

# Executive advisory and support offices: exploring the institutional architecture of ministers' offices

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## Abstract

The paper introduces the novel concept of an Executive Advisory and Support Office (EASO), as a 'universal' label to identify ministers' offices and the institutional habitats of political advisers in executive government. It suggests six key institutional dimensions along which EASOs can be categorized and presents originally collected data on eight EASOs across two politico-administrative traditions: *Napoleonic*—Belgium, France, the European Commission, and Italy; and *Westminster*—Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The paper shows that the institutional architecture of ministers' offices differs across, but also within politico-administrative traditions. Three 'types' of EASOs were identified across Westminster and Napoleonic systems: 1) the ministerial cabinet, 2) the *Cabinet Westminsteriel*, and 3) the Wilsonian office.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the rapid growth of research on political advisers since the end of the 1990s the attention of political scientists to the offices of executive politicians has been rather limited. With a few exceptions (Shaw and Eichbaum 2018), which will be reviewed below, past studies' treatment of the institutional habitats of political advisers is largely contextual-descriptive and non-comparative. More importantly, past research on political advisers has so far treated the offices of politicians mostly as reflections of the political and administrative tradition of each country. Limited comparative attention has been paid to how the institutional architecture varies across, but also within politico-administrative traditions. This is surprising given a) the divergence of many institutional habitats outside of their original politico-administrative tradition; b) the importance of how institutional characteristics, such as rules and institutional habitats, affect the behaviour and interactions of actors in executive government; and c) also given the critical role that comparative research might play in helping to advance literature beyond pure description to more advanced typologizing and hypothesis formulation (Landman 2008). Even basic terminology such as the name and definition of a ministerial office differs across countries, requiring researchers to satisfy issues of equivalence (Van Deth, 2009).

In a particularly useful contribution, Shaw and Eichbaum (2018, p 199-211) present a table with a range of suggested dimensions along which the institutional architecture of ministers' offices could be compared. The results demonstrate widespread variation across 10 countries using two empirical 'clusters', including institutional habitat (e.g. the number of advisers, location, and form) and formal rules (e.g. code of conduct, employment contract, and legal cap on numbers). However, the authors stop short of allocating the variations into some form of ministerial office types. They also argue that comparing cases at the level of administrative traditions offers diminishing returns considering the widespread diversity across cases within an administrative tradition; a similar critique also raised by Cooper (2020).

To build upon Shaw and Eichbaum's contribution, and to increase attention to the institutional architecture of ministers' offices, we pose several research questions: How do we define a ministerial office that can be applied across different political systems and administrative traditions? What are and how can the dimensions of ministerial offices be measured? And if the institutional architecture varies across countries, what types of ministerial offices exist?

This paper has several aims. First, we introduce the term Executive Advisory and Support Office (hereafter EASO; and EASOs for plural) which, we suggest, can be used to describe the office of a member of the political executive in any political system, or administrative traditions. This can be used as a generic term to describe the institutional habitats of advisers across systems instead of referring

to a plethora of location or tradition specific terms such as ministerial offices, ministerial cabinets, and other equivalent terms, Second, we show how EASOs differ across, but also within the Westminster and Napoleonic politico-administrative tradition. In an inductive empirically driven approach we explore six clusters of dimensions that comprise the institutional architecture of an EASO: size, rules, location, specialisation, osmosis, and politicisation. These data points are collected through a comparative analysis of eight political systems across two administrative traditions: *Napoleonic*—Belgium, France, the European Commission, and Italy; and *Westminster*—Australia, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Readers should be aware that we currently have preliminary results.

Comparing cases from these two administrative traditions contributes to ongoing observations of institutional change whereby Westminster countries have incrementally been ‘cabinetising’ to potentially resemble ministerial cabinets in Napoleonic countries, and Napoleonic countries have experienced ‘decabinetisation’ reform attempts aimed to reduce the control and influence of ministerial cabinets (Gouglas and Brans 2017). While cabinetisation and decabinetisation are not exact reverse processes of each other, they nonetheless invite questions as to the extent to which ministers’ offices in Westminster and Napoleonic countries have become similar.

The remainder of this paper is as follows. We present the term and definition of an EASO, as well as empirical dimensions that comprise the EASO. Then the methodological approach is briefly presented. Following this, we present the results. In the discussion, we identify variations across the cases which leads us to identify three ‘types’ of EASOs: 1) the ministerial cabinet, 2) the *Cabinet Westminsteriel*, and 3) the Wilsonian office.

## THE EXECUTIVE ADVISORY AND SUPPORT OFFICE: DEFINITION AND KEY DIMENSIONS

In this section we present and define the term EASO and present six empirically driven dimensions. In doing so, our aim is to bring greater clarity to the institutional architecture of the places ministerial and political advisers inhabit.

### 1. EASO: Definition

To establish comparative equivalence, we must first highlight the differences in terminology across countries when referring to ministers' offices. For instance, when referring to the *form* of the institution, Shaw and Eichbaum (2018, p. 207) highlight four different names to 'establish equivalence' (Van Deth, 2009) in these types of institutions: ministerial office (to Australia, Canada, Denmark, Ireland, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom), political office of the minister/prime minister (to Greece), leadership staff unit (to Germany), and bureau S-G (to the Netherlands). The Westminster countries commonly use the term *ministerial office* while Napoleonic countries often use the term *ministerial cabinet*. In this section we highlight these variations and suggest a 'universal' term to be applied across any political system.

Applying the local terminology for an executive office is a standard approach in single case studies (e.g. ministerial office in Denmark) or comparative studies of countries with similar systems of government (e.g. ministerial offices in the UK and Canada). However, different terms arise even within similar systems of government. In one Australian study, the authors refer to both "political offices" and "ministerial offices" interchangeably (Taflaga & Kerby, 2019), without providing a clear definition to the differences (if any) between the two. In Germany, the political offices of ministers are called "leadership staff units" (Hustedt, 2018), seemingly viewed as a sub-unit of the minister's office. Elsewhere, Gouglas (2015) introduces Greek ministerial offices as "political offices", but then refers to the offices as "ministerial cabinets", which, the latter is a common term used in Napoleonic model countries. In that regards, what is called a "ministerial cabinet" in France has been relabelled as a "strategic cell" in federal Belgium (Brans et al. 2017) or "office of direct collaboration" in Italy (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013). In Portugal, another Napoleonic model country, Silva (2017) adds the word 'private' to what is referred in the paper as the "ministerial private office" in her examination of ministerial cabinets.

