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**Ministerial cabinets and partitocracy
A career pattern study of ministerial cabinet
members in Belgium**

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Samenvatting

België werd in het verleden vaak een schoolvoorbeeld genoemd van een participatie. In een participatie proberen de politieke partijen zich in te bedden in alle geledingen van staat en maatschappij. Om dat te bereiken worden overal waar mogelijk trouwe partijjonnen benoemd, waarvan in ruil verwacht wordt dat ze hun hele carrière loyaal de partijorders volgen.

Deze paper gaat over slechts één van de plaatsen waar men in een participatie mag verwachten dat het krioelt van partijmensen: de ministeriële kabinetten. Dit zijn immers een reeks persoonlijke medewerkers en adviseurs van de minister die buiten de administratieve hiërarchie de minister assisteren in het identificeren en formuleren van problemen, het uittekenen van het beleid, en de dagelijkse uitwerking ervan. Ministeriële kabinetten (of een vorm ervan) bestaan in vrijwel alle Europese landen, maar in België worden ze als buitengewoon machtig bestempeld. Ze worden bovendien grotendeels door de partijen samengesteld, en niet noodzakelijk door de minister in kwestie. Ze spelen een cruciale rol in nagenoeg alle stadia van het beleid en verzekeren zo dat de beleidslijn in overeenstemming blijft met de wensen van de partij. Daarnaast spelen ze ook nog een sleutelrol in de personeelsselectie binnen de publieke administratie. De politieke benoemingen in de (top van de) administratie worden veelal via de ministeriële kabinetten verzekerd. Nagenoeg alle topambtenaren hebben dan ook wel eens op een kabinet gewerkt.

Ministeriële kabinetten kunnen dus worden beschouwd als belangrijke instrumenten binnen een participatie. Maar ze zijn ook meer dan dat. Het zijn knooppunten van communicatie waar expertise met de loyaleiteit en flexibiliteit wordt gecombineerd die de administratie in de ogen van de ministers niet (zo goed) kan leveren.

Door middel van een groot bestand, waarin de carrières van 4779 kabinetsmedewerkers geregistreerd werden van de periode 1970-1999, probeerden we expertise, loyaleiteit ten aanzien van de minister en loyaleiteit ten aanzien van de partij tegen elkaar af te wegen als determinanten van een kabinetscarrière.

Uit eerder onderzoek blijkt dat kabinetsleden bijzonder hoog opgeleid zijn. Dat suggereert dat kabinetspersoneel wordt aangeworven omwille van competentieredenen. Als het zo is dat kabinetsleden vooral worden aangeworven omwille van hun specifieke kennis over een bepaald onderwerp, dan mogen we verwachten dat ze niet zomaar van departement wisselen als bijvoorbeeld hun minister dat doet. Maar hoewel ongetwijfeld over het algemeen een hoog competentieniveau wordt verwacht van een kabinetslid, zijn andere factoren van belang dan enkel specialistische expertise. Uit de analyses blijkt dat kabinetsleden vaak wisselen van beleidsdomein, en dat dit zo is voor alle soorten kabinetsleden. Franstalige kabinetsleden wisselen iets meer dan Vlaamse, en er zijn wat verschillen tussen de verschillende partijen. We gingen ook na of de frequentie van de wissels te maken had met onechte wissels, tussen twee gelijkaardige beleidsdomeinen

bijvoorbeeld (zoals financiën en begroting). Dit bleek soms het geval te zijn, maar het aantal wissels blijft hoog, en het is dus in ieder geval niet de verklaring voor het hoge aantal wissels.

Er zijn uiteraard nog capaciteiten die losstaan van beleidsdomeinen, en dus door de mazen van ons onderzoeksnet gevallen zijn, zoals bijvoorbeeld managementcapaciteiten. Maar we mogen in ieder geval concluderen dat het niet de inhoudelijk-[specialistische](#) expertise is, die het verloop van een kabinetscarrière bepaalt.

Uit verschillende surveys bij kabinetsleden blijkt dat vele kabinetsleden persoonlijk gevraagd zijn door hun minister, en dat velen in dezelfde kiesomschrijving wonen. Dit suggereert dat er een persoonlijke relatie bestaat tussen minister en kabinetsleden, die misschien wel determinerend is voor de kabinetscarrière. In dat geval verwachten we dat de kabinetsleden uiteraard hun minister volgen wanneer die naar een ander departement gaat, en niet geneigd zullen zijn voor een andere te werken. De cijfers tonen dat het fenomeen van de ministertrouw weliswaar toeneemt met de jaren dienst, en zeker voor langdurig werkende kabinetsleden de kabinetscarrière sterk bepaalt, maar dat er over het algemeen toch vaak van minister gewisseld wordt, gemiddeld om de twee jaar. Ministertrouw is dus in ieder geval ook niet de sterkste determinant van een kabinetscarrière.

Als laatste determinant onderzoeken we de partijtrouw van de kabinetsleden, een kenmerk dat ze zelf in surveys als weinig belangrijk afdoen. Als het niet het onderwerp of de relatie met de minister is die het verloop van de kabinetscarrières bepaalt, is het misschien de loyaliteit ten aanzien van de partij. Dat wil dus zeggen dat de kabinetsleden ingezet zullen worden waar de partij ze het meeste nodig heeft, ongeacht de minister of het beleidsdomein. En dat ze dus wel van kabinet wisselen, zolang het maar binnen de partij blijft.

Uit onze data blijkt inderdaad dat een overweldigende meerderheid (87,4%) van de kabinetsleden gedurende geheel hun carrière bij eenzelfde partij blijven, en als ze dan al wisselen, het meestal gaat over een wissel binnen eenzelfde politieke familie. Slechts 130 van de 4779 onderzochte kabinetsleden (of 2,7%) durfden het aan om op een kabinet van een andere politieke familie te gaan werken. Deze groep bestaat uit kabinetsleden met een langere carrière, een relatief hoge positie en hebben vaak voor een kabinet van de premier of vice-premier gewerkt. Er zijn overigens wat partijtrouw betreft maar weinig verschillen tussen de Franstaligen en Nederlandstaligen. Franstaligen bleken minder trouw aan expertise en ministers, maar zijn even partijgetrouw als hun Nederlandstalige collega's.

