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From Government Office to Private PR—The Boundaryless Careers of Special Ministerial Advisers and the Privatization of Politics

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Abstract

This article presents a study on special advisers examining their careers beyond their roles in the machinery of government. Applying a theoretical framework derived from the literature on the sociology of work and the transformation of the organization of politics in the Nordic welfare states, we make two theoretical points. First, special advisers are part of an emerging group of partisan policy professionals, and second, the characteristics of this group are best analyzed through the lens of the boundaryless career. By combining these two positions, we contribute to studies on special advisers by offering a longer career perspective, and we contribute to studies on the boundaryless career by analyzing a job market other than the dot-com and cultural industries. Mapping the entire career paths of all Danish special ministerial advisers from 2000 to 2017 (n=144), we show that the position of special adviser serves as a steppingstone to a new labor market that typically culminates with a position in private public relations. This conclusion lends fresh support to concerns about the privatization of politics changing policy formation in the Nordic welfare states.

KEYWORDS: Special advisers, boundaryless career, partisan policy professionals, political PR.

Introduction

A special ministerial adviser, sometimes popularly referred to as a spin doctor, can be more formally defined as a person “appointed to serve an individual minister, recruited on political criteria, in a position that is temporary” (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017:300). Special advisers are exempted from the Weberian obligations of impartiality and objectivity and thus can provide ministers with unique political support that traditional civil servants cannot (Gruhn and Slater 2012). A persistent metaphor in studies on special advisers is the need to more constantly shine the bright light of research in their direction: Blick’s (2004) seminal book on special advisers bears the title *The People Who Live in the Dark*, and in an introduction to a recent special issue on ministerial advisers, Hustedt and Salomonsen (2017:201) argued for a need to drag ministerial advisers “out of the dark.” That, however, is not the only need Hustedt and Salomonsen (2017) addressed: they also called for a theoretical turn in studies on special advisers, following Shaw and Eichbaum (2015) in an earlier special issue on the subject. The present research follows this call to further theorize special advisers by applying a career perspective inspired by both the literature on policy professionals (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017b; Garsten et al. 2015; Svallfors 2017) and the sociology of work literature (Abbott 1993; Gill 2013; Neff 2012; Neff et al. 2005).

So far, research has mostly aimed to identify special advisers’ role in the “machinery of government” (Goplerud 2013:334; see also Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017). Such research has considered the different kinds of roles special advisors play in various political systems (Askim et al. 2017; Connaughton 2010; Maley 2000), their roles in so-called administrative politization (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Öhberg et al. 2017), their accountability (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010), their advice to ministers (Shaw and Eichbaum 2017), and their effects on government dynamics such as government coordination (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017). This body of research thus has focused on special advisers *while* they work as special advisers. A few scholars such as Goplerud (2013) and Yong and

Hazell (2014) have also followed the careers of special advisers after leaving politics. As Hustedt and Salomonsen (2017) pointed out, special advisers are employed only temporarily, so their broader career paths before and after serving as special advisers become a crucial question to fully understand their role and status in modern society.

To examine special advisers from a career perspective, this research adopts a theoretical framework that combines studies on so-called partisan policy professionals (PPP) with the literature on the boundaryless career. As a new group of professionals, PPPs have grown in numbers in most advanced democracies, including the Nordic welfare states (Svallfors 2016, 2017a). This group consists people who are employed to influence politics and policy-making rather than elected to office. PPPs' careers are characterized by frequent moves between jobs crossing from the public to the private sector, particularly the public relations (PR) and lobbying industries. These career patterns have often been described as the emerging privatization of politics (Garsten et al. 2015; Svallfors 2016; Tyllström 2013). In the literature on the boundaryless career, most researchers have agreed that this emerging career type is characterized by flexibility, individual ambition, and the accumulation of competences through frequent job shifts (Greenhaus et al. 2008; Hill 2013). This career type has frequently been critically investigated and linked with new and emerging job markets such as the dot-com industries and the fashion and cultural industries, while its possible individual and societal costs have also been addressed (Gill 2013; Neff et al. 2005).

Together, these two literature strands complement and supplement each other to add to the career perspective of special advisers. Studies on PPPs show how and why a new political job market is emerging in the Nordic welfare states and bring attention to the possible broader societal effects of this new career type, while the literature on the boundaryless career highlights the development of new job markets and more individualistic, flexible careers based on the accumulation of marketable skills. By combining these two positions, this research contributes to studies on special advisers by

offering a longer career perspective that extends beyond the machinery of government and contributes to studies of the boundaryless career by analyzing a job market other than the dot-com industries (Gill 2013; Neff 2012) and the cultural and fashion industries (Neff et al. 2005). Finally, the focus on a new political job market applies critical perspectives to questions about the influence of the boundaryless career on a specific field of society.

Rise of Partisan Policy Professionals in Nordic Welfare States

In recent years, the Nordic welfare states of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden have experienced similar transformations in the organization of politics and policy formation that have led to the rise of PPPs as a new group of professional actors (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017a). The theoretical concept of PPPs builds on Dahl's (1989) concept of policy specialists and Kingdon's (2011) work on policy entrepreneurs, while the core concept of the policy professional can be traced to Heclo (1978; see also Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017b; Svallfors 2017a). A common focus of all these studies has been a focus on the rise of a group or groups of political actors who affect politics but are—in a strict democratic sense—not accountable for their actions.

