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Politicisation within the European Commission's Bureaucracy

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Abstract:

Against a background of institutional change and organisational reform, we analyse the politicisation of the European Commission's bureaucracy. Politicisation can generally be defined as the substitution of bureaucratic neutrality by introducing political considerations into the human-resource management and behaviour of civil servants. The concepts of direct and professional politicisation serve as vantage points for our analysis. The empirical data are taken from documentary analysis and recent online and semi-structured surveys of Commission officials. We show that Commission bureaucrats, although they are highly sensitive to the political side of their job, are less politicised since the Kinnock reforms than before. While the College of the Commission seems to have indeed become more politically responsive to its supranational peers and national governments, the Commission's bureaucracy can be characterised as weakly politicised or, according to current debates, as quite instrumental in a Neo-Weberian sense.

Points for practitioners:

- Distinction between "direct" and "professional" politicisation

- We see de-politicisation at service level but a stronger political role for the College of the Commission

- Evidence for the high quality and high professionalism of the Commission service

Key Words: administrative reform, bureaucratic autonomy, European governance, European Union

Word Count: 8 592

1. Introduction

In this article we study the extent to which the European Commission's bureaucracy is politicised. How "bureaucratic politicisation" is best defined and whether it is a good thing (in terms of effective management and steering) or a bad thing (in terms of legitimacy and democratic governance) has been widely debated in our discipline (Peters, 2011; Peters and Pierre, 2004). Against the background of this literature, we define bureaucratic politicisation as the substitution of bureaucratic neutrality by introducing political considerations into the human-resource management (HRM) and direct behaviour of civil servants. We suggest operationalising this definition by employing the concepts of "direct" and "professional" politicisation (explained in more detail in the following section) as two useful aspects from which we can study the bureaucracy of the European Commission.

The article proceeds as follows. After this initial exposition, we introduce the Commission in its political context and also the central features of its administrative organisation (Sections 2 and 3). Then we discuss the theoretical and conceptual implications of the choice of our politicisation perspective and we describe our data sources and the method we employ (Sections 4 and 5). Our empirical analysis follows in Sections 6 and 7, where we assess the degree of direct and professional politicisation of the Commission bureaucracy from both a structural and perception-based perspective. We conclude by discussing the implication of our findings (Section 8).

In a nutshell, we argue that the Commission's bureaucracy (although the bureaucrats are highly sensitive to the political side of their job) is less "politicised" today – i.e., after the Kinnock reform – than in the past (Bauer, 2008, 2009). While the political apex of the

Commission appears to have indeed become more politically dependent upon the European Parliament and the member states, the Commission's bureaucracy remains highly autonomous. In this regard, recent administrative changes (Kinnock reforms) appear to have put the Commission's bureaucracy on a Neo-Weberian trajectory (Ongaro, 2011; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). While it is undeniable that performance measurement has improved and greater responsibility has been transferred to the lower echelons of the administration (see Bauer, 2008), the Weberian core features of an administration are still clearly discernible and by and large intact. In this sense, the Commission's bureaucracy, seen from the perspective of those at its uppermost levels, has become more instrumental in recent years.

2. Three Trends Characterising the Commission's Changing Institutional Context

The European Commission is an organisation which is forced to permanently adapt its internal set-up (new responsibilities, re-allocation of portfolios, etc.) while it operates in a constantly changing political system. One may argue that "change within change" applies somehow to all central state administrations and all political systems. However, the intensity and quality of systemic change the Commission is confronted with appears unmatched in the "normal times" of national contexts. There are at least three major trends that impinge in particular upon the political and institutional role of the Commission's bureaucracy: the parliamentarisation of the EU, the governmentalisation of the Council structure and the presidentialisation of the Commission itself. Each of these trends would merit close scrutiny on its own. For our purpose, however, a short description with reference to the implications for the working context of the European Commission's bureaucracy must suffice.

Parliamentarisation: Previously, the Commission was the natural "ally" of the European Parliament in its struggle (against the Council and the member states) for recognition and competences in the EU system. Now that the Parliament has become an equal co-legislator with the Council, the Commission appears to be increasingly sidelined. Moreover, the Parliament has increased its political influence over the Commission. This is most evident in the inauguration process for a new Commission where the candidate for the Commission presidency must be elected by an absolute majority of European parliamentarians.[1] What is perhaps most telling, given that the Parliament is not satisfied with its decision rights in the legislative process, is that it has become progressively more interested in the political agenda-setting and executive powers vested in the Commission. The Parliament thus increasingly uses its enhanced budgetary powers to attempt to micro-manage policy development.

Governmentalisation: Although the European Parliament is the "supranational" winner of recent constitutional changes, the intergovernmental element of the EU's complex institutional set-up has also been strengthened. This is most visible in the changing role of the European Council, where the heads of government meet. The European Council has recently been made a formal EU institution, so that far from only providing "general guidelines", it now defines detailed policy programmes that then have to be "implemented" by the other institutions. The Commission is thus at risk of de facto losing its monopoly of initiative. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that the Commission is only an observer on the board of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), while the working group set up to formulate the new growth and stability pact is headed by European Council president Van Rompuy. Previously, such preparatory tasks related to policy would naturally go to the

Commission. Even in daily policy-making, the Commission appears to be coming under greater pressure from the heads of state and governments.

Presidentialisation: Parliamentarisation and intergovernmentalisation do change the external political context in which the Commission has to operate, but the Commission itself has also changed. In particular, the authority of the President of the Commission over his fellow Commissioners has been considerably increased. However, what is discussed under the heading of "presidentialisation" also includes the strengthening of the top-down steering capacities (via recent management reforms) of the Secretariat-General (in particular in view of the pluri-annual management cycle where policy objectives have to be formulated and their implementation continuously reported).

These few remarks underline the fact that the role of the Commission is in flux; it is coming under greater political pressure from both the member states' governments (via the European Council) and the European Parliament. It would be difficult for the Commission today to re-establish its famous "policy entrepreneurial" skills – even if Jacques Delors were president. At the same time, the relationship between the political College and the Commission's bureaucracy is changing, too. At the very least, the Commission has recently created new organisational capacities for procedural top-down administrative steering. Since the concept of politicisation is in essence relational, we need to keep these trends in mind if we later want to assess the implications of the empirical politicisation we find inside the Commission bureaucracy.

