

Untangling the conceptual web of political professionalization

Measuring the professionalism of internal political staff

Pieter Moens (UGent)

pmoens.moens@ugent.be

Paper prepared for ECPR General Conference
Panel 'Politicians and Bureaucrats'

14 - 16 September 2017, Oslo

- Please do not cite without the authors' permission –

Abstract

This paper lays the conceptual groundwork for a research project focusing on political staff in Belgium and the Netherlands. It addresses how the key concept of professionalization relates to individual staff members. What does political professionalization mean and how can it be measured? We put forward an interpretation of staff professionalization as two parallel processes. Not only do parties hire more staff (quantitative shift), a different kind of staff member is increasingly being recruited (qualitative shift). Based on existing literature, we then discuss how this individual, qualitative side can be measured via four dimensions: social characteristics, expertise, organizational position and autonomy. As a conclusion, two suggestions for future empirical research are formulated. First, empirical measurement will benefit from approaching the concept as a continuum instead of a categorical distinction. This enables researchers to measure the degree of professionalism for individual staff members rather than relying on a crude, binary distinction between bureaucrats and professionals. Second, research on the qualitative side of professionalization can study causal mechanisms by comparing between political systems, parties or individual staff instead of focusing on historical development for which no data is available.

1. Introduction

Political staff are omnipresent in today's political parties and institutions. Although they hold unelected positions, they are often assumed to have a considerable impact on political decision-making. While membership figures have been shrinking (Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012), elected officials are increasingly dependent on paid staff as a supporting structure (Webb & Keith, 2017). As a result, the volume and quality of staff can be considered a valuable asset for parties within different competitive arena's (media, electoral, policy). We argue that these staff members working within political organizations and institutions deserve more empirical attention. However, research on political professionalization is inhibited by its complicated conceptualization (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002) and the scarceness of empirical data (Webb & Kolodny, 2006). Therefore, this paper addresses the complexities of conceptualization and empirical measurement of political professionalism in preparation of a survey project focusing on political staff in Belgium and the Netherlands. Its aims to a) clarify our conceptual approach to political professionalization, b) make an inventory of the empirical indicators for measuring individual professionalism and c) discuss the different relevant approaches for case studies.

Due to the wide application of professionalization to describe a myriad of phenomena in scientific and popular discourse, constructing an agreed-upon definition is problematic (Lilleker & Negrine, 2002).

Not only is the concept blurred by its normative association with efficiency in everyday language, scholars have applied the term to subjects ranging from the career patterns of elected officials (Borchert, 2003; Weber, 1921) to the diffusion of campaigning practices (Gibson & Rommele, 2001; Stromback, 2009; Tenscher & Mykkanen, 2014). We therefore draw clear conceptual boundaries by confining our approach to the individual aspects of the unelected personnel working within political parties and institutions. In doing so, we deliberately exclude other existing lines of research that interpret the concept of professionalization differently. By excluding the elected positions in political organizations, our focus remains with the supporting staff instead of the elected officials. Independent consultants are consciously disregarded to aim our attention at the role of the assistants that permanently work within organizations or institutions. Furthermore, we center our understanding of professionalization on people and their behavior rather than campaigning techniques.

The conceptual approach of this paper emphasizes the individual profile of staff members. Although the evolution staff size has been gaining empirical attention in recent years (Krouwel, 2012; Webb & Keith, 2017), our understanding of the shifting profiles of staff members remains limited. Building on the seminal work of Panebianco (1988) and existing empirical studies of staff profiles (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003), this paper discusses the four dimensions that shape the profile of staff members: social characteristics, expertise, organizational position and autonomy. The discussion of each dimension kicks off with Panebianco's (1988) distinction between bureaucrats and professionals and addresses how it can be measured empirically. Drawing from existing case-studies (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003), we construct an inventory of the indicators that can be used in a survey questionnaire.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of how professionalization can be defined in the context of the studying staff members. We then construct an inventory of the indicators that can be used to measure professionalism empirically via survey methods. As a conclusion, we anticipate how a case-study design can be constructed to study the professionalization of staff members.

2. Defining professionalization

Before addressing the dimensions concept in depth, this section clarifies our understanding of political professionalization. Most importantly, we address it as a transformational process involving the unelected staff members working inside political organizations or institutions. Our interpretation of professionalization is based on the following definitions formulated by Panebianco (1988) and Webb and Kolodny (2006).

“Bureaucratization implies a growth of a specific type of political professionals, i.e. administrators who are devoted to the organization’s maintenance and are in a highly disadvantageous position in relations with national leaders because of the relative unsubstitutability of the selective and identity incentives they enjoy. Professionalization on the other hand, involves the increase in the number of experts employed in the organization (or recruited with short-term contracts). Professionalization is the distinguishing feature of the organizational change political parties are currently undergoing; it implies the decreasing importance of the old bureaucracy and the increasing importance of the staff” (Panebianco, 1988, pp. 231-232).

“Professionalization refers to an institutional process by which professionals become more central to an organization (in our case, a political party organization)” (Webb & Kolodny, 2006, p. 339).

The single most recurring theme in these definitions is the impact of staff members on politics. Professionalization assumes that they are becoming increasingly important. In this section, their growing importance is elaborated through a discussion of two evolutions: a quantitative shift towards more staff and a qualitative shift towards another type of staff. After that, our conceptual approach is further clarified by excluding existing interpretations of professionalization which do not take political staff as their central starting point. As a consequence, the career patterns of elected officials and studies of political communication or campaigning will be discarded. Without disavowing the value of these research topics, we argue that a more confined interpretation is necessary for a focused empirical application.

