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Administrative politicization or contestability? How political advisers affect

neutral competence in policy processes

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ABSTRACT

There is limited empirical research on the extent to which politicized recruitment of ministerial advisers affects the quality of the policy process. In this article we take a novel step by looking at two possible consequences of increased political recruitment for the policy process: administrative politicization and contestability. We deploy a Most Similar Systems comparison of Denmark and Sweden and include survey answers from 657 civil servants in managerial positions. We find that political recruitment of top civil servants, such as Swedish state secretaries, restricts the access of the civil service to the minister, but it does not substantially politicize the policy process. Danish civil servants perceive themselves as more contested by the relatively few Danish political advisers than their Swedish colleagues. Our results imply that the organization of political advice is a crucial factor for politicization and contestability

INTRODUCTION¹

The neutral competence that once seemed to provide administrative agencies with a distinctive capacity to illuminate the dark corners of policy issues now competes with a ‘thousand points’ of expert light generated in all sectors of American government and society (Rourke 1992, p. 540).

This initial quote by the political scientist Francis Rourke illustrates the potential challenge that the growing number of ministerial advisers pose to civil servants’ role in the policy process. Being a pivotal one of those “thousand points of expert light” that now fight to influence government policies, politically recruited staff that work for ministers at the Government Offices (here referred to as political advisers) may contribute to crowd out the neutral competence that civil servants are supposed to provide. A major concern has been that political advisers politicize the policy process excessively. The greater in number and the closer they are to the ministers, the more they may diminish the role of the permanent civil service and the professional competence they represent (Rourke 1992; James 2007, p. 9; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008, p. 338; LSE GV314 Group 2012; Garsten *et al.* 2015, pp. 218-225; Maley 2015). This may, in turn, undermine the legitimacy of the public administration, since the existence of a professional and impartial civil service is seen as a guarantee of fair and equal treatment of government institutions (Derlien 2003; Peters and Pierre 2004).

However, there is limited empirical research on the extent to which increased politicized recruitment of ministerial advisers affects the quality of the policy process. Previous research has mainly focused on the extent to which the recruitment of ministerial advisers is politicized or not (Weller 1989; Campbell and Wilson 1995; Mulgan 1998; Dahlström *et al.* 2011; Christensen *et al.* 2014). Not many have studied how this development affects the neutral and professional competence applied during the policy process. Chris Eichbaum and Richard Shaw (2008, p. 339) thus state that ‘[o]rthodox understandings [of politicization] are of limited use in both describing and assessing the threat to civil service neutrality, which some see in the advent and conduct of political advisers.’

Evidence in some studies points to a small or negligent move towards more politicization (cf. James 2007; Mulgan 2007; Ehn *et al.* 2007; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008), but we know little about possible moderators to this relationship, for example the hierarchical positions of political advisers. Politicized recruitment can take many forms (Lewis 2008); in some contexts, political advisers serve mainly as the ministers’ personal factotum, whose interactions with the rest of the ministerial staff are fairly limited. In other cases, governments appoint state secretaries (here referred to as political appointees) who are not only political advisers to the minister, but who are also in charge of running the ministries. The question is to what extent these different forms of politicized recruitment politicize the policy process

¹ We are grateful for comments from four unanimous reviewers and from editors Salvador Parrado and Martin Lodge.

and in that case how. This is something we examine in this paper. Our contribution is therefore threefold:

First, we apply Eichbaum's and Shaw's (2008) theoretical framework of administrative politicization outside the Westminster context and thereby answer their call to 'enrich our understanding of the milieu and practices of political advisers' (Shaw and Eichbaum 2015a, p.73; cf. also Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014; Connaughton 2015). *Administrative politicization* refers to political advisers' intervention in the relationship between a minister and the permanent civil service with the effect that the latter's effort to provide frank and fearless advice to the former is disturbed or obstructed (Eichbaum and Shaw 2008, p. 343). Our study thus provides a first empirical test of the relevance of this new concept outside New Zealand.

Second, we test the applicability of administrative politicization in comparison to the concepts of contestability and thickening of government. Contestability was also introduced into the literature on politicization by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008). The notion of contestability has been used by scholars that examine cohesion between elite groups (see e.g. Bottomore 1964; Parry 1969). We relate contestability to the tensions that may arise between civil servants and political advisers/appointees out of competition for access to the minister. Political advisers can in this view be seen as a thickening of government (cf. Light 1995). The literatures on contestability and thickening of government can help us to partly understand the consequences of increasing politicization of ministerial advice.

Third, we carry out a Most Similar System study between Denmark and Sweden. These countries are similar in many respects, but differ noticeably in their organization of ministerial advice, with Denmark being notably less politicized with regard to the recruitment of political advisers as well as state secretaries. Hence, our research design contributes systematic comparative data to a new wave of research on political advisers (Shaw and Eichbaum 2015b) and allows for an analysis of how the degree and kind of politicized recruitment matter for the level of administrative politicization, something that, to our knowledge, has not been studied previously. We do so by asking the civil servants themselves in a survey about their working conditions and experiences of the policy processes.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: First, we briefly review the concept of politicization. Then follow two sections in which we give an account of the research on how politicized recruitment and contestability may affect the perceived presence of neutral competence in the policy process. In the next step, we specify our three research questions and describe the research design and data. The paper concludes with an empirical analysis and a discussion of the results.

