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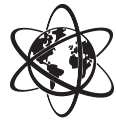

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Ensuring political responsiveness: politicization mechanisms in ministerial bureaucracies

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Abstract

Although politicization is a perennial research topic in public administration to investigate relationships between ministers and civil servants, the concept still lacks clarification. This article contributes to this literature by systematically identifying different conceptualizations of politicization and suggests a typology including three politicization mechanisms to strengthen the political responsiveness of the ministerial bureaucracy: formal, functional and administrative politicization. The typology is empirically validated through a comparative case analysis of politicization mechanisms in Germany, Belgium, the UK and Denmark. The empirical analysis further refines the general idea of Western democracies becoming 'simply' more politicized, by illustrating how some politicization mechanisms do not continue to increase, but stabilize – at least for the time being.

Points for practitioners

The claim of increasing politicization of the interaction between ministers and civil servants is often made in research and government practice. As the completely neutral bureaucracy is a myth rather than empirical reality, all democracies have to balance demands for both neutral expertise and political responsiveness. The latter often involves the introduction of politicization mechanisms. Politicization comes in a variety of forms, and the article develops a typology covering formal, functional and administrative politicization. Further it empirically demonstrates how politicization mechanisms not only increase, but how they develop and interact, altering balances of neutrality and responsiveness in potentially conflicting ways.

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central administration, ministers and civil servants, political advisers, political responsiveness, politicization, public administration

Introduction

The literature on the minister–civil servant relationship generally recognizes that Max Weber's clear distinction between civil servants and politicians is more of a myth than empirical reality in the bureaucracies of Western democracies. When this ideal is not entirely violated, it is typically supplemented by demands for political responsiveness affecting the recruitment principles and behaviour of the permanent civil service and further complemented by different types of political staff and advisers such as exempt staff, ministerial advisers and special advisers (SpAds) (Shaw and Eichbaum, 2012: 1). These developments are usually characterized as a politicization of the bureaucracy. The contradiction between the notion of a neutral bureaucracy and politicization reflects a basic dilemma of any democratic government between ensuring both neutral expertise and political responsiveness. The accommodation of this dilemma differs as the organization and regulation of the politician–civil servant interaction varies between ministerial bureaucracies (Derlien, 1996; Page and Wright, 1999: 268). Politicization is contingent upon the constitution and administrative traditions, resulting in considerable variations between Western democracies (Christensen, 2012; Eichbaum and Shaw, 2013; Hood and Lodge, 2006; Rouban, 2012: 381). Recently, increasing politicization in ministerial bureaucracies has been identified as one of the 'persistent claims' (Christensen, 2012; Peters and Pierre, 2004: 1; see also Eichbaum and Shaw, 2013; Van der Meer et al., 2007: 41) in public administration research, which is alleged to result from increasing pressures on governments to react to demands produced by globalization, Europeanization and mediatization. The literature reflects the empirical development of politicization but has been largely descriptive and attaches a variety of meanings to the politicization concept (e.g. Page and Wright, 2007; Peters and Pierre, 2004). Hence, concepts of politicization differ. This article has a twofold aim: first, it seeks to identify systematically and empirically validate different types of politicization mechanisms: is it possible to identify a typology of discrete and empirically valid politicization mechanisms? Second, the article aims to investigate the 'persistent claim' of increasing politicization: are ministerial bureaucracies becoming increasingly politicized? The article focuses on politicization mechanisms related to the advice provided to the minister by the civil service and political advisers and includes case studies of the politicization mechanisms in Germany, Belgium, Denmark and the UK.

The next section discusses and defines politicization mechanisms. The third section specifies the research design and methods. The empirical analysis of the four cases is presented in the fourth section, ending with a comparative analysis. The article concludes with an assessment of the typology of the politicization

mechanisms and discusses the idea of contemporary ministerial bureaucracies becoming 'simply' more politicized.

Conceptualizing politicization mechanisms

Politicization initially refers to the politician–civil servant interaction and particularly to the political control over bureaucracy identified by Max Weber as a precondition for democratic government. Because bureaucracy enjoys an inherent pre-eminence in expertise, it tends to become self-controlling, and the 'quest for neutral competence' (Kaufman, 1956: 1059–1062) becomes the traditional normative response. From a more analytical perspective, however, 'politicizing or neutralizing the bureaucracy are two basic options' (Derlien, 1996: 150) to be observed in different ministerial bureaucracies. To secure democratic legitimacy, a persistent objective has been to design rules and structures for the bureaucracy in such a manner that ministers can fully access its expertise and qualifications (Page and Wright, 1999: 269; see also Peters, 2013: 21). This disposal is typically termed 'responsiveness', which 'refers to the readiness of public servants to do what government ministers want' (Mulgan, 2008: 345). Various ways of ensuring political responsiveness are conceptualized as different ways of politicizing, resulting in a number of politicization concepts (see, for example, Peters, 2013; Rouban, 2012; Ståhlberg, 1987). Those varying concepts can be distinguished according to their main point of reference. Whereas some notions focus on recruitment as the main point of reference, others refer to the behaviour of the civil service and political advisers. The two most important behaviour-related concepts are 'functional politicization', as primarily advocated by Mayntz and Derlien (1989), and 'administrative politicization', as suggested by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008).

