Who Joins the Party Crew?

Political Staff in the Low Countries.

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Abstract

Political staffers are an increasingly relevant area of study due to dropping party membership rates, increasing staff size and the growing prominence of staff positions in political careers. However, the subject is understudied and remains limited to studies of staff size and the role of staffers within specific institutions. This paper introduces a research proposal that aims to join earlier in depth studies of political staff by conducting the first survey among staffers of all Dutch and Belgian parties represented in parliament. Based on these empirical data, we will investigate their recruitment, socio-demographic composition, political opinions, expertise, professional ambition and democratic accountability. The project will be constructed around five separate papers, in which the position of staffers within parties will be discussed through the lens of existing theoretical work on party politics. By gathering new empirical data on the subject, our goal is to connect the discussion on political staff with larger questions on party organization, such as electoral-professionalism, the opinion structure of parties, cartelization and democratic accountability.

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1. Introduction

Paid staff members are omnipresent in today's political parties and institutions. Following the historical development of party organizations, they have become involved in important aspects of the political process. The first political employees to catch the attention of political scientists were involved in extra-parliamentary party organizations, "*running the party machine*" (Michels, 1915). Up until today, staffers oversee membership administration and coordinate between central offices and local branches. Second, parties and elected officials have enlisted staff to support their activities inside public institutions. In legislative bodies, they assist MP's in drafting legislation and controlling the executive branch of government. In their turn, ministers are accompanied by advisors with policy expertise within their respective portfolios. Third, the most infamous staffers are campaign strategists who advise parties and candidates on how to communicate and appeal to voters. The permanent campaign environment (Blumenthal, 1980) has led parties to hire social media managers and opposition researchers outside of election periods. Hence, political staff have a significant role in party organization, policy-making and communication.

Although research on political staff is scarce (Webb & Kolodny, 2006), it is nonetheless a relevant area for empirical research. First, they hold a peculiar position as non-elected elites. Unlike other political elites that are often studied, staffers are involved in the political process without being elected. However, they often operate behind the scenes, an area that remains opaque to voters and the public at large. Yet in contrast to civil servants, their position as political appointee is inherently partisan and should be of interest to political scientists. Second, a considerable portion of political staff pursue elected office later on. Future MP's and ministers increasingly gain experience through paid political work (Barber, 2014; Cowley, 2012). In such cases, unelected staff positions serve as a training ground for future elected officials, providing a novel, non-traditional pathway to power (Taflaga & Kerby, 2017). Third, political parties have become more dependent on paid labor due to the continuing decline of party membership figures (Van Biezen, Mair, & Poguntke, 2012). While party members could initially serve as volunteers supporting the party organization, these diminishing free labor forces were replaced by paid employees. As a consequence, the role of paid staff is becoming increasingly important as political parties professionalize (Krouwel, 2012; Webb & Fisher, 2003; Webb & Keith, 2017).

Most existing studies have investigated this increasing professionalization by analyzing evolutions in staff size. Longitudinal analyses of European party organizations have documented a significant increase in staff size since the 1960's (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Kölln, 2015; Krouwel, 2012). From this long term perspective, the theoretical imperative of ongoing linear growth is supported by virtually

every case within the analysis. As expected, staff growth has especially occurred within the public face of parties (Bardi, Calossi, & Pizzimenti, 2017; Katz & Mair, 1993). However, there are more aspects to the professionalization of parties than increasing staff size. As described by Panebianco (1988), the process entails a shift in the individual profile of staff members: a transition from bureaucrats towards professionals with higher levels of expertise. Although studies of staff size do indicate that party organizations have indeed been transformed, our knowledge about this growing body of staff remains very limited. This research proposal aims to fill that gap with a cross-sectional, in depth investigation of political staff. Who are they and what they do?

This research project aims to produce a better understanding of the position of paid staffers within party organizations. More specifically, the investigation will focus on the career development of staffers, investigate the impact of staff on the internal power balance of parties and assess the democratic accountability of political advisors. Empirical data will be gathered through an online survey among political staffers from all parliamentary represented Belgian and Dutch parties (see: appendix). As a complement to these quantitative data, semi-structured elite interviews will be carried out for additional insights on more sensitive and complex issues. Hence, the anticipated result is a cross-sectional study among fifteen parties from two different nations. The project will be constructed around five separate papers, each dealing with a specific aspect of the relationship between political parties and their staff (Table 1). As a common thread, all papers will aim to explain variation between staffers on four analytical levels, examining factors related to differences between 1) individuals, 2) party branches, 3) party organizations and 4) nations.

Paper Title	Topic	Empirical indicators
1. Professionalization versus pillarization? Political ties and staff recruitment.	Recruitment criteria	Party ties
		Societal ties
2. Between grassroots and elites? Assessing congruence between staff and other party actors.	Intra-party congruence	Sociodemographic profile
		Ideological position
3. From knowledge to power. The distribution of staff expertise in party organizations.	Distribution of expertise	Level of expertise
4. Should I stay or should I go? The professional ambitions of political staffers.	Direction of ambition	Career aspirations
5. Of masters and puppets. The control mechanisms between staff and elected elites.	Democratic accountability	Control mechanisms

Table 1: Research Project divided into five papers

Concerning **career development**, our analysis will deal with how staffers enter and exit their position within party organizations. While our first paper will investigate the importance of political ties during recruitment, the exit of staff will later on be analyzed in paper four. Which career paths do staffers envision after their current position? Furthermore, their impact on the **intra-party balance** will be approached from a vertical and a horizontal perspective. In paper two, we will investigate the vertical perspective by comparing their political opinions and sociodemographic profile to the party grassroots. The horizontal perspective will be addressed in paper three, in which we will focus on the distribution of expertise among different party branches. Does the level of expertise among staff members reflect the *ascendancy of the party in public office*? Finally, our fifth and last paper will focus on the interaction between staffers and elected elites within institutions and party organizations. By analyzing the **democratic control** mechanisms that hold staffers accountable, the research project will conclude by examining if and when the position of political staff constitutes a democratic deficit in representative democracies.

