



Functional Politicization in the Dutch Senior Civil Service: Evidence from Longitudinal Surveys and Qualitative Research (2007–2019)

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Abstract

Although substantial advances have been made in our comprehension of functional politicization – political capacities and activities being taken on by bureaucrats in their administrative duties – questions surrounding its causal mechanisms remain. To shed light on these questions, we here explore increasing political polarization (and fragmentation) in Dutch politics and functional politicization over the period 2007–2019 to see how the two are related. To do so, we adopt a cross-time approach that observes which skills – political-strategic insight, substantive expertise (*Fachwissen*), or procedural knowledge (*Dienstwissen*) – senior civil servants perceive to be the most relevant to successfully and correctly exercise their profession in a period of increasing polarization in the Dutch political landscape. Drawing from surveys conducted with senior civil servants in 2007, 2013 and 2019, combined with semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019, the data depicts the prevalence of political astuteness in the profession and highlights the factors for its causes: institutional, organizational, and interpersonal dynamics. This indicates an (in)direct link between political polarization and functional politicization of the administrative apparatus that serves as a basis for further cross-time and cross-country investigation.

Key words:

polarization, functional politicization, senior civil servants, political-administrative dichotomy, bureaucratic powers.

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1. Introduction

Until the 1970s, the notion of administrative politicization often conjured up a Wilsonian (1887) critique of a civil service defined by politically motivated appointments on key administrative positions. Relatively recent studies conducted in a wide range of Western countries, however, challenge this representation by pointing towards a particular brand of civil-service politicization that differs from this classical-formal type (Peters and Pierre 2004). Referred to as functional politicization (Mayntz and Derlien 1989), this form of politicization involves a process by which political-strategic capacities and activities are increasingly prominent in the work of senior civil servants. Studies conducted in Canada (Aucoin 2012), New Zealand (Eichbaum and Shaw 2013), the Netherlands (van Dorp and 't Hart 2019), Germany (Ebinger et al. 2019), and Scandinavia (Christiansen et al. 2016) have demonstrated the use of political-strategic capacities and activities in functional politicization mechanisms and have depicted how they have had a marked impact on political-administrative relations. However, the studies that deal with functional politicization or *new political governance* (Aucoin 2012) almost without exception are fixated on the here and now and are based on single-measurement data.

Concentrating on a specific time and place has assisted in exposing the various individual dynamics – such as self-perception, rationalization, and interpretation – behind functional politicization (Aberbach et al. 1981). Though this has proved vital in our understanding of politicization and the political-administrative dichotomy (henceforth, PAD), this time-specific stance means that our knowledge on the evolution of functional politicization mechanisms, such as political-strategic astuteness, is limited. As such, to bring the field of politicization research forward, it is crucial to observe changes in a longitudinal manner to gain a better understanding of how and why the degree of politicization, but also the type of politicization, has evolved over time (see van den Berg 2017). To do so, this article looks at Dutch senior civil servants' perception of how relevant political-strategic insights were and are for the successful exercise of their profession. We observe these views both intrinsically and in relation to the other key pillars that make up what is defined as “bureaucratic power” (Weber 1988). As such, to unveil civil servants' perceptions on what skills and types of knowledge are essential to carry out their duties in a professional manner, we pose the following research question: To what extent and how has the increasingly political fragmentation and polarization of Dutch politics led to a functional politicization of the senior civil service during the period 2007–2019?

To answer this question, this article shall address four points. First, in our theory section, we construct a framework for analysis by combining insights on the various forms of bureaucratic power and the notion of functional politicization and political fragmentation on polarization in the Netherlands' parliament and within its political executive. Second, we discuss the quantitative and qualitative data and methods used. Third, via surveys conducted in 2007, 2013 and 2019, we shall look

at Dutch senior civil servants' perceptions of the importance of these powers and how they have evolved. Fourth, following this quantitative approach we shall adopt a qualitative stance by delving into interviews conducted with senior civil servants in 2019 in an attempt to elucidate why and how the importance of these perceptions has changed.

2. Theory

2.1 Bureaucratic power and functional politicization

While Montesquieu's (1748) classic notion of the *trias politica* stands as one of the indisputably founding stones of many Western democratic systems, multiple authors attest the existence of more than three powers. The Fourth Estate (Carlyle 1841) refers to the significant indirect social influence the media wield via their capacity to advocate and to implicitly frame political issues. Other authors have employed the notion of a "fourth branch of power" in reference to an array of institutions, including Montaigne's designation of lawyers in 1580 (Florio 2006), or Fielding's (1752) reference to the proletariat two hundred years later. During his 1969 inaugural lecture, the Dutch scholar René Crinice Le Roy evoked the notion of the fourth power (*vierde macht*) in reference to the bureaucracy and the powers brandished by civil servants. By illustrating how bureaucratic expertise and advice often forms the backbone of policy formation and distribution, Crinice Le Roy emphasized the administrative branch's implicit yet defining role. His definition of the fourth power soon became a core notion in public-administration studies, today still widely recognized in the Netherlands as being a reference to the bureaucracy and its influence (Bovens 2000).

In his seminal work on bureaucratic rule, Max Weber (1988) conceptualized the powers wielded by the civil service by using the notion of *Wissen*, where *Wissen* can refer to multiple types of knowledge and expertise. When observing the bureaucratic apparatus, he noted that civil servants are endowed with substantive expertise (*Fachwissen*), procedural knowledge (*Dienstwissen*), and secret knowledge (*Geheimwissen*), the three of which forming what he labelled the pillars of "bureaucratic power". Weber's differentiation between these three powers highlighted their uniqueness and independency. Whilst the first refers to a civil servant's accrued knowledge on specific disciplines and topics, the second highlights their understanding of how the civil service, politics, and the political-administrative relationship operates. The third emphasizes how civil servants use the first two in a discrete manner to mask their intentions. Weber's concept of bureaucratic powers therefore not only demonstrates the influence held by the administrative apparatus, but highlights that these powers are in fact skills civil servants obtain, hold, and consequently use to fulfil their duties as they see best. In this sense, to employ Bourdieu and Passeron's (1964) conception of the term, bureaucratic powers can be seen

as a form of *capital*.³ It is with this *capital* that civil servants exercise their profession as they see best or most appropriate in given situations.