De carrière van kabinetsleden wordt in zekere mate beïnvloed door expertise en ministertrouw, maar ze zitten dus zeker niet vastgekluiserd aan één onderwerp of minister gedurende hun carrière. Maar wat ze duidelijk niet doen, is naar kabinetten van andere partijen overstappen. Ze vertonen aldus een sterke partijtrouw. Eens

iemand op een kabinet terechtkomt, krijgt die een partijlabel, dat dan de rest van zijn of haar kabinetscarrière bepaalt.

Voor ons is dit een duidelijke indicatie dat de leden van ministeriële kabinetten vooral partijsoldaten zijn, die niet overwegend op post blijven omwille van hun specifieke expertise of persoonlijke relatie met de minister, maar wel omwille van hun partijpolitieke geloofsbrieven. Of tenminste niet worden aangenomen als ze tot een andere politieke partij behoren.

1. Partitocracy and ministerial cabinets: inseparable twins?

Party government is main stream government (Katz, 1986). In some political systems, though, parties play an even bigger role. Sometimes the major political parties are omnipotent and push aside most other political actors. To refer to this 'degeneration' of party government political scientists coined the concept of 'partitocracy'. In the partitocracy literature three central elements surface: a partitocratic polity features (1) strong mass political parties, (2) that make up government, determine government policies and are able to implement those policies, and (3) that use public resources to appoint befriended personnel in public and semi-public agencies in a system of patronage and clientelism (De Winter, Della Porta en Deschouwer, 1996: 217). In a partitocracy the major political parties overpower the other political actors, be it interest groups, social movements, public administration or technocratic experts. Their influence is not limited to the strictly defined political field, but stretches out to society as a whole. All kinds of parallel power positions in public administration, the judiciary, public and even semi-public agencies (e.g. public broadcasting, telephone companies, post organisations...) are filled with partisans, appointed because of their party affiliation. In a nutshell: in a partitocracy political parties permeate state (political power) and society (patronage and clientelism).

Some scholars considered Belgium to be a textbook example of a partitocracy, a position Belgium shared with Italy. On the basis of a comparative analysis of all EU-countries in the 1970-1990 period, De Winter, Della Porta and Deschouwer (1996) showed that Belgium and Italy score very high on a number of indicators of partitocracy. Both countries were the champions of party influence on policy and on (semi-)political personnel selection. As in Italy (Pasquino, 1987; Vasallo, 1994), Belgian political scientists tried to assess the degree of partitocracy in their own country using different indicators. Dewachter (1981a, 1981b) gauged the power of the different political actors (government, head of state, prime minister, parliament, parliamentary fractions, party leaders) and concluded that Belgium, again with Italy, was the most straightforward case of partitocracy in Western-Europe. De Winter (1981) studied the parties' grip on administration, judiciary and public broadcasting in Belgium and concluded that parties played a crucial role in all top position appointments in these (semi-)public agencies. In a more recent article De Winter (1996) argued that Belgian partitocracy was alive and well in the mid 1990s. It has been able to adapt itself to changing situations and is encroaching largely on the legislative and executive branch. Deschouwer (1996: 296) made the same point when he defined Belgium as a 'consociational partitocracy'. Through the devolution process the regions inherited the partitocracy of the federal state, and the regional polities are no less partitocratic than the Belgian polity. Recently increasing electoral shifts and volatility, diminishing party membership figures, reforms in the administration, the judiciary and the semi-public agencies suggest that, in most recent times, Belgian partitocracy might have been forced to back down. Yet the period we focus on in this contribution, 1970-1999, comprises the heydays of Belgian partitocracy (see below).

Cabinet ministers in Belgium have ministerial cabinets at their disposal to help them to outline policy. A ministerial cabinet (MC) can be defined as a staff of personal advisers who are hired when a minister takes office and are not part of the administrative hierarchy. They assist the minister in identifying and formulating problems, in outlining policy, and in everyday decision-making. They come and go with their minister. A MC acts as a minister's private council. MCs are not an exclusive Belgian phenomenon. In countries like the UK and the Netherlands, ministers rely on their supposedly neutral and unconditionally loyal senior civil servants and, consequently, they do not need a shadow structure to invent and implement policy (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). In Germany, the politicisation of the higher civil service has been formalised: top civil servants are dismissed when they do not endorse the political line of their minister (Goetz, 1999). Even in these polities without MCs, ministers can rely on a small number of personal advisors (Heywood and Wright, 1997). In quite a few other West-European countries like France (Rouban, 1999; Suleiman, 1984), Italy (Cassese, 1984; Pasquino, 1996), Greece (Sotiropoulos, 1999), Spain (Molina Alvarez de Cienfuegos, 1999) and Portugal (Rocha, 1998), and even in the European Commission, extensive private ministerial councils exist. Although in most countries some embryonic form of MCs exist (e.g. the special advisers in the UK) only in some countries these personal advisors developed into fully-fledged MCs. Most scholars agree that MCs in Belgium are powerful institutions. Belgian MC's prepare, deliberate, decide and implement (all) government measures (Molitor, 1983; Van Hassel, 1994). Since their beginning the Belgian MCs have always been fiercely criticised (Van Hassel, 1973; Suetens & Walgrave, 1999). Due to their constantly expanding action radius, their considerable size and their central position close to a minister, the ministerial cabinets are said to have revealed themselves as centres of power that have eroded the significance of other political institutions (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). Especially the country's administration is considered to be underperforming exactly because of the MC's doing the top civil servants' job. Again, there are reasons to state that, at this moment, the heydays of MC power are past. In 1999 an ambitious reform of the administration was initiated which aimed, among other things, to reduce the size and the power of the MCs in favour of a reinforcement of the country's regular administration. Yet in the period under study here, 1970-1999, the MCs functioned in full glory and they were widely considered as being crucial policy makers.