2.1. Quantitative vs. qualitative professionalization

First and foremost, professionalization is a specific organizational transformation taking place within political organizations. While Panebianco (1988) considered it a fundamental development, other theoretical models of party organization have integrated professionalization as an aspect of a larger process of transformation (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999; Katz & Mair, 1995). As discussed above, we approach professionalization as an organizational development in which paid staff members become increasingly important. We argue that staff members become increasingly central to political parties through two parallel processes. Not only do parties hire more staff (quantitative shift), a different kind of staff member is increasingly being recruited (qualitative shift). As a result, the concept of professionalization encompasses both the amount of staff (quantitative aspect) and the profile of

individual staff members (qualitative aspect). Since the emergence of electoral-professional parties (Panebianco, 1988), both of these aspects have been affected by organizational transformation.

The increase of staff members (quantitative shift) has been interpreted as a transition from labor-intensive to capital-intensive forms of party organization (Farrell & Webb, 2002). Whereas voluntary party activists played a vital role within labor-intensive organizations, capital-intensive party organizations increasingly rely on paid staff instead. This quantitative shift has typically been operationalized through the analysis of staff numbers. Based on these data, several empirical analyses have demonstrated the nearly universal growth of political staff in European democracies since the 1950's (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012). In essence, this evolution illustrates the shifting *supply of human capital* within party organizations throughout this period. First, public funding mechanisms have enabled party organizations to develop staff infrastructures with unprecedented amounts of direct and indirect resources (Katz & Mair, 1995). Through this process of cartelization, the party on the ground becomes increasingly marginalized while especially the party public office thrives (Katz & Mair, 1993, 2003). Second, this intra-party shift has been further reinforced by the dropping membership rates of political parties (Van Biezen et al., 2012). As membership bases increasingly shrunk during the last decades, the available pool of voluntary human capital has been drying up.

The qualitative shift in the profile of staff members has been conceptualized as a transition from bureaucrats towards professionals with higher levels of expertise (Panebianco, 1988). Compared to bureaucrats, Panebianco (1988) envisioned professionals to have a higher economic status, be better educated, and serve as an expert within the organization and to be more independent from political leadership (Table 1). This switch from bureaucrats to professionals can be interpreted as a changing *demand for human capital* within party organizations. While mass integration parties relied on bureaucrats for running the extra-parliamentary membership organization (Michels, 1915), professional staff members offer a different type of contributions to electoral-professional parties. The demand for more professional expertise is the product of broader social transformations, for example in the electoral arena. As parties broadened their electoral focus beyond their *classe gardée* with catchallization (Kirchheimer, 1966), the emergence of mass media offered platforms for direct linkage with voters. Hence, parties hire trained professionals to navigate developments in communication technology. Similar pressures characterize the policy arena. The societal reach of current-day welfare states covers a broad range of policy domains, resulting in a need for expertise to deal with the complex and technical nature of policy-making. As mentioned earlier, the rest of this paper will exclusively focus on this qualitative side of professionalization and how to measure it through survey methods.

	Bureaucrat	Professional
Social characteristics	Lower class	Higher middle class
Skills - education	Running the party machine Less-educated	Extra-political expertise Well-educated
Organizational role	Line role: administrator	Staff role: expert
Relation to leadership	Easy to control: dependence	Hard to control: independence
Control system	Hierarchical system: subordination	Dual control system: hierarchy vs. peer judgement

Table 1: Distinction Bureaucrat – Professional, Panebianco (1988)

2.2. Conceptual boundaries

By focusing our attention on staff members working within political organizations, other areas of study are consciously left out of the discussion. In this section, we discuss three other topics that have been situated under the umbrella of professionalization: political officials' careers, independent political consultants and campaigning techniques. For each of these topics, a specific aspect of our understanding of the concept is emphasized and contrasted with other interpretations.

First, the political professionals discussed in this paper hold unelected positions in party organizations or public institutions. This excludes the career developments of political officials, which have received considerable attention under the umbrella of professionalization. Considering the economics of a career in public office, scholars have discussed the growing importance of politics as a vocation (Weber, 1921) or profession (Von Beyme, 1996). Similar to the cartelization thesis (Katz & Mair, 1995), such scholars have addressed the growing gap between politicians and society at large. As politicians become increasingly enclosed within an ivory tower, some authors have addressed this development as the formation of a political class (Allen & Cairney, 2017). Empirical analyses of this phenomenon have focused on the career patterns of elected officials (Best & Cotta, 2000), while others have addressed the financial dependence on public resources by studying the remuneration of positions in public office (Borchert, 2003). We acknowledge the relevance of this line of research for scholars of party politics, but our interest here is with paid staff with no elected position in public institutions or a party organization.

Second, our interest lies with politically appointed staff working within political parties or public institutions (either legislative or executive). This excludes the role of independent, external consultants, who are often hired as strategists for electoral campaigns (Dulio, 2006). Considering

existing practices in the United States as the “*Mecca of political campaigning*” (Scammell, 1998), scholars have studied the development of the industry of political consulting within the states and their diffusion elsewhere (Farrell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001). As such individuals are not based within political institutions and offer their services independently, their position resembles the sociological ideal type of a profession (exemplified by medical doctors or lawyers). Intrigued by these PR-guru’s, both scholars and popular media have turned their attention towards the power of consultants, “*to the point where the politicians and outsider observers may wonder who is in charge*” (Mancini, 1999, p. 237). Again, we acknowledge the value of this line of research for scholars of party politics, but our interest here is with the staff operating within institutions on a permanent basis.

