

The Spy Who Loved Me? Cross-partisans in the Core Executive

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ABSTRACT

Political appointees from different parties from that of their minister – *cross-partisan* appointees (CPAs) – are increasingly often found in the core executive. Ministerial advisory scholarship has overlooked CPAs, while the coalition governance literature sees them as ‘spies’ and ‘coalition watchdogs’. This article argues theoretically and demonstrates empirically that this conceptualisation is overly limited. The empirical basis is a large-N survey of political appointees from two Norwegian coalitions, and a qualitative follow-up survey of CPAs. The results show that CPAs monitor on behalf of their party, provide cross-partisan advice to their minister and perform many of the same tasks as regular partisan appointees do, including exercising independent decision-making power. In this research context, most CPAs act as coalition liaison officers who, rather than create tension and negative dynamics, contribute to building trust between coalition partners.

INTRODUCTION

To anyone not working close to the apex of government, political appointees in executive government – special advisors, ministerial/political advisors, personal aides, state secretaries – used to be ‘people who live in the dark’ (Blick, 2004). Since about 2000, however, these ‘entourages of the executive’ (Eymeri-Douzans, Bioy, & Mouton, 2015) have become items of interest in popular culture (in TV series such as *The West Wing*, *The Thick of It*, *House of Cards*, etc.) and in scholarship on political elites and routes to political power (Goplerud, 2015; Yong & Hazell, 2014), on ministerial advisors (Hustedt, Kolltveit, & Salamonsen, 2017; Hustedt & Veit, 2017; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2015; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010), and on multiparty governments. One subgroup that still lives in the dark, however, are the *cross-partisan* appointees (CPAs) – a special class of political appointees who are deployed to work under a cabinet minister from a party other than their own. Despite their absence from the spotlight, CPAs are relatively common. Verzichelli (2008) shows that since the 1940s, about 80 per cent of the coalition governments in ten European countries have had CPAs.

Moreover, CPAs will likely become more common with time, assuming a continuation of the current trends of increasing frequency of multiparty governments and of coalitions formed by parties without a history of governing together (Deschouwer, 2008; Grotz & Weber, 2016).

So far, coalition government research is the only body of scholarship that has paid any attention to CPAs. Here, the dominating assumption is that CPAs are ‘spies’, ‘watchdogs’ or ‘hostile junior ministers’ appointed to ‘keep tabs on partners’ (Manow & Zorn, 2004; Thies, 2001; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011; Strøm, Müller, & Smith, 2010; Verzichelli, 2008). Despite persuasive arguments that CPAs do ‘spy’ on their ministers, we know very little about the consequences of having CPAs in the core executive. Consequently, scholars have called for studies that take a step back to explore in depth how CPAs work (Martin & Vanberg, 2004, p. 17; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011, p. 1163).

In this article, we take this step back. We first extend theoretical arguments from coalition research and core executive studies to identify two stylised functions that CPAs can perform: monitoring the minister on behalf of their party and providing cross-partisan advice to their minister. We first ask, to what extent do CPAs perform these two functions, and does the balance between the two differ across types of coalition cabinets? Second, do CPAs also perform the same tasks as their colleagues selected from the minister's own party? Third, does the presence of a CPA create tension and lead to exclusion within a ministry's political leadership? According to the OECD, deploying CPAs is a recipe for 'destructive dynamics' (2008, p. 10).

Empirically, this article strengthens the understanding of CPAs by using quantitative and qualitative data obtained from surveying insiders from two coalition cabinets in Norway (2001–2005 and 2005–2013). A survey distributed to all political appointees (with 206 individual responses) contained fixed and open questions about CPAs, some directed at all political appointees and some at CPAs alone. A follow-up with open questions was sent to CPAs to flesh out the results of the first survey.

The article finds that Norwegian CPAs tend to combine monitoring on behalf of their parties and giving cross-partisan advice to their ministers, thus acting as what we conceptualise as coalition liaison officers: actors who enhance communication between coalition partners and are loyal both to their ministers and to their parties. In addition, CPAs perform many of the same tasks as regular partisan appointees do; some even have independent decision-making competence. In systems like Norway's, which, comparatively, has a fairly but not very strong legislature (André, Depauw, & Martin, 2016) and a high-trust and consensus-oriented political culture (Christensen, 2003), ministers may trust and appreciate CPAs. They may see them less as thorns in their side and more as useful political resources that are sometimes better equipped for political coordination than regular partisan

appointees are. While CPAs have so far been primarily considered as oversight instruments against ministerial drift, and as such a resource for their party, this study indicates that, at least in some systems, they should be considered an important political resource for their cabinet ministers too, despite and perhaps even due to their ‘alien’ party affiliation.

THEORISING CROSS-PARTISAN APPOINTEES

Political appointees have been theorised by drawing on existing literatures and theories within political science and public administration, such as public service bargains (De Visscher & Salomonsen, 2013; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2017), core executive studies (Craft, 2015; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2014), policy advisory systems (Craft, 2013; Craft & Howlett, 2012; Hustedt & Veit, 2017), and principal-agent theory (Esselment, Lees-Marshment, & Marland, 2014). The unique contribution made by political appointees in the core executive is that they are close political allies and confidants who can give ministers purely political advice about, for example, new policies and tactics to outmanoeuvre political opponents (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2017; Connaughton, 2010; Craft & Howlett, 2012; LSE GV314 Group, 2012; Maley, 2000; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2014). Giving purely political advice is something that civil servants will typically not do or might be unable to do. Additionally, political appointees prepare the ground for successful policy proposals by obtaining something of crucial importance: information that enables the minister to anticipate reactions from line and coordinating ministries (Craft, 2017; Olsen, 1983, p. 112). Political appointees also liaise between ministries and parliament, and they ease ministers’ workloads by having executive powers within ministries and by fronting issues in the media (Askim et al., 2017).

