather vaguely formulated, criticisms towards the general management of the institution as hierarchical and old-fashioned (see the quotation I17 below). These findings constitute an interesting tension, as part of the old-fashioned-ness seems to be necessary for the positive experience of prestige and respect in the institution. However, the fact that individual MPs rely much on the personalised help and support is not contradictory with and may even indicate more systemic issues, as Aula and Konttinen (2020; see also Aula & Koskimaa, 2023) have noted. Interestingly, the quotation below also includes the MP's assessment of the staff's potential self-conception of their role ("noble task"):

> I doubt that the exceptional service-mindedness is due to the leadership here, but it may have to do with a noble task or something like this, perhaps. In any case, it [the leadership] is not modern and there are many problems, and things are too cumbersome. (I17, SDP)

As the institutional service staff are non-partisan and the tasks of many have little overlap with the MPs' work, the role conceptualisations regarding them do not seem to challenge the Weberian model of politics/administration relationship. While the staff and the politicians continuously interact, the interviewees do not express any merging of their roles or spheres. Moreover, members of this staff group are presented as allies rather than as competitors (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021). Metaphorically speaking, the red and blue form unique marble-like patterns rather than blending into purple.

5.2. Committee Staff in the Purple Zone

The committee personnel have an eminent position in "working parliaments" such as the Finnish one, as they facilitate the work of the committees, organise expert hearings, and draft reports of the committee work (see Helander et al., 2007; Pekonen, 2011; Raunio, 2023; Rinne, 2020). The committee counsels, being the head administrators of the committee work, were described as important educators for the newly elected MPs learning the craft of law-making. They were also quoted as a resource to rely on when in opposition and lacking the benefits of one's party being in executive power. Importantly, the counsels were praised and admired for their professionalism that often combined a legal education, long experience in parliament, expertise in the subject matters, and extensive networks, including civil servants in ministries. Their ability to synthesise the substance of the preparation in a reliable and balanced manner was assessed as a source of added value, easing the workload of the MPs (see the quotation I32 below). One interviewee would have preferred the recruitment criteria for the committee counsels to include economic expertise, a comment that stood out amongst the highly positive assessments of the committee staff's expertise:

> [The committee counsels are] extremely important experts who are involved in this process. In my opinion, their role is central not only so that they are…extremely skilled in [formulating in] writing the understanding that comes from…the representatives, so that we can reach a consensus, unanimity, and make the general will visible….But also, they play an important role in a way that if they lacked the know-how…it would employ the representatives much more. (I32, SDP)

The committee counsels' role was defined as one of a non-political expert (see the quote I4 below) or a "background actor." However, the interviewees acknowledged that the committee counsels' style and preferences (see also DeGregorio, 1988) and their collaboration with the chair of the committee had a

crucial impact on their respective committees' political work. The committees have distinct traditions regarding how specifically they process bills, hear experts, and produce reports, and the lack of a uniform procedure was sometimes noted negatively. Some interviewees perceived certain counsels critically as strong-headed and keen on the power accessible to them (see the quotation I6 below), although one description of a counsel as a "tough woman" was admiring in tone. What the interviewees understood as the counsels' ideological leanings, membership, or sympathies with any specific party were sometimes noted. These extracts included an interviewee criticising a committee counsel for backing a party's position on a policy issue, and positively perceived cases of committee counsels demonstrating impartiality despite a commonly known party affiliation:

> It is an extremely important role, and we must be able to make good use of the expertise of committee counsels. The committee counsel must not be made into a political instrument. We must always remember what the role of a committee counsel is. It is the chairperson's job to make sure that we don't put the committee counsel in charge of resolving a matter that is political. It must be decided by the committee itself. (I4, CPF)

> Some committee counsels use their power tremendously, or try to use it, and thus the committee and the chair struggle to hold on to their power. In contrast we also have highly skilled committee counsels who always primarily recognise the will of the committee and who use their expertise in writing that down. (I6, G)

Providing substantial service to the MPs in their legislative work, the committee staff clearly has an expert role. The interview accounts vividly illustrate the dynamic and delicate character that the merging of administrative and political work entails, crystallising in the intimate collaboration between the political chair and the expert administrator conducting the committee work. The counsels could be characterised as the purple elite (see also Becker & Bauer, 2021; Geddes, 2021), conceptualised as a particularly prominent role in "working parliaments" such as the Finnish one. If the institutional staff above evoke a sentiment of gratitude and fondness among the MPs, the counsels enjoy admiration and respect related to their knowledge and skill. Compared to other staff groups, the counsels seem to be allowed more room for crafting their (internal) role conceptions in their everyday work (see also DeGregorio, 1988). Yet the (external) expectations about their role were also high and specific. The sharp comments regarding the perceived use of political power in a partisan manner marked the limits of the purple zone and the clearly blue zone of politics, and of the role understood as legitimate for the committee personnel by the MPs. Although the accounts on the committee staff mainly describe collaboration, they also indicated a slightly more conflictual position for the committee staff when compared to the institutional one (see Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

5.3. The Strengthening of Political Staff—With a Complex Role for PAs

The directly political staff working in parliament includes personnel working in the PPG offices and the PAs, who are either employed by the PPGs or work for an individual MP (formally employed by parliament). The interview accounts regarding the PPG offices and their personnel were mainly neutral or positive, accompanied by a negative testimony of a general secretary of a PPG defrauding the group. The interviewees also addressed the strengthening of the PPGs as political actors, illustrated by the following quote:

> [Before], the power came from [the party office], the definition of the political line came from them…[t]he system has changed, and group subsidies and alike have also helped to make it possible to build a political preparation resource around the [parliamentary party] group. The assistants and the parliamentary party group offices all indicate this. (I19, NCP)

The most significant part of the interview accounts for the political staff focused on the PAs, both the individual assistants and the assistant system. Not everybody among the MPs nor in the parliamentary administration had given unreserved support to the introduction of the PAs in the mid-1990s (see the quotation I37 below), partly because of their more clearly (party-)political role compared to the rest of the parliamentary administration. A more recent source of disagreement was the group office model in which the PAs are recruited and employed by the PPGs instead of individual MPs recruiting their personal assistants and the parliamentary office employing them (see also Ludwicki-Ziegler et al., 2024). While providing a broader structure for the assistants' work, the model also strengthened the PPGs' role as an organiser of staff resources, and consequently, the political character of parliamentary staff:

> The old administration could not endure that the assistants came. They thought it was really wrong…It [the active resistance] was stupid, because I have had excellent assistants…Within our party group, the assistants have from the start collaborated well. (I37, G)

Most interviewees shared positive accounts about the assistants helping them in their daily work. Some highlighted the assistants' support for the parliamentarians as a system-level feature. The role conceptualisations vary between the interviews: some MPs understood the PAs' role as a more administrative one, while others had given their PAs more political tasks, such as speech writing. The interviewees mostly described their former PAs as professional and reliable, or expressed collegiality with them (see the quotation I25 below). Nonetheless, the appraisals were more mixed than in the case of the other staff groups. Some negative evaluations of the PAs were related to the interviewee's feeling that the assistant failed to perform as expected. The limits of the legitimate role also had to do with stepping out of the purple zone and challenging the MP in the blue sphere of politics (see the quotation I19 below). However, there were also interviewees who had supported the PAs' political careers or were nonchalant about their potential party membership:

> The word "assistant" is a bit incorrect, because for me they have been colleagues and a natural part of the working community…I haven't probably been able to think of them in the hierarchy, whether they are above or under. (I25, LA)

> [The recruitment] was a bad choice in the sense that they gradually became a competitor for the latest parliamentary elections…They were such an assistant that if a topic interested them, they did the work better, but if the topic didn't interest them, hardly anything came out of it. (I9, FP)

At the introduction of the assistant system, PAs were recruited by the MPs (although formally employed by the Finnish parliament), supporting the parliamentarians' individual political work. This represented a break with the Weberian ideal of the separation of administration and politics, a blending of spheres. The PAs are thus more clearly situated in the purple zone than the institutional staff, as they are close to the MP's political work. Yet they do not possess the status, expertise, and experience of the committee staff. The role

conceptualisations of both the PPG staff and PAs were also related to more structural accounts of the organisation of the parliamentary work, highlighting a system-level tension between the institutional and the more politically oriented staff. With the strengthening of the PPGs both more generally and in recruiting, employing, and organising the PA work specifically since the early 2010s, the pendulum has shifted towards a stronger role of the political staff in parliament (see also Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023). In the work of the PAs, this political nature of the work also caused tensions with the MP in cases where they were perceived as competitors (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

5.4. Summary of the Results

The role conceptualisations are conditioned both by the position of the staff with respect to the political work and by their position in the parliamentary hierarchy (see Table 2). The institutional staff, the furthest away from actual politics and low in the formal hierarchy, are praised for their kindness and helpfulness. At the heart of the legislative work and high in the parliamentary hierarchy, the committee staff earn respect because of their expertise, experience, skills, and networks. They enjoy more freedom in their work (see also DeGregorio, 1988; Geddes, 2021) and were only occasionally criticised in the material in cases where the MPs felt that the counsels moved from the purple zone into the blue sphere of politics.

Table 2. Evaluations of the parliamentary staff in relation to the parliamentary hierarchy and proximity to politics.

		Proximity to politics	
		Low	High
Status in the parliamentary hierarchy	Low	Institutional support staff: positive evaluations	PAs: mixed evaluations
	High		Committee personnel: mixed but mainly positive evaluations

The unequivocally political staff of parliament consists of the PPG personnel, the position of which has recently strengthened in Finland (Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023), and the PAs, situated in the purple zone between politics and administration but not enjoying the status of the institutional legislative staff. While PAs in general are appreciated by the MPs and support them in various tasks (see also Brandsma & Otjes, 2024), they remain the most precarious staff group of the institution. The position of the assistants, many of whom have political ambitions but are not allowed to politick in their work, is somewhat complex in terms of the politics/administration divide, which at times creates tensions between them and the MPs. Although the MPs mainly see the staff as their allies, particularly the positions in the purple zone that come close to the political work of the MPs cause tensions (see also Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021), which can nevertheless be partly attenuated by expertise and high status, as in the case of the committee staff.

We did not find significant differences between political parties nor differences based on the gender of the former MPs, although parties with many new MPs (such as the Finns Party in 2011) seemed to need more support from the staff than the more established ones. The length of the parliamentary career was mostly visible in the accounts of very experienced MPs with memories from a time when the administrative resources were scarcer, PPGs were weaker, or the PA system was introduced (see also Ollila, 2007).

6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In the study, we applied a broader and more normative perspective on the roles of the parliamentary staff than the one focusing on task-based roles (cf. Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2022), drawing on an interpretive and relational perspective (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Busby, 2013; Crewe, 2018; Geddes, 2021; Geddes & Rhodes, 2018). The concept of role conceptualisation (Stout, 2013) allowed us to see how MPs' perceptions of the roles of the various parliamentary staff contributed to the construction of these roles, their normative underpinnings and legitimacy, and their limits in a prestigious and highly political environment. The MP–staff relations in the Finnish parliament were mostly presented in a positive light (cf. Niemi, 2010; White, 2024), in line with the international research using similar material (Peplow & Pivatto, 2020). A central finding regarding the role conceptualisations was their conditioning by the position of the staff, both with respect to the political work and the parliamentary hierarchy, with the personnel most distant from the political core and lowest in the parliamentary hierarchy receiving the most praise.

The concept of the purple zone, highlighting the mixing and complementarity of politics and administration (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015; see also Svara, 1999), described the roles of the parliamentary staff better than a clear-cut politics/administration dichotomy would have done. While interaction between the institutional support staff and the MPs was not described in terms that indicate a blending of spheres, the role conceptualisations of the committee counsels place them clearly in the purple zone. In the case of the PAs, the role conceptualisations varied in terms of "purpleness," with some of them clearly having a more political role, and others a predominantly administrative role. However, a distinction between a "legitimate" purple zone and actual, "blue" politics was emphasised in the material regarding the work of the committee counsels and PAs, establishing that it was not legitimate for the staff to meddle in the latter. Consequently, our findings on both role conceptualisations and the purple zone also give a nuanced picture of whether the parliamentary staff are perceived as allies or competitors of the MPs (Becker & Bauer, 2021; Peters, 2021).

Other studies on the purple zone, mainly addressing the local implementation of public policies (Alford et al., 2017; Bellò & Spano, 2015), have highlighted the new, dynamic roles adopted by public administrators. Such alternatives to the classical Weberian model have also been taken up in the literature on role conceptualisations (Stout, 2013). In our material, the role conceptualisations of the parliamentary staff by the MPs can be described as traditional rather than innovative, with the staff incorporating and reproducing the legacy of the parliamentary institution through their everyday work. However, the strengthening of explicitly party-political staff has clearly had an impact on the relationship between politics and administration (Aula & Konttinen, 2020; Aula & Koskimaa, 2023; Raunio, 2023), a trend which is likely to continue.

In future research, alternative frameworks, such as that of representative bureaucracy, could provide more insights on the political staff in parliaments (see Egeberg et al., 2013). The views of the incumbent rather than former MPs could provide more up-to-date conceptualisations of the roles of the parliamentary staff, although these MPs might not speak as freely as the retired ones. Also, a comparison between the self-conceptions and externally produced role conceptualisations of the staff could provide further insights on the topic, as would an international study that could distinguish between the contextual and more generic findings. The invisibility of some staff groups (such as cleaners or café workers) could be addressed in further research, as it potentially overlaps with a gendered division of labour (see Niemi, 2010; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2018). The concept of the

purple zone could be examined in subsequent studies in relation to political positions in parliaments that have an administrative dimension, such as the speaker or the chancellery commission (the highest organ of the parliamentary administration, consisting of MPs) in the Finnish case. Methodologically, our study can provide inspiration for further research using oral history archive material in other countries (see, e.g., Peplow & Pivatto, 2020), broadening the scope of studies in which such materials can be employed.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The original Finnish/Swedish language data used for the study is available at the Oral History Archive of Finnish Parliament, subject to permission (see https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/naineduskuntatoimii/kirjasto/palvelut/Arkiston_palvelut/Pages/Veteraanikansanedustajien-muistitietoarkiston-palvelut.aspx).

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Staff Matters: The Effect of Political Group Staff on MP Activity in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The small but growing literature on parliamentary staff is largely composed of qualitative descriptive studies of staff roles and activities. A key assumption that underlies all of these studies is that "staff matters" for parliamentary activity, but this assumption has never been formally put to the test. This article presents a first cut at filling this lacuna and attempts to quantify the effect of political group staff. We examine the Dutch lower house. Our central question is: How does the availability of different forms of staff support within political groups affect the activity of MPs? For each political group in the lower house, we gauged how many ghostwriters and marketeers they employ. We then relate this to a variety of indicators of parliamentary activity of individual MPs, such as the number of motions, written questions, and amendments submitted, as well as activity on social media (specifically X, formerly Twitter). For questions, motions, and amendments, we do see a staff effect on MP activity, but with social media presence, the results suggest that staff constrains rather than promotes the number of tweets.