3. Organisational Characteristics of the Commission and Internal Change

The Commission's bureaucracy has a similar organisation to national ministries (Egeberg, 2010: 133). While the political leadership (the College of Commissioners and their cabinets) is subject to parliamentary scrutiny, and the College collectively agrees on policy initiatives, each of the 27 Commissioners assumes supervisory and policy responsibility for the work of his/her Directorate-General (DG). There are more than 30 such DGs and other services, which are responsible for agriculture, cohesion policy, environment, translation and so forth. More than 40,000 officials and non-permanent staff work in Brussels (and to a limited extent in Luxembourg and the other sites of the Commission), forming what we call the Commission bureaucracy.

The Commission also recently went through a major organisational change. The so-called Kinnock reforms (named after the former vice-president in charge) consisted of four crucial issues: personnel, strategic planning and programming, financial management, and transparency and ethics. The reform changed the Commission from a traditional continental bureaucracy into an administration moving towards pluri-annual planning, increased vertical and horizontal coordination, and a focus on outputs (Balint, Bauer and Knill, 2008). More emphasis was put on capacities for effective top-down management, as well as on performance indicators and audit.

The hybrid character of the Commission – a technocratic elite organisation producing policy drafts that at the same time is a political broker helping to bring about reliable compromises – is acknowledged in many studies (see Peterson, 2006: 80—82). It should be highlighted, however, that the Kinnock reforms have altered the relationship between the Commission's political level (College) and its civil servants (in the DGs), in particular by setting clearer "boundaries" between the two spheres and by introducing to the culture of the Commission both horizontal and vertical coordination and steering mechanisms. In this

regard, a recent study concluded that "what is perhaps most distinctive about the 'new' [Barroso I] Commission is how far the two halves of the hybrid had drifted apart" (Peterson, 2008: 767). Our focus on politicisation wants to shed light precisely on the crucial relationship between the administrative and the political parts of the European Commission.

4. Bureaucratic Politicisation

Bureaucratic politicisation is a phenomenon that affects all public administrations, though to different degrees, and also touches upon the main function of an independent civil service as the basis of a modern government. Politicisation creates a tension that lies in the fact that it is seen, on the one hand, as a helpful tool for the leaders of the day in controlling the bureaucracy and, on the other, as a means to short-cutting – with potentially devastating side effects – the fundamental principles on which the very functioning of an instrumental administrative hierarchy depends. These core principles of a modern civil service endangered by politicisation are the expectation that its members can pursue a career based on objective performance (meritocracy) and the belief that the policy solutions suggested by the public service are the best conceivable with regard to ensuring the common good (Peters, 2011). It is hence quite obvious that the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of bureaucratic politicisation is of great importance – especially where consequences for policy-making are to be expected – for scholars of public administration, policy analysts and practitioners alike. Unfortunately, there is no single consensual theoretical definition of bureaucratic politicisation, nor are there unambiguous analytical concepts or empirical measurement traditions to which one could easily turn for the analysis of specific cases.

At the conceptual level, a variety of different (sub-)dimensions of bureaucratic politicisation are described in the literature. In his contribution to the Handbook of Public Administration, Luc Rouban (2003), for instance, distinguishes between three broad dimensions that all have a very distinct reading of the concept. He views politicisation (1) as participation in political decision-making, (2) as partisan control over the bureaucracy and (3) as political involvement of the civil service as citizens and voters. Peters (2011) suggests a taxonomy of six theoretically derived dimensions, which, with respect to possible ways to operationalise them, appear not to be always empirically clearly distinguishable.[2] Schwanke and Ebinger (in a recent study based on the German scholarly tradition about the politicisation of German federal ministries) distinguish between the dimensions of formal and functional politicisation, which are similar to the understanding in this paper and additionally identify party-political activities and politicisation ex officio (2006: 234).

As regards measurement, previous efforts at studying politicisation have approached the concept by either inquiring into the politicisation of *appointment* or the politicisation of *policy-making* itself (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008: 342; Mulgan, 2007). The former, and more conventional, "appointment approach" is less straightforward because one may only hypothesise about the *potential* (as opposed to the *de facto*) consequences HRM can have on public policy-making (Mulgan, 2007: 571). However, its advantage is that it is more amenable to comparative studies (Peters and Pierre, 2004). The latter "policy-making approach", in contrast, directly links administrative behaviour with policy output and is thus closer to the ambiguous practical consequences of the phenomenon touched upon above.

In brief, we lack a clear, overarching definition of bureaucratic politicisation that is able to cover all the different potential forms of the concept. As we do not want to engage in theorising politicisation or to start a discussion about the implications of operationalisation

and measurement, we take recourse in Peters and Pierre (2004), which seems to us to be a widely accepted study in the area. We broaden their definition slightly and include previous points of criticism by taking a less appointment-focused approach to the topic (see Eichbaum and Shaw, 2008). Hence, we refer to *bureaucratic politicisation as the substitution of neutrality by introducing political (i.e., non-meritocratic and – given the policy dossiers at stake – non-objective) considerations into the decision-making process*. The areas of greatest interest where such bureaucratic politicisation may take place are HRM (and thus intra-organisational decisions about staff) and self-censorship, whereby civil servants align their professional behaviour to expectations about the value preferences of their superiors. We operationalise these two conceptual sides of bureaucratic politicisation as "direct politicisation" and "professional politicisation", respectively. Each serves as a separate point of departure for our empirical inquiry into the European Commission bureaucracy.

Direct politicisation, or formal politicisation as it is also called (see Rouban, 2003: 313–317), can be conceived of as the top-down ability of political superiors to decide about recruitment and promotion by considering non-merit characteristics of officials (in particular, at the higher echelons of the services). On the one hand, such direct politicisation obviously has important implications in terms of the steering capacity of superiors, since it helps to ensure compliance by subordinates. On the other hand, direct politicisation undermines the principle of a merit-based civil service and circumvents the desired neutrality of the bureaucracy in more general terms.