Most conceptualisations of the functions political appointees perform are derived from studies of single-party governments (Shaw & Eichbaum, 2014). Many functions will be similar in single-party and multiparty governments, but multiparty government undoubtedly adds a layer of political complexity and therefore additional functions for many actors in the

core executive, not least for political appointees. Some of these functions are particularly suited for CPAs. Any cabinet can degenerate from collective rule into ministerial rule, as policy responsibility is delegated to individual cabinet ministers whose political preferences diverge (Thies, 2001, p. 580). This delegation problem is particularly acute and complex for coalitions (Müller & Meyer, 2010, p. 1066), where collective rule can degenerate into infighting along party lines. Recognising these problems, coalition governments strive to prevent and overcome policy drift by using items in the coalition-monitoring toolbox. From the perspective of scholarship on coalition governance, CPAs are one such tool; their *raison d'être* is to offer coalition parties day-to-day supervision of each other's activities (Carroll & Cox, 2012; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011; Thies, 2001). CPAs evaluate the minister's policy proposals on behalf of their party superiors (Müller & Meyer, 2010, p. 1082), reduce information asymmetries and enable parties 'not holding the portfolio to act in other arenas – the cabinet, a coalition committee, or the corresponding parliamentary committee' (Strøm et al., 2010, p. 525).

In the coalition governance literature, CPAs are referred to as 'hostile junior ministers' (Thies, 2001) and 'coalition watchdogs', actors with shadowing and oversight as their main functions (Falcó-Gimeno, 2014; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011). We call this cross-partisan task 'monitoring'. This task entails that CPAs evaluate the minister's nascent policy proposals and report back to their party superiors. According to Strøm et al. (2010, p. 524), 'screening of departmental affairs from a partisan point of view (...) and reporting to their party superiors – is the most important [task] when junior ministers are of the [cross-partisan] variety'. This claim is supported by, for example, studies from Belgium (De Winter, Timmermans, & Dumont, 2003, pp. 325–326) and Germany. German chancellors have installed CPAs as 'bridge heads' in some major ministries (Saalfeld, 2003, p. 71).

In the case of Austria, Müller has found that although monitoring is a crucial task, some CPAs serve as ‘ambassadors of their department’ (Müller, 2003, p. 109). This leads to the point that beyond monitoring, there is another cross-partisan task, one we can call ‘cross-partisan advice’. Here, CPAs provide their minister with information about their party’s policy on relevant issue areas. This task is not emphasised in the coalition governance scholarship, but it is an obvious one from the perspective of core executive studies. Focusing on dependencies and resource exchange between actors in the political system, as Rhodes (2007) does, opens up the possibility that a CPA might be a very valuable asset for a minister. Given their background from another party, CPAs are better positioned than regular partisan appointees are to provide their ministers with information about what the coalition partners can and cannot accept, and about what it will take to reach a compromise (Müller & Meyer, 2010, p. 1082). Multiparty cabinets need discipline and unity in order to formulate policy proposals and require a majority in parliament in order to avoid defeat. One way of achieving cabinet unity and success in parliament is to anticipate how proposals will fare with coalition partners and parliamentary parties. If deemed necessary, ministers can adjust their proposals (Rasch & Tsebelis, 2011). By bringing party viewpoints to their ministers, CPAs can be uniquely useful advisors. In the Netherlands, where a comparatively high proportion of junior ministers are of the cross-partisan variety (Andeweg & Irwin, 2014, p. 160), CPAs liaise between their ministry and their party to ensure that the minister’s actions are acceptable to the CPA’s party (Andeweg & Bakema, 1994, p. 64; Thomson, 2001, p. 179). According to Timmermans (2003), some Dutch CPAs have changed their role from ‘watchdog’ to ‘guide dog’ during their time in office, eventually acting as ‘a sort of *postillon d’amour* between their department and their party’ (Timmermans, 2003, p. 356).

To sum up so far: using coalition governance, political advisory and core executive research, and substantiated by a small number of empirical studies, it is established that CPAs can to a large or small extent monitor their minister for their party and to a large or small extent provide their minister with cross-partisan advice. This insight can be summarised in a two-by-two table with four stylised roles for CPAs (Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

These roles can be interpreted through the lens of principal-agent theory, wherein one actor (the agent) acts on behalf of another (the principal) (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). As cross-partisans, CPAs have two principals: their minister and their party leader(ship). This creates a multiple-principal problem. In theory, two principals can have different and even rivalrous interests, and each principal might attempt to control the agent, and/or insulate the agent from the other principal's influence (Moe, 2012, p. 11). An agent can be 'forced to make compromises and trade-offs favouring some principals over others, and [may], in its own self-interest, [be] attracted to strategies that play its principals off against one another' (Moe, 1987, p. 482).

Assuming that CPAs exclusively or predominantly have only the *watchdog* role (the upper-left cell in Table 1) implies taking for granted that the two principals have diverging interests and that CPAs favour one of them – their party leader. A watchdog is placed in the ministry to observe and report back to his or her party superiors, not to provide the minister with information about the CPA's party. By contrast, the *coalition advisor* role (the bottom-right cell) captures CPAs providing their minister with information about their party's policy positions and flexibility. Like watchdog role, the coalition advisor role means to essentially carry information unidirectionally, but in the other direction, that is, from the CPA's party to

his or her cabinet minister, who is the favoured principal for a CPA in the coalition advisor role.

The *liaison officer* role (the upper-right cell) captures CPAs acting as lines of communication between coalition partners; they report to their party superiors about potentially difficult issues and report to their ministers about their party's policy and flexibility on difficult issues. The role also captures that CPAs can be useful liaison officers for their ministers in executive-legislative relations in order to secure parliamentary support. In the liaison officer role, CPAs effectively serve both their two principals.