The contribution of this research project to existing literature will be threefold. First, the research project will elaborate the peculiar position of political staff within party democracy by addressing their significance within intra-party democracy and public institutions. In doing so, it aims to address an issue that has only briefly been touched upon by earlier studies (Fisher & Webb, 2003; Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Second, we build on the studies by Webb & Fisher (2003) and Karlsen & Saglie (2017) by including staff from all faces of the party (Katz & Mair, 1993). Most studies on individual staff explore the role of employees within a specific institution, either within the legislative (Busby & Belkacem, 2013; Egeberg, Gornitzka, Trondal, & Johannessen, 2013; Pegan, 2017; Romzek & Utter, 1997) or executive branch of government (Dickinson & Tenpas, 2002; Maley, 2000; Walgrave, Caals, Suetens, & De Swert, 2004). The proposed research design will investigate all faces within party organizations, which enables us to study how the profiles and task assignments of staffers might differ between different party branches. Third, our case-selection strategy allows for explanatory analyses of individual differences between staffers. By including both Belgian and Dutch parties, our data will allow for comparison across different political systems and party families. Previous surveys of political staff were either limited to a certain party (Webb & Fisher, 2003) or focused on a specific political system (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017).

This paper proceeds as follows. In section two, a discussion of our understanding of political staffers will delineate our population of interest. The research design will be introduced in section three by addressing five separate papers, each one centered around research question. In section four, our strategy to disseminate a survey among this nonelected elite will be discussed. Finally, section five will

propose a research schedule, putting a time frame on the different work packages for the research project.

2. Defining political staff: delineating the population

As this research proposal explicitly targets political staff, it aims to explore a specific population. In this section, we draw clear boundaries to sharpen our understanding of the study object. More specifically, we choose to investigate political agents with a remunerated, unelected position that have been politically appointed within a party organization or political institution. We consider each of these individual properties (criteria) as necessary conditions for belonging to our population of interest. In the following paragraphs, these four relevant criteria are discussed in more detail. While each criterion will be situated within existing literature on staff and party organization, we will also pinpoint which specific political agents are excluded by wielding these criteria.

Criterion	Exclusion
Remuneration	Volunteers
Unelected position	Elected officials
Political appointment	Civil servants
Inside organization/institution	Independent consultants

Table 2: Criteria for delineating political staff

Our first criterion concerns the issue of remuneration: staff members receive a salary in return for their political activities. In this sense, they "*live off politics*" as described by Weber 1921) in his discussion of politics as a vocation. Applying this criterion makes an essential distinction between staff and volunteers like party members or sympathizers. The distinction between voluntary and paid political work is often interpreted as a historical 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. Although voluntary agents certainly continue to be relevant to the political process, our interest lies with the individuals who are directly employed within party organizations or political institutions. Hence, the origin of their salary can either be the party payroll or the state (Monroe, 2001; Webb & Kolodny, 2006).

Secondly, our notion of staffers is confined to unelected positions. As opposed to elected officials, staffers are hired and appointed by party organizations or political leaders. While both staff and elected officials are considered to be a part of a political class that lives off politics (Borchert, 2003; Von Beyme, 1996), the election of political leaders by voters or party members sets them apart from

their advisors and aides. In fact, the peculiar position of staff as an unelected elite raises interesting questions in and of itself. While some have stressed their recruitment among grass roots activists as a sign of their similarity to party members (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017), others have demonstrated that their profiles and attitudes show more correspondence to elected elites (Fisher & Webb, 2003; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Furthermore, individuals can move between elected and non-elected political positions, which is clearly demonstrated by the growing number of elected officials with prior experience as political advisors (Allen, 2012; Barber, 2014).

Thirdly, the research project will be limited to formal politically appointed positions. Although civil service can be subject to party patronage (Kopecký, Mair, & Spirova, 2012; Peters & Pierre, 2004), the politicization of public administration goes beyond the scope of this research project. Hence, the investigation will focus on staffers in positions that have deliberately been created for political appointments. We acknowledge that staff and civil servants don not inhabit completely separate worlds: a considerable portion of political staff might have earlier professional experience or future ambitions as a civil servant (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). In the Belgian case, ministerial cabinet members have even been known to hop back and forth between public administration and ministerial cabinets (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). However, expanding our analysis to the civil service would make the group of respondents too large and heterogeneous. Therefore, we exclude civil service personnel that remains in position regardless of changes in the composition of political leadership within institutions.