Keywords

parliamentary activity; parliamentary staff; social media; the Netherlands

1. Introduction

The literature on the role of parliamentary staff in politics has traditionally been little more than a "cottage industry" (Otjes, 2023, p. 374), but has seen renewed interest in recent years. Thus far, this literature consists mainly of descriptive analyses that map out the organization, role, and backgrounds of specific staff types in specific parliaments (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Crewe, 2017; Egeberg et al., 2013). Even though

conceptualizations and the selection of relevant staff types vary between studies, they all take as a starting point the presumption that parliamentary staff have a certain effect on the activities of MPs, party groups, or parliaments more generally. In other words, they argue that staff matters.

Only more recently, US-focused studies started moving beyond descriptive accounts by gauging the extent of staff impact on various aspects of parliamentary behaviour (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017; Ommundsen, 2023). In this article, we join this explanatory turn in parliamentary staff studies. Our central question addresses the key presumption in parliamentary staff studies directly and asks: How does the availability of different forms of staff support within political groups affect the activity of MPs?

We understand parliamentary activity as all the work that MPs do individually or collectively, focused on the functions of parliament to shape legislation, scrutinize the government, and represent the people. We look at different specific activities of MPs: their use of motions, amendments, and questions, and their use of social media. These are related to different roles MPs play: as co-legislator (amendments), as those who oversee the government (questions), and their work as representatives communicating with citizens (social media). While we generally have the same expectation for each of these roles (more staff means more activity), we look at them separately because staff may play different roles in different areas.

Our study does not just contribute to the study of parliamentary staff, but also to the study of MP activities, which so far has mainly focused on individual characteristics to explain behaviour (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018; Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). MPs are not just individuals, but they are part of parliamentary organizations that supply them with resources to do their work. We place individual MPs into their organizational context by studying how staffing affects their level of activity both in parliament and on social media.

We focus our study on the lower house of the Dutch parliament (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*). We do so for two reasons: Firstly, because the lower house is the only parliament (that we know of) where there has been a comprehensive survey of the size and role of the staff of parliamentary party groups (PPGs; Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). This gives a unique opportunity to study whether staff matters. Secondly, as Louwerse and Otjes (2016) argue, the electoral system of the Netherlands (a single national district with relatively little influence of preference votes) creates relatively few incentives for MPs to pursue personal votes through parliamentary activity. This means that this is a likely case to observe how another factor, in our case, organizational structure, affects behaviour, without the need for strong controls.

We now turn towards discussing the existing theory on staff, which we use to formulate expectations about how they affect MP behaviour. Subsequently, we introduce our case, data, and methods. We then discuss our results and the conclusions that can be derived from these.

2. Staff as the Crucial Resource for MP Activity

The central theoretical assumption of our contribution is that the work MPs do is not just produced by themselves but co-produced by them and a team of parliamentary staffers. This is perhaps best exemplified in the image of a US congressman as an "enterprise" by Salisbury and Shepsle (1981) or the congressional office as a "small business" by Loomis (1979). Most of the words an MP says in parliament have been prepared by the staff who write their speeches and who practice the parliamentary interactions with them,

suggesting possible interventions and responses. Staff also draft the motions, questions, and amendments that MPs submit, and they write or produce the messages, memes, and videos that MPs post on social media—or they post them on their MP's behalf.

Despite the long pedigree of the "small business" or "enterprise" conception of staff-MP relations, empirical studies that recognize the collective nature of parliamentary work are sparse (but see Crosson et al., 2020; Madonna & Ostrander, 2014; Ommundsen, 2023; Squire, 1993). Earlier explanatory studies focused on individual-level and party-level incentives for parliamentary activity, without bringing the organizational resources that staff provide into the equation. These individual-level explanations largely focus on the vote-seeking motivations of individual MPs (Mayhew, 2004). The central argument is that MPs who are less sure of their re-election are likely to be more active in order to showcase their performance to the voters and the party selectorate. The extent to which this explains the behaviour of individual MPs, however, strongly depends on the electoral system (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). The opposite image of this notion is that MPs who will not seek re-election will become less active (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018).

Variables at the party level offer an alternative explanation of individual-level parliamentary activity. A party's ideological position, participation in government, and size all matter for explaining between-party differences in parliamentary activity: MPs from parties that are in the opposition, are more likely to use formal tools to obtain information or to convince the government to pursue particular policies as they lack the informal pathways available to coalition parties (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016; Otjes et al., 2023). MPs from parties that are ideologically far away from the government may be more likely to desire changes to proposed policies and use formal tools to force such change (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Populist parties may use particular formal instruments more often as they better allow them to voice their opposition (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021).

Staff resources may well be an additional driver of parliamentary activity. Their support can be conceptualized in a qualitative and a quantitative sense. Qualitatively, staff activities feed into the content of questions, amendments, tweets, resolutions, debate contributions, and any other kind of activity—for instance, by drafting these, advising MPs on formulation based on policy, political or legal expertise, or by obtaining information from academic experts or interest groups. From this perspective, the congruence between a staff member's opinions and those of her MP and their constituents is of key relevance in studying staff impact on parliamentary behaviour (cf. Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). In a quantitative sense, staff allow the MP to boost activity (cf. Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981). By distributing tasks over specialized staff, MPs can generate more output than they would be capable of producing alone. More staff thus simply means more amendments, more questions, and more motions, to name only a few examples. It is this last, quantitative perspective that guides our present analysis. Notwithstanding any qualitative impacts on parliamentary work through staff inputs, at the very least, we may expect a correlation between staff size and MP activity if we assume that staff matters from a quantitative perspective.

Brandsma and Otjes (2024) have proposed a grid to map the diversity of staff types and their activities. Building on role theory (Andeweg, 2014), they argue that staffers play many different roles. They recognize five, which are not mutually exclusive: information broker, advisor, compromise facilitator, marketeer, and ghostwriter. For our discussion, the latter two roles are crucial. Information brokers collect and filter information from society and experts. Advisors present with possible courses of action, based on their own

expertise (be it subject matter expertise or political expertise). Compromise facilitators explore zones of potential agreement within or between parties (see Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, for a more extensive description). These roles have in common that they still leave much work in the hands of the MPs themselves, as they only seek to facilitate parliamentary behaviour—staff may send information or advice to the MP, but the MP still has to decide on any course of action. In other words, for these three roles, staff activity does affect parliamentary activity directly, but the relation with generating outputs is only indirect, which makes it difficult to observe a staff effect on MP activity quantitatively.

This is markedly different for the other two roles: marketeers and ghostwriters. Marketeers communicate on behalf of MPs with citizens and journalists, and in particular, while managing the social media presence of MPs, they directly control outputs. Ghostwriters draft documents on behalf of MPs that they can submit under their own name. Those can be speeches, motions, amendments, and written questions, but also op-eds and press releases. Of course, both categories of staff may enjoy varying degrees of discretion in carrying out their tasks, but the crucial difference with other staff roles is that they prepare specific expressions inside or outside of parliament *in full*, and thus can act as near stand-ins for the MP for those. It therefore seems reasonable to expect a correlation between the availability of these staff roles within a party group and the number of outputs generated by MPs.

In the Dutch case, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) found that the vast majority of the support that MPs receive from ghostwriters and marketeers is provided by party group staff. Each party group receives a budget that derives directly from its size in parliament plus a fixed amount, and it is at the party's discretion how many staff to recruit, how many MPs to team them up with, and which specific roles to assign to them. Parties can therefore make strategic choices in allocating more or fewer staff resources to (social) media presence, providing policy advice, and supporting speechwriting, question writing, or other parliamentary activities. Ghostwriters tend to work as specialists on a specific subject (e.g., education or housing) and they are often responsible for drafting both speeches, motions, and written questions; although small differences may exist between PPGs and individual staffers (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). The leeway enjoyed by the staffer in approaching this task may vary: the MP may significantly edit the drafts produced or simply submit the draft unchanged. In any event, delegating the task of drafting texts to a ghostwriter should allow MPs to work more efficiently.

The level of activity reflects the opportunities MPs have for such activities (which may be more or less constrained), their willingness to engage in these, and the staff resources available. Consider the difference between parliamentary speeches, amendments, and written questions. An MP can only speak in parliament when a debate is scheduled, which oftentimes requires the consent of a majority of parliament (Döring, 1995; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021). Moreover, how much MPs can say will often be determined by the speaker, who decides speaking times (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021). Motions can only be proposed when a debate has been held on a specific subject, meaning that MPs are also constrained in this respect by parliamentary majorities. An MP can only submit an amendment when the government or another MP has proposed a bill. Finally, the number of written questions an MP can submit is typically unconstrained by rules and regulations—how many questions an MP can submit is only dependent on their own willingness and resources. In this contribution, our focus is on identifying to what extent levels of activity can be explained by the availability of staff resources. Therefore, we do not examine the number of words spoken but focus on activities like submitting questions where MPs have some freedom in deciding their own level of

engagement: from most to least free, these are submitting written questions, submitting motions, and submitting amendments.

The existing evidence from the US shows mixed patterns: Madonna and Ostrander (2014) show that the more staff a US congressperson or senator has, the more bills and amendments they introduce. Ommundsen (2023) shows that for US Senate Committees, the number of experienced staffers increases activity, while Crosson et al. (2020) show the same for the staffs of individual representatives.

With this background, we formulate the following hypotheses:

1. *Question Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of questions, the more questions MPs of that PPG will submit.
2. *Motion Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of motions, the more motions MPs of that PPG will submit.
3. *Amendment Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of amendments, the more amendments MPs of that PPG will submit.

The role of a marketeer refers to staff whose responsibility it is to communicate about the activities of MPs to the wider public, either through traditional media or through social media. In a nutshell, they should "sell the member like a product" (Loomis, 1979, p. 53). To what extent we can see the effect of the activity of staffers depends on the interplay between gatekeepers, on the one hand, and MPs and their staff, on the other. Marketeers focused on traditional media (often known as press officers) seek to "sell" journalists specific stories and dissuade them from writing others (Fox & Hammond, 1975). The success of their efforts is, however, difficult to measure: in the end, the decision whether or not to publish a story lies with editors and is not in the hands of the ones selling the story. Moreover, the success of this work is reflected in what is written in newspapers and said on TV and radio about an MP, not necessarily how much. A press officer may, in fact, be most successful if they quash a specific story. This is markedly different in social media, where the "politician-as-enterprise" is both subject and broadcaster in one. Marketeers focused on social media (often known as social media managers) directly post the stories, tweets, memes, and videos online. Their activity is directly visible without any gatekeeping by journalists (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). We can see their productivity reflected directly in the social media activity of their MP.

There is some reason to believe that staff plays this intermediary role. For one, earlier research by Squire (1993) indicated that the perceived responsiveness of US state legislatures by citizens reflected the level of professionalization of that legislature's staff. Secondly, Jacobs and Spierings (2019) found that relatively few MPs of Dutch populist parties have Twitter (now X) accounts, which suggests an effect of party structure on social media activity. In all, it seems reasonable to expect a higher production of social media content when dedicated staff manage the production thereof:

4. *Social Media Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for contact with citizens via online media, the more social media messages MPs of that PPG will send out.

3. Data and Methods

Our study quantitatively examines the activity of Dutch MPs in the first half of 2023 as a function of staff size. We will discuss our reasons for studying this case, our data sources, and our methods in the following paragraphs.

3.1. Case Selection

We focus on the lower house of the Dutch parliament. Our primary reason for studying this case is data availability. To our knowledge, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) offer a unique, comprehensive survey of the PPG staff. Moreover, due to the high fragmentation of the Dutch lower house and the significant variation of how Dutch political party groups have organized their staff, this case includes sufficient variation for detecting staff effects. At the time of data collection, the 150-member lower house was very fragmented. It included no less than 17 PPGs, with the largest groups, VVD and D66, having respectively 34 and 24 seats, and only 4 groups winning over 10 seats. Roughly 500 staff members worked for the political groups in parliament. Finally, the different levels of activity of MPs in the Netherlands offer somewhat of a conundrum: Dutch MPs have few individual incentives to be active in parliament. Where in many systems, individual vote-seeking motivation helps to explain behaviour (Mayhew, 2004), the Dutch parliament, because of its semi-open list system with a single national district, lacks meaningful individual electoral incentives for MPs to act in parliament (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016)—nearly all MPs are elected on the coattails of the party leader. Even for social media activity, Spierings and Jacobs (2014) show that the number of preference votes MPs receive is only weakly related to their social media activity.

3.2. Dependent Variables

We look at the relationship between MP staffing and MP activity in the Dutch parliament in the first seven months of 2023. In this period, 162 people served as MPs, as some people left parliament and were succeeded by others. The limited *N* means that we must be cautious in our conclusions.

We look at four different dependent variables: the number of motions, the number of amendments, the number of questions, and the number of tweets per MP. The first three are derived from Louwerse et al. (2018; update provided by the lead author in 2025 through personal communication). This data offers the number of motions, amendments, and questions per MP on a day-to-day basis. In this article, we look at the number of motions, amendments, and questions for which the MP was the first sponsor. In the context of the Dutch parliament, the first sponsor usually is the MP who took the initiative for a particular proposal, while other MPs co-sign it to express support for the proposal—either from different parties (in which case it is a way to build a majority or to signal cross-party salience), or from the same party (in which case it signals that the issue does not fit neatly into the portfolio of a single spokesperson). Note that there is no procedural difference between questions, motions, and amendments with different numbers of co-sponsors. As not all MPs were in parliament for the entire term, we divide the number of motions, amendments, and questions by the number of days the MP was in parliament, and multiply it by the total number of days in the seven months.

We focus on Twitter (now X) because in the first half of 2023, this (still) was the dominant social media platform used by individual Dutch politicians to communicate with journalists and other MPs; though Facebook and Instagram were also used, but mainly by parties to reach out to voters directly. The shift to BlueSky by progressive politicians occurred after our research period (in the fall of 2024). The number of tweets was collected by the Documentation Centre for Political Parties (DNPP), which kept a database of Twitter activity for all (Dutch) political accounts ("handles"), both MPs and parties. DNPP offered us the number of tweets per MP per month for the first seven months of 2023. This data is available for 150 of the 162 people who were MPs in this period. As not all MPs were in parliament for the entire term, we divide the number of tweets by the number of full months the MP was in parliament, and multiply this by the total number of months in the seven-month period.

3.3. Independent Variables

Our key independent variable is the number of relevant staffers who work for the party group. We derive this from Brandsma and Otjes (2024), who interviewed the personnel from PPGs to count the number of staff and map out their activities. They collected this information for 14 out of the 17 PPGs that were active in the first half of 2023 (with radical right-wing populist parties PVV, FvD, and JA21 refusing to participate in the study). Therefore, we have staffing data for 131 out of 162 MPs. For each, we look at the total number of staffers in each PPG in a certain ghostwriting role, divided by the number of MPs in that PPG as an indicator of ghostwriting staff resources per MP. For questions, motions, and amendments, we look at those who ghostwrite these documents. For questions and motions, these are mostly the same staffers; parties report on average 25.5 staff members who ghostwrite both motions and questions. This amounts to a share of 55% of all staff within a PPG, or 1.6 ghostwriters per MP. For amendments, however, the number of staffers specifically focused on ghostwriting these is quite low. The average party reports only one staffer focused on this task. This is, on average, one in four MPs or one in 20 staffers. This can be explained by the fact that most PPGs rely on the legislative counsels, who are part of the institutional staff (the so-called *Bureau Wetgeving*), to actually write the text of the amendment, with the (limited) staff who ghostwrite motions liaising with the legislative counsels in the institutional staff about the text (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). In the text, we focus on the number of staff who *either* write amendments or motions. This is 25.9 per party, which is 1.6 per MP and 55% of staff. Furthermore, in the Supplementary File, we look at a number of alternative operationalizations: firstly, we look at the actual number of staffers in each role; secondly, we look at the share of the total staff of each PPG in a specific role.

