

Master Thesis:

Merit or politicization in the Dutch top civil service? Neutral and responsive competencies of Dutch Secretaries-General appointed in the period 1994-2020

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Date: **January 8th, 2021**



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Preface

This thesis is written as a part of the Master Public Administration at Leiden University. The topic of this thesis concerns the Dutch secretaries-general. A secretary-general is the highest-ranking civil servant position in the Netherlands and the secretary-general leads the ministry alongside with the minister. In that regard, the topic is very much in line with my two earlier theses written at Leiden University.

My Bachelor thesis, part of the Bachelor Public Administration, was focused on the political assistants of Dutch ministers, and I examined if they politicize the national bureaucracy.

After that, I wrote my Master thesis for the Master Management of the Public Sector. I focused on the junior ministers in the Netherlands, and examined their professional backgrounds and their roles within the government.

In this thesis, I examine the competencies and backgrounds of the secretaries-general, as well as the extent of politicization of their appointments. By doing so, this thesis brings together parts of my earlier theses and contributes to ‘get to know’ those with the most powerful positions in the Dutch ministries. Together, the theses cover three of the most important persons around the Dutch ministers: their political assistants, their junior ministers, and the highest-ranking civil servants in their ministry. In that regard, it is also a fitting closure of my study years at Leiden University.

I enjoyed writing this thesis. I hope you enjoy reading it.

Felix van der Velde,

January 8th, 2021

Abstract

Objectives: Top civil servants have an important position within governments. They need to be competent in their jobs, and balance between neutrality and responsiveness. While theoretical arguments about the need for certain merit-based competencies (managerial skills, policy expertise and political craft) are substantial, empirical data about the actual possession of these competencies is lacking. Furthermore, knowledge about the role of political ideology on appointment criteria, and the extent of the politicization of the civil service, is limited. The merit-based competencies and political criteria that are desired of top civil servants are, therefore, the focus of this study. This thesis aims to gain a better understanding of the extent of politicization in the appointments of top civil servants, as well as to describe the merit-based competencies that are desired from top civil servants. Theoretical arguments will be applied to the case of the Dutch secretaries-general, the highest-ranking civil servants in the Netherlands. The following question is central in this thesis. *“Which competencies did Dutch secretaries-general possess in the period 1994-2020, and how did party-political considerations play a role in the appointment of these secretaries-general?”*

Methods: This thesis uses quantitative methods to answer the research question. Through a descriptive statistical analysis, the competencies of the secretaries-general are identified. In addition, through logistic regression analysis, hypotheses concerning the role of ideology in appointments are tested.

Results: In terms of competencies, almost all secretaries-general (94%) have managerial skills, followed by professional policy expertise (65%) and, to a lesser extent, political craft (25%). However, based on this research, there is no evidence that party-political considerations play a substantial role in the appointments of secretaries-general. Merit-based competencies are central, and the political influence of ministers in the appointment process seems to be small at best.

Keywords: neutral & responsive competencies, politicization, top civil service, political ideology, secretaries-general, logistic regression

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Political-administrative relations are an important topic within public administration (Goetz, 1997) and the relation between top civil servants and their political superiors is important and delicate. Top civil servants have a crucial position in governments and are “indispensable” for their ministers (Christensen, Klemmensen & Ostrup, 2014 p. 217). Top civil servants can thus have much influence, but unlike politicians, they are not very known among the general public. However, as Peters (2016, p. 82) notes, civil servants bring values and operating routines into the policy process that are formed because of their academic backgrounds and work experience. Therefore, it is important to understand how governments select civil servants and to know “who within the societies seek to work for government” (Peters, 2016, p. 82). Indeed, the selection of top civil servants is “essential” (Christensen et al., 2014, p. 217). An important challenge when selecting top civil servants, is the need to balance between neutral, merit-based competencies, such as technical and managerial expertise, and political responsiveness, e.g., political affiliation and political sensitivity (Christensen et al., 2014; Peters, 2016, p. 83; Krause & O’Connell, 2019, p. 528). The classic Weberian view of a pure merit-based civil service does not always meet the practice. As Hustedt & Salomonsen argue, “Max Weber’s clear distinction between civil servants and politicians is more of a myth than empirical reality in the bureaucracies of Western democracies” (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 747). In addition, Ebinger, Veit & Fromm (2019) state that, especially for top-level civil servants, the “clear legal line between politics and administration” is in practice rather a “blurred area” (Ebinger et al., 2019, p. 862).

According to Van der Meer (in Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 216) there is much speculation ongoing whether and to what extent party-political considerations influence the appointment of top civil service positions in the Netherlands. On the one hand, legal guarantees in the recruitment process lead to an emphasis on merit-based competencies. However, on the other hand, it is an “open secret” that the appointment procedure leaves “ample scope” for political criteria in the appointment process (Van der Meer, in Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 216). Furthermore, the tenure of these top civil servants has become shorter over the years, with a growing turnover rate (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016, p. 467). This gives political executives more chances to interfere with appointments: “opportunities for political appointments come around more often” (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016, p. 467). Therefore, it is interesting to examine if these chances are utilized. Hence, this thesis will focus on the appointments of top civil servants. In particular, this thesis focusses on two related subjects concerning appointments. Firstly, the merit-based appointment-criteria in terms of neutral competencies, such as management skills, that are needed to have an effective top civil service. Secondly, the party-political considerations that play a role in appointments, such as a desired party affiliation, which are desired for a responsive top civil service. By doing so, this thesis will shed light on the phenomenon of the mostly ‘unknown’ top civil servants, especially on the highest-ranking Dutch top civil servants, the secretaries-general of the Dutch ministries.

1.1 Research goal

This thesis has two main goals. The first goal is to gain a better understanding of the desired competencies of civil servants and the extent of politicization in the appointments of the secretaries-general through a theoretical lens. By testing hypotheses derived from theory, the theoretical arguments in the academic literature can be improved, which contributes to the broader public administration literature. The second goal is to provide descriptive information on the demographic, professional and political backgrounds of all the Dutch secretaries-general in recent history (1994-2020). This will put a spotlight on the powerful but mostly unknown and ‘invisible’ highest-ranking civil servants in Dutch government.

1.2 Research question

Based on the research goal set out above, the research question that will be answered in this thesis is formulated as follows. *“Which competencies did Dutch secretaries-general possess in the period 1994-2020, and how did party-political considerations play a role in the appointment of these secretaries-general?”*

To answer this research question, biographical data of all the Dutch secretaries-general that were appointed since 1994 will be collected. Based on theoretical arguments, hypotheses concerning the role of party-political considerations in the appointment process are set out, which will be tested by regression analyses. Furthermore, descriptive statistics are applied to shed light on the competencies of these secretaries-general.

1.3 Scientific relevance

Although a considerable amount of articles is published about top civil servants and political-administrative relations, relatively few articles have focused on the backgrounds of top civil servants in terms of their competencies and expertise -whether this expertise is technical, political or managerial. As Bach & Veit (2018) notice, earlier scholarship on the selection and appointment of top civil servants in parliamentary democracies only paid “scant attention” to professional competencies of top civil servants (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259). While earlier research provided insights in the role of partisan loyalty in appointments of top civil servants, this research paid “only limited attention to other criteria” for the selection and appointment of top civil servants (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 255). Therefore, the empirical knowledge concerning the “complex criteria” ministers use in the selection of their top civil servants is still “very limited for parliamentary systems” (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 255). It is therefore important to describe the competencies and expertise that the Dutch secretaries-general possess. This will increase the empirical knowledge about the competencies of top civil servants.

In addition, according to Bach, Hammerschmid & Löffler (2020), the politicization of appointments has increased in countries with a meritocratic tradition. However, they note that the systematic evidence about the scope of politicization is small (Bach et al., 2020, p. 4). As Boyne, James, John & Petrovsky (2009) acknowledge, only “little systematic, empirical research” has focused on the role that party politics play on the turnover of top civil servants in

“supposedly politically neutral systems of administration” (Boyne et al., 2009, p. 136). Additionally, there is academic disagreement on the question whether left-wing or right-wing governments are “equally inclined” to politicize top civil servant appointments (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 892). The empirical research on the political criteria in the appointment process is thus still limited, especially in parliamentary systems (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 896). In short, there is a considerable research gap that needs to be addressed. As Peters & Pierre (2004, p. 11) note, scholars focused on politicization have the “empirical challenge” of identifying the kind and degree of political interference within the civil service. This thesis takes that challenge, by testing theoretically-driven hypotheses about political appointment criteria, based on a minister’s ideological position on the left-right spectrum.