The research literature suggests that partitocracy and MCs are associated. Scholars argue that MCs play a crucial role in the partitocratic grip of political parties on governmental policy and on the selection of public sector personnel. In this contribution, we will scrutinize this MC-partitocracy argument. We want to test the hypothesis that MCs were, in Belgium in 1970-1999, partisan instruments in the hands of government parties reinforcing their parties' grip on policy making. We will test this alleged association based on career data of Belgian MC members in the 1970-1999 period. Yet before we introduce our data and methodology, let us elaborate the assertion that partitocracy and MCs are associated.

Concerning the first feature of partitocracy, parties' grip on policy making, Dewachter (1981a) states that not so much the cabinet ministers themselves but their political parties choose the members of a MC. This is confirmed by De Winter (1981: 61-62; 1996: 332), and he asserts that especially the senior MC functionaries are selected by the party president, and not by the minister himself; even lower personnel is sometimes forced upon the minister. Probably the extent to which the minister or his party composes a MC depends on the seniority of the minister, with more senior and experienced ministers doing their hiring themselves. Either way, since MCs are central policy makers and since parties are at least involved in the compounding of MCs, we can assert that MCs are an essential institution of partitocracy in Belgium. With the help of their army of MC soldiers, the major government parties can dominate the Belgian polity.

Also the parties' grasp on civil service and the whole (semi-)public sector, the other central feature of partitocracy, is said to be sharpened by the existence of MCs in the 1970-1999 period. Civil service has always been strongly politicised in Belgium (Hondeghem, 1990). Beyond the formal and objective procedures, lots of possibilities existed to appoint and promote politically befriended civil servants. Government parties even used to negotiate formally on the top function allocation. In that system of clientelism and patronage, MCs played a crucial role. Firstly, the MCs negotiated in the name of their minister about those allocations of top functions (De Winter, 1981: 69). Secondly, MCs simply took the human resources management of their department out of the hands of the civil servants, bypassing neutral and objective personnel management and mainly using partisan criteria for appointments or promotions (De Winter, 1981: 66-67). Thirdly, and most importantly, a large part of the MC members themselves were rewarded for their services with a top position appointment in that same civil service afterwards (or with a promotion if they came from it in the first place). A 1973 study into the influence of more than twenty factors on civil servants' professional careers revealed that civil servants felt that participating in a MC was the number one requirement for gaining promotion (Depré, 1973: 332). In a similar study conducted in 1990, civil servants still found that the shortest path to the top was via a MC (Hondeghem 1990: 318, 439). Consequently many top civil servants in Belgium served as a MC member before. Comparing our MC member database (see below) with the 10 top officials of the Belgian civil service (secretary-general of a department) in 2000, we found that *all* these top functionaries served in a MC at least for a while, evenly spread over the four traditional government parties. Former MC service is not an exclusive characteristic of this small group of top civil servants. A larger sample of federal, regional and even local top functionaries (N=298), resulted in a former MC-position ratio of 36%. The same applies more or less to appointments or promotions in most semi-governmental enterprises and services not belonging to civil service in the strict sense.

Thus, both characteristics of partitocracy - a firm partisan hold on politics and on the selection on public sector personnel - seem to be associated with the presence of MCs. In the scientific literature on MCs, however, not only partitocratic functions of

MCs surface. MCs are said to perform a whole range of tasks and functions, a lot of which are not related to the typical partitocratic grip of political parties on politics and on public sector personnel. In a functional analysis of MCs we argued that MCs perform a number of tasks which make them functional in the present Belgian political system (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). MCs are (1) communication hubs where (2) expertise, (3) loyalty and (4) flexibility are combined. Communication is needed for the internal deliberation and streamlining of the decision making process within large coalition governments confronted with decentralised and federal decision making procedures. In Belgium up to six parties take up national office and the country counts six constituting communities and regions. A pillarised and neocorporatist polity, Belgium needs many external communication and deliberation structures. Apart from communication centres, MCs are brain trusts (De Winter, 1981: 66) in which a lot of expertise is concentrated in the form of ‘external based knowledge’ which is especially useful for innovation (Aberbach & Rockman, 1992). Furthermore, ministers do not want to be surrounded by more or less correct executors, that role could be taken up by the civil servants. Belgian ministers want to be surrounded by supporters, political advisors who fully subscribe to their ideological policy views and who can fulfil the ‘promotional function’ in politics (Lasswell, 1971). Finally, there is the flexible composition of the cabinet, tailored to the ministers needs, and functioning like a task force with a direct command structure which works more smoothly, decisively and more quickly than a rigid bureaucracy (Self, 1988; Kooiman, 1993).

Communication, expertise and flexibility, three of the four potential functions of MCs in a polity, are not intrinsically related to partitocracies. Any policy maker needs these assets, whether or not in a partitocracy. And even loyalty, the fourth function, does not necessarily mean loyalty to a party and to a party programme or ideology. Loyalty could also mean devotion to the person of the minister, and not so much to the party to which the minister belongs. Thus, party encroachment is only one of the many functions MCs could fulfil. Therefore, it is too easy to state that MCs simply exist *because* of their functionality for partitocracy. MCs could serve other masters too.

In the empirical part of this study, we would like to assess the relationship between the MCs and the political parties in Belgium. To what extent can Belgian MCs be considered as instruments in the hands of the parties and their leaders? Or are MCs performing more general policy functions? Are MC members in the first place hired for their communication networks, for their expertise, for their flexibility and for their personal loyalty or are they engaged mainly for their party loyalty? Do MCs perform other functions in the North (Dutch-speaking) and the South (French-speaking) of the country? And what about the differences between parties? Are some parties regarding these advisors more as party soldiers than other parties?