A number of factors have contributed to the rise of the PPP, but two have typically been highlighted: the increased mediatization and the de-corporatization of politics (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017a; Svallfors 2016). The mediatization of politics is defined as the “long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors have increased” (Esser and Strömbäck, 2014:6). This development has led to a focus on political communication and the desire to control the media agenda among most organizations dealing with politics, policy formation, and influences on public opinion (Blach-Ørsten, 2016). Consequently, such organizations have hired increasingly more professional communicators (Blach-Ørsten 2016; Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017; Lilleker and Negrine 2002).

Regarding the de-corporatization of politics, the Nordic countries have a long tradition of corporatism, understood as organized negotiations and deliberations between the state, employer associations, and unions (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017a; Campbell and Pedersen 2014). However, recent studies have suggested that a process of de-corporatization starting in the mid-1980s has led to fewer committees and a weaker focus on tripartite negotiations (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017a; Blom-Hansen 2000; Christiansen and Rommetvedt 1999). As corporatism has declined, lobbyism and the privatization of politics has arisen, and a new market for buying and selling political influence, opinions, and ideas has emerged. This development is well known in the United States but new to Scandinavia (Tyllström 2013). Svallfors (2016:58) characterized this market as “a substantial labor market that is defined by its particular relations to politics ... where the skills of policy professionals are bought and sold.” Svallfors (2016:58–59) summarized these skills as follows: 1) policy formulation skills that involve the ability to frame social problems and possible solutions; 2) process skills that involve knowledge of the where, how, and why of the policy-making process; and 3) access skills that involve quickly finding relevant information.

Boundaryless Careers of Partisan Policy Professionals

The term *boundaryless career*, though contested, is best understood in opposition to the term *organizational or bureaucratic career* (Davidson and Meyers 2016; Gill 2013; Greenhaus et al. 2008; Hill 2013). The organizational or bureaucratic career is characterized by careerism, company loyalty, and a slow rise through the ranks (Gill 2013), whereas the boundaryless career is characterized by frequent career moves across different organizations, accumulation of marketable skills, and construction of a personal network (Gill 2013; Greenhaus et al. 2008). Thus, a common characteristic of the boundaryless career is that it is guided more by personal ambition and self- fulfillment than organizational loyalty (Gill 2013; Greenhaus et al. 2008). Critics of the term have argued that the shift from the organizational career has been overstated, but they have acknowledged that the concept

has pushed studies on careers in new directions and highlighted transformations of contemporary job markets (Hill 2013; Inkson et al. 2012).

A second characteristic of the boundaryless career is a focus on competences accumulated through work in different types of organizations and sectors (Greenhaus et al., 2008). DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) described the competences of the boundaryless career as know-why, know-how, and know-whom competences. Know-why skills refer to self-awareness and self-motivation, know-how to skills portable between organizations, and know-whom to the construction of networks providing information and social contacts (Greenhaus et al. 2008). These competences resemble the competences of PPPs described by Svallfors (2016), and both theories hold that such competences are individual and accumulated through jobs in different types of sectors and organizations. A third characteristic of the study of boundaryless career is the focus on “cool jobs” and “hot” industries (Neff et al. 2005). Public discourses on the “dark” power of people in these positions and various television series focusing on the same dark powers have shaped the image of the special adviser into a public figure with new kinds of power (McNair 2004). Consequently, the position of special adviser position appears to be a cool job for those drawn to power but not willing to “suffer” a traditional political career (Svallfors 2017b:554).

In sum, the two strands of literature reviewed add to the career perspective of special advisers in the context of the increasing privatization of politics. Studies on PPPs explain how mediatization and de-corporatization have given rise to a new political job market in the Nordic welfare states, while the literature on the boundaryless career brings attention to the career aspects of this job market by focusing on mobility between jobs and organizations and the accumulation of marketable skills through this mobility. Together, these two approaches highlight potentially critical aspects of this new cool job market at a societal level. Rather than one-sidedly pointing to individual dark character traits sometimes associated with entrepreneurial career types (see, e.g., DeNisi and Alexander 2017),

these approaches combined highlight the larger, systemic transformations in policy formation that may follow from the boundarylessness of policy professionals' career paths.

Research Setting: Special Ministerial Advisers in Denmark

The introduction of partisan special advisers in the late 1990s marks an exception in the Danish administrative system and civil service, which have a strong Weberian tradition with a focus on non-partisan recruitment (Danish Ministry of Finance 2004, 2013; Öhberg et al. 2017). White paper 1537 gives particular focus to special advisers and describes their position:

They cover media-related tasks, secretarial assistance to and services for the minister, the provision of advice to the minister in form of general sparring, the drafting of speeches and accompanying the minister to meetings of different types as well as management of external contacts to parliament, stakeholder organizations and other ministries for the minister. (Danish Ministry of Finance 2013:181–182)

According to white paper 1443 (Danish Ministry of Finance 2004), special advisers are recruited based on their professional skills. Unlike regular civil servants, their employment is tied to the specific minister for whom they work, and they are not entitled to give instructions to general civil servants outside the staff function of the ministry they serve. Special advisers' salaries vary among ministries, but some make more than 1 million Danish crowns a year (around US\$150,000). Special advisers have higher salaries than general civil servants but less top civil servants (Djøf 2019).