Concerning Dutch top civil servants specifically, there is also an empirical gap, and more empirical data about the competencies and political criteria of the highest-ranking Dutch top civil servants is therefore desirable. A quantitative design seems very plausible to acquire these data, since hard empirical data are lacking and earlier research into the Dutch case was mainly qualitative or descriptive, with the exception of Ennsner-Jedenastik (2016).

Furthermore, this thesis will help to gain more insights into the Public Service Bargains framework, developed by Hood & Lodge (2006), specifically on the Dutch Public Service Bargain (PSB). PSBs can be described as the implicit and explicit agreements between politicians and civil servants (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 210). These agreements concern rewards, competencies, loyalty and responsibility (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011; De Visscher et al., 2011). However, there is a great variation on the exact competencies and qualities civil servants possess and the degree of loyalty that is expected from them (Christensen & Yesilkagit, 2019, p. 953). This thesis is mainly focused on competencies and political loyalty, and will therefore provide better insights into the Dutch PSBs. The PSB-framework has been applied on the Dutch top civil service system before. For example, Steen & Van der Meer (2011) described the PSBs for Dutch secretaries-general. However, this thesis will include more recent data, will delve deeper into the PSB aspects of competencies and loyalty and will be partly explanatory instead of purely descriptive, thereby expanding the existing knowledge.

1.4 Societal relevance

This thesis is relevant for society for three main reasons. Firstly, a societal debate about top civil servants is ongoing, sparked by (recent) criticism and concerns about both the quality of the competencies of top civil servants and the alleged politicization concerning top civil servants. Secondly, there is a lack of visibility of top civil servants. Lastly, this thesis may lead to the improvement of public administration.

According to some experts, there are some worrisome trends and risks concerning the politicization of top civil servants. Roel Bekker, a former secretary-general himself, noted that the civil service is at risk to become politicized, and that core administrative values, such as expertise and neutrality, are overshadowed by political values, such as pursuing short term interests and a media focus (Bekker, 2019). These concerns fit in a longstanding normative debate about the dilemma between a neutral, merit-based civil service system on the one hand,

and a politicized, responsive civil service system on the other hand, with the latter system bringing the risk of a loss in efficiency and legitimacy of the civil service (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013). This thesis aims to contribute to this debate by presenting empirical evidence on the incentives of politicizing appointments and the level of politicization.

There are currently a lot of discussions about the lack of certain competencies in the top civil service, such as professional policy expertise. Recently, the Dutch parliament criticized procedures around top civil servants. Concerns focused on the possibility that failing top civil servants could get promoted to other positions within the top civil service; an investigation is currently conducted about these procedures (De Kruif, 2020). Noordegraaf, who is leading this investigation, said that media and politicians pose questions about the expertise and management qualities of top civil servants (De Kruif, 2020). Politicians and scholars were also concerned about the lack of technical knowledge of top civil servants. Dutch ChristenUnie MP Eppo Bruins is worried whether technical knowledge is getting enough attention in the rotation system of top civil servants. “If you see that a civil servant is given a managerial position at another ministry without blushing, then I think: do you have an affinity with that policy field, does that even count when you apply for a different position?” he asked (De Zoeten & De Kruif, 2020). Very recently, former professor of public administration Wim Derksen criticized the lack of subject-matter expertise in top civil servants (Derksen, 2020). By describing the educational backgrounds and careers of the Dutch secretaries-general and identifying their competencies, this thesis can either confirm or reject these concerns.

Furthermore, top civil servants can have much influence on policies, but unlike politicians, they are not very known among the public. Recently, Van der Wilde (2020) observed that although top civil servants are very powerful and influential, hardly anyone in the Netherlands knows them: “if you pass them on the street, you walk past them”. Van der Wilde (2020) noted therefore that ‘top civil servants deserve more spotlights’. This thesis will serve as a spotlight, shedding light on the backgrounds of the secretaries-general, so that the public can ‘get to know them’.

Lastly, society can benefit from this research because the findings of this thesis can be used to formulate policy recommendations if necessary. These recommendations can be made in order to improve the appointment process of secretaries-general and may thereby contribute to a better administration. For example, if it turns out that the appointment process of secretaries-general is indeed politicized, then it may be desirable to formalize this politicized process to tighten the gap between the formal and political or practical reality and to avoid a false impression of a purely neutral and merit-based civil service. In the past, discussions about formalizing a more political role for the secretary-general took place, for example by making the secretary-general political accountable to parliament (Van Rijswijk, 2006). However, this did not lead to changes in the appointment process of top civil servants or on their desired role. The findings of this thesis may bring new insights in this discussion. Additionally, if the empirical findings show a lack of certain competencies within the population of secretaries-general, then the appointment criteria should perhaps include these competencies more frequently.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The structure of this thesis will be as follows. In chapter two, a theoretical framework is presented, where the most important theoretical arguments and concepts will be described. This framework is based on a review of the existing literature on this thesis' topic. Several hypotheses will be derived from this framework. In chapter three of this thesis, the research design will be discussed, including the justification of the case selection, the methods that will be used to answer the research question and the ways the data is collected. Furthermore, the most important concepts will be operationalized, and the reliability and validity of this thesis are discussed. In chapter four, the empirical findings of the research will be presented. This empirical part of the thesis is divided in a descriptive part, where the competencies, characteristics and backgrounds of the secretaries-general are set out, and an explanatory part, where the hypotheses about politicized appointments are tested and analysed. In chapter five, the conclusion of the thesis will follow. In this concluding section of the thesis, the research question will be answered. The limitations and practical implications of the research will also be discussed in chapter five.

Chapter 2. A theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework that will be the scientific basis of this study is presented. The previous scholarly literature on the topic of this thesis will be addressed, based on which theoretical arguments will be made. Additionally, the existing empirical research into the Dutch case will be reviewed, to show the literature gaps. Derived from the theoretical arguments, hypotheses will follow about the determinants of political criteria.

The scholarly debate about the desired separation of politics and administration goes back to classic public administration scholars as Weber (1978) and Wilson (1887) (in Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013, p. 891). But ever since, and up to the present day, scholarly literature is concerned with the dilemma between having a merit-based civil service, which is based on “appropriate competence”, and a politicized system of the civil service, where political criteria form the basis of appointments and where primarily political responsiveness is sought (Christensen, Klemmensen & Ostrup, 2014, p. 215). This debate touches upon two main themes in the literature about top civil servants: their merit-based competencies and the politicization of their appointments. These topics are related to each other because politicization, as will be set out later on, can be described as the substitution of neutrality, by introducing political criteria in the appointment process. When politicization occurs, political criteria are considered more important than neutral merit-criteria. While responsiveness may be strengthened through this practice of politicization, the substitution of neutral and merit-based competencies can affect the neutrality and professionalism of the top civil service. Below, the merit-based competencies will be set out, as well as the responsive competencies and the practice of politicizing civil servant appointments.

2.1 Merit-based competencies of top civil servants: neutral criteria

Top civil servants play an essential role in government, since they form the link between the political executives and the civil service (Christensen et al., 2014). To effectively carry out their role as policy advisors to their ministers and managers of their ministries, these top civil servants need to be competent in their jobs. There is considerable academic attention on the desired merit-based competencies of civil servants. These merit-based, neutral competencies are needed to ensure that political decisions are executed based on the best available knowledge (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2018) and to “obtain the best outcomes possible” (Krause, Lewis & Douglas, 2006, p. 771). There are many competencies and requirements that can be desired of top civil servants. For example, integrity, creativity and network and leadership skills (Kruyen & Van Genugten, 2020) are considered some important competencies. However, studying the literature concerning the competencies of top civil servants, the competencies that are considered to be the most important for them are technical-professional policy knowledge, managerial skills, and political know-how. Below, each of these competencies is discussed. These competencies are neutral in the sense that they may be desired regardless the party affiliation or loyalty of top civil servants (Moynihan & Roberts, 2010), although the competency of professional policy expertise may be valued higher by certain political parties, as will be discussed later.

Technical-professional policy expertise -or rather general knowledge?

An important part of the tasks of top civil servants is to advise their ministers on policies. Therefore, top civil servants are desired to have professional and technical expertise on their policy area (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259, Christensen et al., 2014, p. 218). Top civil servants gain policy expertise through education in their policy area and knowledge of the policy field in which they operate (Christensen et al., 2014, p. 218). Similarly, top civil servants need to have insight into the organizational context of the ministry (Idem). High-level subject expertise and technical skills were essential of many of the traditional understandings of competencies of the civil service (Lodge & Hood, 2005, p. 781).