Lastly, we will focus our attention solely on staff working within political organizations and institutions. This excludes the independent, external consultants who are often hired as strategists for electoral campaigns (Dulio, 2006; Farrell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001; Scammell, 1998). As pointed out by Karlsen 2010), the direct political involvement of such external consultants has been somewhat overestimated in European political systems due to their prevalence in American, candidate-centered politics. As a result, research on political staff has been distorted by a sociological ideal type political professional with a high level of independence and self-regulation, similar to doctors or lawyers. However, the European party-centered context offers a different picture. The process of cartelization (Katz & Mair, 1995) has created a vast reservoir of public resources for parties to accumulate internal expertise in support of their elected elites. The proposed research project will be limited to those internal experts, omitting the role of external consultants.

3. Research design

Staff are a crucial component of today's party organizations due to the process of professionalization. In his seminal contribution to the topic, Panebianco (1988) considered the growing presence of staff professionals as *"the distinguishing feature of the organizational change political parties are currently*

undergoing" (Panebianco, 1988, p. 231). The changing composition of political staff signaled a switch from *mass bureaucratic* to *electoral-professional* parties. Reinforced by the abundance of public resources, this process of professionalization exemplifies a fundamental shift towards capital-intensive forms of organization (Farrell & Webb, 2002). Whereas voluntary party activists played a vital role in the era of mass membership politics, parties increasingly rely on paid professionals instead. Fueled by cartelized party-state linkages (Van Biezen & Kopecký, 2014), this organizational shift embodies the widening gap between political parties and society at large. Furthermore, the infusion of staff into politics has transformed party organizations from within. As the influx of staff is distributed unequally within political organizations, some party branches thrive while others are becoming increasingly marginalized. The growth of staff has particularly benefitted public and central offices to the detriment of the crisis-struck party on the ground (Katz & Mair, 1993, 2003).

However, the impact of professionalization goes well beyond simply employing more staff. Instead attracting additional traditional bureaucrats, parties have increasingly shifted their interest towards different types of staff (Panebianco, 1988). The demand for this different kind of staffer can be considered as a response to several environmental challenges. In relation to voters, parties face increased competition due to electoral volatility. As parties broadened their electoral focus beyond their *classe gardéé* (Kirchheimer, 1966), the emergence of mass media offered platforms for direct linkage with voters. As a result, parties now hire trained professionals to navigate technological developments and strengthen their position towards media outlets. Among members and activists, parties face the weakening of the party on the ground (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002). As membership bases shrunk during the last decades, the available pool of voluntary human capital became increasingly limited. Hence, parties rely on staff to support and stimulate local activists, candidates and mandate-holders. In the policy arena, parties require expertise on a diverse set of issues. As the societal reach of current-day welfare states covers a broad range of policy domains and multi-level governance gains importance, parties need staff who can navigate the complex and technical nature of policy-making.

This research project aims to join earlier in depth studies of political staff (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003) by addressing the role of Belgian and Dutch political staffers within party organizations in five separate papers. In each paper, our data about the employees will be connected to a larger theoretical question. First, a paper will investigate on the role of staff recruitment in party organizations. By mapping their prior and current participation levels and their earlier professional experience, the analysis will address how parties value ideological affinity and activism. The larger theoretical discussion will focus on the impact of pillarization (Lijphart, 1968) on staffing patterns. Second, a paper will address the role of staff towards other party actors. By comparing the

sociodemographic composition and the political opinions, the paper will discuss whether staff empower political elites to the disadvantage of grassroots activists. The discussion will be embedded in theoretical insights about May's special law of curvilinear disparity (May, 1973) and cartelization (Katz & Mair, 1993, 1995).

Third, a paper will focus on the role of staff in the distribution of expertise within party organizations. The analysis will measure the individual expertise of political staff and compare the distribution of this expertise between the party on the ground (subnational branches), the party in central office and the party in public office. The theoretical backbone will be founded on *the ascendancy of the party in public office* (Katz & Mair, 2003), in combination with the systemic impact of *partitocracy* and *fractiocracy*. Fourth, a paper will explore the role of staff careerism in party organizations. It will investigate which factors can explain the different types of ambition (discrete, static, progressive) and different professional directions (public office, party work, private sector, …) envisaged by political staffers. Supporting theory will originate from existing insights on political ambition (Schlesinger, 1966). Fifth, the last paper will address the role of staff in representative democracy. By examining the democratic chains of delegation and control, the analysis will investigate the interaction between elected elites and their unelected staff. The theoretical foundation for this topic will come from a principal-agent approach to the democratic chain of delegation (Strøm, 2000).

In what follows, the approach of each paper will be further elaborated in five sections. Each section develops a research question with corresponding expectations linked to a larger theoretical framework. Regarding this theoretical angle, we deliberately chose to expand the theoretical horizon of the papers beyond the literature on political professionalization. Instead of considering the level of professionalism a purpose in and of itself, this proposal discusses specific aspects of professionalism (expertise, autonomy, career mobility, commitment) within a broader frame of reference. Although earlier studies have used a direct approach to professionalism (Romzek & Utter, 1997; Webb & Fisher, 2003), the fundamental aim of this project is to enhance our understanding of the role of staffers in political parties. Moreover, such an approach demonstrates the broader relevance of the research topic. Instead of studying political staff for the sake of it, this research proposal addresses their significance within party democracy.