Denmark presents a case study outside the Westminster context, where the study of special advisers has so far primarily focused. Öhberg et al. (2017) and Husted and Salomonsen (2017), though, studied special ministerial advisers in Danish contexts. Focusing on administrative politicization, Öhberg et al. (2017) found that to some extent, traditional civil servants perceive political advisers as a threat to administrative neutrality. Hustedt and Salomonsen (2017) reported that Danish special advisers play

only indirect roles in this government coordination. In sum, both studies show that special advisers are new actors with some influence but seem to play a more indirect role in Denmark than many other countries.

We propose that this relatively new group of actors in Danish politics constitutes a prime example of PPPs characterized by entrepreneurial and boundaryless career paths—and this career profile is crucial to assessing the implications of the introduction of the position of special ministerial adviser for society as a whole. Our study thus focuses on the overall question of whether and how the career paths of special ministerial advisers can be understood as boundaryless policy professional careers. To do so, we seek to answer a number of related research questions that each refers to a particular element of the boundaryless career formed around the position of special ministerial adviser:

RQ1: What competences in educational background and work experience do special ministerial advisers accumulate across different fields before and after their time in government?

RQ2: What role does the time in government play in the formation of special advisers' boundaryless career paths?

RQ3: To what degree are the career paths of special ministerial advisers characterized by professional job-to-job mobility?

RQ4: Which special ministerial advisers have the most prototypical boundaryless career paths?

Data and Methods

This study was based on an empirical analysis of the entire career paths of all Danish special ministerial advisers from January 2000, when the position was formally introduced, until October 2017, covering five entire electoral periods and part of a sixth. A comprehensive list of all special advisers employed in this period was compiled by accessing open source records of the names and

employment periods of all current and previous special advisers from all existing 19 ministries over 2000–2013. Access was also gained to the Danish Agency for the Modernization of Public Administration (*Moderniseringsstyrelsen*), which has made exhaustive lists of all special ministerial advisers since October 2013. The compiled list was later cross-checked with an internal list from the Ministry of Finance.

Our sample constituted 144 special advisers, including some who served as special advisers two or even three times over consecutive electoral periods: 10 were active during the Poul Nyrup government (1998–2001), 21 during the first Anders Fogh government (2001–2005), 17 during the second Anders Fogh government (2005–2007), 35 during the Anders Fogh/Lars Løkke government (2007–2011), 57 during the Helle Thorning government (2011–2015) and 35 during the Lars Løkke government (2015–). Of the 144 special advisers in the study, only 33 (23%) were female, even less representation than the already low representation of women (27%) in the broader Danish communication elite consisting of high-ranking politicians and political journalists, editors, and spokespeople (Mayerhöffer 2019).

Information on individual special advisers' educational backgrounds and work experiences was primarily obtained from their profiles on publicly available professional networking sites. In the (few) cases when the target persons did not have such profiles, or their profiles were outdated or incomplete, missing information, particularly educational background, was obtained from their ministries, professional “who-is-who” lists, and newspaper content. The latter source also verified information obtained from professional networking sites, especially times of employment.

For all special advisers in our list, the following relevant information was recorded: gender, current and all previous jobs (employer name, job title, and start and end years of employment), and educational background for all completed tertiary degrees (education level, obtained title, and

graduation year). For both work experience and educational backgrounds, positions did not have to be full time, so both part-time educational programs and side jobs (e.g., university teaching and publication relations work) and volunteer work (e.g., electoral observer) were included. Board memberships and other honorary posts were not included.

Much of our data material was based on self-reported information provided by the special advisers. While we took great care to cross-check self-reported career paths with outside sources whenever observing a break in the timeline or any other inconsistency, the reliance on self-reported career paths came with the limitation that the persons in our sample did not disclose part-time jobs, volunteer work, and early career internships in their CVs to equal extents.

For the purposes of the analysis conducted, the individual job positions in addition to special ministerial adviser were classified into five main categories: positions in journalism, political parties (including PR positions), public-sector PR (public PR), private-sector PR (private PR), and other (in the public or private sector). These categories went beyond the broader differentiation of public- and private-sector professional expertise often applied to special ministerial advisers to allow for a more fine-grained analysis of the different relevant work competences accumulated by these professionals during their boundaryless careers.

In presenting our results, we alternated between an analysis based on all individual special advisers (n=144) and an analysis based on all recorded positions as special advisers (n=159). The latter took into account the service of a number of people on our list as special advisers at two or more non-consecutive points in time. Positions stretching over more than one consecutive electoral periods or several ministries (following a particular minister during a cabinet reshuffle) were regarded as the same position.

Results

RQ1: Special Ministerial Advisers' Competences

Looking at the education backgrounds of the special ministerial advisers, we can identify two main areas. First, 69, or nearly half of the 144 special advisers, had educational backgrounds in media and communication in general.ⁱ Among these, 45 (31%) were fully educated journalists. The second prominent educational background was political science (32%, n=46), arguably the traditional pathway to entering careers in politics and public administration in Denmark. Seven (5%) held degrees in both disciplines.

Although almost half of the Danish special ministerial advisers had some form of communication background, whether classical journalistic training, communication-related degrees, or further education during their careers, a communication-related education was far from necessary for recruitment as a special ministerial adviser. Despite a focus on media-related tasks in the job descriptions of Danish special advisers, this finding shows that from the onset, trained journalists have been only a strong minority rather than the majority among special advisers, and their numbers have further declined from the preceding electoral period (28% journalists by training) to the current electoral period (26% journalists by training).