To overcome any comparative misconceptions, Dahlstrom (2011) uses the more general term "central government offices" in an attempt to *translate* across 18 countries in both parliamentary and presidential systems of government. However, the author does not provide a definition of the central government office. Moreover, the study examines political appointees, which includes secretaries

with executive powers who advise ministers, but also have line management duties and do not strictly belong to the office of their political boss.

In light of these variations, we seek to propose a definition that comparativist scholars can apply 'universally' across a diverse range of cases. We suggest the term **executive advisory and support office (EASO)**, and the following definition:

an **executive advisory and support office** is an institutional structure that acts as the personal office of a member of the political executive; it is comprised of individuals as ministerial staff hired at the executive actor's discretion to perform advisory and support functions

This definition narrows the characteristics of the executive office into three key dimensions:

- **The EASO is an institutional structure. We conceptualize the EASO as an institution as it comprises** "regulative, normative and cultural cognitive elements that together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott, 2014, p. 56). As an organization<sup>1</sup>, the EASO may be organized in specialized sub-offices to pursue specific functions.
- **The EASO is headed by a member of an executive government** - The term "executive" refers to the political authority that makes policy decisions (Dunleavy & Rhodes, 1995). Some authors use slight variations to the term executive. For instance, the terms "political executive", "executive government", and "central government" are commonly used by public administration scholars (Dahlstrom, 2011; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2011; Hustedt, Kolltveit, & Salomonsen, 2017; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2015). In our definition, we understand "executive" as any actors who are a member of the political executive, irrespectively of their importance within the executive. In this respect, we consider as an EASO, the offices of President (e.g. in the United States (Hart, 1995; Tenpas, 2018)), Prime Ministers (Burch & Holliday, 1999), Cabinet ministers as well as junior ministers but also of other executive actors who hold case specific titles which are functionally equivalent to the titles listed such as European Commissioners (Rogacheva, 2019).
- **The EASO pursues advisory and support functions** – EASO provides two types of advice. On one hand it provides policy advice understood as "information, knowledge and recommendation for action" (Halligan, 1995). On the other, EASO also performs political advisory functions. Those functions are similar to what Goetz (1997) as defined as "political craft"; for example advice regarding the political implications of policy proposals; consideration of a specific issue within the broader context of the government's programme; negotiation with other actors in the policy-

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<sup>1</sup> Following Williamson (1975, 1980), we view organizations and their structures as institutions (as cited in Scott, 2014, p182)

making process, notably other ministries, Parliament, subnational governments and organized interests; and to design processes that maximize the chances for the realization of ministers' substantive objectives (p754). Beyond those advisory functions, the EASO also pursues support functions that are of an administrative or logistical nature (take for example drivers, secretaries, translators).

- **The EASO is composed of ministerial staff** - Any individual working in an EASO is labelled as ministerial staff. We identify two types of ministerial staff: ministerial advisers and support staff. Ministerial advisers are individuals who perform any type of policy-related/ political advisory function. Support staff on the other hand perform logistical and administrative functions.
- **Ministerial staff are recruited at the discretion of the principal** - Recruitment clearly differs from the standard civil servant recruitment based on merit. In most countries, the executive actor appoints his/her own staff. In some case, (important) staff positions are formally approved by the prime minister (e.g. Norway, Australia) or the Government as a whole.

## 2. The EASO: key dimensions

We identify six dimensions that we argue are defining features of an EASO: size, rules, location, specialization, osmosis with the administration and formal politicization of top civil servants. This last variable is contextual, while the other directly relate to the EASO. For each dimension, we identify one or several indicators.

### Size

The first indicator we consider is size (i.e. number of ministerial staff). Using this indicator is in line with the dimension suggested by Gouglas and Brans. In fact, their work systematically suggested this dimension by refereeing to "an increasing number of advisers" (Gouglas, Brans, & Jaspers, 2015), resulting in "big" or "large" (Gouglas & Brans, 2016, 2017) offices when talking about ministerial cabinet. Suetens and Walgrave (2001, p. 13) also suggest that size matters, and suggest that to characterize an advisory system, the number of personal advisers (ministerial advisers) is one of the two defining features (the second one is the degree of top civil service politicization). This indicator is further supported by organizational and institutional literature. In fact, considering human resources allows one to grasp "asymmetries of power", the extent to which those resources enable or constrain the action of a given organization (Scott, 2014, p. 57).

To measure size we use two indicators: average size and size of the Prime Minister's office. Firstly, *average size* is calculated by counting the total number of ministerial staff working within the executive and dividing this by the total number of executive actors, irrespectively of their importance or seniority. Considering the *size of the Prime Minister's office* independently is useful for empirical

and theoretical reasons. Empirically, the PMO is much bigger than other EASOs of the same government (for example in Italy or France). Theoretically, the centralization thesis and closely related presidentialization thesis expects a tendency of government leaders to benefit from more resources than other government members (Poguntze & Webb, 2005; Savoie, 1999).