To tackle all these questions, we collected data about the careers of MC members in Belgium between 1970 and 1999. These career patterns can tap some of the roles MC

members play. Unfortunately, we cannot measure flexibility or communication networks on the basis of our career data. Yet, careers can learn us a lot about the relative importance of three other potential assets: expertise, personal loyalty and party loyalty. When ‘cabinettards’ would stick to their department (e.g. environment, treasury...) even if their minister changes or even if their minister’s party loses that department to another party, this would suggest that they are in the first place hired for their expertise and technical know-how on this specific policy domain and not for their personal or party loyalty. If MC members, in contrast, follow their minister from department to department, even if their ministers’ competence is changing dramatically, we could conclude that personal and not party loyalty is the key motive. Only if cabinettards are rarely or never changing parties, and stick neither to their department nor to their minister, we should decide that above all party loyalty is at stake here, that MC members are foremost party soldiers, and that MCs at least contribute to maintaining partitocracy. Of course, our analysis cannot be final and decisive. We only try to weigh up personal loyalty, party loyalty and expertise. For personal loyalty, party loyalty and expertise are not mutually exclusive. If we would find, for example, that MC members stick to their party much more than to a certain competence, this would *not* conclusively mean that expertise is not important at all for a MC career nor that party devotion is the one and only determinant of MC service. Party loyalty and expertise, in other words, can go hand in hand.

A final disclaimer: as mentioned before, our research regards a specific time period that can be considered as covering the heydays of Belgian partitocracy as well as the peak of MC power. The conclusions we will reach do not necessarily apply to the most recent years.

2. Data and methodology

For every minister portfolio, mostly paralleling the administrative departments of the state, a Belgian minister can engage a separate MC. Ministers administrating different portfolios and departments, can engage several fully-fledged MCs. The vice prime ministers, overlooking all government activities, have an entire MC for that general policy matter. In 2000, approximately 25 MCs existed at the federal level, for only 17 cabinet ministers (or junior ministers). The core of a MC exists of 10 policy collaborators who are the main personal political advisors of the minister even representing him sometimes at formal occasions. Apart from these substantial aids, a MC consists of almost 40 technical and administrative collaborators: secretaries, chauffeurs, cleaning personnel... Combining different portfolios, a minister can have up to a small army of 150 personal aids. Since the alleged power of MCs resides in their policy advisors, we only focus on these people in this contribution.

In the period under study the federal information service published the composition of the MCs about twice a year. All MC members are listed under the name of their minister and their minister’s competence, mentioning their language group, and

sometimes their grade (from chief of MC to press officer) and the more specific substantive policy domain they are entrusted with. On the basis of these publications, we constructed an extensive database containing all names of all policy level collaborators of all Belgian ministers from 1970 till 1999. In the 80s, Belgium gradually became a federal country, and policy competences were transferred to the regions and their separate regional governments (for Flanders, Brussels, Wallonia and the German-speaking part of Belgium). Those governments simply emulated the MC system from the federal government. Therefore we also included the regional MC members in our database. In the period under scrutiny the number of ministers expanded, among others due to the devolution, and the total number of political advisors increased from around 300 to 900.

All variables for every MC member listed in the booklets¹ were encoded by a team of trained encoders. All available booklets were analyzed, and whenever a change in one of the variables took place (e.g. a cabinet minister changing departments or a MC member getting promotion in his MC), a new record was constructed and all variables were encoded again for this new record, a record being a separate career step of a certain MC member. In sum 96 booklets were encoded encompassing 15 different governments² with 9 different Flemish and French-speaking political parties³ from 1970 till 1999. This took about 1500 hours of encoding and cleaning. In total 20,450 records, i.e. career steps, were made, including 4,779 individual MC members⁴. All analyses that follow draw upon this extensive dataset.

In this study, we were primarily interested in the career of the MC members, i.e. the changes in competences, ministers, or parties they make during their MC career. The database, however, only contains indirect career information. The object of our analysis, i.e. the career of individual MC members, and the database records, i.e. career stages of individual MC members, are situated on a different level. Every career level analysis was always to be preceded by a ‘career constructing’ data step. In this step different records for the same individual are combined in order to construct a whole MC career out of these separate career stages. It turned out to be simply technically impossible to undertake complex analyses. We are forced to present here only uncomplicated analyses, sometimes even on the basis of counting and comparing the records manually.

¹ These variables were: name MC member, name minister, competence of minister, party of minister, date of booklet, government name, type of government (federal or regional), grade, language group and specific responsibility.

² In fact the 1970-2000 period encompassed 16 governments. During the very short government of prime minister Mark Eyskens (31/03/1981-17/12/1981) no MC-member booklets were published and data are missing.

³ These parties were the Flemish (CVP) and French-speaking (PSC) Christian-democrat parties, the Flemish (SP) and French-speaking (PS) socialist parties, the Flemish (PVV-VLD) and French-speaking (PRL) liberal parties and the Flemish (VU) and French-speaking (RW and FDF) nationalist parties.

⁴ In most analyses the small number of MC members of the German-speaking community government were omitted. As a result the total N-value differs a little bit in some analyses.

Another difficulty is the irregularity of the booklet publication in the early 70s and the fact that some of the published booklets were just impossible to lay hands on. As a consequence, some cabinet careers could be estimated too short or too long. MC members could have been engaged for half a year before we found a trace of their existence in a booklet. Vice versa, it is quite possible that we considered a MC member to be still in service, because we simply did not have a booklet to prove he was no longer in function and we did not ‘close’ the record. Overall, we believe that these errors compensate each other and that our data are, apart from for the early 70s, by and large rather precise. The average time gap between two booklets was 3,5 months which yields a rather fine-mesh net of MC career information.

The great advantage of career data is that they are quantitative and foremost hard evidence. In contrast with surveys asking for facts or opinions, which are susceptible to disinformation and social biases, these positional data are directly tapping actual behaviour over a long period and for large numbers of individuals. Survey answers about sensitive issues like loyalty might be biased and less valid. Together with the extensiveness of the total population data base - we do not need to take into account measures of statistical significance nor do we have to bother about response rates - this compensates to a large extent for the impracticalities and the difficulties of the data manipulation.