For tweets, we look at the number of marketeers per MP who are supposed to communicate to citizens directly, e.g., through social media. About one in eight PPG staffers does so, with the average PPG employing five such social media marketeers. The average per MP is 0.46, meaning that a party has one for roughly every two MPs. We calculated our variable for every PPG to account for between-PPG variation.

3.4. Control Variables

We control for a number of factors. At the MP level, we control for whether the MP is a PPG leader or the speaker. We expect that these MPs are less active in using these tools. As there were two PPG leadership changes during the period of our investigation, we control for the share of the period that an MP was a PPG leader. We control for year of birth (in years) and length of service in days (at the end of the seven-month

period) with the expectation that older and more experienced MPs are less active than younger and less experienced ones (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018). We derive this data from the Dutch Parliamentary Documentation Centre, via www.parlement.com. We control for relative list position with the expectation that MPs with a less secure, lower relative list position will be more active (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). We also control for the MP's gender without a specific expectation.

At the party level, we add a number of controls. We control for the number of seats a party has, with the expectation that MPs in larger groups are less active (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). We also control for whether a party is in government with the expectation that MPs in governing parties will be less active, particularly in their use of motions, amendments, and questions (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). Next, we control for the left–right distance to the weighted government mean. We derive the party positions from the Populism and Political Parties expert survey (Zaslove et al., 2024). We expect that parties further away from the government are more likely to use formal parliamentary tools (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). Finally, we also look at the level of populism (also derived from Zaslove et al., 2024). We expect that populist parties are more likely to ask questions but are less likely to introduce amendments (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019).

3.5. Methods of Analysis and Robustness Tests

In Table 1, we present negative binomial regressions with standard errors clustered at the party level, and Figure 1 visualises the central results. Given that our dependent variable has a clear left skew, a count model is justified. We use negative binomial regression instead of Poisson regression, due to the overdispersion of our dependent variable (detailed in Table A1 of the Supplementary File). Given that our variable of interest is at the party-level, clustering standard errors at the party-level (where our variable of interest varies) is justified.

In the Supplementary File, we look at a number of alternative models. First, we look at different operationalizations of the main independent variable: firstly, we look at the absolute number of staffers with the relevant role (model A1 for motions, A8 for amendments, A16 for questions, and A23 for tweets); secondly, we look at the share of staffers with that role (models A5, A13, A20, and A27). For amendments, we also look at the number of staffers per MP who actually write amendments (A10). We also include models without control variables (A2, A9, A17, and A24). Given the possibility that outliers might drive the results, we look at models without the 10% highest number of staffers on a task (A3, A11, A18, and A25). These outliers are mostly smaller PPGs: as PPG staff budgets are composed of a fixed amount for each PPG plus a variable amount by size in parliament, this results in more staffers per MP for smaller groups. Differences between these results and the one in the main text would indicate that these outliers drive the results. Given the possible role that PPG size can play, we replace our control of the number of seats with logged party seats (A4, A12, A19, and A26). Next, we look at different ways to operationalize the dependent variable: one can look at the absolute number of tweets, motions, questions, and amendments, and include a variable that measures the number of days the MP was in parliament (A6, A14, A21, and A28). Finally, as we observed in Section 3.2, MPs can co-sign motions, amendments, and questions. In Model A7, A15, and A22, we look at the total number of motions, amendments, and questions with the MP's name that were submitted (independent of whether they were the first sponsor or not).

Table 1. Negative binomial regressions with standard errors clustered at the party-level.

Model Dependent variable	Model 1 Questions	Model 2 Motions	Model 3 Amendments	Model 4 Tweets
PPG question ghostwriters per MP	0.11** (0.04)			
PPG motion ghostwriters per MP		0.23*** (0.07)		
PPG motion and amendment ghostwriters per MP			0.35*** (0.09)	
PPG social media marketeers per MP				−0.52*** (0.15)
PPG seats in parliament	−0.02*** (0.00)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.02*** (0.01)
PPG left–right distance to the government	−0.10* (0.05)	−0.15*** (0.06)	0.08 (0.05)	0.18** (0.07)
PPG = in coalition	−0.46*** (0.15)	−0.64*** (0.20)	−0.47** (0.23)	−0.07 (0.28)
Level of populism	0.09*** (0.03)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.15** (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)
MP = PPG leader	−1.26*** (0.25)	−1.20*** (0.26)	−1.13*** (0.35)	−0.24 (0.24)
MP = Speaker	−21.56*** (0.96)	−18.09*** (1.13)	−16.85*** (0.99)	−1.05*** (0.18)
MP = Male	−0.13 (0.09)	0.03 (0.06)	0.09 (0.19)	0.08 (0.11)
MP year of birth	0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
MP experience	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
MP relative list position	0.07 (0.10)	−0.18 (0.14)	−0.36 (0.31)	−0.40*** (0.11)
Constant	2.98 (15.52)	10.61 (9.44)	14.42 (14.74)	31.04* (18.56)
Number of cases	131	131	131	123
Aikake's Information Criterion	891	1057	584	1549

Notes: * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

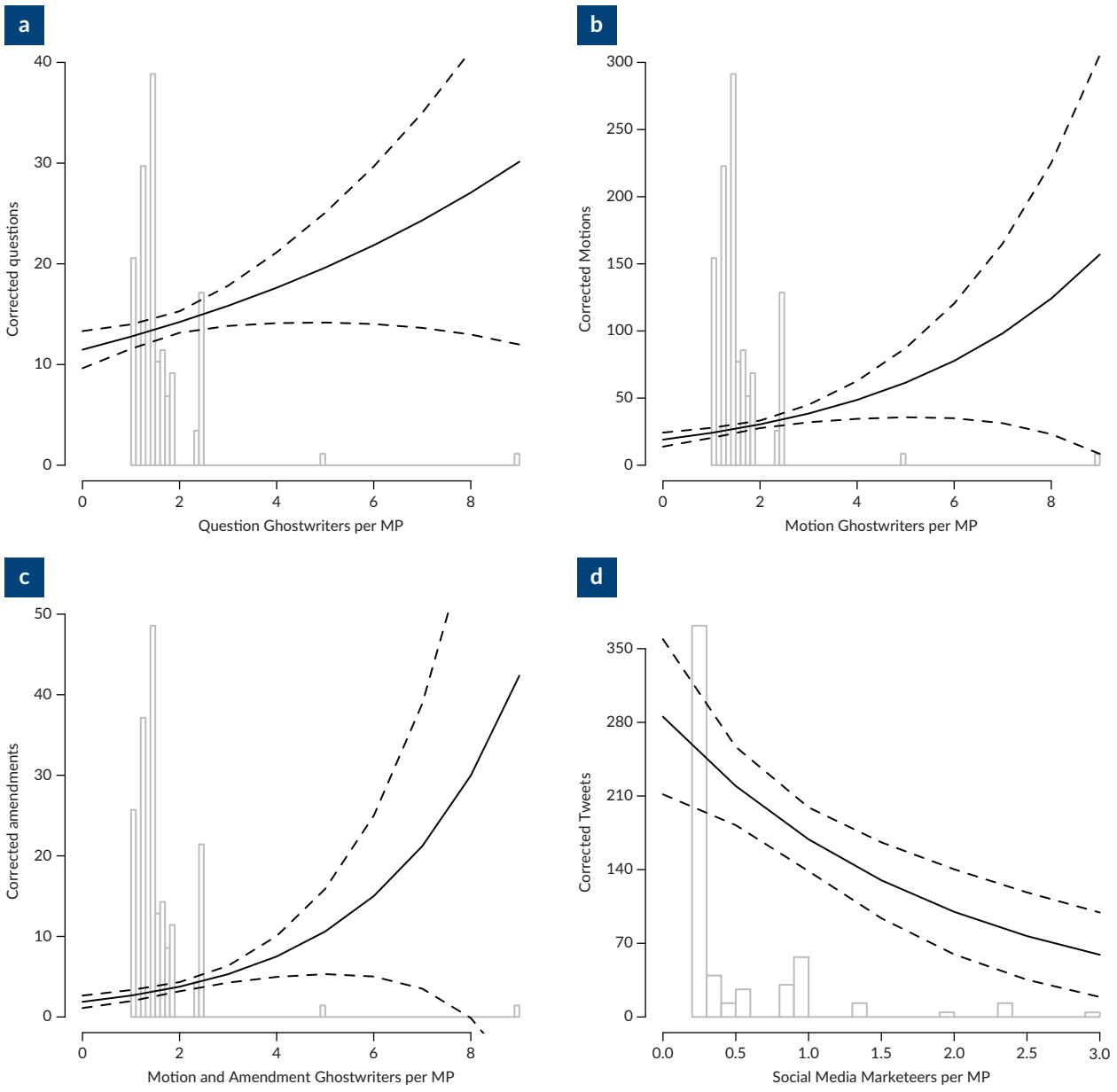

Figure 1. (a) Model 1: Ghostwriters and Questions; (b) Model 2: Ghostwriters and Motions; (c) Model 3: Ghostwriters and Amendments; (d) Model 4: Social media marketeers and Tweets. Notes: (a) Expected number of motions with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 1; (b) expected number of amendments with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 2; (c) expected number of questions with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 3; (d) expected number of tweets with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 4.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the central results and Figure 1 their visualization. Our first hypothesis was the *Question hypothesis*, which suggested that the more staff an MP has available for drafting questions, the more questions the MP will submit. Model 1 in Table 1 and Figure 1 shows statistically significant results. Every additional staffer per MP increases the number of questions by 11%. Table A4 in the Supplementary File offers a number of alternative specifications and shows a mixed picture: staff size has an effect on the number of questions in four out of seven models. In three cases, we do not find a significant pattern: when

we look at the absolute number of ghostwriters (which shows that it is useful to look at the number of staffers per MP), when we omit control variables (the lack of significant results is likely due to omitted variable bias), and when we exclude the parties with the 10% highest relative staff numbers in this role (those are PPGs with 2.5 or more staffers performing this role). These results indicate that the smaller PPGs that have a lot of staff relative to the number of MPs drive the significant result.

The *Motion hypothesis* proposes that the more staff a PPG employs who are responsible for ghostwriting motions, the more motions MPs of that PPG will submit. Model 2 in Table 1 and Figure 1 shows a strong and significant effect. Every additional staffer per MP increases MP activity by 23%. As we show in Table A2 in the Supplementary File, this pattern persists under different specifications shown with one exception: it is not visible when we exclude the parties with the 10% highest relative staff numbers in this role (these are PPGs with more than 2.5 staffers in this role). This indicates that the significant result is driven by the smaller PPGs that have high staff-to-MP ratios.

Our third hypothesis was the *Amendment hypothesis*. It proposed that the number of staffers per MP working on amendments predicted the number of amendments MPs would submit. Model 3 of Table 1 and Figure 1 shows a significant pattern: Every additional staffer per MP increases the number of amendments by 35%. In Table A3 in the Supplementary File, we look at different specifications. We find a significant pattern under every specification, with one exception: when we look at the number of staffers that PPGs indicate actually work on amendments. This indicates that looking at the staff writing amendments *or* liaising with the Bureau Legislation is likely a better predictor, given that in practice the drafting of amendments is largely outsourced to parliament's institutional staff.

Model 4 of Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate a strong, significant negative relationship between the number of social media marketeers and the number of tweets. Every additional staffer reduces the number of tweets by 52%. This pattern is quite persistent in the Supplementary File (Table A5); we only do not see it when we do not include control variables, indicating that individual characteristics and factors like left–right distance to the government are more important in understanding MP tweeting behaviour.

5. Discussion

What do these results mean for our expectations? Given the small *N*, we have to be cautious in our interpretation. But, independently of how we operationalize our dependent variable, we find significant results in the expected direction for three of our four dependent variables (i.e., that ghostwriters affect the number of questions, amendments, and motions).

Yet, we find that when excluding outliers, we only find a significant result in the expected direction for one indicator, namely, that the number of amendments reflects the number of ghostwriters. This indicates that the results that we found for motions and questions are driven by relatively small PPGs. That does not mean that we should entirely dismiss our expectation on these grounds, but we should rather take into account the nature of staff organization for these small PPGs, where MPs, in relative terms, have quite a lot of staff ghostwriting motions. The differences between the other PPGs (with between 1 and 2 motion ghostwriters per MP) do not affect MP activity. This suggests that staff make more of a difference for small parties than for larger ones, or that the larger parties' staff organization does not vary enough between parties to observe

meaningful differences. Note that we control for group size, so the results do not necessarily reflect size effects but rather how PPG size and total PPG staff interact.

With these caveats, we find substantial differences in the effect size between amendments (strongest effect), motions (medium-sized effect), and questions (weakest effect and also the least consistent results when looking at alternative specifications). While our expectations were based on the idea that the level of freedom that MPs experience was crucial to identify an effect of staff, another factor appears to be more important: labour intensity. Questions are the least labour-intensive form of parliamentary activity, so staff size matters least here. Motions are in between amendments and questions, both in terms of labour intensity and effect size. Amendments are most labour-intensive to write, and it is therefore not unreasonable that we find the strongest effect here. We should, however, note that this effect is constrained by the types of staff that would liaise with the legislative counsels working for parliament as a whole, rather than the number of staff within PPGs who would actually draft legislative amendments themselves. All in all, we need to be cautious in our conclusions for each of these variables: either we find a positive result that is mainly driven by small PPGs with a relatively high number of staffers (motions and questions) or a positive result that is driven by staff that liaises rather than ghostwrites (amendments).

The negative results between Twitter (now X) activity and staff working on direct marketing to citizens pose a conundrum: why would more staffers lead to less activity? There may be good reasons for this pattern. Firstly, these staffers would not just work on the Twitter (now X) activity of MPs but actually work on the party accounts. On the one hand, they thus may not supply individual MPs with a lot of support, but also, MPs may see less of a need to use social media individually when their party's accounts are strong on this already. The evidence for this is not strong: at the party level, the correlation between the absolute number of direct social media marketeers on staff per party and the number of tweets from the party account is weak (Pearson's R is 0.36, not significant for 13 cases). Secondly, it is the only activity in our analysis that is not purely intra-parliamentary, and the party headquarters may enter the equation. The party headquarters may take more control over the party's entire communication channels during campaign periods: our research period coincided with the provincial election campaign (election on March 15, 2023). The correlation between party Twitter (now X) activity and party staff size in the last four months of the research period is even lower, which dismisses the notion that during campaign periods parties take greater control over communication channels (Pearson's R is 0.34, not significant for 13 cases). Finally, the number of tweets may not necessarily be the best indicator of political activity on social media. A party may want to put well-tested, high-quality, unified messages on social media, including memes, videos, or infographics. MPs putting whatever comes to mind on Twitter (now X) may actually not be in the strategic interest of the party: these messages may distract from the party's well-crafted, unified message (cf. Proksch & Slapin, 2014). Part of what social media staffers may be occupied with is convincing MPs not to tweet certain material (or actually to remove certain tweets). From this last perspective, it is not strange that MPs from parties with a higher number of social media staff post fewer tweets: these staff mediate the relationship between citizens and MPs in the interest of the party's overall strategy and therefore limit their own individual activity on social media.