## Rules

### A. Legal recognition

Formal rules are an essential pillar of any institution (Scott, 2014). To determine what an EASO is, one must examine its legal recognition. At one end, the introduction of ministerial advisers often developed as an “ad hoc” experiment that developed in part by a personal decision of a political executive and/or with support from a review of the civil service that endorsed the use of advisers (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018). These foundations, however, had a low level of legal recognition in so far as they were not ‘hard’ legislative instruments (Ng 2018). Thus, at the other end, countries that have later implemented a legislative instrument (e.g. a parliamentary law) related to EASOs and their staffs is said to demonstrate a high level of formal legal recognition to that of the earlier foundation principles. As Ng (2018, pp. 38-39) says, legal recognition in relation to staff contracts means, “ministerial advisors were normalised as part of the institution of government, rather than just being staff employed as an exception to normal public service processes.” In practice, while the UK may have introduced special advisers in the 1960s through various types of non-binding soft law-like instruments (e.g. a personal decision by prime minister Harold Wilson and with an endorsement from the Fulton Commission report (Blick 2004), it was only in 2010 that the most significant statutory hard law instrument detailing special advisers’ *special* role in British politics was enacted—the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010* (Yong & Hazell, 2014). Considering the different types of regulatory instruments, we code recognition by the degree of formality from weakest to strongest by soft and hard law: Soft law = 0 (e.g. code of conduct, ministerial handbook), and Hard law = 1 (e.g. parliamentary law, constitutional requirement, executive decree).

### B. Legal formality

Beyond legal recognition, we consider the extent to which regulation set clear boundaries (which we label “legal formality”) in defining how the EASO should work. We propose five indicators that can be indicative of their institutional architecture. To assess legal formality, we do not analyse the content of the rule, but whether it exists or not. All indicators are thus coded as binary variables (0 = does not exist; 1 = exist). These include:



- Cap on size: This refers to whether there is a legal cap on the number of ministerial staff.
- Secondment: Another dimension is whether civil servants are permitted to freely transfer into and out of a ministers' office without hindering their administrative career. This is what has been labelled as "career hopping" or "osmosis" (Gouglas & Brans, 2017; Maley, 2017).
- Eligibility criteria: The indicator refers to whether there are specific eligibility criteria required for individuals to be appointed as a ministerial adviser. This can include criteria related to nationality, language, minimum education requirements, and more.
- Roles: The indicator refers to whether the regulations clearly detail the specific roles and functions of ministerial advisers.
- Oversight body: The indicator relates to whether the EASO is overseen by an agency that monitors the accountability, transparency, and ethical behaviour of staff.
- Ethics: This relates to the existence of transparency and accountability measures that reduce incidents of conflict of interest. When working as a ministerial adviser for example, rules commonly ban advisers from obtaining private sector income, and they must declare gifts or assets. When advisers leave government, post-employment rules can impose a "cooling off" period where former advisers are not eligible to do lobbying activities for a period of time (e.g. 1 or 2 years). The rules are aimed at giving public confidence in managing conflicts of interest where current or former special advisers may exploit their insider knowledge and/or contacts for private gain.

### C. Partisanship

This indicator refers to whether the regulations clearly stipulate that ministers' offices are a partisan entity. A country in which its regulations identify the unique partisan nature of a ministers' office is coded as 1, while a country with no such partisan recognition is coded as 0.

### Location

The level of interaction between ministerial staff and departmental civil servants is considered an important aspect of influence and coordination with the executive (Maley, 2018a; Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014). This, Maley (2018) suggests, can be measured by examining the physical location of the EASO, split between one of two options:

1. The EASO is located within the minister's ministerial departmental building
2. The EASO is physically separated from the minister's ministerial departmental building (often in an executive wing of the legislature)

In the first option, ministers, ministerial staff, and senior civil servants work in close proximity to enable a constant flow of interaction between these administrative and partisan actors. In the second option, however, the physical separation means civil servants have a significantly reduced interaction with ministers and their staffs. Scholars suggest the separated ministerial office architecture elevates the role of political staff and reduces the influence of civil servants (Ng, 2018; Rhodes & Tiernan, 2014; Weller, 2018). Moreover, decabinetisation attempts trying to physically relocate the ministerial cabinets closer to the administration (Meert et al, 2022) supports the idea that the physical location of an EASO is important. As such, option one is coded as 0 and option two is coded as 1.

### Specialization

Another feature of an EASO is the variety of roles that staffers perform – an indicator of functional specialization or diversification. This can include roles such as management, policy, parliament, media, and sometimes within specialised sub-units of a ministers’ office. Consistent with the professionalization of politics thesis, specialized staff become a central part of supporting an organization and its aims (Katz & Crotty, 2006). One concern with specialization is that it goes hand in hand with the size of an EASO; that is, an EASO with only two ministerial advisers can be viewed as being both small and un-specialised, while an office with 15 or more ministerial advisers can be viewed as being both large and have a higher degree of specialisation. However, differences also relate to a *quantitative* shift towards more ministerial staff (size) and a *qualitative* shift towards types of staff (specialisation).

We measure specialisation by dividing the number of ministerial staff by the number of job titles. That way, we find on average how many individuals hold a similar job title. The fewer the number of individuals, the more specialized. Given the functional and personnel differences between a prime minister’s office to that of another cabinet minister’s office, we measure variations from both the PMO and the health minister’s office (the health minister acting as a proxy middle-tier ministerial portfolio).

### Osmosis with the administration

The degree of osmosis between the administration and a EASO is also important. Gouglas and Brans have repeatedly referred to the extent to which ministerial cabinet as a type of EASO created “more blurred politico-administrative boundaries” (Gouglas et al., 2015, p. 1), where civil servants could pursue a career as advisers” (Gouglas & Brans, 2016) “without [this] hindering their return to their department” (Gouglas & Brans, 2017). Extending this argument, we argue that the more individual interactions between executive offices and the administration, the more that EASOs become part of the norms and routines in politico-administrative relations. In that regard, EASOs become increasingly

institutionalized in cultural-cognitive norms making the institutions “culturally” accepted (Scott, 2014, p. 60).

To measure the degree of osmosis, we use two indicators. The *formal osmosis* indicator looks at the extent to which it is legally allowed for civil servants to be seconded in an EASO. We see three options: it is either (1) allowed, (2) forbidden, or (3) not mentioned in the regulation. We argue that *informal osmosis* should also be considered: the question here is not whether secondment is allowed, but rather to what extent do individuals actually move from one world to another. To measure this, we consider the professional employment experience of the most senior ranked civil servant in a ministerial portfolio, and examine whether they previously worked in an EASO.

