



Politics and Administration in Germany

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1 INTRODUCTION

The relationship between ‘politics’ and ‘administration’ in both practical and theoretical terms is one of the most controversial and, at the same time, often not well understood features of modern states. Especially the close institutional links between politics and administration in Germany, which have a long history, are internationally not well known.

In public administration literature, two ideal types of political-administrative relations are distinguished. On the one hand, there is the assumption of a basic ‘dichotomy’ between politics and administration, going back to the ground-breaking work of Woodrow Wilson (1887) and Max Weber ([2019] 1922) in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. They described politics and administration as two different spheres of public life, both governed by their own rationalities: while politics is concerned with power, legitimacy and the formulation of

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policies, administration stands for professionalism, legality and the implementation of policies. Although Wilson and Weber saw the bureaucracy as an ‘instrument’ of political power, both had severe doubts that professional bureaucracies could be controlled by amateur politicians. In this context, Weber stressed the dependency of politicians on bureaucrats because of two types of knowledge: *Fachwissen* (which is a bureaucrat’s superior professional expertise) and *Dienstwissen* (which is their procedural and institutional knowledge of the functioning of public administration). From this perspective, administrations become powerful for their own sake, eventually creating the ‘iron cage’ of modern bureaucracies. This understanding has been taken up by modern economic principal–agency theories. Here, too, the principals—the politicians—have great problems controlling what their agents—the bureaucracies—are doing, so the relationship becomes one of permanent distrust and power and blame games.

On the other hand, there is a less theoretical, more empirical understanding of the relationship, which argues that there is and can be no clear distinction between politics and administration, fundamentally questioning the ‘instrumentalist’ concept. This argument has been at the core of social science-oriented public administration and policy studies, first in the United States, but also after the Second World War in Western Europe (for Germany, e.g. Mayntz and Scharpf 1975). A seminal international study of ministerial bureaucracies—the Comparative Elite Study (CES) (Aberbach et al. (1981)—showed that in all Western countries the image of the ‘classical bureaucrat’ as an apolitical instrument in the hands of his masters does not reflect the real relationship between politics and administrations and that most modern civil servants in the ministerial bureaucracy see themselves as ‘political administrators’ instead. They acknowledge, and most of them generally appreciate, the political aspects of their profession. Public administration scholars call this phenomenon ‘functional politicisation’ (Mayntz and Derlien 1989).

In practical and normative terms, the first ideal type—the ‘instrumentalist’ concept with its emphasis on a neutral and apolitical civil service—resembles the so-called Westminster model known from the (former) Commonwealth or the Scandinavian countries (where principal–agent problems play an important role in political and theoretical discussions). Simple, and many would argue naïve, models of New Public Management (NPM) tried to establish this concept as a baseline for public sector reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that politics should only

be concerned with the ‘what’ of public policies, while the ‘how’ should be left to administration.

The second ideal type, which assumes that there is no clear and simple distinction between politics and administration, is usually represented by the US system with its large number of political appointees (Lewis 2012), but also, in a much less open way, by many South and East-European countries (Meyer Sahling 2008). In these countries, governments may often pay lip service to the neutral and apolitical civil servant, while replacing large numbers of them after elections or for other political reasons.

Germany falls somewhere between these two ideal types. The traditional view holds that the civil service is above politics and in the old Hegelian-inspired state theories, which were prominent and dominant at least until the first half of the twentieth century, only the civil service could guarantee the common good, if necessary, even against politicians, interest groups and parties merely representing special interests. This ideology of the apolitical, neutral civil servant only interested in the common good was brutally discredited in the Nazi period (1933–1945). Already in the late Weimar republic, many top civil servants were decisively anti-democratic, supported right-wing parties and ideas, and later played an important role in the rise and crimes of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party (NSDAP) (Jann 2003). Many indeed joined the NSDAP after Germany became a one-party state in 1933.¹ In 1930, a famous liberal constitutional lawyer, Gustav Radbruch, had already characterised the apolitical civil servant as the ‘living lie of the authoritarian state’ (*Lebenslüge des Obrigkeitsstaates*). But even before these devastating experiences, a simple distinction between politics and administration has never been a defining feature of the German political and administrative system. The German system had early on developed some quite unique institutional features to create linkages between the two spheres, for example the concepts of the ‘political civil servant’ (*politischer Beamter*) at the ministerial level and the ‘elected civil servant’ (*Wahlbeamter*) at the local level.