Whilst the notion of bureaucratic powers demonstrates the inherent influence, power and agency of the civil service, the notion of functional politicization posits that the bureaucratic realm is witnessing an encroachment of politics into the business of administration that is not without consequences. Civil-service politicization has long been seen primarily as the political influence in the staffing of the public service as a function of partisan patronage or cronyism (Peters and Pierre 2004). Functional politicization, by contrast, is a notion that focuses on the degree to which political activities and politically oriented ways of thinking are moving into the administrative sphere. This includes giving precedence to political-strategic considerations over substantive or constitutional arguments in policy advisory activities and the politicization of the content of public-service communications to the media and the public (Aucoin 2012; van den Berg 2017). Authors have referred to this approach as providing advice in a political-tactical manner (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014). In such an instance, the senior civil servant acts in a political-strategic demeanour: a process that consists of integrating policy expertise with political advice. Though this is regularly considered to be a trait of functional politicization (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014; Hood and Lodge 2006), it is also considered by some to be a necessity seeing the current “turbulent political era” (Aucoin 2012; Page and Wright 1999; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). As such, seeing the pressures stemming from populism, political polarization, and the 24/7 immediate media culture that define this turbulent political era, it is interesting to see how senior civil servants in the Netherlands perceive the relevance of their bureaucratic powers, and if their perception of their use has evolved in this era of turbulence.

In this study the notions of bureaucratic powers and functional politicization are brought together by observing how civil servants perceive the relevance of substantive knowledge (*Fachwissen*) and procedural knowledge (*Dienstwissen*) compared to political-strategic insight. We theorize that if civil servants perceive these two bureaucratic powers to be more relevant than political-strategic insight, the profession may be relatively un-politicized. If on the other hand they perceive political-strategic insight to be more relevant, this is seen as an indication of functional politicization.

2.2 Political polarization and fragmentation

Aucoin (2012) argues that as electorates have become more volatile in many Western democracies, polarization along party lines has increased, since parties pur-

3 By working in the profession, civil servants gain an array of knowledge (on how to exercise their profession but also on how the procedures in the profession work), expertise, contacts, and recognition, the sum of which forming what we shall here describe as *bureaucratic capital*: a “tool kit” that gives them the powers to be influential in their profession in the manner they see fit.

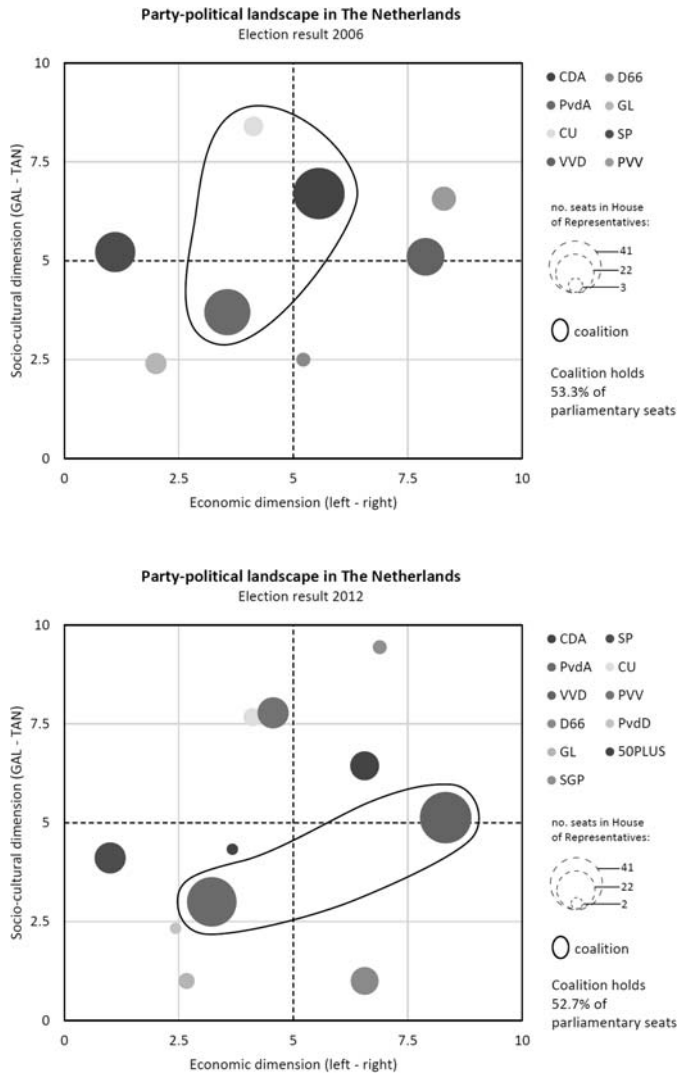
sue policy positions that elicit support primarily from their core supporters. Many Western democracies have experienced the collapse of major traditional parties and the emergence of various new parties and movements. For Westminster systems, it is generally assumed that partisan polarization fosters functional politicization insofar as it promotes a dualistic view of politics in which those who are not allies of the government are likely to be its enemies. Aucoin contends that “[t]his perspective sends the political signal to public servants that they need not give priority to the public service value of impartiality as the government deems impartiality a fiction” (183).