Although the total number of individual cabinettards runs into thousands, the actual number of MC members that actually remained long enough in MC service to change from competence, minister or party is less significant. Even if governments in Belgium on average did not last long in the period under consideration (Woldendorp, Keman and Budge, 1993: 108), the personnel turnover in the Belgian MCs remained impressive: the average duration of MC service is only 37.9 months (just a bit more than 3 years) and 40.9% of the MC members left office before they passed the two-year barrier. This basic fact puts our quest for loyalty in perspective: on average MC members are not ‘loyal’ at all since they leave their MC position before the end of a normal government term.

Where possible and for interpretative reasons, the analysis of the MC members database (1970-1999) will be supplemented with the results of a survey (N=320)(response rate 73%) we conducted in 1998 among the policy-level staff of the MCs of the former federal and Flemish regional governments during the 1995-1999 legislature. In this survey all political advisors were questioned about their personal characteristics and their work (Suetens & Walgrave, 1999).

3. Expertise: competence mobility of MC members

Our 1998 survey showed that Belgian cabinettards are highly educated in comparison to other Belgian political actors like civil servants and parliamentarians (Suetens & Walgrave, 1999: 507-511). Of them 81% has a university degree, more than a third

possesses more than one university degree and 7% even has a PhD. This suggests that MC members are hired for their expertise. What does our MCs career database tell us?

We can indirectly tap the importance of expertise of MC members using career data, when we consider competence homogeneity of the minister(s) they serve during their career as an indicator of expertise. The more MC members are changing competences during their career - e.g. serving a minister with the competence of the treasury and thereafter working for a minister with the portfolio of interior affairs - the less they are probably hired for their specific knowledge. This is not to say that those competence shifters do not have any expertise but their expertise probably lies not in the specific field of their MC's competence. If a MC employee, in contrast, sticks to the same department or competence during his whole MC career, irrespective of who administers it, we could infer that he has a competence specific know-how and is above all engaged for this expertise linked to this department. Specialist expertise can hence be assessed on the basis of the departmental stability of the MC activity.

Analysis of the MC career database reveals that MC members do not show too much homogeneity in the ministerial portfolios they serve. MC members simply are not devoted to a policy branch but alter MC positions frequently. They demonstrate a high level of competence mobility. During their MC career the ministerial advisors on average held MC positions in 1.73 different policy domains, as is shown in Table 3.1 (column 3)⁵. Knowing that the typical MC career lasts 37.9 months, this means that they typically change competence every 21.9 months. More than once every two year, a MC member steps over to another policy domain.

Table 3.1 shows that there are some differences between the MC members of the Flemish and the French-speaking parties, but they all show a similar low rate of departmental stability. Flemish party's MC members are somewhat more competence devoted than the French speaking ministerial aids. Especially PS (and FDF) ministers seem to be short-term employers with political advisors moving in and out all the time. The CVP, the major party delivering the prime minister in the whole 1970-99 period, has by far the most steadfast ministerial advisors. These persons typically work in a policy field for almost two and a halve years. In doing so they typically stick more than 10 months longer to the same department than the least department devoted MC members, those of the French-speaking socialist party PS. If one relates this to the total number of competences the parties administered in the whole 1970-99 period (column 6), the high competence turnover in the French speaking MCs can be put somewhat in perspective⁶. Probably due to the asymmetrical governmental structure within the two Belgian regions - with from 1980 onwards more ministers and competence fragmentation on the French-speaking side - the French-speaking parties simply administered more different portfolios. And if a party administers

⁵ The total number of different competences in the whole examined period is 88.

⁶ Only counting the 15 most current portfolios which amounted to 210 possible combinations.

more different portfolios, the likelihood that its MC members change from one portfolio to another increases. Still, if one compares parties with a more or less equal number of competences held, the French-speaking parties display consistently more competence mobility.

	# competence combinations (1)	# MC members (2)	Average number of ≠ competences (=(1)/(2)) (3)	Average career duration (in months)(4)	Average competence change every x months (5)	# different competences held by party (6)
CVP	1,801	1,042	1,73	50.6	29.3	56
SP	1,018	648	1,57	35.4	22.6	54
PVV-VLD	511	309	1,65	38.9	23.6	27
VU	229	159	1,44	32.2	22.4	18
<i>TOTAL Flemish parties</i>	<i>3,559</i>	<i>2,158</i>	<i>1.65</i>	<i>39.3</i>	<i>24.5</i>	<i>155</i>
PSC	1,477	760	1,94	47.1	24.3	58
PS	2,141	1,234	1,74	33.1	19.0	65
PRL	715	428	1,67	34.4	20.6	40
FDF	190	104	1,83	31.3	17.1	22
<i>TOTAL French-sp. parties</i>	<i>4,523</i>	<i>2,526</i>	<i>1.79</i>	<i>36.5</i>	<i>20.4</i>	<i>185</i>
Total Belgian parties	8,082	4,684	1.73	37.9	21.9	340

Table 3.1: Competence loyalty of MC members

To pursue this matter further, we searched for typical combinations of similar portfolios that suppose more or less the same skill. If that were the case, a switch between those competences could not be considered as a real change and the competence change ratio would be down. We hypothesized, for example, that the portfolio of the treasury and of the budget required more or less the same financial capabilities. The same applies to the portfolios of housing and of city and country planning. There were indeed some traces of more recurrent switches between those competences, but these switches cannot account for the overall low rate of portfolio fidelity. Almost all possible combinations of MC activity appeared in a MC member portfolio combination matrix (figures not in table).

Interestingly, especially the members of the Prime Minister's MC were most prone to step over to other MCs controlling other portfolios. The Prime Minister's MC members served almost twice as much different portfolios during their career than ordinary MC members. In addition the Prime Minister's collaborators had a much longer MC career (52.5 months) than the other ministers' advisors (35.1 months). The outspoken competence mobility of the Prime Minister's staff, suggests that specific domain expertise is even less important for this central and foremost political portfolio.