Our aim in this chapter is to look at the relationships between politicians and administrators in Germany in institutional and legal terms, but especially also in its empirical manifestations at the federal, state and local level. We start with a simple, actor-oriented distinction between politicians and civil servants. The first are elected for a limited period of time (and may be removed if they lose support), while the second are appointed, usually for a (lifelong) career. Politicians are dependent on political support, while civil servants are not, at least in theory. But how true are these

distinctions in practice? In order to discuss these questions, we use the concept of politicisation as an analytical lens. Two core dimensions of politicisation are distinguished. The first dimension is functional politicisation (whether and how both politicians and bureaucrats are engaged in different kinds of policymaking tasks). The second dimension is party politicisation (whether and how does party political attachment play a role for administrative careers). Empirically, we will look at party membership (the most straightforward measure of party politicisation) and turnover rates after elections as well as the relevance of ‘political craft’ for administrative careers.

The following sections are structured as follows. We start with a description of political-administrative relations at federal level, thereby focussing on both dimensions of politicisation and on typical career patterns in federal ministries. Subsequently, a similar overview is given for the *Länder* level. Afterwards, the main characteristics of political-administrative relations at local level are examined. The chapter ends with concluding remarks and lessons for transfer.

2 POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN FEDERAL MINISTRIES

In the German federal system, the *Länder* and their local governments are responsible for the implementation of most laws, while the federal level dominates the law-making process and policymaking (see chapters Fleischer; Schraper; Kuhlmann/Veit). This deep involvement of federal ministerial officials in policymaking is reflected in a special legal construct, the so-called political civil servant (*politische Beamte*). According to Section 54 of the Federal Civil Service Act (*Bundesbeamtengesetz*), civil servants in the two highest ranks in the federal ministerial hierarchy—administrative state secretaries (*beamtete Staatssekretäre*, who are the official administrative heads of ministries) and directors-general (*Ministerialdirektoren*, who are the heads of directorates)—are political civil servants. They traditionally have a background in the career civil service, but serve at the request of their ministers and can be sent into retirement at any time and without any given reason, while they keep their earned pension rights and can be recalled at any time. The basic idea is that ministers should be able to choose their most important officials and advisors from civil servants they trust and if this trust—for whatever reason—no longer holds, replace them.

The institution of ‘political civil servant’ and the ‘political retirement’ tradition in Germany date back to the middle of the nineteenth century. During this period, the ‘lifetime principle’ for civil servants was introduced in Prussia. This meant that civil servants could no longer be dismissed unless they committed a civil offence. This raised the question of how to constrain the power of civil servants and especially how to secure a distinct degree of harmony between the monarch and top civil servants. Therefore, in 1849 in Prussia (when quite a few civil servants had shown sympathies with the failed 1848 revolution), a new ordinance was introduced that, for the first time, enumerated the leading positions within state administration. It stated that civil servants in these positions could be temporarily retired by the king at any time. In the following decades, the position of a ‘political civil servant’ was introduced in many German *Länder* and from 1871 onwards at national level.

Administrative state secretaries are not to be confused with parliamentary state secretaries who are elected members of the *Bundestag* and support the minister in maintaining good relations between the ministry and the parliament. When the institution of parliamentary state secretaries was first introduced in 1967, the minister was given a great deal of leeway over which tasks to delegate to the parliamentary state secretary. The influence parliamentary state secretaries exert on the internal affairs of the ministry is considered not very strong compared to that of the administrative state secretary.

Besides the federal chancellor, there are currently 15 federal ministers and 35 parliamentary state secretaries, so all in all 50 executive politicians in the federal government, and about 125 political civil servants (25 administrative state secretaries and about 100 directors-general, all in all far less than one per cent of all higher civil servants at the federal level). All other civil servants in federal ministries, that is heads of sub-directorates, heads of divisions (*Referatsleiter*) and all lower ranks are career civil servants in tenure positions. This does not mean, however, that they do not fulfil politicised functions or have no party affiliation.

Germany was one of the country cases explored in the CES study by Aberbach et al. (1981). This study revealed that senior officials in federal ministries—not only political civil servants but also civil servants in lower ranks—are, even more so than in other Western democracies, deeply involved in the process of policymaking. They not only develop draft laws and draft policies but also play a prominent role in intra-governmental coordination as well as negotiation and coordination with other levels of

government and external actors, such as interest groups (see also Mayntz and Scharpf 1975). A replication of CES in the second half of the 1980s (Mayntz and Derlien 1989) as well as more recent studies (Ebinger et al. 2018; Ebinger et al. 2019) confirm these findings and underline that most senior officials in federal ministries not only appreciate the political side of their job but also anticipate political considerations when fulfilling their tasks. Thus, the main focus of the federal level on policymaking is reflected in a high degree of functional politicisation among civil servants in federal ministries. Functional politicisation is higher in ministries than in federal agencies, and higher for top positions than for lower hierarchical ranks (Ebinger et al. 2018).