For a multi-party system like the Netherlands, the degree of party-political fragmentation is another variable of importance. With an electoral system based on proportional representation combined with a very low electoral threshold, the number of parties represented in parliament can in theory rise to great heights (Lijphart 2012). The Netherlands has a tradition of political stability and predictability in the post-war period: voters voted overwhelmingly for candidates from their own pillars and until 1994 government coalitions always consisted of the Christian Democrats with either the Liberals to the right or the Social Democrats to the left. This has since been followed by a period of much greater electoral volatility and increasing societal-political pressure on the executive: the period 1998–2012 saw six new government coalitions, none of which completed a full four-year term, various anti-system protest parties have emerged and won considerable numbers of parliamentary seats, and the party political landscape has become increasingly fragmented. In 2010, for the first time since the Second World War, no majority government could be formed, which resulted in a minority cabinet with parliamentary support from the controversial Freedom Party of Geert Wilders. The two most recent governments (Rutte II and III) have not fallen prematurely, but have both depended on very small parliamentary majorities and have necessitated very intense interparty coordination within the coalitions in order to successfully navigate through legislative processes (see Van den Berg et al. 2019). The number of parties in parliament has gradually risen from 7 in 1989 to 20 in 2020, decreasing the average size of parliamentary factions from 21.5 seats to 7.5.

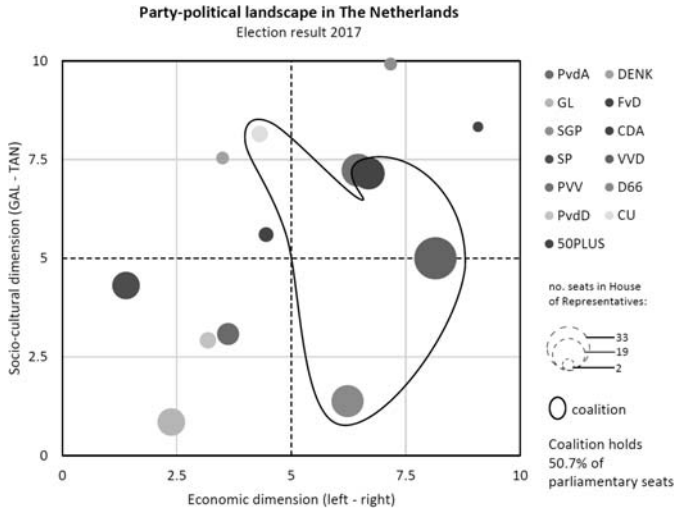
The below figures indicate both the polarization and the fragmentation of the party-political landscape over the course of our period of investigation: each dot represents a party represented in the House of Representatives, and the size of each dot indicates the relative size of that party in parliament. It shows that the number of parties has increased, but also that the ideological distance between the parties along the socio-economic left right and the GALTAN dimension, both in parliament and within the coalition, has increased over time.⁴

4 The following figures are based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey responses from 2006 (Hooghe et al. 2010), 2012 (Polk et al. 2017) and 2017 (Bakker et al. 2019).

Figures 1, 2 and 3
Party-political landscape in the Netherlands in 2006, 2012 and 2017⁵



5 Special credit goes to the University of Groningen's Geodienst department for creating the figures, and to Sander Kunst (Kunst 2020) of the University of Amsterdam (UvA) for his inspiration.



2.3 A novel analytical approach

In this paper, we explore the possible relationship between increasing polarization and fragmentation in the political sphere and the process of functional politicization of the senior civil service. The mechanisms by which we hypothesize greater polarization and fragmentation may lead to greater functional politicization is threefold: through institutional factors, organizational factors, and interpersonal dynamics.

Institutional dynamics refers to dynamics that find themselves instilled within the governmental apparatus. This can take the form of institutional components such as procedures, reforms, policies, protocols, or laws. The example of new directives introduced by the Dutch senior civil service office (ABD) – the “Vision of Public Leadership”⁶ directive (Algemene Bestuursdienst 2016) – seems fitting. In an attempt to increase cross-sectoral and cross-organizational mobility within the administrative branch, a model was introduced where senior civil servants can serve no longer than 7 years in one position, referred to as the ‘3-5-7’ model. According to this model, the first three years in a position are partly used for investing in knowledge and relationships helpful for the job, the next two years are the time for harvesting and peak performance, and the last two years are used to prepare for a successful transfer to the next position. In reality, however, the 3-5-7 model led to an unforeseen acceleration of top civil-service turnover, where the average term of a senior bureaucrat in their position went down to 4.5 years in 2019 (van den Berg et al. 2019). Increasing the mobility of top civil servants from one policy area to another has been an explicit goal of the ABD since its formation in 1995 and particularly since the adoption of the new rotation guidelines in 2016. Its policies have

6 Visie op publiek leiderschap.

thereby always carried the implicit message that substantive expertise is less of an important asset for top civil servants than managerial skills, procedural knowledge and political-strategic insight. Therefore, it seems likely that the relevance senior civil servants attach to substantive expertise has decreased over the course of the period studied here, in our case, from 2007 up until 2019.

In addition, the new leadership approach explicitly emphasized the importance of greater “political sensitivity” among senior civil servants. Such an institutionalized call for more “political sensitivity” would likely lead to a perception of greater relevance for certain skills, notably political-strategic insight, over others, such as substantive expertise.

Organizational dynamics refers to the physical organizational traits of the current government. This could be within the cabinet or the legislature, for example. In this case, dynamics such as (a frequent) turnover in ministers or greater political polarization within the coalition may fuel impressions of an instable political landscape, in turn leading to civil servants perceiving political-strategic insight to be essential in the profession.

