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## **Political appointments in 18 Democracies, 1975-2007**

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### **QoG WORKING PAPER SERIES 2009:18**

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June 2009

ISSN 1653-8919

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QoG Working Paper Series 2009:18  
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### **Abstract**

Scholarly literature holds a clear expectation of a growing politicization of the bureaucracy in mature democracies. It is also common for these students to warn against the negative effects produced by merging the roles of politicians and bureaucrats, and it is plausible that a growing politicization of the bureaucracy reduces accountability and thereby increases the risk of bad governance. Existing analysis is, however, almost exclusively based on single case studies, or few case comparisons. This paper presents results from a new expert survey on political appointments in the executive, covering 18 democracies between 1975 and 2007. By using this data the paper gives a unique description of the number of political appointees in the executive, both between countries and over time. The empirical findings confirm the general expectation of increasing politicization, but also demonstrate different trends in countries belonging to different administrative traditions.

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## **Introduction**

In recent years the number of political advisers and other politically appointed staff in the executive has increased in many mature democracies. This has happened not only in countries from the Germanic and Napoleonic administrative traditions, but also in countries from Scandinavia and the Commonwealth, all of which traditionally have few political appointees (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Pierre 2004). The existing literature indicates that there are important differences in how much and when governments have politicized the executive, but since scholars almost exclusively have relied on analyses of single case studies or few-case comparisons broad comparison is still missing (Page and Wright 1999; Peters and Pierre 2004).

The goal of this paper is to give a novel overview of political appointments in the core executive of 18 democracies. A comparative measure of the numbers of political appointees in the executive is reported. It is based on an original expert survey conducted during 2007 and it covers every tenth year between 1975 and 2007 for 18 countries.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2 the expert survey data collection is presented. Section 3 reports the results from the expert survey and offers some preliminary analyses. Section 4 concludes.

## **The expert survey**

This section reports new data on the numbers of politically appointed officials in the central government offices in 18 democracies. Highly qualified country experts in these countries have been asked to estimate the number of politically appointed officials in the central government offices for the years 1975, 1985, 1995, and 2007. The number of

respondents per country was between two and four which is comparable to several other expert surveys (see for example Rauch and Evans 2000). See table 1 for details.

**Table 1 about here**

There are at least three ways of defining politicization: functional, role, and personal (Derlien 1996:149; see also Rouban 2007). The measure of politicization used in the survey is limited to the third type, quantifying the number of political appointees in the core executive. This also fits the definition of politicization suggested by B. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre (2004:2). Practically this means that the terms of employment determine who is counted as politically appointed.

All of the country experts who participated in the survey were identified on the basis of their publications in the area of public administration. They have all published articles in peer-reviewed journals, books, or chapters in edited books that specialize on the structure of the central bureaucracy in the country at hand.

The country experts were contacted by e-mail. The e-mail gave a short introduction to the research problem as well as the aim of the project which was “to get a comparative measure on the politicization of the central bureaucracy”. Four questions were asked and they are presented in table 2.

**Table 2 about here**

The second question, Q2, concerns the absolute number of political appointees at the central government offices. The fourth question, Q4, asks for the absolute numbers of the political appointees for the years 1975, 1985, and 1995. These two questions were the most useful of the questions for cross country comparisons.

The country experts were asked to include all political appointees in the central government offices, but to exclude all elected politicians as well as political appointees in agencies and at the local level. Their answers have been checked against other available sources, such as statistics from the Office for Administrative Affairs within the Government Offices, other administrative agencies, or secondary sources. Experts in the same country sometimes provided different answers and when this occurred they were contacted again in order to identify why their answers differed. In some cases this gave enough information to illuminate all important differences. However, in a few other cases a substantial difference remained and in such cases, only answers that could be confirmed by a written source were included in the data set.

Table 3, found in the next section, reports the answers from questions Q2 and Q4. The two questions Q1 and Q3 are not reported in this paper.

### **Political appointments in the central government offices in 18 democracies, 1975-2007**

The results from the survey are presented in table 3. The countries have been divided into five groups depending on their administrative tradition (Painter and Peters forthcoming). The fifth category does however only capture one country, Japan, and will here be left out of the analysis. The absolute number of political appointees in the central government

offices is reported, together with a relative measure capturing the number of politically appointed officials per minister. Data for the number of ministers are from Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998) for the years up to 1995, and from various numbers of *Political Data Yearbook*, published by *European Journal of Political Research*, for the years after 1995.