Finally, it is possible that CPAs neither monitor their minister nor give him or her cross-partisan advice. They may have the role of a *regular political appointee* in the ministry (bottom-left cell) or, as we discuss below, be consciously side-lined by the minister. In the first case, cross-partisanship is irrelevant for understanding the CPA's role; in the second, it is essential.

According to Giannetti and Laver (2005), CPAs are 'typically' tasked with '[running] sub-departments with precise areas of delegated responsibility'. They argue that CPAs 'in the real world are almost never free-roaming actors stalking the corridors of the cabinet minister's department, looking through keyholes with the sole objective of spying on the minister' (p. 98). Still, running sub-departments, developing policy, liaising between ministries, and meeting with lobbyists and journalists – that is, ordinary partisan appointee functions – are not things we should expect a minister to ask of a watchdog, that is, a CPA whose primary loyalty is towards his or her party. The remaining three CPA roles from Table 1 are more compatible with performing such functions.

Principal-agent theory does not stipulate the concrete situations in which two principals have rivalrous interests, or whether the incentives of the minister and the cross-partisan appointee are aligned. The likelihood of a CPA filling the watchdog role depends on the

political context. First, according to Martin and Vanberg (2011, 2014), the importance of CPAs for cross-partisan control, and thus the likelihood that CPAs would take on the role of the watchdog, is highest in political systems with weak legislatures. In systems where the legislature is comparatively strong vis-à-vis the executive, coalition partners can reduce each other's information advantage and control each other through parliament (Thies, 2001; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011).

Second, situational factors such as the composition and parliamentary basis of the cabinet can be expected to influence what roles CPAs play. Extending the strong/weak legislature argument suggests that in minority cabinets, coalition partners can control each other's ministers in the parliamentary arena, thereby reducing the need for CPAs to perform the watchdog role within the cabinet. CPAs should be more needed as watchdogs in majority cabinets, where more matters are decided before they reach parliament.

Third, coalition governance scholars have found that CPAs are used sparingly, usually only when 'the differences between the parties are substantial' and when the 'stakes are high' (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011, p. 1162), for example, in salient ministries where parties have a lot to 'lose from abdication' (Thies, 2001, p. 581; see also Greene & Jensen, 2016). Other factors that might affect which roles CPAs actually play in the core executive include the overall state of coalition relationships, personal relationships between party leaders and cabinet ministers within the coalition, and personal relationships between the ministers and their CPAs.

Related to the research setting of this article, we should not expect to see CPAs primarily as watchdogs in Norway, since, comparatively, Norway's legislature is closer to the strong than to the weak end vis-à-vis the executive (André et al., 2016). Furthermore, minority cabinets have been the norm for several decades in Norway as in the rest of Scandinavia, but majority cabinets do occur, and the material used in this article covers both types. This

material enables an investigation of the assumption that CPAs act more as watchdogs in majority than in minority cabinets. Finally, the material covers several ministries, enabling an investigation of whether CPAs act more as watchdogs in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) than in other ministries.

RESEARCH SETTING

Norwegian ministries have since the late 1940s had two types of political staff (appointee) positions in addition to the minister position (*statsråd*): the political advisor position (*politisk rådgiver*), which is the more junior position, and the state secretary position (*statssekretær*), which is the more senior position. As in all Scandinavian countries (Dahlström, 2009), the number of political appointees has increased the last 20–30 years. Today, each Norwegian ministry typically has one political advisor and two state secretaries. State secretaries are mentioned in the Constitution. They are not part of the cabinet, but serve as ministers' stand-ins and are generally important actors in executive government. Political advisors are formally appointed by the Prime Minister's Office, and should be at the personal disposal of the minister; they tend to be relatively young and have limited or no executive powers (Askim, Karlsen, & Kolltveit, 2014, 2017).

Cabinet decisions are formally made either within individual ministries or in the Council of State. Weekly cabinet meetings are the main arena for clarifying and settling disagreements between ministries or parties (Christensen & Lægreid, 2002; PMO, 2010, p. 9). All matters of importance are presented by individual ministers in the form of brief cabinet notes. If disagreements between ministries or parties are not settled in the cabinet meeting, they are further discussed and resolved by a cabinet subcommittee consisting of a small group of ministers, often under the leadership of the PMO (Kolltveit, 2013a).

Norway has had nine coalition cabinets since 1945. The first three (coming into office in 1963, 1965, and 1972) did not appoint any CPAs. In 1983 (the Willoch II cabinet), CPAs

were appointed in two ministries: the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Here, the CPAs worked alongside state secretaries and political advisors selected from the same party as the minister. As shown in the appended Table A.1, the Ministry of Finance has been a permanent location for CPAs since 1983. The number of ministries housing CPAs grew considerably when the centre-left Stoltenberg II government took office in 2005. Stoltenberg appointed CPAs to four line ministries, the PMO, and the Ministry of Finance. The Solberg cabinet, which took office in 2013, extended its predecessor's practice, with CPAs being appointed to nine of 16 ministries. Only state secretaries have ever been appointed to work under a minister from a party other than their own in Norway. There is formally no difference between cross-partisan and regular state secretaries. Their position is the same and they have the same rights and obligations under all regulations. So referring, as we do, to 'cross-partisan' as opposed to 'regular' or 'other' state secretaries is only a pedagogical device; it does not imply that these are two distinct positions in any legal sense.