Unlike the two previous factors, **interpersonal dynamics** alludes to individual-level relations and interactions. This can take on an array of forms. For example, it may materialize as a minister asking senior civil servants for evidence-based facts in policy proposals, or as a request for advice on how to “sell” a policy to fellow cabinet members or the opposition. This could therefore equally potentially influence how relevant a skill is perceived to be. Though these three potential factors are distinct from one-another, they are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 4
Analytical model



3. Research design and data

To investigate polarization and functional politicization in the Netherlands, this study was designed with a multi-method and cross-time approach. This was to ensure that the examination of polarization and bureaucratic politicization was done in a thorough and linear manner. Our approach consists of both a quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) element. In the first, surveys sent

to senior civil servants allow to establish a numeric measurement of the relevance of the bureaucratic powers and political-strategic insight. This provides us with comparable data, which proves essential in establishing the relevance of bureaucratic skills over political-strategic insight, which could point towards functional politicization. Numeric measurements consequently assist in highlighting general trends and in exposing differences that may be difficult to distinguish with a purely qualitative approach. The second, qualitative, approach provides testimonies that can assist in explicating the survey results and consequently also assist in establishing the impact of polarization on the profession of the senior civil servant. The combination of the two hence go hand in hand and highlight over-all trends whilst providing insights into the dynamics behind them.

Though our understanding of functional politicization has developed since its conception in the 1970s, the focus has primarily been on studying forms of politicization at particular points in time (the “here and now”), meaning that our understanding of how functional politicization mechanisms have evolved is somewhat more limited. Overlooking evolutions can be detrimental not only to our understanding of how and why the degree of politicization changes, but also to how the form of politicization has changed. Hence, we incorporated a cross-time approach in this study. This was done through the survey which was conducted in 2007 and replicated with the same questions and the same population in 2013 and 2019, and by examining how polarized the Dutch political landscape – and coalitions – were following the elections of 2006, 2012 and 2017 elections (the election years closest to the 2007, 2013 and 2019 surveys). The surveys examined how civil servants perceived the relevance of bureaucratic powers and political strategic insight, whilst the plots (see Figures 1, 2 and 3) illustrate the extent of polarization during the same period. In doing so, it was possible to compare the results of the surveys and the polarization plots amongst each other (i.e. how relevant were political-strategic insight and substantive knowledge in 2007 compared to 2013 and 2019?), but also between one another (i.e. how do evolutions in the degree of polarization fare to evolutions in the perception of the various skills?). By adopting both a multi-method and cross-time approach, this study is novel in that it provides a chronological observation of how senior civil servants perceive the relevance of various skills necessary to conduct their duties, combined with observations from recent interviews amongst the background of polarization, which gave a “snap shot” image as well as yielded cross-time impressions where respondents reflected on the past 10 year period. As a result, we can perceive the importance senior civil servants assign to the various influences they possess, observe how these perceptions have evolved over time, and consequently potentially see the prominence of functional politicization mechanisms.

The question remains as to the advantage of observing the Netherlands. When looking at the case of Westminster countries, Aucoin clearly demonstrated how, in his opinion, partisan polarization poses a risk to civil-service impartiality and

hence creates a foundation for bureaucratic politicization (2012, 183). By focusing on Westminster systems – countries with majoritarian democratic systems (Lijphart 2012) – Aucoin, however, left the question open as to whether a similar phenomenon is equally perceptible in consensus democracies. Functional politicization resulting from partisan polarization seems more likely to occur in majoritarian systems, given that in majoritarian systems, there is a stronger inherent dualistic view of politics, in which those who are not allies of the government must be its enemies, than in consensus systems. Therefore, if a relationship between polarization and functional politicization was found in a consensus system, where it was relatively less likely to occur, this would strengthen the idea that both phenomena are indeed related, regardless of the type of democracy.

The Netherlands is a fitting example of a consensus-based democratic system (Lijphart 2012), characterized by the classic features such as executive power-sharing in (broad) coalition cabinets; substantial power of the legislature over the executive; a multi-party system; proportional representation; and a (neo)corporatist-type interest group policy-making model.

Being a consensus-based democracy, examining polarization in the Netherlands and its link to bureaucratic politicization not only provides us with valuable country-specific insights, but also serves as a reference for other studies. Seeing its traits, the Netherlands almost surfaces as the archetype of Lijphart's definition of a consensus-based democratic system. As a result, if such dynamics can be found in the Dutch context, such findings can possibly be transferred to other consensus systems, with similar studies even being replicated in other national contexts. Consequently, examining the Netherlands seems beneficial to expand our knowledge on the link between polarization and bureaucratic politicization in consensus-based democracies. Furthermore, it can contribute to comparative research between consensus and majoritarian systems, in turn assisting in highlighting similarities and differences in such dynamics.

4. A cross-time analysis: 2007, 2013 and 2019 surveys

To conduct the linear study, survey data collected in 2007, 2013 and 2019 provided measurements from three precise moments in time. These surveys were sent to civil servants in all governmental sectors including ministries, project organizations, monitoring agencies and executive agencies, hence providing an in-depth look into civil servants' impressions on a governmental-wide scale.

As this study focuses explicitly on the senior echelons, only responses from senior civil servants were included here. To establish which population fit the criteria of senior civil servants, an institutional delineation was selected: individuals officially belonging to the Dutch senior civil service (*Algemene Bestuursdienst* (ABD)). The ABD defines senior civil servants as civil servants belonging to the top ranks

of their respective departments (profession grades 15 and higher). As a result, in ministries, respondents belonged to the top four ranks: secretary-general, deputy secretary-general, director-general, or deputy director-general. In project organizations, they were 1st- or 2nd-level project directors (chief director, directors); in monitoring agencies, they were 1st- or 2nd-level strategic inspectors (inspector-general); and in executive agencies, they were 1st-, 2nd- or 3rd-level managers (chief director, directors or general director). A total of 416, 235 and 516 responses were received in 2007, 2013 and 2019 respectively (equating response rates of 41.4 %, 29.3 % and 56.1 %). Responses were then calibrated to only include those received by senior civil servants. As a result, a total of 262, 133 and 377 responses were included in this study, with senior civil servants working for ministries forming the majority of respondents each year (62 %, 57 % and 65 % respectively). The variation in the number of respondents per survey can consequently be attributed to the response rates.