Is the Prime Minister's MC typically the final stage of a long MC career, or does the Prime Minister send out his men⁷ to other MCs and thereby permeates the entire government? Checking these hypotheses empirically, proved technically impossible but the first is the most plausible. In Belgium the Prime Minister forms the heart of government, and his MC coordinates the whole government policy, from general measures to individual ministerial decisions. The Prime Minister has a special MC for these 'general matters'. Specialists from all kinds of policy domains are needed to monitor and supervise government initiatives in this MC for the PM's MC functions as a kind of shadow government. Since the scope of the Prime Minister's MC is broad, lots of experienced MC specialists, and probably also skilful generalists of other departments are called to serve the PM. The fact that also the MCs of the vice-Prime Ministers, have somewhat more mobile MC members underlines the specificity of these primarily political MCs.

Of course, our competence fidelity indicator for the weight of expertise for a MC employment cannot be fully conclusive. There are other kinds of expertise which are not related to a certain ministerial competence and that cannot be gauged by competence homogeneity. Managerial capacities, for example, are not associated with a particular policy field but should be considered as a specific expertise. Yet, by and large the career data point out that at least specialist expertise does not seem to be the most important argument to hire a MC collaborator. Maybe the personal loyalty to the minister is?

4. Minister loyalty: changing ministers as underwear?

Our 1998 survey among MC members pointed out that a quarter of the surveyed policy advisors of the federal and regional governments lived in the same constituency as their minister⁸. This suggests that a minister engages his personnel at least partly himself and that personal considerations probably play a role in these hiring decisions. Another survey of MC hiring practices in the Flemish regional governments confirms this and estimates that 40% of the MC members were personally asked by the minister. The main policy maker of the MC, chief of MC, was even personally asked by the minister in almost nine out of ten cases. Very few MC members said to have been contacted by party functionaries (Pelgrims, 2001: 84). Also the fact that MC employees develop a personal relationship with their minister, half of them say to have personal contact with their minister every day (Suetens & Walgrave, 1999: 525), adds weight to the personal loyalty hypothesis. Do we find evidence of that minister loyalty in our MC member career database?

⁷According to our 1998 survey, 70% of the ministers' collaborators are men and only 30% are women.

⁸ At that time, Belgium still counted 21 electoral districts.

	Average number of \neq ministers per MC career (1)	Average career duration (in months)(2)	Average minister change every x months (3)	# different ministers per party (4)	Corrected minister loyalty ratio ((1)/(4)) (5)
CVP	1.67	50.6	30.3	50	0.0334
SP	1.65	35.4	21.5	34	0.0485
PVV-VLD	1.60	38.9	24.3	19	0.0842
VU	1.21	32.2	26.6	7	0.1728
TOTAL Flemish parties	1.53	39.3	25.7	110	0.0847
PSC	1.80	47.1	26.2	37	0.0486
PS	1.57	33.1	21.1	52	0.0301
PRL	1.49	34.4	23.1	23	0.0447
FDf	1.36	31.3	23.0	6	0.2267
TOTAL French-sp. parties	1.56	36.5	23.4	118	0.0875
Total Belgian parties	1.56	37.9	24.5	228	0.0861

Table 4.1: Ministerial loyalty of MC members

We do find some evidence of personal loyalty, but it is not entirely convincing. Indeed, we find rather high levels of ministerial mobility among MC members. As Table 4.1 shows, a typical MC member works for 1.56 different ministers during his MC career (column 1). Of our MC members 67.7% only served one minister, 20.4% served two ministers, 7.5% three ministers, 2.8% four ministers... One PRL MC member served no less than *nine* different ministers. Taking into account the short duration of an average MC career (column 2), a typical MC member alters ministers once every two years (column 3). Knowing that a full legislature counts four years, this means that most MC members only served the same minister half a term⁹. Obviously, this not only means that MC members tend to leave their minister when their term is half, the opposite is possible too: a minister leaves government and a MC member simply cannot continue to work for him even if he wanted to¹⁰. We checked this ‘forced’ minister disloyalty and found that, even when their minister stays in office in the next government, lots of MC members choose to leave their minister’s MC and look for other job opportunities. In almost half of the cases (46.2%) MC members left the minister they served, even when this minister took office in the next government (figures not in table). Clearly, the longer one works for a certain minister, the higher the chances that one follows him to a new government: the number of dropouts gradually diminishes until the most loyal MC members serving seven governments under the same minister are forced to leave the job together with their long-time boss. These long-stayers tend to take up higher functions (chief of MC, deputy chief of MC...) in the later stages of their career. Thus, minister loyalty definitely plays a role in MC careers, but only for the persevering and long lasting MC members. Minister loyalty gradually grows during a career, but it is certainly not the foundation of most MC careers.

⁹ But most legislatures didn’t last four years, especially in the 70s and the 80s. There were general elections in 1971, 1974, 1977, 1978, 1981, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1995 and 1999.

¹⁰ Belgium is a country with a very high minister turnover: 231 different persons held ministerial office during the research period. This high figure includes the many regional ministers of the many governments Belgium counts.

The differences between parties are limited, which indicates that in general parties' MC members are not very loyal to one minister. Yet again, Dutch-speaking MC members have a slightly steadier career, while French-speaking MC members are somewhat more minister hoppers. Comparing the parties and considering the average number of months before a MC members changes employers (column 3), both Christian-democrat parties (CVP and PSC) seem to have had the most minister loyal MC members, while both socialist parties (SP and PS) happen to have most minister switchers among their political advisors. Of course, chances of swapping ministers (without changing party) mount with the number of different ministers a party delegates to government. A party as the VU only sent 7 ministers to Belgian governments during the whole thirty-year period. The likelihood that an MC member belonging to a VU MC switches to another minister of that party is much smaller than in the case of, for example, the PS which delegated no less than 52 different persons to one of the governments. If we relate the average number of different ministers a MC member works for during his career (column 1) to the total number of individual ministers that party sent to government during the whole period (column 4), we become a corrected minister loyalty ratio (column 5). The higher the ratio, the more different ministers a normal MC member of that party served and the lower the minister loyalty. This corrected index yields only slightly different results. The Christian-democrat parties (CVP and PSC) are confirmed to have most personally loyal MC members, even if the large amount of ministers delivered by their party gives them plenty of opportunities to switch ministers during their career. Nationalist parties' MC members (VU and FDF) are least faithful to their minister.

