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"Most MPs are not all that sharp." Political employees and representative democracy

This paper analyses the orientations of political employees In Sweden. Why do they prefer to pursue politics in this particular form and not as elected politicians? What are their views more broadly about representative democracy, and what do they think about the elected politicians? What do these orientations imply for their role in democratic governance? The paper finds that their roles are diffuse: there is no agreement among political employees about whether they are politicians or not, and their mandate is fleeting and unclear. They hold the(average politician's intellectual abilities in low regard, and . sometimes take on clearly paternalistic views towards elected representatives They see little attraction in pursuing a career as elected politicians, because of intrusive media scrutiny and since they hold a view of elected politics as slow, boring, and shallow. The professional route to politics is seen as more efficient, fast and fun.

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Introduction

Anyone with the slightest interest in TV drama series cannot help noticing the appearance of a new breed of heroes and villains – who live and breathe politics without being conventional politicians. They are the advisors to the president in the immensely successful *West Wing*; they are the detractors and henchmen of the diabolical politician Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*; they are the "spin doctors" of PM Birgitte Nyborg in the Danish international success *Borgen*. They are people who work with politics and policy making 24/7; they deal with the media, they write speeches, they give advice on policy. On TV they seem to have more power than most elected politicians. And yet they are not politicians in the strict sense – no one voted for them, and they owe their allegiance not to voters but to their organizations, certain individuals, or specific causes.

TV dramatization aside, the growth in numbers and influence of a social stratum of non-elected political actors is an undisputed fact across the rich democratic societies (Dahlström, 2009; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010). They are neither elected politicians nor public administrators, but a "third element" in the political game (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2015). The aim of this paper is to analyze the orientations of these political actors in regards to the practices of representative democracy and elected politicians. As will be clear from the literature review, these are topics to which previous research has paid less attention, but these orientations are in fact important in understanding the changes to political life brought by the appearance of actors who work full-time with politics without being elected to office.

The setting is current Sweden, a country that was for long characterized by a stable and social-democratic-led political-institutional formation that has recently experienced quite far-ranging changes (Svallfors, 2016b). Among these changes we find a substantial increase in the numbers of people who are employed rather than elected to do politics, in particular among the PR agencies but also among political parties, in the Government Offices[1] and other organizations (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2010; Tyllström, 2013; Ullström, 2011).

In this paper, I will focus a subset of these "policy professionals" (Heclo, 1978): people who work closely with politicians as their advisors and secretaries. I will use the term "political employees" to cover these various and yet quite similar groups, such as political advisors and press secretaries employed in the Government offices and political secretaries who work for political parties as support for elected politicians in parliament, party offices and at the regional and local level. In Sweden, political employees in the Government Offices are hand-picked by the minister and/or the prime minister's office, while their counterparts in parliamentary party offices and local/regional offices are rather recruited by the party organization and not tied to specific MPs or councillors. Political employees are recruited to support the daily activities of the

elected politicians in everything from minor daily issues to helping formulate new policies and ways to promote and sell such policy inventions (Connaughton, 2010; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007, 2008; Garsten, Rothstein, & Svallfors, 2015; Maley, 2000, 2011; Yong & Hazell, 2014).

I will probe these political employees' views about political life and the practices of representative democracy. How do they compare themselves and their work tasks with the elected politicians? Why do political employees prefer to pursue politics in this particular form and not as elected politicians? What are their views more broadly about representative democracy, and what do they think about the elected politicians? What do these orientations imply for the role of political employees in democratic governance?

Political employees, politicians and civil servants: Literature review

Even if elected politicians and public administrators still attract far more research interest than the category we target here, there is an emerging field of research that concerns the roles of political and policy advisors. Such research – to the extent that it is relevant here – is centered on three interrelated topics: the relations between advisors and the civil service, the complex roles of advisors in relation to their principal politicians, and the accountability problems connected with the rise of the new stratum of non-elected political professionals both inside and outside government.

In two large reports, OECD has raised concerns about the roles of political advisors in relation to the civil service (OECD, 2007, 2011). The organization argues that the increasing use of political advisors and other political appointees represents a potential problem. Lack of transparency regarding numbers, tasks, costs, and risks of undue influences over merit-recruited civil servants are some of the issues that these reports bring out. At the same time, the reports emphasize the positive roles played by many political advisors, by relieving ministers and civil servants from media pressure and by supplying much-needed advice and assistance on handling an increasingly complex political environment. The OECD concludes that there is a need for formally regulating the roles of political and policy advisors, for example, to make clear that they should not have any direct order-giving functions in relation to the civil service.