In all three surveys the following question was asked: “*Various skills are associated with the profession of senior civil servant. How relevant are each of the following skills to your current position?*”⁷ Respondents were then able to provide an answer on a scale from one to five – one being the lowest and five the highest⁸ – to each of the following skills: substantive expertise; procedural knowledge; and political-strategic insight.⁹

To conduct a linear study, it is necessary to have data from different points in time that is of equal value. If of equal value, these data can then be compared (Petigrew 1990). As the formulation of the question and answers remained identical in all three surveys, the responses can be considered to be of equal value. Having distributed the surveys via Qualtrics, the response data was then analyzed and compared in SPSS. The table below indicates the average answer to each of these skills per year.

Table 1

Average response to how relevant respondents believe each skill to be

| Date | Substantive Expertise | Procedural Knowledge | Political-Strategic Insight |
|-------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 2007 | 4.24 | 4.17 | 4.66 |
| 2013 | 4.32 | 4.32 | 4.76 |
| 2019 | 4.25 | 4.21 | 4.7 |

7 Met het werk van topambtenaren worden verschillende vaardigheden geassocieerd. Hoe relevant is elk van de volgende vaardigheden voor uw huidige positie?

8 1 = Not relevant at all; 2 = Hardly relevant; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Quite relevant; 5 = Very relevant.

9 Inhoudelijke deskundigheid; Procedurele deskundigheid; Politiek-strategisch inzicht.

As Table 1 illustrates, overall, respondents in each of the survey years consider the three skills to be between “quite relevant” (4) and “very relevant” (5), hence attesting how essential civil servants perceive them to be. What stands out here is the remarkable stability of the relevance senior civil servants associate with each of the three types of skills. In order to test whether or not there is a relation between the survey year and the perceived relevance of the types of skills, a one-way ANOVA test was run in SPSS. The results came back inconclusive, hence reflecting no significant difference between the perceived relevance of the skills and the survey year. As such, we cannot conclude that certain skills’ perceived relevance stands out in one year compared to another (i.e. political-strategic insight was considered to be more relevant in 2013 than in 2007).

Though it is not possible to draw conclusions based on the relevance of skills between years, as confirmed by a second ANOVA test, it is, however, possible to do so between skills. Multiple points of interests consequently emerge. First, it surfaces that substantive expertise and procedural knowledge are considered to be of almost equal relevance – unsurprising seeing that they form two of the three bureaucratic powers (Weber 1988). Senior civil servants in the Netherlands are selected on merit-based criteria, notably their substantive knowledge and expertise (Overeem 2013). Though this knowledge seems to be a defining criterion in accessing senior positions, once having obtained them, the intricate knowledge of how procedures work and agents’ capability of navigating political-administrative waters also seem to be vital in correctly exercising the profession. The substantial relevance of both substantive expertise and procedural knowledge reflected in the survey therefore seems self-explanatory.

Secondly, based on the first point we can establish that political-strategic insight appears to have always been considered the most important skill. By constantly showing a mean that is higher to those of the other skills, it seems that political-strategic insight is considered the most relevant of the skills in exercising the profession. Though it cannot be said whether its relevance has grown or diminished over the years, the surveys and ANOVA test confirm that it has consistently been perceived as the most relevant.

This second point is of particular relevance as it testifies to how political-strategic insight appears to be more relevant despite not being one of the bureaucratic powers. It therefore appears that the profession of senior civil servant requires political astuteness to exercise the profession. The question remains as to what this says about functional politicization. Functional politicization, as mentioned previously, is a process by which political considerations play an increasingly prominent role in the profession (Mayntz and Derlien 1989). This begs the question: is political-strategic insight simply another relevant skill to the profession, or rather a sign of functional politicization being well and truly present? Furthermore, has its relevance come at the expense of substantive expertise and procedural knowledge,

or do these skills co-exist harmoniously? To address these questions, testimonies from semi-structured interviews are required to provide additional insights.

5. Bureaucratic skills and functional politicization: 2019 semi-structured interviews

Interviews conducted in 2019 allowed us to ask respondents on their profession, the use of these skills, and functional politicization. A total of nineteen interviews were held with civil servants belonging to the top ranks of various ministries and sectors. The table below provides an overview of each respondents' sector and rank:

Table 2
Interview Respondents' Corresponding Sector and Rank

| | | |
|-----------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Ministry of Finance | Director-General |
| 2 | Ministry of Finance | Director-General |
| 3 | Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management | Director-General |
| 4 | Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management | Director-General |
| 5 | Ministry of Social Affairs | Director-General |
| 6 | Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate | Director-General |
| 7 | Ministry of Social Affairs | Director-General |
| 8 | Ministry of Finance | Deputy Secretary-General |
| 9 | Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management | Deputy Secretary-General |
| 10 | Office for the Senior Civil Service | Director-General |
| 11 | Ministry of Finance | Former Director-General |
| 12 | Ministry of Justice and Security | Chief Director |
| 13 | Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management | Deputy Director-General |
| 14 | Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate | Inspector-General |
| 15 | Ministry of Finance | Secretary-General |
| 16 | Ministry of Finance | Chief Director |
| 17 | Office for the Senior Civil Service | Deputy Director-General |
| 18 | Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations | Director-General |
| 19 | Ministry of Education, Culture and Science | Director-General |

Respondents fitting the necessary criteria were found via the ABD's "Top Management Group" and "Who is Who" webpages. The first catalogues the various senior positions and rank in each ministry and consequently provides links and contact information for the concerned individual. As this page is, however, limited to the ministries, the second webpage ("Who is Who") provided us with contact information of those working in non-ministerial sectors. The selection of respondents

was consequently straightforward as it was limited to top civil servants in these top positions – overall a rather limited pool. Although the total number of interview respondents is significantly lower than the survey participants, both respondent groups are senior civil servants and their perceptions are hence comparable. As a result, interview respondents inhabit positions at the top echelons of their respective sectors, meaning their consequent proximity to politics subsequently provides valuable in-depth testimonies that elucidate the survey responses.