Professional politicisation, or functional politicisation as it is also called (see Mayntz and Derlien, 1989), should be understood as the degree of bottom-up responsiveness of bureaucrats towards the political requirements of their job. The assumption is that officials

attempt to anticipate the policy position of those whom they serve, mainly in order to enhance their personal career prospects.[3]

5. Data and Method

Bureaucratic politicisation is not directly observable. The rules of HRM might be applied in a politicised way, but such exploitation is not visible just by looking at the documents. Informal party-political influence or the influence of national governments is also difficult to pin down. What studies of politicisation (including this one) do, therefore, is look for traces of politicisation in the topical responses of officials. Two major problems come with this commonly applied "perception-based approach" to politicisation. First, respondents are notoriously unreliable when it comes to evaluating changes over time; in our case, this means that the comparison between developments before and after the Kinnock reforms may not be accurately reported. Second, there is the risk of systematic under-reporting of politicisation because of desirability effects; in other words, respondents perceive politicisation as bad and thus (intentionally or unintentionally) downplay its presence or impact. Such problems are common in this kind of research and can be accounted for. We "triangulated" our findings (1) by conducting different kinds of interviews (online survey, semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews); (2) by looking for validation of observed or unobserved effects through the use of a variety of different questions (stimuli) to examine the same concept; (3) by also using structural indicators taken from documentary analysis that capture HRM practices and allow for better longitudinal comparison. More precisely, apart from the analysis of available Commission documents (especially in the area of HRM), this study is based on three data sources. First, it draws on a large online survey of a sample of policy-related Commission staff to examine how these

people conceive of the political side of their job and of party-political influence and national influence within the Commission.[4] Second, it uses 119 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the senior and middle management of the Commission (also collected as part of EUCIQ). Third, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews with randomly selected Commission officials with the aim of validating our findings and obtaining additional explanatory comments. The following two sections present our empirical results from both a structural and a perception-based viewpoint.

6. Direct Politicisation within the Commission

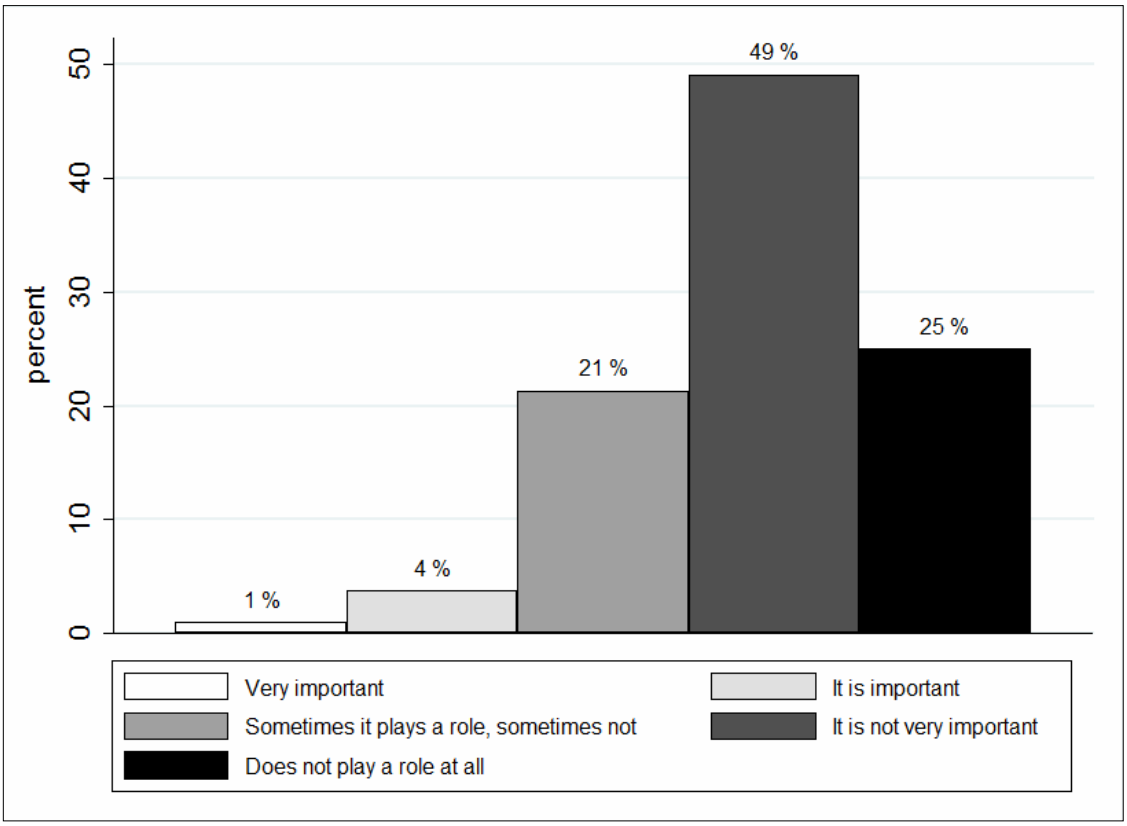
Direct politicisation has been defined as the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection and the promotion of members of the public service (Peters, 2011). In our view, there are three ways to conceive of "political" in the context of the European Commission's bureaucracy. First, "political" can mean ideological bias or party politicisation. Second, "political" might be translated as unjustified sensibility for (particular) national positions. Finally "political" can mean undue rewards from top office-holders for loyal behaviour by subordinates. Do we find evidence for any of these three?

Little evidence of party-political politicisation in the Commission

Asked how important party affiliation or sympathy for a particular party is in the Commission, 74 percent of the interviewed middle and senior Commission managers said that "party affiliation is not important" or even that "it does not play a role at all". Only 5 percent believed "it is important", while 21 percent of the managers said it may be "sometimes important and sometimes not" (see Figure 1). Being a party member is also unusual for Commission civil servants. Only 9 percent of our sample said they are an active

or passive member of a national political party.[5] Compared to the top-level ministerial bureaucracy of Germany, for instance, this is a very low share (see Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006: 239). In relative terms, therefore, one can say that with respect to party membership and affinity, the Commission is less directly "politicised" than are the central administrations of the EU member states.

Figure 1: Perceived party politicisation within the Commission administration: "How important is party affiliation or party sympathy for Commission officials?"