Third, our focus is on people instead of campaigning techniques and – activities. This excludes the dominant approach to professionalization within the discipline of political communication. From this angle, professionalization is mostly addressed as an issue of the effectiveness and efficiency in campaign techniques and practices. It has more resemblance to the everyday concept of professionalism used in popular conversation – which Webb & Kolodny (2006) have labeled ‘*the soft notion of professionalization*’. Such a conception also implies elements of quality: professionalism is about engaging “*in a set of practices that are accepted, at particular moments in time as the standards of the best*” (Negrine, Mancini, Holtz-Bacha, Stylianos, & eds., 2007, p. 29). Researchers have developed tools for measuring this level of professionalism in campaigning (Gibson & Rommele, 2009) and have theorized about which party-specific factors might explain variance in levels of professionalization (Gibson & Rommele, 2001). Empirical applications have compared campaigns between different parties (Stromback, 2009) and nations (Tenscher & Mykkanen, 2014). However, such an approach to professionalization does not correspond to our aim of addressing the staff members themselves.

3. Qualitative professionalism: concept and measurement

How does the theoretical concept of professionalization relate to empirical reality? In this section, we aim to bridge the gap between the preceding conceptual discussion and empirical measurement. The discussion of these individual aspects of professionalism is based on the distinction between bureaucrats and professionals made in Panebianco’s seminal work on party organization (1988), which mentions four dimensions on which professionals distinguish themselves from other political staff (Table 1). For each of these four dimensions, we address the initial conception by Panebianco (1988)

and empirical indicators used by earlier research. For each dimension, the discussion is concluded with a summary table of the different indicators that can be used in future research.

3.1. Social characteristics

Panebianco's first distinction between bureaucrats and professionals addresses the socioeconomic status of staff. The underlying assumption is that a higher socioeconomic status corresponds with a higher degree of professionalism. According to Panebianco, traditional bureaucrats in mass integration parties stemmed from a traditional working class background, whereas professionals originated from "*upper-middle class extraction*" (1988: 222). A first option is to gauge at the **class identification** of respondents directly. Webb and Fisher (2003) presented staff within the Labour party with a head-on question about their own perceived class identity. It remains a question whether this strategy will produce reliable results outside the environment of a social democratic party in a class-conscious nation such as the UK. A second option is to develop additional indicators for the respondents' **socioeconomic status**, which can address their level of education, home ownership, their place of residence, union membership and occupations held prior to their current employment.

Such direct indicators of current status the current staff members might complemented by a third option: the social background of **the respondent's parents**. Although many employees within political organizations and institutions might share a similar current occupational profile, it is likely that the social environments from which they originate will be more diverse. In addition to the social indicators mentioned above (education etc.), such indicators can include the occupational background of parents.

Beside serving as indicators of economic status, the personal characteristics of staff members can also contribute to research on **political representation** (Pitkin, 1967). For example, Webb and Fisher (2003) have discussed the descriptive representation concerning age, gender, class, ethnicity and union membership among New Labour employees. In interpreting these observations, the study contrasted the social characteristics of staff with the voters, members and political elites of the party. To our knowledge, this area of study has attracted remarkably little attention compared to the extensive literature on representation among elected political elites.

Aspect	Indicators
Economic status	Respondents' status Class identity Home ownership Place of residence Prior occupation Union membership Respondent's parents' status Level of education Home ownership Occupation
Personal characteristics	Age Sex Ethnicity Citizenship Parents' citizenship Place of birth Parents' Place of birth Mother tongue

Table 2: measuring the social characteristics of political staff

3.2. Expertise

Expertise constitutes the second dimension of Panebianco's conceptual framework. Not only are professional staff members considered to be better-educated, they are assumed to be experts providing specific kinds of knowledge. To our understanding, such individual expertise can be the result of either education, experience or training.

3.2.1. Education

The most evident aspect of this dimension is the **level of education**. A first option is to measure the number of years during which staff members received education on top of the required minimum. A second approach registers the degree(s) obtained by respondents, ranging from secondary to post-graduate education. However, neither of both options matches the categorical distinction of Panebianco (1988). Which level of education constitutes the exact threshold to be considered professional? Depending on the interpretation of that threshold, Webb and Fisher (2003) observed that the proportion of professionals among the staff of New Labour could vary between 20 and 50 percent. The distinction might have been less complex within the developing organizations of the *catchall* parties on which Panebianco based his concept of electoral-professionalism. However, we argue that the democratization of education has led to higher levels of education among Western European populations in general. As a result, the educational levels of contemporary political staff are likely to demonstrate various degrees of education without a clearly defined threshold between bureaucrats and professionals. As a consequence, this also implies that variation in the level of

education can be distorted by a generational effect, as younger staff members can be expected to have a higher level of education in general.

Besides the level of education, the actual **content of the education** is also relevant. Which area of expertise does a staff member have to offer to a political organization or institution? Existing literature offers two diverging viewpoints on professionalization concerning this point. Karlsen and Saglie (2017) established that some authors assume professionals bring **extra-political expertise** into politics (Panebianco, 1988) while others interpret professionalization as a form specialization within the political sphere (Katz & Mair, 1995).

