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Bridging the Archipelago: Toward an Integrative Approach to Studying Bureaucratic Politicization

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Introduction

- 1 On the morning of February 7th, 2019, Canadians awoke to allegations that their most senior civil servant, Michael Wernick, had acted in a partisan manner. His involvement in pressuring the country's attorney general to abandon the prosecution of engineering company SNC-Lavalin culminated in a controversial appearance before a parliamentary committee, during which he "abandoned impartiality" and became "a public cheerleader" of the government" (Cooper, 2023, p. 116). This led to his resignation just three years after taking office (Cecco, 2019). Months later, the Dutch Ministry of Finance similarly found itself at the centre of a media storm. National headlines reported that civil servants had edited and scrapped the findings of an independent external investigation into the Tax Authority's practices regarding childcare subsidies. This manipulation aimed to align the report with political interests and to shield the department from criticism and reputational damage (Kleinnijenhuis, 2019). Despite the distinct characteristics and circumstances surrounding these incidents, they both captured media attention and sparked varying degrees of public outrage due to their controversial nature: civil service politicization.
- 2 Bureaucratic politicization is particularly difficult to define in an era in which the lines between the political and administrative apparatus have become increasingly blurred (Van den Berg, 2011). Scholars point towards civil servants being increasingly thrust into the public eye – a spot traditionally reserved for politicians – and note that it has "become a part of the role of public sector leaders to act as the public face of their organization in expressing its values, outlining its mission, and defending its mistakes" (Grube, 2019, p. 77). Others talk about increasing politicization in the context of a

turbulent contemporary political climate in which ever-growing pressures from populism, political polarization, and a 24/7 media culture (Aucoin, 2012; Bozeman et al., 2024; O'Leary, 2019; Page & Wright, 1999; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011) mean that civil servants are having to “now pay greater attention to politics than they did in the past” (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 1).

- 3 Given this ambiguous context, it is no surprise that numerous studies have emerged, each seeking to make sense of some facet of the challenges presently facing civil servants or the blurring of boundaries between politics and administration. These studies span various national and systemic contexts, with research conducted in countries such as Australia (Maley, 2017), Belgium (Brans et al., 2017), Canada (Aucoin, 2012), Germany (Ebinger et al., 2019; Hustedt & Veit, 2017), Ireland (Connaughton, 2015), the Netherlands (Van den Berg, 2017; Van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019; Van Dorp, 2023a; 2023b), New Zealand (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007, 2013, 2019), Turkey (Demirelli & Aydin, 2024), the United States (Lewis, 2012; Peter & Pierre, 2019), and Scandinavian systems (Christiansen et al., 2016).
- 4 As this list demonstrates, research tends to adopt a nationally orientated stance. Studies place the national context under the microscope to understand the dynamics and interplay between actors that fuel politicization. Inter- or cross-national studies are, however, becoming more common (Cooper, 2020; Gherghina & Kopecký, 2016; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Kopecký, Mair & Spirova, 2012; Maley & Van den Berg, 2018; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012; Shaw, 2023; Suleiman, 2003). Yet, despite this growing profile of comparative research, studies tend to adopt the form of either: (1) a comparison between countries belonging to the same administrative tradition (often Westminster-systems; e.g. Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Grube, 2019); or (2) a collection of country-specific studies which are, in the words of Derlien (1992), more comparable than they are comparative (e.g. Peters & Pierre, 2004). Such studies provide valuable insights into politicization, but are limited to specific geographical or political-systemic contexts. Consequently, the contributions of international and cross-systemic research to the field of bureaucratic politicization – in particular the extent to which they can help elucidate the conditions and circumstances under which politicization is likely to occur – have been somewhat overlooked.
- 5 Furthermore, most research on bureaucratic politicization examines the dependent variable through the lens of one of three forms of politicization: formal, functional, or administrative bureaucratic politicization (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). Rarely do scholars adopt an approach that combines all three. In short, research remains largely focused on national or systemic contexts and a specific form of politicization, resembling isolated islands of an archipelago. To advance the research frontier and bridge these islands, what is needed is comparative research that examines all forms of politicization across administrative traditions.
- 6 This paper focuses on two interconnected objectives to address these gaps. First, it examines how bureaucratic politicization – through its formal, functional, and administrative dimensions – is conceptualized within the extant literature and can be compared across different administrative traditions, distilling both shared and context-specific dimensions of politicization. Second, it illustrates the dynamics and indicators of bureaucratic politicization within four distinct administrative contexts – Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain – providing insights into how these forms manifest in practice. By adopting a comparative and integrative perspective, this paper contributes

to the literature by addressing the siloed treatment of politicization's facets and highlighting the importance of cross-administrative analysis.

- 7 While the empirical analysis is illustrative rather than exhaustive, it underscores the utility of combining conceptual frameworks with empirical examples to deepen understanding of politicization across diverse administrative traditions. This approach navigates the theoretical and empirical thickets in the literature, offering insights for future research on bureaucratic politicization that are both integrative and context sensitive.
- 8 To this end, the article begins by examining the concept of bureaucratic politicization and elaborating on the various indicators used to identify and measure its various forms. The research design and methodology, which employs a comparative analysis based on data collected from four European countries between 2019 and 2023, are then detailed. Finally, the study reflects on how employing an integrative and comparative framework can enhance scholarly understandings of bureaucratic politicization, revealing the complex dynamics and interdependencies that shape this phenomenon.

What is 'bureaucratic politicization'?

Forms of politicization

- 9 The scholarly literature on bureaucratic politicization is extensive and characterized by a wide range of empirical foci. These include human resource management regimes (Bauer & Ege, 2012; Mikkelsen, 2018; Van de Berg et al., 2019), bureaucrats' conduct and perceptions of their roles (Aberbach et al., 1981; Grube & Howards, 2016), and the impact of political staff on civil service impartiality (De Visscher & Salomonsen, 2013; Öhberg et al., 2017). Consequently, the core notion approximates a 'liquid' concept (Bauman, 2000) that is sufficiently fluid to explain matters across a broad expanse of different conditions, contexts, and situations. An element of conceptual ambiguity is perhaps inevitable (and useful), given that bureaucratic politicization is not so much a single phenomenon, but rather several. However, too much fluidity can impede the consolidation of knowledge on the topic (Lewis, 2012). This article strives for less fluidity and more focus. To this end, Hustedt and Salomonsen's (2014) three-part typology of politicization has been adapted for the purposes of reviewing the literature on bureaucratic politicization (see Table 1).