3.1. Professionalization versus pillarization? Political ties and staff recruitment.

Existing literature on professionalization argues that the political ties between parties and their staff have weakened (Panebianco, 1988; Webb & Fisher, 2003). Compared to bureaucrats, professional staff are assumed to have weaker ties to party organizations. 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 such *"traditional identity incentives"* (Panebianco, 1988, p. 232). Hence, Scammel 1998) refers to political professionalization as a process of displacement. "*Party strategists have been replaced by non-party 'professional' strategists*" (Scammell, 1998, p. 4). This emphasis on the political links of staff dates back to the conceptual foundations of political professionalization, which was based on the sociological ideal type of professionalism (exemplified by medical doctors or lawyers). However, this interpretation of staff is largely inspired by the American, candidate-centered context with weak party organizations and an industry of independent political consulting. As a result, the existing frame of reference has limited applicability to political staff in European, party-centered systems (Farrell & Webb, 2002; Karlsen, 2010).

Empirical research of European cases has contradicted this dominant image of political staff. Evidence from the United Kingdom and Norway indicates significant ties between political parties and their staffers (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003). In both cases, the vast majority of party staff were active members within the party organization before their employment. This observation has lead Karlsen & Saglie 2017) to conclude that European professional staffers resemble unelected party politicians more than the theoretical image of strategy professionals. Interestingly, Norwegian staff with more professional profiles even have stronger ties to the party compared to other staffers.

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

Table 3: Typology of Party Staff (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017, p. 5)

This research proposal aims to introduce new data from the Low countries and advance the discussion by introducing additional elements. The first paper will therefore investigate the following research question: ***How strong are the political ties between staff and political parties in the Low countries (RQ1)?*** By measuring the degree of membership and activism before and during employment, the paper will discuss how our cases relate to existing theory and earlier empirical studies. We expect that party ties might be stronger than in other European cases due to the historical context of pillarization in the low countries (Lijphart, 1968). As traditional political movements structured civil society via extensive networks of collateral organizations, we anticipate that staff recruitment is likely to be facilitated by these organizational networks. In addition to structural coordination mechanisms, exchange of personnel might help to maintain ideological coherence within these pillars.

In addition to these aggregate observations of party ties among political staff, this paper will take the discussion a step further by investigating the conditions that shape the strength of party ties. After constructing a party ties index, it will assess to what extent different factors can explain individual variation in the strength of party ties. Such an explanatory approach will enable us to contribute to this ongoing discussion by developing and testing new hypotheses about the party ties of staffers. From an individual perspective, we anticipate that staff with political tasks involving communication, policy or organization will have stronger party ties than their colleagues involved in administrative and technical tasks. Although the theoretical image of staffers predicts that more professional tasks might correlate with weak party ties, earlier studies of staffers party-centered political systems have observed the opposite effect (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). From the perspective of party families, it is expected that staff working for parties belonging to traditional pillars will have stronger party ties. In contrast, nontraditional parties in search for staff have to recruit more personnel outside of such existing networks. From a systemic perspective, we anticipate that the high level of party patronage in Belgium (Kopecký et al., 2012; Müller, 2006) corresponds to stronger ties between parties and staff. Moreover, the systemic contrast between Belgian *partitocracy* (De Winter, 1996) and Dutch *fractiocracy* (Andeweg, 2000) will have an impact on the strength of party ties among staff in the public and central office. We expect the most influential branches of the party to concentrate staffers with the strongest party ties. This hypothesis predicts strong ties in Belgian central offices and ministerial cabinets, as opposed to strong political ties in the parliamentary party in the Dutch case.

3.2. Between grassroots and elites? Assessing congruence between staff and other party actors.

Scholars of party politics consider the party on the ground as the weakest link in contemporary party organizations (Scarrow, Webb, & Farrell, 2000; Van Biezen et al., 2012). Since it strengthens the position of elites, staff growth is assumed to contribute to this *marginalization* of the party on the ground (Katz & Mair, 2003). As these developments coincided with a de-energization among local volunteers (Seyd & Whiteley, 2002), elected elites have expanded their influence within parties to the disadvantage of grassroots activists. A similar evolution characterizes the interaction between political elites and the public at large. Fueled by a dissatisfaction with the political establishment, elected elites are portrayed as a self-involved political class (Allen & Cairney, 2017). Being out of touch with the public, political elites are considered to inhabit an ivory tower. In our second paper, we aim to investigate if and how this supposed divide applies to staffers. Is there a gap between staff and the party on the ground (members and voters)? Do they contribute to this division between elites and the public, or can they act as mediators instead?

Existing research on staff has considered both sides of the argument. While some have argued that the recruitment of staff among activists (cf. party ties) may prevent staffers from becoming 'uncritical yea-sayers' (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017), others have stressed the sociodemographic similarities between staff and elected elites (Webb & Fisher, 2003). To investigate this supposed gap between members and staffers, this research project will compare party strata on two fronts: their sociodemographic composition and their ideological positions. Hence, the second paper will address the following research question: ***How do the social-demographic characteristics and ideological positions of staff compare to party members, party voters and elected elites (RQ2)?*** To answer this question, our primary data-collection among political staff will be matched to secondary data from existing projects. Depending on the reference group, these data could stem from projects such as MAPP (party members), European social survey (voters) or Partirep (MP's).