POLITICIZATION – IN DIFFERENT DISGUISES

The concept of politicization has come to cover different aspects of the roles of political advisors, state secretaries, and civil servants, but it also refers more broadly to the functioning of modern bureaucracies (for a review see e.g. Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014).

In one strand of the literature, politicization denominates the phenomenon that ministerial staff is hired or promoted on political grounds. Politicization thus occurs with the "... substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards and disciplining of members for the public service" (Peters and Pierre 2004, p. 2). Politicization in this sense focuses on *recruitment* and it can be open and formal (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014, p. 749) or hidden and informal (Ban and Redd 1990). In this study, two groups can be politically recruited: political advisers and state secretaries.

In another strand of the literature, politicization relates more broadly to the *functions* of the civil service (Aberbach *et al.* 1981). Although it is widely recognized that empirically it is not possible to separate the administrative and the political functions of the civil service, it is generally accepted that some tasks are more political in nature than others (Mayntz and Derlien 1989). Furthermore, these political tasks have come to play a more prominent role in the portfolio of the civil service. Political-tactical advice (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014) on how best to sell policies to parties, MPs, interest groups, and the general public is by way of example of a more political character than advice on legal and technical matters. To the extent that the permanent civil service becomes increasingly involved in the performance of these political functions, we can speak of functional politicization. Functional politicization only relates the functions performed by the permanent civil service.

Recently, the concept of *administrative politicization* has been introduced by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008). The authors argue for this concept by pointing out that other definitions of politicization – such as the ones mentioned above – do not ‘speak to the nature, location, and exercise of the institutional levers through which political advisers may be able to exert pressure on civil servants’ (Eichbaum and Shaw 2008, p. 342). Hence, traditional definitions of politicization do not take into account the extent to which political advisers affect the content of the policy process. Addressing this question requires a theoretical concept that captures the actions of political advisers and the way they interact with other ministerial actors. Rather than focusing on recruitment of individual civil servants or advisers, the interest is the interplay between political advisers, civil servants, and ministers and how this may lead to a politicization of the policy process.

Administrative politicization is defined ‘as an intervention that offends against the principles and conventions associated with a professional and impartial civil service’ (Eichbaum and Shaw 2008, p. 343) and it has a *procedural* as well as a *substantial* dimension. Procedural politicization occurs when political advisers intervene in the internal workings of a ministry, or in the relationship between a minister and her civil servants in ways that constrain the extent to which the latter can provide free, frank, and fearless advice. The political advisers act as veto players or gatekeepers who control the flow of information that reaches the minister. This procedural dimension thus mainly regards how political advisers may limit civil servants’ access to the minister during the policy process. The substantial dimension

concerns to what extent political advisers also influence what kind of advice reaches the minister – i.e. if the advice of the civil servants becomes coloured by partisan considerations.

The concept of administrative politicization thus allows us to approach the role of political advisers in the policy process, especially how they affect the neutral function of the civil service. In two following sections, we discuss the idea of the neutral competence of the civil service and how this may be jeopardized by political advisers.

POLITICIZATION OF THE POLICY PROCESS

The policy process has several stages (Hill 2009) and civil servants are potential actors in them all, e.g. they help developing political ideas, take part in the policy formulation stage, and they take part in the processes whereby public policies are being prepared for implementation. But what does it mean that civil servants should contribute neutral competence to these policy stages, and how may an increasing politicized recruitment of political advisers change this?

Defined narrowly, civil servants apply ‘value-neutral techniques derived from science and professions to achieve the ends prescribed by law’ (Green 1998, p. 92). This implies an ‘expert, objective performance of work’ (Aberbach and Rockman 1994, p. 461) carried out without any ‘independent judgment about the rightness or appropriateness of the actions of government’ (Thompson 1985, p. 556). Civil servants of this kind should not be involved in politics at all; they should not take sides or provide information in ways that may give one political party an advantage over the other (Aberbach and Rockman 1994; Mouritzen and Svava 2002:138-139). However, politics and policy formation cannot be kept apart in practice (Svava 1999, 2001): A civil service that blindly follows the letter of the law and solely acts on scientific and professional knowledge without regard for their government’s political ambitions would be of limited use to the same, or even worse: be beyond democratic control.

A more complex view of neutrality takes this tension between obedience, expertise, and principle into account (Mouritzen and Svava 2002, p. 28) and therefore does not ban civil servants from politics completely, but only from certain partisan activities, such as political campaigning. Policy advice on complex and politically sensitive issues, or political strategic advice on how to achieve the government’s goals do not necessarily compromise the neutrality of the civil service according to this view (Mulgan 2007). Neutrality is obtained by ensuring that the knowledge and skills of the bureaucracy are available to all elected officials regardless of party affiliation (Kaufman 1956; Rourke 1992), or at least to the government of the day, as well as to the government of tomorrow (Mouritzen and Svava 2002, p. 139).