Table 1. Making sense of bureaucratic politicization

Types	Actors	Focus	Interventions	Authors
formal	ministers top civil servants	political control over recruitment; conduct of political executives	recruitment/appointment, remuneration, termination	Christensen and Opstrup (2014); Mikkelsen (2018); Peters and Pierre (2004)
functional	top civil servants staff in line departments and agencies	political control over civil service behavior; conduct of civil servants	self-censorship; hyper-responsiveness; aligning role perceptions with minister's interests	Aberbach et al. (1981); Christensen and Opstrup (2018); Grube and Howard (2016); Mayntz and Derlien (1989); Poulsen and Koch (2018); Putnam (1973)
administrative	ministerial advisers top civil servants	political control over policymaking; conduct of ministerial advisers	obstructing access to ministers; intervening in departments; directing civil servants to alter advice	De Visscher and Salomonsen (2013); Gains and Stoker (2011); Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; Öhberg et al. (2017)

Source: Adapted from Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014)

- 10 The Hustedt and Salomonsen typology is especially helpful insofar as it links the three major categories of core executive actor (ministers, senior civil servants, and ministerial advisers) with a corresponding form of politicization (formal, functional, and administrative politicization respectively). Peters and Pierre provide an accepted point of departure for the first, formal politicization, defining it as “the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards and disciplining of members of the civil service” (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 2). Others, including Mulgan (1998), Peters (2013), and Bach et al. (2018) also focus on recruitment as the critical political strategy for securing the loyalty of the senior bureaucracy. Underpinning these understandings of formal politicization is the assumption that the political executive is the major player in the process: it is agency on the part of ministers and executives which determines whether or not the standing bureaucracy cleaves to the principle of impartiality. In the first instance, then, bureaucratic politicization is visited upon the civil service from without; partisan imperatives filter down through line departments and agencies as a function of organizational leadership.
- 11 This particular conception is generally held to be the most common approach in the literature on bureaucratic politicization (Appiah & Abdulai, 2017; Hood & Lodge, 2006). Its roots reach at least as far back as Wilson (1887), who asserted the importance of an administrative apparatus that is not the product of a spoils system defined by nepotism, patronage, and clientelism (see Overeem, 2012). Viewing the issue of politicization through the lens of formal politicization generates an empirical emphasis on the extent to which formal rules allow specific civil service positions to be held according to the prevailing minister's preferences (Rouban, 2012), with researchers exploring the ‘how, if and what’ of a civil service rule regime based on political rather than meritocratic criteria.
- 12 Borang et al. (2018) illustrate how formal politicization operates in practice, detailing how political control over bureaucratic appointments, promotions, and tenure allows incumbents to manipulate or suppress policy data to their advantage. In this regard, it acts as a bridge between formal politicization and functional politicization by

demonstrating how structural preconditions enable bureaucratic behaviors that align with political objectives.

- 13 A focus on the basis on which top civil servants are recruited will not, however, necessarily explain how the “substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria” can occur further down the chain of command. Neither will it illuminate the potential impact of ministerial advisers (now part of the “triangular” executive in most mature democracies) on bureaucratic impartiality, nor draw attention to the possibility that politicization may occur volitionally rather than as a result of external pressure being brought to bear on line departments. Additional conceptual tools are needed for this purpose. These should speak to “the introduction of political considerations into actions traditionally carried out by the civil service” (Dahlström, 2011, p. 2066). Two further concepts are useful in this respect.
- 14 The first, functional politicization, describes “a mechanism by which the public service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behavior” (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 750). Instances of this “active involvement in political processes” (Ebinger et al., 2019, p. 2) include “politically flavored tasks such as writing political speeches and providing ... political superiors with strategic advice regarding the framing of policy propositions” (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013, p. 905). The bases and nature of the conduct of civil servants, rather than the appointment of top civil servants or the activities of ministerial advisers, are the primary concerns.
- 15 Where formal and functional forms of politicization zero in on the conduct of political executives and civil servants respectively, administrative politicization comprises interventions by ministerial advisers (known variously as political staff, special advisers, and exempt staff) “that offend against the principles and conventions associated with a professional and impartial civil service” (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008, p. 343). The concept has procedural and substantive dimensions. The first describes efforts by political staff to constrain civil servants’ capacity to provide responsible competence, while the second refers to attempts to inject partisan considerations into bureaucratic advice. Shaw and Eichbaum (2019) further highlight how the evolving role of ministerial advisers can challenge traditional norms of bureaucratic impartiality. The focus here is on political control over policymaking rather than recruitment, with an empirical emphasis on the formal and informal rules-of-the-game that both regulate the activities of political staff and structure their relationships with civil servants.

Making sense of the forms

- 16 Things are seldom as clear as they appear and it is important to address some of the ambiguity behind the categorical reassurance suggested by Table 1. Peters (2013, p. 20) concludes that the “conventional normative stance on politicization [...] is that it is a blight on well-functioning democratic politics.” There is little debate concerning the corrosive effects that patronage, nepotism, and an exclusive diet of acceptably partisan advice have upon good governance. Beyond that, however, some nuance is required.
- 17 The orthodox pathway into this issue is to frame it as a tension between responsive and responsible competence (Christensen & Opstrup, 2018). The first refers to advice that is sensitive to an elected government’s democratic mandate, but which stops short of partisan advocacy of specific policy; the second is captured in Hecló’s (1975, p. 81) famous reference to “loyalty that argues back.” The trick for bureaucrats is to strike a

balance: furnish ministers with advice that they need (but may not wish) to hear while respecting their right to pursue policies consistent with a democratic mandate. Too much of the first will be interpreted by ministers as obduracy; a surfeit of the second will provoke charges of politicization and partisan complicity.

- 18 Two normative positions on the matter are found in the literature. The first is typified by the criticism of the “facile assumption about the compatibility between nonpartisan objectivity and political responsiveness” (West, 2005, p. 147). This position is most clearly expressed in Aucoin’s (2012) analysis of the extent to which, under the “promiscuous partisanship” demanded by New Political Governance, partisan loyalty has replaced impartial loyalty as the standard by which ministers evaluate top civil servants. Under these conditions, it has become nearly impossible for civil servants to provide “loyal contradiction” (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2017) to their political principals.
- 19 The second, somewhat more moderate view is that civil servants can and should provide loyal contradiction *and* remain sensitive to ministers’ political operating environments (Mulgan, 2008, p. 348). Indeed, a civil service acting “without regard for their government’s political ambitions would be of limited use to the same, or even worse: be beyond democratic control” (Öhberg et al., 2017, p. 272). The point, as Hustedt and Salomonsen (2018, p. 79) express it, is that “thinking politically is ... a necessary pre-condition for doing a good job. Thinking politically does not refer to party politics, however, but rather to navigating through political landscapes for the sake of the government in office. This is exactly where the line is drawn: between party politics and governmental policymaking”.
- 20 Essentially, the debate is about distinguishing bureaucratic politicization from bureaucratic responsiveness. The difference may, however, exist largely in the eye of the beholder, such that one person’s politicization is another’s responsiveness.
- 21 A second issue concerns the *fons et origo* of politicization. Clearly, it can be a result of (or response to) pressure brought to bear from outside – as when ministers “want their public service to be publicly supportive, even enthusiastic, about their agenda and to promote it in their consultations with stakeholders as well as in their delivery of services directly to the public” (Aucoin, 2012, p. 189). It can, however, also emerge out of endogenous organizational cultural contexts rather than in response to exogenous pressures (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2020). The empirical requirement – often through the interpretation of civil servants’ perceptions of their position and roles (e.g. Poulsen & Koch, 2018) – is to assess the degree to which political considerations inform bureaucratic actions, conduct, and duties that ought to be performed on the basis of impartiality. The relevant scholarship can be traced back to Putnam’s (1973) work on western European civil servants. With Aberbach and Rockman, Putnam (1981) subsequently revisited the notion of functional politicization, drawing attention to the importance of civil servants’ self-perception and the role of bureaucracies’ cultures in fashioning objectives, *modus operandi*, and interpretations of roles.
- 22 Another possibility is that bureaucratic hyper-responsiveness is a rational response to incentives woven into the architecture of the contemporary civil service courtesy of the new public management-inspired reforms of recent decades. In an earlier era the “Schafferian” public service bargain (Hood & Lodge, 2006) struck by political and administrative executives – which rested upon permanency of appointment, anonymity for civil servants, and the absence of political influence in the appointment of top

officials – provided protection against political forays into the civil service. However, the “managerial” bargain that emerged from the era of structural reform overhauled the incentives for top officials. It is not difficult to mount a case that the advent of fixed-term employment contracts, individual performance agreements, and political control over the appointment and reappointment of the most senior civil servants has boosted the likelihood that civil servants might choose to engage in the “politics of policy advice” (Halligan, 1995, p. 160).