Note: Heads of Unit, Directors, Deputy Directors-General, Directors-General (n = 108). **Source:** EUCIQ; see Annex Q1.

Are we at risk of under-reporting party politicisation due to social desirability effects? The online survey contained a question which we can use as a "control". The officials were asked about the basis of their professional network within the Commission (see Suvarierol, 2008). Party-political contact ranked low. Only 19 percent said that ideology or party

affiliation would play a role in their individual networking.[6] Thus, on that account, too, party politics appears not to be very relevant in the daily life of Commission officials.

"Nationality" is no substitute for missing party politics in the Commission

In the same "basis of your professional network" question just mentioned, "nationality" turned out to be more than twice as important as ideology and party affiliation (52 percent). Is perhaps "nationality politicisation" within the Commission the counterpart to "party politicisation" within national bureaucracies?

The intra-organisational handling of staffs' nationality is indeed a disputed aspect of HRM in the Commission and is reflected in several formal rules and guidelines (such as recruiting "on the broadest possible geographical basis from among nationals of member states"; see European Commission, 2004: I – 14, Article 27). The crucial question then becomes: Do we find evidence that national quotas and a fair distribution of administrative top jobs are used as a systematic tool to substitute merit criteria in the recruitment and promotion of Commission officials (and thus to eventually influence policy-making in a way that is favourable to specific national concerns)? There are some clues in textbooks about the Commission. For example, the dominance of officials from southern countries in the DG for Cohesion Policy (responsible for the distribution of structural funds from which the southern countries benefit the most) or the habit of "national flags" – the Director-General of DG Agriculture must be French and the Director-General of DG Competition German. The new obligation that Directors-General have to move to a new post after five years seemed to have solved the "national flag" problem. However, it is difficult to obtain systematic empirical data that would help to investigate routine struggles to promote or recruit particular nationalities into certain jobs. Nonetheless, if nationality has become an unjustified political criteria in the selection and promotion of civil servants, this should leave

"observable" traces in our survey — as career civil servants would certainly be unhappy with such practices.

And indeed, the acceptance of the geographical balance principle is relatively weak among Commission staff. Only 35 percent of the 1,658 respondents (distributed about equally throughout hierarchical ranks) indicated in the online survey that they actually agreed that posts in the Commission should be distributed on the basis of geographical balance. A total of 48 percent were opposed to such a distribution, while 17 percent remained indifferent.[7] Thus, we can say that the problem as such is of some concern to the Commission staff. Face-to-face interviews, however, showed overall acceptance of the principle of geographical balance — with the condition that *merit should come first*, in other words, that geographical balance should not be the *sole* criterion for selection or promotion.

To have nationals of all member states represented in a "balanced" way is one thing, but the existence of signs of the political positioning and subsequent national usage of these staff to influence Commission policy-making is quite another. Interviewees admit that national governments do indeed "lobby" for their national candidates to get into top positions; however, national governments can only do so where the right "constellation" emerges (i.e., an appropriate national candidate is available and the constellation surrounding the vacancy does not already contain too many "own" nationals). In other words, it is very difficult for a national government to orchestrate Commission promotion procedures in accordance with their preference in order to achieve exploitable strategic policy configurations (i.e., to have their "man/woman" in a crucial post inside the Commission). To be "successful", national governments have to support well-qualified candidates in promising constellations and they can rarely afford to only follow their current political interests and personnel preferences. In sum, the "remoteness of Brussels" and the

fact that national governments have only limited means to directly influence important promotions both set natural limits to the systematically exploitable substitution of merit criteria for political criteria.

We can cross-check the robustness of such a "low salience of nationality politicisation" interpretation with another question from the survey. The civil servants were asked whether they think it is problematic that Commission officials should manage dossiers of special interest to their "own" member state. More than half of the respondents (51 percent, no major differences between hierarchical ranks) actually believed it was *not*. Only 34 percent had some concerns that there might be a conflict of interest.[8] Compared to the findings of interviews conducted in 1996 and 2002 (see Hooghe, 2005), the percentage of those who consider the handling of dossiers from a Commission official's home country a problematic conflict of interest has drastically declined. Our follow-up interviews confirm this result. About half of our 112 respondents from middle and senior management thought that there had indeed been a change of mind in the Commission towards more tolerance for handling of home-country dossiers. Furthermore, the fact that their colleagues saw little danger of nationality-driven conflicts of interest did not surprise them.[9]

In sum, nationality in Brussels seems to lack the cohesiveness that party-political ideology produces (and which makes it utilisable for office-holders) in national administrative environments. Even if a concern for geographical balance substitutes merit criteria in some cases, the feeling in the Commission is that nowadays this is of much less strategic importance and is considerably less associated with attempts to systematically steer the Commission civil service than had been the case before the Kinnock reform.[10]