Above we found that MC members working for the Prime Minister or the vice-Prime Minister displayed most competence mobility: they changed departments more frequently during their career and tended to be pulled away from normal MCs to the (vice-)PM's office. What about these MC members and their minister? We listed 30 long-staying ministers with the most ministers-hopping MC members and found that more than half of those ministers have been Prime Minister or vice-Prime Minister. The political advisors of former federal Prime Minister Mark Eyskens (CVP) served averagely 2.58 different ministers, and those of the other federal Prime Ministers in the research period followed close behind: Wilfried Martens (2.43), Leo Tindemans (2.30) and Jean-Luc Dehaene (2.17) (all CVP) (figures not in table). Prime Ministers and vice-Prime Ministers tend to have collaborators, which served most different ministers. Minister loyalty seems to play a limited role in MC members' careers in general, and this is even more the case for the political advisors working in the most political and powerful MCs.

We conclude our quest for minister loyalty. MC members not only typically switch to other departments during their short political advisorship, as we showed in the previous chapter, which seriously questioned the relevance of their expertise. But they abandon their employers frequently (or he leaves them) as well, and they are hired by another ministerial employer. This finding raises doubts about the importance of personal loyalty towards a minister. If competence-specific expertise

and personal loyalty are not the best clue to unravel MC members career patterns, maybe party loyalty is. Are MC members switching parties during their political advisorship?

5. Party loyalty: MC members as party soldiers

Our 1998 survey among MC members revealed that it is exceptional for MC staff not to hold a party membership card. No less than 86% of the MC members were affiliated to their minister's party and almost half of the MC members declared to be even an active militant of their party (Suetens & Walgrave, 1999: 521-527). At first glance this points towards a close link between political parties and their MCs. The problem is that we do not know whether these MC members were party members *before* or only became members afterwards. Are they engaged on the basis of their political affiliation, or do they become party supporters because they were hired in the first place? Our survey results do indicate that party membership and activism increases with the lengthening of a MC career¹¹, which seems to confirm the post-hiring partisan affiliation hypothesis. The survey of Pelgrims (2001: 91) indicates that most Flemish MC members were party members before they joined a MC and that only a minority of them became party supporters during their MC participation. Notwithstanding that, the MC members *themselves* strongly claimed that their party activism was by far the least important reason why they were hired (Pelgrims, 2001: 87). These survey results on party affiliation and MC membership, hence, are ambivalent and contradictory. Maybe our career data can shed light on the entanglement of party politics and MCs?

In contrast to their frequent competence and minister switches, MC members do not switch between different parties' MCs that easy. An overwhelming majority of them sticks to one party during their whole MC career. Table 5.1 contains the most important figures sustaining that point. To determine whether an MC member remains loyal to 'his' party, he had to be assigned to a certain party in the first place. Using three different indicators - party of the minister he first worked for, number of party ministers he worked for, and the party colour of the MCs he worked longest for - we allocated all MC members to a 'home' party. All figures in Table 5.1 are based on these party labelled MC members.

¹¹ All MC members with a career of (more than) 10 years were party members, while only 74% of the MC personnel with maximum 3 years of experience had a party card.

	Average number of ≠ parties per MC career (1)	Average career duration (in months)(2)	Average parties change every x months (3)	% of MC members sticking to one party (4)	% of MC members sticking to one ideology (5)	% of party switchers who switched to befriended party (6)
CVP	1.09	50.6	46.4	90.4	97.4	73.0
SP	1.14	35.4	31.1	91.7	98.9	85.9
PVV-VLD	1.14	38.9	34.1	86.7	96.1	68.3
VU	1.02	32.2	31.6	98.1	-	-
<i>TOTAL Flemish parties</i>	<i>1.11</i>	<i>39.3</i>	<i>35.4</i>	<i>90.0</i>	<i>97.5</i>	<i>75.7</i>
PSC	1.16	47.1	40.6	84.2	95.9	72.5
PS	1.12	33.1	29.6	95.6	98.4	60.7
PRL	1.11	34.4	31.0	94.4	97.4	54.2
FDF	1.09	31.3	28.7	58.4	-	-
<i>TOTAL French-sp. parties</i>	<i>1.12</i>	<i>36.5</i>	<i>32.6</i>	<i>83.2</i>	<i>97.2</i>	<i>62.5</i>
Total Belgian parties	1.11	37.9	34.1	87.4	97.5	69.1

Table 5.1: Party loyalty of MC members

On average, MC members worked for 1.11 different parties (column 1), sticking to this party during 34.1 months (column 3). An overwhelming majority of MC members (87.4%) spent their whole MC career in departments administered by the same party (column 4). Most Belgian unitary parties only split up in two parties (Flemish and French-speaking) during the research period (in the 70s), and until recently those parties maintained close mutual relationships¹². That is why we did not only calculate party loyalty, but also what we would call ‘ideological’ loyalty including MC members who switched to the ideologically befriended party across the linguistic border (within the Christian-democrat, socialist and liberal party families). Ideological loyalty proves to be even higher (97.5%)(column 5). Even if we only take into account the MC members who served more than one government and had a better opportunity to switch parties, the average of ideology switchers hardly changes (96.1%)(figures not in table). If a MC member switches parties, in an overwhelming majority of the cases he is going to serve a minister of a party belonging to the same party family (column 6). In short: switching to a ideological different party’s MC almost never occurs: only 130 of the 4,779 MC members (2.7%) went to serve an MC with a different ideology.

The differences between the two language groups are small. We recorded a lower competence loyalty and a lower minister loyalty in the French-speaking MCs (see above), but French-speaking MC members are neither less nor more loyal to their party or ideology than their Flemish counterparts. With the exception of the FDF, all parties show a remarkably high partisan and ideological loyalty.