Our interpretation should also be cautioned by the fact that we missed six PPGs: we did not study three groups that were formed as splits-offs formed during the term, which received less staff than PPGs of equal size formed after the elections. Including these might have shown more nuanced patterns for PPG and staff size. We also did not study three right-wing populist PPGs that refused cooperation (with 17, five, and three

seats). Given that populist parties rely more on scrutiny tools than policy-making tools, this may also have given different insights.

All in all, our results indicate that staff matter under specific conditions (motions), perhaps in different roles than we proposed (amendments), and as a constraint on rather than promoter of activity (tweets).

6. Conclusion

Much of the literature on political and parliamentary staff starts its analyses from the premise that staff matters. In this article, we put this assumption to the test. Focusing on the activity of MPs in terms of asking questions, proposing amendments, submitting motions, and Twitter (now X) activity, we asked to what degree the availability of PPG staff matters in explaining activity levels of MPs. Earlier studies explained these by individual-level electoral incentives or by party-level variables such as participation in government and ideological position. The resources provided by staff, however, have so far been neglected.

While our results generally support the notion that staff indeed matters, they suggest that their effect is not the same for every tool that an MP has at their disposal. We do see a link between staff availability and the production of questions, motions, and amendments, with the strength of the relationship reflecting the labour intensity of each tool. With tweets, we also see a link, but in the opposite direction from what we expected: more staff means fewer tweets, not more. For some types of activity, and in particular motions and questions, the results seem driven by small parties. Having a smaller staff size, these smaller parties also differentiate tasks to a lesser degree, resulting in a higher share of staff involved in ghostwriting motions and questions. This result suggests that the effect of staff differs between small and large parties.

These first results are suggestive but not conclusive. The underrepresentation of right-wing populist parties in our data may well bias results. Furthermore, they only show a rudimentary picture of staff effects on MP activity: we explored purely quantitatively to what degree staff makes a difference for the *number* of outputs produced by MPs, not to what degree or how staff inputs *inform* MP behaviour. Moreover, even though the Dutch case is a clear case of an electoral system without strong individual electoral incentives, it is also a fragmented political system, which at the time of our research was more fragmented than ever before. Despite the variance this yields and therefore also results that may travel well to other parliamentary contexts, larger and/or less fragmented parliaments may display higher levels of task specialization among staff than we have found in the Dutch case, and perhaps also less attenuated results.

While we originally planned to look at a period of one year, the 2023 elections (which were called for in July 2023) and consequent focus away from parliamentary work to campaign work, necessitated us to cut our research period short. As we only have basically the first half year, this may affect our result, as the focus of parliamentary activity, particularly in terms of proposing motions, is in the fall when the budgets are discussed. This should, however, only affect the overall level of activity as this applies to all parties in parliament equally, and not to the variance in their reliance on staff resources.

We see our findings as a call for an organizational turn in legislative studies. While in parliamentary studies, how MPs are organized has been a key factor to explain outcomes (e.g., Krehbiel, 1992), the allocation and role of staff have been conspicuously absent in this debate. In a nutshell, our result shows that staff organization

matters, but that a more fine-grained understanding is called for on the precise choices party groups make in allocating staff resources, and the leeway given to them. Our study, therefore, opens up fruitful avenues for further comparative research on the organization and effect of political staff.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Anna-Lena Högenauer (University of Luxembourg).

Data Availability

Replication data is available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/K1DYQH

Supplementary Material

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

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ARTICLE

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Echoes and Barriers: Staff as Key Actors in the Representative Process

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Abstract

Political staffers play a central but often overlooked role in shaping the representative relationship between members of parliament (MPs) and constituents. Drawing on constructivist theories of representation and original survey data from 366 Canadian federal MP staffers and 97 MPs, this article argues that staffers act both as "echoes," amplifying constituent concerns, and "barriers," filtering which concerns reach elected officials. Quantitative findings reveal that 78% of MPs trust staff discretion over constituent interactions, and two-thirds of staff report primarily interacting with constituents, often influencing information MPs receive by routinely selecting, synthesizing, and prioritizing constituent concerns. By mediating access, staffers structure the everyday work of representation, showing that representation is not solely an act of elected officials but is co-constructed by staff. This article advances representation theory by demonstrating that democratic representation is a dynamic, mediated process wherein unelected staff play a crucial role.

Keywords

Parliament of Canada; parliamentary democracy; political staff; representation

1. Introduction

The relationship between representative and represented is the heart of democracy. Yet, in practice, this relationship is often mediated (Dittmar, 2021; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Laube et al., 2020; Moens, 2023; Rosenthal & Bell, 2003). More often than not, staffers meet with constituents rather than the member of parliament (MP) themselves (Cloutier, 2019; Docherty, 2005). Staff engage directly with constituents, interpret their concerns, and relay them to the MP, often shaping how those concerns are ultimately understood and addressed. Thus, staff members are not merely passive administrators or service workers

but instead are central actors in the representative process. This intermediary role grants staff a form of representational power, raising important questions about how constituents' voices are filtered, framed, and prioritized. Moreover, we know little about how this delegation of contact structures the nature and quality of democratic representation. While political staff are not elected, they are embedded in formal political structures through their employment by elected representatives. Their position allows them to contribute meaningfully to the representative process. This article thus asks: How do MPs' staff mediate the representative relationship between constituents and MPs, and how does that mediation affect how we understand representation? Using constructivist theories of representation, I argue that staff actively shape and mediate representation by echoing constituent concerns and acting as barriers between the constituent and the representative. Staff can also frame constituent concerns through selecting and synthesizing which information reaches the representative.

To investigate these dynamics, I apply original data from two national surveys conducted in 2023: a staffer survey ($n = 366$) and an MP survey ($n = 97$). The staffer survey examines how staff interact with constituents, how often staff relay information back to their MPs, and how they decide which information to report. The MP survey explores how MPs perceive their staff's role in mediating constituent interactions and the extent of delegation or trust they place in staff discretion.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I describe the theoretical framework, using constructivist theories of representation to explain how staff can be seen as active agents in the representative process. Second, I explain why studying staff, and specifically staff in Canada's parliamentary democracy, is critical for understanding representation beyond elected officials. Third, I outline the research design, including the data collection methods and the structure of the two surveys. Finally, I present and discuss the results, showing how staff operate both as "echoes," who amplify constituent concerns, and as "barriers," who filter and control access to MPs. By examining how MP staffers filter, frame, and relay constituent concerns, this research challenges traditional, election-centered models that view representation as solely the act of elected agents. It shows that staffers, though unelected, hold representational power: They structure political communication, influence MPs' perceptions of their constituencies, and structure the priorities that guide political action. By integrating political staff into theories of representation, this article expands our understanding of who participates in the representative process and how representation is constructed in practice. In doing so, it highlights the invisible but powerful role that staffers play in sustaining and influencing the quality of democratic representation.

2. Constructivist Theories of Representation

Pitkin's foundational work *The Concept of Representation* describes representation as "the making present of something which is nevertheless not literally present" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 143). For Pitkin, representation also involves "acting in the interests of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 209). This understanding influenced the classic principal–agent model of representation, wherein elected officials act as agents of their constituents, legitimized through authorization and held accountable through electoral processes (Dovi, 2018; Pitkin, 1967). While institutional analyses could trace how office structures condition staff roles (Otjes, 2023; Pegan, 2017), and behavioral approaches could examine individual motivations or attitudes staffers have towards work (Egeberg et al., 2013), these frameworks obscure the representational significance of the everyday work through which staff mediate between constituents and MPs (Crewe & Sarra,

2021). In short, they capture important structural or psychological dimensions, but not always the dynamic processes by which representation is enacted by unelected actors.

However, recent scholarship has expanded the lens of representation beyond elected officials to include non-elected political actors (Disch, 2011; Montanaro, 2012; Salkin, 2021; Saward, 2006). Thus, representation emerges not only through institutions and electoral mandates but also through everyday practices and relationships. Feminist scholars further argue that research should shift from who represents to how representation is done: the process of representation (Celis & Childs, 2020; Franceschet & Piscopo, 2008). This includes examining the norms and expectations that determine perceptions of what makes a "good representative" (Dovi, 2012).

Constructivist approaches to political representation are particularly useful for analyzing this phenomenon. Saward's (2006) constructivist theory places *claims-making* at the heart of representation. Rather than focusing solely on policy outcomes or legislative behavior, this approach emphasizes the performative and rhetorical aspects of politics. Representation, in this view, is constituted through the construction and reception of claims to speak or act on behalf of others. As Saward notes, "People construct them, put them forward, make claims for them—make them" (Saward, 2006, p. 301). Legitimacy is not derived purely from institutional position but from whether audiences accept these claims. Constructivist theories of representation view representation not as a fixed relationship but as a dynamic process formed through interpretation, communication, and claims-making.

The constructivist turn thus provides a framework for studying unelected representatives (Disch et al., 2019; Saward, 2006). It recognizes representation as a process, not a status, allowing us to analyze how staffers' work frames both the performance and perception of representation. Dittmar's (2021) research demonstrates how women congressional staffers in the United States mediate representation, using their own personal experiences to influence policy outcomes. For example, women staffers were able to interject their own experiences with accessing medical and family leave, racial profiling, or immigration advocacy to help broaden the representative's views on specific policies. This builds on Franceschet and Piscopo's (2008) differentiation between representation as process and representation as outcome. They contend that even outside of substantive policy change, representational processes—through communication and advocacy—can still fulfill important democratic functions to shape the entire process of representation. While not elected, Dittmar's (2021) research about women congressional staffers shows how proximity to the representative can determine what information the representative hears and considers.

Staffers filter, translate, and shape constituents' concerns, thus influencing both the MP's responses and the broader representative relationship. Through their interactions with constituents, stakeholders, advocacy groups, and lobbyists, staff do more than extend an MP's reach; they actively determine how representation is enacted. Notwithstanding the important contributions of traditional theories of representation, I will use constructivist theories of representation to better understand the representative role of political staffers. This framework broadens the definition of representative. It invites examination into how staff—often behind the scenes—frame public messaging, constituent interactions, and even MPs' public image. Staff are not merely passive "mouthpieces" (Pitkin, 1967, p. 82) but instead active participants in constructing representative claims, often scripting and framing those claims for their elected employers (Fossen, 2019; Saward, 2006; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019). Bringing staff into the study of representation allows us to

explore how interests, values, and identities are translated into the political sphere. Castiglione and Warren (2019) argue that constituents are not represented as whole persons but through selective aspects of their identities and preferences, which become politically salient through representative claims. These preferences are not static; they are co-constructed in dialogue between constituents and representatives, often mediated by staff (Dittmar, 2021; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019). Constructivist theories of representation allow us to understand representation as a dynamic, performative process in which political staff play a crucial, if overlooked, role.

By investigating representation as a process rather than solely an outcome, a constructivist lens provides the conceptual tools needed to understand how unelected staffers contribute to the construction and mediation of political representation. Staffers' roles can be conceptualized as acting as both "echoes" and "barriers." As echoes, staff alleviate MPs' information overload by screening, filtering, and synthesizing constituent communication (Busby & Belkacem, 2013; Otjes, 2023). Constructivism highlights that echoing goes beyond relaying information. When staff decide how to filter and present constituent concerns, they are actively making claims about which issues matter, which can then determine the agenda that MPs carry into both constituency work and parliamentary debates. As barriers, staff serve as gatekeepers, controlling constituents' access to MPs through correspondence management and scheduling (Marland & Esselment, 2019; McKee, 2023). This discretion can bias which information reaches the MP, shaping their understanding and decision-making (Dittmar, 2021; Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). Such gatekeeping practices illustrate the constructivist point that representation is not a fixed relationship but an ongoing process. Staff exercise discretion not only over access but also over which voices are heard, effectively constructing the boundaries of representation in practice. Thus, staff play a critical, often underappreciated role in mediating the representative process. This theoretical lens therefore enhances our understanding of how routine staff practices help produce the everyday work of political representation, revealing that representation is an ongoing process.

3. Why Staff?

Most Canadian and international scholarship on political staff focuses on ministerial or executive-level advisors, who are often politically appointed and funded from departmental budgets (Benoit, 2006; Wilson, 2015). Ministerial staff are shown to broker between ministers, the public service, and political parties, influencing decision-making and often reinforcing centralized authority in cabinet and the prime minister's office (Brodie, 2012, 2018; Craft, 2016; Robson, 2015; Savoie, 1999). Internationally, Westminster research also emphasizes ministerial staffers' influence, focusing on institutionalization, accountability, policy advice, and agenda-setting (Bakvis, 1997; Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007, 2011; Maley, 2011, 2015; Moens, 2023). However, this literature largely overlooks staff working directly with elected representatives outside the executive. In Canada, MPs' personal and constituency staff remain underexamined, despite their public engagement and everyday representational work.

In parliamentary democracies, MPs serve as "the vehicles of representation" between constituents and Parliament (Malloy, 2023b, p. 7). Since the 1970s, Canadian MPs have had formal resources to hire staff, who help manage the overwhelming demands of the role (Docherty, 1997; Malloy, 2023a). This necessitates delegation of some of their responsibilities to their staff, such as meeting with members of the public, answering emails, and helping constituents solve their problems. Docherty explains that one MP admitted

that "it would be inefficient to come to me with every or most problems," for their assistants would know how to identify and solve most issues constituents raise with their MP (Docherty, 1997, p. 174). MPs must delegate representational responsibilities to staff, since MPs cannot oversee every interaction or decision. While MPs frequently describe this in terms of "trust," analytically it reflects a broader process of devolving decision-making discretion to staff who cannot check with the MP before every decision. As such, staff have a degree of independence from the MPs, which allows them to exercise their discretion to make "assessments, practices, judgements and decisions" (Tomkinson, 2020, p. 675). Staff not only handle the bulk of constituent engagement but also shape how MPs perceive their communities, as access and interaction are often mediated through staff (Henderson et al., 2023; McCrain, 2018; Peters, 2021; Willems et al., 2024).

Constituency service has become central to how representation is enacted (Koop et al., 2018). A recent scoping review of 198 studies by Sanches et al. (2024) shows that research on constituency service has grown over the past decade in both scope and methodological diversity. Most of this work conceptualizes constituency service as either "casework," assisting with government services or solving individual problems, or "homestyles," cultivating local presence and connections (Fenno, 1978; Sanches et al., 2024). Constituency service provides tangible support and allows for representatives to gather feedback on how policies affect their communities, creating a connection between citizens and parliament (Blidook & Koop, 2022). Yet, staff are often treated as background resources, rather than active participants in service delivery.