### **Formal politicization of the top civil service**

A commonly used definition of politicization refers to the “substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service” (Peters and Pierre, 2004, p.2). Closely related to this, we focus specifically on formal politicization. This recruitment related concept (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014) relates to the existence of rules that allow ministers to hire (top) civil servants according to his/her own preference (Rouban 2012).

As Peters and Pierre (2004, p2) explain, “all civil service systems have some level of political involvement in personnel matters”. Therefore, a binary classification of political systems between neutral and political appointment (Walgrave & Suetens, 2001, p. 13) may be an oversimplification. Instead we use the politicization of civil service index developed by Balint and colleagues (Balint, Bauer, & Knill, 2008) based on seven indicators. Since two of these indicators are related to EASOs, and not to top civil service appointments strictly speaking, we exclude them. The five remaining indicators are the following:

1. Senior staff is usually recruited from the administration itself – yes (0) no (1)
2. Senior staff is recruited through formal procedures prior to the appointment – yes (0) no (1)
3. Senior staff can be dismissed by the minister without cause - no (0) yes (1)
4. Senior staff can be replaced when the government changes - no (0) yes (1)
5. The incumbent minister can appoint senior staff – no (0) yes (1)

The higher the score, the more politicized the system.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To test the key dimensions of the Executive Advisory and Support Office, we use empirical data derived from eight cases; four each from Napoleonic and Westminster political systems (Peters 2021). Table 1 synthesises the cases included in this study, as well as the year and government characteristics. We originally had intended to use the most recent data possible (2021). However, in some cases, the years 2018 or 2019 are considered for reasons of accessibility to data, as well as case-specific circumstances (such as an election or change of government), which may have distorted the data.

Case	Administrative tradition	Year(s) considered	Head of Government
Belgium	Napoleonic	2021	De Croo
France	Napoleonic	2021	Castex
European Commission	Napoleonic	2021	Von der Leyen
Italy	Napoleonic	2021	Draghi
Australia	Westminster	2018	Turnbull
Canada	Westminster	2018-19	Trudeau
Ireland	Westminster	2019	Varadkar
United Kingdom	Westminster	2019	Johnson

Primary data was mostly collected from official government sources in each country. These include data from government websites and documents such as annual reports listing the number of ministerial advisers, and regulations such as codes of conduct governing ministers, advisers, and civil servants. As with most comparative studies, there are shortages in the data which provide limitations. This is unsurprising considering the comparative ambitions across countries, actors, and institutions. For example, in the UK and Ireland it is not common for special advisers to specifically list a job title, which is one of the indicators for specialisation. To compensate, we also sourced secondary data from more informal sources, including government telephone directories, news articles, and the social networking website for professionals LinkedIn.

## RESULTS

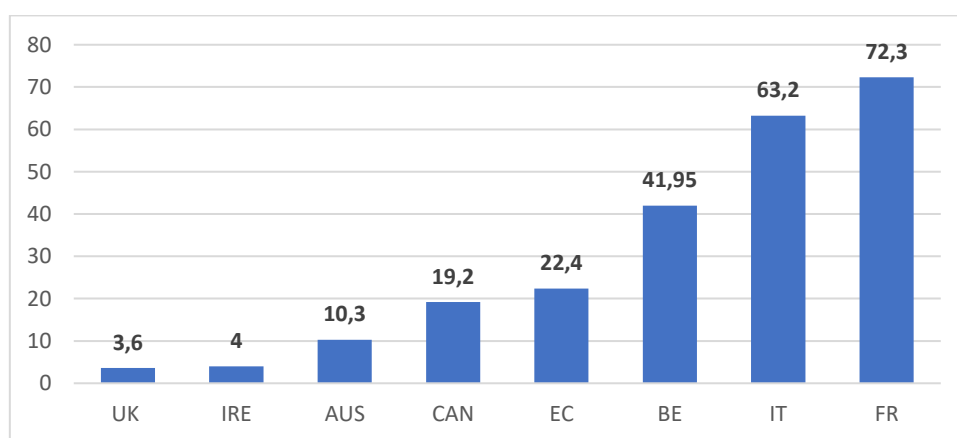
### Size

As Figure 1 illustrates, we find a clear distinction between the average size of EASOs in the Westminster world compared to the Napoleonic one: the four smallest offices belong to the former administrative tradition while the four biggest belong to the later.

Yet we should not overlook variation within administrative systems. In fact, while French EASOs have on average 72.3 ministerial staff, the ones of the EC have “only” 22.4. In the same vein, Canadian offices have on average 19.2 staff, while only 3.6 in the UK<sup>2</sup> and 4 in Ireland.

Setting administrative tradition aside, we find three types of EASOs. We qualify UK and Irish offices as *small* since they have an average of less than five ministerial staff per office. Australian, Canadian, and Commission executive offices are mid-sized since they have on average around 10 to 20 staff. Finally, French and Italian offices are definitely “big” since they have on average over 60 staff. We argue that Belgium also belongs to that group, with an average of over 40 staff per EASO, while it in fact finds itself in between the European Commission and Italy.