To further assess the competences qualifying professionals for the position of special ministerial adviser, we analyzed in which of four main work fields traditionally associated with politics and policy formation (journalism, political parties, public PR, and private PR) Danish special advisers gained work experience before and after their time in government. As Figure 1 shows, a strong minority of 40% of all the special advisers came to their positions through work experience in journalism, while 60% previously worked for political parties. Even though PR experience, especially in the private sector, was a factor to some degree, the low number of special advisers who worked

exclusively in PR before becoming special advisers indicates that those recruited to these positions were by no means classical PR experts. Only 10 (7%) of the special ministerial advisers had not gained work experience in any related field before their time in government.

Figure 1 about here

The patterns of work experience before assumption of positions as special advisers have been surprisingly constant over time (Figure 2). Except for the very first generation of spin doctors entering their positions in the last year of the fourth Poul Nyrup government (1998–2001), which included only one person with a background in a political party, the overall distribution of work fields has remained largely unchanged.

Figure 2 about here

Figure 1 shows that 50% of all special ministerial advisers previously worked in only one field. In addition, 34% had experience in two related fields of work, and 8% in three fields, while 8% had no work experience in one of the four relevant fields (not in figure 1). This finding is not least due to the fact that recruitment to this government position constituted an early- to mid-career move: about one third of the special advisers assumed these temporary positions within five years of graduation, and only one tenth had worked for more than 15 years before becoming special advisers. When arriving in the government, the careers of special ministerial advisers thus were not yet boundaryless.

As Figure 1 shows, journalistic and party–political competences generally were acquired in the first part of special ministerial advisers’ career paths before assuming their positions in government. This picture changed significantly once special ministerial advisers left government. At some point, 69% of the special advisers acquired PR-related work experience in the private sector (62%) or the public sector (20%). The time spent in government, in contrast, set an endpoint to most (ongoing or potential) journalistic careers: only 27% of the special advisers with previous work experience in journalism

ever went back to working in journalism after serving as special advisers, and only 2% of special ministerial advisers with no previous journalistic work experience gained such experience after their time in government (not in figure 1). Even among the 12% of special advisers who worked exclusively in journalism before their time as special advisers, less than half (40%) ever returned to this profession. Similar patterns occurred for employment in political parties. Over the entire span of their careers to date, special ministerial advisers' cross-sectoral work experience increased substantially: 73% gained experience in at least two relevant work fields (other than government) and 25% in three or four fields (not in figure 1).

RQ2: Critical Time in Government

The fact that special advisers are “beamed” to relatively influential, high-profile positions in government and political communication in rather early stages of their careers adds relevance to the question of their career paths after leaving government. In particular, this raises the question of how this temporary,ⁱⁱ high-profile government position serves as a critical step in transitioning from more conventional journalistic or political party careers to what we refer to as a type of a boundaryless policy professional career. To understand this transition, it is necessary to look closer at these professionals' positions immediately before and after their temporary positions in government. As can be seen in Figure 3, only 17 of 134 special advisers directly switched to government from positions in journalism, significantly less than their educational backgrounds and previous work experiences would suggest. Instead, the majority of the special advisers entered these positions from within political parties, often from campaign and communication functions. About one third arrived in special adviser positions via PR, primarily the private sector. Except for the very first generation of spin doctors in 2000–2001 who were almost exclusively recruited from outside political parties, party employees have constituted the dominant recruitment source in all the electoral periods. In

contrast, over the years, currently active journalists have drawn less attention when ministers have looked to recruit special advisers, mostly in favor of PR employees.

Figure 3 about here

As illustrated by the crisscrossing arrows in Figure 3, time in government was a decisive point in many spin doctors' career paths. Only 49 (37%) professionals returned to the same field in which they worked before becoming special advisers, and only 24 returned to the same organization. The latter all unsurprisingly returned to political parties, while none were the returning journalists (not in figure 3). Even though we can account for a wide variety of switching patterns among fields of work, this reshuffling of career paths brought about by the temporary time in government has not been balanced by any means. As shown in Figure 3, private-sector PR appears to have functioned as a magnet for retired special ministerial advisers, primarily at the expense of journalism and political parties. Not only did about two-thirds of private-sector PR professionals return to this field after their time in government, but the sector has also attracted professionals from all other relevant sectors.

As argued by Svallfors (2017b), the draw of private-sector PR likely is motivated by special ministerial advisers' personal career motivation to work in politically related fields without being "bogged down" by classical political careers. However, factors other than special advisers' entrepreneurial spirit likely also play roles. One factor to consider is that relatively early in their careers, special ministerial advisers receive very substantial paychecks that—despite the introduction of a cap in 2011—are personally negotiable and almost on par with leadership positions in the central administration. Given that the position of special ministerial adviser resembles a temporary leadership position in finances and competences, the return, particularly to political-party communication positions, may feel like a career setback. Moreover, special advisers' function as partisan professionals in an otherwise decisively non-partisan administrative system makes directly

transitioning to positions in the central administration nearly impossible. In fact, only 3 of 134 special advisers transitioned to jobs in public administration, and only one to a job in government, a senior consultant position in the same ministry (the category “other” in Figure 3 includes these positions, along with non-PR positions in the private sector). What is certain, though, is that the pull of private-sector PR has become continuously stronger ever since the introduction of the position of special ministerial adviser in Danish politics in 2000: whereas only one third of the special advisers who left their positions in the first electoral period (through 2001) entered private-sector PR, this share has steadily risen to 54% in the ongoing electoral period (since 2015).