Peters and Pierre (2004: 2) provide a widespread recruitment-related concept, defining politicization as 'the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards and disciplining of members of the public service'. Peters' recent suggestion of six subtypes of politicization also refers to recruitment in one way or another (Peters, 2013: 16). He characterizes politicization as the recruitment of 'political loyalists' (Peters, 2013: 17) to career positions (direct politicization); the recruitment of loyalists that simultaneously are professional civil servants (professional politicization); the recruitment to positions to supervise the activities of the civil service (redundant politicization); exit of civil servants when expecting a new government (anticipatory politicization); recruitment decided by parliament and government (dual politicization); and the influence of other social actors on recruitment or the careers of civil servants (social politicization) (Peters, 2013: 17–19).

Because this article focuses on the politicization of the advice provided to the minister by civil servants and politically recruited advisers, we consider it indispensable to include a conceptual focus on both the recruitment and behaviour of the civil service and political advisers. We select three different politicization mechanisms: (1) formal, (2) functional and (3) administrative politicization.

A distinction is to be drawn between the latter two because functional politicization focuses on the behaviour of the civil service, while administrative politicization refers to the behaviour of political advisers (see below). Mechanisms are understood as institutional solutions to solve the dilemma of having both expert knowledge and politically responsive advice at the minister's disposal and are reflected by formal rules as the result of political decisions as well as by informal rules, procedures and behaviour considered appropriate responses to the demand for political responsiveness.

While formal politicization represents the classic notion, functional and administrative politicization concepts were launched more recently. Overall, formal politicization reflects the historically enacted or evolved institutional recruitment rules and arrangements of a given system to ensure responsiveness (Derlien, 1996; Page and Wright, 1999: 268), whereas later ones reflect more informal institutional and behavioural responses from the civil service and political advisers, respectively, to relatively recent increasing demands for political responsiveness from ministers (Van der Meer et al., 2007: 42–43).

Formal politicization

Formal politicization as the conventional definition of politicization (Dogan, 1975: 13; Ståhlberg, 1987: 366–368) is widely used in research (Peters and Pierre, 2004: 2) referring to formal rules prescribing that certain (top) civil service positions can be filled by civil servants (or others) according to the minister's contingent preferences (Rouban, 2012: 384–388). Formal rules legitimizing the recruitment of staff by criteria other than meritocratic criteria allow for political recruitment, often conceived of as party-political appointments. However, these rules also enable ministers to appoint staff with particular professional qualifications that are traditionally not provided for by the ministerial bureaucracy (professionalization) or merely staff which the minister prefers as advisers from a personal point of view (personalization) (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2013). Thus, formal politicization can function as a means for the minister to ensure party-political responsiveness, but also to provide additional competencies as well as providing the minister with an adviser based on a relationship of personal trust. The crucial point is the formal regulation conceding the right for discretionary recruitment for certain positions to the minister as part of the discretion inherent to his position. Contrary to widespread misconceptions, formal politicization represents a legal and legitimate recruitment and promotion practice in contrast to the often informal and closed patronage practice (Page and Wright, 1999: 271; Rouban, 2012: 384), by which appointments are made in violation of formal rules and/or administrative traditions safeguarding bureaucratic neutrality. Formal politicization can be operationalized in the recruitment rules of the civil service and ministerial advisers and in how those rules are actually applied. It remains an empirical question whether formal politicization reflects the party-politicization, professionalization or personalization of the advisory staff (Mulgan, 2007: 585).