It must be noted, however, that some authors argue that top civil servants should be “highly educated generalists” rather than technical experts, since they have leading positions in the ministry (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 218). According to this generalist perspective, competencies that are useful in all domains of the national administration should be given priority, instead of having specific policy expertise (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259).

Ministerial managerial skills

Management skills are a very important competency for top civil servants, considering that managing the ministry is an important task of top civil servants (Bach & Veit, p. 259). The academic literature concerning competencies of top civil servants focused largely on managerial competencies, and managerial competencies are seen as one of the most important skills for top civil servants (Kruyen & Van Genugten, 2020, p. 118). Ministries are large and complex organizations. A ministry needs to be administered professionally and efficiently. This minimizes organisational failures in the ministry and in that way, negative media attention is also avoided, which in turn protects the minister (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259).

Political know-how

The third core competency of top civil servants according to the academic literature is political know-how (Bach & Veit, 2008). Top civil servants are an important link between the political arena and their ministry, and they are involved in political decisions and bargaining. Therefore, it is important that they understand the political process and account for political implications when they advise their ministers (Bach & Veit, 2008, p. 258). Instead of focusing purely on the technical details of policies (policy expertise), the political landscape needs to be taken into account to have politically feasible policies. In addition, political craft is essential for top civil servants because it can help them to achieve political goals set by their ministers and protect their ministers from political blame (Bach & Veit, 2008, p. 259). Political know-how is especially useful in multi-party government systems, based on coalitions of parties where majorities are often narrow (Goetz, 1997, p. 754). In these systems, it is important that top civil servants are able to account for the reactions of coalition parties when dealing with policy proposals (Goetz, 1997, p. 754). Political know-how should not be confused with political loyalty to the minister. Knowledge of the political context of policies is important regardless the political colour of the minister that is being served.

Political expertise and political sensitivity are considered of growing importance in appointments (Bekker, 2019; Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 221). Political skills may be even more desired when the pressures from media and parliament are high: the risk for a minister to get blamed is then probably higher. Over the years, media pressure on ministries has increased. Ministers are under constant media attention (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 59). Salomonsen, Frandsen & Johansen (2016) examined the relationship between political responsiveness and media attention and media awareness of civil servants. It was found that the more top civil servants were aware of media attention, the more they were involved in strategic political communication (Salomonsen, et al., 2016, p. 215). According to 't Hart & Wille (2006), also in the Netherlands ministers face more and more media attention and pressures from parliament. When the parliament is assertive, political know-how is even more important, because it is then crucial that top civil servants are able to judge the mood of the parties in parliament (Goetz, 1997, p. 755).

Since ministers cannot afford to appoint top civil servants purely based on political criteria, while they disregard other professional qualifications (Bach & Veit, 2018; Bekker, 2012), it is expected that secretaries-general possess some combination of the merit-based competencies set out above. However, to which extent they have acquired these competencies is still unclear. Henceforth the descriptive question of this thesis, “*which competencies did Dutch secretaries-general possess in the period 1994-2020?*”

2.2 Responsive competencies of top civil servants: political criteria

Three of the main merit-based competencies that are desired of top civil servants were discussed above. These competencies are, as stated before, neutral in the sense that the literature is clear that they are of great importance for the effectiveness of top civil servants, regardless of their political colour or the political executives they serve.

However, in addition to the competencies of technical expertise, managerial skills and political know-how, political executives may desire additional competencies that are based on party-political and ideological arguments, rather than neutral requirements. These competencies can be seen as ‘responsive’ competencies. Responsiveness can be described as the “readiness of public servants to do what government ministers want” (Mulgan, 2008, p. 345). Responsive competencies are focusing on being loyal to the minister, sharing the minister’s worldview and agreeing with the minister’s policy preferences (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2018, p 71; Wolf, 1999). If top civil servants are responsive, they are “responding” to the preferences of their ministers (Mulgan, 2008).

Party affiliation and loyalty

Responsive competencies in terms of loyalty are often dealing with party affiliation, in particular a match in the party affiliation between the minister and his or her top civil servant. This thesis also looks at the party matches of top civil servants as responsive competencies. Specifically, this thesis looks at a (mis)match of the party affiliation of the secretary-general with his or her minister. Responsiveness can focus on the relationship between a top civil

servant and an individual minister. Then, a match in party affiliation between the top civil servant and the minister can ensure partisan loyalty. However, responsiveness can also be focused on the cabinet as a whole (Mulgan, 2008, p. 346). As will be explained more extensively later, if a top civil servant is affiliated with a different coalition party than his or her minister, i.e., if there is a party mismatch, (s)he can potentially monitor the minister on behalf of his or her party, to ensure that the coalition agreement is upheld. This is of interest for the whole cabinet.

Career backgrounds and sharing the minister's worldview

This thesis will also look at responsive competencies in terms of sharing the minister's worldview. One of the classic differences in the worldview has to do with how one values the market. It can be argued that roughly, one can be seeing the market as a merit, or one can be in favour of strong government interference. Experience in the private sector may increase the appreciation of the market. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between what a minister thinks that is the best approach towards solving policies: driven by political ideology, or by expert-based considerations, i.e., a more technocratic approach. This thesis argues that, although technical-professional policy expertise is a merit-based competence in the first place, a technical-professional policy background may be valued differently by ministers, dependent on their political ideology. In that regard, it can be seen as a responsive competency as well: it can be in line with the worldview of the minister.

2.3 The politicization of appointments

To obtain responsive competencies in top civil servants, politicization comes into play. While the definition of politicization differs per author, in the context of appointments it can be described as the substitution of neutrality by introducing political criteria in the appointment process (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 2). In terms of competencies, politicization entails that the desire for responsive competencies, based on political criteria, substitutes the need for neutral competencies.

One of the main reasons why politicians might want to politicize appointments is to gain maximum control over the bureaucracy (Bach & Veit, 2018; Peters & Pierre, 2004; Moynihan & Roberts, 2010, p. 573). Indeed, politicization is seen as a helpful tool for political executives for controlling the bureaucracy (Bauer & Ege, 2012, p. 407) and politicized appointments “are one of the strongest determinants of political control of the bureaucracy” (Waterman & Ouyang, 2020, p. 717). A growing amount of literature has focussed on the politicization of the civil service. This literature is mainly focused on the United States' Presidential system, focusing on the trade-off between loyalty and competency (e.g., Krause & O'Connell, 2019, Moynihan, & Roberts (2010). Ideally, a President would appoint top civil servants who are both very loyal and highly competent. Yet, because there is a limited pool of candidates and the desire for effective administration and political control are competing, a trade-off must be made (Krause & O'Connell, 2019).

Besides the literature on US Presidential appointments, several politicization studies were focused on parliamentary systems as well. Most of this research is focused on the desire of political executives to have partisan loyalty within the top civil service (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 255; Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014; Mazur, Możdżeń & Oramus, 2018). Indeed, one of the most important ways of politicization, is the appointment of top civil servants affiliated with the party of the minister, to ensure partisan loyalty and a responsive government (e.g., Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014). As Peters & Pierre (2004, p. 7) note, if partisan loyalty is assured within the top civil service, “there will be less deflection of policy directions than in a system dominated by the career public service” (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 7).

2.4 Existing empirical research into the Dutch case

The review below critically analyses the earlier empirical academic contributions to the topic of the merit-based and responsive competencies and politicization of the Dutch secretaries-general. This review has multiple purposes. It serves as a means to summarize the existing knowledge about the Dutch case and to identify the gaps and flaws in the existing literature (Knopf, 2006). In that way, the empirical knowledge that is present can help to guide this thesis; it justifies the research design and helps to answer the question based on the existing knowledge.

Merit-based competencies

Based on biographies, Bekker (2012) described the careers of 44 top civil servants who were appointed between 1970-2010, including secretaries-general and directors-general. In terms of competencies and politicization, a few things can be derived. Based on a comparison of the biographies, Bekker distilled the basic characteristics of top civil servants. Firstly, they need to be “competent advisors” (Bekker, 2012, p. 334), which indicate the need for professional policy expertise and political craft to see the political implications of policy proposals. Indeed, as Bekker note, political sensitivity is essential for top civil servants (Bekker, 2012, p. 387). Furthermore, they need to “lead a major organization” (Bekker, 2012, p. 334) implicating the need for managerial expertise. As Bekker note, the extent of success of top civil servants lies in the ability to unite the advisory and management skills (Bekker, 2012, p. 334). Lemstra (1993) examined the formal position and roles of the secretary-general. Derived from the roles of the secretary-general, and in accordance with Bekker (2012), Lemstra state that “The Secretary-General not only has to act as a knowledgeable policy advisor, he also has to have marked managerial qualities” (Lemstra, 1993, p. 263).