Individual motivations for moving from special advisor to private PR notwithstanding, the direct switch from government positions to the private sector made by so many special advisers is not unproblematic given the potential conflicts of interest. Only a few cases in our data suggested direct conflicts of interest (e.g., a spin doctor switching to an interest organization working in the same policy area as their former ministry). We, however, can observe that the character of private-sector PR employment changed before and after special advisers’ time in government. After serving as special ministerial advisers, those who opted for careers in private-sector PR were more likely to do so in interest and labor market organizations: before their time in government, 19% of professionals in private PR worked for interest and labor market organizations, but 28% did so afterward. As well, the share of professionals in private PR working for private companies dropped from 32% (before) to 25% (after). Finally, both before and after, roughly half of all professionals in private-sector PR worked for PR agencies. Although not drastic, the shift toward interest and labor market organizations is still noteworthy because these organizations seek to directly influence policy formulation and implementation, which makes potential conflicts of interest even more significant.

RQ3: Job-to-Job Mobility

So far, our analysis of Danish special ministerial advisers' career patterns has shown that this position forms part of rather heterogeneous, mixed career paths that can be described as broadly related to the field of politics. Put differently, at least in Denmark, becoming a special ministerial adviser is not about finding a way into heavy political and administrative positions, establishing and solidifying careers in parliamentary politics, or taking a temporary break from a high-profile journalistic career. As argued, such career patterns resemble what has been described as boundaryless careers. A further characteristic of such more entrepreneurial forms of careers is job-to-job mobility, or frequent, rapid moves among positions to form a heterogeneous portfolio of competences and networks, preferably in different fields of expertise.

Job-to-job mobility, due to its model of flexicurity, generally is high in the Danish labor market: a Dane, on average, holds the same job position for approximately 7.5 years (OECD, 2019). However, special ministerial advisers should be considered to be an especially mobile profession even in this context. Within only the past ten years (2007–2017), special ministerial advisers held an average of 4.9 positions, while 22% held seven or more positions.ⁱⁱⁱ Our data show that many special ministerial advisers' career paths are characterized by substantial job-to-job mobility from their onset. Even though becoming a special ministerial adviser represents an early- to mid-career move, special ministerial advisers generally have already worked in more than four different places before assuming their positions.^{iv} On average, special ministerial advisers hold three positions over five years (0.6 positions per professional year after graduation).^v This average value remains unchanged before and after time in government.

RQ4: A Prototypical Boundaryless Policy Professional Career

So far, we have analyzed whether special ministerial advisers have boundaryless career paths based on this group as a whole, but we have not focused on which individual special ministerial advisers best fit this description. Based on the previous sections, we regard special advisers' career paths as exemplifying boundaryless policy professional careers when characterized by a) cross-sectoral work experience in politically related fields; b) a switch in field of work before and after serving as special ministerial advisers; and c) high professional mobility throughout their career. Empirically, these criteria can inform a Policy Professional Index (PPI) comprised of the following indicators:

- Cross-sectoral work experience: Worked in at least two relevant work areas (public PR, private PR, journalism, and political party) in addition to a special ministerial adviser (73% of all special advisers in our sample)
- Switching fields: No work in the same work field immediately before and after being a special adviser (currently active special advisers are coded as “switching fields;” 69% of all special advisers in our sample)
- Mobility: Holding four or more positions in the past ten years (first quartile split; 74% of all special advisers in our sample)

Overall, 56 (39%) Danish special advisers met all three criteria and thus can be described as following prototypical boundaryless careers. They resemble “regular” special advisers in some respects (e.g., gender composition), but some important features set them apart from the rest. They have especially strong media profiles: almost half had classical journalism education as their first degree (30% of all special advisers), and 64% had some form of education in communication (48% of all special advisers). Moreover, 54% worked in journalism before becoming special advisors (40% of all special advisers), though only a minority (14%) ever returned to working in journalism.

Perhaps less surprisingly, the professionals with prototypical boundaryless career paths were most likely to use the position of special ministerial adviser as a steppingstone to positions in PR: 53% (37% of non-PPPs) moved on to jobs in private-sector PR, and 18% to jobs in public-sector PR (5% of non-PPPs) immediately after their time in government.

Figure 4 about here

Most importantly, however, our data show that the share of special ministerial advisers with prototypical career paths has steadily risen since the introduction of the position in 2000 (Figure 4).^{vi} During the Helle Thorning government (2011–2015), nearly half of special ministerial advisers met the description of a prototypical policy professional with a type of boundaryless career. The increase in special advisers moving to private-sector PR observed over time thus goes hand in hand with the growing number of special advisers following prototypical boundaryless career paths.

Conclusion

In this research, we focus on the careers of special advisers in Denmark. We argue that previous international studies considered special advisers' role in the machinery of government, but there is a need to broaden the focus in research on special advisers. We propose analyzing special advisers through a theoretical framework derived from the literature on the sociology of work and the transformation of the organization of politics in the Nordic welfare states. We argue that special advisers should be seen as part of an emerging group of policy professionals who work to influence politics and policy making but are not elected to office.