The concerns raised by the OECD are shared by many researchers in the field. Tiernan offers a highly critical analysis of the role played by political advisors in Australia (Tiernan, 2007). In her analysis, they are highly unaccountable for their actions and have a problematic influence on decisions made in the civil service. Such problems have been noted also elsewhere, through analyses of a number of high-profile scandals involving actions taken by political advisor and/or communication of such actions through the media. Such miscondu-

ct included attempts to affect the actions of civil servants, interference with recruitments to the civil service, and "spicing" up of government reports and briefings (Blick & Jones, 2013: 264-5; Garsten et al., 2015; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2012: 3-4).

Other research into the relations between advisors and the public administration has been less concerned about a negative impact on the integrity of the civil service. A fairly harmonious relationship transpires in these analyses, in which civil servants often share goals with political advisors, and on the whole seem rather unconcerned about the impact of political advisors (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008; LSE GV314, 2012; Maley, 2011; Ullström, 2011).

But what do political employees actually do for the politicians who hired them? The official picture is not entirely clear, because advisors are to a large extent "people who live in the dark" (Blick, 2004) and exactly what they do in political and policy processes is not always very visible.[2] Maley (2000; see also Maley, 2011) focusses the varied policy roles played by political advisors in the Australian political system. She distinguishes between the roles as agenda-setter (bringing issues into the political process), as linker of ideas, interests and opportunities (observing and taking advantage of "windows of opportunity"), as mobiliser (rallying party members and voters behind proposals), as bargainer (negotiating with affected parties and interests) and "deliverer" (bringing the pieces together and the policy process forward). Political advisors often form a cross-departmental network of power which serves the leading politicians in bringing coherence to the governmental process.

Connaughton (2010) conceptualizes the varied and complex tasks that advisors in Ireland fulfill in relation to cabinet ministers. She distinguishes among the roles of "expert" (bringing in specialist competence in specific issues), "partisan" (solving problems related to party and political power), "coordinator" (working to harmonize across government departments and with outside actors), and "minder" (taking care of the minister's personal agenda and everyday activities). These roles are not necessarily exclusive for a single advisor, because they may shift across different roles at different time periods. But in combination they point to the complexity of the work of political advisors (see also Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007, 2008).

In general, the growth in the numbers of political employees in government and party politics seems to be explained by some combination of three factors. The first is the increasing need for coordination as the result of increased political complexity. A more fragmented party system, increased policy interdependence and a more complex multi-level form of governance all increase the difficulties of coordinating policies and politics and maintain functional political steering. Here, political advisors are supposed to increase steering capacities by acting as "extensions of the minister" and acting in that capacity (Dahlström & Pierre, 2011; Ullström, 2011).

The second is the dramatic mediatization of politics and policy making. In a game where almost constant media attention has become a condition for political survival, the packaging and media dissemination of policies and politics that many political employees conduct become vital considerations (Esser, 2013). While political employees often shun the limelight of personal media attention for themselves, they use the mass media as one of their main arenas for affecting politics and policies (Garsten et al., 2015). There is thus an almost paradoxical co-existence between a front-stage of constant media presence of key politicians and a back-stage of carefully crafted messages that are not often delivered by the actors who actually produced them. Hence, the rise of the political employees and the mediatization of politics are symbiotically related.

The third key aspect is the perceived need among many leading politicians to surround themselves with fully loyal close collaborators, who can be expected not only to share the politicians' basic values and outlook but also to act as a sort of emotional buffer against a hard and unforgiving environment (Garsten et al., 2015; Maley, 2011; Yong & Hazell, 2014: Ch. 4)). The search for loyalty and support can be especially pressing when a long period in opposition can raise suspicions that the civil service may be imbued with different values and interests from the incoming government.[3]

The complexity and invisibility of what political advisors actually do, and the activities of political employees more broadly, create problems of accountability. In constitutional terms, political advisors should basically be seen as extensions of the elected politician, and all political responsibility therefore lies with the representative in question. But if the *de facto* responsibility for certain measures lies not with the elected politician, but with the advisor, then responsibilities and accountability becomes blurred (Romzek, 2000), and there have been several high-profile cases in which leading politicians have tried to avoid blame by pointing to the actions of their advisors (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2012: 3-5). This points to clear accountability problems, that are aggravated by the fact that in many places, Sweden included, the role of political advisors and political employees in general is hardly constitutionally regulated at all, and there exists little in the way of commonly agreed rules of conduct (Garsten et al., 2015: Ch. 6; cf. Heclo, 1978).