In other empirical research, backgrounds of top civil servants, including secretaries-general, has been described in terms of their educational degrees and subjects (Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 2014; Steen & Van der Meer, 2011). Yet, this description was only based on the comparison of data from the years 1950 and 2009 and therefore, does not provide a full picture. Furthermore, while theoretically based arguments were made about the need for political and managerial competencies (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011), empirical data on the actual possession of these competencies were missing.

In a survey research, Kruyen & Van Genugten (2020), examined the competencies that civil servants themselves deemed important. Many competencies were mentioned, such as having judgement skills, being trustworthy, and being people-oriented. However, this study has several limitations. First of all, the competencies that were mentioned are desired competencies, and not necessarily the actual competencies civil servants possess. Secondly, the majority of the respondents of the survey were local civil servants (Kruyen & Van Genugten, 2020, p. 133). The survey was thus not focusing specifically on top civil servants in the national government, who generally have a different role and stand closer to the political arena. Therefore, the results cannot be applied easily to the context of secretaries-general.

Politicization of appointments

Bekker notes that ministers try to get influence, subtle, by suggesting candidates for a position, or keep saying no to candidates, until the candidate of choice is the only one left (Bekker, 2012, p. 390). However, political influence on appointments does not happen at a large scale according to Bekker, and rumours of this influence on appointments are based on stories and suggestions, rather than reality (Bekker, 2012, p. 390). While Bekker (2012) provided detailed biographical information, it contained only a selection of the entire population of secretaries-general. Additionally, the research was purely qualitative, valuable for in-depth knowledge, but not suited for statistical analysis and the exploration of associations.

In a research report by Van Thiel (2009), the question whether political parties have influence on top-level appointments in the (semi-)public sector, including ministerial departments, was addressed. Through a qualitative survey among experts and former top officials, it was found that the formal influence of the minister on departmental appointments is considerable. However, respondents noted that the actual political influence was lower. In addition, they noted that the main appointment criterium was merit. However, political criteria do play an important role as well, and parties do try to influence their minister to appoint certain candidates, and “information about vacancies is spread throughout the party network by different party members” (Van Thiel, 2009, p. 33)

The literature that applied theories of politicization to the Dutch case specifically, has some caveats. The academic studies all focused on partisan loyalty, ignoring other relevant criteria that politicians might have, based on their ideology. For example, Ennser-Jedenastik (2016) sought to explain the different motivations for appointing Dutch secretaries-general with a party-political affiliation, in the period between 1945 and 2013. Ennser-Jedenastik argued that the prime motivation for politicization is to ensure political responsiveness and the compliance with the political goals of the minister. It turned out that there is an ideological agreement between a minister and his top civil servant in about one third of the cases (Ennser-Jedenastik (2016). In addition, Ennser-Jedenastik (2016) focused among others on the ‘watchdog’ role that Dutch secretaries-general can potentially fulfil, i.e., monitoring their ministers to ensure that they do not deviate from the policies that were agreed by the coalition. Based on the analysis, it was found that there is not much evidence for a watchdog role of secretaries-general; the watchdog logic plays “a limited role at best” in party-political politicization, according to Ennser-Jedenastik (2016, p. 463) However, the chosen research design had a limitation that

might have led to a bias in the results. Portfolio salience was taken as an indicator, but while portfolio salience is an important indicator of the ‘watchdog’ hypothesis, it is not the only one. The deviation of the ideology of the minister compared to that of the coalition centre, is another important indicator, for the watchdog logic (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011), which was not used.

Party affiliation of secretaries-general was examined by Van der Meer & Raadschelders (2014) and Steen & Van der Meer (2011) as well. It was noted that a growing number of secretaries-general was affiliated with the same party as their minister, and that most of the secretaries-general were affiliated with the social-democratic PvdA and the Christian-Democratic CDA (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011). However, the empirical findings only included data of 1988 and 1989, 2009 and 2012. Furthermore, the determinants that might have led to the party-affiliation, such as the ideological position of their ministers, were not included in this research.

Summing up

Looking at the review above, it is seen that the theoretical arguments of professional policy expertise and managerial skills fit well in the Dutch context. Furthermore, there are signs that politicized appointments do occur, although there is some variation in the degree of politicization. However, empirical investigations in the actual competencies and skills that top civil servants possess have been limited. Moreover, the empirical literature on the politicization of top-level appointments is incomplete. As seen, there is not much focus in the academic literature on political criteria that are desired from top civil servants different from a congruence in the party ideology. Other political considerations were left out in these publications. It is now clear that there is a considerable empirical gap in the existing literature focusing on the Netherlands, that needs to be filled.

2.4 Determinants of responsive competencies: party-political ideology

Responsive competencies are not the same for every minister. Indeed, in multi-party cabinets, ministers differ in terms of party, ideology and worldviews. In this thesis, it is argued that the ideological position of the political parties of the minister plays a role in the kind of ‘responsive’ competencies that are desired from top civil servants. The dependent variables of this thesis are thus the different responsive competencies. It is argued that the ideological position of the minister has an influence on the appointment criteria of top civil servants. According to Dahlström & Niklasson (2013), politicization of the civil service is key to accomplish ideological loyalty of civil servants. Indeed, ideology is, though not the only one, a “relevant government characteristic when it comes to how different governments approach political recruitment” (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013, p. 894).

2.5 Hypotheses

Political ideology can explain the need for different responsive competencies in appointments. But how does political ideology play a role in these appointments? Below, several theoretical arguments will be set out, about the role of the political-ideological position of ministers in the

criteria that are expected from top civil servants. Based on these arguments, hypotheses will be set out. These hypotheses are helpful to answer the question *how party-political considerations played a role in the appointment of the Dutch secretaries-general*.

Controlling the coalition: top civil servants as political watchdogs

As stated before, politicians want to politicize appointments in order to gain control over the bureaucracy (e.g. Bach & Veit, 2018). Yet, control over the coalition may also be crucial for political parties. In coalition governance, i.e. governance based on a multi-party cabinet, found in many parliamentary government systems, the risk exists that ministers, having an information advantage in their own ministry, will pursue their own party's preferences instead of the coalition interest (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011, p. 1153). In coalition governance, there is thus a motivation to monitor ministers from the coalition parties in order to prevent that they are deviating from the coalition agreement and to ensure that they will not pursue their own preferences over the coalition's interest (Thies, 2001). This 'watchdog' role can be fulfilled in the legislative level, through parliamentary commissions, or in the executive level, through junior ministers from another party as their senior ministers (Thies, 2001; Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011). However, not all ministers are accompanied by junior ministers. Yet, all ministries accommodate top civil servants. The highest-ranking top civil servants, who are in close proximity of the ministers, may be especially in the position to fulfil a watchdog role (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016, p. 454).

It is argued that the larger the ideological difference between the minister and the cabinet as a whole, the greater the incentives to monitor that minister are (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011). Coalition parties should namely be more willing to monitor ministers if those ministers are affiliated with a party that is ideologically placed further from the coalition centre. Those ministers have more incentives to deviate from the coalition agreement (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, p. 1159, Thies, p. 586). Indeed, if a minister's party is placed far away from the coalition centre, that minister is expected to be less comfortable with the coalition's policies and may want to pursue his own preferences. Reversely, if the ideology of the minister's party is in close proximity of the coalition centre, then the need to monitor that minister is low, considering that a deviation of policy preferences is then unlikely.

It must be noted that a given minister may not be willing to appoint a secretary-general affiliated from a different party than their own. However, the whole cabinet has to formally agree with an appointment. That makes it possible to negotiate that in return, another 'watchdog' from the party of the minister concerned is appointed to balance the appointments. Indeed, ministers negotiate about the allocation of junior ministers as well. Furthermore, a political appointee coming from a different coalition party has also advantages for the minister. These appointees can give their ministers cross-partisan advice; they know which policies are accepted by their own parties and can thereby avoid problems in the coalition (Askim, Karlsen & Kolltveit, 2018). Following this reasoning, a minister may be inclined to approve of such a 'cross-partisan' appointment. Based on the theoretical arguments set out above, the first hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H1: The more a minister's ideology differs from the mean ideology of his cabinet, the higher the amount of secretaries-general that are affiliated with a different coalition party as their ministers.