First, the analysis will address this issue from the angle of 'political sociology' (Webb & Kolodny, 2006) through a discussion of sociodemographic characteristics. More specifically, the age, education, economic status, gender and ethnicity of staffers will be compared to other groups. The politics of presence (Phillips, 1995) provide the underlying logic for this comparison. The assumption is that, for the interests of certain groups and minorities to be represented, the sociodemographic composition of political staff should resemble (at least to some extent) members and voters. Based on similar approaches, earlier studies have observed an underrepresentation of women (Taflaga & Kerby, 2017) and less-educated working class (Webb & Fisher, 2003). Our expectations are in accordance with those earlier studies. We expect that the gender balance, social status and ethnic background among staff will not be representative of voters and (to a lesser extent) members, especially when we single out the actual political staffers by filtering out administrative and technical positions. In accordance with the *glass ceiling* phenomenon, we expect underrepresentation to be stronger in prestigious staff positions (high ranking functions within the public office).

Second, this paper aims to add a new element to this discussion: the political attitudes of staffers. Our analysis of their sociodemographic profile is likely to show that they are indeed different from members and voters. However, the question remains: do they actually think differently? Does the anticipated descriptive underrepresentation among staffers translate into substantive underrepresentation? Instead of inferring ideological divides from social characteristics, this research project aims to directly investigate the opinion structure among staffers, members, voters and elected elites. More specifically, the paper will contrast the positions of the different party strata on a left-right scale and a broader set of ideological indicators[1]. We anticipate that such an approach will offer us a

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[1] The actual content of these indicators will have to be coordinated between our primary data-gathering and the availability of specific information in the secondary datasets needed for the analysis. Additional indicators could

more nuanced view on the relationship between different party actors. In contrast to May's infamous law on *curvilinear disparity* (May, 1973), empirical research has indicated that ideological disagreements within parties do not align with divisions between different party strata (Holsteyn, Ridder, & Koole, 2017; Kitschelt, 1989; Norris, 1995). As a result, staffers or elites might just as well as members be found on different sides of an ideological divide.

3.3. From knowledge to power. The distribution of staff expertise in party organizations.

The impact of organization on the intra-party power balance is a recurrent theme in research on party politics. From the functioning of extra-parliamentary organizations (Duverger, 1964; Michels, 1915) to the professionalization of electoral strategies (Kirchheimer, 1966; Panebianco, 1988), political scientists have investigated how the organization of parties (dis)empowers certain political agents or institutions. More recently, Katz & Mair 2003) have argued that the public face of political parties has gained unprecedented importance at the expense of other party faces. The *ascendancy of the party in public office* is considered an integral part of the process of cartelization, in which parties have become closely intertwined with the state (Katz & Mair, 1995). The underlying logic is that these public institutions are the main recipient of the abundance in public resources, reflected in superior funding and staffing (Katz & Mair, 1993, 1995, 2003). Hence, the increasing amount of staffers in public offices is considered to strengthen the concentration of power with the political leaders within these offices, reinforcing presidentialization (Poguntke & Webb, 2007).

In accordance with the observations of Katz & Mair 1993), several consecutive studies of staff size have unanimously demonstrated that the biggest staff growth has occurred within the public face of parties (Bardi et al., 2017; Katz & Mair, 1993; Krouwel, 2012). However, other studies have noted that a larger staff does not automatically imply a greater ability to exercise leadership (Elgie, 1995; King, 1993). In order to assess whether public offices actually have such a staffing advantage, we argue that the expertise of staffers is a more appropriate indicator. Hence, our third paper will investigate the following research question: ***How is staff expertise distributed between the party on the ground, the central office, the party in parliament and the party in government (RQ3)?*** More specifically, the link between individual expertise and the physical work location of staffers will be analyzed to test the assumption of *the ascendancy of the party in public office*. Hence, the key hypothesis is that most staffers with high levels of expertise will be concentrated within the public face of the party, in contrast to central offices and (most significantly) the party on the ground (Katz & Mair, 1993). To test our general hypothesis, the analysis will examine the tasks of staffers and determine their level of

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include measurements of materialism/post materialism, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism or positions on specific political issues.

expertise. First, the activities carried out by staff in different party branches will be addressed. Based the typology of tasks conceived by Karlsen & Saglie 2017), the main assignment of staffers will be categorized as either political-strategic (communication, policy or organization) or administrative (accounting, IT, administrative support or personnel management). Second, an index measuring the individual expertise of each respondent will be constructed by combining the indicators that measure their level of education and prior professional experience.

In addition to testing this general hypothesis, the proposed case-selection will enable us to analyze how the differences between party faces are shaped by systemic and party-specific conditions. From a systemic perspective, this third paper will contrast the Belgian *partitocratic* setting (De Winter & Dumont, 2006; Deschouwer, 2012) with the Dutch institutional context of *fractiocracy* (Andeweg, 2000). Such a comparison is driven by the hypothesis that expertise is more equally distributed between central and public offices in Belgian parties, while the parliamentary party and small executive staffs act as the uncontested centers of expertise in the Netherlands. Hence, our study will argue that a more fine-grained distinction between the *party in government* and the *party in parliament* is needed to capture the nuances of the *ascendancy of the party in public office*. From a party-specific perspective, we aim to investigate the relation between staff infrastructure and the age, ideology and electoral strength of political parties observed in Moens & Smulders 2017). As the forementionned paper demonstrated that older, left-oriented and electorally strong parties employ the largest amounts of staff, we will investigate how staffing patterns on the aggregate level relate to the individual characteristics of staffers. Does a large staff infrastructure correspond to a higher degree of expertise? Or do parties with a limited amount of staff compensate their quantitative disadvantage with higher levels of individual expertise?