From forms to indicators of politicization

23 Definitions aside, although the various types of politicization are not mutually exclusive (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 751), the challenge remains how to build the bridges that enable their joint observation in a truly cross-national and cross-administrative manner. A literature review reveals that each form identifies several indicators for determining the presence of or measuring politicization. Table 2 outlines the indicators used to identify and measure the different forms of politicization. A detailed elaboration on each cluster follows.

Table 2. Indicators used to establish the various forms of politicization

FORMAL	FUNCTIONAL	ADMINISTRATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Substitution of merit-based criteria with political criteria in appointments (Christensen et al., 2014; Demirelli & Aydin, 2024; Lewis, 2008; Mayntz & Derlien, 1989; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Rouban, 2012) - Turnover of civil servants and changes in government, including shifts in ministerial and head of government positions (Demirelli & Aydin, 2024; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012) - Extent to which civil servants' personal political preferences are known (Lewis, 2012) - Importance of political contacts, including party-membership, in being appointed to positions and in career progression (Demirelli & Aydin, 2024; Lewis, 2012; Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012; Panizza et al., 2022; Staronova & Rybár, 2021; Van Dorp, 2023a) - Experience of senior officials in politics, e.g., as party members, elected representatives (Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012; Staronova & Rybár, 2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extent to which ideology rather than evidence determines policy decisions (Lewis, 2012) - Extent to which civil servants are requested to provide political-strategic / political-tactical advice (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014) - Extent to which civil servants are involved in what were traditionally political tasks – or the degree to which tasks have become politically tainted – (Dahlström and Niklasson, 2013) due to (the influences of): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24/7 (social) media (Aucoin, 2012) • Reduced anonymity (Aucoin, 2012) • Populism (Peters and Pierre, 2019; 2022) • Political polarization (Bellour & Van den Berg, 2020; Meyer-Sahling, 2006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advice from civil servants to ministers is constrained by ministerial advisers, or is politically “colored” by ministerial advisers (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tasks and responsibilities of ministerial advisers • Relationship between ministerial advisers and bureaucrats • Relationship between bureaucrats and ministers - Transmission of advice and information from civil servants to ministers

Source: The authors

24 Formal politicization dominates much of the research on bureaucratic politicization. Scholars use various indicators to assess how civil service positions are filled based on political rather than meritocratic criteria. We selected indicators from several seminal studies (Christensen et al., 2014; Demirelli & Aydin, 2024; Lewis, 2008; Mayntz & Derlien, 1989; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Rouban, 2012). Meyer-Sahling and Veen (2012) identified indicators such as the turnover of civil servants after elections, the political

experience of senior officials, and the role of political contacts in appointments and career progression. These indicators reveal not just the scope of positions susceptible to politicization but also the “intensity of politicization” by highlighting conditions under which ministers may appoint political allies (Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012, p. 9). Like Lewis (2012), we also included the importance of political contacts and the visibility of civil servants’ personal political preferences, which further sheds light on the intensity rather than the scope of politicization.

- 25 Functional politicization examines politically responsive bureaucratic behavior (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 750). Although the list of potential indicators is extensive, this study focuses on those commonly discussed in the literature. For instance, Lewis (2012) used the extent to which ideology, rather than evidence, drives policy decisions to gauge politicization within departments. Similarly, Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014) found evidence that civil servants are asked to provide more political-strategic advice in their administrative duties. This indicator captures the changing perception politicians may have of civil servants, framing them as advisers for assisting in the navigation of political waters. A final broader indicator explores how various dynamics, catalysts, and influences lead civil servants to engage in political tasks, thereby affecting the political nature of routine administrative duties.
- 26 The reasons behind these phenomena are numerous. Seminal papers in the field highlight the desire on the part of political principals to exert greater control over their bureaucratic agents as a response to political distrust in bureaucrats’ impartiality and effectiveness (Lewis, 2005, 2008; McCubbins et al., 1987; Peters & Pierre, 2004, pp. 7-8;). Some authors (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2019) point toward the immediacy of 24/7 media, stating it has increased the need for civil servants to be politically savvy due to heightened public scrutiny. This challenges the traditional notion of anonymity in public service, once a cornerstone of the Schafferian bargain (Hood & Lodge, 2006). Evidence now shows that civil servants operate in more publicly exposed environments, particularly during crises (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2019).
- 27 Other scholars argue that populism and political polarization drive politicization. Meyer-Sahling (2006) used Hungary as an example of how party polarization pressures the politicization of the ministerial bureaucracy. Recent research has also examined the impact of populism on bureaucracy, questioning whether and how it leads to increased politicization in democracies worldwide (Peters & Pierre, 2019, 2022; Rockman, 2019).
- 28 Administrative politicization involves fewer indicators but is equally significant. It focuses on how ministerial advisers influence or obstruct the bureaucracy’s capacity to provide impartial advice. Key indicators are derived from Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) and include (1) advisers limiting civil servants’ access to ministers and (2) directing officials to modify their professional advice to align with partisan goals. These mechanisms are assessed through indicators related to the roles and relationships between ministerial advisers, bureaucrats, and ministers, as well as the transmission of advice.
- 29 These indicators have informed research in various contexts, demonstrating their translatability across space and, increasingly, time. Since cross-comparability is central to cross-comparative studies (Pettigrew, 1990), it is fitting to place these forms and their indicators at the core of this research design. Our view is that specific indicators of politicization are valuable tools for conducting comparative research on

politicization. They facilitate an integrative approach by identifying forms of politicization in various contexts and serve as benchmarks for systematic comparison. Researchers can then investigate the factors behind their manifestation and, by comparing these, determine whether they are common across contexts or context-specific. By understanding how and why these indicators are or are not present in specific environments, this research delineates both the unique and common factors driving politicization across different administrative systems. Such an approach provides a more contextual framework that captures the multifaceted nature of bureaucratic politicization and reveals both shared and context-specific dimensions.