Having respondents from multiple government sectors allowed for a better understanding of how things have evolved over time, why changes – if any – have occurred, and what the current relational political-administrative landscape looks like. Multiple topics were touched upon during the semi-structured interviews, such as leadership, the pressures on the civil service, how they enact their duties and provide advice, and the relationship between the political and administrative spheres. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded with the aid of ATLAS.ti. The use of codes facilitated the analysis as they assisted in identifying the various themes that surfaced and their recurrence. Codes were then consequently compared to identify common testimonies relating to the themes of functional politicization, substantive expertise, procedural knowledge, and political-strategic insight.

5.1 Political-strategic Insight

Though political-strategic insight is considered to be a feature of functional politicization rather than one of Weber's bureaucratic powers, the surveys conducted in 2007, 2013 and 2019 highlighted the importance senior civil servants perceive political-strategic insight to have. This was equally reflected in respondents' testimonies at multiple instances. A particularly flagrant example of this surfaced when a respondent responded in the following way to an inquiry about acting in a political-strategic manner: "That you must act more politically-strategically? Yes, I think that has gradually become more and more the case, yes, I certainly think so. More is required of you in that area than in the past" (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019). Although the respondent highlighted that they acted more politically-strategic, the question as to what senior civil servants consider political-strategic insight to be remained. When interrogating about what political-strategic insight in their opinion was and why it seemed to have become gradually more important, the respondent explained that this was due to everything having seemingly become "more political" than before. In their opinion, this was partly due to the more polarized political landscape that had resulted in a coalition composed of a multitude of small parties:

Things have certainly become more political, I'll give you the following example. We have an upcoming session on climate impact, so I recently asked the minister: "do you think that an agreement will be reached in the next session?" I asked this because I

personally have no idea. Their response was that they didn't think that an agreement would be met at the following session as there were still a few issues, so I asked about these issues so that I could better prepare for the upcoming session. They said that the current situation is X, Y and Z, and that they thought there may be manoeuvrability in this and that. So based on this, what we [the department] did is gather together and say "it could be that there is room for manoeuvrability here. Can we accommodate that in regards to state aid? Do we have any ideas on this? Can we create some scenarios in regards to this, such as what it could cost and how we can prepare for that?" That's how things now go (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019).

Another respondent shared a very similar perception:

The classical linear process of taking notes, asking the minister's opinion and then sending it to Parliament who may then come back with some requests for changes or something is no longer the same. The process is surrounded by political interventions because the multitude of parties in the coalition has made things more complex (Author interview 8, Den Haag, 2019).

As these quotes show, due to the multitude of parties and the need to find an agreement that suits all involved, senior civil servants must now not only produce policy advice or measures that are based on evidence, but also need to find a way of balancing parties' different wishes and desires if they want everyone on board. Another respondent named this the "marketability" of propositions, and also shared the view that a coalition formed of many parties made things more political:

The political process has always had a marketing and sales department. So the marketability of policies and measures is of course considered. A result of this is that sometimes something is added which may not be purely evidence-based simply to serve a certain target group or to better sit with them. You see that too (Author interview 1, Den Haag, 2019).

Political-strategic insight thus seems to be a necessity in the profession. Though this may assist in creating harmony between the various political parties that form the coalition, questions as to whether this is a task that should be left to the administrative circle can be raised. Especially, if this can lead to some propositions being composed of elements that are not entirely evidence-based. Though both respondents believe that multiple parties in a coalition lead to civil servants having to act in a politically-strategic manner, another respondent was not certain that this had become more so the case than previously: "If the marketability of policies and measures is more required than before ... that is something that I question.

I think that the underlying trend of rationalizing is very dominant and that this is possibly just a reaction to populism” (Author interview 1, Den Haag, 2019).

Regardless of whether political-strategic behaviour had grown or not, another respondent emphasized that the capacity to act in a political-strategic manner seemed to be valued by politicians, as once part of the higher echelons of the civil service, you were no longer asked to just provide policy advice, but also political advice: “And then you become a civil servant, and as you climb higher in the ranks of the civil service, you actually become more and more of a political adviser based on your experience and authority” (Author interview 8, Den Haag, 2019). This quote emphasizes the roles that politicians in the Netherlands expect senior civil servants to play as a result of the political climate. Though on the surface this raises more questions on the nature of their profession, the interviewed senior civil servants elaborated upon these politically charged tasks almost as though they considered them to be a normal or expected part of the profession. One respondent even played it down to a certain degree:

It is not the case that MPs now call civil servants directly or that we join MPs’ sides. That’s still not how things go ... but you see that ministers more so require civil servants that can simply explain things to MPs, and that has nothing to do with the fact that they don’t understand and that they need it spelled out to them, it is more to do with “can I inspire confidence”, and more to do with having a proposal they made that is also based upon political support. This therefore makes it a fine line between substantive expertise and the capability of acquiring majorities (Author interview 8, Den Haag, 2019).

Various respondents linked the increased importance of political skills to the fragmentation in the political landscape, where one of them formulated it as follows:

The House of Representatives is fragmented, the discussions have become increasingly emotional and less substance-based. Under such circumstances, can senior civil servants still rely on substance, or are they primarily focused on the political side of things? (Author interview 11, Den Haag 2019).