Partisan loyalty of top civil servants

As seen in the literature review, politicization of appointments is often focused on the partisan loyalty of top civil servants. However, it can be argued that the ideology of the minister plays a role in this process. For example, it is argued that in the United States, Republican Presidents make more politicized appointments because they have a more negative view of government and the 'liberal' civil servants within government (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 893). An "ideological mismatch between civil servants and the governing party" can therefore provide an explanation of politicized appointments (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 892). Politicized appointments could therefore be a "weapon" that political executives use when they doubt the ideological loyalty of the civil service (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 893). These appointments "can function as a means for the minister to ensure party-political responsiveness", and as a means to assure personal trust (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 749). Top civil servants are "more directly confronted with the feasibility problems of political projects than are politicians, who mostly debate about principles and long-term objectives" (Peters & Pierre, 2004, P. 190). Indeed, often civil servants present "rational arguments, often with the purport that something is not possible, or that there are procedural or other objections to a certain course of action" (Bekker, 2016, p. 63). Therefore, parties that are in favour of political objectives that would be costly and deviate largely from the status-quo, should be more inclined to appoint top civil servants who share their objectives, although they may not always be feasible.

In general, left-wing parties are in favour of more government programmes and more government spending. It might not be surprising that therefore, left-wing political parties, such as the Dutch social-democratic party, are often seen as suspicious towards the top civil service (Nieuwenkamp, 2013, p. 11). A 'dominant explanation' for this suspicion lies in their belief that society can be fundamentally changed through government interference, "which can collide with a top civil service system that regularly warns of existing legal or budgetary impossibilities" (Nieuwenkamp, 2013, p. 11). This in contrast to right-wing parties, who favour a 'laissez-faire' approach, leading to less suspicion towards the top civil service (Nieuwenkamp, 2013, p. 11). According to Dählstrom & Niklasson (2013), the social-democratic party in Sweden is argued to have pushed the hardest for politicized appointments, with the Prime Minister defending this practice by claiming that there was an over-representation of the centre-right political ideology in the civil service, created by previous cabinets (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 893). In line with this 'ideology hypothesis' (Dählstrom & Niklasson, 2013, p. 893), the more left-wing a minister is, the more party loyalists are expected to be appointed, and vice versa. Therefore, the second hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H2 The more right-wing a minister's ideology is, the fewer secretaries-general are appointed that are affiliated with the minister's political party.

Private sector experience among top civil servants

One of the determinants of the backgrounds of top civil servants, is their prior work experience. In particular, work experience in the private sector can be a responsive competence. It can be argued that political parties positioned at the economic right-wing of the political spectrum put a higher value on top civil servants with a career in the private sector. As Dählstrom & Niklasson (2013, p. 893) state, in the United States, Democratic Presidents have a more positive view of government and its problem-solving capacity than Republican, right-wing, Presidents. Businesses form a major constituency for the Republican party in the US and therefore Republican Presidents are expected to favour business backgrounds in political appointments (Waterman & Stewart, 2015). The same logic may hold true for other countries, including the Netherlands. Generally speaking, left-wing parties stand for a big government and large government spending (e.g. Jensen, 2010), while right-wing parties put a higher value on the private market and a restricted role for government. Recall that politicization of appointments does not only focus on party-political affiliation, but also on “additional competencies” (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 749). These other competencies might as well mean the work attitude and values, such as efficiency, innovativeness and profitability (Van der Wal, De Graaf & Lasthuizen, 2008) derived from the private sector. Therefore, the third hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H3 The more right-wing a minister’s ideology is, the more secretaries-general with private sector experience are appointed.

Technical-professional policy expertise

Generally, right-wing ideologies are more in favour of technocracy, that is, “expert-driven political decision-making in contrast to governance by popularly elected officials” (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017, p. 431). According to Bertsou & Pastorella (2017, p. 444), the more right-leaning citizens are, the more they are in favour of technocracy. Technocrats have been associated with free-market capitalism and market economics, and neoliberalism and technocracy “go hand in hand”, for example because both technocracy and neoliberalism value (productive) efficiency (Bertsou & Pastorella, 2017, p. 444). Indeed, one of the characteristics of technocracy is the idea that “efficiency and effectiveness of a government is more important than its programme” (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 191). Considering that efficiency and effectiveness are also important values in the private sector (Van der Wal et al., 2008), this may indeed appeal to right-wing politicians. In Belgium, it was found that both politicians and civil servants on the right-wing of the political spectrum lean more towards technocracy than left-wing politicians (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 191). Technocratic views were among the highest within the centre-right Christian Democrats (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 191). Based on the arguments set out above, professional policy expertise as a competence might be more valued by right-wing ministers. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is formulated as follows.

H4 The more right-wing a minister’s ideology is, the higher the chance a secretary-general is appointed who is a professional policy expert in his policy area.

2.6 Conceptual framework

As seen in this theoretical framework, the place on the ideological left-right spectrum may determine the political criteria that are used for the appointment of top civil servants. Following the watchdog theory about monitoring ministers, it is expected that the higher the minister’s ideological deviation from the mean cabinet ideology, the higher the amount of appointed secretaries-general affiliated with a different coalition party than their ministers (H1). Following political preferences of political parties, it is expected that ministers placed on the left-wing of the political spectrum, who are more suspicious towards the bureaucracy, appoint more secretaries-general affiliated with their own party (H2). Ministers of the right-wing of the political spectrum, generally valuing private sector values and efficiency, are expected to appoint more secretaries-general with a private sector experience (H3) and more secretaries-general with technical-professional policy expertise (H4). All of these theoretical expectations will be empirically tested in the analysis section in chapter five of this thesis. *Figure 1* summarizes the expectations in a conceptual model, mapping the theorized relationship between the independent variables -the ideological position of the ministers- and the dependent variables -the characteristics and criteria that are desired from the top civil servants.

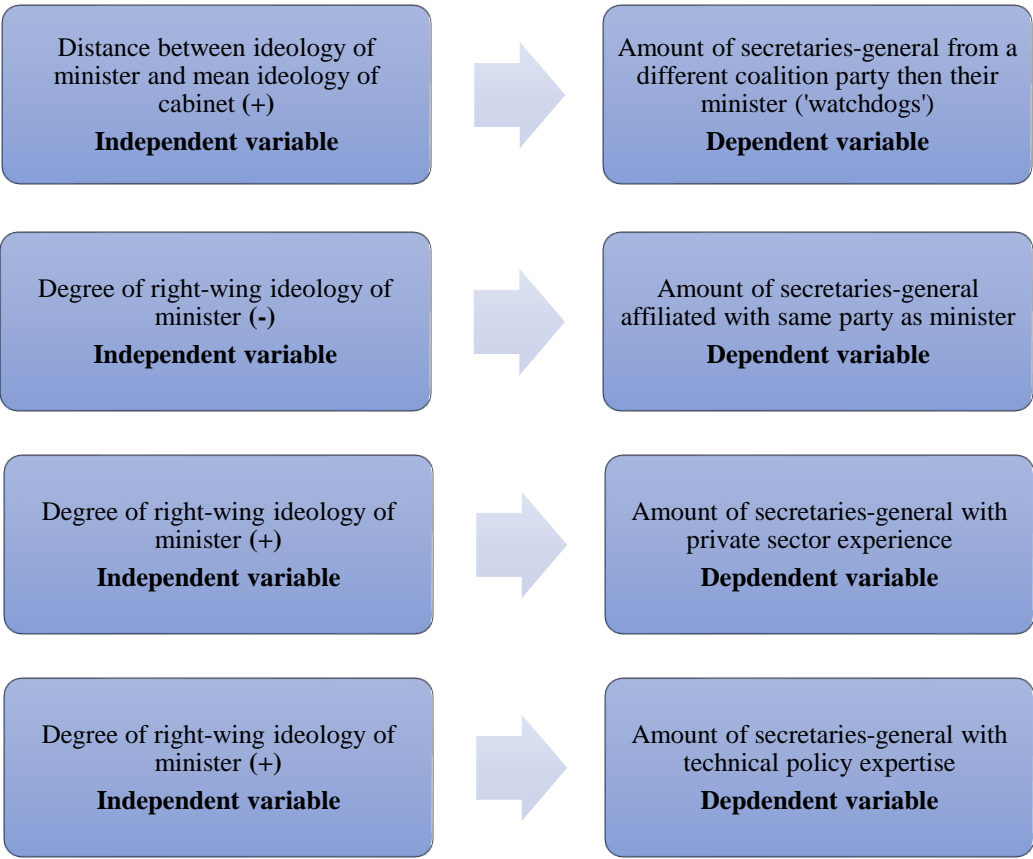


Figure 1 Conceptual model derived from the theoretical framework

Chapter 3. Research Design and Methodology

In this chapter, the chosen research design for this thesis will be set out. Furthermore, the choices regarding methodology, the operationalization of concepts, methods of analysis and case selection will be discussed. Lastly, there will be reflected upon the reliability and internal and external validity of the research.