Research design and methods: a cross-administrative comparative approach

- 30 This study, conducted between 2019 and 2023, aimed to examine how bureaucratic politicization manifests across different administrative traditions and to identify both shared and context-specific dimensions. To achieve this objective, a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) (Przeworski & Teune, 1970; Seawright & Gerring, 2008) was employed, selecting cases that differ in systemic characteristics while sharing the same outcome: the presence of bureaucratic politicization. By focusing on most-different cases, analysis is directed at politicization's forms, rather than the systems (i.e. the administrative traditions) themselves, allowing for the identification of traits that are common across all cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). As noted by Seawright and Gerring, this strategy is particularly effective for identifying patterns and mechanisms that operate across diverse contexts (2008, p. 304), making it well-suited to the comparative and exploratory aims of this study.
- 31 According to Przeworski and Teune (1970), diversity not only allows for the identification of commonalities, but also enables the exploration of context-specific dynamics by highlighting how unique institutional and cultural configurations influence shared outcomes. Their framework provides a valuable lens for examining how such dynamics shape the manifestation of bureaucratic politicization. Furthermore, this approach aligns with their argument that comparative analysis across diverse cases enhances theoretical generalizability while remaining sensitive to the nuances of individual contexts (p. 34-36). Consequently, the MDSD framework also underpins the broader objective of bridging theoretical and empirical gaps in the study of bureaucratic politicization.
- 32 The four countries selected – Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Spain – represent distinct administrative traditions (Westminster, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Napoleonic, respectively). In addition to each country representing a distinct administrative tradition, they were selected based on multiple criteria: the existence of multiple studies on bureaucratic politicization in these contexts, accessibility to respondents for data collection, and civil servants from the top three ranks performing comparable functions across each country.
- 33 The decision to focus on the top three levels of the civil service was based on two key reasons. First, given that most of the literature on bureaucratic politicization focuses on senior civil servants, it was crucial to focus on positions that met the seniority criteria. The Office for the Senior Civil Service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst* - ABD),

responsible for the recruitment, development, and career management of senior bureaucrats in the Netherlands, identifies the positions of secretary-general (SG), deputy secretary-general (DSG), and director-general (DG) as institutionally and functionally senior. Second, these roles hold comparable responsibilities and functions across all the selected countries, enabling meaningful cross-national comparisons. As such, these ranks met the definition of seniority across the four country cases. To ensure functional equivalence, departmental organigrams were consulted, and local scholars in each country verified the appropriateness of the selected ranks.

- 34 To further ensure comparability, respondents were selected from specific ministries, notably, Social Affairs, Education, Finance, and Infrastructure / Environment. This selection was based upon Lewis' (2012) strategy, which hypothesizes that high-saliency and high-expenditure departments are more likely to experience politicization. This would maximize the likelihood of respondents having encountered forms of politicization. Departments were chosen based on their share of the total annual government budget and the frequency with which their policy domains appeared in ruling governments' campaign manifestos (for majoritarian democracies) or coalition agreements (for consensus systems). Suitable respondents were identified and contacted via email, with interviews conducted in person.
- 35 Faced with the heterogeneous mix of indicators, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable method for conducting this study for several reasons.
- 36 First, they enabled an array of themes and topics to be explored within a single sitting. In this regard, all the forms and indicators could be touched upon, while allowing respondents to expand upon them and delve into the intricacies and specificities of each one. The semi-structured format allowed conversations to flow openly, enabling new topics or insights that respondents deemed important to emerge, while ensuring that central themes were covered (Karatsareas, 2022). Furthermore, by allowing respondents to freely expand upon their systems and experiences, the open format helped reveal local specificities and enabled further inquiry into these points when needed.
- 37 Second, as several studies have shown, semi-structured interviews are an effective method for gathering insights on functional and administrative politicization (e.g. Cole (2020); Eichbaum and Shaw (2008); Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014, 2017); Van Dorp (2023b)).
- 38 Third, although formal politicization is not typically studied through semi-structured interviews, this method revealed significant insights, such as the degree to which civil servants' personal political preferences are known among colleagues. It also illuminated the roles of meritocracy and political contacts in appointments, highlighting similarities and variations between departments (for example) within the same context. This approach was particularly effective for delving deeper into the underlying reasons for these dynamics, offering a clearer understanding of the specificities at play, which is often not captured by more conventional methods of studying formal politicization.
- 39 In short, given the focus on politicization's forms across administrative traditions, semi-structured interviews were deemed well-suited for capturing the detailed and nuanced perspectives necessary to understand the varied manifestations of politicization in different contexts. By providing respondents the flexibility to express

their views and experiences in depth, semi-structured interviews capture ‘thick description’ data which is key in identifying both common and divergent patterns and variation (Geertz, 1973, p. 6; 2008). This depth assists researchers in determining whether observed patterns or differences are context-specific or *ad hoc*, or stem from more structural, systematic factors. This distinction is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the broader theoretical implications of politicization, enriching the analysis of its forms across different systems. A total of 27 interviews were conducted, including seven in Ireland, 11 in the Netherlands, four in Norway and five in Spain.

- 40 That said, semi-structured interviews primarily reflect respondents’ opinions and experiences. Ideally, this project would have employed the most appropriate methods for analyzing each indicator. Such an approach would have allowed for a thorough, in-depth analysis of each context’s forms of politicization and indicators. However, given the number of required methodological approaches, several constraints – including limited time and resources to effectively implement each method across the different countries – made such an approach impractical. Furthermore, as our method is more illustrative than exhaustive, a preliminary exploration was deemed sufficient to align with our primary theoretical aim of comparing politicization across different administrative traditions while highlighting both shared and context-specific dimensions.
- 41 Having elaborated on the various facets of politicization, their indicators, and the research design, the paper now turns to its second objective: the empirical analysis. The analysis is structured such that data is assessed for each indicator of politicization within each of the three ‘baskets’ of politicization types.

Formal politicization

Substitution of merit-based criteria with political criteria in appointments and turnover of civil servants

- 42 The appointment of civil servants on the basis of merit rather than political criteria is the bedrock of bureaucratic impartiality (Lewis, 2012; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Wilson, 1887). Turnover rates are often used to gauge the “intensity of politicization” by revealing the conditions under which ministers might make political appointments. Some studies focus on turnover following ministerial replacements after elections (Meyer-Sahling & Veen, 2012), while others examine turnover following changes within an existing government (Staronova & Rybář, 2021). This study also finds that civil servants view appointments based on political rather than merit-based criteria as indicative of politicization and consider turnover an ideal metric for understanding appointment practices.
- 43 In the Netherlands, the Office for the Senior Civil Service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst - ABD*) has been responsible for senior civil service appointments since 1995, ensuring that appointments are based on merit. The ABD receives position criteria from ministries, seeks candidates both internally and externally, and screens applicants before employment. As an independent body, the ABD prevents positions from being filled based on political recommendations. Respondents indicated that this filtering system effectively ensures that senior appointments are based on professional

qualifications. Turnover after elections was reported to be low, suggesting that the administrative apparatus is not directly influenced by politics. Similar results were observed in Ireland, possibly indicating that the Irish Public Appointments Service has a comparable impact to the Dutch ABD.