The substitution of merit for personal loyalty

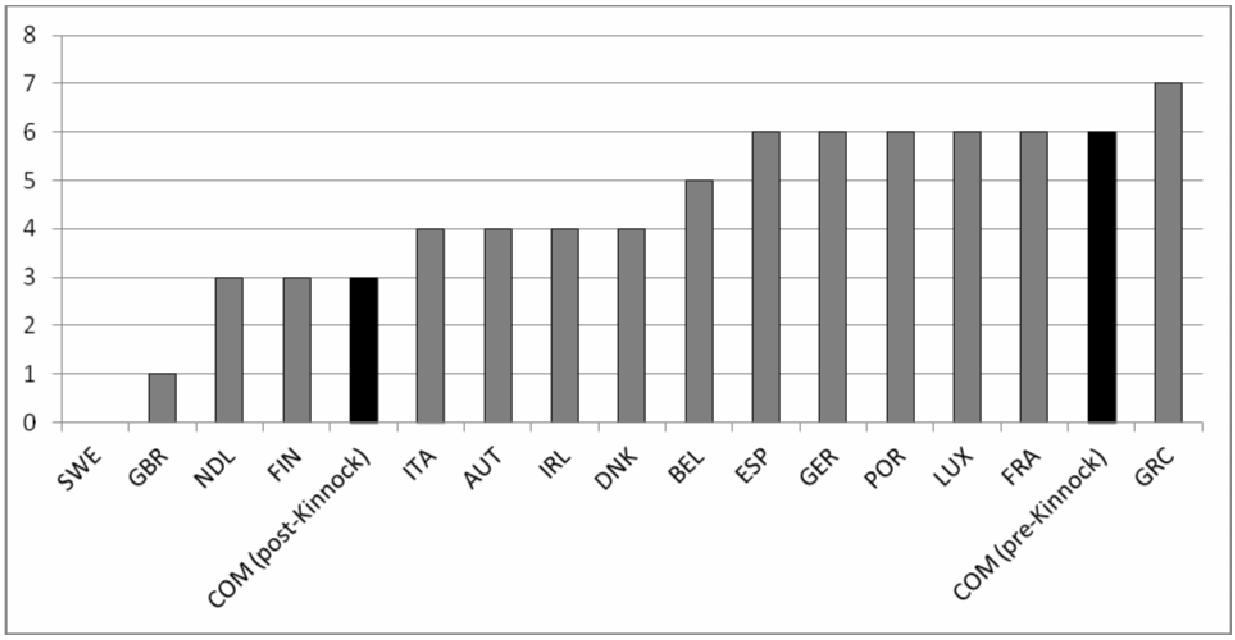
Party-political affiliation and nationality thus appear of little use for steering the Commission civil service; however, it may still be the case that the substitution of merit criteria by political criteria is useful for the organisational apex of the Commission in getting their political programmes implemented (apart from direct party-political or national links). In this sense, direct politicisation would allow the organisational leadership to select and promote individuals of their trust into strategic positions within the Commission hierarchy. The success story of the presidencies of Jacques Delors is usually explained by just this: his determination to put "his" people in the right positions (Grant, 1994). As opposed to the concept of professional politicisation, which will be dealt with below, loyalty here is assumed to work top down. It is unproblematic if subordinates feel loyal and act accordingly, but more serious for the civil servants' neutrality if the organisational leadership is formally able to reward perceived individual loyalty on non-meritocratic grounds by exerting influence on HRM.

One example may suffice to highlight this point. The recruitment and selection of Directors and Directors-General in the 1980s was characterised by low formalisation and a high degree of discretion at the hands of the individual Commissioners and their cabinets. Since the implementation of the Kinnock reforms and the release of the new staff regulations in 2004, individual Commissioners still hold the right to appoint the senior management within their DG, but they have significantly weaker discretionary powers since "Consultative Committees of Appointments" have gained an important say in the (pre-)selection of qualified candidates.

It is possible to quantify recent changes in the formal politicisation of the Commission by means of an additive index using existing formal organisational rules (see Balint, Bauer and Knill, 2008). Following a scheme based on previous work by Schnapp (2004), the degree

of politicisation of promotion and selection procedures within the Commission can be compared to that of national public administrations.[11]

Figure 2: The politicisation of senior civil servants: The EU-15 and the change of the Commission



Notes: Reference year for all country data is 2002; reference year for Commission data is 2006; SWE = Sweden, GBR = Great Britain, NDL = Netherlands, FIN = Finland, COM (post-Kinnock) = European Commission after the Kinnock reforms (as of 2006), ITA = Italy, AUT = Austria, IRL = Ireland, DNK = Denmark, BEL = Belgium, ESP = Spain, GER = Germany, POR = Portugal, LUX = Luxemburg, FRA =France, COM (pre-Kinnock) = European Commission in the 1980s, GRC = Greece. ***Source:*** own modification to Balint et al. 2008: 685; Italy was re-coded according to Ongaro 2009.

The selection of individual indicators or the attribution of particular values may be criticised, but the observable trend appears solid: the post-Kinnock Commission's recruitment and promotion rules leave less room for the substitution of merit criteria by the political preferences of superiors than in the preceding period. Even if one argues that the formal side of the promotion procedure is one thing and the "real" informal handling another, one cannot deny that the new rules will make it more difficult for superiors to bring their loyalists into strategic positions.

In sum, with respect to direct politicisation within the Commission, we conclude that party politics (as could perhaps be expected) plays hardly any and nationality politics plays only a weak role. As indicated by our structural measurement, top-down politicisation was strong in the past (even compared to most civil service systems in member states). It has, however, considerably decreased since the Kinnock reform. If anything, with respect to direct politicisation, the Commission administration appears to be the opposite of a highly politicised bureaucracy.