3.1 Research design

This thesis uses a deductive, quantitative approach. Contrary to qualitative research methods, a quantitative research approach is eminently useful for the sensitive topic of politicization of appointments. If ministers or top civil servants are asked about their motivations for appointments, it is likely that they give socially desirable answers and deny that party-political considerations play a role (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016, p. 451) because they “are very secretive about this aspect of the appointment process” (Van der Meer, in Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 216). By combining concrete biographical data of top civil servants with the ideology of the ministers who appoint them, associations between ideology and political criteria can be seen, in order to identify politicization of appointments.

The population of this study consists of all the secretaries-general in the Dutch government who were appointed between Augustus 1994 and November 2020. The units of analysis are the individual secretaries-general that are appointed, with a focus on their professional and personal backgrounds.

The research is *X-Y* focussed, i.e., the theorized relationships between the independent variable -the ideological position of ministers, *X*- and dependent variables -professional characteristics of the top civil servants, *Y*- are tested. This thesis will consist of a descriptive part and an explanatory part. In the descriptive part, basic characteristics of the top civil servants are presented, such as their education and career background. In this way, the population of secretaries-general in the period 1994-2020 is described. The explanatory part will test the hypotheses that have been set out in the theory chapter. This will be done through regression analyses, to address the theoretical expectations. By conducting regression analyses, the relation between the variables can be examined. The methods of analysis will be discussed later.

3.2 The case selection and the context of Dutch secretaries-general

The Dutch case is eminently useful for researching merit-based competencies and political criteria in the appointment process of top civil servants. Generally, the Dutch civil service is seen as merit-based and neutral (e.g., Van der Meer & Raadschelders, 2014; Steen & Van der Meer, 2011) with limited political influence on appointments. However, in recent years, research articles and media reports showed that the appointment of top civil servants is not always as neutral as it seems. A secretary-general stated: “a minister can also make his own suggestions for a particular vacancy” and observed that ministers can veto an appointment (Stokmans & DeWittwijnen, 2020). A former secretary-general, Roel Bekker, also noted that there is subtle political influence in appointments and resignations of top civil servants

(Parlement, 2012). Bekker noted that “more than before, the political profile of a top civil servant also seems important”. In addition, Dutch Member of Parliament Thierry Baudet speaks of a “party cartel” where top positions, including civil servant positions, are divided between the political elite (Forum voor Democratie, n.d.). At the same time however, the selection and appointment procedures for top civil servants are transparent and formalized (Algemene Bestuursdienst, n.d.; Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 216), promoting merit-criteria in recruitment and restricting possibilities for politicized appointments (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 225). The procedure, in short, works as follows. If there is a vacancy for the position of secretary-general, the director-general of the Algemene Bestuursdienst, the organization responsible for the employments of top civil servants, makes an “initial selection of suitable candidates (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 213). The Minister of the Interior then proposes a candidate, after consultation with the minister concerned (Parlement, n.d. a). The council of ministers must then formally agree with an appointment. Since the introduction of the top management group in 2000, a secretary-general is appointed for a maximum of seven years (Parlement, n.d. a). This appointment procedure leaves opportunities for considering political criteria in the appointment process (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014, p. 456); leaving an “impression” that political criteria as party affiliation do play a role (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 225). The question to what extent politicians influence appointments in the Netherlands thus remains unclear and needs to be examined.

Additionally, the Dutch government system has some important characteristics which makes it even more interesting to examine for several reasons. First of all, the Netherlands has features of the two major administrative systems, namely the German traditional civil service, which is more merit-based, and the French Napoleonic civil service, which leaves more room for politicization (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 10). Secondly, there are only few political advisors within the Dutch government. Unlike, for example, in Belgium and France, there are no *cabinets ministériel*, which consist of numerous political appointees around the minister. In the Netherlands, ministers generally have only one political advisor. Therefore, political-strategic advice can also be expected from top civil servants, which can lead to a more political role of top civil servants and can make them thus less neutral in the sense of Weber’s distinction between politics and administration. This is for example also the case in Denmark (Christensen, Klemmensen & Ostrup, 2014). Furthermore, in contrast to countries as the United Kingdom, the Dutch government is based on coalitions of political parties, with different ideologies. Coalition governance comes with its own challenges, such as ensuring that ministers from coalition parties do not deviate from the coalition agreement. As has been set out in the theory chapter, secretaries-general may be a helpful asset for this challenge, by monitoring ministers.

There is also a good reason to focus this study on the Dutch secretaries-general specifically, instead of examining the whole top civil service -which also includes directors-general and directors, responsible for specific policy areas within the ministries. This specific focus has three main reasons. The first reason concerns *feasibility*. There are relatively limited numbers of secretaries-general in contrast to the whole top civil service, which includes many directors and directors-general. The second reason is that more *information and data* is publicly available for secretaries-general. The third reason is that examining secretaries-general is more *interesting and relevant* in terms of political-administrative relations and the politicization of

the civil service, since they are the highest-ranking and most influential officials in the top civil service. By law, secretaries-general are the administrative head of a ministry, alongside their minister, who is the political head of a ministry (Overheid, n.d.). Secretaries-general can be seen as “the right-hand men” of their ministers and they form the “connecting links” between their ministers and the rest of the civil service (Breeman, Van Noort & Rutgers, 2016, p. 59). Indeed, secretaries-general have an integrating role in the ministry, standing above the sectoral interests of the directorates-general within the ministry (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 220). Furthermore, besides from being an ‘important advisor’ to his minister, the secretary-general may in some cases ‘act as a representative of the Minister, for example during official acts, working visits, etc.’ (Parlement, n.d. a).

In some ministries the secretary-general can be accompanied by a deputy secretary-general. However, these deputy secretaries-general will not be included in this research. Deputy secretaries-general are not a prime policy advisor of the minister: they are mainly responsible for internal management (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 219), such as personnel-, facilitatory and organizational issues. Thereby, their role in the policy process is much more limited; they have less to do with their ministers and their influence on policymaking is small. Therefore, it can be expected that politicization of appointments of deputy secretaries-general does not have the same impact on policies as politicized appointments of secretaries-general. Furthermore, in contrast to data on secretaries-general, the publicly available data on deputy secretaries-general is very limited -perhaps because of their more managerial role.

3.3 Research population and time frame

The Netherlands has known 63 secretaries-general in the period of 1994-2020. Therefore, N=63. During this twenty-six-year period, nine cabinets took office. This period was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, the chosen period has known both right-wing cabinets, such as the cabinet Balkenende-I, which consisted of the liberal-conservative VVD, the Christian-Democratic CDA and the right-populistic LPF, and left-wing cabinets, such as the cabinets Kok-I and Kok-II, with the social-democratic party PvdA, the VVD and the social-liberal party D66. There is thus a considerable variation of the independent variable -the ideological position of ministers- which makes the case relatively more helpful for observing the potential effects that “suggested explanations might have on the level of politicization” (Dahlström & Niklasson, p. 895). Furthermore, the period is relatively recent and gives an overview of the situation as it is now, which is good for the societal relevance. Related, the *Algemene Bestuursdienst*, the organization responsible for the employment of top civil servants, was created at the beginning of the chosen period, in 1995 (*Kennis Openbaar Bestuur*, n.d.), formalizing the appointment procedures. Lastly, confrontations between ministers and bureaucrats in the 1990s sparked fear about a politicized relationship between these two actors (‘t Hart & Wille, 2006, p. 124), so the 1990s seem to be a good starting point for the research.

It is often the case that secretaries-general rotate in the ministries, so during his or her career, one person can become a secretary-general in several ministries. The number of individual persons who fulfilled a term as secretary-general is thus lower than 63. To be precise, there are 52 unique individuals who were appointed as secretary-general in the period.