Functional politicization

Functional politicization represents a mechanism by which the civil service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behaviour. The idea of a functionally politicized bureaucracy originates in the seminal studies carried out by Putnam (1973) and later Aberbach et al. (1981), analysing the self-perception and attitudes of civil servants resulting in the famous four role images conceptualizing the division of labour between politicians and top bureaucrats, ranging from total separation (Image I) to the 'pure hybrid' form of Image IV (Aberbach et al., 1981: 1–21). Later, Mayntz and Derlien (1989: 393) studied whether German civil servants consider their tasks and roles to be essentially political. More recently, functional politicization refers to understanding bureaucratic behaviour (Pierre, 2004; Salomonsen, 2003; Sausman and Locke, 2004). Functional politicization strengthens the political responsiveness by anticipating and integrating politically relevant aspects in the bureaucracy's day-to-day functions. A central element of functional politicization is the provision of political-tactical advice. Hence, the permanent civil service is required to have knowledge of 'how politics works' to supplement their neutral competencies and to assist in navigating politically risky situations (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 102). Mulgan (2008: 347) argues that responsiveness does not necessarily conflict with responsibility; that is, the oft-quoted 'free, frank and fearless' advice most familiar to Westminster conceptions of the work of bureaucracies. On the contrary, only a responsive *and* responsible civil service satisfies criteria of democratic legitimacy (Mulgan, 2007, 2008). Hence, functional politicization can be considered both necessary and legitimate as long as the loyalty of the permanent civil service reflects a 'constrained partisanship' (Mulgan, 2008: 348); that is, the loyalty granted to the government of the day should not be pure partisan advice. Functional politicization is operationalized in the bureaucracy's self-perception regarding its role, in the competencies it contributes (Hood and Lodge, 2006) and in its behaviour.

Administrative politicization

Administrative politicization refers to ministerial advisers' relationships with the (permanent) civil service (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008: 343). It represents a mechanism by which ministerial advisers politicize the advice provided by the permanent civil service. Depending on the relationships between ministerial advisers and the civil service, the advice to the minister can become more politicized in two respects. First, ministerial advisers can prevent the civil service from giving free, frank and fearless advice and, hence, constrain the access of the civil service to the minister (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008: 343). Second, the advice from the permanent civil service can become 'coloured' by partisan aspects when ministerial advisers interfere (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008: 343–444). Administrative politicization ensures political responsiveness by creating an intermediate layer (ministerial advisers) between ministers and the bureaucracy that can evolve into the minister's political

watchdog not hesitating to politicize the advice provided by the civil service. Acting as the political watchdog can foster a conflicting relationship with the permanent civil service. Administrative politicization becomes apparent in the role perception of ministerial advisers and their behaviour towards the civil service as well as in the institutional advisory procedures and actual advisory behaviour.

Although the three concepts reflect discrete types of politicization mechanisms, they are by no means mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they coexist in various ways, as will become evident in the subsequent analysis.

Design and methods

The empirical analysis is a comparative case study of the politicization mechanisms reflected in rules, constitutions, procedures, attitudes, behaviours of as well as relations between ministers, ministerial advisers and civil servants in Germany, Belgium, Denmark and the UK. The four cases are chosen because they allow an empirical investigation of the different types of politicization mechanisms across different types of politico-administrative systems to maximize the empirical domain in which the mechanisms may prove their validity. The chosen cases include unitary versus federal state structures, traditional majority versus minority governments, and Westminster systems versus ministerial bureaucracies equipped with ministerial cabinets.

Assessing different politicization mechanisms requires different types of data as summarized in Table 1, which also reflects the operationalization of the mechanisms.

Table 1. Operationalizing politicization

Politicization mechanism	Operationalization	Data type
Formal	Formal rules and procedures on discretionary recruitment... and their implementation (party-politicization, professionalization or personalization)	Constitutions, white papers, ministerial codes, data on discretionary recruitment... data on discretionary recruitment, but also data on the number as well as the educational and occupational backgrounds of persons recruited on the basis of formal politicization rules
Functional	Behaviour and attitudes (including role perceptions) of bureaucrats	Interviews, surveys
Administrative	Behaviour and attitudes (including role perceptions) of advisers vis-à-vis permanent civil servants	Interviews with both ministerial advisers and civil servants

Formal documents regarding the respective recruitment rules and behavioural codes of the permanent civil service and ministerial advisers were analysed for all four cases. In addition, the case studies are based upon existing literature on the four countries. The data upon which the literature is based (if available) are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Literature and data used in this study

Country	Study	Empirical basis
Germany	Hustedt, 2013	27 interviews with administrative state secretaries and employees attached to staff units in all federal ministries (except the Ministry for Defence and the Chancellor's Office) October 2006–June 2008
	Ebinger and Jochheim, 2009	Survey of administrative secretaries, heads of divisions, heads of subdivisions in all federal ministries November 2008–February 2009
	Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006	Survey of administrative secretaries, heads of divisions, heads of subdivisions in all federal ministries August until September 2005
Belgium	de Visscher et al., 2011	Survey of and 11 interviews with highest Belgian federal civil servants March–May 2009
	Dierickx, 2003	Interviews with 157 senior civil servants, 51 politicians, 28 ministerial staffers From 1989 onwards
Denmark	Salomonsen, 2003	25 interviews with civil servants at all hierarchical levels in two ministries Spring 2002
	Ministry of Finance, 1998, 2004	Surveys of all ministers, permanent secretaries and private secretaries 1997–1998, 2003
	Christensen, 2012	Data on careers of all permanent secretaries 1950–2010 (with intervals)
	de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013	13 interviews with permanent secretaries June 2009–March 2010
UK	Blick, 2004	Archival documents 'more than forty interviews' (Blick, 2004: 327)
	LSE GV314 Group, 2012	Survey of 125 and interviews with 26 former SpAds February–March 2011
	Wilson and Barker, 2003	Interviews with and survey of 108 'very most senior servants' 1993–94