7. Professional Politicisation of Commission Officials

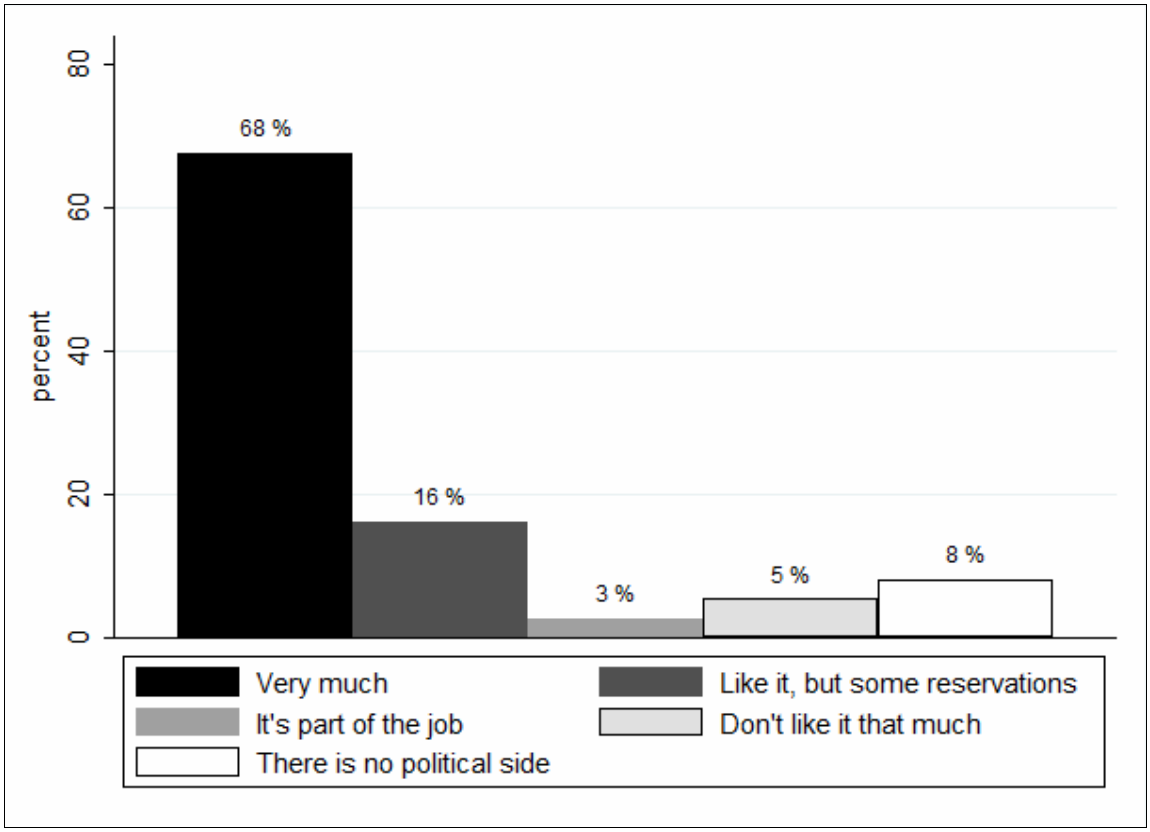
Direct politicisation assumes that partisan, national or internal-network considerations have atop-down impact, that is, from the leadership down to the lower levels of the bureaucratic echelons. Politicisation can, however, also work the other way around. Those working in the civil service are usually responsive towards the political requirements of their job — they take seriously the preferences of those who formally guide them. Civil servants are responsive to their leaders out of a working ethos, conviction or opportunism, but in effect most of them in their daily work follow directions from above. The clearer these directions are, the better they follow them, and if they have no or no clear directions, they try to guess what the current leadership might want them to do. Such professional politicisation has been described elsewhere — under the heading of functional politicisation – as implying:

> "… a greater sensitivity of civil servants for considerations of political feasibility, and institutes a kind of political self-control of top bureaucrats through their

anticipation of the reactions of the [domestic] cabinet and of parliament to their policy proposals and legislative drafts“ (Mayntz and Derlien, 1989: 402).

What evidence do we find for such functional, professional or anticipatory politicisation in the case of the European Commission? A preliminary observation is that because of the Commission's responsibility to initiate policy drafts under the decision-making system of the EU, Commission officials at all levels are *ex officio* involved in EU policy-making. After all, the Commission does not produce number plates, passports or a particular service to citizens, but complex political goods like policy programmes, management of the financial responsibilities of the EU, supervising of joint implementation and so on. It may sound trivial, but it should be restated that the Commission is – in this general sense – a political organisation. Working in the Commission means you are exposed to politics, although the degree of this exposure may vary. As Figure 3 indicates, senior officials are aware of this political side of their job and the large majority also perceives it as a particularly enjoyable aspect of their work.

Figure 3: Political involvement of Commission officials: How much do you like the political side of your job?



Note*:** Question asked of Directors and Directors-General only; n=37. ***Source: EUCIQ 2011 (see Annex Q6).

In brief, to the extent that they work on politically contested issues, the Commission officials can be viewed as "political" bureaucrats who explicitly like this role.[12] Senior Commission officials, especially, are thus similar to higher domestic civil servants who work in close contact with the political leaders and who, due to their substantial engagement with the world of politics, naturally deviate from the ideal type of a purely instrumental bureaucrat (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981: 4—6). As Hooghe (2012) shows, Commission officials also develop distinct images of Europe (often in favour of supranationalist ideas) that may guide their daily work. The question that is of interest here, however, is in what way precisely and to what degree Commission officials are "hybrids" (to borrow a term from the classical analysis by Joel D. Aberbach and his colleagues)? We essentially raise two questions to find out: The first one concerns the loyalty of Commission

officials towards both the politically agreed content and the political leadership as such. Second, how do Commission officials perceive their own role within the politico-administrative system of the European Union?

Asked whether they think it the responsibility of the services to support the politically agreed position of the College, the expressed agreement among Commission civil servants is very high, nominally increasing from rank and file, to middle, to top management.[13] The self-commitment of the service to College decisions is exemplary, on average 87 percent; this is certainly a high value for overall bottom-up loyalty prevailing within the Commission services.

Liking the political part of their job and demonstrating great loyalty to political decisions from the top makes Commission officials fall perfectly into the conceptual category of "image II" bureaucrats who demonstrate a clear ability to distinguish between a power-based and a policy-based understanding of political work (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981: 4—23; Mayntz, 1984: 201). It fits this picture that only one third of Commission officials when asked whether their departmental loyalty overrides their organisational loyalty put the DG interest ahead of the organisational interest in their work (see Annex Q8). Hence, this data is not proof of an outspoken "silo" mentality or of strong "sub-unit autonomy" (see Trondal, 2011), that is, of a parochial culture and lack of inter-departmental cooperation within the Commission.

In order to capture Commission officials' understanding of their role, we used the categories that Aberbach and colleagues developed in their classical study of national civil servants (1981). An overview of the roles is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: List of (non-exclusive) roles that middle or senior officials may consider part of their job.[14]

	Role	Role description
1	**Technician**	Solving technical policy problems and applying specialised knowledge
2	**Advocate**	Fighting for or representing the interests of a social group, class or cause, or protesting against injustice
3	**Legalist**	Focusing on legal processes or legalistic definitions of one's responsibilities
4	**Broker**	Mediating or resolving conflicts of interest and political conflicts
5	**EU Representative**	Representing the European Union
6	**Facilitator**	Protecting the interests of specific clientele groups or constituents
7	**Partisan**	Focusing on the political or partisan aspects of the job

Source: EUCIQ compilation based on Aberbach et al. 1981.