In practice, staff are the front-line service workers for MPs (Cloutier, 2019). They manage the bulk of casework and correspondence (Cloutier, 2019; Docherty, 1997) and crucially exercise discretion over which concerns are escalated to the MP. Here, the MP staffer differs from bureaucratic caseworkers. As Gidengil explains, "The caseworker has a good deal of discretionary power over clients, including the ability to terminate their benefits" (Gidengil, 2020, p. 9). MP staff lack such formal authority; they cannot grant or revoke services. Instead, their discretion lies in whether to pass along constituent concerns, how to frame them, and how to prioritize demands on MPs' limited time. This more subtle but pervasive form of discretion impacts which voices are amplified and which remain unheard.

As Cloutier (2019) shows, this dynamic is perhaps most visible in casework with federal departments. Staff frequently report that they dislike "dealing with bureaucracy" and with the "wheels of government" when attempting to assist constituents (Cloutier, 2019, p. 67). This frustration stems from two related factors: First, staff cannot always secure the help constituents need, and second, constituency offices are often the last resort for those in need. As a result, many constituents arrive already agitated, or hostile, while others are highly emotional, particularly when seeking help with immigration or visas for relatives abroad. In addition, when constituents are angry, either over substantive political issues or because they cannot obtain the assistance they need, staff often bear the brunt of the verbal abuse (Cloutier, 2024).

4. Why Canada?

Canada offers a compelling case for studying the dynamics between MPs and their personal staff. Canada's institutional setting, a parliamentary democracy with a single-member plurality (SMP) electoral system, makes it broadly applicable to similar contexts, such as the United Kingdom and Ireland. Canada's system is

party-centered (Cross et al., 2022) and candidate-centered (Cheng & Tavits, 2011; Pruysers & Cross, 2016), with a clear representative in each district: the fundamental unit of representation (Bodet et al., 2022). The SMP system ensures a clear representative–constituent link, making it easier to isolate the specific role of the MP in constituency representation (Koop et al., 2018), and by extension, the function of their staff.

MPs employ staff who are directly accountable to them, rather than to parliament as an institution (Board of Internal Economy, 2024). The organization and hiring of staff are subject to limitations imposed by the financial resources allocated to MPs. Each MP receives the same baseline budget for their office(s) and staff, set at $411,300 for the 2023–2024 fiscal year. To account for disparities among constituencies, additional funding is available for larger ridings, densely populated ridings, and ridings with restricted access to transportation and communications infrastructure.

MP staff may be located either in constituency offices or on Parliament Hill. Their responsibilities are largely determined by the MP's strategic priorities and preferences. Constituency staff generally manage casework related to federal services (such as immigration and employment insurance), respond to public inquiries, prepare local communications, and coordinate events and meetings within the riding. Conversely, staff working on Parliament Hill tend to support legislative and political functions, including preparing materials for Question Period and committee meetings, managing the MP's schedule while in the capital, and overseeing communications with the media, stakeholders, and constituents. In both contexts, staff frequently serve as the primary—or only—point of contact between constituents and their elected representative. With an average of five staff members per MP (Cloutier, 2019), these small teams foster close, trust-based working relationships, distinct from non-partisan legislative staff (Malloy, 2023a). While international studies are beginning to develop frameworks for categorizing staff roles (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024; Otjes, 2023), Canada presents an opportunity to examine personal staff specifically, in a system where their proximity to and dependence on the MP are especially apparent.

Despite their critical function, staff in Canada remain understudied. Much of the academic literature on Canadian political representation focuses on MPs themselves, with relatively little attention to how MPs manage their staff or how staff contribute to representative work (Docherty, 1997, 2005; Koop et al., 2018; Malloy, 2023b). MPs widely recognize the importance of constituency service, often noting that staff are more efficient at and knowledgeable about this work, which includes connecting citizens to government services and offering guidance about accessing federal programs (Docherty, 1997). Given the importance of constituency work to Canadian MPs' roles (Koop et al., 2018), understanding how staff support and structure this work is essential to a complete picture of political representation (Cloutier, 2025). My research offers a novel contribution by situating political staff into broader theories of representation.

5. Data and Methods

Given the limited attention to staff in theories of representation, this study employs an exploratory, inductive approach to examine how MP staffers facilitate representation. I survey both federal MP staffers (n = 366) and MPs (n = 97) to assess how staff interact with constituents and how MPs use staff to support their representative roles. Following Stebbins (2001), exploratory methods are used when knowledge about a group or process is limited but holds potential for meaningful discovery. This study uses inductive online surveys combining open- and closed-ended questions to explore MP and staffers' experiences and

perspectives (Albrecht & Archibold, 2023; Braun et al., 2021). Inductive surveys are especially useful for uncovering patterns in new research areas (Albrecht & Archibold, 2023), offering both broad quantitative trends and deeper qualitative insights into how staff mediate the representative process. Administering the survey online allowed broader geographic reach and anonymity, reducing participation barriers and encouraging candid responses (Hwang, 2023). Rather than aiming for generalizability, this approach prioritizes transferability, providing rich descriptions that illuminate staffers' roles in mediating the relationship between MPs and the public, thereby contributing to the study and functioning of representation.

The staff survey targeted individuals employed by a sitting MP at the time of data collection. I compiled the sample using the Government Electronic Directory Services, which, as of August 2023, listed 1,926 staff members working for 332 MPs. All listed staff, regardless of job title, were invited to complete the survey anonymously, given staffers' general hesitancy to participate in academic research (Campbell & Bolet, 2022). The survey opened on August 25, 2024, when the House of Commons was not in session, maximizing staff availability. Out-of-office replies often identified replacements or additional staffers, who were also invited to participate to ensure broader coverage. The staff survey remained open until October 5, 2023. In total, 366 staff members completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 20%. This response rate aligns with previous studies of Canadian political staffers (Cloutier, 2019; Snagovsky & Kerby, 2019; Wilson, 2020). As well, at least one staffer responded across 213 MP offices, for an office coverage rate of 64%. Staff working for Conservative MPs were the least likely to complete the survey, with a higher share reporting no completes compared to other parties. Staff working for men MPs were also less likely to complete the survey compared to staff working for women MPs. Response rates are explored more fully in Table 1 in the Supplementary File. For MPs, 97 completed the survey, for a response rate of approximately 30%. This is greater than other recent surveys of Canadian MPs (Varone & Helfer, 2022; Walgrave et al., 2024).

The responding MPs were broadly representative of the House of Commons in terms of gender (36% of respondents were women, compared to 31% of all MPs) and region (e.g., 34% of respondents from Ontario compared to 36% of MPs overall). Party representation among respondents also closely reflected the chamber's composition, with 47% Liberal, 35% Conservative, 9% Bloc Québécois, and 8% New Democratic Party. Staff respondents were also broadly representative: 54% of staff respondents were women, and most staff respondents work for men MPs (66%). Most staff respondents are employed in a constituency office (64%) while a smaller proportion work on Parliament Hill (29%). A "both" option was provided for those working in and around the capital region, as staff could feasibly work in a constituency or parliamentary capacity. This distribution aligns with existing research, which suggests that MPs typically employ more staff in their constituency offices than in their parliamentary offices, and that more women work as staffers than men (Cloutier, 2019). The MPs who staff work for and the MPs who responded to the survey are overall reflective of the composition of the House of Commons, and the full set of descriptive statistics for staff and MP survey respondents compared to the composition of the House of Commons is available in Table 2 in the Supplementary File.

Both surveys focused on influence, discretion, and engagement with constituents. MPs were asked about the importance of staff accessibility to the public, how often they expect reports from staff about constituent interactions, and when they instruct staff to use discretion rather than report every encounter. Staff were asked about the groups they interact with the most, the frequency of public contact, how often they engage with policy advocates, and how frequently they report interactions back to MPs. They also

identified reasons for withholding information from MPs. By examining the frequency and nature of engagements between staff and constituents and staff perceptions of their own effectiveness and reporting practices, I can assess how staff influence the flow of information and influence the MP's connection with constituents. These questions provide valuable insight into the staff's function as both a point of access for the public and a filter through which constituent concerns reach the MP. Staff and MPs were permitted to skip any question or select "prefer not to answer," and results are only reported where five or more individuals responded, preventing deductive disclosure.

Close-ended survey questions were complemented with two open-ended staff survey questions. Staff were asked whether and how they influence their MP's representational work, and to share any additional thoughts about their role. These responses provide valuable qualitative elaboration, revealing how staff understand their roles as echoes and barriers in representation. Responses in French were translated into English for analysis. Two-sample *t*-tests were conducted where appropriate to determine statistically significant differences between constituency staff and Parliament Hill staff. This mixed methods approach, combining structured survey items with qualitative responses, provides a more nuanced understanding of staff's role in the representational process. It captures both the frequency and character of constituent interactions, as well as staffers' self-perceptions of their influence on MPs' representational practices. By integrating the perspective of both MPs and staff, the study sheds light on the relational, constructed nature of representation in parliamentary democracy.

6. Results

Recall that the study's main question is "How do MPs' staff mediate the representative relationship between constituents and the MP, and how does that mediation affect how we understand representation?" When the House is in session and MPs are therefore predominantly in Ottawa, they delegate their constituency duties to their staff. Through this delegation, most MPs ($n = 95$; 86%) agree with the statement that they trust their staff to make some decisions on their behalf. Almost all MPs think it is important (33%) or very important (66%) that their staff are accessible for meetings with members of the public. An overwhelming majority of MPs (82%) think it is important that their staff are accessible to meet with individuals or groups wishing to voice legislative initiatives.

When MPs were asked how often they ask their staff members to inform them about interactions with members of the public, most said daily (29%) or weekly (64%). Yet, when asked to provide the reasons why they might tell their staff to not inform them about interactions with members of the public, an overwhelming majority of MPs (78%) reported they trust staff members to use their discretion. One MP explained, "I trust them to contact me when needed." MPs reported they tell their staff not to inform them about interactions with members of the public when it was a "routine" interaction (53%). One MP explained how "regular case work only needs my attention if my staff determine that I need to get involved which is rare." Another MP explained how they ask "for issue summaries, so every/routine interactions are aggregated." This suggests most MPs trust their staff to take on a representative role on their behalf.

The following results draw directly from the staffer survey, highlighting how staff actively mediate the representative role between constituents and MPs. In their job, staff often serve as the first point of contact for constituents, representing the MP in the community and ensuring that local voices are heard. As one

constituency staffer described: "Being the first point of contact for constituents at the office, we represent the people of the riding and report back to the MP ensuring their voice is heard and their concerns are relayed."

All staff were asked to select which members of the public they mostly interact with, depicted in Table 1. Most staff selected constituents (66%), followed by community stakeholders (15%), elected representatives (7%), registered lobbyists (6%), and business stakeholders (2%). Only 4% of staff indicate that they do not interact with members of the public. Not surprisingly, constituency staff were most likely to meet with constituents (83%), followed by community stakeholders (13%). After meeting with constituents (32%), Parliament Hill staff were equally likely to indicate that they meet with community stakeholders (17%), registered lobbyists (17%), and other elected representatives (17%).

Table 1. Members of the public staff most frequently interact with (n = 332).

	Constituency Staff (n = 229)		Parliament Hill Staff (n = 103)		Total (n = 332)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Constituents	189	83%	33	32%	222	67%
Community Stakeholders	29	13%	18	17%	47	14%
Elected Representatives	5	2%	17	17%	22	7%
Registered Lobbyists	< 5	—	18	17%	19	6%
Business Stakeholders	< 5	—	7	7%	8	2%
Rarely Interacts	< 5	—	10	10%	14	4%
Total	229	100%	103	100%	332	100%

Staff were asked how frequently they provide people with information about federal government policies, shown in Figure 1. Overall, staff indicated they provide people with information about the government's position at least once a day (43%) or a few times a week (40%). Constituency staff (44%) were more likely than Parliament Hill staff (22%) to indicate they provide people with information about the government's position on a daily basis. A two-sample t-test was conducted to examine the differences in staff interactions. Constituency staff report more frequent interactions with members of the public about federal government policies (M = 4.11, SD = 1.00) than Parliament Hill staff (M = 3.69, SD = 1.06), $t(334) = 3.4467$, $p < 0.001$. These findings highlight the crucial role constituency staff play in directly engaging with the public and providing information about federal government policies. Their frequent interactions with constituents demonstrate their function as both service providers and communicators of government positions. The higher frequency of information-sharing among constituency staff compared to Parliament Hill staff suggests that local offices serve as critical access points for public engagement with federal policies.

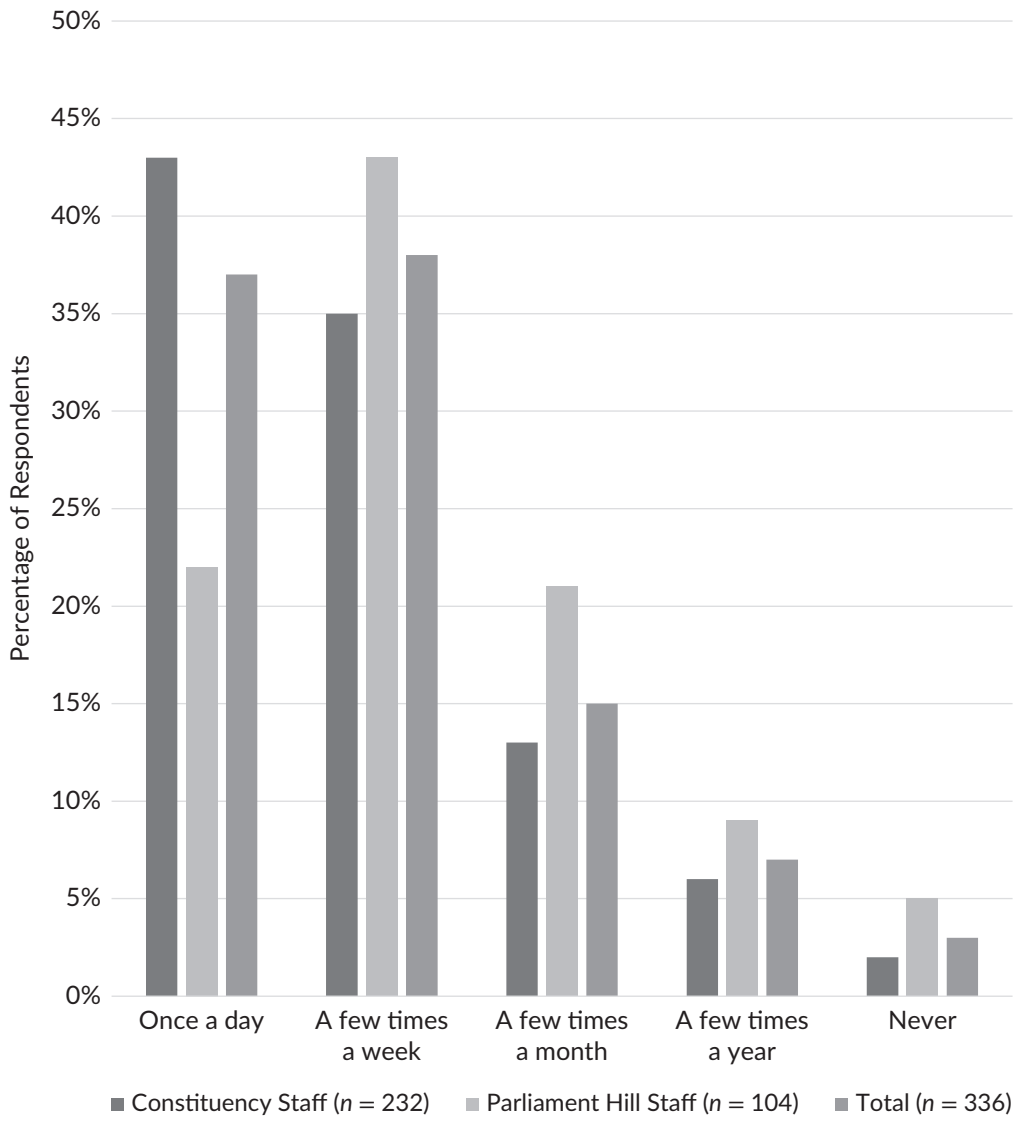

Figure 1. Frequency of staffers providing people with information about federal government policies ($n = 366$).