Analysing politicization mechanisms

Formal politicization

The rules for formal politicization in the German federal bureaucracy date back to 1848–49, when Prussia became a constitutional monarchy (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 39). The transition from absolutism to a constitutional system created the separation of government and administration. The notion of the political civil servant was born and first regulated in a statutory ordinance in 1849, replaced by a law in 1852. The temporary dismissal of high-ranking civil servants was established as an instrument to abolish liberalism, which was quite prominent among the high-ranking Prussian bureaucrats of the day. Basically, this general rule has remained unchanged until today, but the group of political civil servants expanded on several occasions (Priebe, 1997: 28). In the Weimar Republic, the temporary retirement instrument was considered to ensure that only constitution-supporting civil servants remained in office. This was not self-evident at the time, as parts of the Prussian bureaucracy remained close to the Conservative (anti-democratic) Party, and the temporary retirement option was considered an instrument to strengthen the republic (Priebe, 1997: 32–33).[1] Hence, the German bureaucracy was born formally politicized, both to consolidate the republic and ensure political responsiveness. Thus, formal politicization in the German ministerial bureaucracy refers to the possibility of dismissing high-ranking civil servants to temporary retirement when ministers no longer consider them trustworthy and politically reliable. According to today's civil service law, ministers can dismiss civil servants in the top two ranks of the departmental hierarchy (administrative state secretaries and heads of division) at any time and without any given reason. Obviously, this mechanism is pivotal after a federal election, particularly when producing a new government. Over time, federal governments increasingly used the rule. Whereas 33 percent of all political servants were removed from office after the new government took office in 1969, this figure was 52.2 percent in 1998, when, for the first time, both of the former coalition parties left government (Ebinger and Jochheim, 2009: 332–333). A lower rate in 2005 (15.6 percent; Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006: 241) can be explained by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) remaining in the grand coalition (with the Conservative Party CDU-CSU) after governing with the Green Party between 1998 and 2005 and obviously succeeded in maintaining 'their' political civil servants in the new coalition (Ebinger and Jochheim, 2009: 332–333).

Even though ministerial advisers do not exist in German federal ministries as a formally established position, the personal staff that recently tended to be organized in particular staff units (*Leitungsstäbe*) perform functionally equivalent tasks, usually organizing the cooperation with parliament and cabinet, providing information to the press, and organizing the minister's calendar and files in his personal office. These staff are often recruited from the line bureaucracy; however, it is widely acknowledged that the minister recruits his press spokesperson from outside the ministry, often a former journalist, as well as his personal secretary. There are no quantitative data regarding the extent of external recruitment, but there are

numerous examples of externally recruited personal secretaries (Hustedt, 2013: 223–229). Personal secretaries or the heads of the minister's office are often promoted to head of staff unit after some time in office (Hustedt, 2013: 322).

The formal regulations for recruitment to the Belgium ministerial bureaucracy date back to the Camu reform in 1937, by which a uniform statute for all Belgian civil servants was established for the first time. This statute created a merit civil service committed to the constitution and Belgian laws (rather than to the government of the day) which was set up as a neutral and professional civil service recruited by competitive examination, appointed for life and promoted by merit to the upper ranks and length of service in the lower ranks of hierarchy (Brans and Hondeghem, 1999: 126; Dierickx, 2003: 321, 331).

Although the civil service was born as a merit bureaucracy and recruitment and promotion are generally supposed to be apolitical (Brans and Hondeghem, 1999: 128), this 'has often been bypassed' (Hondeghem, 2011: 141). Party-political criteria in recruitment and promotion became so important that the political parties agreed to an institutionalized procedure in the 1960s. Here, the parties of the government coalitions negotiate package deals for political appointments to balance the respective parties' interests (Dierickx, 2003: 332), demonstrating 'partitocracy' (Pelgrims et al., 2008: 188); hence, the almost unlimited influence of political parties characteristic of the Belgian political system. A six-year mandate system for top positions introduced by the Copernicus reform in 2000 means that a minister can choose among the candidates who performed best in the selection procedures. Recent research indicates that the mandate system resulted in increasing 'political interference' (Hondeghem, 2011: 141) in nominations.