The first approach argues that the added value of political professionals lies in the technical knowledge they bring into politics from outside the strictly political realm. To Panebianco, professionalization was fueled by the *“increasingly technical nature of political decisions which require expert skills (...) in all sectors in which the state intervenes”* (1988: 222). Hence, the need for specialists coincides with the reach of the state within society. In a minimal state with a limited number of active policy domains, the need for extra-political expertise is confined to areas like defense or monetary policy. On the other hand, current-day welfare states undertake legislative and executive actions on a broad range of domains. As a result, the expertise of staff can range from fiscal policy to clean energy or health care. Furthermore, the electoral aspect of politics implies that staff with expertise in maximizing votes is equally important. From this perspective, useful expertise includes public relations, marketing strategy, market research (polling, focus groups ...) and social media. Based on the literature on party goals (Strom, 1990), it is evident that the balance between such different areas of expertise is a product of votes - , policy - and office-related goals within a political organization or institution. As a result, the scope of relevant knowledge among staff is context-dependent: it mirrors the political and ideological preferences of its environment.

A second approach considers **politics as an area for specialization** in and of itself, similar to the professionalization of political officeholders (Von Beyme, 1996; Weber, 1921) discussed above. From this angle, it is an independent sphere in which specialists can spend entire careers, *“increasingly separated from other occupational tracks”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 6). Following this train of thought, a relevant educational background focuses directly on political processes (social science, law or public management).

3.2.2. Professional experience

Another aspect of expertise is **professional experience**, either inside or outside of the current organization or position. To capture this dimension, indicators like the years of prior experience or the number of earlier positions are the most evident options. When measured inside the current

organization or position, measuring years of experience boils down to a form of seniority. It is likely that professionals develop a type of political craftsmanship throughout the years, accumulating expertise along the way. A longer track record implies that employees have experienced a history of past political cycles and crises, resulting in a deeper knowledge of their profession. Whether experience outside the political sphere translates into professionalism or not depends on the strategic relevance of the previous career. As mentioned above, this extra-political expertise was a crucial element in Panebianco's electoral-professional party, as he described how the infusion of outside expertise was transforming politics (Panebianco: 1988). As a result, the relevance of a specific expertise is context-dependent in this case, too. Similar to the educational backgrounds, we argue that the party goal literature (Strom, 1990) offers a perspective for understanding the relevance of expertise. Staff focusing on maximizing votes will benefit from earlier experience as marketer, pollster or social media analyst. Employees hired to formulate policies can draw from earlier experience within their respective policy domain, either in government, business or academia.

3.2.3. Training

Next to standard education and experience, scholars have approached **job-related training** as a form of expertise (Webb & Fisher, 2003). Empirical measurement can focus on a) having received training or not b) the length/intensity of a training course and c) the number of training courses received. However, we should not jump to conclusions to interpret these indicators as an undisputed sign of professionalism. Receiving training might just as well point out that certain skills are considered lacking. For this reason, future research can examine how well training correlates with other indicators of professionalism. Nonetheless, training remains an interesting indicator, as it can illustrate which units within a political organization receive incentives to professionalize. As they observed considerable differences in training between central office staff and their counterparts within regional branches, Webb and Fisher (2003) considered this an illustration of the marginalization of the party on the ground (Katz & Mair, 1993). Furthermore, the content and the evaluation of training courses is another relevant issue. It seems likely that the content of training will complement the education and experience of staff members, as they receive extra training for the skills lacking in their profile. For example, employees whose education focused directly on political processes will benefit from absorbing extra-political knowledge and vice versa. Again, relevant extra-political expertise for training courses will follow strategic political goals (votes, office or policy).

Aspect	Indicators
Education	Level of education Years Degree Content of education Political expertise Extra-political expertise
Experience	Years Prior positions Extra-political Private sector Civil society Public administration Inside politics Other parties Faces of the party Political official(s)
Training	Source Internal vs. external Content Complementary vs. specialization Evaluation Satisfaction Relevance

Table 3: measuring expertise of political staff

3.3. Organizational position

The third dimension of Panebianco’s conceptual framework (1988) deals with the organizational role of political employees. It is evident that the impact of staff on the organizational DNA of political parties goes beyond the mere personal characteristics discussed above (social characteristics, education). With the advent of electoral-professionalism, professional staff profiles were deliberately hired by parties to fill new positions and carry out new types of tasks. From this angle, it is evident that professionalism is about more than who the employees are. We argue that political professionals especially distinguish themselves by what they do. To get a sense of the different organizational position, three relevant aspects of a staff member’s function are discussed: their position within the hierarchy, the tasks they carry out and the branch of the party in which they are active.

3.3.1. Hierarchy

To clarify the distinct organizational roles of bureaucrats and professionals, Panebianco (1988) made use of private sector terminology. Referring to line - and staff roles as the equivalents for bureaucrats and professionals, he contrasted the operational nature of bureaucratic tasks with more knowledge-intensive professional activities. More concretely, traditional bureaucrats were mostly involved in running the party machine as administrative clerks. Professionals however, were considered to advise elected officials with their specialist knowledge. Karlsen (2010) has translated this dimension into a division between **technical and strategic** assistance. The fundamental difference between the two lies within the political nature of professional assignments: *“Strategy assistance refers to involvement in essentially political decisions, such as the development and implementation of policy and campaign strategy. Technical assistance includes administrative functions and services, such as website design or maintaining membership files”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017).