Based on these observations, it seems that political-strategic insight is unquestionably an inherent part of the profession. Though some respondents believed that it played a more prominent role now than previously, whilst others did not, the survey nevertheless showed that political-strategic insight was perceived to be the most relevant trait for the profession in 2007, 2013 and 2019. The interviews reflected this by depicting how a more turbulent political landscape has led to them becoming political advisers and/or having to take political intricacies into account in their duties more so than before.

5.2 Substantive expertise

Substantial expertise can be defined as the accrued knowledge from specific disciplines and topics. Hence it refers here to civil servants' capability to successfully exercise their profession based on this accumulated knowledge. The previous respondent mentioned that the line between substantive knowledge and political astuteness had become somewhat blurred ("This therefore makes it a fine line between substantive expertise and the capability of acquiring majorities"). This testimony certainly reflects Hood and Lodge's (2006) and Hustedt and Salomonsen's (2014) definition of political-strategical advice: the integration of policy expertise with political advice. The respondent's mention of substantive expertise and the thin line that separates it from the political playing field raised the question of how civil servants' perception of substantive expertise has evolved. From the surveys, it seems that substantive expertise is considered to be less relevant than political strategic insight. The interviews shed light upon why this was the case. The following revealing testament came from a senior civil servant when discussing substantive expertise:

I think that part of what we see happening today is the technical approach being chastised. I think that the big problem is that the public don't think as experts, and that it remains fairly difficult to make sound policies. You can also debate whether everything we've done really was sound from an objective perspective, but even if you could objectively establish that it was sound, it is not always easy to explain (Author interview 1, Den Haag, 2019).

This testimony indicates that though substantive knowledge is essential in forming the evidence-based knowledge required for evidence-based policy building, it is not always simple. This in turns means that it is consequently difficult "to sell". As such, substantive knowledge seems to be "chastised" and consequently overshadowed by marketability – a trait of polarization. A conflictual state between the factual knowledge needed to build solid policy and the political scaffolding that frames such propositions therefore seems to unravel in civil servants' hands. This situation does not, however, appear to be one that senior civil servants deem desirable. Rather, some thought that the substantive nature of their duty was, and should remain, central to their profession:

What I have also found very important, and this is a conversation that we have had amongst ourselves, is that our profession remains one that provides the facts and figures, and that we remain focused on the content, not on speaking. ... I think that it is our task to properly submit the facts and figures to the minister. If they then want to present it in a certain way or want to share it framed under a certain light then that is up to them. But we have to assure that the basics are all in order, that is essential in my opinion (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019).

According to this interviewee, the political twist that envelopes the gathered evidence in the policy-making process is something that should be left to the political sphere. Civil servants should instead serve their minister by focusing on fact-finding and providing purely administrative advice. Though the above participant emphasized that civil servants should, in their opinion, always place content before form, this ideal situation seemed to sometimes lie far from reality. Politics seems to have infringed upon the civil service's work to the extent that some senior civil servants felt that they were asked or required to assist their minister in political framing:

The minister says, "I can't once again approach the coalition with bad news, so I want some sweet next to the sour". This is something that we are becoming more and more familiar with. We know that it is now more difficult to get things through, so what can we do to make things attractive for party A, party B, or for all of the parties. In that sense, things are certainly more political. ... Yes, we can assist with thinking about how this or that will sit with some and what we can do about it. But what I think about the Dutch civil service is that, on average, we are incredibly loyal, so we don't consciously get the idea of going and doing something that would be detrimental to the minister into our heads very quickly. I believe in what I have seen from the loyalty of the civil service. And we [the civil service] take our loyalty pretty far (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019).

Though the following accounts exemplify that the participants perceived substantive expertise to be of importance, it is indisputable that the consensus amongst them was that substantive expertise had come under some strain. The respondents were reportedly not entirely in favour of these changes, as politicians seemed to have combined the substantive expertise with political-strategic advice. The interviews further reflect that substantive expertise is considered to be crucial in defining the profession, and that they were hence somewhat sceptical towards this trend of political duties becoming more prevalent. This may, however, also be due to regulations from the Office for the Senior Civil Service (*Bureau Algemene Bestuursdienst*) that state that senior civil servants may only remain in a position for a maximum of seven years before having to move on to another (van den Berg and Ferwerda 2020). Faced with this, we can only hypothesize that civil servants nonetheless consider substantive knowledge to be vital and that the survey results are but a mere reflection of the changes substantive knowledge has gone through; that is that the substantive expertise appears to have been overshadowed by the political-strategic oversight.

5.3 Procedural knowledge

The third and final skill examined in this study was procedural knowledge. Simply put, procedural knowledge alludes to a civil servant's know-how on how the political-administrative infrastructure and relationship functions, here specifically referring to how the civil service and political apparatus operate and intertwine. Interviews with participants exemplified how procedural knowledge is used, and highlighted changes that had taken place. In general, the interviews illustrated how civil servants use this knowledge in order to assure the "smooth" operation of both the administrative and the political "machine". A first point that surfaced was the changes that had occurred in political-administrative relations due to ministers encircling themselves with a group of trusted advisers. Respondents in particular alluded to the ministers' "political assistant" (PA) – also commonly referred to as a "special adviser" (SpAds) or a "ministerial adviser" – who is personally appointed by the minister and assists them in their day-to-day duties. Multiple studies have examined PAs in an attempt to understand their roles and tasks (Gains and Stoker 2011; Shaw and Eichbaum 2018). It is, however, widely understood that they serve ministers by coordinating with parliament and the civil service, and by providing advice on (how to frame) policy proposals (Connaughton 2015). Respondents stated first and foremost that these figures were a recent addition to the political spectrum and that they seemed to be playing a more important role:

Before, there wasn't such a thing as a political assistant, they came about later, they are a new figure. I think that they have become more important over time. If you compare things to twenty years ago, they have become really very important, they weren't as important back then compared to now (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019).