The strong political grip on the Belgian civil service is accompanied by a lengthy tradition of influential ministerial cabinets, which emerged from personal assistants to the minister to full-fledged cabinets since the second half of the nineteenth century (Suetens and Walgrave, 2001: fn7). The cabinets continuously expanded in terms of their role, structure and size. One aim of the Copernicus reform was to abolish the ministerial cabinets, although the reform failed in this regard (de Visscher et al., 2011: 178). It is difficult to identify the exact size of the ministerial cabinets, but investigations claim a near doubling between 1989, when the average cabinet had 13.8 staff members, and 2004, by which time the average size had grown to 28 (Pelgrims and Dureu, 2006, cited in de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013). Ministerial cabinets are staffed with equal numbers of external employees and civil servants from the line organization. External recruits are predominantly drawn from the minister's party and are often selected by the party headquarters as a party-based means of control for the ministers (Brans and Hondeghem, 1999: 131). This staffing guarantees that ministerial cabinets are equipped with both party and personal loyalty to the minister and procedural as well as sectoral know-how (Pelgrims et al., 2008: 184).

In contrast to the German case, party-political influence on recruitment is not considered a formal legitimate practice in the Belgian ministerial bureaucracy, but

rather an excessive, negative behaviour by politicians and political parties and is interpreted as a firm expression of partitocracy.

The regulations of the Danish ministerial bureaucracy date back to ministerial reform in 1848, when absolutism was replaced by constitutional liberalism. However, the position of the civil service is not part of the constitution. The ministerial reform gave ministers the authority to appoint civil servants. At the time, ministers were recruited from the civil service, and the exclusively Conservative governments expected and received party-political loyalty from the civil service. Mixed careers were not unusual.

In 1901, a Liberal government came to power for the first time. At the time, the civil service changed from being politically responsive to a minister with whom they shared party-political affiliation to a neutral, merit-based bureaucracy providing expert knowledge, with no mixed careers between ministers and civil servants. Civil servants became reluctant to openly express personal party affiliation. However, Danish ministers are formally allowed to dismiss permanent secretaries on discretionary grounds. A decreasing mean length of appointment of permanent secretaries from more than 15 years in 1960–69 to less than 10 years since 1990 suggests that ministers are increasingly interested in appointing permanent secretaries (Christensen, 2012). But these developments do not justify considering the Danish civil service as formally politicized. A change in the permanent secretary by a new minister stands as the exception rather than the rule, as it violates the ideal of the neutral merit bureaucracy. Furthermore, when permanent secretaries are replaced, this change is often due to bad chemistry or a lack of 'mutual congeniality' (Christensen, 2012) rather than political disagreement.

Special advisers were introduced into the Danish central administration around the 2000s. In the 1990s, the opposition occasionally accused the government of patronage appointments in the Prime Minister's Office resulting in an expert committee established by parliament. In 1998, this committee published a White Paper, which legitimates the minister's employment of a special adviser based upon political criteria if their appointment is tied to the minister's term in office (Ministry of Finance, 1998: 221–223). Special advisers 'are subject to the same requirements of legality, obligation to speak the truth and professional standards' (Ministry of Finance, 2004: 283–284) as the civil service. In contrast to the permanent civil service, special advisers are also allowed to provide party-political advice (Ministry of Finance, 2004: 287). The number of advisers has been quite stable since 2001. And most ministers now employ one special adviser. Ministers typically recruit advisers with whom they share party-political affiliations and/or who are political communication experts. This is reflected in both the formal descriptions of the educational and occupational backgrounds of the advisers and in the role descriptions of special advisers provided by permanent secretaries (de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013).

The UK is the traditional homeland of an absolutely neutral merit bureaucracy. In the Whitehall bureaucracy, recruitment is strictly based on merit and the civil service is characterized by permanence, anonymity and neutrality (Kavanagh et al.,

2006: 44). Moreover, party-political activity among civil servants in management positions is explicitly forbidden (Sausman and Locke, 2004: 102). The merit principle stems from the Northcote Trevelyan Report of 1854. A Civil Service Commission was set up in 1855 to put an end to patronage. The Commission evaluated whether actual recruitment to the civil service complied with the principles of merit and open recruitment. To ensure the strict implementation of the merit principle, the independent Civil Service Commission issued a number of recruitment principles to be followed (Civil Service Commission, 2012). Moreover, the Civil Service Code stresses the principle of merit and highlights the values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality (Cabinet Office, 2006: 1), reflecting the core idea of a civil service being able to 'speak truth to power' (Sausmann and Locke, 2004: 121). Most recently, the merit principle and a civil service code were rendered statutory in the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act of 2010 (chapter 1).

In practice, especially during Margaret Thatcher's term in office, some appointments were regarded as being based on either personal or political criteria (Page, 2010; Sausman and Locke, 2004: 103). However, the British permanent civil service is characterized as non-formally politicized in practice as prescribed by the formal regulations described (Barker and Wilson, 1997).