We show that that the special adviser position has been male dominated from its introduction and serves as an important step in building boundaryless careers. Before working as special advisers, 50% of the sample had only worked in one field, but over their careers, their cross-sectoral work experience

rose substantially: 73% gained experience in at least two relevant work fields other than government and 25% in three or four relevant work fields. We argue that these frequent job shifts show that especially after leaving politics, many special advisers follow boundaryless career paths characterized by cross-sectoral employment. However, the high level of professional mobility found in our study may also be partly attributed to the fact that the position of special ministerial adviser is an early- to mid-career position when job shifts generally are more frequent. The position has only existed since 2000, so many former special advisers have not yet reached more stable late-career stages. Still, the number of positions held, particularly across sectors, appears to be very high compared to the general Danish population.

We also show that private-sector PR is the biggest magnet for former special ministerial advisers. Not only did about two-thirds of private sector PR professionals return to this field after their time in government, but the sector also attracted professionals from all other relevant sectors. The draw of private-sector PR likely was motivated by special advisers' personal career motivation to work in politics-related fields without being bogged down by classical political careers. Indeed, the pull of private-sector PR has steadily become stronger since the introduction of the position of special ministerial adviser in Danish politics in 2000: whereas only one third of the special advisers who left their positions in the first electoral period (through 2001) entered private sector PR, this figure steadily rose to 54% in the ongoing electoral period (since 2015). Another reason for the pull of private-sector PR might be that unlike journalism, it is an expanding sector and probably the best field to maintain a high-end salary in the long run.

The function of the special adviser position as a steppingstone to a boundaryless policy professional career for many has consequences for the policy-making process. Using their know-how and know-whom of politics, these policy professionals influence politics and policy formation but are not

accountable to the public in a strict democratic sense. This emerging privatization of politics represents a clear shift in traditional policy formation in the Nordic welfare states. This shift likely is characterized by an orientation toward short-term gains for specific individuals and organizations rather than a more consensual form of policy making to realize the long-term common good. This trend toward the privatization of policy formation is potentially exacerbated by special advisers' career considerations that may risk affecting their behavior when participating in the processes of policy formation—both while and after they work in government. Further research should address the individual career motivations and considerations of special advisers to shed light on how the privatization of policy formation plays out at the individual level.

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ⁱ Degrees in communication, journalism, rhetoric, media science and strategic communication, including diplomas and executive programs.

ⁱⁱ On average, special advisers remain in this position for 2.1 years (n=159).

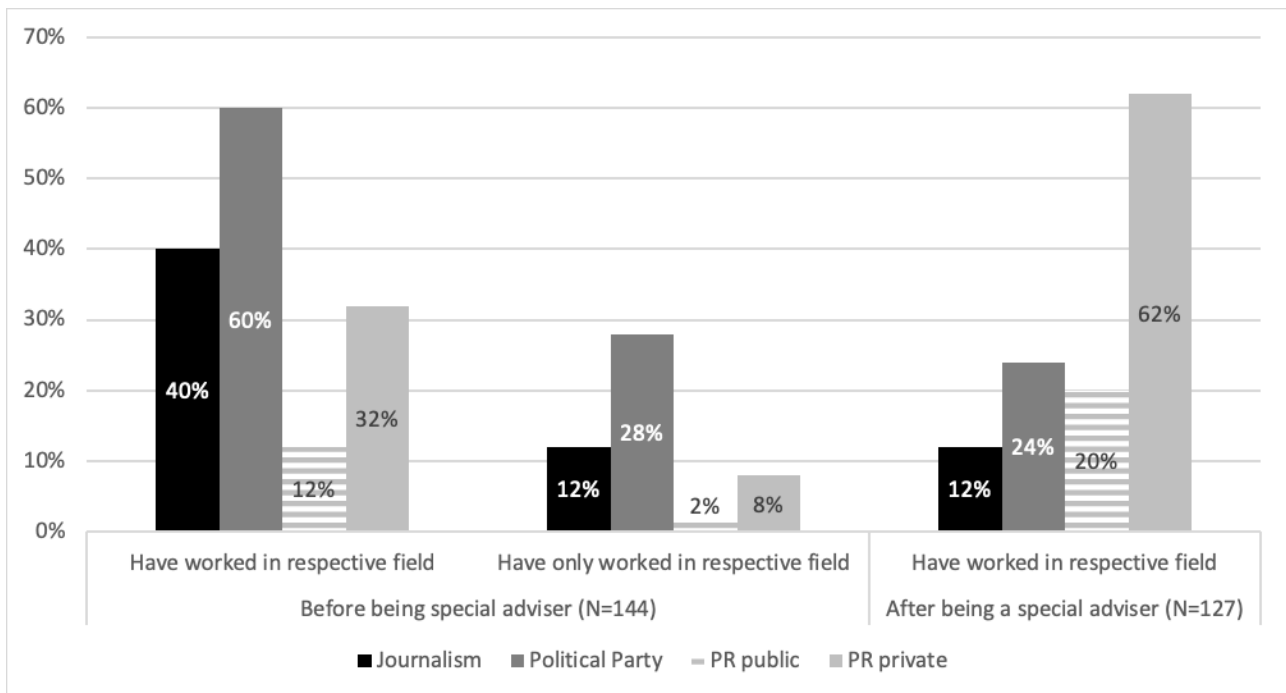
ⁱⁱⁱ 33 special ministerial advisers included have graduated later than 2007. However, this group of recent graduates has held an average of 6.8 positions, higher than the overall average.