Figure 1 EASO Average Size



Considering the size of the EASO of the Prime Minister (PM) in isolation is very instructive. Figure 2 shows the difference of the size of the PM office with an average EASO. As the “long” bar illustrates, PM offices do not necessarily follow the same trend as the average offices within their government. There seems to be a high level of centralisation of personnel resources in the prime minister’s office in many Westminster countries. The PM’s office in the UK and Australia have between 40-44 more staff than an average cabinet minister’s office. In Canada, the centralisation effect is even stronger

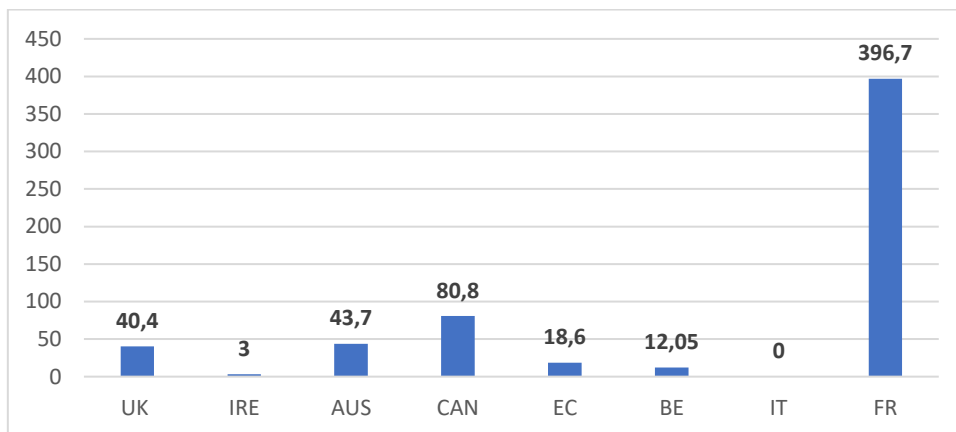
<sup>2</sup> In addition, UK ministers’ offices include a private office staffed by private secretaries and other administrative staff not included in this analysis. The size of a private office varies between a department’s ministers, and ranges from five to 18 for secretaries of state. Further, ministers are supported by a parliamentary private secretary (PPS), an MP who serves as an unpaid assistant to a government minister. The most basic part of the PPS role is collecting and passing on documents from civil servants to their minister while he or she is speaking in parliament. Beyond that, they serve as an informal liaison between their minister and their party’s MPs.

since the PM has more than 80 additional staff in the office than regular Ministers. Both the President of the European Commission and the Belgian Prime Minister’s offices are small when compared to the French Prime Minister’s office, which is the most “presidentialized” with almost 400 additional staff compared to an average French EASO.

What is also interesting is that in numerical terms, both the Australian (58 individuals) and the Canadian (100 individuals) have more staff in their PMOs than staff in the the PMOs of two Napoleonic cases: Belgium (52 staff) and the European Commission (41 staff).

If we consider both the average size of an EASO and the size of the PM office in each system, we note that only in Ireland do both regular Ministers and Prime Minister have a very weak office (in numerical terms).

Figure 2 Size difference between an average EASO and the EASO of the prime minister



## Regulation

### A. Most formal recognition

Table 2. Most formal recognition	
Case	Type of regulation
Australia	Hard Law (voted in Parliament)
Canada	Hard Law (voted in Parliament)
Ireland	Hard Law (voted in Parliament)
United Kingdom	Hard Law (voted in Parliament)
Belgium	Hard Law (Governmental Decree)
France	Hard Law (Governmental Decree)
European Commission	Soft Law (Communication of the President)
Italy	Hard Law (voted in Parliament)

As Table 2 illustrates, EASOs are not mentioned in the Constitution of any of the cases. This is not so surprising for the Westminster cases<sup>3</sup> where EASOs are a recent phenomenon. It is more surprising in the case of France or Belgium where the executive offices (ministerial cabinets) have been long established.

In that regard, we note that EASO appear to be generally more formally recognized in Westminster cases than in some Napoleonic ones. Indeed, in the UK<sup>4</sup>, Australia<sup>5</sup>, Canada<sup>6</sup> and Ireland<sup>7</sup> but also in Italy<sup>8</sup> are EASOs regulated by a Law voted in Parliament. Conversely both in Belgium<sup>9</sup> and in France<sup>10</sup> the most formal piece of regulation that refers to these offices is a governmental decree. In the European Commission (EC), the executive offices (ministerial cabinets) are only mentioned in a Communication from the President<sup>11</sup> and in the Rules of Procedures of the EC.

### B. Legal formality

The degree of legal formality of an EASO is assessed by considering whether regulation covers key dimension of the executive office (size, secondment, eligibility, roles, oversight body).

Case	Legal formality score	Item not covered
Australia	3/5	Size; Eligibility
Canada	3/5	Size; Eligibility
Ireland	4/5	Eligibility
United Kingdom	3/5	Size; Eligibility
Belgium	5/5	/
France	5/5	/
European Commission	5/5	/
Italy	5/5	/

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in some cases, such as UK, a written Constitution does not exist

<sup>4</sup> Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010

<sup>5</sup> Members of Parliament (Staff Act) 1984

<sup>6</sup> Public Service Employment Act 2003, see also the Conflict of Interest Act 2006

<sup>7</sup> Public Service Management Act 1997, see also the Ethics in Public Office Act 1995

<sup>8</sup> DECRETO LEGISLATIVO 30 luglio 1999, n. 300

<sup>9</sup> Arrêté royal du 7 novembre 2000 portant création et composition des organes communs à chaque service public fédéral ; Arrêté royal du 19 juillet 2001 relatif à l'installation des organes stratégiques des services publics fédéraux et relatif aux membres du personnel des services publics fédéraux désignés pour faire partie du cabinet d'un membre d'un Gouvernement ou d'un Collège d'une Communauté ou d'une Région

<sup>10</sup> Décret n° 2017-1063 du 18 mai 2017 relatif aux cabinets ministériels

<sup>11</sup> Rules governing the composition of the Cabinets of the Members of the Commission and of the Spokesperson's Service (1/12/2019)

As depicted on Table 3, we see a clear distinction between Napoleonic and Westminster cases. For the former, we can talk of a high level of legal formality. In the respective regulations concerning EASOs of the EC, Belgium, France and Italy, all key aspects (size, role, secondment, eligibility and oversight body) are covered. On the other hand, in most Westminster cases (UK, Australia, and Canada), Ireland being an exception, the size of the executive office is not regulated. Moreover, it appears that in none of the cases eligibility criteria are defined by regulation. This implies that literally anyone can be recruited in the EASOs of the Westminster cases discussed here.