The concept of functional politicisation is closely related to the concept of ‘political craft’, which was developed by Klaus Goetz (1997) based on empirical work on the federal ministerial bureaucracy in Germany. He defines political craft as ‘the ability to assess the likely political implications and ramifications of policy proposals; to consider a specific issue within the broader context of the government’s programme; to anticipate and, where necessary, influence or even manipulate the reactions of other actors in the policymaking process (...); and to design processes that maximise the chances for the realisation of ministers’ substantive objectives. To do all this, senior officials need to be able to draw on personal networks of information and communication that extend beyond their own ministry (...)’ (Goetz 1997: 754). Thus, political craft means not only having the ability to act in a functional politicised manner, but also having the willingness and ability to play an active part in the political process by drawing on political networks.

Empirical studies examining the career background of political civil servants in federal ministries have repeatedly shown that many of them gain professional experience in civil service positions close to politics, such as personal assistant to a minister or head of the ministers’ office, in the federal chancellery or as party staff in parliament while being on leave from their position in the ministry (Schröter 2004; Veit and Scholz 2016) earlier in their career. All these positions are not only suitable for acquiring ‘political craft’ during a career in the civil service, they can also reflect a civil servant’s political attachment. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that many higher-ranking civil servants in Germany are party members.

One important and defining feature of the German system is that all civil servants, from the lowest to the highest level, can be members of political parties, and very often are. Allowing party membership (even for

soldiers) is one of the many lessons the ‘founding fathers’ of the Federal Republic drew from the experiences of the downfall of the Weimar Republic and the rise and success of Nazi Germany. As a result, Germans prefer their civil servants to declare their political standing and not hide behind a false veil of political disinterest. This does not mean that all civil servants are members of a political party, but that being a member is a legitimate and respectable expression of one’s political views (Jann and Veit 2015). In practice, the political activities of civil servants are far less restrained than in many other countries. Highly visible activities for left or right-wing radical parties are, however, forbidden.

Promotion to the top positions in federal ministries depends both on professional competence and on party political attachment and loyalty (Bach and Veit 2018). Political civil servants are mostly, but not necessarily, members of the same political party as the minister (Fleischer 2016) and most of them are replaced after a change in government (Ebinger et al. 2018). The share of party members and civil servants with clear party-political loyalties among top civil servants is high, even among ‘non-political’ heads of sub-directorates and divisions (Bach and Veit 2018; Ebinger et al. 2018). All this points to the relevance of political patronage and there can be no doubt that party membership is relevant for top administrative careers in the German civil service. But while top civil servants may depend on political support for their careers, this relationship cuts both ways. Ministers are just as much, or perhaps even more, dependent on the support, the loyalty and especially the professionalism and expertise of top civil servants.

Despite the particular relevance of ‘political craft’, the careers of executive politicians and ‘political civil servants’ in federal ministries have traditionally been clearly separated: top civil servants do not usually come from a career in parliament or as a minister and ministers do not usually come from the top civil service (Derlien 2003), even though there have recently been some well-known exceptions. Civil service careers in federal ministries—similar to other parts of public administration in Germany—are characterised by a low inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral mobility, that is in most cases, ministerial civil servants spend their whole career within the jurisdiction of one ministry—the only exception being the secondments to the chancellery or the federal parliament mentioned earlier. Despite the high degree of continuity in civil service careers in federal ministries, some changes have been observed over the decades. First, the typical ‘pure civil service career’ where an individual enters the civil service directly after

graduation and remains there until retirement is no longer the norm. The latest figures show that less than one-fifth of the administrative state secretaries belong to this group. All others have work experience outside public administration, often in academia, in the judiciary, or in some kind of political function (Veit and Scholz 2016). Among the directors-general, ‘pure civil service careers’ are more common, but here mixed careers have also been growing in importance in recent years. Second, the former ‘monopoly of jurists’ in the federal senior civil service has converted into a mere dominance: over the years, the proportion of jurists among senior civil servants has gradually declined. While in 1954 more than three-quarters of the administrative top positions in Bonn were held by jurists, this decreased to about 50 per cent in the 2000s (Veit and Scholz 2016).