Staff are also important for relaying constituents' views back to their MPs, shown in Figure 2. Overall, staff report responding to people advocating for a specific policy position at least once a day (23%) or a few times a week (38%), while Parliament Hill staff (28%, $M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.08$) were more likely than constituency staff (20%, $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(329) = 2.6754$, $p < 0.004$, for daily interactions with people advocating for a specific policy position. These frequent interactions make staff crucial liaisons for constituent voices, setting the stage for how they act as "echoes" through amplifying or selecting the information that reaches MPs.

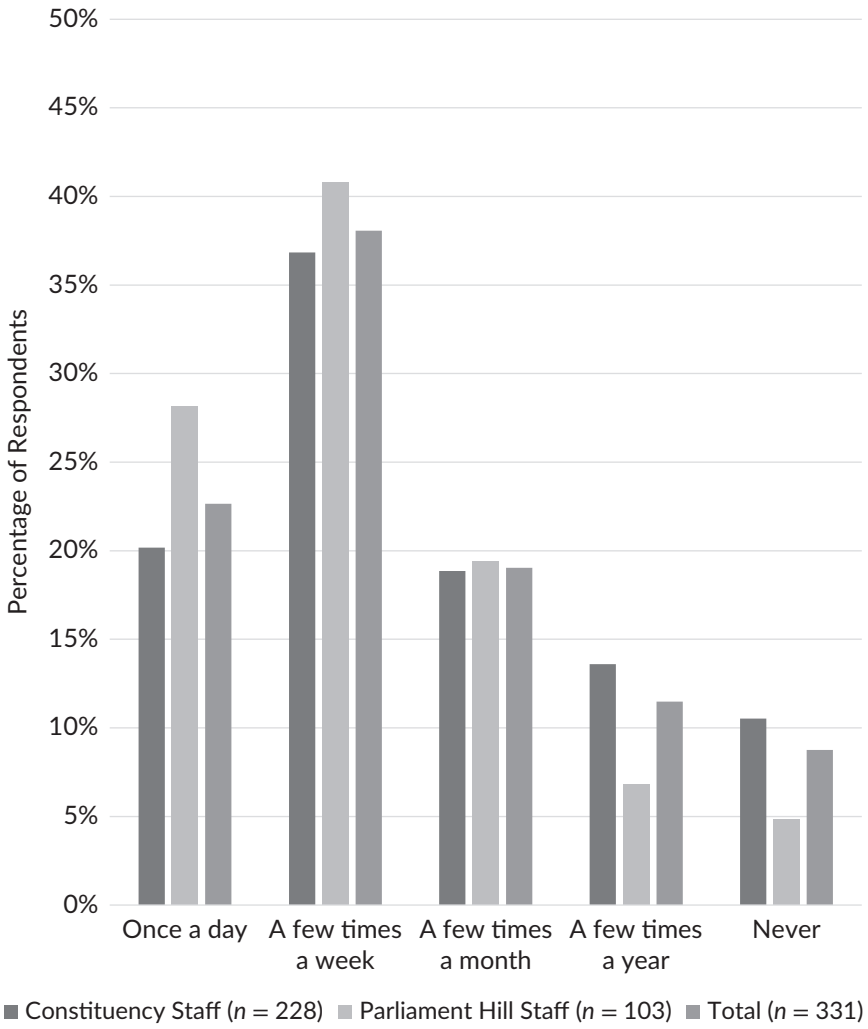

Figure 2. How frequently staff indicate they respond to people advocating for a specific policy position ($n = 331$).

6.1. Staff as Echoes

Staff play a crucial role in relaying, or echoing, constituents' views back to their MPs. One staffer describes the role of a staffer as being "an echo of what's said in the constituency." Staff report how they collect information to report back to the MP, ensuring the most important concerns are relayed and reported to the MP. For example, one constituency staffer explains how they pass information from constituents to the MP, including "their concerns about upcoming bills." As another constituency staffer emphasizes:

> Because we're in direct contact with citizens while the MP is in Ottawa, we have a reality on the ground that we're able to share. The MP can then intervene at committee meetings based on the situations experienced in their riding.

While the MP cannot be in more than one place at once, their staffers act as stand-ins and bridge the gap between the riding and Ottawa.

One constituency staffer explains how constituent interactions can be "emotionally more difficult," such as helping with immigration files. Another staffer explains how their interactions with constituents are predominantly about their difficulties. These interactions can be "very taxing for employees." One staffer explains how their MP requires the constituency staffers to have a social work degree. This could be because neither MPs nor their staff receive adequate training on how to navigate difficult conversations (Cloutier, 2024; Cockram, 2023).

Beyond offering a listening ear, staff are also key intermediaries between the public and the MP. One staffer notes that by handling calls from constituents, they often gain access to valuable information that may be useful to the MP. Another constituency staffer describes their role as both a "sounding board" and an "information collector," emphasizing that while MPs tend to focus on high-profile issues, staff may detect emerging concerns before they reach the MP's attention. Through their front-line interactions and discretion in relaying information, staff play a pivotal role in amplifying emergent issues and determining the flow of constituent concerns that inform MPs' priorities.

6.2. Staff as Barriers

Staff's responses also emphasize a barrier role, acting as gatekeepers to MPs. Staff use their discretion to control, interpret, and manage the flow of information, determining which constituent interactions or information is deemed worthy of the MP's attention. A staffer explains how they are "often the information barrier between various stakeholders and [constituents] and the MP." While this engagement enables staff to bring forward individual experiences and broader constituency concerns, it also demonstrates their influential position in determining the MP's awareness and priorities. Another constituency staffer writes the following:

> I think that through our interactions with the public, community organizations, private businesses and other groups, I'm able to guide the prioritization of issues to work on, positions to think more about, actions to take to represent our fellow citizens well, and initiatives to take.

This quotation highlights how staff help decide the MP's agenda by prioritizing information. Determining when (and if) the representative gets to hear about an issue is a gatekeeping function, reflecting staff's discretionary power to decide what warrants the MP's attention.

Staff regularly brief the MP, highlighting key trends and urgent matters. One constituency staffer explains:

> We provide feedback to the MP on a weekly basis about the issues and cases that [come] to our office. Many cases the MP will advocate for and bring to Ottawa [are] based on what also happens in her constituency office.

Another constituency staffer highlights how their regular interactions with the public help frame the MP's political priorities:

> I interact with constituents on a very regular basis. I have a feel for the salient issues within the community and report back to the MP about what issues are important for them to focus on in their

> communications to riding residents and in caucus meetings, as well as which projects to put their political support behind.

As another constituency staffer explains:

> We keep him informed of everything that is happening in his constituency, be it wishes, discontents, problems of residents and organizations, events to celebrate, etc. In this way, the MP can maintain a privileged relationship with his community and better represent the interests of residents.

This regular flow of information not only supports the MP's representative role, but also, through staff, MPs are able to reinforce their responsiveness in the riding. In this way, staff become what they call the MP's "eyes and ears," helping the MP stay connected with community needs.

Staff were asked how often they give their MP a direct report about what happened in meetings with members of the public on a scale of 0–100%, with 0% being "never" and 100% being "always." Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses by staffers working in the constituency offices and on Parliament Hill. On average, staff say they report back to their MP more often than not, although there is substantial variability in responses, with a standard deviation of 30%. The most common response was 100%, with approximately 20% of staff indicating they always report back to their MP. The distribution of responses is left-skewed, meaning staff are generally more likely to report back at higher percentages. When comparing job locations, a statistically

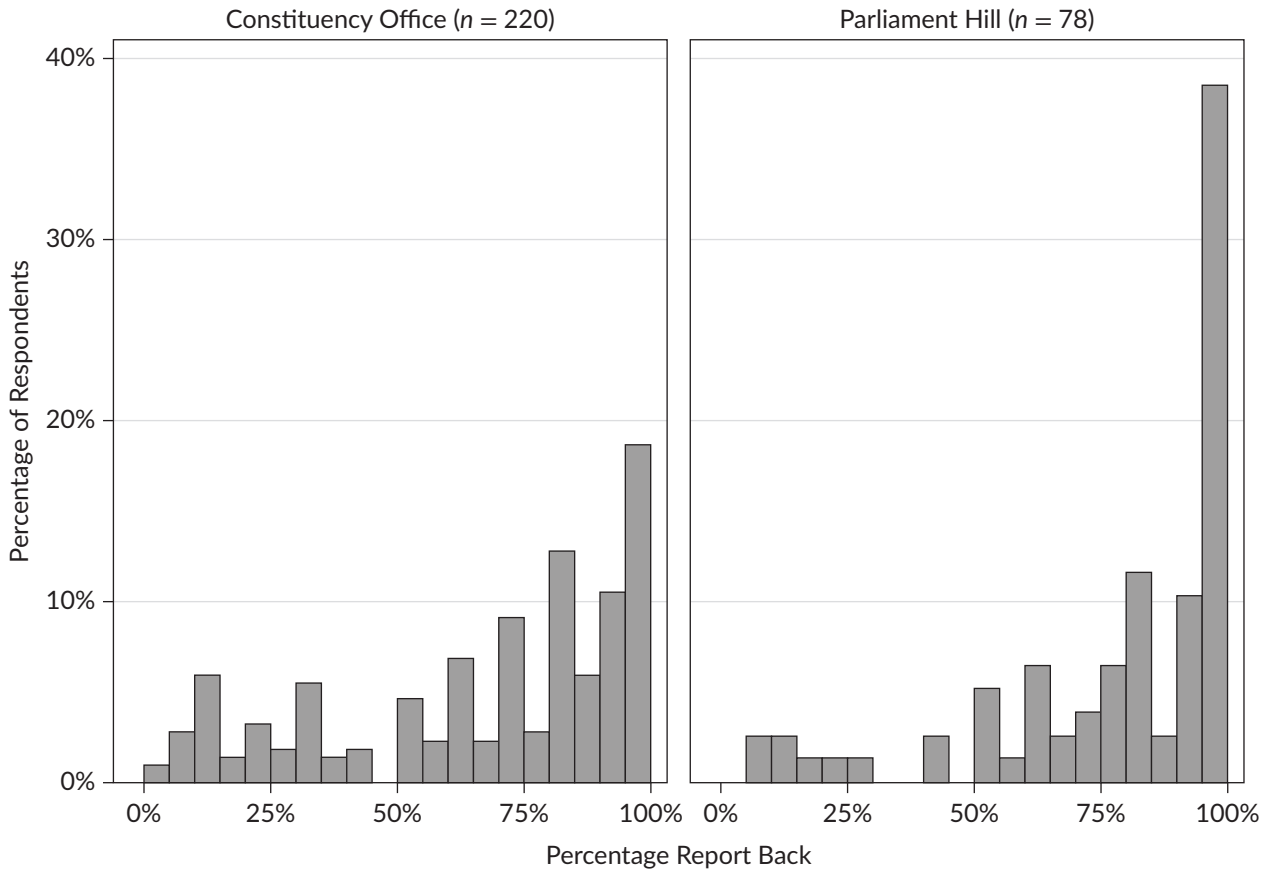

Figure 3. How often staff report back to MP, by job location ($n = 298$).

significant difference emerges. Staff located on Parliament Hill ($M = 77.62$, $SD = 26.25$) are significantly more likely to report back to their MP compared to staff working in constituency offices ($M = 66.00$, $SD = 29.65$), $t(296) = 3.0612$, $p > 0.001$.

While the results in Figure 3 suggest a high rate of communication, it may not fully capture the nuances of what gets communicated and why. Staff working in constituencies are more likely to use their discretion about when to report back to the MP about interactions with members of the public. I asked staff to select all answers that apply to why they would not tell their MP about their interactions with members of the public, shown in Table 2. Staff were also invited to provide additional information if a reason was not provided, adding greater explanation and candor behind the decision-making process of not informing their MP about interactions with members of the public.

Table 2. Reasons staff do not inform MP about interactions with the public ($n = 337$).

	Constituency Office ($n = 232$)		Parliament Hill ($n = 105$)		Total responses selected ($n = 337$)	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
It was a routine interaction	172	74%	229	68%	57	54%
Didn't think it was relevant for the MP to know about	137	59%	192	57%	55	52%
It's something they already talked about	73	31%	113	34%	40	38%
Didn't want to bother the MP with the interaction	39	17%	56	17%	17	16%
It's something the MP has told staff that they didn't want to know about	17	7%	25	7%	8	8%
Another staff member told staff not to tell the MP	11	5%	16	5%	5	5%
It would be hurtful for the MP to know	10	4%	19	6%	9	9%

The primary reasons staff chose not to inform MPs about their interactions with members of the public were the routine nature of interactions and perceived irrelevance, shown in Table 2. The majority of respondents indicated that their interactions were routine (68%), with a statistically significant higher percentage for staff working in constituency offices (74%, $M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.44$) compared to staff working on Parliament Hill (54%, $M = 0.54$, $SD = 0\ .50$), $t(335) = 3.6782$, $p > 0.0001$. Similarly, staff did not inform MPs about their interactions because they believed the information was irrelevant (57%), with consistency observed between constituency staff (59%) and Parliament Hill staff (52%). Specifically, a constituency staffer explains that they do not inform their MP when it involves other service requests, such as cases that require the "intervention of CRA officials, Service Canada, Phoenix, Passports, or others." Another constituency staffer explains that it is unnecessary to inform the MP "when it is a problem that concerns another level of government." One constituency staffer writes, "You'd be surprised how many people state the obvious but treat it as new news. I don't share that with the MP." Throughout this, staff are able to select what information is relevant for the MP to know. One constituency staffer explains how they "track calls, visits, and emails" to present interactions "as 'big picture'", meaning they can synthesize incoming issues and report back to distill the most relevant aspects of what is happening in the riding to the MP.