### **Table 3 about here**

There is a large variation in the country sample even though all eighteen countries are mature democracies and most of them are located in Europe. The number varies from 0 to 42 political appointees per minister. Generally, and in line with expectations, countries from a Napoleonic administrative tradition have by far the highest number of political appointees, and have had so for the entire period. This is explained by an institutional difference between the Napoleonic countries and the rest of the countries in the sample concerning the structure of the government offices. In the Napoleonic countries the ministers have private offices, so-called “cabinets ministériels”, where most officials are politically appointed (Cassese 1999; Page and Wright 1999; Rouban 1999, 2004; Suleiman 1975). It can be noted that with one exception (ministers in Australia have also a relatively large private staff) this organizational characteristic of the summit is only found in Napoleonic countries (Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000).

Looking at the group mean of the number of political appointees per minister, the Napoleonic countries are followed by the Anglo-American countries. But this is the group with the largest within-group variation and here we find countries with very low

levels, such as New Zealand and the UK, together with countries with very high values, such as Australia and the United States. Politically appointed officials are well-known parts of the Executive Branch in the United States and the government offices in Australia. In the United States it is commonly explained by the so-called “spoils-system” and in Australia by a system of large private staffs for the ministers (Lewis 2008; Maley 2002; Tiernan 2004; Weller 2000). If the US and Australia were taken out of the group it would instead have the lowest mean, and maybe more correctly catch the properties of Ireland, New Zealand, and the UK (Campbell and Wilson 1995; Eichbaum and Shaw 2007).

The Napoleonic and the Anglo-American countries are followed by the Germanic and then the Scandinavian countries. Judging from earlier comparative research, countries in these two groups are placed where we would expect them to end up (Matheson et. al. 2007; Page and Wright 1999; Peters, Rhodes and Wright 2000; Peters and Pierre 2004; SIGMA 2007).

Switzerland is an outlier in the Germanic group and it is surprising to find Switzerland at this high level. The relative numbers might, however, lead us to overestimate the presence of political appointments in the Swiss central government offices. The relative numbers in Switzerland are increased by the fact that Swiss governments are relatively small with only 7 ministers. If we instead look at the absolute numbers, Switzerland ends up in the middle of the sample, together with countries like Austria, Sweden and Germany, which is probably more correct (Klöti 1999).

As mentioned already in the introduction to this section there is a clear expectation in the literature for increasing numbers of political appointees over time (see for example

SIGMA 2007). To a large extent, this expectation is confirmed by the data. 14 of the 18 countries have increased their number of political appointees per minister from the mid 1970s to mid 2000. This conclusion does however need some specifications.

As is shown in figures 1-4, trends towards higher numbers of political appointees is not equally strong in all administrative regimes, and in the countries belonging to the Napoleonic tradition the line is almost flat. France saw its highest number of political appointees in the early to mid 1980s, after the election in 1981, and after that the number has either been stable or decreased (Rouban 2004). The development in Italy has been similar with a peak in the 1980s and the number of political appointments in the executive seems to have decreased until the late 1990s. Since the early 2000 there are however signs of an increase again (Cassese 1999; Matheson et al 2007).

In Belgium the trend is not as clear. The number of political appointees increased early in the period and, as Guido Dierickx (2004) notes, this development reached its peak in the late 1980s when “there was a widespread feeling among both SCS [senior civil service] and many politicians that politicization had gone to far” (Dierickx 2004, 194). During the 1990s and 2000 several steps were taken in order to modernise the government, reduce the influence of political appointees and dismantle the ministerial cabinets. The reforms – especially the Copernicus plan in the late 1990s and early 2000 – aimed at strengthening the role of the administration in producing policy advice, but as Marleen Brans, Christophe Pelgrims and Dieter Hoet (2006) observed “Ministers clearly reinvented ministerial cabinets”, which created a backlash (Brans, Pelgrims and Hoet 2006, 46; Pelgrims and Brans 2006).



#### **Figure 1-4 about here**

The countries belonging to the Anglo-American, Germanic and Scandinavian administrative traditions are generally moving towards higher numbers of political appointees in the summit. But both between and within these three groups there are differences in how strong the trend is. The group that is most obviously moving towards more politically appointed officials is the Scandinavian group. All Scandinavian countries have increased the number of political appointments between all four points in time, which is not true for any of the other country groups (see table 3). It is however also important to note that the differentiation within the Scandinavian group increases over time. The four countries are drawn apart, with Sweden as the most and Denmark as the least politicized country in the Scandinavian group. Among all countries in 2007, Denmark is the country with the lowest proportion of political appointees, with less than one political appointee per minister, while Sweden ends up on 10<sup>th</sup> place (of the 18 countries). In the beginning of the period Denmark and Sweden were at the second and fifth place respectively.

The within-group variation increases also in the Anglo-American and Germanic countries. In the Anglo-American group this is explained by the development in Australia and the US, while the other countries in that group stay close together. In the Germanic group dispersion is due to developments in Germany and Austria, while the other countries are stable (Schröter 2004; Liegl and Müller 1999). However, also in this respect, the development in the Napoleonic countries goes in the other direction, towards less within group variation.