It should be mentioned that the legal formality score only captures the extent to which key dimensions of the EASOs are regulated (or not). However, more attention should be paid to the content of those regulations as to assess for more variation. For example, there are eligibility criteria defined in both the French<sup>12</sup> and the European Commission<sup>13</sup> regulation. Yet, in the French regulation, to be eligible a MA should “have his social and political rights” while in the European Commission, it is required that a certain number of MAs are seconded from the administration and that (Deputy) Chief of Staff should be of a different nationality than the one of the Commissioner. While both France and the European Commission scored equally on the legal formality index, we find various degrees of strictness of eligibility criteria. The same applies to “role” which can be defined very specifically or broadly and oversight body which can be internal, like in Australia (Department of Finance) or in Belgium (Chancellery) or external to government like in Canada (Office of Conflict of Ethics Commissioner).

### C. Partisanship

Finally, when considering regulations we also investigated whether the partisan nature of the EASO is formally recognized. We find that partisanship is much more explicitly recognized in Westminster cases (see Table 4). All of the four countries considered specify the partisan nature of the executive office in regulations (often referring specifically to political staff). Conversely, only in the Belgian regulation did we find such a reference. Moreover, we did not find it in the regulation *stricto sensu*, but in the preamble of the regulation.

The fact that the partisan nature of the offices is made explicit in more Westminster than Napoleonic cases does not indicate that Westminster executive offices are more partisan than the Napoleonic cases. Rather, we hypothesize that the partisan nature of Napoleonic office is implicit and part of the cultural norms.

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<sup>12</sup> Décret n° 2017-1063 du 18 mai 2017 relatif aux cabinets ministériels, art 3

<sup>13</sup> Rules governing the composition of the Cabinets of the Members of the Commission and of the Spokesperson's Service (1/12/2019), 3.1.2. Administrative Status



Table 4. Partisanship

Case	Partisanship	Source quote
Australia	Y	“Ministerial advisers have a political role to help the Minister fulfil his or her aims across the portfolio”
Canada	Y	“The purpose of establishing a Minister’s office is to provide Ministers with advisors and assistants who are not departmental public servants, who share their political commitment”
Ireland	N	/
United Kingdom	Y	“They [special advisers] are an additional resource for the minister, providing assistance from a standpoint that is more politically committed and politically aware than would be available to a minister from the permanent Civil Service”
Belgium	N	/
France	N	/
European Commission	N	/
Italy	N	/

### Location

In relation to the location of ministerial offices, most EASOs have their ministerial offices located in ministerial department buildings (See Table 5). Only the Australian ministerial offices are grouped together in an executive wing of Parliament House, while Belgian and European EASOs are usually located in their own building, isolated from the administration.

This may suggest that in those three cases case, ministerial staff have less interaction with civil servants and more interaction with their ministerial staff counterparts, providing for a hyper-partisan environment. In contrast, the other cases illustrate that ministerial offices are commonly located in ministerial department buildings, enabling advisers and civil servants greater interaction and a more neutral institutional environment.

Further interrogation is needed to understand the unique contextual environment in every case. In the Belgian and European context having the EASO away from the department may not necessarily be a political decision but could also be a logistical one (lack of space in the administration building). In the UK while most ministerial offices are located in a ministerial department, the prime minister’s offices at 10 Downing Street is not within but adjacent to the Cabinet Office building (the department responsible for supporting the prime minister and cabinet).

Table 5. Location of ministerial offices

Country	Location of ministerial offices	proximity of ministerial staff to civil servants	
		ministerial offices	Coded
Australia	Separate offices away from ministerial department (in executive wing of Parliament)	Low	1
Canada	Ministerial department	High	0
Ireland	Ministerial department	High	0
United Kingdom	Ministerial department (Except PMO)	High	0
Belgium	Mix of ministerial department and separate offices	Hybrid	0.5
France	Ministerial department	High	0
European Commission	Separate offices away from ministerial department	Low	1
Italy	Ministerial department	High	0

Note: Ministerial department refers to the ministerial bureaucracy or departmental buildings of the administration. For example, the Health minister's office will be located in the health department / ministry building.

## Specialisation

Specialisation was measured by dividing the number of staff in an EASO by the number of the staffers' job titles. Table x illustrates the level of specialisation in each case sampled from the prime minister's office and the health minister's office. The figures in Table 6 represent how many individuals hold the same job title. The lower the number, the more specialized the office. Next to the figure and for further context, the number of staff and number of job titles is presented in brackets.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to highlight the operationalisation challenges in comparing job titles. The first challenge relates to data collection where some countries clearly report job titles and organograms illustrating hierarchy (e.g. France and Belgium), and other countries invariably do not (e.g. Ireland and the UK). Secondly, seemingly an EASO with a high number of staff may seemingly appear more specialised; but these staff may be particularly concentrated in one type of job classification area (e.g. media, parliamentary affairs). Thirdly, EASOs with low numbers of advisers can appear to be highly specialised when calculating the number of staff by job titles, but is evidently misleading (see the UK below).

In relation to the sample of specialisation within the health minister's office, the Belgian, Australian, and Canadian cases are fairly similar ranging between 2-3. The European Commission is the most specialised (1.8). The Irish and UK at one each may seem more specialised than the Commission, but the results are misleading as this reflects the low numbers of special advisers in each country. France (4.9) and Italy (10.5) have the lowest levels of specialisation.

In the prime minister's office, a cluster of cases including Belgium, Ireland, the UK, and the EU Commission range between 3.3 and 5.1. The next cluster of cases including Australia and Canada range between 10-13. While the French case is the least specialised at 42.6.

Cases	Sample from Health Minister's Office	Prime Minister's Office
Belgium	2.5 (44/17)	3.3 (54/16)
France	4.9 (49/10)	42.6 (469/11)
European Commission	1.8 (18/10)	5.1 (41/8)
Italy	10.5 (63/6)	TBD
Australia	2.7 (11/4)	13 (52/4)
Canada	2.6 (13/5)	10.2 (72/7)
Ireland	1 (2/2)	3.5 (7/2)
United Kingdom	1 (2/2)	4.3 (43/10)

### Osmosis with the administration

In this section we consider both formal and informal osmosis with the administration. Formal osmosis refers to whether or not it is formally (legally) allowed for civil servants to be seconded to an EASO. We find that in all eight cases, secondment is allowed.