Approximately one-third (34%) of staff stated that they do not report back to MPs when it was something they had previously discussed with the MP, slightly higher for those working on Parliament Hill (38%) than for constituency staff (31%). A smaller proportion of staffers (17%) indicated reluctance to "bother the MP," with nearly identical responses from constituency and parliament offices. An explanation from a constituency staffer clarifies more nuanced decision-making processes. The staffer states they might withhold information if they believe the MP "would not understand the issue (optimal use of our time)" or if the matter "goes against party lines (pick your battles)." This illustrates how political judgment and strategic communication impact staff decisions. In this case, withholding information is not about lack of transparency, but rather about prioritization and efficiency. Additionally, the strong party discipline in Canada (Godbout, 2020; Marland, 2020) reinforces the need for staff to manage communications in ways that align with broader party objectives. Staff must balance responsiveness to their constituents with the reality that MPs operate within a structured partisan environment. Staff are not simply messengers; they are interpreters, strategists, and filters who shape the flow of information to MPs in ways they perceive to be most effective or pragmatic.

Less frequently cited reasons include staff receiving explicit instruction from the MP not to inform them (7%) or that they received advice from another staff member to not tell the MP (5%). Staff also infrequently selected that they would not report back an interaction with members of the public when it could be hurtful for the MP to know (6%). However, Parliament Hill staff (9%) were more likely than constituency staff (4%) to select this option. One constituency staffer explains: "It was a violent email[,] not necessary to report every time." This reflects the broader reality that both MPs and their staff are frequent targets of harassment, which can influence how staff decide what incidents to relay (Cloutier, 2024). One Parliament Hill staffer writes, "The only time I wouldn't tell them something was if it was a rude comment or hate someone made about them." Another constituency staffer explains how the information can be completely irrelevant to the work of the MP because it is targeted to be hurtful:

> Sometimes we receive feedback and [because] of the public role of the MP a constituent might feel comfortable discussing [the MP's] weight gain or "health" since assuming the role. In my opinion this is not a relevant part of the conversation, the constituent has no right to pass that judgement or make that comment and I will not relay that to the MP because there is no benefit to anyone sharing that comment. Outside of that type of comment I would not withhold any comment that might be hurtful…if it needs to be known.

These examples emphasize how staff often serve as protective buffers for MPs, especially in an increasingly hostile political climate. Their decisions about what to filter reflect not only professional judgment but also a growing need to manage the emotional and psychological toll associated with political office today (Krook, 2020; Raney & Collier, 2024).

Interpersonal communication between an MP's office and constituents is a constant and varied part of daily operations. MPs emphasize the importance of responsiveness, though this is done via their staff. MPs receive constant contact from constituents, though staff often manage their email accounts as part of their duties. One staffer mentioned how, every day, the number of emails they receive is in the "high hundreds." Over two-thirds of MPs surveyed stated that it was important or very important for staffers to respond to every letter or email from members of the public, even if they aren't from the MP's riding. As Figure 4 shows, staff are frequently contacted not only about political matters but also about deeply personal concerns, sometimes

simply because people need someone to talk to. These interactions happen regularly, with staff reporting daily (42%) or weekly (39%) contact of this nature. Constituency staff emphasize the importance of active listening and creating a non-judgmental space, recognizing that many constituents simply want to feel heard. As one constituency staffer explains:

> Listening is a very important skill when dealing with the public and being non-judgmental. Sometimes people just need to vent and get things off their chests. We must remember to thank them for their opinions and let them know they have been heard.

This underscores a broader theme of constituency work: The MP's office often serves as an accessible, human point of contact between the government and the public.

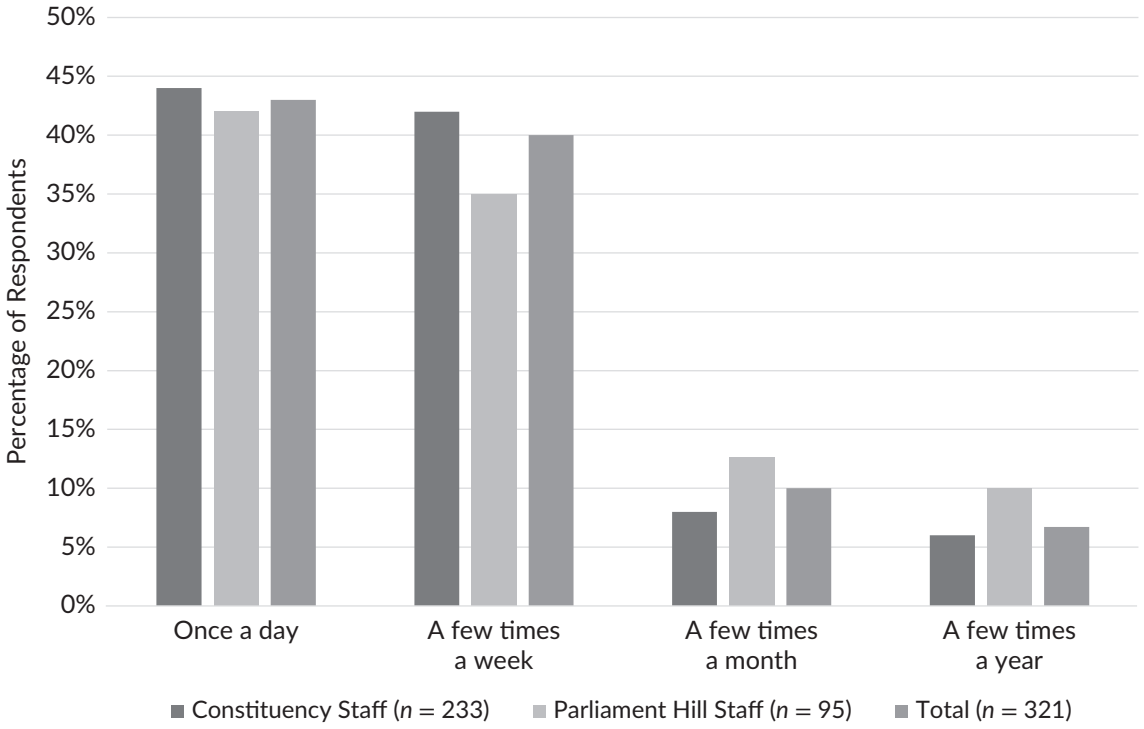

Figure 4. How frequently people contact the MP's office just to talk (n = 321).

Importantly, staff also view themselves as advocates as well as intermediaries. Several highlighted how they help the MP represent their constituents more effectively in Ottawa by sharing real-life stories and concrete examples. One staffer explains, "I inform the MP about situations that the citizens of the riding are experiencing in relation to the government," adding that they provide "a concrete example of the reality of the people who live these problems." Another staffer notes:

> Our jobs as political staffers have a direct impact on an MP's job as an elected representative. We do our very best to pass on any messages that the public (whether they be constituents or not) [passes] directly to the MP to ensure their voices are heard. Our abilities to advocate for the public on behalf of our MP has a direct correlation with their job as an elected representative.

This is an integral role in the representative process, creating greater connection between the community and the MP. This demonstrates how much staff seriously dedicate themselves to their positions. One constituency staffer even explains how, though it is not mandatory, they network and attend social events because "it is crucial to make connections and friends at other MP offices or other levels of government. It helps to refer constituents to the right person to help solve their problem, if not me or my office."

Parliamentary and constituency staff play a crucial role in mediating the flow of information that reaches MPs, which informs an MP's decision-making, both on Parliament Hill and within the riding. One Parliament Hill staffer highlights the weight of sharing information, stating that staff must be mindful of how their decisions to pass on or withhold certain information can influence an MP's decision-making. They emphasize the importance of avoiding personal biases that could impair the MP's options, underscoring that "this is perhaps the most important responsibility" of staffers.

Emphasizing the importance of managing the flow of communication between constituents and MPs, one staffer explains that they do not want to overwhelm the MP with "consistent feedback or interruptions." This suggests that staff can filter and strategically present constituent correspondence, thereby determining what the MP comes to know about their riding. Another constituency staffer makes this role explicit: "We have a reality on the ground that we're able to share, and the MP can then intervene at committee meetings on the situations in his riding." Similarly, another staffer reflected:

> There are so many issues in society, and we focus on the big ones, but sometimes there's a big one either under the surface or about to become big, and I may hear about it five or six times before it hits the Member's radar.

These accounts suggest that staff are not simply passing along information, but decide which issues warrant attention and when they should be escalated. In doing so, staff can create the informational frameworks that affect MPs' priorities and timing. As one staffer elaborates:

> I influence how the MP [builds] connections to the government when they want to raise an issue, need help, coordinate meetings, etc. Staffers who keep on top of community communications, needs, and requests help the MP better represent and address the needs of their riding. MPs have so much work; any tasks we can pick up help them focus on the jobs we all need them to accomplish.

Together, these reflections suggest that staff operate as facilitators and curators of constituent information. While MPs have the authority as elected representatives to represent their riding in parliament, their capacity to respond effectively to both legislative and local demands can be contingent on the informational frameworks constructed by their staff.

Within constituency offices, staff's work in filtering constituent concerns and translating local issues into parliamentary priorities is central to the representational work of MPs. One staffer notes that constituent input often informs a wide range of political communications, stating that "regularly sharing concerns raised by individuals and community groups in the riding could be seen as influencing the text drafted for speeches, Question period, social media, op eds, etc." Staff are mindful that MPs are the elected representatives and staff acknowledge the MP's "vision and voice" must remain central. This reflects the dual representational

burden placed on staff: to convey local concerns and constituent voices while aligning them with the MP's broader political perspective.

Constituency staffers can wield substantial discretion in determining representational priorities, with the power to influence which communities gain political access and which are marginalized. One constituency staffer states:

> Through my dealings with the community I get a gauge of how each ethnic community views us, the work we do and our party as a whole. From that I inform him what communities to prioritize and which ones we should push more to the side.

This comment illustrates how staffers exercise judgment in ways that may be informed by their own perspectives or biases about different communities within a constituency. In some cases, such judgments may operate through a combination of echoing certain voices while blocking others, thereby impacting which groups appear more or less salient to the MP. This dynamic points to a potential, though not necessarily typical, influence of staff on representational politics, highlighting that questions of access and exclusion merit further, more systematic investigation.

7. Discussion

This study examines how MP staffers mediate the representative relationship between constituents and their elected officials. The findings reveal that staff are not merely administrative support but are integral actors who influence the representational process. Staff facilitate representation by echoing constituent concerns, yet they also mediate and filter these concerns through discretionary practices, determining what information reaches MPs and how it is framed. Constructivist theories remind us that such discretion is not a neutral filter, but a form of claims-making, as staff determine, implicitly or explicitly, which concerns are worthy of being relayed to the MP. The capacity of staffers to exercise judgment over the content, timing, and relevance of information emphasizes the substantial, albeit often invisible, role they play in shaping the quality and character of democratic representation.

Constructivist theories of representation offer the best framework for understanding these findings, emphasizing that representation is not a static relationship based solely on electoral authorization, but rather an ongoing process constituted through claims-making, and communication (Disch, 2011; Saward, 2006). In this framework, the question is not simply who is authorized to represent, but how representation is enacted through everyday practices. By filtering constituent concerns, amplifying certain voices, and curating the information that reaches MPs, staffers become integral actors in the construction of political claims. If representation is framed through these everyday acts of mediation, then the role of staff must be recognized as central to the representative process.

Concerns about democratic quality and inclusion also resonate through these findings. Following Dovi's (2012) argument that good representation requires attentiveness to whose voices are included or excluded, this study highlights how staff exercise influence over the inclusiveness of the representative relationship. Staffers' selective engagement with particular constituent groups, seen in the example of a staffer prioritizing outreach to certain ethnic communities while minimizing contact with others, demonstrates the political

weight of staff discretion. This discretionary power means that staff play a pivotal role in determining which communities gain political attention and which are left at the margins. Thus, staffers are not merely extending MPs' reach; they are actively constructing the boundaries of political representation itself.

These findings resonate with broader research on front-line staff in other domains. As Gidengil (2020) explains, people's interactions with front-line staff matter because the way they are treated, whether with courtesy or neglect, impacts not only the person's immediate experiences but also their overall evaluations of the institution. Similarly, in MPs' offices, staff are often the first and most consistent point of contact for constituents, meaning that their conduct and discretion can profoundly impact how representation is experienced on the ground. Future research could examine how the treatment that constituents receive from staff influences their broader evaluations of MPs and democratic institutions as a whole.

Other patterns emerging from the data further highlight the protective role staff play in insulating MPs from harmful or emotionally taxing interactions with constituents. Constituents who have to go to their MP for help often do so as a last resort (Cloutier, 2024; Hofstetter & Stokoe, 2018). As a result, constituents may have trouble communicating their issues to their MPs or staff when emotions run high. While this work may feel "routine" for staff and their MPs, these interactions are very important to constituents, especially when dealing with issues such as family reunification and financial concerns. While staff act as intermediaries and buffers can contribute to the sustainability of MPs' work under conditions of emotional and psychological strain, staff then have to manage constituents' emotions in these situations (Cloutier, 2024). This role is increasingly vital given the rise of hostility directed toward public officials (De Angelis, 2024; Raney & Collier, 2024).

Recognizing the limitations of this study is important for future research to address. Staffing arrangements across MPs' offices are highly decentralized, creating variation in how much discretion individual staffers exercise and how they manage constituent interactions. While the survey captures the occurrence of mediation activities, it does not fully reflect the content, depth, or timing of communication between staff and MPs. Future work should examine the decision-making processes staffers use to prioritize or withhold information, the relational dynamics within MP offices, and the extent to which staff perceive themselves as extensions of their MPs' political identities. Another possible consideration is that, in parliamentary democracies like Canada, individual MPs have limited authority, constrained by strong party discipline (Godbout, 2020; Marland, 2020), and the executive maintains control over the legislative agenda (Malloy, 2014). This raises questions about the relevance of studying staff mediation. Yet, constituency representation remains a core democratic function and a vital site of political engagement (Koop et al., 2018). Regardless of formal constraints, MPs' interactions with constituents, mediated by staff, critically shape how representation is constructed and experienced. These limitations reinforce the value of constructivist approaches, which direct attention not just to the institutional structures or electoral mandates of representation, but to the routine, everyday practices through which representation is performed by unelected actors (Crewe & Sarra, 2021).

8. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that MP staffers influence the representative relationship between constituents and MPs. Most MPs trust their staff to make some decisions on their behalf, and most instruct staff to use discretion in routine interactions. Staffers act both as "echoes," ensuring constituent voices are heard, and as

"barriers," managing access and shielding MPs from harmful comments. Through these practices, staff help construct the everyday act of representation, shaping MPs' perceptions of their communities and the issues they bring forward in parliament. Constituents are the primary group that staff engage with, and constituency staff report daily engagement about government policies at significantly higher rates than Parliament Hill staff. Conversely, Parliament Hill staff are more likely to interact daily with policy advocates. While staff generally report constituent concerns back to MPs frequently, they exercise considerable judgment over what to communicate. Routine or perceived irrelevance were the most common reasons for withholding information, with constituency staff especially likely to filter routine interactions, a crucial finding given that constituency staff, who interact most directly with the public, are not often considered in studies of representation. Staff also perform critical emotional work, regularly serving as listeners for constituents seeking just to talk to someone. These practices highlight how representation is not solely performed by elected officials, but is a dynamic process co-produced with their staff. By shifting the focus beyond elected officials, this study expands theories of representation to account for the critical role of staff. Future research should explore how staff discretion varies across institutional and partisan contexts and examine how staff–MP dynamics influence the broader representative process. This study highlights that representation is not only performed by those elected to office but is co-constructed by the staffers who stand between MPs and the public. Staffers' discretion, judgment, and everyday practices makes them crucial parts of the representative process.