In sum, political-administrative relations in federal ministries in Germany are characterised by close collaboration in policymaking and a high degree of functional and party politicisation of top bureaucrats on the one hand, and clearly differentiated career patterns of politicians and bureaucrats on the other. However, the growing importance of ministerial officials having professional experience in the political sector indicate some changes. Surprisingly, these changes are more rapid at the *Länder* level as will be shown in the next section.

3 POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN *LÄNDER* MINISTRIES

More than half of all public employees in Germany work in one of the 16 *Länder*, but only a very small number of them in ministries. *Länder* ministries resemble federal ministries in many respects (similar institutional framework, similar structure, etc.) but differ with regard to their task portfolio as the law-making competency of the *Länder* is restricted to a limited number of policy fields, most importantly education and police (see chapter Schrapper). The involvement of *Länder* ministerial officials in policymaking varies considerably across ministries and implementation and oversight responsibilities are usually more important than policymaking.

The number of ‘political civil servants’ in the *Länder* is therefore smaller than at federal level. The number of *Länder* ministries (besides the state chancellery) varies between 7 and 12. Each *Land* ministry is headed by a minister. In most *Länder*, there are no parliamentary state secretaries. In all *Länder* except Bavaria, the highest-ranking civil servant in each ministry (the administrative state secretary) is a ‘political civil servant’ who—like his counterpart at federal level—can be sent into temporary retirement

on the minister's behalf. Heads of directorates in *Länder* ministries and all lower-ranking officials are career officials in tenure positions, even though heads of the police force (*Polizeipräsident*) and regional administrations (*Regierungspräsident*) are also often political civil servants. All in all, the number of political civil servants does not exceed 20, even in the largest *Länder*.

As at federal level, administrative state secretaries in *Länder* ministries are usually recruited from the civil service: out of all the administrative state secretaries appointed between 2000 and 2018, 85 per cent had at least one year's work experience in the civil service and roughly half of them had more than ten years of civil service experience at the time of their appointment.² However, mixed careers, that is careers in different sectors, especially between administration and politics (members of parliament becoming permanent secretaries, civil servants becoming ministers), are more common than at the federal level. Similar to the federal level, there is a high proportion of jurists and women are under-represented in top administrative and political positions in the German *Länder*. The under-representation of women in administrative offices is, however, much more pronounced as discussions on issues relating to representativeness are less intense when it comes to public administration.

Thirty years after the demise of the German Democratic Republic and reunification in 1990, considerable differences still remain between East and West Germany. After German unification, the implementation of democratic political institutions and, in particular, the establishment of a functioning public administration after the West German model, was supported by a wide-ranging recruitment of West German civil servants to leadership positions in the East German *Länder* (and local) administrations (see chapter Wollmann). Our data analysis reveals that in the East German *Länder* of Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony and Thuringia, the proportion of administrative state secretaries who were born in Germany is still rather low, ranging from under 20 per cent (Saxony) to more than 30 per cent (e.g. Brandenburg). Thus, most administrative state secretaries still come from the western part of Germany. This differs greatly from the *Länder* ministers, where the proportion of East Germans is much higher.

With regard to politicisation in *Länder* ministries, five empirical findings are particularly striking. First, the proportion of party members is high (similar to the federal level). Second, administrative state secretaries have very often acquired professional experience in the world of politics (be it

as an elected politician, party professional or civil servant with experience in offices close to politics, such as personal assistant to a minister) at earlier stages in their careers. More than two-thirds of all administrative state secretaries have this kind of experience. On the other hand, many ministers (about one-third) have professional experience in the public sector. This indicates that political and administrative careers in the German *Länder* are not as strictly separated as at federal level. Third, and again different from the federal level, almost every fifth political civil servant (18 per cent) was a full-time professional politician (member of parliament) before being appointed as a political civil servant. This, again, reflects the higher hybridisation of administrative and political careers at *Länder* level. Fourth, political experience at local level (as elected mayor or council) is widespread but decreasing over time. Whereas at the beginning of the 2000s, 38 per cent of the administrative state secretaries in the German *Länder* had such a background, this percentage decreased to less than 25 per cent between 2015 and 2018. Fifth, the importance of having relevant experience as a party professional or in civil service offices close to politics has increased considerably over time. This resembles developments at the federal level and presumably reflects the increasing importance of ‘political craft’ for administrative top positions at both levels of government.