- 44 Norwegian civil servants also reported that meritocratic principles govern the assignment of bureaucratic positions, and that turnover is low. Senior officials typically have long careers within their departments, reflecting minimal turnover. When turnover does occur, it is often because individuals choose to leave if their personal political beliefs do not align with those of the new minister. This phenomenon is known as “anticipatory politicization” (Peters, 2013) and has been documented in the work of Christensen (2004) and Rouban (2004). This suggests a cultural practice in which Norwegian bureaucrats resign voluntarily before a new minister arrives, highlighting the importance of accounting for national specificities in comparative studies. If turnover is merely measured by counting position changes post-elections, reasons behind them may be overlooked, leading to potentially misleading interpretations. The Norwegian case, then, illustrates the importance of accounting for national specificities in making sense of comparative research data.
- 45 In Spain, civil service positions are generally seen as political appointments. If political appointments of senior civil servants are a core indicator of formal politicization, then Spain would be classified as a politicized system. In practice, political appointments must meet merit-based conditions. First, senior positions are filled only after candidates pass a competitive examination and belong to one of the senior civil services corps (Eurostat, 2015). Second, appointment to senior positions is done indirectly by the minister. Potential candidates are forwarded to the minister based on merit and competency, with the minister then selecting one of the forwarded individuals. As a result, ministers cannot appoint an individual of their choosing, but rather have their ‘pick of the basket’. Consequently, ministers typically do not know the candidates’ political preferences before they assume their positions. The particulars of the Spanish procedure, however, are such that turnover after elections is higher than in the Netherlands, Ireland, or Norway.
- 46 Overall, the civil service across the studied countries is characterized by merit-based appointments to senior positions, with turnover appearing largely independent of political influence. These conclusions are drawn from considering the unique characteristics and cultural contexts of each country. Without accounting for these factors, Spain might be mischaracterized as more politicized than it is due to its appointment practices.

Extent to which civil servants’ political preferences are known

- 47 Based upon Lewis’ (2012) criterion of the extent to which civil servants’ personal political preferences are known, the civil servants interviewed were questioned about the extent of their knowledge of colleagues’ beliefs, and the general culture surrounding the sharing of personal political beliefs. Two camps clearly emerge: countries where discussing personal political beliefs is (relatively) acceptable (the Netherlands and Norway), and those where it is not (Ireland and Spain). As Lewis’s indicator states that the more civil servants are aware of their colleagues’ beliefs the

stronger the degree of politicization, we shall begin with countries where knowledge was low.

- 48 Regardless of the ministry, respondents in Ireland reported that it was difficult to know colleagues' political inclinations even after a number of years. Overall, they were not particularly curious about their colleagues' political beliefs, and as such did not discuss personal opinions – a reflection of the Westminster tradition of impartiality and discretion (Aucoin, 2012; The Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour, 2008). Some stated that this may be because Ireland's two traditionally dominant political parties – *Fianna Fáil* and *Fine Gael* – share similar views on several points. In Spain, knowledge of colleagues' personal political beliefs was even less likely than in Ireland, as discussing or inquiring about personal views was considered taboo and unacceptable. Respondents suggested that this is likely because Spain's democratic system has been in place only since the fall of the Franco regime in 1975, resulting in strong sensitivities among civil servants regarding individual political beliefs.
- 49 Conversely, awareness of colleagues' personal beliefs seemed to be higher in Norway and the Netherlands. This is not to say that those beliefs were openly discussed or explicitly known. Rather, most respondents stated that they thought they could accurately guess close colleagues' political views on the basis of elements picked up in conversation. Interviewees in the Netherlands stated that this was more likely to be the case in some ministries than in others, as certain policies classically tend to follow left- or right-wing ideological orientations. Overall, respondents stated that beliefs were not openly shared, and as such felt that they did not directly influence bureaucratic professionalism when it came to policy advice, design, and implementation. Whether advice was actually partisan and simply dressed as professional and impartial was however not out of the equation.
- 50 It is apparent that the Dutch and Norwegian civil services differ from their Westminster and Napoleonic cousins. They are more similar to Germany, where political affiliations are not entirely secret (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). The possibility for Spanish ministers to select top civil servants after an election and the ensuing turnover that can result also resembles the German case (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). Therefore, discussing political preferences seems to be linked to the various contexts' specific norms, values, traditions, and culture. And that begs the question as to whether awareness of colleagues' political affiliations is a suitable criterion with which to measure the degree of politicization.

Importance of political contacts in appointments and career progression, and experience of senior officials in politics

- 51 Meyer-Sahling and Veen (2012) and Lewis (2012) emphasize that both political contacts and prior political experience are crucial for securing appointments and advancing careers, highlighting these as key indicators of the degree of politicization. Contrary to these findings, respondents from all four countries reported that political contacts played no role in appointments or career progression. However, some respondents were, or had been, party members.
- 52 Irish senior civil servants were not allowed to be party members and hence had no party affiliations. Moreover, all respondents reported that given the regulations surrounding recruitment, transparency, and an apolitical bureaucracy, it was difficult

for politics to play a significant role in appointments and career progression. Spanish civil servants provided similar testimonies. In Norway, on the other hand, political party membership, although disapproved of, is not forbidden. Some respondents stated that they had been active party members but desisted due to feeling uncomfortable about potentially running into the minister at party gatherings. Some Dutch respondents mentioned that they, or colleagues, were or had been active party members. Given the Dutch tradition of an independent and impartial civil service (Overeem, 2013), this may seem paradoxical. In practice, though, this tradition seemingly functioned as a safety valve against the tainting of professional duties, as it provided a platform for political views, in turn preventing them from obliquely entering the office. As such, it was widely held that personal political affiliations did not affect career progress for better or worse, and that evidence for this lay in progress within the ministry despite civil servants having worked for ministers with varying political backgrounds.

Functional politicization

Extent to which ideology rather than evidence determines policy decisions

- 53 Civil servants are required to provide ministers with evidence-based advice. As functional politicization refers to the extent to which the civil service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behavior, establishing the extent to which policy advice plays into political ideological preferences rather than evidence has not been overlooked by scholars (Lewis, 2012; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014; Van Dorp, 2023b). Respondents in each of the four countries studied for this project reported evidence-based findings to be the core of their advice. Moreover, given technological advancements, multiple respondents stated that gathering and analyzing (different types of) data had now become possible, reinforcing the veracity of evidence-based advice and facilitating its provision. In some ministries – notably education and social affairs – this was welcome, as the lack of data in the past meant that advice and decisions were often based upon what was believed to be “the best way”. As a result, there was a sense that civil service advice is perhaps now less ideological – and more data-driven – than was previously the case.
- 54 On the other hand, today’s ‘post-truth’ climate presents challenges. Though respondents were of the view that evidence-based advice was more dominant than ever, so was the political spin applied to this advice. Though spin-doctors were typically the ones administering the political twist(s), respondents in Norway and Ireland, in particular, mentioned that they felt compelled to also present potential political arguments alongside their evidence. Spanish respondents on the other hand viewed themselves as technocrats, as they reportedly restricted themselves to providing factual evidence. Of course, ministers have the final say and are at liberty to choose a more ideological stance over an evidence-based one if they so desire. As such, there is a certain paradox in which although evidence-based advice is more preponderant than ever, so is ministers’ recourse to ideological constructions around the facts. The question of whether evidence or ideology determines policy decisions

seems to be dependent on the minister, rather than a reflection of institutionalized formal requirements.