DATA

The empirical material used in this article comes from a two-leg survey of political appointees in Norwegian cabinets. The first leg was distributed in 2015 to all 283 individuals who had served as a state secretary or as a political advisor in the Bondevik II cabinet (2001–2005), a minority coalition cabinet consisting of the Conservative Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party, or in the Stoltenberg II cabinet (2005–2013), a majority coalition cabinet consisting of the Labour Party as the senior partner, the Socialist Left Party, and the Centre Party. It is difficult to compare the two governments' intra-coalition policy differences, but they had one major difference: The Bondevik II cabinet consisted of parties that had all been in coalition governments several times before, often, and in the near past, with each other. The Stoltenberg II cabinet, by contrast, represented the first

time the Labour Party did not govern alone and represented the first time ever in cabinet for the Socialist Left Party.

The respondents' names were collected from the Political System Directory of the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and their e-mail addresses were collected from the websites of their current employers or provided by the national secretariat of their political party. The survey was distributed by e-mail to the respondents (using Questback). After two probes, the response rate reached 73 per cent, with 206 individual responses. Of these, 67 were political advisors and 139 were state secretaries. Thirteen of the state secretaries had been of the cross-partisan variety only and some had served as both regular and cross-partisan state secretaries during their time in government. The response rate was higher among appointees in the Stoltenberg II cabinet (76 per cent) than in the Bondevik II cabinet (65 per cent). No other indications of analytically important bias were found in the sample. The frequency of non-responses to individual questions was negligible.

A second-leg supplementary survey containing open-ended questions was distributed in 2016 to all 20 respondents who had experience as CPAs. Fifty-five per cent of the respondents answered (11 individuals).

Both legs of the survey contained questions about the political appointees' activities in government, such as the types of advice offered to ministers, the types of assignments, the levels of responsibility, and whether respondents could make independent decisions in the ministry. We cannot exclude the possibility of self-aggrandisement, but we do not suspect strong desirability bias in the data; few questions asked directly about the appointees' influence, importance, achieved results, and relationships with other political actors. The surveys were conducted in Norwegian. All answers and quotations used in this article were translated into English by the authors.

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF CPAs

The empirical analysis first investigates the extent to which Norwegian CPAs – cross-partisan state secretaries (which is the term used in this empirical section) – monitored and advised their minister and whether their emphasis on each function varied between the minority and the majority government in our data. We then compare cross-partisan and regular state secretaries. Finally, we analyse whether the presence of cross-partisan state secretaries created tensions within ministries.

The balance between monitoring and advising: CPAs' roles

To study the extent to which cross-partisan state secretaries monitored their ministers on behalf of their party and provided cross-partisan advice to their ministers, we rely on answers to some questions posed directly to the cross-partisan state secretaries (Table 2) and on answers to some questions posed to all political appointees about the purpose of appointing cross-partisans (Figure 1).

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 shows that the vast majority of cross-partisans, 16 of 19, monitored their minister on behalf of their party (values 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 to 5). Slightly fewer, 14 of 19, provided their minister with cross-partisan advice. The fact that none of the cross-partisans had performed these functions ‘to a very large extent’ (value 5) can be read to indicate that they also performed other, ‘normal’ state secretary functions. In fact, only two cross-partisans reported that they did not relieve and advise their minister in a similar manner as other state secretaries did.

The results further demonstrate compatibility between the two stylised CPA functions. Fourteen of 19 cross-partisans reported that they performed both functions to a large extent.

Two cross-partisans did monitor their ministers and did not provide them with cross-partisan advice ('not' measured as value 3 or lower), and two cross-partisans performed neither of the two functions. Using self-reports regarding task performance and using the typology presented in Table 1, we can conclude that three of four cross-partisans were 'coalition liaison officers', while about one in ten was purely a 'watchdog'. None were purely 'coalition advisors', and fewer than one in five was just a 'regular political appointee' who did not perform stylised CPA functions.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figure 1 shows the opinions of more than 200 state secretaries and political advisors (cabinet insiders) regarding why cross-partisans are deployed to ministries. The results largely support the conclusions from the analysis of self-reported data from the cross-partisans. The vast majority of cabinet insiders were of the opinion that cross-partisans are appointed to monitor ministers on behalf of their party. A somewhat smaller majority maintained that cross-partisans are appointed to provide the minister with cross-partisan advice. Opinions were more split about whether cross-partisans were appointed to balance the allocation of seats among coalition partners and about whether cross-partisans were appointed to offer expertise unavailable in the minister's own party.

The cabinet insider data also support the notion that the two stylised CPA functions are compatible: 75 per cent saw both monitoring and cross-partisan advice as important reasons (values 4 or 5) for appointing cross-partisans (cross-tabulation not shown). Virtually no one rejected the stylised CPA functions as the rationale for appointing cross-partisans.

Qualitative data from open-ended survey questions support the notion that cross-partisans are important liaison officers. As one cross-partisan noted, 'It was often necessary to contact

the party leader, other ministers or the party faction in parliament to clarify our party's interest in matters that came up'. Another cross-partisan said:

In some cases, the party differences were so large that all we could do was to lift the issue up to the party leaders and their cabinet subcommittee. Personally, I felt the most fruitful approach was to be honest from the start and to identify the most difficult points as soon as possible.

The qualitative data suggest that the role of cross-partisans in the PMO was slightly different from that in line ministries. The difference is illustrated by the following quote from a respondent who had been a cross-partisan in both contexts:

In the line ministry, I had my own policy areas [of delegated responsibility], just like the [regular] state secretaries had, and I was involved on a par with the others in the daily work in the ministry. In the PMO, my main role was to be my party's representative (...). I coordinated [my party's] cabinet ministers' work with cabinet notes [and I had] contact with [my party's] parliamentary group.

There were few differences between the two cabinets studied. In both cabinets, more than 90 per cent of cabinet insiders reported that monitoring was (quite or very) important; 80 per cent from the Bondevik II cabinet and 75 per cent from the Stoltenberg II cabinet said that cross-partisan advice was an important reason for having cross-partisan state secretaries.¹

¹ Since we do not have a probability sample, but have surveyed all political appointees in the two governments, we do not here test for statistical difference; we report all differences. Statistical difference is usually used to test whether a difference found in a probability sample (of a given population) is generalisable to the larger population.