4 POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

At the local level, there are two competing understandings about the relationship between politics and administration. Traditionally, local government in Germany is not legally defined as politics, but ever since the famous Stein-Hardenberg reforms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as local self-administration (*lokale Selbstverwaltung*). Taking this view, local government is essentially apolitical. Politics does not and should not play an important role (‘there are no conservative street lights or social-democratic public conveniences’) and the elected councils at local level, by legal definition, are not local parliaments but part of the administration. The same holds true for elected mayors, heads of counties (*Landräte*) and other local politicians. Mayors and heads of counties as ‘elected civil servants’ (*Wahlbeamte*) are both part and head of the local administration.

Local government is in the German constitutional tradition and doctrine part of the *Länder* administration (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019: 92ff.) and due to the autonomy of the *Länder* in determining their

organisational structure, there is a large and sometimes confusing organisational variance between them. This overall variance has been somewhat reduced since the 1990s in all of the *Länder* when the direct election of mayors (and in most of them county heads too) became the norm. Even though they are ‘elected civil servants’, as directly elected politicians they have a strong direct legitimacy, actually much stronger than other executive politicians in Germany. They are elected for a term of five to ten years,³ but they can be removed by different forms of recall, usually through a combination of direct democratic and representative procedures. As Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019: 95) point out, ‘it is worth noting that the local executive is acting as a politically accountable local politician rather than as ‘agent of the state’, even in the conduct of delegated business’, that is in those areas where they act as direct representatives of state and federal government and can be instructed by higher levels.

Those who hold the second view have therefore argued for quite some time that local self-administration is in reality highly politicised, that party politics plays an ever more important role, both for elected mayors and especially for councils at all levels, which for all practical concerns act just like local parliaments. This goes along with the normative argument that local government should align itself to competitive party democracy in order to ensure transparency and control of hitherto opaque administrative decision-making and to enable political participation. Again, the basic assumption is that there is no apolitical administration.

At the local level, the empirical reality is more complex, but it shows many interconnections and networks between politics and administration, probably even more so than at the state or federal level. The new reality has been described as self-government instead of self-administration (for more details see Bogumil and Holtkamp 2013).

While there is a wide consensus that local administrations in Germany have become much more politicised in recent years, there are, at the same time, a number of important distinctions between the different forms of politicisation, which have to do with, among others, size, institutional settings and the traditions of local government in different parts of Germany. In larger municipalities, especially in the more industrialised parts of Germany (like North Rhine-Westphalia) party politicisation of councils and of mayoral elections have become the norm. Careers in politics are made, first of all, through political parties, councils are organised between opposition and governing factions, and many decisions are made along

party lines. In more rural, smaller municipalities, especially in the southern part of Germany (like Baden-Württemberg), local careers are usually much less determined by parties; there are more members of councils, mayors and heads of counties who do not belong to a party, and decision-making at local level is more consensual. If you compare all the German *Länder*, more are on the consensus side, especially in East Germany. All in all, the relevance of political parties thus may decrease, while executive leadership (by elected civil servants) and consensual decision-making are gaining ground. At the same time, elements of direct democracy and citizen participation at the local level have been strengthened in all German *Länder* and, moreover, are much more widely used (even in the form of more recalls of mayors) than before.

Furthermore, there is a second, quite often overlooked, element that creates a close relationship between elections, political parties, councils and administrations, which is the institution of the so-called *Beigeordnete* (adjunct mayors or adjunct head of counties). Here, too, these vary confusingly from *Land* to *Land* but, in general, these positions are obligatory in all larger municipalities and counties. *Beigeordnete* are elected by the local council for a fixed term of up to eight years and are the responsible heads of larger sections of local administrations like ministers in state and federal governments (one of them is usually the *Kämmerer*, the chief financial officer in local government). They are usually full-time employees (unless they work in small municipalities) and, like mayors and heads of counties, 'elected civil servants'. An interesting feature is that they are not elected on the lines of 'government and opposition' but mostly by proportional representation. Thus, all major parties and other groups in local councils are represented in proportion to their strength in the political leadership of local administrations. In some *Länder*, this proportional electoral system is even mandated in the legal rules for local government (i.e. in Baden-Württemberg and Saxony), but even if not required, it is widely used nearly everywhere.