3.4 Data and data collection

Below, there will be elaborated upon the methods of data collection, and the sources that are used in the data collection. This will be helpful for the replicability and reliability of this thesis.

3.4.1 Methods of data collection

For the data collection, a *desk research* is conducted, where information about the top civil servants is collected from online sources and is subsequently systematically entered in a dataset. The sources of this data collection will be discussed later on.

By conducting a desk research, relevant data on the backgrounds of the Dutch secretaries-general is collected, as well as data from the cabinets and ministries in which they are appointed. The data is both needed for describing the population of secretaries-general and conducting regression analyses to answer the research question. The data that is collected will focus on the professional and political backgrounds of the secretaries-general and the political-ideological backgrounds of their ministers.

3.4.2 Sources of the data

The data on the backgrounds of the Dutch secretaries-general will be based on publicly available data. This data will primarily be derived from the website *parlement.com*. This website is part of the *Parlementair Documentatie Centrum* (PDC), and provides “independent information about Dutch politics and about the persons who play or have played a role in it” (Parlement, n.d. *b*). On this website, bibliographical and personal information of the Dutch secretaries-general can be found as well. In addition to this website, five other sources are used. Firstly, if available, *LinkedIn* profiles of the secretaries-general are studied. Secondly, the government website of the *Algemene Bistouries* is consulted. On this website, short biographies of top civil servants can be found. Thirdly, newspaper articles where the biographies of top civil servants are mentioned will be consulted. These articles will be retrieved through the database *Lexis Uni*. If they are available, CV’s on various websites of governmental, public and private organizations where secretaries-general (have) work(ed) will be consulted. In addition, if limited information is found, Wikipedia-pages of the secretaries-general are consulted. While this source is not suitable as “a sole source” for students (Brown, 2011, p. 342), biographies of government officials can often be very accurate (Brown, 2011). By adding all these different sources in the data collection process, information that may be incomplete on one website, can be complemented with data on other websites. Besides, the data can be confirmed by different sources, which strengthens the reliability of the data.

The website *parlement.com* is also consulted to study the ministers that are in office and the cabinets in which they are seated. The information about the ideologies of cabinets and political parties is derived from the Comparative Manifestos Project, a scientific project focusing on content analyses of manifestos of political parties across Europe, including Dutch political parties (Comparative Manifestos Project, n.d.), while the measures of portfolio salience are derived from Druckman & Warwick (2005). All the information will be systematically noted in a hand-made database in Microsoft Excel (*Version 1908*).

3.5 Operationalisation and measurement of concepts

To capture the concepts that are used in this research, it is important to operationalize them, so that they can be measured. Below, each variable is operationalized. Where possible, the operationalization is based on earlier research. This ensures validity and reliability in the research process.

3.5.1 Dependent variables

The dependent variables concern the responsive competencies that ministers might seek in top civil servants, dependent on their ideological position.

The party affiliation of secretaries-general concerns a categorical variable. If a secretary-general is a known member of a political party, the variable of the party will take the value of the corresponding party (see *Table 1*). This variable is needed to measure two other variables, namely *party match* and *secretary-general as a watchdog*.

The variable *secretary-general as a watchdog* is needed to test hypothesis one. If a secretary-general is a member of a different coalition party than his or her minister, the secretary-general may potentially play a role as a watchdog. If this is the case, this variable will be coded 1, otherwise it will be coded 0. If a secretary-general is member of an opposition party, this does not count as a watchdog, because the watchdog theory assumes that only the parties in the coalition want to monitor ministers.

The *party match* variable, needed to test the second hypothesis, measures if a secretary-general is affiliated with the same party of his or her minister. If this is the case, this variable will take the value 1.

Private sector experience -needed for the third hypothesis- is operationalized as having a work experience in the private sector, i.e., the business sector, for at least 12 months, because, again, a minimum amount of time is needed to gain experience. Thus, if someone worked in the private sector for only two or three months, this will not be included as private sector experience. The exact definition of the public and private sector is somewhat ambiguous (Van der Wal et al., 2008; Rainey & Bozeman, 2011). This thesis will therefore only include businesses and companies as private sector organizations. For example, advocacy groups and NGO's receive donations and funding and serve some parts of the public interest, therefore, in terms of their organizational funding and tasks they are not purely private. The variable will be coded 1 if a secretary-general has private sector experience, and 0 if this is not the case.

The *technical-professional policy expertise* of the secretaries-general is needed both for the fourth hypothesis and the descriptive analysis. This expertise is divided in technical policy expertise and thematic policy expertise. Secretaries-general are considered to have *technical policy expertise* if their education lies in the same area as his or her ministry (Real-Dato & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016, p. 502). For example, if a secretary-general studied Medicine and is appointed at the ministry of Health, this counts as technical expertise. If this is the case, this variable will be coded as 1. It must be noted that to acquire technical expertise, the education alone is sufficient. Thus, in the above-mentioned example of a secretary-general who studied

Medicine, that secretary-general may have worked prior to his appointment in a different policy area, such as economics. *Thematic policy expertise* is operationalized as a career in the same area as the ministry in which the secretaries-general are appointed (Real-Dato & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016, p. 502), regardless of their prior education. Indeed, as Jann & Wegrich rightfully note, “after years in a ministry of agriculture, not only lawyers but also economists and political scientists are as much specialists in agricultural policy as agricultural engineers are” (Jann & Wegrich, 2019, p. 848). Because a considerable amount of work experience is needed to be considered an expert, this thesis follows Bach & Veit in a requirement of an experience of at least 12 months (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 262). So, if a secretary-general worked as an army general for more than a year prior to his or her appointment, and is appointed at the ministry of Defence, this counts as thematic expertise. Again, this variable will be coded as 1 if this is the case. A secretary-general is in this thesis considered to have professional policy expertise if he or she has either technical expertise (education) or thematic expertise (career), or both.

3.5.2 Independent variables

The independent variables in this research concern the ideological position of the minister’s party. Among political scientists, there is agreement that “almost everywhere”, political ideologies can be measured using a left–right scale (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 188). Therefore, this scale will be used in this research as well.

The *ideological position of a minister* is derived from data of the Comparative Manifestos Project (Comparative Manifestos Project, n.d.), which scores political parties across Europe, including Dutch political parties, on a right-left scale. The parties are placed in this scale by examining the party manifestos (for the detailed measurement criteria, see Mölder, 2016) where a pure left-wing party is scored -100 and a pure right-wing party is scored +100. In practice however, the ranges are more limited, since parties are rarely purely left- or right-wing (Mölder, 2016, p. 39). In this thesis, the range is approximately -20 to +20. Because the ideology of political parties may shift over time, the ideological position of a minister’s party is determined based on the ideological score that the party is given at the start of the coalition. There is a potential limitation concerning this variable. The scores the parties are given do not necessarily match the minister’s ideology. It might be the case that a minister himself is positioned at the very left- or right-wing of a political party, for example when he is a ‘conservative social-democrat’. However, it is difficult to identify an individual minister’s political position relative to his or her party. Besides, the minister is expected to act on behalf of the party (s)he is representing. Therefore, it is not likely that this will alter the outcomes of the study, and the variable can still be used.

To examine hypothesis 1, the mean ideology of a cabinet must be measured as well. The mean ideology of a cabinet is measured by calculating the ideological right-left positions of all the parties in the coalition. The score on a right-left scale of a coalition party is then weighed by the parliamentary seats of the coalition parties; this results in the mean ideology of a cabinet (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011, p. 1158). The *deviation of the ideological position of ministers* relative to the mean ideology of their cabinet, is then calculated by extracting the minister’s party score from the mean ideology of the coalition in which the minister takes part. Because

the absolute distance of the minister's ideological position relative to the cabinet is needed (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011, p. 1158), negative numbers are turned into positive numbers (e.g., -2,0 is turned into 2,0).

3.5.3 Control variables

As explained before, the independent variable is the ideological position of the minister. However, there might be other variables that have an impact on the relationship between the ideological position of the minister and the dependent variables.