Prior to the 1970s, British ministries employed only permanent civil servants. At that point, however, special advisers were introduced. The employment of special advisers is tied to the minister (Guy, 2009: 3), for which reason their appointment is neither expected to follow the principle of merit nor are they required to be as impartial and objective as the permanent civil service (Cabinet Office, 2009, section 4). However, they are expected to comply with the principles set in the Civil Service Code (2006). With the exception of the prime minister and deputy prime minister, cabinet ministers may appoint up to two special advisers (Cabinet Office, 2010: 6). The annual number of special advisers in the UK appears to have stabilized since the end of the 1990s. In 1998–99, 70 special advisers were appointed, 25 of whom were employed in the PM's Office. In 2008–09, 74 special advisers were appointed by the government, 25 again in the PM's Office (Guy, 2009).

Regarding the degree of formal politicization, British special advisers are also either recruited on political criteria or because of their political communication competences and are involved in both the ministries' policy-making activities and in 'spinning' the government's messages (Fawcett and Gay, 2010: 29–30).

Functional politicization

Asked via survey questionnaires to identify their most relevant ideal-type role models by assessing the relevance of respective ideal-types between 1 (most relevant) and 5 (not relevant), German top bureaucrats consistently perceive themselves as experts in their particular policy domain (1.4), as executors of political goals (1.5) and as representatives of the state (1.6) (Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006: 243). Whereas 28.1 percent of the responding bureaucrats said in 1970 there was no

role overlap between their own roles and some activities typically performed by politicians, in 2005 only 1.6 percent shared this perspective. Hence, an increasing number of bureaucrats agree that there is at least partly an overlap between bureaucratic and political roles (Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006: 242).

When bureaucrats are asked about their loyalty to the government of the day, decreasing loyalty is found. In 2005, 47 percent believed that it was at least partly appropriate to maintain previous policies after a change in government. This figure increased to 54 percent in the 2009 survey. In 1987, 80 percent had considered such an attitude to be unacceptable (Ebinger and Jochheim, 2009: 338).

In general, German federal bureaucrats appreciate the political aspects of their day-to-day activities. Even though a slight decline in the positive assessment of this part of their job is reported in recent surveys, it remains at a rather high 90.9 percent (Ebinger and Jochheim, 2009: 339).

Both Belgian politicians and senior civil servants emphasize the separation of their roles. Although each feels superior to the other, both accept the dominance of the politicians (Brans and Hondeghem, 1999: 132; Dierickx, 2003: 325). Traditionally, senior civil servants in Belgium predominantly viewed themselves as implementers of public policy with technical expertise (de Visscher et al., 2011: 171) and as 'servants of the state' (de Visscher et al., 2011: 180). Since the Copernicus reform, however, this pattern appears to change slightly. Recent research documents a shift in loyalty towards the respective ministerial department (de Visscher et al., 2011: 180). Belgian civil servants are commonly associated with both technical skills and a technocratic attitude towards their positions (de Visscher et al., 2011: 171; Dierickx, 2003: 326), and they tend to 'dislike the political aspects of their job' (Brans and Hondeghem, 1999: 132). Political alienation has been documented as a characteristic feature of the civil service professional culture, which refuses features of political activities such as compromise (Dierickx, 2003: 327). Due to a lack of more recent research, it is difficult to assess whether the top civil servants' attitudes have changed (Hondeghem, 2011: 139). In contrast to the line civil service, members of the ministerial cabinets can be characterized as highly functionally politicized, because they monopolize policy formulation and advice, perform politically relevant functions and become 'shadow administrations' (Brans et al., 2006: 62, also de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013).

Danish civil servants responded to an increasing demand for political advice since the 1980s by integrating their policy expertise with political-tactical advice. Although the provision of political advice was subject to both political and public debate, it is generally recognized as legitimate and obligatory for the civil service to provide such counsel to the minister (Ministry of Finance, 1998: 21). Both qualitative and quantitative studies document permanent secretaries as the main providers of political advice (Ministry of Finance, 1998; 2004; Salomonsen, 2003). However, permanent secretaries generally refrain from party-political advice when balancing responsive and responsible advice.

Although it is difficult to 'measure' substantial changes in functional politicization, there is no indication that the introduction of special advisers caused a change

in the degree of functional politicization of the permanent civil service, either in terms of the extent or type of political advice provided (Ministry of Finance, 2004: 76). Instead, roles are functionally divided in most ministries. Whereas permanent secretaries preserve their role as the primary advisers for expertise-based policy advice and political-tactical advice, the special advisers focus on advice on political communication and party-political issues (de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013).