- 55 On a final note, a consensus could be drawn from respondents that certain ministries had always been more ideologically orientated than others. These ministries had a tradition of weighing the input of ideology and evidence into the policymaking process differently. Multiple respondents alluded to this being necessary for socially sensitive departments, such as the ministry of defence, where a general ideological direction was essential in mobilizing social support. Respondents believed that policy advice in these ministries is more evidence-based than ever; however, given that civil servants also provide political recommendations, it remains uncertain whether implementation tips more toward the political or the evidence-based side.

Extent to which civil servants are requested to provide political-strategic advice

- 56 A core characteristic of functional politicization is civil servants providing political advice to ministers. Authors such as Putnam (1973), Aberbach et al. (1981), Mulgan (2007), Dahlström and Niklasson (2013), and Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014) have highlighted how this form of politicization deviates from the normative expectations of bureaucrats in multiple countries. Numerous respondents to this study said that it had become common for them to be asked by ministers or their advisers for political advice. Whilst the majority stated that they limited the advice provided, others did not consider these requests abnormal given their insights and years of experience. For these respondents, providing political advice was seen as part of the profession, and even an integral aspect of the 'craft' of a civil servant (Grube, 2019; Van Dorp & 't Hart, 2019; Van Dorp, 2023b). Nevertheless, the line was drawn at offering advice or information that could be detrimental to policy development or coalition relations.
- 57 Most respondents stated they were prudent of political advice and only provided it in a nuanced manner by, for example, providing it alongside evidence-based advice. This meant using the minister's political views in a means that positively framed the evidence. In doing so, respondents stated that they could strategically assure that evidence-based facts remained central. In this regard, the profession of senior civil servant, particularly in the Netherlands, Norway, and Ireland, has had to incorporate strategy: civil servants must now combine their political knowledge with their administrative expertise when providing advice. While it has long been argued that the political and administrative realms are inseparable (Grube, 2019, p. 28), most civil servants, especially those with over 15 years of experience, believe that this integration is more pronounced today than in the past.
- 58 In respondents' view, this has made the provision of advice, on the one hand, more technical and evidence-based. On the other, contemporary circumstances are such that senior civil servants have to be politically astute. Respondents in Spain viewed the technocratization of their profession positively, believing it enhanced their standing. As evidence-based advice gained more weight and substance, they felt their recommendations held greater credibility among ministers. This aligns with Carpenter's (2002) work which explores how bureaucracies can cultivate autonomy and authority based on expertise and merit despite political influences. Based on respondents' testimonies, political-strategic advice consequently typically involves

either (1) offering political angles alongside evidence-based advice to frame it more favorably for the minister, or (2) directly advising on how to navigate political waters.

Extent to which civil servants are more involved in traditionally political tasks, or the degree to which tasks have become politically colored

- 59 To observe the extent to which civil servants are more involved in traditionally political tasks or the degree to which tasks have become politically colored, it is essential to (1) observe the tasks carried out by civil servants themselves, and (2) identify the various factors that have led to tasks becoming more politically colored. This includes the influences of 24/7 (social) media, populism, political polarization, and the demise of civil service anonymity.
- 60 Research into the effects of the 24/7 media culture on the civil service is extensive (Aucoin, 2012; Grube, 2019; Sausman & Locke, 2004). Respondents in these studies uniformly agree that media scrutiny has intensified pressure on civil servants in three ways. First, the immediacy of media has pressured civil servants to provide responses within hours rather than days. Second, the proliferation of media outlets, including social media platforms, digital media (e.g., YouTube, online newspapers), and local newspapers and TV channels, has led to constant scrutiny from multiple angles. Third, news now tends to fall into personalized echo chambers via algorithms, ‘alternative-facts’ pages, and an increased loyalty to specific media outlets (aka ‘Fox News’ versus ‘CNN’). This personalization has resulted in news tailored to individual preferences, fostering polarized audiences who are more skeptical of facts and evidence than in the past (Pariser, 2011).
- 61 In response to this pressure, respondents reported that they could no longer perform their duties without considering the media. For instance, many senior civil servants in Norway noted that ministers now expect them to present evidence-based findings with a political angle to anticipate media scrutiny. Others proactively added a political spin to pre-empt repeated consultations on how to frame the facts. Some respondents had even taken to drafting speeches for ministers, a practice that aligns closely with Dahlström and Niklasson’s (2013) definition of functional politicization (p. 905).
- 62 These accounts reveal a trend we term auto-politicization (or self-censorship): rather than being imposed top-down by ministers, politicization emerges from civil servants themselves in a bottom-up manner (Sotiropoulos, 2004; Van Dorp, 2023b). While similar accounts were reported across all countries, none were as striking as the explicit spin-doctoring and speech-writing reported in Norway. In Ireland and Spain, civil servants stuck to evidence-based facts when providing information to ministers for media inquiries, but still faced scrutiny during scandals. The prevailing climate of constant media vigilance seemed to dominate the profession. This raises the question: does the adaptation of civil servants to media pressures indicate increased politicization? Some might argue that this sensitivity is a response to evolving media forms and influence (Grube, 2019). Others might argue that it reflects increased politicization, given that media preoccupation has become a defining feature of the profession (Aucoin, 2012). While media pressure and bureaucratic responses might signal functional politicization, we refrain from concluding that Norway is the most politicized country.

This is primarily because a more nuanced understanding of how administrative traditions shape bureaucrats' interactions with the media is needed.

- 63 All of the countries in this study had been exposed to political party polarization or populism to varying degrees. The Netherlands has experienced significant political shifts in recent years. In the 2023 senate elections, the Farmer-Citizen Movement party (*Boer Burger Beweging*) won more seats than any other party. Additionally, late 2023 marked the election of Geert Wilders' nationalist and right-wing populist party, the Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), in the national elections. At the time of this research, Spain was emerging from a series of votes of no confidence and snap elections starting in 2017, with a notable rise in popularity for the far-right party VOX. Norway has recently seen a far-right party join the coalition, while Ireland saw *Sinn Féin*'s significant resurgence in the 2020 general election, its most substantial comeback since the 1970s. These examples illustrate a broader populist trend across Europe, while Ireland's case represents a disruption to the traditional political landscape rather than a populist shift. This raises the question: how might this departure from traditional parties influence politicization?
- 64 Reports of political instability emerged from all countries, with many respondents expressing concerns that traditional norms were either disappearing or evolving. Norwegian civil servants noted that politicians, unable to identify a clear support base, were now seeking policies that would appeal broadly. This shift compelled the civil service to provide evidence-based recommendations that were more general and less tailored to specific contexts. Fears regarding a change in roles and responsibilities within the civil service surfaced, prompting the publication of a document reaffirming traditional civil service roles in Norway in 2018.
- 65 Similar concerns about the impact of populism on political-administrative relations were reported in the Netherlands and Ireland. In Spain, civil servants speculated whether they would resign if a populist party came to power. Those opting to stay often believed that the increasing technocratization of the profession provided bureaucrats with greater leverage to "tame" populist parties. This "taming" was thought possible by demonstrating the technical complexities of policymaking and illustrating why radical policy proposals would be unrealistic and unfeasible.
- 66 These accounts suggest that populism creates an environment of speculation and uncertainty, potentially increasing the extent to which civil servants' tasks and responsibilities become influenced by politics. However, it remains unclear whether this influence is direct or indirect and whether it should be considered a form of politicization or merely a reaction to a generally unstable political climate
- 67 Anonymity is traditionally considered a cornerstone of the civil service in Westminster systems (Hood & Lodge, 2006). However, this guarantee is increasingly under threat (Grube, 2019). In Ireland, the high level of public exposure led some respondents to remark that senior civil servants are inevitably thrust into the spotlight during crises or scandals. Most did not find this abnormal as they were part of the policymaking process and saw it as a by-product of accountability and transparency. In their opinion, greater public exposure increased the importance of their input, which most saw as evidence of a more independent rather than politicized civil service. Indeed, the loss of anonymity and transparency made it easier for them to challenge questionable political demands, as everything was (or could be) on public record.