3.4. Should I stay or should I go? The professional ambitions of political staffers.

Compared to other occupations, political staffers are involved in a particularly dynamic professional environment. Driven by political developments and electoral cycles, their positions are neither permanent nor static. Not surprisingly, different studies have observed high turnover rates in political offices (Dickinson & Tenpas, 2002; Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981; Webb & Fisher, 2003). In a fourth paper, we aim to investigate these career developments by linking the earlier professional experience of staffers (cf. 3.1.) to their future career plans. More specifically, the paper will address the different directions of these professional aspirations (elected office, party work, private sector, public sector, …) and investigate how variation between individual staffers can be explained. Such an analysis will contribute to a better understanding of the factors that drive the behavior of staff. Moreover, we argue

that career patterns affect their relationship with elected elites – a topic that will be discussed in more detail in our fifth and final paper.

Theoretical party literature offers competing views on the career patterns of political professionals. On the one hand, Panebianco (1988) claims that political professionals will either abandon politics for more prestigious occupations or try to gain an elected position. On the other hand, Katz & Mair (2009) speak of increasing specialization, resulting in a growing separation with other occupational tracks. To test how these hypotheses apply to our respondents, the proposed analysis aims to describe and explain the different career aspirations of staffers. Hence, our fourth paper will investigate the following research question: ***What are different the career patterns of political staffers and how can they be explained by individual characteristics (RQ4)?*** In the descriptive section of our analysis, the paper will first distinguish between internal and external career paths and explore the different avenues for future careers (political work, elected office, public sector and private sector). Consequently, the career aspirations of staffers that aim to stay within the political environment will be compared to the current positions of respondents to classify their political ambitions according to the work of Schlesinger (1966). Hence, the career plans of respondents will either be static (remain at current level) or progressive (move to a more prestigious level).

In the second section of this paper, we will investigate which factors can explain staffers' different career plans. Why do some plan to stay while others leave? Why do some aspire elected office while others do not? Why do some have progressive ambitions while others anticipate a static career? Our independent variables will be based on the earlier analyses described above. We anticipate that individual differences in party ties, expertise, tasks and sociodemographic characteristics will have a meaningful influence on the future plans of staffers. First, one can expect that stronger party ties will lead to the aspiration to stay with the party or pursue elected office. Second, we anticipate that higher levels of expertise will lead to progressive ambitions and will incentivize staffers to leave politics in search of a more prestigious position or higher remuneration. Third, bureaucratic tasks like administration are expected to lead to static ambitions, with respondents aspiring to remain in politics within their current position. Fourth, similar modest ambitions are likely to be more common among underrepresented minorities. Fifth, the electoral and governing prospects of parties might influence ambition, as entering or leaving a government coalition can open or close a window of opportunity for staffers with certain ambitions.

3.5. Of masters and puppets. The control mechanisms between staff and elected elites.

Although legislative studies often approach representative democracy as a chain of delegation (Strøm & Müller, 2009), these insights are rarely applied to party organizations as such. However, we argue

that this principal-agent framework can enhance our understanding of the relationship between staff and elected elites in contemporary parliamentary democracies. By applying this perspective, elected elites in central and public offices can be seen as the principals who delegate a number of tasks to staffers (agents). The relationship between these two political actors represents one step in a larger process, namely the democratic chain of delegation (Strøm, 2000). In the case of parliamentary assistants for example, voters transfer political authority to representatives who, in their turn, delegate aspects of their assignment to staffers. To ensure that the interests of voters, MP's and staffers remain aligned, *"this chain of delegation is mirrored by a corresponding chain of accountability that runs in the reverse direction"* (Strøm, 2000). For other types of staffers, these chains can either run through extra-parliamentary party structures or the executive branch of government. Table four offers a simplified reconstruction of such chains of delegation and accountability.

Chain of delegation	Chain of accountability
Voters > MP's > Legislative staff	Legislative staff > MP's > Voters
Voters > MP's > Prime Minister > Minister > Executive staff	Executive staff > Minister > Prime Minister > MP's > Voters
Party members > Party leader > Party staff	Party staff > Party leader > Party members

Table 4: Democratic chain of representation applied to Political staff

However, this theoretical framework does not necessarily reflect the political realities of staffers in Belgium and the Netherlands. It rather offers a normative approach of how democratic accountability should be organized, based on the principles of representative democracy. Instead of simply taking the structure of these chains as a given, this paper aims to contrast theory and practice of the control mechanisms between elected elites (principal) and staffers (agent). We argue that the relationship between these two political actors is important for two reasons. First, it addresses the potential democratic deficit caused by having a nonelected elite directly involved in political work. As discussed by Karlsen & Saglie (2017), the unelected position of staffers is less problematic in democratic terms if they "*are accountable to someone who is accountable to the electorate, the party organisation, or both*" (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017). From a democratic viewpoint, the interaction along this chain of accountability matters a lot more than the mere existence of nonelected political actors. Second, the relationship between elected elites and staffers has implications for the power balance between the political leaders of different party branches. More specifically, extra-parliamentary party organizations are known for intervening in this democratic chain of delegation. Previous studies have analyzed how parties extract resources from parliamentary institutions, ranging from personal assistants (Pegan, 2017) to party group experts (De Winter & Dumont, 2006). Hence, this final paper will address a fundamental question: the potential tension between political professionalization and democracy.

Since this tension lingers in the background of most studies of political staff, this study aims to foster an informed debate with empirical evidence.