Our results (see Table 2) indicate that the self-perceptions of technical problem-solvers (Role 1), representatives of the EU (Role 5) and brokers that mediate between diverging interests (Role 4) are seen as the most accurate descriptions of the work of top-level European civil servants. By contrast, Commission officials see themselves least as agents pushing for a particular or partisan aspect of their job (Roles 2 and 7). Compared to the average role understanding of domestic civil servants in the seven countries examined by the Aberbach team (1981: 89), the results of our survey are quite similar. However, both the broker role (25 percentage points more) and the representative role (22 percentage points more) are much more pronounced in the European context. This difference underlines the fact that Commission officials do still perceive themselves as brokers between different national and inter-institutional interests, as well as representatives and servants of the greater good of the European project.

Table 2: Role perception of Commission officials

	Role	Percent	Ranking	Role perception of ECS in comparison to DCS
1	**Technical**	77 %	2	+ 8 (role is 8 percentage points *more* important for ECS)
2	**Advocate**	8 %	7	- 12 (role is 12 percentage points *less* important for ECS)
3	**Legalist**	34 %	4	- 2

4	**Broker**	63 %	3	+ 25
5	**Representative**	78 %	1	+ 22
6	**Facilitator**	12 %	5	- 17
7	**Partisan**	8 %	8	+ 1

Notes: The different roles are non-exclusive categories. The three most accurate/important roles are considered per respondent. ECS = European civil servants; DCS = domestic civil servants. **Source:** EUCIQ (n=73, see Annex Q9); data on DCS is taken from Aberbach et al. (1981: 89).

In sum, the average Commission official is very sensitive to the political side of her/his job; s/he is, however, more interested in problem-solving than in pursuing a particular ideological policy solution; s/he goes a long way to find a pragmatic solution for whatever problem s/he is confronted with; her/his loyalty lies with the official leadership, whose directions s/he is happy to follow, as s/he has a clear notion of the difference between political and politics. When interviewing Commission officials in this regard, the answer we got most of the time is perhaps best summarised in a comment by a director:

> "Working for Europe is my first point. We do initiate, but achieving concrete results is my goal. I have to cover a wide range. It is about what you manage to achieve and results, not the impact that happens in the future. The real job of the Commission is to listen, to the Council, to the Parliament, to the people, and then make the synthesis trying to make the best proposal and then spend your life negotiating."

8. Conclusion

Isolating the effects that an administrative reform has on a public administration is never easy. Reform objectives are rarely unambiguous, intervening effects are difficult to control for, assessments shift as time goes by and new challenges arise. Assessing the effects

of the recent administrative reform of the European Commission brings even more challenges because the Commission's bureaucracy does not serve a minister or national government that is politically accountable to a parliament, rather it serves a collective body of a group of technocrats (most of whom probably never met before they were appointed). Moreover, the Commission is part of a political system, the European Union, which is constantly changing; it is thus not always clear how organisational change (within the Commission) relates to external structures that are changing in parallel.

With such caveats in mind, our first result is that the Commission as a supranational institution has become more dependent upon its supranational and governmental peers than it used to be in the past; especially the power-maximising Parliament claims more scrutiny and control powers over the European Union's "administrative apparatus". While the European Parliament (like any parliament in the world) lacks the capacities and (perhaps also) the incentives to deal with executive minutiae, the Council has traditionally guided the Commission (in programmatic terms), while the Lisbon treaty has consolidated the Council's pivotal position in this regard. At least, the recent institutional changes (EU foreign minister and permanent president of the European Council) have added to the fusion of executive and legislative logics so characteristic for the EU and appear to further strengthen the intergovernmental element of the European order. The simple point we want to make in this context is that the Commission's dependency upon Parliament and Council has increased; hence, the College as a political body is less autonomous today than in the past.

A second result is that within the Commission as an organisation, important changes have taken place, too. The College has become large and unwieldy, so that the idea of an "aréopague" of equals is now obviously illusionary. The college logic has been supplanted by a hierarchal logic embodied in the growing powers of the Commission president. Moreover,

the Commission president politically, and the Commission's Secretariat-General organisationally, do indeed use their new top-down management powers to an unexpected extent.

The third result is to restate that, in terms of professional ethos, the Commission civil servants appear politically sensible, but hardly proactive as regards political ideology. They seem politically self-controlled and guided by considerations of political feasibility with a sound capacity for anticipating the reactions of the important players. They are — in Aberbach et al.'s sense — "image II" bureaucrats who are political but not very politicised. What is more, despite the multinational context of EU policy-making, there is little evidence that the missing party politicisation of the Commission civil service has been replaced by something like nationality politics.

The point now is that as the Commission (as a supranational institution) becomes politically increasingly dependent upon the Parliament and the Council, the individual Commissioners become increasingly subordinated to the Commission president. Such institutional changes are flanked by intra-organisational change fuelled by the recent Kinnock reforms. However, these organisational reforms reduce the ability of those at the top of the Commission's bureaucratic hierarchy to use HRM (especially staff promotion) as a steering tool; in other words, direct politicisation as perhaps the last stronghold of political steering inside the Commission has lost appeal in recent years. Our fourth result, therefore, is that the Commission civil service has become more independent and more autonomous in this crucial respect.

What we thus observe is a paradox: As a supranational institution, the Commission is becoming politically ever more dependent upon its peers, it is obviously losing

entrepreneurial clout; the Commission public service, however, has become more autonomous with respect to its hierarchical apex.

In this respect, the post-Kinnock Commission fits a Neo-Weberian trajectory (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011): Against the background of increased performance measurement and transferred policy responsibility to the lower echelons of the administration, the Weberian core traits are still clearly visible or have even been strengthened.

In a broader perspective, we thus see an ever less politicised civil service in an ever more politicised organisational context. At first sight, this may be taken as good news since de-politicised civil servants are thought to be more likely to execute and deliver technically appropriate solutions and to follow their integrative mission (see Ellinas and Suleiman, 2011). At a second glance, however, problems may arise because those who should be steering the bureaucracy (namely the College and the president) are under greater political pressure, but at the same time they have fewer means than before to direct their apparatus in a top-down way. Despite important organisational measures taken by the Secretariat-General, it thus appears that the separation between College and Commission service has intensified. With the autonomy of the service further enhanced, the production of suitable policy programmes and problem solutions will depend to a great extent upon the "bottom-up" political sensitivity and sensibility of the bureaucracy. The question, however, is: Will "bottom-up sensitivity" be enough to make the Commission deliver? As long as outside political demands are diffuse, this system may work; once political demands become more consistent, however, frustrations appear unavoidable. It will be interesting to see what will be the effects of a further de-politicised bureaucracy operating in an increasingly politicised institutional structure.