Comparing cross-partisan and regular state secretaries

As shown in Table 2, cross-partisan state secretaries (self-reportedly) relieved and advised their ministers in a similar manner to that in which state secretaries from the ministers' own parties did. We now compare the two groups in greater detail, first by investigating whether the cross-partisans' contact patterns differ from those of regular state secretaries (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

Three observations can be made from Table 3. First, cross-partisan state secretaries are more frequently in contact with their party's hinterland than are other state secretaries. The mean contact frequency with party leadership ranges from weekly to daily for cross-partisans, while it ranges from monthly to weekly for regular state secretaries. A closer look reveals that this difference is driven by cross-partisans in the PMO, who report being in daily contact with party leadership. This high contact frequency is not surprising since, as one respondent explained: 'As [a cross-partisan] in the PMO, my primary responsibility was to coordinate and prepare matters that affected all ministries on behalf of my party'.

A second observation from Table 4 is that, like regular state secretaries, cross-partisans have daily contact with others in the ministry's political leadership (ministers, state secretaries, and political advisors) as well as with the communications unit and other actors in the permanent bureaucracy (the secretary general and civil servants in the ministry). Altogether, contact patterns indicate that cross-partisans are as integrated in the ministry as state secretaries from the minister's own party.

Third, compared to regular state secretaries, cross-partisans have somewhat more frequent contact with the political leadership in other ministries (nearly daily compared to nearly weekly). To some extent, this greater contact frequency is likely due to the fact that cross-

partisans have frequent contact with party leadership, because the party leader is typically a cabinet minister in another ministry. As one cross-partisan put it:

I had a continuous but irregular dialogue with my party leader, who was a cabinet minister in another ministry. I largely assessed the need for contact myself, but it also occurred that the party leader and other ministers from my own party contacted me’.

Next, we compare cross-partisan and regular state secretaries’ answers to survey questions regarding what tasks they performed in the core executive (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

Four observations can be made from Figure 2. First, cross-partisan and regular state secretaries work equally intensively with political coordination between the ministry and the party organisation, and between the parliamentary party groups and the other ministries. Second, as indicated from the analysis of contact patterns, cross-partisans, and especially those in the PMO, coordinate with their own party to a greater extent than other state secretaries do.

Third, notwithstanding that cross-partisans, like other state secretaries, are in daily contact with the minister, they appear to have somewhat different tasks in relation to ministers. Cross-partisans do not advise ministers on the handling of urgent media issues to the same extent that other state secretaries do, and they contribute less when it comes to offering long-term political advice and policy-substance advice on single issues. Still, cross-partisans are by no means outcasts in the ministries. The differences in assignments are not very large, in many cases driven by data on cross-partisans in the PMO, and on important fronts such as

giving ministers political-tactical advice on single issues, cross-partisans contribute on a par with other state secretaries.

Fourth, compared to regular state secretaries, cross-partisan ones had less *de facto* responsibility for parts of the ministry and contributed less to fronting policy issues in the media. In both instances, the differences are driven by cross-partisans in the PMO; in line ministries, cross-partisans contribute on a par with other state secretaries. As one line ministry cross-partisan explained: ‘I had state secretary responsibility for specific policy areas in the ministry. The responsibility was, without limitations, on a par with that of the other state secretaries in the ministry’.

Consequences of having cross-partisans in ministries

Cross-partisans hold that they contributed to solving difficult issues in the cabinet. Nineteen of 20 cross-partisans claim that their cross-partisan advice contributed to clarifying political disagreements between coalition partners at an early stage of the policy process (Table 4). One cross-partisan elaborated: ‘In a ministry where one of the [coalition] parties has clear interests, a cross-partisan can contribute with clarification of political differences before the issues end up at the cabinet meeting’.

[Table 4 about here]

The experiences of cross-partisans vary in terms of whether their ‘alien’ party affiliation meant that they were sometimes side-lined by the minister. Forty per cent of respondents had experienced feeling excluded from the ministry’s political leadership, and 40 per cent had not. Upon closer examination, a clear difference can be observed between types of ministries. It appears that excluding cross-partisans occurs more often in the PMO than in line ministries (mean scores of 3.7 and 2.2, respectively, on the 1 to 5 scale).

The qualitative data adds color to the picture of how cross-partisans function inside ministries. Contrary to the assumption that cross-partisans create friction and destructive dynamics, these data indicate that cross-partisans perceive a good relationship and a high level of trust between themselves and their ministers. Generally, cross-partisans were of the opinion that the partnership with the minister worked very well, and some lauded their minister for creating a trustful working environment and a unified team in the ministry:

My minister was very open and inclusive regarding various issues in the ministry, as well as [regarding] internal party matters. [He/she] wanted information about my party's positions on various issues as input to [his/her] overall assessments. We state secretaries also had a good and open relationship.

The collaboration was excellent and not hampered by party differences. To some extent, this was due to the praiseworthy clear feedback from the minister to both party colleagues and civil servants that we [the cross-partisans included] were all one team, and that everything could and should be shared.

It was a clear expectation of the minister that we all – regardless of party affiliation – were [his/her] state secretaries, not the different parties' state secretaries.

One respondent illustrated that cross-partisan advice could be well received by one's minister:

A few times, I found reason to point out that a position on an issue could be difficult for my party (...). When that sort of input was given at the right time, problems were avoided, not created'.

Furthermore, cross-partisans did not typically ascribe any friction within the political leadership to party differences. As one respondent stated: ‘it was mainly because of personal differences and not party differences’.