The position of staff members within the organizational hierarchy is a first important aspect of this distinction. Staff in management and semi-management positions are more likely to provide such political-strategic assistance. This aspect can be measured by identifying the level or **grade of seniority** of staff members and is essentially a hierarchical feature. Earlier research has observed that the hierarchical position of staff members corroborates with the expertise of staff members. *“As we would expect, the groups we have identified as most likely to consist of political professionals are also more likely to be employed at relatively senior grades within the party”* (Webb & Fisher, 2003, p. 16). However, the level of seniority remains a predominantly formal aspect to measure what an employee actually does within an organization. For this reason, this indicator should be complemented by a more fine-grained measurement of the tasks staff members carry out within their organization or institution.

3.3.2. Tasks

In order to grasp what a specific staff member contributes to a political organization or institution, we need more insight than his or her seniority grade. Hence, recording the **job assignment** of respondents is an essential indicator for capturing this qualitative aspect of professionalism. The main challenge for an empirical measurement is to find a workable equilibrium between detail and generalization. The Norwegian study by Karlsen and Saglie (2017) is an excellent example, as it a convincing, applicable classification of the different tasks of staff members. The authors have developed three strategic (professional) and four administrative (bureaucratic) assignments, which allowing for differentiation without losing oversight. Strategic tasks include communication, political advisement and organizational work while technical assistance is comprised of accounting, IT, administration and personnel management.

3.3.3. Face of the party

Lastly, the organizational position of staff members is marked by the specific **branch of the party** in which they are active. The three faces of the party developed by Katz and Mair (1993) offer a useful distinction between the party in central office, the party on the ground or the party in public office. Staff members can be located within subnational units, the central party headquarters, the parliamentary structure or in executive government. The profile and task assignments might vary considerably between the different faces, especially since the assumption of the ascendancy of the party in public office was partially built on the distribution of staff between the different party branches (Katz & Mair, 2003). Up to this point, it is unclear whether quantitative asymmetry (staff size) also implies qualitative discrepancies. As an empirical indicator, respondents can be presented with four distinct categories: regional branch, central office, parliamentary office or executive government.

Aspect	Indicators
Hierarchy	Line vs. staff role Technical assistance Strategic assistance Seniority level Management Middle management Other staff
Tasks	Job assignment Technical assistance Administration Personnel management Accountancy IT Strategic assistance Communication Organization Policy
Face of the party	Party branch Regional office Central office Parliamentary office Executive government

Table 4: measuring the organizational position of political staff

3.4. Autonomy

The fourth and last dimension of political professionalism is the autonomy of staff members. Political leaders are considered to have a fundamentally different relationship with professionals compared to traditional bureaucrats (Panebianco, 1988). This assumption is based on two elements. First, professional staff enjoy a more advantageous labor market position thanks to the broader relevance of their expertise. Hence, the dependence on politics as a source of income is considered to be considerably smaller for professionals than for bureaucrats. Second, professional staff members balance the judgement of political leaders with the appreciation of professional peers outside of the political field. *“A party-employed economist, for example, must be loyal to the party’s economic policy but will also attempt to maintain his or her professional reputation among independent economists”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 4). As a result, the frame of reference of political professionals stretches beyond the immediate organizational hierarchy. This has important implications for the **career patterns** of staff members and their **ties with the party (leadership)**.

3.4.1. Career mobility

A first theoretical aspect of this professional autonomy concerns **career mobility**. While the ideal type bureaucrat is encapsulated within the party’s organizational sphere, political professionals are not assumed to spend entire careers in a political institution. Rather than a permanent occupation, their involvement in a political institution is temporary. According to Panebianco (1988), their predicament between political leadership and professional peers pushes professionals into new positions. *“The intrinsic instability of professional roles pushes experts, after a certain time, to abandon professional politics (though not necessarily the party) for more prestigious jobs outside of the organization or to try to attain leadership roles within the party”* (1988, p.234). As a consequence, empirical studies have focused on career patterns to investigate the professionalism of party staff (Fisher & Webb, 2003a; Karlsen & Saglie, 2017).

The length of careers within politics (more specifically: **turnover** within the organization) provides a first indicator for career mobility. Respondents can be asked either how long they have been active in their current position, or when they started their first position within the organization or institution. Hence, career mobility can be translated into two components: internal (other position in paid party politics) and external (position outside of paid party politics). However, the conceptual core of career mobility as an aspect of professionalism lies within external mobility. Such career patterns can be studied by further elaborating the **prior professional experience** (cf. 4.2.) by including the **professional aspirations** of staff members. Which future career do staff members envision for themselves?

Earlier empirical studies offer insights on the potential ambitions of political staff. While Webb and Fisher (2003) investigated the political ambitions of employees, Karlsen and Saglie (2017) offered respondents a wider range of options. The latter study distinguished between four different career plans: staying within the party organization, political career outside the party organization, private sector or government administration. As anticipated by Panebianco (1988), the British data affirm the attraction of elected office: 20% of party employees aspired a position as an. A second remarkable observation is the popularity of a future career as a lobbyist, considered as the “biggest draw” on party employees by some respondents MP (Webb & Fisher, 2003). The Norwegian data paint a different picture: a future career as MP or cabinet minister have the lowest scores of all options presented in the survey. Norwegian party employees seem to prefer staying with the party, switching to the private sector or joining public administration (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). Future research might aim to deepen our understanding of these systemic differences.