There is an idea that the quality of the policy process and agency performance partly relies on the consideration of neutral professional knowledge and technical expertise (Kaufman 1956; Rourke 1992; Krause *et al.* 2006; Lewis 2008, 2011, 2012; Dahlström *et al.* 2012). There are also reasons to believe that the balance between civil servants’ and political advisers’ input in

the policy process matters for how public policy is actually formulated and implemented. Carl Dahlström's (2011) study of 18 OECD countries e.g. shows that welfare cuts are designed differently depending on the extent to which the government relies on the advice from political advisers or civil servants. Governments that employ a greater number of political advisers tend to make welfare cuts that spare their own voters to a greater degree than governments that rely more heavily on the advice of civil servants. A similar pattern has been found in US case studies that show how political advisers 'influence the distribution of federal grants to co-partisans and electorally important districts and states' (Lewis 2011, p. 58). It matters whether politicians take their advice from political advisers or civil servants.

Several scholars argue for having a group of neutral civil servants who do not share the political interests of the government as a counterbalance in the policy process (Rourke 1992; Aberbach and Rockman 1994; Dahlström *et al.* 2012). Such a group can provide informed criticism that can contribute to the aversion of unsound decisions and anticipated implementation problems (Rourke 1992), e.g. by speaking up against projects that do not benefit the common good, however defined. As Aberbach and Rockman (1994, p. 461) put it: '[a neutral competent official] with an eye to the long-term interests and the institutional health of the government.' It is therefore important to strike a sound balance between political advisers and civil servants in the policy process (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010).

Exactly where this balance point lies is unclear. The ambition with this paper is to contribute a piece of the answer to this question. It is obvious that political advisers do not automatically constitute a threat to the neutrality of the civil service. Mayntz and Derlien (1989) observe that despite a clear politicization of the recruitment of the ministerial staff, civil servants still identify strongly with the role as experts with specialized knowledge. Thus, increasing politicization through the hiring of political advisers does not in itself diminish the weight civil servants place on neutral and professional competence. This conclusion is supported in a later study of Swedish government offices (Ribbhagen 2011). These studies do not say anything about whether civil servants experience any pressure from political advisers to disregard their professional competence, however.

CONTESTABILITY IN THE POLICY PROCESS

Administrative politicization is one factor that might cause tension between political advisers and civil servants because political advisers somehow obstruct the work of the civil service. Conflicts between advisers and the civil service may also occur out of competition more than obstruction. Competition over the control of the policy process is what Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) denotes contestability. They do not discuss much why contestability is likely to occur in the relationship between civil servants and political advisers, but it is likely that competition is simply about being close to the centre of policy making and thus close to the minister. We argue that it may be fruitful to see contestability as a consequence of the 'thickening of government' that an increasing recruitment of political advisers and appointees often contributes to (Light 1995, Lewis 2008, pp. 30-43), either by the introduction of new

actors, or by adding more layers to the bureaucratic structure (Van den Heijden 2011). Thickening may be caused by many other factors than increasing number of political advisers. Just like administrative politicization, a thickening of government may lead to information being distorted or stopped as it passes through the many organizational levels on the way to the minister. The thickening of government argument does not automatically imply a political bias in how information is changed; it is simply a fact that information changes with each connection that is added to the chain (Light 1995, p. 65). The negative consequences for the quality of policy decisions may be severe, however, and it becomes hard to hold any particular individual accountable for the imperfect information that decisions are based on (Light 1995, pp. 62-66).

In this light, contestability between political advisers and civil servants may be a consequence of these groups simply competing over access to the minister rather than an attempt by the former to unduly politicize the process or the advice of the latter (Eichbaum and Shaw 2008). Civil servants may perceive political advisers as a threat because they represent yet another layer of actors that compete over access to the minister and who might diminish their role in the policy process. Delivering political advice is prestigious and exciting and losing this part of the job may be felt as real loss that makes ministerial work less attractive to highly qualified people (Garsten *et al.* 2015, p. 219). Through their proximity to the ministers, political advisers gain influence that civil servants may resent and envy, particularly if this results in their own input being devalued or disrespected (cf. Dunleavy 1991), or if political advisers, by exceeding their mandate, are seen to gain illegitimate power over the policy process.

Contestation does not necessarily have to be intense. There are many examples of a positive interplay between political advisers and civil servants (Svara 2001; Lewis 2011; Ullström 2011, pp. 203-205). A British case study of political advisers' role in the policy process shows that there is surprisingly little conflict in the policy formulation stage between civil servants and political advisers (LSE GV314 Group 2012). On the contrary, surveys and interview responses of former political advisers describe an environment in which these groups work together in agreement or offer advice on different issues.