This emphasis on trust and team building indicates that cross-partisans can bridge divides between coalition partners and, in so doing, help to prevent conflicts before they arise. One respondent concluded: ‘[cross-partisans] create understanding and trust and are thus invaluable as an everyday tool to strengthen coalition governments’.

DISCUSSION

As agents in a multiple-principal situation, CPAs – that is, cross-partisan state secretaries in the Norwegian case – may or may not experience temporary or permanent tension between the interests of their minister and the interests of their party. As principals, depending on the situation, ministers and party leaders may or may not try to shield their agent, the CPA, from the other principal’s influence. Moreover, ministers may or may not expect CPAs to perform regular political appointees’ tasks, such as running ministerial sub-departments. The theoretical discussion demonstrated that these are empirical questions, depending on the system, type of cabinet, and personal relationships, and the literature review showed that these questions so far have not been answered.

This study shows that CPAs do indeed ‘spy’ on their ministers on behalf of their party. By monitoring their ministers and reporting back to their parties, CPAs contribute to what Scharpf (1994) calls ‘negative coordination’ in executive government. This article adds depth to the understanding of how such monitoring takes place. Moreover, we have argued theoretically and shown empirically that monitoring is just one of two functions CPAs are particularly well positioned and qualified to perform; the other is to give cross-partisan advice to their ministers. When they perform both functions, as most CPAs manage to do in

this research setting, they effectively serve two principals simultaneously: their minister and their party. Therefore, we argue, it is more suitable to consider CPAs as ‘liaison officers’ than as watchdogs. Location, meaning ministerial affiliation, appears to influence what CPAs do, though. In this research setting, for example, CPAs in the PMO put greater emphasis on monitoring and less emphasis on advising their ministers than did CPAs in line ministries.

Despite having different party affiliations from those of CPAs, ministers make extensive use of CPAs in coordinating policymaking within the cabinet, and in coordinating between the ministry and the legislature. The empirical material strongly indicates that rather than seeing CPAs as a thorn in their side, as some have suggested (OECD, 2008, p. 10; Thies, 2001, p. 596), ministers consider CPAs to be useful resources for developing policies that have a good chance of passing both the cabinet and the legislature. Naturally, having a watered-down compromise passed is often preferable to having a proposal with a clear party profile rejected. Although not always: as Schermann and Ennser-Jedenastik (2014) show in their study on Austria, acting on partisan advice from CPAs can constrain the ‘effectiveness of ministers to deliver on the promises put forward by their party’ (p. 579).

Our findings indicate that CPAs influence policy outcomes beyond their contribution to negative coordination (Giannetti & Laver, 2005; Martin & Vanberg, 2014). They also influence policies by warning ministers about possible objections from their party and advising them about how to achieve successful policy proposals. Additionally, CPAs wield influence when they are delegated authority to oversee the bureaucracy’s policy implementation. These findings support Greene and Jensen’s (2016, p. 388) assumption that CPAs do more than just monitor ministers; otherwise (they ask), why would parties negotiate so actively for their appointment to specific portfolios?

Cross-party monitoring and advising are functions that CPAs are uniquely qualified to perform. They are therefore ‘different’, if not extraordinary, political appointees.

Nevertheless, they are also ordinary, since part or perhaps most of the time, they perform the functions of perfectly ordinary political appointees. Those who consider that providing an institutional check on ministers is the *raison d'être* for appointing CPAs might consider it an anomaly that CPAs 'go native' and identify themselves closely with the minister from an 'alien' political party. Müller and Meyer (2010, p. 1076), for example, maintain that such CPAs have degenerated from watchdogs into 'lapdogs'. Our results indicate that CPAs can perform both cross-partisan and regular political appointee tasks without degenerating in any way.

Political appointees can become captured by the permanent bureaucracy and, like civil servants, they can catch 'departmentalitis', that is, they can become too concerned with the objectives and interests of their ministry and can disregard those of the coalition as a whole (Kaufman, 1997, p. 10; Flinders, 2002, p. 66). CPAs may be particularly at risk, if they are 'isolated' in the political leadership and, in response, develop strong ties to civil servants in order to advance their own interests. In our data, however, there are no indications that CPAs have more frequent or deeper contacts with the permanent bureaucracy than do regular partisan appointees.

CPAs are generally well integrated in the ministerial political leadership team. Still, they are occasionally excluded because of their party affiliation. Although ministers rely on both groups of political appointees for a number of purposes, CPAs are somewhat less frequently called upon to, for example, front issues on the minister's behalf in the public arena, advise ministers on how to handle urgent media issues, and run ministerial sub-departments.

CONCLUSION

The results from this first systematic in-depth study of cross-partisans in the core executive speak directly to coalition government scholarship and to research on ministerial advisors. Regarding the latter, by focusing on CPAs, this study expands the set of roles commonly

attributed to political appointees by ministerial advisory scholarship (Askim et al., 2017; Connaughton, 2010, p. 352; Eichbaum & Shaw, 2011); it continues what Craft calls the process of updating the core executive ‘gospel’ to broaden the ‘initial membership’ (Craft, 2015, p. 64). From a core executive perspective, (Elgie, 2011; Shaw, 2015), CPAs can be useful political resources to help ministers achieve their goals. We have noted analytically interesting differences between CPAs in the PMO and CPAs in line ministries. Beyond that, this study does not use data with a sufficient number of observation and sufficient variance to explain how institutional characteristics affect what roles CPAs play. Future studies could explore how cross-partisan roles vary depending on, for example, whether they represent junior or senior coalition partners, the intensity of policy disagreements within the cabinet, and the former cabinet experience of coalition partners.