Our fifth paper will investigate this relationship between elected elites and staffers through the following research question: ***Which elected leaders act as the principals of staffers and through which control mechanisms do they hold staffers accountable (RQ5)?*** The analysis will investigate two types of control mechanisms and address how they can be used to hold staff accountable. On the one hand, elected elites control staff via ex-ante mechanisms such as hiring procedures, in which the principal directs the actions of agents before delegation takes place (Lupia, 2003). On the other hand, ex-post mechanisms such as monitoring and oversight enable elected elites to control staffers after the fact. At this point, we have identified six potential instruments that political elites can use to direct the behavior of staffers (Table 5). Most likely, this list will be further adjusted as we explore the topic empirically.

Ex-ante	Ex-post
Recruitment and selection	Day-to-day interaction
Contractual agreements	Remuneration, financial incentives
Codes of conduct, directives	Fulfilment of career ambitions

Table 5: Staff control mechanisms

In describing the use of these different control mechanisms, the analysis will combine qualitative and quantitative observations. Due to the complex (and possibly sensitive) nature of the subject, we argue that qualitative data-gathering is the most appropriate strategy in this case. However, our survey questionnaire will contain a few questions to support this fifth paper. More specifically, the survey will gather data about selection procedures and personal interaction. This information will give us a first impression of the complexity of screening procedures and the actors involved in it, as well as illustrate the monitoring of staffers by colleagues and elected officials. Together with our earlier observations about the recruitment (3.1.) and ambitions (3.4.) of staffers, this quantitative material will provide a firm frame of for reference for a more qualitative, in-depth approach. This research design will enable us to a) describe existing practices and b) contrast our empirical observations with the principles of democratic accountability.

We expect that the analysis will illustrate two significant phenomena: power concentration and individual variation between staffers. First, we anticipate that the existing chains of delegation will lead to a small group of elected officials in top positions, consisting of the party leadership and members of the executive. Moreover, we expect this small elite to delegate the management of staffers to their senior staff, de facto surpassing other elected elites. According to existing literature about parties in

the Low countries, we can expect this concentration to strengthen Belgian extra-parliamentary leaderships (De Winter & Dumont, 2006), while empowering parliamentary leaders in the Dutch case (Andeweg, 2000). Second, we foresee that the strength of existing control mechanisms is dependent on the type of staffers who are involved. For example, the ex-ante control of staffers without meaningful party ties could be considerably weaker. The risk of ideological incongruence is higher, since such staffers did not invest in the parties' political project before their employment. Conversely, the ex-post control of staffers with static or progressive ambitions in politics could be considerably stronger. With party leaderships being 'in control of the means to their ambitions' (Strøm & Müller, 2009), these staffers will be considerably more sensitive to career incentives than their counterparts with ambitions outside of politics. Finally, staffers with a high level of expertise will also be harder to control, as information asymmetry can strengthen agents towards their principals (Lupia, 2003).

4. Data and method

As the research project is built on a mixed-method design, our papers will rely on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. In this section, the chosen methods are discussed in more detail. First, we explain how our in depth interviews will be carried out in two separate phases: an exploratory and a targeted phase. Thereafter, the specificities of the proposed survey design will be addressed, as we identify two important issues that need extra attention: gaining access and improving response rates.

4.1. Qualitative data

Although most of the proposed papers will be based on data gathered through a survey, this research project will nonetheless gather crucial information through semi-structured in depth interviews with staffers and (to a lesser extent) elected elites. Not only will these interviews introduce us to a relatively opaque environment, this qualitative approach is considered particularly insightful to uncover the complex or sensitive issues about staff. According to Webb & Kolodny (2006), *"individual party employees are often willing to grant interviews and to discuss matters with a striking degree of candour, which suggests that qualitative methods may hold the key to unlocking this particular research programme"* (Webb & Kolodny, 2006, p. 345).

The first phase of qualitative data-gathering will precede the dissemination of our survey questionnaire. By conducting a series of exploratory elite interviews with experienced staffers, two purposes will be served. First, these elite interviews will provide us with in-depth information about the recruitment, ideological position, expertise and career patterns of staffers. Later on, these exploratory data will form the broader frame of reference for the first four papers, guiding us in the interpretation of our quantitative observations. Second, our qualitative observations will feed into the

construction of the survey questionnaire. In this sense, our first round of exploration will guide decisions on how to properly format questions and response categories. The respondents for these interviews will be selected among the individuals who have previously held key positions within Belgian and Dutch party organizations. In the Belgian case, the sampling of these respondents will be based on the annual reports published in Res Publica, as they reported who held those positions until 2007 (Noppe, 2007). In the Dutch case, we hope to identify a similar publication through which former political staffers with extensive experience can be identified.

The second phase of qualitative data-gathering will take place after the dissemination of our survey questionnaire. At this stage, elite interviews will be carried out to gather data for our fifth and final paper, which addresses the democratic accountability of staffers. Since our interest is mainly directed at the current situation, respondents for this second series of elite interviews will be selected among contemporary staffers and elected elites. Our sample will contain three types of actors who are involved in the democratic chains of delegation and control: political staffers, staff managers and elected elites. Furthermore, these three types of actors will selected from three party branches: the central office, the parliamentary party and the party in government.