In summary, the role of political advisors in various guises has increasingly been the subject of analysis and debate. Most of the existing research is focused rather specifically on what advisors inside government do in an immediate sense for or against ministers and/or the public administration. But what seems missing so far is an extended analysis of the broader orientations of political employees and their relations not only to their immediate principals, but to politics and politicians in general. Their perceptions of the practices of representative democracy, including views about elected politicians such as MPs and other representatives, are important when we try to understand the implications of the rise of this set of unelected political actors. How do political

employees perceive what they do and who they are in political life? How does their appearance affect not only what ministers can and should do, but how political life in general is structured? It is the intention of this paper to bring light to such issues.

Data

The analyses in the paper build on fieldwork conducted in Sweden in 2012–3. The core data material consists of 71 long (average interview time 2.5 hours), semi-structured interviews with policy professionals in different positions and organizational types. In addition, 21 shorter interviews (about one hour each) were conducted with elected politicians (MPs and former government ministers), newly retired civil servants, recruiters, and policy professionals working for private enterprises. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees and their distribution across organizational types. Interviews were transcribed (about 3500 pages), and pertinent interview quotes were assembled in a 100-page excerpt document.[4]

Table 1: Interviewees (N= 71; interviewed 2012-2013). Informants (N=21; interviewed 2013).

Organizational type	Men	Women	**Total**
Government Offices	8	4	12
Parliamentary Party Office	5	7	12
Local/Regional	6	7	13
Trade Union	5	8	13
Interest Organization	6	3	9
Think Tank	3	2	5
Public Relations Agency	5	2	7
Total	**38**	**33**	**71**
(Former) Government Minister	3	1	4
MPs	4	2	6
(Retired) Civil Servants	1	1	2
Recruiters	5	1	6
Private Companies	3	0	3
Total	**16**	**5**	**21**

This paper make use of the interviews with people who were employed as political appointees in the Government Offices, in the parliamentary party offices, or as political secretaries at the regional and local offices (N= 37). In addition,

interviewees who had previously held such positions but currently had other policy professional positions (for example at PR agencies or think tanks) were also included in the analysis (N=17). The paper builds on a sub-set of the interview themes, related to the occupational role of political employees, and their views about elected politicians and representative democracy more generally.[5]

The research project also included a quantitative mapping of policy professionals in 2012 (including 1468 individuals), containing descriptive information about gender, age, education, and labor market experience.[6] Information from this descriptive mapping will be used sparingly in the paper to support specific arguments.

To mainly rely on interviews brings both advantages and important limitations. The long thematic interviews allowed nuances to be articulated and provided strikingly frank and open discussion of various aspects of the work of political employees (provided under guarantees of anonymity). At the same time, we must take into account the self-understanding of the interviewees, who may easily misperceive their own role in politics and policy making. However, the interviews with (ex-) politicians, civil servants, and organizational recruiters served as important addenda to the interviews with political employees. In general, as will be obvious from the analysis, these additional interviews confirmed what had emerged from the main interviews, that is, that the interviewees' representation of what and who they are is shared by groups who come into regular contact with them.

A diffuse role

A key factor in the constitution of a social category is its boundaries towards and relations with adjacent categories (Lamont, 1992, 2000). For political employees it is the boundary with the elected politicians that is the most important. In a formal sense, no political employee is a politician. They have not reached their position by being elected, they were employed by a ministry or party office. But interestingly, when political employees are asked about how they perceive their role, no consensus prevails about whether they are politicians or not.

A press secretary in the Government Offices maintains that they "*are just as much a politician as the minister is. In reality.*" They take part in making decisions and they actively influence people with power and position. A political secretary in parliament agrees and even thinks that "*in what I am supposed to do at work, I don't really see the difference between my responsibility and that of the MP, when it comes to taking part. And it is even stated in our job description – to take part in and have responsibility for political development and such things, for example.*"

For these political employees it is the fact that they have political influence that makes them politicians. But other political employees do not agree. They want to make a clear distinction between their role and that of a politician, and to see themselves as administrators – albeit of a particular kind. Even someone who works very closely with a minister can find it difficult to see the role as something different from an administrator:

> I am just a public administrator who works for the government. I am not elected. I am not the government. I don't make the decisions but I prepare the decisions for the government. And that is very important for me to emphasize.