While we did not systematically collect this data, it would be interesting to investigate the extent to which EASOs rely on seconded civil servants. In fact, secondment may be allowed in all cases, but not relied upon to the same extent. For example, in Belgium, we know that in the current government, more than 55% of the ministerial staff are seconded, which appears as a very high figure. In Australia, a previous estimation was that 20 per cent of all ministerial staff were seconded civil servants (Maley 2017), while in Canada it is suggested to be less than 10 per cent (Benoit 2006).

To assess the extent to which the EASO and the administrative world are in “osmosis” we also use the “informal osmosis” indicator. This indicator evaluated whether the highest ranked civil servant of a ministerial portfolio has prior experience working in an EASO (Table 7).

Case	Score (as a %)
Australia	71%
Canada	8%
Ireland	6%
United Kingdom	5%
Belgium	50%
France	69%
European Commission	59%
Italy	?

We generally find that in Napoleonic systems at least half of the top civil servants sampled have EASO experience. Such informal osmosis is a growing phenomenon in the European Commission: since its inception there is a rising number of top civil servants who have ministerial cabinet experience (Georgakakis and de Lassale, 2007). In Belgium, this informal osmosis is also high at the Regional and Community level (Brans et al, 2022). In the French case, the osmosis between ministerial cabinet and the administration has long been present and discussed in the literature (see for example Remond, Coutrot and Boussard, 1982; Sawicki and Mathiot, 1999). The Italian case may be peculiar since Di Mascio and Natalini (2016) showed that key advisers from Italian ministerial cabinets had a legal (State Council for example) background. In their most recent sample (1996-2014), the Italian authors found that only 9,6% of the top advisers had Senior Civil Service background. However, no conclusion should be drawn for this since it may well be that the ministerial cabinet experience is a stepping stone to a top civil service career but that the opposite is not true.

Conversely, most Westminster cases features a low degree of informal osmosis, since in the UK, Canada and Ireland most top civil servants have not worked in an EASO before. In the UK, there was one case where career official Tom Scholar, current head of the Treasury, was both interim chief-of-staff and principal private secretary to prime minister Gordon Brown for seven months in 2007. Similarly in Ireland, there was just one case of a department head having previous experience as a special adviser. This is Katherine Licken, the top official in the Department of Transport, who worked as a special adviser 20 years earlier around 2001, during the early stages of her career. What is more surprising is the case of Australia which actually shows a higher percentage of informal osmosis (71 per cent) than all the Napoleonic cases. The low numbers of osmosis in the UK and Ireland may be a reflection of the low numbers of special advisers in each country, providing a limited pool of candidates. However cohort size is not sufficient to explain the variation between Australia and Canada which both have a large cohort of ministerial staff.

### Formal politicization

Case	Politicization Index
Australia	2/5
Canada	2/5
Ireland	2/5
United Kingdom	2/5
Belgium	3/5
France	4/5
European Commission	1/5
Italy	2/5

The Westminster cases all feature a low level of politicization of the top civil servants recruitment.

Conversely, Napoleonic cases are more politicized, particularly France and Belgium. However, Italy also score 2/5 and the European Commission even lower (1/5) as a result of their successful administrative reform (Bauer & Ege, 2012).

Table 9. Summary results

Cases	Top CS politicization	Size		Regulation			Location in Dpt	Specialization		Osmosis	
		Average	Δ PMO	Highest level	Legal formality	Partisanship		Health minister	PMO	Formal	Informal
Belgium	3/5	41,9	12,05	Hard Law (Gvt decree)	5/5	N	N	2,58	3,37	Y	50%
France	4/5	72,3	396,7	Hard Law (Gvt decree)	5/5	N	Y	4,9	42,63	Y	69%
Italy	2/5	63,2	N/A	Hard Law (Parliament)	5/5	N	Y	10,5	?	Y	?
European Commission	1/5	22,4	18,6	Soft Law	5/5	N	N	1,8	5,12	Y	59%
Australia	2/5	10,3	43,7	Hard Law (Parliament)	3/5	Y	N	2,75	13	Y	71%
Canada	2/5	19,2	80,8	Hard Law (Parliament)	3/5	Y	Y	2,6	10,28	Y	8%
Ireland	2/5	4	3	Hard Law (Parliament)	4/5	Y	Y	1	3,5	Y	6%
UK	2/5	3,6	40,4	Hard Law (Parliament)	3/5	Y	Y	1	4,3	Y	5%

## DISCUSSION – IDENTIFYING DIFFERENT EASO VARIATIONS AND TYPES

Based on the empirical evidence provided, we identify three clusters of EASOs:

### **The Ministerial Cabinet (Italy, Belgium, France)**

The Ministerial Cabinet type of EASOs can be found in Belgium, Italy, and France. They share the following features. They have a high number of ministerial staff: all three cases have on average more than 40 ministerial staff per EASO. This figure would be even higher if only Cabinet Ministers were considered. Indeed, in Italy, Belgium and France, the important number of Junior ministers negatively impacts this average. We also find a high level of osmosis between the administration and the EASO. While formal osmosis is allowed (but not a key feature of the “ministerial cabinet”) it is particularly interesting to note that in all three cases more than 50% of the top civil servant have EASO experience. We interpret this high level of informal osmosis as illustrative of the fact that the “ministerial cabinet” type of EASO is embedded in the cultural norms of the executive triangle. Another salient point is that because the “ministerial cabinet” type is culturally accepted and considered the norm in these countries, it is not considered necessary to explicitly mention the partisan nature of an EASO in regulations. Finally, we also find a high degree of legal formality.