In the participant's eyes, this gain in importance was not inconsequential. When further questioned upon how their profession had evolved following PAs' grown importance, respondents elaborated upon how political assistants' advisory role, increased proximity to the minister, and the ensuing influence they held, had led to senior civil servants' traditional functions becoming perceived by ministers as less significant. This had, to a varying degree, hindered top-down and bottom-up communication:

Senior civil servants should actually be the primary advisers, yet you sometimes see other people come and fill that position. ... Look, in a hierarchical organization, the transmission of information from the top to the bottom and from the bottom to the top is always complicated/complex. So I mean, if something there [in the information transmission] doesn't work, that is down to something not working in the system, that is obvious (Author interview 6, Den Haag, 2019).

According to these testimonies, it appears that changes seem to have come about in a top-down manner, in other words, due to politicians attributing more and more value to political assistants. As a result, to ensure that they can successfully and correctly exercise their profession, civil servants have had to adapt. They therefore exploited their procedural knowledge to find alternative manners of assuring that the transmission of information, and the communication with the minister, was not hindered. This was done in multiple ways. One respondent for example stated that:

We [the civil service] can often be a bit hit and run, so now we are very much preoccupied with making sure that we think ahead. ... This is a way to assure that the minister's policy – because he or she is the one that you are serving in the end – gets to those who write it up as a law. There are multiple ways to do this. If you as the bureaucracy want to serve the minister well, then it is important that you also get the information down to your employees as well. ... So yes, I do recognize this [hindered transmission of information], and I personally don't see it as a positive thing, so I do my best to assure that information flows as well as it possibly can (Author interview 6 interview, Den Haag, 2019).

Another participant shared their opinion on how they adapt to hindrances caused by the presence of PAs by explaining that they directly reach out to the PA to work with them:

If I see a political assistant do something that makes me think "that's not going to be possible", then I'll try to have a conversation about it with them. I will ask them if a few short-cuts can be taken on a few things, or I'll ask if they can maybe do things differently next time so that things are more effective and we [the civil service] are not left out (Author interview 2, Den Haag, 2019).

As both of these accounts reflect, faced with PAs providing advice and hindering communication, civil servants have resorted to actively finding alternative procedures to be able to serve their minister. These claims of PAs taking over advisory roles traditionally relegated to senior civil servants, however, refer us back to respondents' perception and accounts of the necessity of political-strategic insight. When reflecting upon respondents' accounts on the relevance of the various bureaucratic powers, it seems that respondents claim that on the one hand their advice is no longer as valued as previously, meaning that they must find alternative means of assuring communication with the minister (procedural knowledge), yet, on the other hand, they claim that political advice is being requested more from them than before (political-strategic insight). Based on these accounts, it seems that the type

of advice ministers expect from senior civil servants has changed. As a result, procedural knowledge seems to be a necessary “tool” for senior civil servants to respond to changes in their profession.

6. Conclusion

Evidence presented in this study suggests that political fragmentation and polarization in Dutch politics has been on the rise over the period from 2007 to 2019. Respondents’ testimonies match this by pointing towards a more polarized and antagonistic political environment that is defined by coalitions formed of a multitude of political parties. The ideological distance has increased within coalitions, within the opposition, and between both camps. What emerges from our study is that there seems to be a link between polarization and functional politicization.

While the Dutch civil service is traditionally known for its strong tradition of independence and impartiality (Overeem 2013), polarization seems to have contributed to an encroachment of political elements into the profession. The analytical approach here developed hypotheses that this can occur (directly or indirectly) via institutional, organizational, or interpersonal dynamics. Evidence, to varying degrees, has been found to support these hypotheses. In regard to institutional dynamics, recent directives, such as those of the 2016 “Vision of Public Leadership” reform, emphasize a need for more “political sensitivity” and have established a more competitive administrative climate by installing post-New Political Management (post-NPM) recruitment schemes such as the “3-5-7” model. Organizational dynamics, such as the prevalence of ministerial advisers and an increased turnover in ministers, may have resulted in civil servants feeling a need to integrate policy expertise with political advice to fulfil their duties adequately and ensure a form of stability. In addition, interpersonal dynamics, as indicated by respondents, testify to a normalization and neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) – in some cases – of explicit or implicit expectations of political advice from civil servants. Though these findings are intriguing, this approach requires more refinement and exploration to expose its potential. Applying such an analytical approach to international comparative research would shed light on whether these traits are exclusive to the Netherlands or rather part of a broader trend.

The qualitative data consequently appears to support our hypotheses; however, the quantitative data yield a less clear picture. The cross-time analysis conducted via the survey is inconclusive due to insignificant differences in responses over the years. This is puzzling as the data do not reflect trends seen in research conducted over the same thirteen year period (’t Hart and Kuijken, 2018; van den Berg 2017; van Dorp and ’t Hart 2019). A possible explanation is that the stability in responses could be due to civil servants having a preconceived and fixed notion of “how things should be”, and consequently lay them out in the “here and now”

when conducting the survey. The striking absence of variance in average survey responses can possibly be explained by a strong collective normative consciousness within the civil service.

The quantitative data does, however, expose that overall, substantive expertise and procedural knowledge appear to be perceived as less relevant than political-strategic insight. It seems unlikely that political-strategic insight has overshadowed these powers or been at their expense. As testified by the surveys and the interviews, both skills are perceived to be consistently highly relevant and are essential requirements for the profession. Political-strategic insight consequently appears to either accompany these powers or seems to be infused with them.

Be it directly or indirectly, political polarization and functional politicization seem to be linked to one another. However, functional politicization does not exist in a vacuum, as other forms, such as formal and administrative politicization, also co-exist. Consequently, to better understand the synergetic relationship between polarization and politicization, it therefore seems necessary to examine how polarization relates to these other forms if we are to truly understand the current turbulent context in which senior civil servants operate.

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