A political secretary stresses – in contradiction to the colleague quoted before – that "*I am a public administrator. I am definitely not a politician.*" This person is seconded by a political secretary at the regional level who says that s/he is a regular administrator and not a politician, even though "*working for the politics.*" For these political employees, it is the fact that they do not have direct political decision power that makes them non-politicians.

Still other political employees seem to have difficulties deciding whether they are politicians or not, or say that their perception of their role has changed over time. A political advisor in the Government Offices gets in a knot and states, "*I am a politician, so to speak, but I'm still not a politician but a political employee, a politically informed administrator.*" A political secretary in parliament also falters: "*I work for a politician and I have a political job but...well what is 'a politician'?*" Another political employee in parliament claims, *"[I] was rather precise when I started here by having to say to people, 'But I am an administrator, not a politician.' Then that has become sort of blurred [laughs] with time.*"

But how is it that the question about whether one is a politician or not elicits such widely different answers? There are no differences in the responses between the left and the right side of politics, nor do we find any clear-cut differences between different types of positions (such as political advisor vs. press secretary vs. political secretary) in how incumbents perceive their role. Instead, it is primarily the career background of the employee that is decisive for their role perception. Those who came to the position from a political background, perhaps from the party's student or youth organization, or who have held some elected positions, tend to see their role as a politician. Those who were recruited from a civil service position, or straight from university studies without any previous political positions, tend to see the role as yet another administrator position.[7]

That the role of political employee can be defined so differently by persons with different backgrounds points out that this is a very diffuse role, which can comprise different content depending on how the incumbents choose to view their mission. For most political employees this role diffuseness is palpable. Some of them even see this as a great advantage. A political secretary in parliament

claims that the role of political secretary can be shaped "*exactly as I want. I can quite simply make that role very perfect for me.*"

Others are more uncertain about the space and mandate they really have in relation to the elected politicians. There are limits to the mandate, but no one seems sure about exactly what those limits are, as put by this political advisor:

> *[Interviewer] How do you perceive the general boundary between what you should do and what the minister should do, and the elected politicians, how does that really work? Does it happen that you are treading on each other's ground, or even that you trespass? Is it hard to know exactly where the boundaries are*?
>
> [Advisor] I have never had a presentation about where that boundary should be. So I don't know at all where that boundary is. You see, I'm here at [the minister's] good understanding and ... goodwill and [the minister] may fire me tomorrow if they want to. I don't know...I don't think that the boundary...It is very unclear where that boundary would be.

From the other side of the boundary is also the case that the boundaries are anything but obvious and self-evident. An MP confirms the unclear boundary between the elected politician and the political employee: "*This is very fleeting and we have to make priorities about what we should do and about who does what*."

An ex-minister with a far-ranging experience of government and cabinet work first claims that the boundary is obvious and clear-cut. Political advisors should simply not be part of policy making. They should be kept "*away from politics, from the policy development*" because this would "*choke the line of command*" between the minister and the civil servants. And this is how it worked during this minister's term of office. But only 14 minutes later in the interview, the boundary is no longer so clear-cut. Now the ex-minister claims that the "*underlings should take their own initiatives and be forward and make suggestions,*" as might be shown by "*taking part in the policy development just like everybody else.*" That a person with such a long and broad experience from the inner rooms of political power speaks in such a contradictory way must be taken as a strong support that the roles of the political employees are truly fleeting and diffuse.

Political employees on elected politicians

If political employees are quasi-politicians with a diffuse role, how do they perceive the elected politicians? Here a rather mixed response emerges. Many professionals express their admiration for the stamina and persistence of the leading politicians, like this press secretary in the Government Offices:

> (N)o matter what political color a minister has for example, they are really "brutal" people. In a positive sense. They put all their engagement into this – remember what I said before about putting your personal life on hold. That is really the case. Work from six in the morning, at home by ten and then preparations for next day, to bed at one, every

> day, all week around. The whole weekend they just have to sleep to catch up. /.../ You should be damn impressed by what they do, then they may have the wrong opinions, but let me put it this way: I am more impressed by their toiling now than I was before.