3.4.2. Party ties

A second aspect of the autonomy of political staff are their ties to the party and its political leadership. Due to the career paths of bureaucrats and professionals, they are expected to have a distinct attitude towards the organization. As described in the seminal work by Michels (1915), *“the bureaucrat identifies himself completely with the organization, confounding his own interests with its interests”* (1915, p. 138). In contrast, political professionals have less need for *“traditional identity incentives”* (Panebianco, 1988, p. 232).

Such party ties can be measured through several empirical indicators. The most evident of them is party membership, either prior to recruitment or at the moment of investigation. A more intense form of (prior) **political engagement** can be signaled by joining (or having joined) the party list during election time. As a consequence, a local mandate (past or present) is another indicator of strong party ties. In addition to engagement within the party itself, the relationship between staff and the **collateral organizations** of parties is also relevant here. For example, to what extent do employees register as union members? Did they gather prior professional experience in civil society organizations that are ideologically close to the party organization (collateral organizations, think tanks)?

Existing empirical studies of these indicators have challenged the theoretical assumptions discussed above. It appears that most political staff have *“stronger party ties than envisaged in influential party models”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). Most notably, only a minority of employees started working for the party without being a member. In both studies, this group represents about a fifth of all respondents. Moreover, the Norwegian data suggest that professionalism might even be positively related to party ties: administrative staff indicated weaker party ties compared to strategic staff. Among these

employees with strategic tasks, communication advisors reportedly have the weakest ties to their party (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). Similarly, future research can further expand our understanding of this dimension by differentiating between different types of political staff. In addition to mapping the party ties of respondents via the indicators mentioned above, the importance of party ties can further be investigated by studying crucial moments in the career development of political staff such as recruitment and promotion.

This apparent contradiction between theory and empirical research might lead us to reconsider the position of political staff. Political engagement and professionalism do not appear to be as anachronistic as previously assumed. According to Karlsen and Saglie (2017), their observations imply that *“professionalisation is less about grassroots no longer being relevant, but rather about how some grassroots activists become professional paid advisers and campaigners. (...) our results indicate that party grassroots and the party organisation continue to be of relevance and serve to socialise not only future politicians but also future party professionals into the party”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 17). As a result, the authors have further elaborated Panebianco’s ideas into an enhanced typology, in which the tasks of political staff are cross-tabulated with the strength of their party ties (Table 5). By broadening the scope beyond the ideal type ‘strategy professional’ and ‘party bureaucrat’ as the only viable models, the authors developed a framework that resonates better with the European party-centered political context.

	Technical tasks	Strategic tasks
Strong party ties	Party bureaucrat	Unelected party politician
Weak party ties	Technical assistant	Strategy professional

Table 5: Karlsen and Saglie (2017, p. 5)

Aspect	Indicators
Career mobility	Turnover Internal External Professional aspirations Elected office Party or government Public administration Private sector
Political ties	Direct political engagement Party membership Local mandate Electoral candidate Collateral organizations Membership Professional experience

Table 6: measuring autonomy of political staff

4. Studying political professionalization: what is it good for?

Having discussed the concept and its empirical measurement in the previous sections, we reflect on how to approach professionalization via case-studies. First, we discuss the different themes that have been addressed through the lens of political professionalism in earlier. Which questions and research areas are relevant objects of study? What do they teach us about current-day staff members and political organizations? Second, some conclusions are drawn regarding the operationalization and the construction of an adequate case-study design. How can we bridge the gap between theoretical ideal types (bureaucrats and professionals) and empirical data? What kind of research design is needed to investigate the qualitative aspects of professionalization?

4.1. Research themes: state of the art

Rather than an empirical concept to be measured, professionalization has been approached as field of interest. As such, the concept has guided research in the sense that it has identified the relevant elements to be studied among political staff. Empirical studies have combined descriptive, bivariate and multivariate analyses to make sense of the different dimensions and aspects we have discussed in this paper.

First, studies have described the population of political employees to get a sense of their social profile, behavior and attitudes. While Webb and Fisher (2003) gathered data on the social characteristics and expertise of Labour employees, Fisher and Webb (2003b) approached political employment as a form of political participation to describe their motivations. More recently, Karlsen and Saglie (2017) have mapped the job assignments, party ties and professional aspirations of Norwegian political staff. Second, such descriptive data have enabled scholars to interpret the data of staff in relation to others, either by comparing political employees with other party strata or by comparing different types of staff with each other. In the British case-study, the social profile and political attitudes of Labour employees was contrasted with the MP's, members and voters of the party (Fisher & Webb, 2003b; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Both the Norwegian and British study differentiated among staff, comparing them based on their education, position within the organizational hierarchy, the face of the party in which they are active. Third, Karlsen and Saglie (2017) have introduced more explanatory approaches by recording bivariate and multivariate relations between the different dimensions and aspects of professionalization. For example, the authors have explored how the party ties of staff members are connected to the tasks they carry out within their organization or institution. Furthermore, the Norwegian study used multivariate analyses to explain the different career wishes of staff members and interpret the varying political importance of their work.

Undoubtedly, the limited existing evidence can benefit from additional research to investigate how these questions and observations apply to additional cases from other nations. Much remains to be explored, especially from the explanatory angle. For example, it could be interesting to investigate which aspects of professionalism can explain differences between staff members concerning their interaction with political leadership, their involvement in decision-making, their motivations or how they perceive their own influence.