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Annex: Survey questions (in order of appearance in the article)

	Method	Topic	Exact wording of the question	Rank of respondents	n
Q1	Face-to-face interviews	party affiliation	"Past studies of national civil services – particularly in Europe — have found that the party affiliation or party sympathy of top managers is often important. How important is the party affiliation or party sympathy of officials in the Commission?"	Directors, Deputy Directors-General, Directors-General, Heads of Unit	108
Q2	Face-to-face interviews	party membership	"If you don't mind us asking, do you belong to a political party?"	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit	110
Q3	Online survey	source of informal network	"We are interested in your views about how formal or informal are interactions within the Commission. In your experience, what are the most important bases for informal networks in the Commission?" [Only results for nationality and ideology/party affiliation are reported]	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit, [Administrators excluded]	497
Q4	Online survey	perception of national balance	"We would like to know your views on the recruitment of officials to the Commission and who should do specific jobs. Some argue that posts in the Commission should be distributed on the basis of geographical balance. What is your view?"	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit, Administrators	1658
Q5	Online survey	conflict of interest	"Some think that it is problematic for Commission officials to manage dossiers of special interest to their own member state. What do you think?"	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit, Administrators	1656
Q6	Face-to-face interviews	perception of the political side of the job	"Senior managers in the Commission by definition are involved in policy-making. This inevitably involves contact with the world of politicians and of politics. Could we ask how much you like the political side of your work?"	Directors-General and Directors	37
Q7	Online survey	loyalty towards position of the College	"We are interested in relationships between different parts of the Commission and categories of Commission official (Please think generally; not just about your own – or your Commissioner's — DG). It is the responsibility of the services to support the politically agreed positions of the College."	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit, Administrators	1441
Q8	Online survey	loyalty towards DG vs. Commission as a whole	"Commission officials work for their Directorate-General first, then for the Commission"	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit, Administrators	1501
Q9	Face-to-face interviews	role perception	"Here is a list of roles that middle or senior officials may consider to be part of their job. The list has proven useful in comparative studies to describe how national or international public servants perceive their role. Are there any with which you decidedly do not identify? Could you rank the top three in order of your priorities?"	Directors-General, Deputy Directors-General, Directors, Heads of Unit	73

Notes

[1] It should be noted here that the observation of increased politicisation of the EP and the Commission cabinet can be seen as part of the broader dispute about the question as to whether or not party politics are "[t]he Right or the Wrong Sort of Medicine for the EU?" (see Notre Europe, 2006).

[2] These are direct, professional, redundant, anticipatory, dual and social politicisation.

[3] For a further differentiation of a top-down and bottom-up understanding of politicisation, see Clifford and Wright (1997) and Peters and Pierre (2004).

[4] The data was collected as part of The European Commission in Question (EUCIQ) project, which was funded by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council (grant RES-062-23-1188) and conducted by Michael Bauer, Renaud Dehousse, Liesbet Hooghe, Hussein Kassim (PI), John Peterson and Andrew Thompson (see Kassim et al. 2011). For further information, visit http://www.uea.ac.uk/psi/research/EUCIQ. The online survey was administered by YouGov in September and October 2008. A sample of 4,621 policy administrators was drawn from a population of over 14,000. The sample was stratified to ensure proportionality by gender, age and nationality; officials from the ten new member states were oversampled. The response rate was 41 per cent (1,901 responses).

[5] For further details, see Annex Q2.

[6] In order to ensure comparability with questions Q1 and Q2, we restricted the calculation of percentages to the responses of middle and senior management. For further details, see Annex Q3.

[7] See Annex Q4. It is not entirely clear, however, if all respondents interpreted the question in the same way. The results of the semi-structured follow-up interviews indicate that some respondents may have understood the word "distributed" in a formal sense (i.e., that there should be fixed quotas and flagging of posts for certain nationalities). Thus, our results may overestimate the negative perception of geographical balance.

[8] Online survey; n=1656. For more information, see Annex Q5.

[9] Many respondents, for example, emphasised the advantages of civil servants dealing with dossiers from their country of origin — especially if that country has a rare language and little organisational memory about its institutional set-up exists as yet within the Commission. Furthermore, many respondents argued that the rules supporting multi-nationality in the DGs, i.e., shared responsibility for a dossier and the monitoring and reporting practices, made potential national bias a negligible issue.

[10] As one interviewee put it, "Those times when the Director-General of DG Agriculture was 'naturally' of French nationality, and no one not French could ever aspire to have this post, are times of the past."

[11] The politicisation index is created by adding up seven dichotomous items. Each item is coded as 1 (i.e. politicised) if the condition in the brackets is satisfied. 1. Senior staff is usually recruited from the administration itself (no). 2. Senior staff is recruited through formal procedures prior to the appointment (no). 3. Senior staff can be dismissed by the minister without cause (yes). 4. Senior staff can be replaced when the government changes (yes). 5. The incumbent minister can appoint senior staff (yes). 6. A formalised cabinet system exists (yes). 7. The appointment of cabinet staff is formalised (no). As regards the Commission, change towards less politicisation is due to changes in the indicators 1,2 and 7, which are all coded 0 since the Kinnock reforms.

[12] The answers to these rather closed questions are strongly upheld by our in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the results are quite similar to the results of interviews conducted with 130 senior civil servants in Germany in 2005, where 61 percent reported that they liked the political side very much (Schwanke and Ebinger, 2006: 244).

[13] See Annex Q7. By reporting more commitment to political goals with increasing hierarchical rank, Commission officials display similar characteristics to national civil servants (see Putnam, 1976: 213; Steinkemper, 1974: 95—97).

[14] For the fifth role we used "Representing the EU" instead of the trustee role ("Representative of the state") (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981: 87). Because it no longer applies, we omitted the role of an ombudsman and also not ask a question about the policy-making aspects in our survey.