A case study of the Swedish ministries concludes that a greater number of political advisers even make collaboration between them and civil servants run smoother than when there are only a few political advisers (Ribbhagen 2011). Politicized recruitment appears to create a higher tolerance for politics among bureaucrats (compare to James 2007, pp. 14-15). The question is if this pattern holds also in political systems where the politicization of ministerial advice has taken other forms.

ADMINISTRATIVE POLITICIZATION OR CONTESTABILITY?

In this study, we see politicized policy processes as a multifaceted phenomenon. Policy processes can be politicized in the sense that political advisers limit the opportunities for civil

servants to give the minister advice during the policy process (procedural politicization). Alternatively, political advisers can politicize the content of policy advice from civil servants to the minister and thus constrain civil servants' possibilities to render free, frank, comprehensive, and fearless advice (substantial politicization). Political advisers may also bring tension to the policy process because they represent an alternative source of policy advice which may increase competition between them and the civil servants (contestability). Therefore, we ask three questions about the interaction between civil servants and political advisers in the policy process:

Q1: Does more politicized recruitment lead to a higher degree of procedural politicization? That is, do political advisers and political appointees restrict or reduce the civil servants' access to the minister?

Q2: Does more politicized recruitment lead to a higher degree of substantial politicization? That is, do political advisers and political appointees attempt to affect the content of the policy advice that civil servants offer to the minister?

Q3: Does more politicized recruitment lead to a higher degree of contestability? That is, does a larger group of political advisers and political appointees result in a competition between them and the civil servants over whose input counts?

RESEARCH: MSS STUDY OF DENMARK AND SWEDEN

It is difficult to study the consequences of the increasing number of political advisers in a single system since they have been introduced gradually in most countries. The effects of gradual changes are therefore hard to isolate from other developments. We try to solve this problem through a Most Similar Study of Denmark and Sweden.

Neighbouring Denmark and Sweden share many important characteristics. They are unitary states with parliamentary systems, a strong corporatist heritage, and influential Social Democratic parties. They have proportional, multi-party election systems and most often minority coalition governments. Both countries run universal welfare states with large and comparatively efficient public sectors characterized by low levels of corruption (Transparency International 2014). Ethical codes in both countries state the importance of professionalism and the application of impartial knowledge in the course of one's duties (Moderniseringsstyrelsen 2015; Värdegrundsdelegationen 2014).

Denmark and Sweden have rather similar political systems, but very different ways of organizing ministerial advice. Both countries rely on a strong Weberian tradition of non-partisan merit recruitment but they have slowly drifted apart since the 1960s. Denmark has been cautious about leaving the Weberian path. Only one exception to merit recruitment has been made: the introduction of the so-called special advisers, or spin-doctors (White Paper (1537/2013) in the 1990s. These advisers come and go with their minister and they are not a part of the organizational line, i.e. they do not have any administrative responsibilities.

Instead, their initial purpose was to assist ministers in media matters, but this has changed over time. Presently they carry out the following tasks for the ministers:

They cover media-related tasks, secretarial assistance to and services for the minister, the provision of advice to the minister in the form of general sparring, the drafting of speeches and accompanying the minister to meetings of different types as well as management of external contacts to parliament, stakeholder organisations and other ministries for the minister (White Paper 1537/2013, pp. 181-2).

Danish ministers also rely on political-tactical advice as well as policy advice from the departments' permanent heads (state secretaries) and other top civil servants. These are recruited on formal merits and have a documented ability to deliver political advice without regard to the incumbent minister's party affiliation (Christensen 2006). In sum, the Danish state administration comes very close to a pure merit bureaucracy.

Sweden has taken a much more liberal stand on political advisers and political appointees, and there are two main differences compared to the Danish model: the state secretaries, who are the second in command in the ministries just below the minister, are officially politically appointed (and resign with the minister) (Ullström 2011). The other difference is that the total number of political advisers is significantly higher in Sweden than in Denmark. In addition to the state secretaries, ministers are allowed a number of political advisers who provide them with policy advice as well as political advice (Niklasson 2005). This group includes press secretaries and advisers whose main expertise is the policy field for which the minister is responsible.

Altogether, about 200 of the 4600 employees in the Swedish ministries are political advisers or politically appointed state secretaries (the Swedish Government's Home Page). Only the state secretaries are part of the regular organizational hierarchy. The political advisers form an organization within the organization, which means that they like in Denmark have no formal authority over the merit-recruited civil servants (Ullström 2011).

Interestingly, the particular way the two countries organize political advice is motivated in the same way: by the growing demand for higher quantity and quality of political advice and the intent to protect the neutrality of the civil service (Larsson 1990; White Paper 1443/2004).

In sum, a comparison between Denmark and Sweden constitutes a good MSS design for studying how increasing politicized recruitment affects the level of administrative politicization and contestability at the ministries. If the Swedish construction with politically appointed state secretaries is added to the bare number of political advisers in this context, it becomes clear that the two countries are indeed organized differently with regard to ministerial advice.