4.2. Operationalization: dichotomy vs. continuum

If we aim to study the relation between (certain dimensions of) professionalization and other factors, it is necessary to reinterpret the original theoretical framework of Panebianco (1988) for the sake of operationalization. The various dimensions of professionalism are built on two ideal types: the traditional bureaucrat and the political professional. For many of the indicators we have discussed, it is unclear how these dichotomous categories translate into social reality. When exactly does the boundary between bureaucrats and professionals lie? Webb and Fisher (2003) faced this issue in their discussion of professionalism among Labour employees. In their assessment, a strict interpretation of professionalism would rule out a considerable portion of staff with relevant, professional traits:

“less than one-fifth of Labour employees might be described as ‘professionals’ in the most exacting sense of the term, although most respondents have higher educational or vocational qualifications of some type. (...) the classic ideal-type is not entirely realistic in the context of modern party political employment; a more flexible definition of ‘professionalism’ might suggest that (...) a professional is one who has been educated to degree level and then achieved the relevant degree of specialisation through on-the-job experience and training. The elements of autonomy, commitment and mobility (...) remain pertinent to this ‘flexible’ definition. On this basis, our quantitative data suggest that as many as half of Labour’s staff might qualify for the label professional” (Webb & Fisher, 2003, p. 15).

As the authors rightly point out, much would be lost by chasing the theoretical ideal type of political professionalism too closely. About thirty percent of their respondents (!) were situated within this grey area with both bureaucratic and professional elements. In our opinion, research on professionalization should replace this dichotomy with a more nuanced interpretation of the concept. Similarly, Karlsen and Saglie (2017) observed that *“when it comes to party employees, the distinction between mass bureaucratic and electoral-professional parties (...) is too crude”* (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 4). Instead of categorizing individual staff members as either bureaucrats or professionals, we argue that they can each be considered to have a certain *level of professionalism*. Approaching the bureaucratic and professional ideal types as two extremes along a continuum, lower levels correspond to bureaucratic characteristics along the dimensions of professionalism and vice versa. Such an approach would enable scholars to devote their energies to studying causal mechanisms, treating this *level of professionalism* as a dependent or independent variable.

4.3. Professionalization and professionalism: temporal and spatial variation

Case-studies directed at the qualitative side of professionalism are compelled to approach the subject from a static viewpoint. Trading in the process-oriented conception of professionalization for a more static form of professionalism, it compares different cases instead of analyzing repeated measurements. This has everything to do with the availability of data. Although professionalization is considered an under-researched topic in general (Webb & Kolodny, 2006), the observation especially applies to the qualitative side of professionalization. In contrast, the quantitative evolution of professionalization has steadily been gaining attention. Following up on earlier research projects (Katz & Mair, 1992; Katz & Mair, 1993), data-gathering and analyses of staff numbers have advanced considerably in recent years (Bardi, Calossi, & Pizzimenti, 2017; Kölln, 2015; Poguntke, Scarrow, & Webb, 2016; Webb & Keith, 2017). As a result, the quantitative shift in professionalization is relatively

well-documented. Longitudinal comparative analyses have established an almost universal growth of both central and public office staff in European democracies since the 1950's (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012).

Although it is often assumed, it remains unclear if this quantitative shift has been accompanied by a qualitative shift in the profiles of political staff. Capturing an evolution in staff profiles requires at least two repeated measurements. From a historical perspective, the relevant timespan for studying professionalization dates back to *catchallization* during the postwar years (Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988). As even crude staff data are often lacking for this period, capturing a qualitative shift is virtually impossible. Contemporary research initiatives are limited to cross-sectional data, limited to a specific point in time. Since it is unlikely that a great qualitative shift will occur within the short term, follow-up studies are not likely to register notable evolutions in the near future.

Nonetheless, contemporary studies with a focus on the qualitative aspects of professionalization can substantially enhance our understanding of staff members. Rather than addressing the dynamics between repeated measurements (increasing professionalization), such studies can compare cases at a specific point in time. However, such cross-sectional data should not withhold researchers from studying causal mechanisms. As described by Gerring (2007), causal effects can be inferred through both temporal and spatial variation. *“There are two dimensions upon which any causal effect may be observed-temporal and spatial. Temporal effects may be observed directly when an intervention occurs: X1 intervenes upon Y, and we observe any change in Y that may follow. (...) Spatial effects may be observed directly when two phenomena are similar enough to be understood as examples (cases) of the same thing. Ideally, they are similar in all respects but one - the causal factor of interest”* (Gerring, 2007:152). Hence, we argue that scholars should aim to use this spatial variation to enhance our current understanding of the qualitative side of political professionalism. For example, it can be treated as a dependent variable by examining the systemic, party-related or individual factors that explain variation in professionalism.