When looking at these close interactions between politics and administration in Germany, it is not surprising that the simple New Public Management mantra of a clear division between politics and administration never really caught on in German local governments. It was not only the legal definition that local councils are part of local administrations which prevented this simple division of labour, but also the traditional understanding of all elected local 'politicians' that they are, of course, responsible for all elements of local administration, especially for the

implementation of policies, not only for ‘strategic goals and objectives’, and that, at the same time, administrators obviously fulfil political functions. Therefore, in all empirical evaluations of NPM reforms in Germany, the ‘clear division of politics and administration’ is the element which, by far, is implemented the least (Kuhlmann et al. 2008: 855).

5 LESSONS LEARNED

A clear distinction or even dichotomy between politics and administration has never been and is not a defining characteristic of the German political-administrative system. Instead, at the federal, state and local level we observe many close interrelations and interactions between elected politicians and appointed civil servants. Civil servants in Germany are used to and generally appreciate the functional politicisation of their jobs, that is their close involvement in all stages of the policy process, from policy formation, goal definition, negotiation within and outside government, and the interaction with citizens and interest groups in the implementation of policies. Obtaining ‘political craft’ has therefore become an important part of the learning and job experience of top civil servants. At the same time, political parties play an important role in German public administrations because all civil servants have the right to join a political party and many of them actually practice this right. For many civil servants—but certainly not for all—their political affiliation is well known within their administration. This political orientation does not impede their role as civil servants, indeed their loyalty to serve all democratically elected leaders is taken for granted and civil servants are expected to exercise some restraint when engaging in their political activities.

While at the federal level the careers of politicians and civil servants are still quite separate, that is very few top administrators become politicians and even fewer politicians end up as civil servants, this is gradually changing at the *Länder* level. Here we observe a growing number of ‘hybrid’ careers, that is people originally working outside the civil service, for example for political parties or in parliament, are appointed to higher civil servant positions and may even end up later in their careers as ministers. At the local level, there is historically an even closer relationship between politics and administration. By legal definition, even local councils are part of the administration, but the close interaction is especially guaranteed by ‘elected civil servants’ (*Wahlbeamte*), that is mayors and adjunct mayors, who belong both to the sphere of politics and administration.

Both at the federal and *Länder* level, the institution of ‘political civil servants’ plays an important role. While Prussian public administration has been the empirical inspiration for the Weberian ideal-type of merit bureaucracy, the political importance of top civil servants has, nevertheless, been acknowledged since the middle of the nineteenth century. When the position of civil servants was strengthened by the introduction of lifelong tenure, the understanding grew that trust between rulers and their top administrators is necessary for government and that rulers, therefore, should be able to choose their top civil servants and, if necessary, retire them. Thus, the institution of the ‘political civil servant’ was invented.

For German ministers at federal and *Länder* level, this means that they are free to choose the top officials in the ministry they lead and can send them into retirement at any time if, for any reason, they no longer enjoy their unlimited trust. Political civil servants, therefore, act as linkages between the professional bureaucracy and the political leadership, helping to create mutual understanding and trust as well as helping to soften misunderstandings and suspicion between both spheres. The typical blame games between politicians and civil servants, or even ‘a government of strangers’, are therefore rather unusual in Germany. The relationship between politics and administration and between elected politicians and appointed civil servants is also in Germany never without its tensions and conflicts, but all in all the politicised civil service, both in functional and political terms, seems to have led to fewer conflicts, misunderstandings and blame games than in other democratic countries. Top civil servants in Germany need both professional expertise and political craft, they do not pretend to be apolitical and neutral, and the German public usually knows where their top officials come from and what they stand for.

The German institutions and experiences cannot be easily transferred to other political systems. The institutional setting in Germany depends not only on a highly regulated legal system but even more so on a large number of informal rules, which define appropriate behaviour and have been developed and adapted over a long time. Nevertheless, the main idea is relevant for other countries and cultures: a neutral and apolitical civil service should not be taken as given and the political role of civil servants should be accepted, made transparent and not be hidden behind unrealistic assumptions and false pretensions.

NOTES

1. By 1934, two-thirds of all top civil servants in German ministries were members of the NSDAP; the share increased to more than 90 per cent in 1939 and later, own data.
2. All numbers presented in this section stem from an analysis of all administrative state secretary appointments in the German *Länder* (except Bavaria) between 2000 and 2018 (N = 1119) that was conducted with a research grant by the Thyssen Foundation as part of the research project ‘Government Constellations and the Politicisation of Bureaucracy’. Data collection is based on biographical data derived from different public sources such as ministry and personal websites, media coverage and parliamentary documents.
3. Term of office differs across the *Länder*.

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