- 68 Dutch respondents agreed that anonymity was no longer an option for most top civil servants, but unlike their Irish counterparts, they did not see this as a positive development. They considered it symptomatic of the increasing entanglement of administrative and political spheres, exacerbated by political instability. This trend is exemplified by the Dutch childcare benefits scandal (*toeslagenaffaire*), where ten senior civil servants were publicly interrogated, compared to only seven politicians (Tweedekamer, 2024). To a large degree Norwegian and Spanish civil servants still felt anonymous, indicating that directorates were more frequently in the limelight than they were. This attested to a decentralization of power, and demonstrated how ministers were less fundamental in decision making than they had been previously.
- 69 In light of these testimonies, we must ask: is the loss of civil service anonymity (where that has occurred) a trait of politicization? More precisely, can it be considered a universal trait of functional politicization, or might that only be so in countries in which bureaucratic anonymity has long been a tradition? If so, then in the context of this study, loss of anonymity should only be used to measure bureaucratic politicization in countries such as Ireland, with its Westminster background.

Administrative politicization

- 70 Ministerial advisers seem to still be searching for role clarity. Connaughton's (2015) typology reveals that advisers undertake a wide range of political and administrative roles, while Shaw's (2023) handbook illustrates the various tasks under their purview. With responsibilities ranging from secretary to strategic political spin-doctor, the profession lacks a certain uniformity. Respondents' testimonies matched existing findings insofar as they all indicated that ministerial advisers' functions depended on ministerial preferences. General responsibilities could nevertheless be perceived in some countries.
- 71 Dutch and Irish ministerial advisers were usually responsible for providing political-strategic advice, placing political-spin on bureaucratic advice, and coordinating between the minister, the civil service, the governing coalition, and the parliament. Akin to De Visscher and Salomonsen's (2013) explorative study into Belgian and Danish ministerial advisers, Norwegian advisers' roles were somewhat unclear. This stemmed from the wide range of tasks performed by different advisers, itself a function of individual ministers' expectations of their advisers. However, recent studies have demonstrated that media adviser is a core task of Norwegian advisers (Askim et al., 2023). Though Spanish respondents stated that advisers' roles were also dependent on ministers' preferences, advisers seemed to have become the primary advisers. In the respondents' views, this had contributed to the technocratization of the profession. They perceived this development as a double-edged sword: on one hand, it helped distance politics from bureaucracy. On the other, it created a gap between the advisers and the minister in certain respects.
- 72 It is unsurprising that respondents reported one of two opposing views when it came to the matter of relations between themselves and the minister. Approximately half stated that the institutionalization of the adviser's role had not noticeably altered political-administrative relations; in fact, the advent of such advisers allowed ministers to balance civil service input with that of the advisers' more equitably. Put another way, contestability rather than competition had been the outcome of this institutional

innovation. The other half, however, thought that advisers had imposed themselves between the minister and the civil service, and felt that since advisers' arrival they had been excluded from meetings with the minister – and hence less thoroughly incorporated into the policymaking process – than had once been the case.

- 73 Though respondents evoked frustrations, they recognized the benefits of such colleagues. Advisers were viewed as a valuable addition to the political landscape, particularly in Ireland. Some respondents noted that advisers provided crucial insider knowledge on political developments, which in turn facilitated their work. Essentially, civil servants could rely on advisers to help secure the minister's support for their recommendations. Which raises a conundrum: is civil servants' interest in the political backroom a sign of politicization, or better understood as a means of gaining information that facilitates exercising their profession in a (more) strategic and relevant fashion? On balance, any response appears to depend on how such information is used: if it serves to enhance the execution of administrative responsibilities in an appropriately objective manner, then perhaps it can be said that the risk of politicization is somewhat limited.
- 74 One of the clearest indicators of administrative politicization occurs when the transmission of advice and information from civil servant to minister is disrupted (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). Gains and Stoker (2011) and Öhberg et al. (2017) explored how ministerial advisers influence this transmission process. In this study, respondents reported both dynamics identified by Eichbaum and Shaw (2008): (1) ministerial advisers obstructing civil servants' access to ministers, and (2) advisers directing officials to modify their professional advice to align with partisan interests. In the Netherlands and Ireland, respondents stated that ministerial advisers added a political spin post-advice. This practice was seen as routine, with many civil servants justifying the need to politically frame evidence-based policy to enhance its public appeal and expressing relief that they were not directly responsible for this task. Norwegian civil servants also noted that their advice frequently received a political patina from advisers. However, some mentioned that they themselves added political nuances to ensure ministerial support, hinting toward some form of self-censorship. In Spanish respondents' eyes, ministerial advisers were placed between them and the minister, with advisers responsible for politicizing the recommendations *ex post* – unsurprising given reports of the technocratization of the civil service.
- 75 Based on respondents' testimonies, administrative politicization seemingly appears in various forms across all the studied departments and countries. Adding political angles to advice is not a new phenomenon; rather, it is the presence of advisers and the ways in which their influence can compel bureaucrats to incorporate political angles into their advice that warrants careful consideration. This should not be overlooked as it has real and potentially transformative effects on the administrative sphere, raising questions about second-order impacts on governmental legitimacy and performance.

Overview of the findings

- 76 To summarize, Tables 3, 4, and 5 illustrate key trends in each country regarding politicization. Each table corresponds to one of the three forms of politicization – formal, administrative, and functional – and outlines the examined indicators. While these tables highlight similarities and differences, facilitating cross-country

comparison, it is important to remember that the findings are based on respondents' perspectives.