In a study of 18 countries, Denmark has the lowest proportion of political advisers and Sweden ranks 10th (Dahlström, 2009) and the two countries rank more or less evenly on

political non-partisanship and bureaucratic professionalism (Dahlström *et al.* 2012). This does not affect our possibilities to draw conclusions, however, because maximizing the variation is mainly important in order to avoid bias when selecting cases on the dependent variable, which we have not done (King *et al.* 1994, pp.129-139). By choosing two similar countries that differ notably, but not at a maximum on the independent variable, we are making it difficult for ourselves to render probable that there is a relationship between politicized recruitment and administrative politicization and contestability. If we still detect that such an effect exists, we can assume that politicized recruitment is a powerful independent variable as only slight changes in this variable affect the dependent variables under study.

DATA

Our data comes from two web surveys conducted in the summer and autumn of 2012. We conducted pilot interviews with former ministers, state secretaries, political advisers, and civil servants in both countries beforehand. The study received support from the Danish Prime Minister's office, which meant that we were allowed to add the following sentence to the email that introduced the survey to the respondents: "The survey has been discussed with the Prime Minister's permanent secretary, Christian Kettel Thomsen, who endorses the questionnaire". No similar support was received from the Swedish government, which probably contributed to the striking differences in response rates between the two countries (see below).

The surveys include aspects that relate to how civil servants perceive their relationships to the political advisers and state secretaries. Only the answers from civil servants with leading positions are used in this paper. In Denmark, this group includes 282 respondents (department managers, office managers, and equivalents), corresponding to a response rate of 76 per cent. In the Swedish case, the group of civil servants who hold a leading position (assistant undersecretaries, experts, deputy assistants, and ambassadors placed in the ministries) includes 393 individuals, corresponding to a response rate of 47 per cent.

Measures

We have two main dependent variables: administrative politicization and contestability. Administrative politicization has two aspects: procedural politicization (Q1) and substantial politicization (Q2). The first is operationalized by two questions asking the civil servants: *To what extent do you experience that the following persons restrict your ability to provide advice to the minister?* The first person (1) concerns the "State secretary" and second (2) "other political advisers". There are five options: 1) Not at all, 2) To a limited degree, 3) To some degree, 4) To a fairly high degree, and 5) To a very high degree.

Substantial politicization (Q2) is captured by a question on whether political advisers and political appointees attempt to intervene in the policy discussions: *These questions concern*

the role and accountability of political advisers and political appointees in general. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements: political advisers and political appointees do not encourage free and frank discussions on the whole range of policy alternatives available. The answer categories were: 1) I disagree completely, 2) I disagree, 3) I neither disagree, nor agree, 4) I agree, and 5) I agree completely.

For contestability (Q3), we use four survey items from the same overall question as for Q2: 1) *'Political advisers and political appointees have too much influence on the government's agenda'*, 2) *'Political advisers and political appointees sometimes exceed their mandate'*, 3) *'Political advisers and political appointees generally respect the civil servants' efforts'*, and 4) *'Political advisers constitute through their behaviour a threat to the bureaucratic neutrality'*. These four items also load on the same dimension in a factor analysis and the Cronbach's alpha is 0.75 (the Appendix reveal the analyses of the four single items). The index runs from 0 to 10. The answer categories are the same as for Q2.

Controls

We add the following individual level control variables: gender, age, seniority, and size of department.

Gender (0: man, 1: woman): there is some evidence on the possible effect of gender on the behaviour of political appointees (Annesley, 2010; Annesley and Gains 2010). Age and seniority are to some extent correlated (0.39). Condrey and Battaglio (2007:429) state that respondents with longer tenure consistently tended to have a more negative view of at-will employment and its consequences (Tenure: 21 categories from <1 year to >20 years). The same relation may be found in relation to age (Age: eleven categories from 26-30 years to >70 years). Gender and age both belongs to the 'usual suspects' of the demography of organizations (Pfeffer 1982, p. 277).

Finally, the size of department may matter. Bigger departments require a more structured access to the minister, which may generate greater acceptance of political advisers (0: smaller departments, 1: among the five largest departments. Denmark: Business and Growth, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Justice and Taxation. Sweden: Finance, Foreign Affairs, Health and Social Affairs, Justice and Enterprise, Energy and Communications). Since the respondents are nested within their departments, they should not be analyzed as independent observations. We therefore use multi-level modeling to avoid this problem (Hox 2010).²

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive data for our variables in the pooled sample as well as for each country. The descriptive data tells us that Sweden appears to have a higher level of

² The models used are XT MIXED and ME OLOGIT in STATA 13.1.

administrative and substantial politicization than in Denmark, but that the level of contestability is higher in Denmark. As regards the control variables Denmark appears to have fewer women in leading positions and the Danish respondents are slightly younger, less senior, and fewer of them work in a large department. From the descriptive data we now turn to multivariate analysis to see to what extent the differences in politicization are statistically significant and to what extent they are affected by the control variables.