### **The Wilsonian offices (United Kingdom, Ireland)**

Conversely, we find another type of offices which are fundamentally different from the “ministerial cabinet” type which we label as “Wilsonian offices” (Gouglas 2020). The Wilsonian offices follow Woodrow Wilson’s rationale of separating administration from politics (Wilson, 1887). Wilsonian offices can be found in the UK and Ireland. They are relatively small since on average less than five ministerial staff work in those EASO. Their partisan nature is made explicit in the regulation. Moreover, very few top civil servants have experience in EASO implying a low level of osmosis with the administration.

### **The Cabinet Westminsteriel (Australia, Canada, European Commission)**

We propose the term *Cabinet Westminsteriel* for labelling *Westminsteriel* (Gouglas 2020) is a hybrid between *cabinets ministériels* (ministerial cabinet in French) and Wilsonian offices . The EASO belonging to that category shares some features of the traditional Wilsonian offices found in the UK and Ireland and of the historical ministerial cabinets of Italy, Belgium and France. The cases that have EASOs of the “Cabinet Westminsteriel” type are Australia, Canada and the European Commission. In fact, they all have EASOs of middle size (between 10 and 20 ministerial staff). Another important feature of the Cabinet Westminsteriel is that the level of formal politicization of their top civil servant recruitment is limited (1 or 2).

The size of those EASO is the main criteria for grouping them. We do not find many other common features within that group. In fact both Australia and the European Commission have a high level of informal osmosis while this is not the case for Canada. Moreover, Canada and Australia are less formally regulated but explicitly partisan while the EC is more formally regulated but the partisanship of its EASO is implicit. Table 10 summarizes the main features of each cluster.

Table 10. Types of Executive Advisory and Support Offices

Type of EASO	Key features	Cases
Type 1: The Ministerial Cabinet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size: above 40 ministerial staff</li> <li>• Informal osmosis: over 50%</li> <li>• Partisanship: implicit</li> <li>• Legal formality: high</li> </ul>	Belgium Italy France
Type 2: The Cabinet Westminsteriel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size: between 10 and 20 ministerial staff</li> <li>• Top CS politicization: low</li> </ul>	Canada Australia European Commission
Type 3: The Wilsonian Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Size: below 5 ministerial staff</li> <li>• Informal osmosis: below 10%</li> <li>• Partisanship: explicit</li> <li>• Legal formality: low</li> </ul>	United Kingdom Ireland

The Table also shows that not all variables that were discussed in the paper are useful to categorize EASOs:

- Formal osmosis (secondment) is allowed in all cases, and is thus not useful to differentiate between EASOs. However, there is some evidence to suggest the extent to which countries use seconded civil servants in EASOs varies considerably and could provide a useful metric.
- The location of the EASOs do not follow the typology we suggest: EASOs are not located in the administration in two “ministerial cabinet” EASO and in one “cabinet Westminsteriel”.
- The size of the Prime Minister’s office is useful to differentiate the degree of centralization of the EASO system. Yet, as for location, the most “presidentialized” offices are found in France (almost 400 extra ministerial staff), Australia (80 extra ministerial staff), Canada and UK (40 extra ministerial staff), which we all categorized in different types (except for Australia and Canada which both belong to the “Cabinet Westminsteriel” category).
- Finally, the specialization indicator is methodologically challenging to operationalise. We find measuring specialisation through job titles is correlated and affected by the size of the total ministerial staff cohort. On the one hand, it is impossible to reach a high level of specialization (high number of different job titles) with a small number of individuals. On the other hand, when calculating the average number of individuals holding the same job titles, the size of the EASO has a disproportionate impact, as having a small office (low number on the numerator) will likely result in data that suggests a high level of specialization (low result).



## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to advance conceptual development of the institutional habitat of the ministerial advisers by suggesting a universal term: the executive advisory and support office (EASOs) which is defined as an institutional structure that acts as the personal office of a member of the political executive and which is comprised of individuals as ministerial staff hired at the executive actor's discretion to perform advisory and support functions.

We suggested six dimensions to characterize and differentiate EASOs: size (average and Prime Minister's office) regulation (legal formality, partisanship, highest level of regulation), specialization, osmosis with the administration (formal and informal), location and top civil service politicization. It should be noted that the choice of those indicators is mainly supported by empirical evidence. Further research should seek to theoretically support these indicators, or suggest others.

Based on recent empirical evidence from eight cases, we were able to identify three types of EASO: the "ministerial cabinet" type (Italy, Belgium, France), the "Cabinet Westminsteriel" type (Australia, Canada, and the European Commission), and the "Wilsonian office" type (UK and Ireland). Some of those dimensions, such as average size, informal osmosis or legal formality revealed to be useful to characterize and differentiate within the population of EASOs. Other dimensions (location, size of the Prime Minister's office, formal osmosis, and specialization) were less or not useful .

Those three groups support Cooper's (2020) suggestion that we may find more variation within an administrative tradition than expected. While the Canadian research focused on top civil servant politicization, we argue that his argument extends to temporary political advisory systems. For example, in the Westminster cases, the UK and Ireland have small EASOs (below five ministerial staff) while Australia and Canada have larger offices (between 10 and 20 offices). If we consider size in the Napoleonic cases, we also find variation with France and Italy having offices of more than 60 staff, Belgium 40 and the European Commission (only) 20.

Yet, one should not ignore that some of the key dimensions can still be read through the "administrative tradition" paradigm. We found for example that in none of the Napoleonic cases was the regulation explicit about the partisan nature of the EASO while the opposite was found in Westminster system. We also found a high level of informal osmosis in all Napoleonic cases. Moreover, the level of legal formality is systematically higher in Napoleonic than Westminster cases.

Future research could extend the empirical analysis to other cases outside of the Napoleonic and Westminster worlds. It would for example be interesting to test the cases of Denmark, Norway, or Germany, which have also been addressed in the literature. Hypothetically, one might speculate that Danish EASOs might fit within the Wilsonian type considering they share similar structural traits to British and Irish offices. The other salient area of research relates to applying the dimensions from a temporal perspective to examine how EASOs have changed over time. That is, if one were to examine the same eight cases in this study using empirical data from say the 1970s, one could track how the institutional architecture has changed over a 50-year period.

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