The admiration for the leading politicians that many of their closest advisors express is tangible. However, when it comes to the intellectual capabilities of the average politician, many political employees are less impressed. A person who now works for a private firm but has a long experience at the core of politics states that "*most MPs are MPs because they cannot become local or regional mayors. That's the fact. Most MPs are not all that sharp.*" A political secretary at the local level but with long experience with parliament shares this withering judgment. Certainly there were many MPs who were highly competent, but the great surprise was still "*that there were many who were of a very low quality,*" to the extent than one could wonder "*if they could even get a job outside politics if they tried.*" A former political advisor who now works as a PR consultant is likewise unimpressed by the typical politician they encounter in everyday work. Politicians do not have "*the drive I think they should have, for the salary and the position they have.*" In the Government Offices, they are surely "*truly cunning,*" "*damn quick and competent and driving.*" But the regular MPs and local politicians are "*sluggish.*"

If views about the average politician are not very positive or even respectful among political employees, how do they perceive the relative power balance between themselves and the elected politicians? Most political advisors and political secretaries emphasize that it is always the elected politician that makes the final decision and who also assumes responsibility for the actions taken. Our interviews with MPs and former ministers also confirm that they perceive themselves to be firmly in control over the final decisions. The basic value and interest congruence between elected politicians and the political employees who work closely with them also serve to keep conflicts or disagreement at a low level.

But at the same time a quite different picture of the relations between political employees and MPs emerges from several interviews, a relationship where some political employees have a large say about what may and may not be put forward. Even if MPs have an unquestionable right to put forth any proposals they want and argue for them, the reality looks slightly different. A person who now works for a private company but with a long experience with parliament remembers that one of the tasks was to "*judge all the MPs' proposals. So, no proposal passed on without an OK from me. The public does not know this, but for all those 2000–3 000 proposals that were written, we had the routine that I looked over all of them.*" Of course, the MPs could make any proposals they wished, even against the advice of the political employee, "*but there is a very high price to pay for doing that.*"

That this was far from merely a vague memory, but is also a reality in parliament today is confirmed by a current political employee:

> For example, in the general proposal period,/.../ they should be writing lots of individual members' proposals and then they should pass them by me for an OK before they are submitted. Which is outright strange; there are no grounds for this whatsoever [laughs]. And they know this, but they can just ignore me and go and turn in their proposal. They have that mandate as MPs and elected by their constituency and so on. And I am not elected at all – I am just an employed administrator. Nobody voted for me, ever, as I am told sometimes [laughs]/.../ I have the responsibility for making sure that the group doesn't put forward any really crazy proposals -/.../- [a responsibility] to the party leadership and the party board that not a lot of crazy stuff is submitted that may be displayed on our web page, that "Now [our party] wants this or that" even if it's just a single MP who has written it.

With such delegated authority in relation to the MPs, it is perhaps not surprising that some political employees even see it as their task to lecture the MPs when they have said something wrong:

> The elected are elected. And then I get a chat with them and can tell them, "That was so stupid. You know we have a policy. This got really disgusting. So bad." And then they most often agree with that. And so they think, "I've learned something from this."

This rather brusque behavior is motivated by the importance of giving the right picture of the party's standpoints and not letting the individual MP's agenda decide. It comes down to "*bringing out the party's politics*" where individual MPs stand rather for their personal opinions, to "*focus on the big picture*" so that the voters get "*a more trustworthy and more true picture of what [our party] stands for, than what perhaps this individual MP wants.*" This more trustworthy and truer picture is not necessarily the one decided by the party congress; it is more the day-to-day standpoint of the party leadership that is decisive:

> And then they say, "But this is what the [party congress] thinks." "Yes, but everything that the [party congress] thinks is not good, you know that too," I would then say, and argue for why we should not air a certain issue.

In summary, among the political employees, the attitudes towards and relations with elected politicians are mixed. They are generally skeptical regarding the politicians' analytical abilities, but they admire their stamina. They are impressed by politicians' relentless battle with and through the mass media, and their tireless struggle with and for voters. But when it comes to intellectual abilities, the political employees feel superior to the politicians. And although political employees always bow to the elected politician in the rare moments when views diverge, some of them take on rather paternalistic tasks and attitudes in relation to the elected politicians.