British top civil servants provide their respective ministers with advice on 'all political matters' (Lodge, 2010: 103). As Kavanagh et al. (2006: 224) note, the permanent civil service plays 'an important political role for ministers in terms of the political game in Whitehall and Westminster'.

Administrative politicization

Leadership staff units in German federal ministries are perceived as the eyes and ears of the minister by the line organization (Hustedt, 2013: 319–322). The ministers expect them to act as political and policy safeguards vis-à-vis the bureaucracy, and they are often privileged in internal procedures. Thus, the heads of staff units are the last party to receive bills and documents (after the state secretaries) before they reach the minister's desk, providing them with the option to interfere in the bureaucracy's presentations to the minister. Based on this privileged access to the minister, they are understood to be the ministers' pre-controllers from both policy and political points of view (Hustedt, 2013: 288–292).

Because of the size and influential role of ministerial cabinets in Belgian ministries, the administrative politicization can be considered quite high. Even though some cabinet members come from bureaucratic positions, they quickly adapt to the political rationality typifying ministerial cabinets (Pelgrims et al., 2008). However, Belgian ministerial cabinet members do not compete with the traditional civil service in providing advice to the minister. A specific division of labour developed marginalizing the civil service in policy-making. Ministerial cabinets perform almost all policy formulation and advice, leaving implementation to the line bureaucracy (Brans et al., 2006; de Visscher et al., 2011: 178; Dierickx, 2003: 328). One element of the Copernicus reform was to reinforce the bureaucracies' role in policy-making, but this attempt has been widely perceived as a failure (de Visscher et al., 2011: 178; Hondeghem, 2011: 140; Pelgrims et al., 2008).

In contrast to the public and political discussions of special advisers (Ministry of Finance, 2004), the Danish permanent secretaries do not experience administrative politicization (de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013). The relationship between the civil service and special advisers is described as complementary rather than competing or conflicting. Special advisers neither threaten the neutrality of the permanent civil service nor do they result in reducing the relevance of the advice of the permanent civil service or the 'colouring' of this advice with partisan aspects. As mentioned, they primarily provide advice on matters that permanent civil servants are either incapable of (political communication) or reluctant to discuss (party politics) (de Visscher and Salomonsen, 2013; Ministry of Finance, 2004).

This can partly be explained by the fact that special advisers are not granted executive powers over the permanent civil service, although those working with press-related functions are exempt from that rule (Ministry of Finance, 1998: 222).

Special advisers caused tensions within British ministries, and occasionally leaked information to the public, resulting in both harsh criticism (Blick, 2004) and the formulation of a Code of Conduct for Special Advisers in 2001 (most recently revised in 2009), explicitly addressing issues of administrative politicization. Special advisers are neither allowed to stipulate that civil servants infringe the Civil Service Code (Cabinet Office, 2009: section 7) nor 'suppress or supplant the advice being prepared for Ministers by permanent civil servants although they may comment on such advice' (Cabinet Office, 2009: section 7). Responding to a critical case in which two of Tony Blair's special advisers were granted managerial responsibility for civil servants (Sausman and Locke, 2004: 106), the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act of 2010 emphasizes that special advisers must not 'exercise any power in relation to the management of any part of the civil service of State' (section 8).

A recent review concludes that many of the British special advisers are deeply involved in policy development and design, and that 'communication occupied only marginally more of SpAds' [special advisers] time than policy design' (LSE GV314 Group, 2012: 7). Even though they are involved in the core activity of the top civil service, the special advisers characterize their relationship with the civil service as 'remarkably non-conflictual' (LSE GV314 Group, 2012: 12). According to some observers, the introduction of special advisers has resulted in the civil service's loss of its central role in coordinating advice to ministers, and it is argued that the permanent secretaries no longer represent the ultimate source of advice (Van Dorpe and Horton, 2011: 243). However, others argue that because of the relatively limited number of special advisers, 'most of the people with whom ministers interact in developing policy are still permanent civil servants' (Wilson and Barker, 2003: 353). Page reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that the special advisers have 'hardly permeated the whole process of civil service policy-making' (2010: 416). The permanent civil service has now started to repel the increasing role of the special advisers and regained its position as central advisers. Hence, a 'bouncing back' (Lodge, 2010: 109) of Whitehall could be observed, resulting in 'normalization' (Lodge, 2010: 109), thus reasserting the advisory role of the permanent civil service.