Table 1 here

Our first question is whether political advisers and political appointees restrict or reduce the permanent civil service's access to the minister. Here we can use an important difference between Denmark and Sweden. The state secretary in Denmark is permanent and recruited from the civil service according to strict Weberian principles (cf. Christensen 2006). Swedish state secretaries are politically appointed and come and go with the minister. In both countries the state secretaries control and sort what information the minister receives from the civil service. This is necessary in order to avoid overloading the minister with information, but it also implies a risk that not all relevant information reaches the minister, and that advice becomes excessively biased. The Danish-Swedish comparison allows us to see whether it makes a difference whether the state secretary is politically appointed or not.

The first column in Table 2 measures the effect of having a politically appointed versus a merit recruited state secretary. The second column shows the same thing, but for political advisers. The first column reveals that Swedish civil servants perceive that they have more restricted access to their minister than their Danish colleagues, as measured by the answers to the question whether the state secretary restricts the civil servants' possibilities to give advice to the minister. 81 per cent of the civil servants in Denmark have not encountered any problems "at all" or "almost none" with the state secretary trying to intervene in their relationship with minister on a political issue, while 68 per cent of the civil servants in Sweden state the same. However, in the regression model the tendency is quite weak and is only significant at the .10 level. Yet, when we re-run the model in Sweden and calculate the share of political advisers in each department, the same pattern emerges. Civil servants in departments with a larger share of political advisers are more concerned about the state secretary's function as a gatekeeper. The results indicate that a more politicized model potentially runs a greater risk of isolating the minister from advice from the permanent civil service because the politically appointed state secretary is a stricter gatekeeper than the Danish equivalent, and that is especially true for ministers in Sweden when their departments have a larger share of political advisers.

The importance of the state secretary is strengthened when we look at column 2 in Table 1. There are no significant differences between the two administrations when civil servants are asked about whether the political advisers (in Sweden not including the state secretaries) attempt to act gatekeepers. The tendency is, however, the same. Civil servants in Sweden find that political advisers to a larger extent try to intervene, but the difference is not significant. In both countries civil servants are less concerned about political advisers as gatekeepers than they

are about state secretaries. Looking at the numbers, 83 per cent of civil servants in Denmark are “not at all” or “to a limited degree” concerned by the political advisers acting as gatekeepers, while the corresponding number in Sweden is 74 per cent.

In the third column, we look at the possible effects of political advisers and appointees on the contents of civil servants’ advice. The results tell us that there is no statistically significant difference between Denmark and Sweden. Swedish civil servants are a bit more concerned with the openness of political advice, but it is only a minority within both administrations that experience political advisers and appointees as a problem in this respect. 13 per cent of the Danish civil servants and 14 per cent of the Swedish find that they “to a fairly high extent” or “to a very high extent” try to control the discussions in the policy process. Our understanding of this insignificant difference is that a politicized recruitment is not decisive for the civil servants’ experiences of substantial politicization, at least not within the range of differences that exist between Sweden and Denmark.

Table 2 here

Political advisers and appointees, on the one hand, and the civil service on the other may be in conflict with each other for a number of reasons, contestability being one of them. Table 2 shows that the level of contestability is much higher in Denmark than in Sweden. Interestingly, and in accordance with previous findings (cf. Ribbhagen 2011), contestability increases in administrations with a low degree of politicized recruitment. Civil servants in Denmark are much more concerned about the influence of political advisers and appointees. We cannot rule out that part of the difference between the two countries is due to the longer period of time in which the Swedish arrangement has been in place. The causal mechanism could be that the Swedish system is better institutionalized because it has had more years to find a less contested equilibrium than in Denmark. Yet, seniority is not of matter in our models. Civil servants who recently started to work at the departments are not more or less in competition with the political advisers, neither in Denmark or Sweden.

There is no straightforward interpretation of this counterintuitive result. An interpretation – in line with that explaining the Danish-Swedish difference – is that it is more difficult to establish a *modus vivendi* equilibrium when there are only very few advisers. Few advisers are more easily seen as foreign objects than when there is a larger number. However, we are only guessing. How an administration is organized and the number of political advisers thus creates different results in terms of how efficiently gatekeepers restrict access to the minister and the level of contestability between political appointees and civil servants. The mere existence of political advisers and appointees tends to politicize the policy process, but only to a certain level.

Table 3 here

CONCLUSION

Denmark and Sweden are countries with comparatively well-functioning bureaucracies (Dahlström *et al.* 2012). It is nevertheless important to be constantly aware of possible threats to their central administrations such as corruption, misconduct, scandals, and excessive politicization. Politicization has been discussed in Denmark and Sweden for many years – as it has in most countries. The possible existence and consequences of excessive politicization will also be discussed for the next many years, because it potentially challenges science, facts, knowledge, and determination on the one hand and spin, logrolling and compromise on the other enter the policy process.

We have studied how the interactions between civil servants, political advisers, and state secretaries correlate with the level of politicization of the policy process. We have analysed the perceptions of administrative politicization and contestability. Investigating these two possible effects of an increasing political recruitment has given us a more nuanced understanding of the role of political advisers and appointees in the policy process.