For coalition government scholarship, our findings imply that although its ‘oversight’ stream, in a sense, has been right all along, it is risky to theorise using the assumption that CPAs do nothing besides spy on behalf of their party. It could be argued that as long as CPAs *do* spy on their ministers, at least some of the time, it does not really matter what else they do, and that CPA deployment therefore is a reasonable proxy for coalition control behaviour. Still, theoretically, CPAs can be more than watchdogs, and in systems like the one studied here, CPAs *are* more than watchdogs. Rather than a constraint, they typically represent a political resource for their ministers. As the article’s title suggests, CPAs may well be spies, but that does not prevent them from loving, or at least showing loyalty to, their ministers too.

The article has studied CPAs in a single country, Norway, a country with both common and uncommon system characteristics. Two governments have been covered, one a majority coalition government and one a minority coalition government. The expectation that CPAs are most important for within-cabinet cross-partisan control in a majority government setting was not supported by the empirical results. Obviously, comparing two governments is not a

firm basis for concluding or generalising about the importance of majority/minority government. Other factors that may influence what CPAs do – for example, their number and ministerial location – also vary. Although the Stoltenberg II cabinet was considered fragile by the media, both coalitions exhibited relatively few large political differences and a high level of cross-partisan trust (Allern, 2010; Kolltveit, 2013b). Better understanding of the relationship between the role of CPAs and the legislature’s situational and systemic strength vis-à-vis the executive requires behavioural data from a greater number of cabinets, ideally across several countries. Still, this study suggests that one should not overestimate the influence that parliament’s situational strength has on the role that CPAs play in government.

Other aspects of this study may be stronger candidates for generalisation. It is possible, for example, that ministers’ giving CPAs access to their inner circle – as close advisors and as executives – is a virtue of necessity. The finding that CPAs often perform the same function as regular partisan appointees do may well be generalisable to the class of political systems where there are relatively few political appointees per minister. With few political appointees, ministers may simply need all of them, including cross-partisans, to contribute to leading the ministry. The theoretical framework developed in this article can guide future research into what CPAs do in executive government, including – referring to the proposed typology – whether and under what (systemic and situational) conditions CPAs are watchdogs, liaison officers, coalition advisors, and regular political appointees.

Finally, governments have been warned against appointing CPAs because they can create negative dynamics within ministries and cabinets (OECD, 2008). This warning derives from the assumption that CPAs are watchdogs and nothing else. In Norway, CPAs and their ministers have high levels of mutual trust, and CPAs, by acting as liaison officers, contribute to building a team spirit within the cabinet. It is an empirical question as to whether this dynamic is common in multiparty cabinets, an outlier observation, or is something common

only in a class of political systems, such as the Scandinavian systems, which are characterised by relatively small differences between political parties (Knutsen, 2017) and by a culture high in collegiality and willingness to reach compromise (Christensen, 2003; Lijphart, 1999). Any coalition government should have the incentive to build a team spirit and thereby avoid rather than repair policy drift, but the chances of achieving such team spirit might depend on political system characteristics.

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Appendix

[Table A.1 here]

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Four stylised roles of CPAs

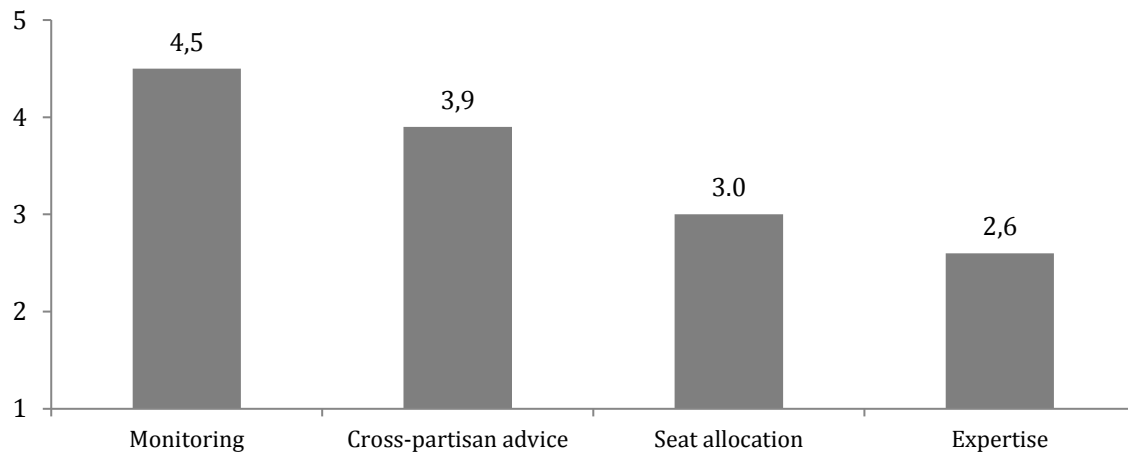
		Cross-partisan advice	
		No	Yes
Monitor	Yes	Watchdog	Liaison officer
	No	Regular political appointee	Coalition advisor

Table 2. Monitoring, giving cross-partisan advice, and performing regular state secretary tasks. Self-reported by CPAs. Frequency and mean on a scale from 1 to 5.

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	N
Monitoring	0	1	2	16	0	3.79	13
Cross-partisan advice	0	0	5	14	0	3.74	13
Traditional state secretary tasks	0	2	5	12	0	3.53	13

Question: When you were state secretary for a minister from another party, to what extent did you have the following tasks in the ministry? Follow issues in the ministry on behalf of their own party; Bring your own party's view to the minister; Relieve and advise the minister as other state secretaries did. Five-point scale (to a very large extent (5), to a large extent, to some extent, to a small extent, and not at all (1)).

Figure 1. Why CPAs are appointed, according to cabinet insiders. Means on a scale from 1 to 5.