I will sum up this section by considering the development over time in all countries in the sample. The data reported in this paper reveals one general difference between the 1970s and the 2000. In the mid 2000 there is only one country with less than two political appointees per minister (Denmark), while there were seven countries below this level in the mid 1970s. In the 1980s we have five countries below two political appointees per minister and in the mid 1990s three countries were below this level. Generally much of the increase in political appointments has happened in the countries that start with the lowest levels. What we have seen from the 1970s and onwards is not so much an explosion in the numbers of politically motivated appointments as a qualitative shift. Governments do not seem to be able to handle the challenges of today without a cadre of political appointees in the government offices, something that governments in all Scandinavian and almost all Westminster countries were able to do 30 years ago.

## **Conclusions**

The development towards higher numbers of political appointees in the executive has been noted by numerous observers (Matheson et. al. 2007; Peters and Pierre 2004; Poguntke and Webb 2005; SIGMA 2007). While earlier studies for the most part have been based on single country studies, or few country comparisons, this paper contributes to the current literature with a comparative measure for 18 countries. Thus, it provides a novel overview of the politicization of the executives. What is more, the results specify the observations made in the scholarly literature. It shows that most of the increased politicization has happened in countries with traditionally low levels of political appointments in the executive, often belonging to the Anglo-American or Scandinavian

administrative traditions. It also concludes that in countries with, traditionally, the highest levels of politically appointed officials in the executive, the number of political appointments have not increased since the mid 1980s. This is the situation in France, Belgium and Italy (all three belonging to the Napoleonic administrative tradition).

The paper concludes that the most striking difference between the 1970s and 2000 in the 18 countries studied is not the overall increase of political appointments already noted by many scholars. The real difference lies in the qualitative shift that has taken place in the countries with the lowest levels of politicization. In the 1970s governments in almost all Anglo-American countries and all the Scandinavian countries handled day-to-day issues without a politically appointed core, and it is only Denmark that has stayed at these levels. Today, in all countries except Denmark, there are some 40 politically appointed officials in the executive. Thus, the non-politicized executive seems to belong to history.

## Tables and Figures

**Table 1**  
**Number of expert respondents per country**

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<b>Country</b>	<b>Number</b>
Australia	4
Austria	2
Belgium	2
Canada	2
Denmark	2
Finland	4
France	2
Germany	3
Ireland	2
Italy	2
Japan	2
Netherlands	2
New Zealand	2
Norway	2
Sweden	2
Switzerland	2
UK	4
US	3

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<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>
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**Comment:** The table shows the number experts answering the expert survey, carried out during 2007.

**Table 2**

**Questions in the expert survey**

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<b>Question number</b>	<b>Question</b>
Q1	Approximately, what percentage of the total number of government officials employed in the central government offices is politically appointed?
Q2	If possible, could you also estimate how many it is in absolute numbers?
Q3	In your opinion, what percentage of the total number of government officials employed in the central government offices was politically appointed in: 1975? 1985? 1995?
Q4	If possible, could you also estimate how many it was in absolute numbers: 1975? 1985? 1995?

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**Table 3**  
**Number of political appointees per minister in 18 countries, 1975-2007.**

Country	2007	1995	1985	1975
<b>Anglo-American</b>				
Ireland	2.5 (37)	3.3 (50)	0.6 (10)	0.4 (6)
New Zealand*	2.7 (53)	2.2 (39)	0 (0)	0 (0)
United Kingdom	3.5 (80)	1.7 (38)	0.9 (18)	1.2 (28)
Canada**	3.8 (120)	4.1 (116)	3.3 (100)	2.7 (80)
U S****	11.6 (208)	8.2 (147)	7.4 (133)	8.2 (148)
Australia	14.8 (459)	17.8 (356)	14.4 (245)	8.4 (227)
<b>Scandinavian</b>				
Denmark	0.8 (15)	0.5 (10)	0.2 (4)	0.2 (3)
Finland	2.3 (42)	1.8 (32)	1.0 (17)	1.1 (17)
Norway	4.2 (73)	2.8 (50)	2.8 (50)	1.7 (26)
Sweden***	6.2 (137)	5.0 (109)	4.1 (82)	1.3 (24)
<b>Germanic</b>				
Netherlands	3.5 (60)	4.3 (60)	4.3 (60)	3.75 (60)
Austria	missing	6.3 (88)	4.0 (60)	2.7 (38)
Germany****	10.0 (160)	7.1 (134)	7.5 (128)	7.2 (115)
Switzerland	14.3 (100)	14.3 (100)	14.3 (100)	14.3 (100)
<b>Napoleonic</b>				
France*****	22.6 (700)	25.9 (700)	35.1 (808)	26.9 (430)
Belgium*****	30.4 (609)	15.7 (235)	21.7 (325)	12.7 (280)
Italy	34.6 (900)	35.7 (750)	45.0 (1350)	42.0 (1050)
<b>East Asian</b>				
Japan	4.6 (82)	2.9 (60)	2.7 (60)	2.8 (60)

**Comment:** The table shows the number of political appointees per minister, and the absolute number of politically appointed officials. The approximations of the numbers of politically appointed officials are based on an expert survey conducted during 2007. The numbers of ministers are based on Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (1998) for the years up to 1995, and from various numbers of Political Data Yearbook, published by European Journal of Political Research, for the years after 1995.