The unbearable media

When the interviewees are asked whether they would consider becoming an elected politician themselves, almost all of them say "no," with different degrees of emphasis. And very few of them – less than 1 in 10 – have ever worked as

remunerated elected politicians (Garsten et al., 2015: table 7). This is in line with the findings presented by Goplerud that only a small minority (about 10%) of former special advisors in Britain ever become MPs (Goplerud, 2015: 333).

There are two main reasons why so few political employees would consider a future as elected politician. The most common one is that many of them claim that they could never stand the personal media attention. The media scrutiny would be absolutely unbearable, claims a political secretary in parliament: "*It seems horrible.*" A second political secretary states a preference not having to endure "*the unbelievable unease it would be to get a camera in your face, even if it is a friendly camera.*" And a think-tank employee reflects on the fact that as a politician "*you are never allowed to be anything more than humdrum, because then you get exposed in the media and your future becomes impossible,*" because "*it is so circumscribed today what you are allowed or not allowed to say.*" "*I do not think I could stand it*" is the short summary of why this person would not consider becoming an elected politician.

For those who have left party politics, this mass media exposure is a big explanation of why they wanted to leave. A person who is now working for a private company, but with a long experience with parliament and government offices reflects on the world of politics and the road not chosen:

> *What do you think made you not want to do this, to try to become minister, party leader, and get leading positions within [the party]?*
>
> I think it had very much to do with the fact that I worked as a close advisor to these people. And saw what a grinding it was./.../You know, I was his chief of communication, and then I would call him early, early in the morning because then the first news programs were starting. Should he have any comments on that? Should he have a TV crew coming out to his house? /.../Should he have some statement at six -o'clock in the morning, from his kitchen sofa more or less? And radio and such kept calling all the time. Then that was followed by newspaper interviews all day long. And then late in the afternoon, the TV talk-shows called because then he was supposed to take part in [the political talk-show] *Kvällsöppet* or a TV debate in Gothenburg at 22.30. And then on some flight to Gothenburg at 19.30 and back home 01.30 and straight to bed, and then it started all over again with me calling at 05.30 because there was some comment on [the radio news] *Dagens eko*. /.../ And as a politician you don't get much positive attention from the public and the journalists and so on. It is not a business where you get a lot of thumbs up all the time but instead a lot of /.../ meetings with people who were dissatisfied or disappointed./.../ And journalists who all the time would look for weaknesses or some mistake and "What about this?" And who were constantly poking around and checking our receipts and would look over them all the time and ask, "What about these numbers?" and "What is the matter with everything here?" /.../ To go to work every day knowing that there are 20 or 30 journalists out there who want nothing more than to shoot you down from your position. That is not how I feel when I come in to work here.

At the same time, the relations with the mass media are highly complex. When political employees were asked about what made them most happy and satisfied

at work, such feelings were almost always connected to getting their message into the mass media, to hearing their own words from the minister's mouth on TV, to changing the public debate as conducted in the mass media (Svallfors, 2016a) . Political employees have a very complex attitude towards the mass media, which they fear and loathe at the same time as they are very dependent on them for their daily information and mundane work satisfaction.

Politics fast and slow

A second, almost as common, reason why political employees shun the role of elected politician is that many of them hold many aspects of the practices of representative democracy in quite low regard. Such politics are seen as slow and boring, as shallow and media-driven, as filled with personal rivalry and petty malice.

The unbearable slowness of elected politics to some extent concerns the processes, where it may take years before the political system is able to come up with concrete proposals to bring things forward. But in this regard there is still quite a large understanding among political employees that democratic processes take time and that this is unavoidable. Instead, the most common complaint about the slow world of representative democracy is that politics in this form is too slow as a *career*. As an elected politician, one has to start from the bottom and slowly work up the ladder to things that really matter. Political employees do not have time and patience for this, as argued by this political secretary:

> *Would you consider becoming an elected politician?*
>
> I really don't think so. /.../ I don't know, I wouldn't say absolutely no, but it is nothing that tempts me. What tempts me is the advisor role, that is what I think is most fun. Like this, behind the scenes, give recommendations, and so on.
>
> *What is it that doesn't tempt you then, about being a politician?*
>
> Partly it is the road to becoming a politician of the caliber where I think it would be fun. You know, local constituencies and sit and talk about...Not to belittle it, but I don't know...It is simply not anything that I am very interested in, to sit and talk about whether that dog yard should remain or not.