5. References

- Allen, P., & Cairney, P. (2017). What Do We Mean When We Talk about the 'Political Class'? *Political Studies Review*, 15(1), 18-27. doi:doi:10.1111/1478-9302.12092
- Bardi, L., Calossi, E., & Pizzimenti, E. (2017). Which Face Comes First? The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office. In S. scarrow, P. webb, & T. Poguntke (Eds.), *Organizing Political Parties. Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Best, H., & Cotta, M. (2000). *Parliamentary representatives in Europe, 1848-2000: legislative recruitment and careers in eleven European countries*: Oxford University Press.
- Borchert, J. (2003). Professional politicians: Towards a comparative perspective. *The political class in Advanced Democracies*, 1-25.
- Dulio, D. A. (2006). Party Crashers? The Relationship Between Political Consultants and Political Parties. In R. S. Katz & W. Crotty (Eds.), *Handbook of party politics* (pp. 348-358).
- Farrell, D. M., Kolodny, R., & Medvic, S. (2001). Parties and Campaign Professionals in a Digital Age Political Consultants in the United States and Their Counterparts Overseas. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 6(4), 11-30.
- Farrell, D. M., & Webb, P. (2002). Political parties as campaign organizations. In R. J. Dalton & M. P. Wattenberg (Eds.), *Parties without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (pp. 102-128). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fisher, J., & Webb, P. (2003a). Political participation: The vocational motivations of Labour party employees. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 5(2), 166-187.
- Fisher, J., & Webb, P. (2003b). Political Participation: The Vocational Motivations of Labour Party Employees. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5(2), 166-187. doi:doi:10.1111/1467-856X.00102
- Gibson, R., & Rommele, A. (2001). Changing campaign communications - A party-centered theory of professionalized campaigning. *Harvard International Journal of Press-Politics*, 6(4), 31-43. doi:10.1177/108118001129172323
- Gibson, R., & Rommele, A. (2009). Measuring the Professionalization of Political Campaigning. *Party Politics*, 15(3), 265-293. doi:10.1177/1354068809102245
- Hopkin, J., & Paolucci, C. (1999). The business firm model of party organisation: Cases from Spain and Italy. *European Journal of Political Research*, 35(3), 307-339.
- Karlsen, R. (2010). Fear of the political consultant. Campaign Professionals and New Technology in Norwegian Electoral Politics. *Party Politics*, 16(2), 193-214. doi:10.1177/1354068809341055
- Karlsen, R., & Saglie, J. (2017). Party bureaucrats, independent professionals, or politicians? A study of party employees. *West European Politics*, 1-21.
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1992). *Party organization: A data handbook*. London: Sage.

- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1993). The evolution of party organizations in Europe: the three faces of party organization. *American Review of Politics*, 14, 593-617.
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy. The Emergence of the Cartel Party. *Party Politics*, 1(1), 5-28. doi:Doi 10.1177/1354068895001001001
- Katz, R., & Mair, P. (2003). The Ascendancy of the Party in Public Office: Party Organizational Change in Twentieth-Century Democracies. In R. M. Gunther, JR & J. Linz (Eds.), *Political parties: Old concepts and new challenges* (pp. 113-135). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kirchheimer, O. (1966). The transformation of Western European party systems. In J. Lapalombra & M. Weiner (Eds.), *Political parties and political development* (pp. 177-200). New Jersey Princeton University Press.
- Kölln, A.-K. (2015). The effects of membership decline on party organisations in Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 54(4), 707-725. doi:10.1111/1475-6765.12110
- Krouwel, A. (2012). *Party transformations in European democracies*. Albany: State university of New York Press.
- Lilleker, D. G., & Negrine, R. (2002). Professionalization: Of What? Since When? By Whom? *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7(4), 98-103.
- Mancini, P. (1999). New frontiers in political professionalism. *Political Communication*, 16(3), 231-245. doi:10.1080/105846099198604
- Michels, R. (1915). *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*. Kitchener: Batoche Books.
- Panebianco, A. (1988). *Political parties: organization and power*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The concept of representation*: Univ of California Press.
- Poguntke, T., Scarrow, S., & Webb, P. (2016). Party Rules, Party Resources and the Politics of Parliamentary Democracies: How Parties Organize in the 21st Century. *Party Politics*, 22(7), 1-18.
- Scammell, M. (1998). The wisdom of the war room: US campaigning and Americanization. *Media Culture & Society*, 20(2), 251-+. doi:Doi 10.1177/016344398020002006
- Strom, K. (1990). A behavioral theory of competitive political parties. *American journal of political science*, 565-598.
- Stromback, J. (2009). Selective Professionalisation of Political Campaigning: A Test of the Party-Centred Theory of Professionalised Campaigning in the Context of the 2006 Swedish Election. *Political Studies*, 57(1), 95-116. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00727.x
- Tenscher, J., & Mykkanen, J. (2014). Two Levels of Campaigning: An Empirical Test of the Party-Centred Theory of Professionalisation. *Political Studies*, 62, 20-41. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12104

- Van Biezen, I., Mair, P., & Poguntke, T. (2012). Going, going,... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe. *European Journal of Political Research*, 51(1), 24-56.
- Von Beyme, K. (1996). Party leadership and change in party systems: towards a postmodern party state? *Government and Opposition*, 31(2), 135-159.
- Webb, P., & Fisher, J. (2003). Professionalism and the Millbank tendency: The political sociology of New Labour's employees. *Politics*, 23(1), 10-20.
- Webb, P., & Keith, D. (2017). Assessing the Strength of Party Organizational Resources: A Survey of the Evidence from the Political Party Database. In S. Scarrow, P. Webb, & T. Poguntke (Eds.), *Organizing Political Parties. Representation, Participation, and Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Webb, P., & Kolodny, R. (2006). Professional staff in political parties *Handbook of party politics* (pp. 337-347). London: Sage.
- Weber, M. (1921). *Politics as a Vocation*: Fortress Press Philadelphia.