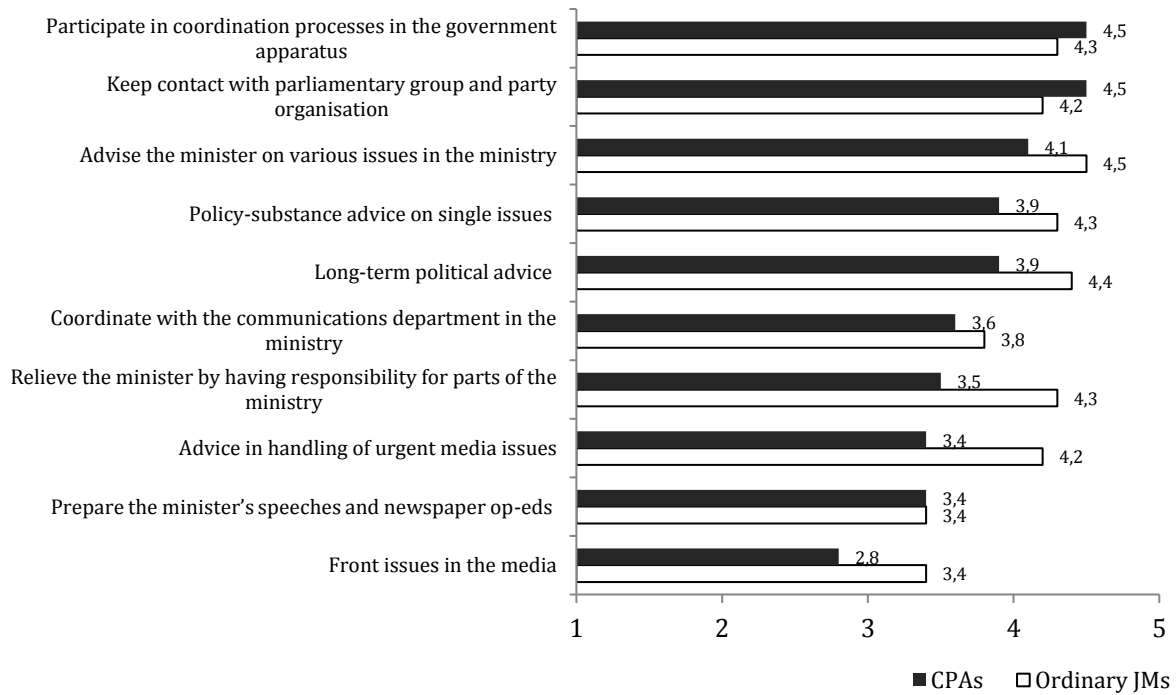
Question: In your view, how important are the following explanations for why ministries have political appointees from parties other than that of the cabinet minister? [Monitoring] It strengthens the coalition parties' ability to follow important issues in the ministries where they have no minister; [Cross-partisan advice] It strengthens the minister's ability to hear objections from the other coalition parties at an early stage; [Seat allocation] The position is part of the equation when allocating positions in coalition governments; and [Expertise] It adds expertise that is unavailable in the minister's own party. Five-point scale (not important at all (1), not so important, neither nor, quite important, and very important (5)).

Table 3. Contact patterns of CPAs compared to those of regular state secretaries. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5.

	Regular state secretaries	CPAs	Diff
Party leadership	3.5	4.2	0.7
Party youth branch	2.4	2.8	0.4
Party headquarters	3.5	3.8	0.3
Director general and deputy DGs	4.7	4.9	0.3
Parliamentary party group	4.0	4.2	0.3
Communication advisors	4.9	5.0	0.2
Political leadership in other ministries	4.2	4.5	0.2
Secretary general	4.8	4.9	0.1
Civil servants	4.5	4.5	0.1
Municipalities	3.9	4.0	0.1
Agencies	2.7	2.8	0.1
Political advisor	4.9	4.9	0.0
Minister	4.9	4.9	-0.1
N (smallest)	114	13	

Question: How often did you have contact with the following actors: seldom/never (1), a few times a year (2), monthly (3), weekly (4), or daily (5)?

Figure 2. A comparison of what cross-partisan and regular state secretaries do. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5.



Note: Respondents who have been both CPAs and regular state secretaries have been removed from the analysis. Question 1: To what extent did you have the following tasks and assignments? Five-point scale (not at all (1), to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, or to a very large extent (5)). Question 2: How important was it to give the following advice to your minister? Five-point scale (not important at all (1), less important, neither nor, quite important, or very important (5)).

Table 4. Consequences of cross-partisan affiliation. Frequency and mean.

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	N
My bringing in party stances contributed to clarifying party political disagreements at an early stage.	0	1	0	12	7	4.25	13
My party affiliation meant that I was excluded in certain contexts.	6	2	4	7	1	2.75	13

** Question: How well do the following statements match your own experience? Five-point scale (perfect match (5), quite good match, neither nor, quite poor match, or very poor match (1)).

Table A.1. Cross-partisan state secretaries in Norway by cabinet and ministry, 1983–2016

Cabinet	Coalition parties	Ministries
Willoch II, 1983–86 (majority)	Cons., Chr. Dem., Centre	Finance; Social Affairs
Syse, 1989–90 (minority)	Cons., Chr. Dem., Centre	Finance
Bondevik I, 1997–2000 (minority)	Chr. Dem., Centre, Liberal	PMO; Finance; Foreign Affairs; Justice
Bondevik II, 2001–05 (minority)	Chr. Dem., Cons., Centre	PMO; Finance
Stoltenberg II, 2005–13 (majority)	Soc. Dem., Soc. Left, Centre	PMO; Finance; Foreign Affairs; Petroleum and Energy; Trade and Industry; Health
Solberg, 2013– (minority)	Cons., Progressive	PMO; Finance; Foreign Affairs; Justice; Labour and Social Affairs; Local Government and Modernisation; Health; Culture; Transport and Communications

Sources: Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD); www.regjeringen.no