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Supplementary Material

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ARTICLE

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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.

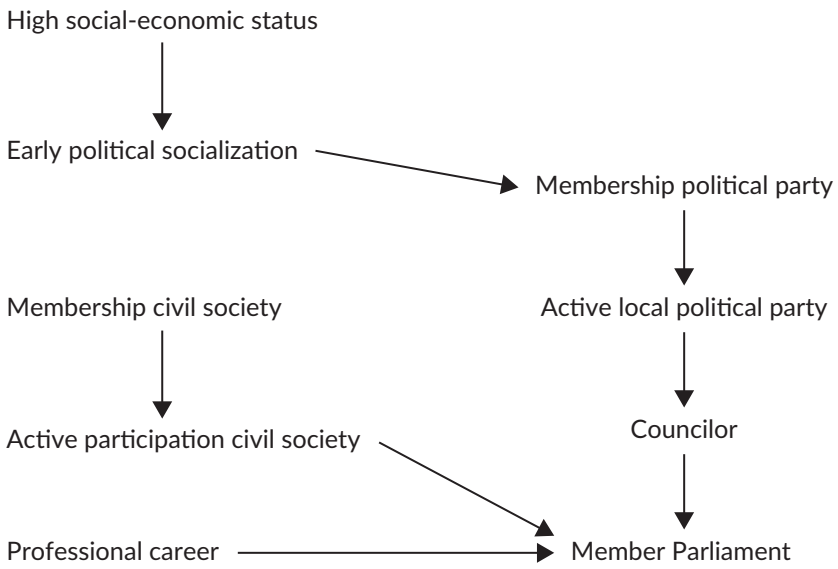

Figure 1. Traditional pathways to parliament. Source: Partially based on Durose et al. (2013, p. 252).

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.

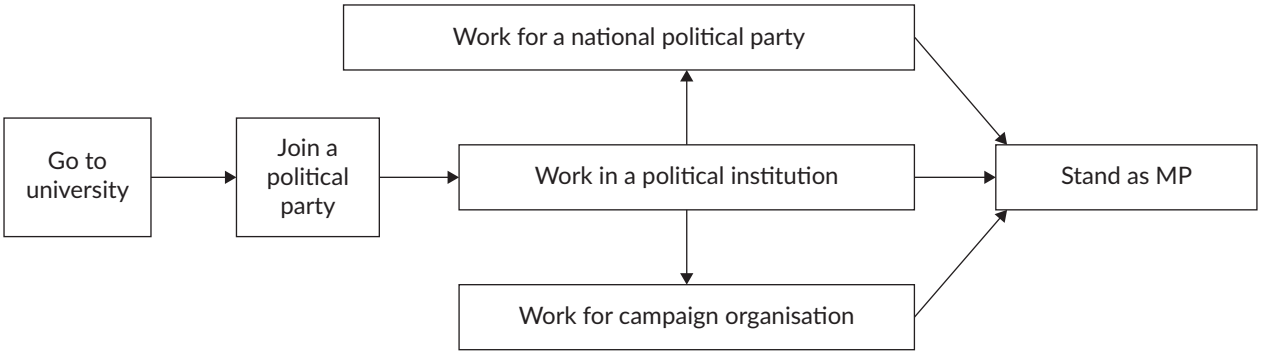

Figure 2. The parapolitical pathway to parliament. Source: Durose et al. (2013, p. 259).

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.

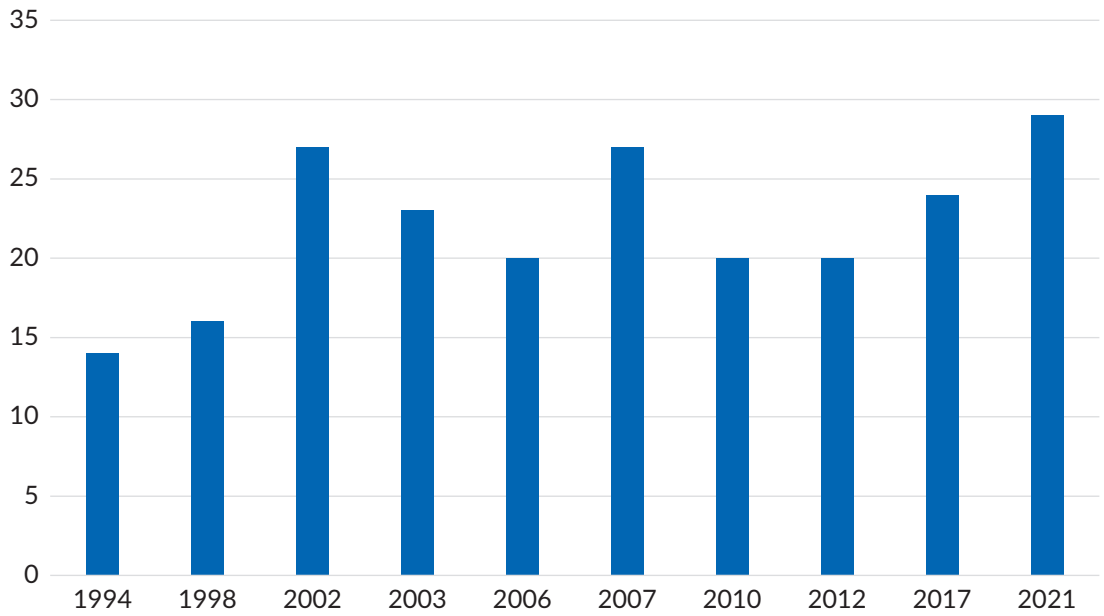

Figure 3. Number of ministerial political assistants. Sources: C. F. van den Berg (2018); from 2017 onward own estimates.

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

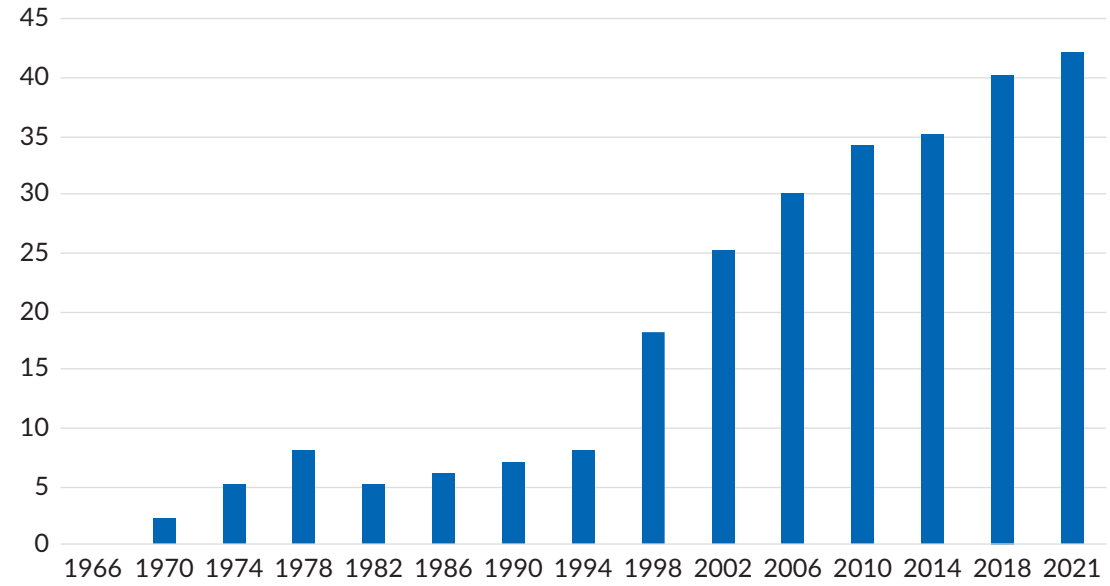

Figure 4. Number of MPs with a background as political support staff, 1966–2021 (absolute).

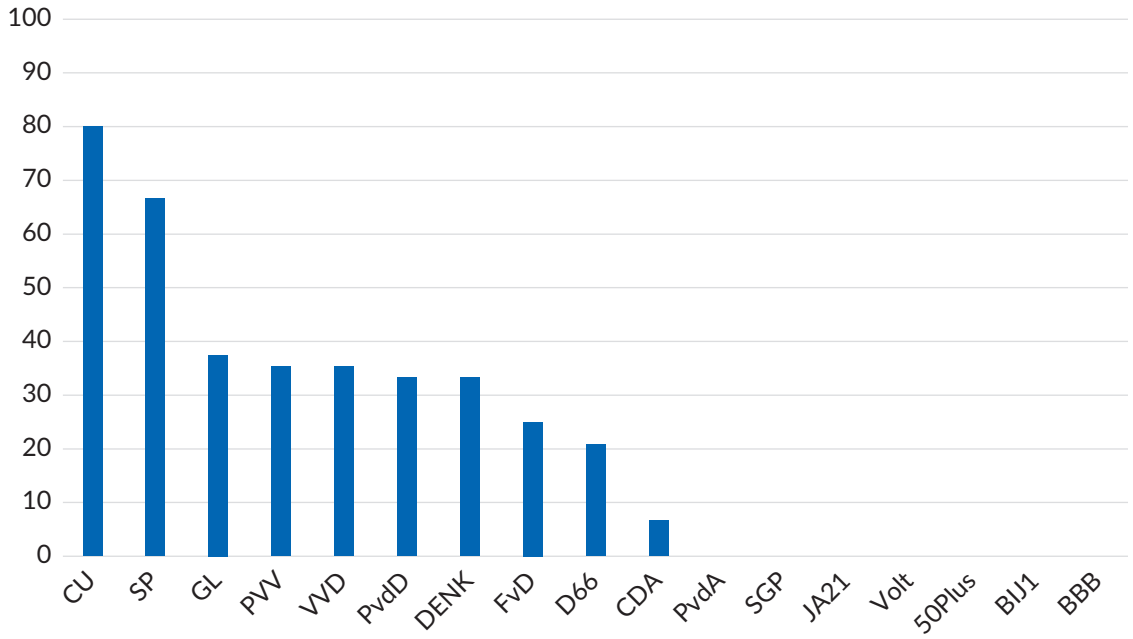

Figure 5. Share of MPs in factions with a background as political support staff in the newly elected House of Representatives, 31 March 2021 (percentage).

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).

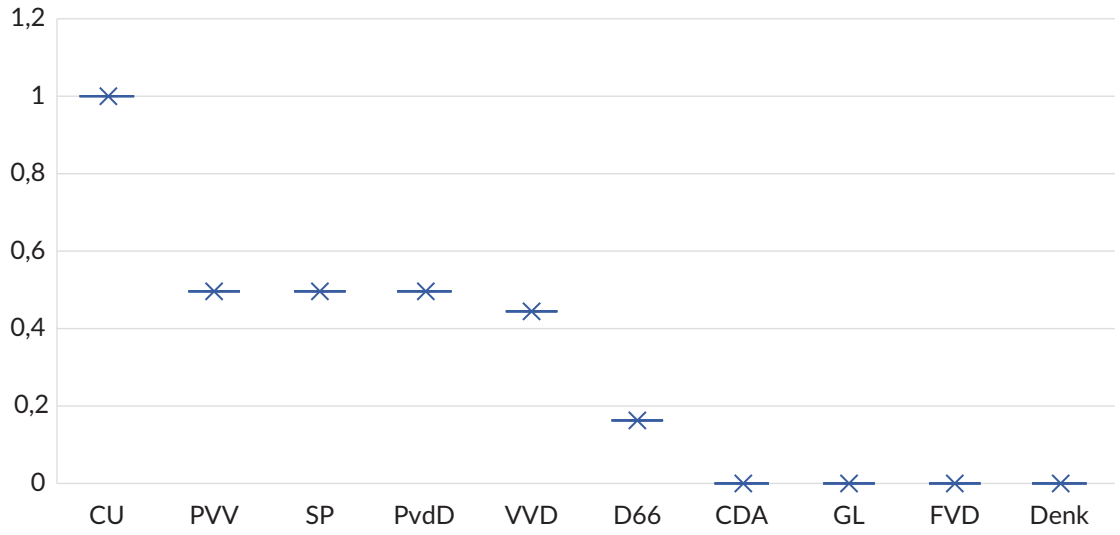

Figure 6. Proportion of parapoliticians in the top 25% of political party lists.

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.

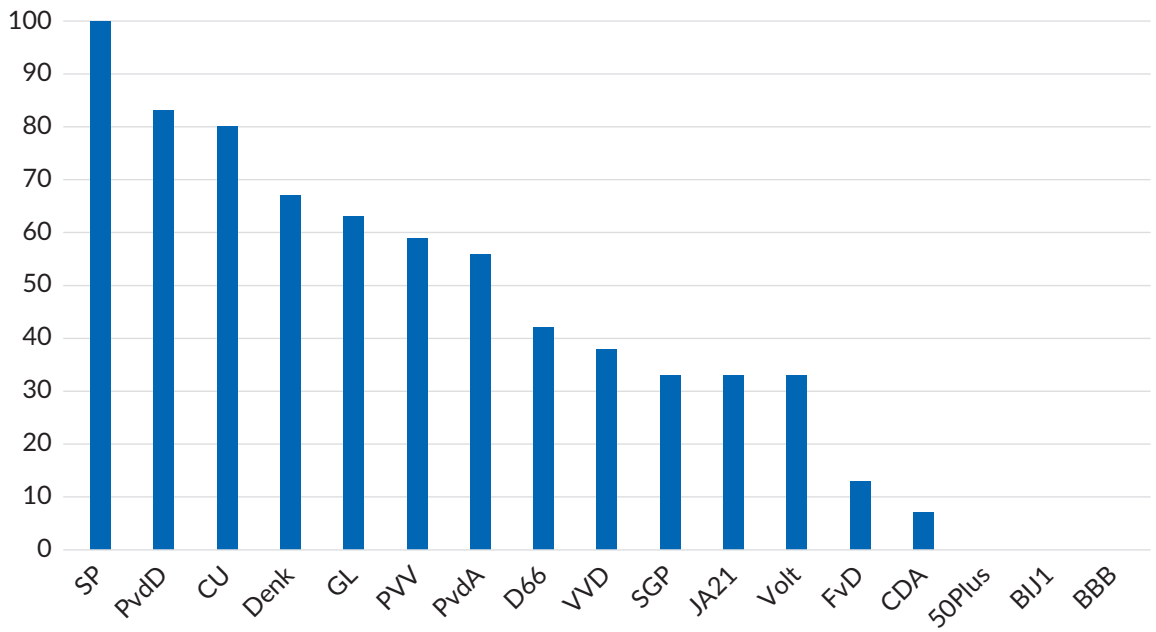

Figure 7. Members of the House of Representatives with a "The Hague" background by party, 31 March 2021 (percentage).

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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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

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

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