

European Parliament staff: who are they and do their backgrounds influence decision-making?

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The European Parliament and the political groups within it employ a number of staff members to help coordinate various aspects of the Parliament's legislative work. But who are these staff members and do their individual backgrounds influence their decisions? [Morten Egeberg](#), [Åse Gornitzka](#) and [Jarle Trondal](#) present the results of a survey of European Parliament officials. They write that while staff come from a variety of different backgrounds, factors such as their nationality and previous experiences have only a modest effect on their decision-making behaviour. Nevertheless, these factors may have a more symbolic impact, for instance in terms of the trust placed in the Parliament by citizens.



Thus far the administrative arm of the European Parliament (EP) has escaped a research focus that corresponds to the increased power of the Parliament. There is a need to know who these office holders are since they deal with a lot of non-trivial activities. Previous research shows that EP secretariat officials and political group staff deserve attention because they take part in decision processes and thus may affect the content of EP decisions. Like government officials, they draft policy documents, offer policy advice, are access points for lobbyists and facilitate inter-institutional relations. EP staff may therefore provide important decision premises, although not making the final political decisions themselves.



So it is of interest to know who these people are and what characterises their backgrounds and careers. Thus, the first priority of our work was to portray the people who serve the members of a parliament which has become increasingly empowered over the years. Our [study](#) is based on an on-line survey among EP secretariat officials and staff employed by the political groups, all at the level of administrator/adviser, or above this level. Among these, we aimed at including those most clearly taking part in the policy process, thus excluding people in important support functions, such as translation/interpretation, information and internal administration.



As the Table below shows, concerning country of origin, secretariat and group staffs are remarkably similar. Member states, grouped according to time of accession to the EU, all seem to be reasonably 'represented' according to their share of the total population in the EU-27. Male officials make up about two-thirds of the staff. Both categories of staff are highly educated: an overwhelming majority holds (at least) a master's degree, most commonly in law or social science. More than half have studied (at least partly) outside one's country of origin. However, only four per cent took up their current position immediately after having completed their education. Job experiences stem from EU institutions, national institutions, business and others. Recruitment to their current position seems to be mainly based on merit.

Table: Characteristics of European Parliament and political group staff members

- [Educational background](#)
- [Country of origin](#)
- [Demographic characteristics](#)

| <i>Educational background</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by the Parliament</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by political groups</i> |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Law | 39 | 32 |
| Social sciences | 25 | 36 |
| Economics and business admin. | 15 | 4 |
| Humanities | 9 | 10 |
| Natural sciences/technology | 3 | 2 |
| Other | 9 | 16 |

| <i>Country of origin</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by the Parliament</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by political groups</i> |
|---------------------------------|---|---|
| Founding members | 39 | 42 |
| 1973-86 enlargement countries | 30 | 35 |
| 1995 enlargement countries | 9 | 2 |
| Post-2004 enlargement countries | 21 | 21 |

| <i>Demographic characteristics</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by the Parliament</i> | <i>Percentage of those employed by political groups</i> |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Male officials | 66 | 69 |
| Studied abroad | 53 | 64 |
| Passed the 'concours' | 93 | 42 |

Note: Founding members are Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The 1973-86 enlargement countries are Denmark, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the UK. The 1995 enlargement countries are Austria, Finland and Sweden. The post-2004 enlargement countries include all other members of the EU-27. For full information see the authors' article in the [Journal of European Integration](#)

This also holds for those employed by the political groups, although party membership and nationality tend to play an important additional role in this case. Our data show only small variations in seniority among officials employed by the EP secretariat compared to those employed by political groups: In both categories as many as 35 per cent have worked in EU institutions for 15 years or more. The fact that virtually all secretariat staff have passed the 'concours' (EU competitive entry exams) probably signals a clear preference for a future career at the international level, although not necessarily only in EU institutions. Even though less than half of the group personnel have passed this exam, most of them too aim at an international career.

The second priority of our work was to make a limited test of whether staff backgrounds really matter for staff

behaviour. Concerning behaviour, we focused on the extent to which officials assign weight to national and/or European interests when doing their work. Arguably, this dimension taps a key aspect in studies of EU institutions. It has to do with whether the EP has developed into a genuinely supranational body or not. Among the demographic factors in our analysis, only length of service in EU institutions seems to affect behaviour: the more years an individual has spent in the EU institutions, the more emphasis they put on European interests, and less weight is given to national concerns. National background does not seem to matter: this is consistent with new findings on what explains the attitudes of Members of the EP.

Staff members' organisational affiliation performs on a par with length of service with regard to explaining their behaviour: Although both categories overwhelmingly give priority to European concerns, group staff are more inclined to emphasise national interests in their work than their colleagues in the EP secretariat. We have seen that nationality matters in the recruitment of group staff, and we know that such personnel are expected to work closely with national parties and delegations.

Our observations are highly consistent with the main results from the general literature on organisational demography and representative bureaucracy showing that background factors, except for educational background, tend to play a rather modest role in explaining decision-making behaviour. Nevertheless, although background characteristics fail to show an impact on EP staff behaviour, they may still make a difference more symbolically, for instance with regard to the trust placed by citizens in the EP.

For a longer discussion of this research, see the authors' recent article in the [Journal of European Integration](#)

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