^{iv} N=131. This excludes special advisers with missing information and those who did not complete secondary education before becoming spin doctors.

^v This excludes special ministerial advisers with fewer than three years from graduation (first completed secondary degree) to their time as ministerial advisers.

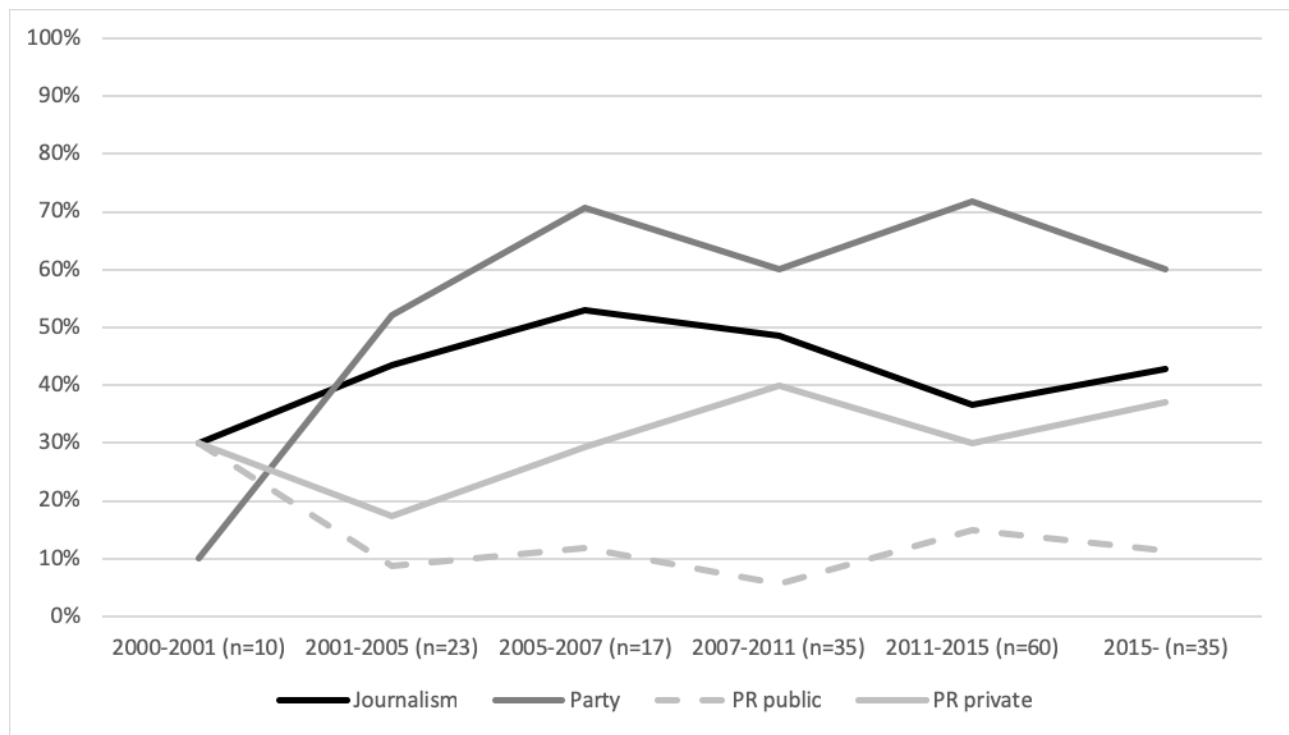
^{vi} This is even though the probability of gaining work experience in different fields naturally rises with overall career length, which would favor older special ministerial advisers.