What distinguishes the small number of party and ideology ‘mixers’ from the other MC members? Party mixers have three conspicuous features. In the first place, their MC career is much longer. Instead of 37.9 months, the average duration of their MC service amounts to 59.8 months (figures not in table). Secondly, they generally attain

¹² That close relationship was, for example, translated in running a common research institution.

higher positions within a MC: 32 of the 130 party mixers became chief of cabinet (24.6%); in the total population, the share of MC staff attaining this top position is only 10.0%. Thirdly, they worked more for the most important MCs, those of the Prime Minister and the vice-Prime Ministers: 34.6% of the mixers served a Prime Minister or a vice-Prime Minister during their career; for all MC members this figure is only 23.7%. Of course, these three characteristics - longer career, higher position and more powerful MCs - are most likely associated, but it is clear that party zappers are by no means marginal or ephemeral political advisors, on the contrary.

We can conclude this section. While some MC members declared not to have been a party member when they joined the ministers' staff and while most political advisors firmly claim that their partisan engagement was not the reason why they were recruited, our career data demonstrate that party and ideological loyalty are critical to understand MC careers. The segregation of the different parties' MCs is almost absolute. If we compare the 1.11 different parties and the 34.1 party months with the competence homogeneity and the minister loyalty (Table 3.1 and 4.1) with averagely 1.56 different ministers served and 1.73 different departments, and respectively 24.5 and 21.9 career months, it is obvious that party loyalty is the best key to make sense of MC careers. Party borders are only seldom trespassed, but minister and competence barriers are taken all the time. Party affiliation seems to outweigh specialist expertise and personal loyalty as determinant of MC careers. Again, this does *not* mean that our ministerial advisors are not competent or not loyal to their minister, our indicator only taps specialist expertise for example, but in terms of their career and their mobility pattern party affiliation seems to be a better predictor. Ministerial aids get a party label when they join a MC and this tag determines all their subsequent MC career steps.

6. Conclusion & discussion

In the introduction we stated that, potentially, MCs perform four functions: communication, expertise, loyalty and flexibility. Our career only permitted us to tap expertise and loyalty to some extent. The personnel management of the Belgian MCs' in the 1970-1999 period showed clear partitocratic features. It looks as if not so much specialist expertise or personal loyalty towards the minister were the crucial factors. The analysis of the dataset with 4,779 individual MC members suggests that Belgian ministerial cabinets fulfilled foremost partisan and promotional functions. By and large our data suggest that it was foremost party loyalty which was the central feature of Belgian MCs. MC staff is primarily recruited because of party loyalty. Yet we want to note, again, that our measurement of expertise was partial and limited. Our competence mobility measures do permit us, we think, to draw conclusions about the competence-specific expertise of the ministerial advisors but they do not tell us anything about generalist expertise these people might have (management capacities, budgetary skills, communication skills, administrative assets...). In a sense our analysis strongly underpins the importance of party loyalty but it does *not* disqualify

conclusively the expertise hypothesis, although it clearly challenges the specialist expertise argument. This conclusion applies to all parties who took office during the 1970-99 period, and it goes for Flemish as well as French-speaking parties. French-speaking MC members may be more mobile than Flemish MC members - they demonstrated a lower degree of competence stability and minister loyalty - but they do not trespass the party borders either. It is interesting to note that the different kinds of loyalty (competence, minister and party) are interconnected: once a MC member has 'betrayed' his party, the number of ministers he served goes up dramatically and he keeps changing competences in his new party (figures not in table).

Yet, we must put our tentative partitocratic conclusion further in perspective. It is possible that MC members were not affiliated to the minister's party at the moment they joined the MC. Only through their MC activities, they became party soldiers and were considered the faithful executors of their minister's partisan will. They gradually got a political colour and a party stamp. This implies that we should differentiate between enrolment decision and subsequent MC career. Probably the first was not as clearly determined by partitocratic motives than the second. Moreover, it is possible that only the decision *not* to hire a potential MC member was based on previous MC activity for another party. Belonging to another party's MC could only have been a disqualifier while the positive decision to recruit a new MC member might still have been inspired by (generalist) expertise motivations.

Belgian MCs do seem to have been, at least to some extent, instruments in the hands of Belgian partitocracy. Does this mean that MCs always play this party encroaching role? Not necessarily. Not all countries with MCs can be characterized as partitocracies. France, for example, is not scoring high on a number of partitocratic indicators (Dewinter, Della Porta and Deschouwer, 1996), but it has got large and powerful MCs. The role MCs play in a polity varies. French cabinettards, for example, are much more emanating from the state's administration than the Belgian MC members (Suetens & Walgrave, 2001). The non partisan origin of the French cabinettards probably diminishes the grip of the French parties on their MCs and hampers the partisan use of MCs.

Finally, our study covers the 1970-1999 period. As mentioned, this thirty year period can be considered as containing both the heydays of Belgian partitocracy and of the the Belgian MCs. Maybe, our findings apply less to the new millennium. First, between June 1999 and May 2003 an innovative rainbow coalition came to power containing liberal, socialist and green parties. Green parties had never taken office before. They could not rely on their ex MC collaborators nor did they have befriended social organisations which could deliver experienced MC staff. The green party decided to recruit some of the former Christian-democrat MC members, as for the first time in 40 years the christian-democrat parties found themselves in the opposition. There is some anecdotal evidence that green ministers even hired other parties' members for their ministerial staff. Perhaps our findings on the partisan bias in MC recruitment do not apply to those green MCs. Pelgrims (2001: 91) found that

no less than 67% of the Flemish green party's MC members were no party members, which is a very high figure if one compares it with the 14% non party members in the preceding governments. Second, only a few months after this government took office it decided to abolish the MCs and to rely on civil service for policy advice. The government started a crusade against the MCs and even involved the population in its campaign by organising a public survey containing a question about the desirability of abolishing the ministerial cabinets. As one might have expected, a large majority approved of the MCs' elimination. For MCs were considered to be the symbol of illegitimate party power. The new government proclaimed partitocracy to be its official enemy. Yet, the abolishment of the MCs did not really succeed and the next government of socialist and liberal parties that took office in June 2003 reinstated the MCs. Belgian partitocracy proves tough to defeat, at least in this respect.

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