A political secretary in parliament explains that the elected career has appeared less and less attractive the more one has seen of parliament and the everyday political work. Previously the secretary had been tempted to become an elected politician, but that is not the case anymore since realizing that "*you have to come so far up to get any influence*" and that the road to becoming committee chairperson or minister is far too long and boring.

Political employees often perceive that the parties' ways of recruiting and promoting lack respect for knowledge and merit and that the way forward therefore becomes tedious and boring. A former political advisor who is now political

director at a trade union thinks that *"[my party] has to a large extent been based on – how should I put it – that you should sit a number of shitty years in order to get promoted on the lists"* while going strictly by merit "*has never been [their] idea about how the political career should be ordered.*" This political director lacks "*the patience to go the long way. I can do politics in a much more fun and fast way. I play a bigger role, I can influence more in this way.*"

But there are further aspects of representative democracy that bore the political employee. One is forced to adapt to what other (less skilled) people think, and one gets too little space to pursue what one considers to be the right course of action. A former political employee who is now director at an interest organization explains why a representative elected role feels like an impossible challenge:

> No, it would be impossible for my brain to get crammed into that kind of shoe-box. I was a member of [a party] for a rather long time, but not anymore. Precisely because you have in a way to buy the whole package, and I imagine that it is part of the modern human that you have problems with going into a shoe-box. You may feel strongly on certain issues and like to engage in those. But to go into shoe-boxes and let someone else define the walls, I have a problem with that.

At the same time as elected politics is criticized for being too slow and boring it is considered to be too shallow and shortsighted. For a political advisor who has taken the step over to the world of business, politics can actually be perceived as less far-sighted than the strategies of the private enterprise:

> The usual thing in the public debate is to talk about "Politics is long-term and then in the private companies there is this 'quarter-capitalism' which has a three-month cycle as perspective." But the fact is, at least this is my picture, today it is politics that is extremely short-term, while the private enterprises have long-term goals, long-term activities, and are not at all affected by this TV-democracy, this media 24-hours tempo that politics lives under.

The complaints about shallow politics not only concern that it is too media-driven and shortsighted. It also concerns the cold-hearted foxiness that many see at the core of elected politics. A political secretary in parliament explains why it may be hard to find a comfortable place in politics: *"[T]here is a shallowness in politics that is found in all parties. Tactics. Scheming. Both politically but also for personal benefit. That you have to choose your moments"*. A political secretary at the local level claims that it was a painful insight to understand "*how much scheming*" there was in the political system, how much lying and slandering, and "*that the biggest enemies are found in your own party.*"

In summary, it is a strikingly skeptical picture of party politics and the practices of representative democracy that dominates among political employees. They are deeply engaged in politics, but feel that they have found a way to pursue this passion without having to endure the slow, boring, shallow aspects of the current practices of representative democracy.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tracked the role orientations of a (partially) new and (definitely) growing social category of political actors: people who are employed to do politics and affect policies. A particular emphasis has been put on how they perceive their own work in relation to that of elected politicians: are what they do and who they are different from elected politicians, and if so, what do these orientations imply for current democracy?

We have – similarly to previous research – found that their roles are diffuse: there is no agreement among political employees about whether they are politicians or not, and their mandate is fleeting and unclear. But furthermore, we have found that the wider orientations and perceptions among political employees contain several interesting features in regards to the practices of representative democracy. They hold some (leading) politicians in high regard because of their relentless struggle with and for voters, at the same time as they display views bordering on outright contempt when they judge the (average) politician's intellectual abilities. In relation to the elected politicians, political employees are in one way clearly subordinated, in that final decisions always lie with the elected politicians, at the same time as many of them take on clearly paternalistic views towards MPs and other elected representatives when it comes to towing the party line and not straying from the main message.

Most political employees see little attraction in pursuing a career as elected politicians. Intrusive media scrutiny is the most common answer to why this is the case. But a second most important reason is that many political employees hold the practices of representative democracy in strikingly low regard. Politics in its elected format is described as slow (especially as a career), boring, shallow, and filled with personal intrigues and animosity. Their alternative route to power and its operating practices are seen as far more efficient, faster and more fun for someone who wants to affect politics and policies.