The results show that the level and kind of politicized recruitment do correlate with the extent to which civil servants perceive that political advisers and state secretaries pose a threat to the neutral competence that civil servants provide in the policy process. It is not because they contribute to a substantial politicization of the policy process (Q2). Rather, our results indicate that this perceived threat is better explained by a higher degree of contestability in the Danish system (Q3). Politicized recruitment does have an impact on the degree of procedural politicization (Q1) however. Swedish civil servants do not have the same access to their ministers because of the politically appointed state secretaries. It is mainly the state secretaries and not the political advisers who act as filters between the minister and the civil service. The purpose of this filtering does not seem to be to influence the substance of the advice; it is more likely about ensuring that an issue is sufficiently prepared, or important enough to be brought to the minister's attention (Ullström 2011, p. 105). Having the power to decide what is important enough does undoubtedly place the state secretaries in a gatekeeping position that grants them substantial power over the policy process, though.

The deployment of the concept administrative politicization (cf. Eichbaum and Shaw 2008) has thus proven useful as it connects politicized recruitment with the form and substance of the policy process in a way that is relevant also outside the Westminster context. Still, we have just scratched the surface of administrative politicization. Future research may show that there is much more to find here.

Contestability also appears to be a relevant and useful concept in this Nordic context. By relating this phenomenon to the layering and thickening of government, we have tried to develop our theoretical understanding of how politicized recruitment may contribute to tensions between political advisers and civil servants. Our results indicate that contestability is less likely to occur with the existence of politically appointed state secretaries who are a part of the formal organizational hierarchy. An interpretation may be that they legitimize the existence of politically recruited advisers. Ullström (2011, p. 117) shows for example that

even though political advisers are not formally placed under the state secretary, they often work closely together and some of them even speak of themselves as the state secretary's advisers rather than the minister's. The state secretary may thus act as a second authority (the other being the minister) who can control the political advisers, but also grant their activities legitimacy in the eyes of the civil servants, something that may decrease contestability.

We believe the results to have relevance beyond the Danish and Swedish cases. Our analyses show rather different levels of administrative politicization and contestability in two countries that are very similar in many respects. This hints that the organization of political advice is a crucial factor for politicization and contestability – also beyond the two cases studied.

In conclusion, we would say that the problem of studying the consequences of an increased politicized recruitment empirically is not so much conceptual as methodological. The corner stones of the present organization of ministerial advice were laid in the 1970s in Sweden and in the 1990s in Denmark. It is difficult to isolate the effects of politicized recruitment on the policy process in the two countries from all the other factors that have affected the policy processes during these years, e.g. mediatization of the political process. With our comparative approach we have offered some knowledge of the relation between politicized recruitment and the policy process. However, there is still a need to open more of the black box of modern policy making.

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Table 1. Descriptive data

Variable	Pooled sample			Denmark			Sweden		
	Range	Mean	Std.	Range	Mean	Std.	Range	Mean	Std.
Administrative politicization:									
Gatekeeper: State secretary	1-5	1.931	1.035	1-5	1.789	0.927	1-5	2.011	1.084
Gatekeeper: Political adviser	1-5	1.790	0.919	1-5	1.676	0.837	1-5	1.856	0.958
Substantial politicization	1-5	3.492	0.898	1-5	3.468	0.896	1-5	3.514	0.901
Contestability	1-10	4.144	1.751	1-10	4.523	1.778	1-10	3.778	1.645
Gender	0-1	0.432	0.496	0-1	0.341	0.475	0-1	0.496	0.501
Age	26-70	46-50		26-70	41-45		31-71	46-50	
Seniority	0-22	10.300	6.619	0-22	8.943	7.105	0-21	11.283	6.066
Departments	0-1	.662	0.473	0-1	.457	.499	0-1	0.810	3.934

Table 2. Civil servants and politicized processes (multi-level models)

	Procedural politicization: Gatekeeping–state secretary	Procedural politicization: Gatekeeping – advisers	Substantial politicization: Politicized policy advice
Country (Denmark)	-0.54* (0.31)	-0.45 (0.34)	-0.26 (0.31)
Sex (women)	-0.10 (0.17)	0.11 (0.17)	-0.30* (0.17)
Age	0.06 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	-0.09* (0.05)
Seniority	-0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Department (large)	-0.27 (0.31)	-0.31 (0.34)	-0.09 (0.31)
Cut point 1	-0.54 (0.47)	- 0.03 (0.49)	-5.42*** (0.61)
Cut point 2	0.74 (0.47)	1.37*** (0.49)	-3.02*** (0.48)
Cut point 3	2.23*** (0.48)	3.31*** (0.53)	-1.23** (0.48)
Cut point 4	3.74*** (0.54)	4.97*** (0.66)	1.19** (0.49)
Department variance	0.35 (0.18)	0.46 (0.22)	0.33 (0.16)
Wald Chi ²	6.53	3.92	5.30
Level 1	553	556	530
Level 2	30	30	30