Figure 1: Work Experience



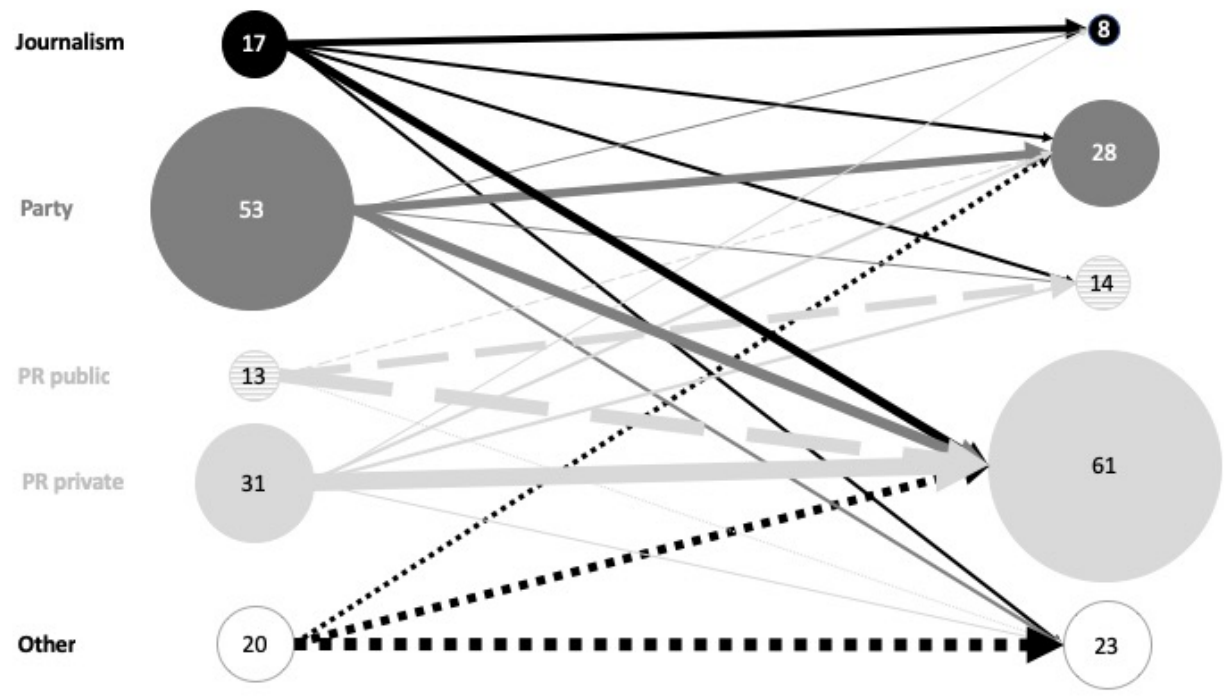
Notes: Percentages of all special advisers with work experience (including internships) in various fields. For “have worked in respective field,” multiple fields of work experience are possible. For “after being a special adviser,” 17 current special advisers are excluded. For individuals that have worked as special advisers more than once, work experience before and after their first position as special adviser is considered.

Figure 2: Previous Work Experience



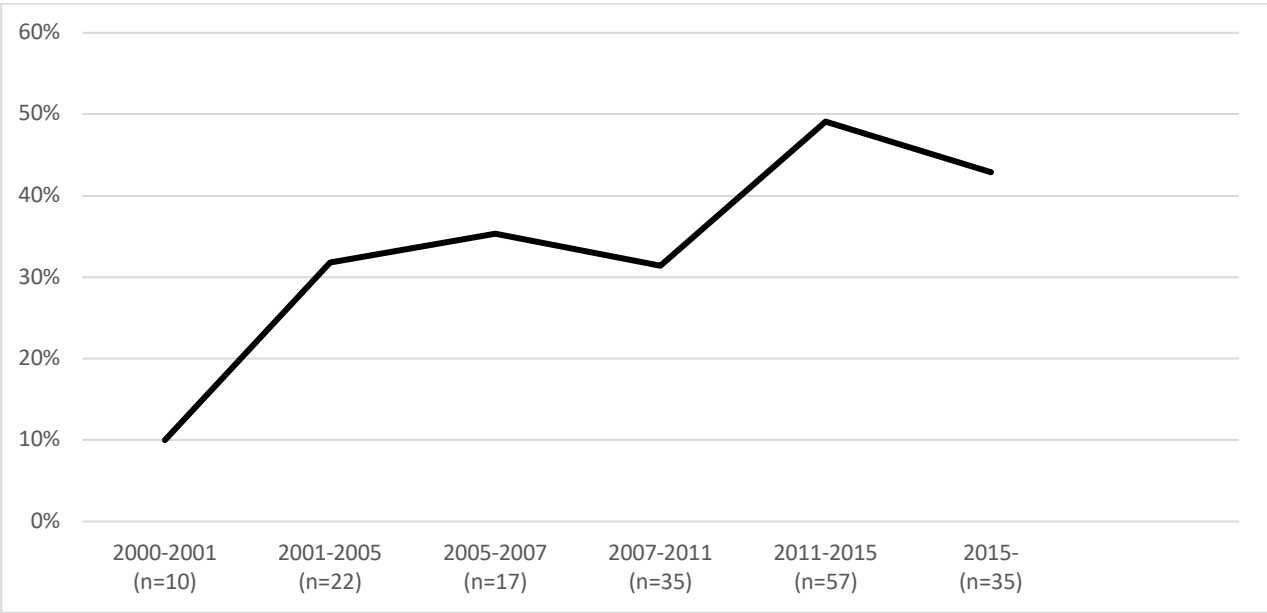
Notes: Percentages of special advisers with work experience in a given field. Experience in multiple fields is possible. Individuals who stay in their positions for consecutive electoral periods and individuals who serve as spin doctors more than once (not consecutively) are counted multiple times for each position and electoral period. In the case of cabinet reshuffles within an electoral period, a spin doctor position is defined by the minister, not the ministry in question.

Figure 3: Work Fields Immediately before and after Being Special Advisers



Notes: The number of special advisers working in a given field immediately before and after being special advisers based on positions (n=134). For individuals with two or more periods of employment as special ministerial advisers, all the periods are included. Special advisers still employed at the time of data collection are excluded. The size of the circles and arrows corresponds to the number of people working in a given field or switching from one field to the other.

Figure 4: Share of Policy Professionals over Time



Notes: Percentages of special advisers who fulfill all three PPI criteria. Special advisers in the period ongoing since 2015 who do not meet the criterion of switching fields are included when they fulfill the first two criteria. The share of policy professionals for the ongoing electoral period is almost identical (42%) when only based on the 19 special advisers who have already left office.