What all these orientations among political employees add up to is a quite different way to relate to politics and policy making than those typically found among elected politicians or public administrators. In contrast to the "representation-and-responsibility ethos" of elected politicians (Weber, 1946 [1919]) and the "public-interest ethos" of the civil service (Lundquist, 1998) , most political employees display a certain "entrepreneurial ethos" in their political activities. The core value of the entrepreneurial ethos is *innovation*. In the political sphere this means coming up with new political ideas – big or small – and finding new ways to market and sell them in public debate and to voters (Svallfors, 2016a). Representation and responsibility are less central for the entrepreneurially oriented political actor, who prefer to work behind the scenes, who hold the practices of representation in low regard, and who do not want to be judged by uninformed publics.

In pursuing action based in this entrepreneurial ethos, political employees tend to strengthen the "aristocratic" element of representative democracy, in which the representatives of the people are seen as superior (in terms of political knowledge and skills) to their ultimate principals (Manin, 1997). This aristocratic element has always been present in the idea and practice of representation, and has a tense relation to the principle of political equality. But the rise of the political employees has – as the results of this paper clearly show – strengthened this aristocratic element in two ways: first, by adding a new layer of politically skilled actors, who are not elected and therefore not subject to even the "thin" traditional checks and balances of representative democracy; second, by increasing the advantage of party and organization leaderships versus regular members or even MPs. The latter now not only have to face a leadership that is more knowledgeable and attentive than they are regarding different issues. In addition, they will face a staff of political employees with great political skills who owe their primary loyalty to the party leadership. The slight disdain that many political employees display regarding regular MPs indicates that these encounters will not necessarily be to the elected representatives' advantage. The top-steering of also democratic organizations will increase with the rise of the political employees, and the vision of political equality will become even more clouded.

In this way, politics in its current professional guise often displays disturbing similarities with pre-democratic modes of organizing political power. Now as then, the "court politics" of unelected political actors includes invisible links of dependency and loyalty as important factors behind power making. To act without being seen to act today includes a distaste of being exposed to intrusive mass media attention, while in the past it involved invisible maneuvers behind the scene of the court. The democratic implications of having actors who are determined to affect the future course of their societies, but who prefer not to do so as elected representatives (cf. Dahl, 1989: 333-4) are therefore potentially problematic. The various fictional TV series actually seem to have something to support their dramatizations of the current world of politics.

Notes

1. In Sweden, the Government Offices form a single, integrated public authority comprising the Prime Minister's Office, the government ministries and the Office for Administrative Affairs. (http://www.government.se/the-government-offices/)

2. In a recent issue of *International Journal of Public Administration* (38:1, 2015), devoted to the role of political advisors, one of the papers claims that "much of what [they] do on a day-to-day basis, and across political systems, remains unclear." (Rice, Somerville, & Wilson, 2015: 5)

3. Two striking examples were the incoming Swedish government in 1976 which put an end to 44 years of Social Democratic rule, and the first government under Tony Blair in Britain in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative rule. The Swedish liberal politician Bert Levin describes the experience of meeting "a forest of red needles" (indicating Social Democratic sympathies) among the civil servants (Levin, 1983), an experience which prompted the recruitment of additional political advisors to the Government Offices. Similarly, the dramatic rise in the number of political advisors under Blair can to some extent be interpreted as triggered by a perceived need to counter a civil service suspected to be infused with Thatcherite perspectives (Blick & Jones, 2013: Ch. 6).

4. All translations from Swedish for this paper were made by the author. In order to guarantee the anonymity of interviewees, specific organizational titles are sometimes replaced with more generic ones, and the gender of the interviewees is withheld. For further details of the data collection and analysis, see (Garsten et al., 2015: Methods appendix). .

5. The interviews were designed to cover three main topics: (1) the work of policy professionals as a specific form of political influence; (2) the occupation and career choices of policy professionals; and (3) the labour market for policy professionals. For each topic, a number of themes were covered in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the work and careers of policy professionals in Sweden.

6. Information from this mapping was collected mainly from open web sources complemented with a small-scale survey administered to local and regional political secretaries.

7. Among the 17 political advisors/secretaries who had a clear political background, 12 saw themselves as politicians, and only one person as an administrator. For the remaining 4, the role was mixed or unclear. Among the 9 who had a clear administrator background, 8 saw themselves as administrators and none claimed they were a politician. Among the 10 who had a mixed political and administrative background, the most common response (5) was that they could not judge whether they were politicians or not. Even though the sample is small (N=36), the result is so clear-cut that it cannot be neglected.

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