Note: Procedural politicization is captured by two questions asking the civil servants: *To what extent do you experience that the following persons restrict your ability to provide advice to the minister?* The first person (1) concerns the “State secretary” and second (2) “other political advisers”. There are five options: 1) Not at all, 2) To a limited degree, 3) To some degree, 4) To a fairly high degree and 5). To a very high degree. Substantial politicization is captured by a question on whether political advisers and political appointees attempt to intervene in the policy discussions: *These questions concern the role and accountability of political advisers and political appointees in general. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements: political advisers and political appointees do not encourage free and frank discussions on the whole range of policy alternatives available.* The answer categories were: 1) I disagree completely, 2) I disagree, 3) I neither disagree, nor agree, 4) I agree, and 5) I agree completely. The analyses are done by multilevel mixed-effect ordered logistic regression with observations grouped by departments (meologit in Stata 13). Standard errors are in parentheses. In the model is the Ministry of the Interior and Health not included, due to only two respondents from the department have answered. The results are robust also when the department is included in the model.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Table 3. Civil servants and contestability (multi-level model)

	Contestability
Country (Denmark)	0.99*** (0.27)
Sex (women)	0.13 (0.15)
Age	0.08 (0.05)
Seniority	0.01 (0.01)
Department (large)	0.01 (0.27)
Intercept	2.86 (0.41)
Department variance	0.51 (0.11)
Sd. Residual	1.59 (0.05)
Wald Chi ²	17.29
Level 1	521
Level 2	30

Note: Contestability is captured by a question on whether political advisers and political appointees attempt to intervene in the policy discussions: *These questions concern the role and accountability of political advisers and political appointees in general. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:* Then comes four items: 1) 'Political advisers and political appointees do not encourage free and frank discussions on the whole range of policy alternatives available', 2) 'Political advisers and political appointees have too much influence on the government's agenda', 3) 'Political advisers and political appointees sometimes exceed their mandate', 4) 'Political advisers and political appointees generally respect the civil servants' efforts', and 'Political advisers constitute through their behaviour a threat to the bureaucratic neutrality'. The answer categories were: 1) I disagree completely, 2) I disagree, 3) I neither disagree, nor agree, 4) I agree, and 5) I agree completely. The index runs from 0 to 10. The analysis is done by multilevel mixed-effect ordinary least squares regression with observations grouped by departments (xtmixed in Stata 13). Standard errors are in parentheses. In the model is the Ministry of the Interior and Health not included, due to only two answers from department employees. The results are robust also when the department is included in the model. See the appendix for the result for each of the items.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

Appendix

Table A1. Civil servants and their relations to political advisers (multi-level model)

	Political advisers too much influence	Political advisers exceed their mandate	Political advisers respect civil servants efforts	Political advisers are a threat to neutrality
Country (Denmark)	-0.64** (0.24)	-0.73** (0.30)	-1.09*** (0.37)	-1.09*** (0.27)
Sex (women)	0.02 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.17)	-0.14 (0.18)	-0.16 (0.17)
Age	-0.08 (0.05)	- 0.01 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.09 (0.05)
Seniority	-0.01 (0.01)	- 0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)
Department (large)	-0.10 (0.24)	-0.02 (0.29)	0.01 (0.37)	-0.09 (0.26)
Cut point 1	-3.95*** (0.48)	- 3.82*** (0.50)	-6.46*** (0.71)	-5.32*** (0.55)
Cut point 2	-1.89*** (0.45)	-1.47*** (0.47)	-3.97*** (0.56)	-3.33*** (0.48)
Cut point 3	-0.16 (0.44)	0.34 (0.48)	-2.72*** (0.55)	-1.87*** (0.47)
Cut point 4	2.33*** (0.48)	2.07*** (0.50)	0.53 (0.53)	0.41 (0.47)
Department variance	0.12 (0.10)	0.29 (0.14)	0.53 (0.23)	0.18 (0.10)
Wald Chi ²	8.76	7.12	13.21	19.29
Level 1	530	527	538	533
Level 2	30	30	30	30

Note: The following questions are used to create the index for Contestability: The questions start like this: *These questions concern the role and accountability of political advisers and political appointees in general. Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:* Then comes four items following the overall question; 1) 'Political advisers and political appointees do not encourage free and frank discussions on the whole range of policy alternatives available. We use four survey items from the same overall question: 2) 'Political advisers and political appointees have too much influence on the government's agenda', 3) 'Political advisers and political appointees sometimes exceed their mandate', 4) 'Political advisers and political appointees generally respect the civil servants' efforts', and 'Political advisers constitute through their behaviour a threat to the bureaucratic neutrality'. The answer categories were: 1) I disagree completely, 2) I disagree, 3) I neither disagree, nor agree, 4) I agree, and 5) I agree completely. In the model the question about respect has been reversed. The analyses are done by multilevel mixed-effect ordered logistic regression with observations grouped by departments (meologit in Stata 13). Standard errors are in parentheses. In the model is the Ministry of the Interior and Health not included, due to only two respondents from the department have answered. The results are robust also when the department is included in the model.

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10.