Comparing politicization mechanisms

In a comparative perspective, the politicization mechanisms coexist and develop in quite different ways. Historically, the four cases differ regarding the origins and perception of politicization, i.e. the question whether politicization is considered to violate the original politico-administrative system and its administrative traditions. Whereas formal politicization was historically built-in and has never been considered a violation of administrative traditions in the German ministerial bureaucracy, the Belgian ministerial bureaucracy was originally solely constructed on the

basis of neutrality and merit, and the emerging formal politicization became considered a threat to those principles. In both Germany and Belgium, formal politicization generates the ‘chimney effect’ (Derlien, 1988: 55), creating incentives for top civil servants to become party members, because formal politicization is widely used to party-politicize, whereas the permanent civil services in Denmark and the UK are not formally politicized, although special advisers have been introduced. However, as this was conceived as a violation of the neutral bureaucracy, special advisers became subject to political and public debate, resulting in an increasing formalization of the position of the special adviser. Moreover, the position of the special adviser is often interpreted as a professionalization, because special advisers import competencies to the ministries that the ministerial bureaucracy does not provide. The formal politicization represented by advisers therefore both reflects party-politicization as well as professionalization. German federal bureaucrats consistently perceive themselves as experts whose position requires political sensitivity, as appears to be the case for the Danish and British counterparts providing political advice, and all can therefore be considered functionally politicized. The Belgian civil service represents a low level of functional politicization with the important exception of ministerial cabinets. Even though German *Leitungsstäbe* developed towards functional equivalents to special advisers as they emerge as political watchdogs on behalf of the minister, administrative politicization is not found. However, while there is no indication of administrative politicization in Denmark, the British case illustrates how administrative politicization can be a temporary feature of a politico-administrative system, as Whitehall featured a certain level of administrative politicization shortly after the position of special advisers had been established. Temporarily, the advice from the civil service appeared secondary to the advice provided from special advisers in the UK. However, the British permanent civil service regained its role as the closest adviser to the minister, as was always the case in Denmark. In stark contrast, Belgian ministerial cabinets remain the most influential units in terms of both policy formulation and advice, and their relationship with the permanent civil service is administratively politicized.

Conclusion

This article identifies the different concepts of politicization present in the literature and suggests a typology including three types of politicization mechanisms: formal, functional and administrative politicization. Based on a systematic comparative analysis across ministerial bureaucracies in Western European countries, the article empirically validates this typology and investigates the ‘persistent claim’ of increasing politicization.

Although all four cases converge insofar as they generally reflect extensive politicization mechanisms, their origins, combinations and the development of each mechanism differ substantially across the cases, reflecting divergence.

These findings allow for a number of general conclusions. First, the analysis does not merely reflect ‘more politicization’, but a more complex development

related to, second, variation over time and mechanisms of politicization. Formal politicization in the four cases under study appears to be quite self-contained; that is, change appears *within* the mechanism. Functional and administrative politicization developed differently, as change appeared *across* the two: the British functionally politicized bureaucracy succeeded in 'bouncing back' emerging administrative politicization. Hence, functional and administrative politicization do not necessarily exclude each other but might rather be understood as interlocked due to mutual observations and reactions by both the permanent bureaucracy and special advisers. Third, politicization mechanisms are best understood as dynamic rather than static: we identify *stabilized* situations in formal politicization (e.g. in the number of special advisers in Denmark and the UK), but also increasing use in Germany. Functional politicization also reflects a *stabilized* mechanism in the UK, Germany and Denmark. We find functional politicization *rebalancing* administrative politicization (in the UK) as well as a *repoliticization* of Belgian ministerial cabinets resulting from failed attempts to *depoliticize*. Fifth, the *formalization* of the recruitment and behaviour of SpAds appears to be an institutional response to criticisms and, lastly, is considered a way of protecting core bureaucratic values.

The scope of generalization of these conclusions is limited by the case selection only including ministerial bureaucracies in north-western European countries. Hence, future research could seek to increase the validity of the typology by expanding the analysis to other cases, for example to ministerial bureaucracies in southern or middle and eastern European countries, which might reveal other politicization mechanisms, such as patronage and their interaction with the three mechanisms analysed here.

As politicization mechanisms represent different historically shaped options for what is considered the appropriate way of assuring the 'best' expertise and likewise ensure political responsiveness, one might ask whether the empirical analysis of politicization mechanisms reflects different limits to 'jeopardizing bureaucratic integrity' (Pierre, 2004: 52). Which future development can then be expected? Regarding formal politicization, limits to ever-growing politicization can be expected to occur by changing governmental colours after an election due to the usual turnover functioning (1) as a barrier to an ever-increasing grip of political parties, which are aware of the time limits with respect to holding power, and (2) as a self-binding mechanism to the chimney effect, as the party book does not guarantee their own party's electoral success. Regarding functional and administrative politicization, limits to ever-increasing politicization root in the risk of public outcries and scandals if neutrality seems violated. Parliamentary opposition and the broader public are sensitive observers here.

Note

1. After the Nazis took power, this rule was adopted but supplemented by making it possible to force retirement on any civil servant who was not actively promoting their political ideas (as well as Jewish civil servants).

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