Table 3. Comparative overview of formal politicization's indicators across the examined contexts

		FORMAL POLITICIZATION				
Indicator	Appointment criteria	Turnover	Political preferences known	Political contacts in career	Experience in politics	
Context						
Ireland (Westminster)	Merit-based	Low	Rarely known	No role	Not allowed	
The Netherlands (Germanic)	Merit-based	Low	Moderately known	No significant role	Not a major factor	
Norway (Scandinavian)	Merit-based	Low (voluntary)	Moderately known	Limited role	Some political backgrounds	
Spain (Napoleonic)	Political appointment, but from merit-based selection	Moderate	Rarely to unknown	No significant role	Political experience considered	

Source: The authors

Table 4. Comparative overview of functional politicization's indicators across the examined contexts

		FUNCTIONAL POLITICIZATION			
Indicator	Ideology vs Evidence in policymaking	Request for political-strategic advice	Involvement in tasks that are traditionally political	Degree to which tasks have become politically tainted	
Context					
Ireland (Westminster)	Evidence-based, with occasional political influence	Limited, mostly evidence-based with some strategic input	Minimal	Influenced by media and reduced anonymity, with rising concern over populism	
The Netherlands (Germanic)	Evidence-based, but subject to political framing	Occasional, mainly for strategic framing	Low	Influenced minimally by media, some impact from populism and political polarization	
Norway (Scandinavian)	Evidence-based, often accompanied by political considerations	Regular requests, often to blend political insights with evidence	Increasing	Highly influenced by media, significant impact from political polarization	
Spain (Napoleonic)	Strong ideological influence, with evidence secondary to political considerations	Regular requests, significant blending of political advice with technical input	High	Highly influenced by media, significant effects from reduced anonymity, populism, and polarization	

Source: The authors

Table 5. Comparative overview of administrative politicization's indicators across the examined contexts

ADMINISTRATIVE POLITICIZATION					
Indicator	Advice constraint by advisers	Role of ministerial advisers	Relationship: advisers and bureaucrats	Relationship: ministers and bureaucrats	Transmission of advice
Ireland (Westminster)	Low constraint	Provide political-strategic advice, ensure coordination	Balance bureaucratic input, seen as a valuable addition	Direct and usually unobstructed; maintains integrity of advice	Direct and unobstructed; advisers help balance civil service input
The Netherlands (Germanic)	Low constraint	Varied strategic tasks; influence policy coordination	Collaborative; influence policy outcomes	Direct and collaborative; maintains smooth interactions	Smooth, with minimal distortion; advisers add political spin post-advice
Norway (Scandinavian)	Some political coloring	Media advice, policy framing; broad range of tasks depending on minister	Close relationship, with some advisers influencing more than others	Close, but occasionally politicized by advisers	Occasionally politicized; advice may receive a political patina from advisers
Spain (Napoleonic)	Moderate constraint	Primary advisers with strong policy influence	Often act as intermediaries between bureaucrats and ministers	Close, but occasionally politicized by advisers	Politically colored post-advice; advisers placed between bureaucrats and ministers

Source: The authors

Conclusion

- 77 By adopting a cross-context – and particularly a cross-form – analysis, this study illustrates that examining forms of politicization in isolation can lead to a narrow, incomplete, or even inaccurate interpretation of bureaucratic politicization. For example, focusing solely on formal politicization in Norway may lead to conclude that politicization is largely absent, thereby overlooking the presence or significance of other forms. In other words, no single form is sufficient to fully capture the nuances of bureaucratic politicization – and a search for just one form may blind scholars to the presence of others. While each sheds light on a specific dimension, focusing exclusively on one may obscure more than it reveals. This risk is compounded by the fact that the indicators used to measure each form are often broad and general, making them ill-suited to capturing the local specificities that are crucial for identifying when, how, and if politicization occurs.
- 78 Considering the above, this study attempts to respond to the siloed approach by offering an integrated typology that treats these three forms of politicization as analytically distinct, but empirically interdependent. For example, civil servants may align their behavior with political preferences (functional politicization), even in systems that are formally merit-based. This alignment becomes particularly significant when internal promotion dynamics informally reward such behavior – especially when these practices contradict officially neutral hiring and advancement rules (formal politicization). Moreover, when politically appointed advisers (administrative politicization) influence or reinforce ‘promiscuous partisanship’ – a form of loyalty that discourages dissent and prioritizes political alignment, as expanded upon by Aucoin (2012) – they help embed a politicized form of bureaucratic responsiveness. The result is a setting where functional alignment is incentivized, formal neutrality is undermined, and administrative actors (partly) mediate the process. Politicization therefore becomes visible only when these dimensions are analyzed in relation to one another.
- 79 By applying this integrated lens across several contexts, this study shows that politicization is not reducible to any single form but is best understood as a composite phenomenon: one that emerges at the intersection of institutional rules, organizational

practices, and individual behaviors. This approach allows for a more nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of politicization that would remain obscured in single-form analyses.

- 80 This conceptual integration signals to a broader shift in the scholarship on bureaucratic politicization - from identifying the *presence* of politicization to understanding its episodic and structural characteristics. In other words, politicization can emerge sporadically under certain conditions (episodic), while also continuously underlying administrative and political dynamics (structural). By examining how politicization emerges not only through political intervention but also through internal bureaucratic behavior and interpretive framings, this study reorients the field toward a more comprehensive, comparative line of inquiry. It also encourages researchers to conceptualize politicization as a dynamic process - not a fixed condition, but rather an ongoing process shaped by institutional, organizational, and interpretive forces.
- 81 The empirical findings support the need for this integrated approach. For instance, the Dutch and Norwegian cases reveal that politicization can be driven from within the bureaucracy through what this study terms 'auto-politicization', which is when civil servants intrinsically act in a politicized manner in response to societal or political pressure. Meanwhile, the Spanish case shows how politicization can be formally minimal but still perceived as significant due to broad definitions and an absence of observing local specificities. These findings suggest that politicization cannot be adequately assessed through formal indicators alone, but must account for how politicization is experienced, framed, and made legible within specific contexts.
- 82 Beyond academic insight, this study speaks to pressing contemporary concerns. In an era of democratic strain, media scrutiny, rising populism, and polarization, the legitimacy of public administration increasingly hinges on how bureaucracies navigate politicization. The literature on the consequences for bureaucracies of these intersecting phenomena is still taking shape, and scholars will need appropriate epistemic approaches to build it. In this context, understanding the intertwining of formal, functional, and administrative politicization can help better identify when politicization is a symptom of deeper institutional tensions, and when it reflects adaptive, even necessary, bureaucratic responsiveness. Ultimately, a more nuanced understanding of politicization - grounded in cross-dimensional, comparative analysis - is essential for advancing the literature and highlighting how bureaucracies can navigate the tension between responsiveness and democratic integrity.

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ABSTRACTS

Despite ample attention to bureaucratic politicization in the public administration literature, most research remains siloed, focusing on individual forms of politicization (formal, functional, or administrative) and limited to single-country analyses. When a comparative stance is adopted, it often concentrates on comparing countries with the same administrative tradition (e.g., Westminster countries). This paper advocates for a comprehensive comparative research approach that integrates all forms and spans administrative traditions, treating the three forms of politicization as analytically distinct but empirically interdependent. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with senior civil servants (n=27) in four countries with distinct administrative tradition - Ireland (Westminster), the Netherlands (Germanic), Norway (Scandinavian), and Spain (Napoleonic) - the study introduces an integrated typology and applies it to demonstrate how politicization manifests across various administrative contexts. The findings reveal that politicization is best understood as a composite phenomenon shaped by institutional rules, organizational practices, and civil servants' interpretive behaviors. This study provides a cross-dimensional, comparative lens that not only bridges conceptual silos, but also offers a more nuanced, context-sensitive understanding of how politicization unfolds in practice.

INDEX

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