4.2. Quantitative data

As the majority of the papers discussed above are based on quantitative analysis, most data for this research project will be gathered by means of an online survey questionnaire among Belgian and Dutch political staffers. This questionnaire will contain questions about staffers' personal characteristics, professional experience, political attitudes, education, future ambitions and their interaction with colleagues and elected elites. As most papers will investigate differences between staffers, our dataset will benefit from a maximum of individual variation. Hence, our survey will not target a sample but the whole population of political staffers in the Low countries. By choosing such an approach, we hope to attract a sufficient number of respondents with varying types of political tasks belonging to different party systems, parties and party branches. To attain this goal, we argue that extra attention should be focused on two important issues: getting access to the population and improving response rates.

The cooperation of parties is of fundamental importance to study political staff. Although party organizations have reportedly been wary of this (Webb & Keith, 2017), earlier studies have nonetheless succeeded in gaining their cooperation (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017; Webb & Fisher, 2003). To gain the trust of parties, we aim to undertake three steps. First, we will build on the experience of Karlsen & Saglie (2017) by linking the research project to existing research initiatives that are known and trusted by parties. More specifically, we will rely on the existing network of the MAPP party member survey to get access to contact points within party organizations. Second, these individuals will be contacted for

an exploratory interview in which our plans for the dissemination of a survey questionnaire will be clarified. Third, parties will receive a tailored research briefing with a party-specific analysis after the survey is completed.

Improving the response rate is another important point of attention. Earlier studies have had varying degrees of success on this front, ranging from the relatively low rate of 33% (Webb & Fisher, 2003) to more satisfactory rates such as 64% (Karlsen & Saglie, 2017) and 73% of the population (Walgrave et al., 2004). Several steps can be undertaken to foster our response rate. First, staff managers (party directors, party group secretaries, cabinet chiefs) will be asked for support by sending out a call for cooperation to their staffers. Second, we aim to limit the length of the questionnaire as to not deter potential respondents from participating. Third, the initial dissemination of the online survey will be repeated after a month.

5. Time Table

	2018 January - June	2018 August – December	2019 January - June	2019 August – December	2020 January - June	2020 August – December	2021 January - June
Qualitative data-gathering (Phase one): Belgium	■						
Qualitative data-gathering (Phase one): Netherlands	■						
Quantitative data-gathering: Belgium		■					
Quantitative data-gathering: Netherlands		■					
Data-analysis leading to paper 1 – Recruitment		■					
Writing, presenting and submitting paper 1 – Recruitment			■				
Data-analysis leading to paper 2 – Party Actors			■				
Writing, presenting and submitting paper 2 – Party Actors			■				
Data-analysis leading to paper 3 – Expertise				■			
Writing, presenting and submitting paper 3 – Expertise				■			
Data-analysis leading to paper 4 – Ambition					■		
Writing, presenting and submitting paper 4 – Ambition					■		
Qualitative data-gathering (Phase two)				■			
Data-analysis leading to paper 5 - Accountability					■	■	
Writing, presenting and submitting paper 5 - Accountability						■	■
Compiling theoretical framework, methodological approach and empirical papers/articles into one document in order to obtain PhD							■

Appendix 1: Overview of cases

	Party	Nation	Party Family	L-R	Vote Share	Seat Share	In Gov	Founding	Age
1	N-VA	Belgium	Conservative	6,5	20,3	22	1	2001	17
2	PS	Belgium	Social democracy	2,9	11,7	15,3	0	1885	133
3	MR	Belgium	Liberal	6,7	9,6	13,3	1	1846	172
4	CD&V	Belgium	Christian democracy	5,8	11,6	12	1	1869	149
5	VLD	Belgium	Liberal	7	9,8	9,3	1	1846	172
6	Sp.a	Belgium	Social democracy	3,2	8,8	8,7	0	1885	133
7	CDH	Belgium	Christian democracy	5,5	5	6	0	1869	149
8	Groen	Belgium	Green/Ecologist	2,6	5,3	4	0	1979	39
9	Ecolo	Belgium	Green/Ecologist	2,6	3,3	4	0	1976	42
10	VB	Belgium	Right-wing	9,7	3,7	2	0	1979	39
11	PA-PTB	Belgium	Communist/Socialist	1,2	3,7	1,3	0	1971	47
12	Défi	Belgium	Liberal	6,1	1,8	1,3	0	1964	54
13	VVD	Netherlands	Liberal	7,3	21,3	22	1	1948	70
14	PVV	Netherlands	Conservative	8,8	13,1	13,3	0	2004	14
15	CDA	Netherlands	Christian democracy	5,9	12,4	12,7	1	1977	41
16	D66	Netherlands	Liberal	4,5	12,2	12,7	1	1966	52
17	GL	Netherlands	Green/Ecologist	2	9,1	9,3	0	1989	29
18	SP	Netherlands	Communist/Socialist	1,2	9,1	9,3	0	1971	47
19	Pvda	Netherlands	Social democracy	3,6	5,7	6	0	1946	72
20	CU	Netherlands	Christian democracy	6,2	3,4	3,3	0	2001	17
21	PvdD	Netherlands	Special issue		3,2	3,3	0	2002	16
22	50+	Netherlands	Liberal	6	3,1	2,7	0	2009	9
23	SGP	Netherlands	Conservative	8,8	2,1	2	0	1918	100
24	DENK	Netherlands	Liberal	6	2,1	2	0	2015	3
25	FvD	Netherlands	Conservative	7,4	1,8	1,3	0	2016	2

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