\* Data for New Zealand refers to the years 1975, 1985, 1998 and 2006.

\*\* Data for Canada refers to the years 1975, 1987, 1997 and 2007.

\*\*\* Data for Sweden refers to the years 1975, 1985, 1995 and 2005.

\*\*\*\* Data for Germany refers to the years 1970, 1983, 1995 and 2007.

\*\*\*\*\* Data for the US refers to the years 1976, 1984, 1995 and 2004.

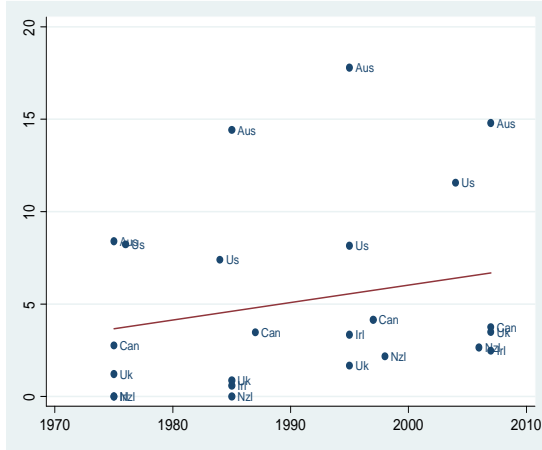
\*\*\*\*\* Data for France refers to the years 1975, 1985, 1995 and 2004.

\*\*\*\*\* Data for Belgium refers to the years 1973, 1986, 1995 and 2006.

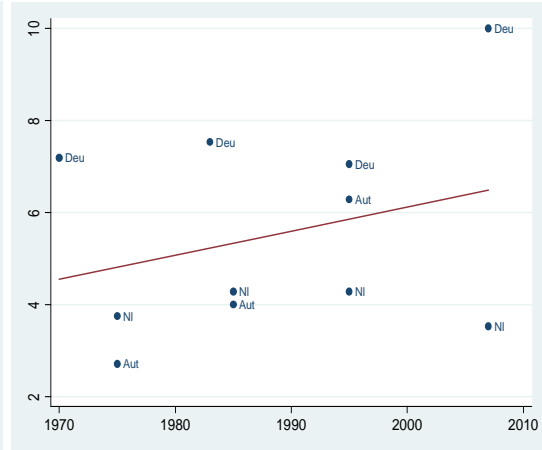
**Figure 1-4**

**Number of political appointees per minister in countries with different administrative traditions, 1975-2007.**

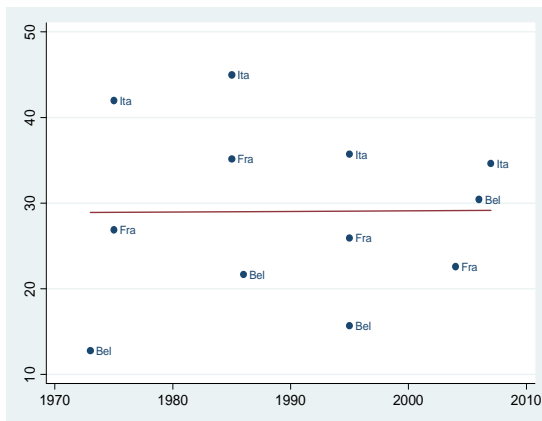
**Anglo-Saxon**



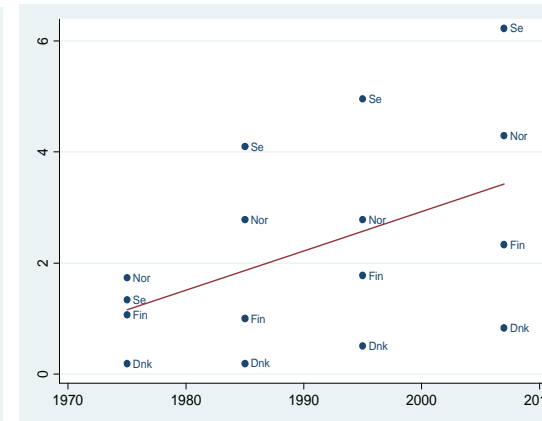
**Germanic**



**Napoleonic**



**Scandinavian**



**Comment:** The figures show the number of political appointees per minister per year. Japan and Switzerland are not included in the figures.

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