For the first hypothesis, about the monitoring of ministers, *portfolio salience* will be used as a control variable. It can be argued that the desire for monitoring ministers is stronger for the most salient ministries, because those ministries are more prestigious and more influential than others (Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011). The concept of *portfolio salience* is calculated based on the research of Druckman & Warwick (2005), where the portfolio salience of each of the Dutch ministries is measured in a numerical scale based on expert opinions (Druckman & Warwick, 2005, p. 40). If a ministry is considered of average importance, or salience, the portfolio salience gets the value 1, while a portfolio salience of 1,5 means that a ministry is 50% more important than an average ministry. Similarly, if a ministry is considered 50% less salient than the average ministry, it will get the value 0,5. The measurement of the portfolio salience of ministries is based on data from 2000-2002 (Druckman & Warwick, 2005, p. 22). In the time between this period and 2020, changes in salience might have occurred. Since portfolio salience is only used as a control variable, and given that the measurements of Druckman & Warwick (2005) are the most recent data available, and that it is unlikely that the salience of ministries will be significantly shifted, the indicator can still be used in this research.

For the remaining hypotheses, the *size of the minister's party* is used as a control variable. The larger the number of seats held by the party of a minister in parliament, the bigger the political capital of that minister and the more political influence a minister might have on appointments. Furthermore, in general, larger parties are also represented by more ministers in the cabinet, who can hinder appointments of other ministers. Smaller parties may therefore be less likely to exert political influence on appointments. The size of the minister's party is measured by the number of seats in the Lower House (*Tweede Kamer*) at the start of the coalition.

3.5.4 Variables regarding demographic, professional and political backgrounds

The variables described below are not used in the regression analyses that will be conducted as part of the explanatory goal of this thesis. The variables are included because they contribute to the descriptive goal of the thesis: describing the backgrounds and competencies of the population of secretaries-general in recent history. These variables are needed to present the characteristics of the secretaries-general in the examined period.

The *gender* of secretaries-general, again needed for both the last hypothesis and the descriptive data, is a dummy variable, coded 0 for males and 1 for females.

The *age at the time of appointment* of secretaries-general is measured by calculating the difference between the birth date of a secretary-general and the date of appointment.

The *educational level* of secretaries-general is measured by the highest level of education they received, based on their academic titles, whereby a distinction is made between PhD degrees, Master degrees, Bachelor Degrees and no higher education.

The *educational subjects*, i.e., the subjects of the education degrees are classified in broader subjects, namely economics and business administration (1); law (2); political and administrative sciences (3); technical sciences (4); natural sciences (5); social sciences (6); medicine (7); humanities (8); Defence and Police (9); other (10)

Ministerial managerial expertise is operationalized as a dummy variable, coded 1 if a secretary-general has worked as head of a ministry or ministry division (as it is operationalized in Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 262) prior to his or her appointment. In other research focused on government officials, management experience in the private sector is counted as managerial expertise as well (Real-Dato & Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016, p. 502). However, private sector organizations are in many ways different to government ministries, the latter having strict bureaucratic procedures, for example. As Bach & Veit note, managerial competencies in this area are defined as the “ability to efficiently orchestrate complex tasks in the specific context of a ministerial department characterized by distinct formal and informal procedures and structures” (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259). Therefore, for effective management in a ministry, experience in managing should come from working experience in a ministry context. In other words, managing a business is not counted as ministerial managerial expertise in this thesis.

Political craft is operationalized as a dummy variable, which will have a value of 1 if a secretary-general has had a career as an elected official or has worked as an assistant for elected politicians or government officials before their appointment for at least 12 months (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 262), or as a political party official. Party membership itself is not considered political expertise, since a party membership does not necessarily lead to knowledge of the political landscape and political craftsmanship. As Steen & Van der Meer (2011) note, political sensitivity as a competency for civil servants requires “knowledge about the political game, exceeding mere knowledge of political priorities or understanding of policy content” (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 221). Thus, a considerable amount of working experience within the political landscape seems necessary for political craft.

Below, a table with the operationalization of the most important variables is presented (*Table 1*)

Table 1 Operationalization of variables

Operationalization, measurement, and sources of variables			
Dependent variables	Operationalization	Source of variable	Measurement/range
<i>Secretary-general as watchdog</i>	Affiliation with different coalition party than his/her minister at the time of appointment.	Parlement.com	1=yes, 0=no
<i>Party match</i>	Secretary-general affiliated with same party as his/her minister at the time of appointment.	Parlement.com	1=yes, 0=no
<i>Private sector experience</i>	Worked ≥ 12 months in the private sector/business before appointment	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	1=yes, 0=no
<i>Professional policy expertise</i>	Education in the same policy area as ministry (technical expertise) and/or worked ≥ 12 months in the same area as ministry	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	1=yes, 0=no
Independent Variables	Operationalization	Source of variable	Measurement/range
<i>Ideological position minister's party</i>	Ideological score of minister's party on a right-left scale	Comparative Manifestos Project	Numerical score on a Right-Left scale, ranging from -23 (left-wing) to 23 (right-wing)
<i>Ideological distance minister</i>	Ideological score of minister's party deducted from mean cabinet ideology	Comparative Manifestos Project	Numerical score on a Right-Left scale
Control variables	Operationalization	Source of variable	Measurement/range
<i>Portfolio salience ministry</i>	Expert rating of portfolio salience of a ministry portfolio, whereby 1 is average salience	Druckman & Warwick (2005, p. 40)	Numerical score, Range between 0,55 and 2,02
<i>Seats of minister's party</i>	Amount of seats the minister's party has in the Lower House	Parlement.com	Absolute number of seats (range between 5 and 45)
Other variables	Operationalization	Source of variable	Measurement/range
<i>Managerial expertise</i>	Worked ≥ 12 months as head of a ministry or ministry division prior to appointment	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	1=yes, 0=no
<i>Political craft</i>	Worked ≥ 12 months as an elected official, a party official, or as an assistant for elected or	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	1=yes, 0=no

	government officials before appointment		
<i>Age at appointment</i>	Difference between birth date and date of appointment	Parlement.com	Age, rounded down
<i>Educational level</i>	Highest level of education received, based on academic titles	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	Master (1) PhD (2) Bachelor (3) No higher education (4)
<i>Educational subject</i>	Subjects of higher education degrees	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Algemene Bestuursdienst, Organizational websites	Economics/business (1) Law (2); Political/administrative sciences (3) Technical studies (4); Natural sciences (5); Social sciences (6); Medicine (7); Humanities (8); Defence/Police (9); Other (10)
<i>Party affiliation</i>	Known membership of a political party	Parlement.com, Newspaper articles, Organizational websites	1=PvdA, 2=VVD, 3=CDA, 4=D66, 5=CU, 6=LPF, 7=GroenLinks
<i>Gender</i>	Gender of secretary-general	Parlement.com	0=male, 1=female

3.6 Methods of analysis

For the first empirical part of the thesis, descriptive statistics are applied to give an overview of the general characteristics of the secretaries-general in recent years. In that way, a description of the population of secretaries-general is given, which contributes to the research goal of putting a spotlight on these mostly unknown top civil servants.

For the second empirical part, inferential statistics are applied. In particular, regression analyses are conducted, to examine the relationship between variables and thereby to test the hypotheses. The regression analyses will be conducted in Stata/MP (Version 16.0). Because the dependent variable is measured on a binary scale (a secretary-general is either affiliated with the same party as his or her ministry or not, has either expertise or not and has either private sector experience or not), a logistic regression is conducted. This method is a standard statistical method for examining the relationship between an independent variable and a binary dependent variable (Osborne, 2015, p. 4). The regression models will be as follows. Firstly, a simple logistic regression is conducted between the independent variables and each dependent variable. After that, the regressions will be conducted again with the control variables included. To confirm or reject the hypotheses, several indicators should be taken into account. This thesis uses four indicators:

- 1) *Nature and strength of the relationship between independent and dependent variables.*
Firstly, it is important to see if there is a correlation between the independent variable and the dependent variable, and the nature and strength of this relationship. This will be done by looking at the *odds ratios* and the *coefficients*.

- 2) *Statistical significance*. To exclude the possibility that the found relationship is based on mere coincidence, the results need to be statistically significant. The significance is measured through the *p-value*. The significance level will be set at 5% (0,05), a standard level in most academic studies.
- 3) *Confidence interval*. The confidence interval is helpful to see the variation of the values of the variables. A *95% confidence level* is taken, meaning that it is likely that the values of the variable will be between the lower and upper value of the interval (in 95 out of 100 times).
- 4) *Explained variation*. The explained variation is measured by the *Pseudo R-squared*, which indicates the percentage of variation of the dependent variable that is explained by the independent variable(s). However, it must be noted that there is academic disagreement whether the interpretation of the Pseudo R-squared is useful in logistic regressions (UCLA, n.d.). Therefore, no hard conclusions should be drawn from it.

3.7 Discussion on validity and reliability

It is important to ensure the reliability and the internal and external validity of the research that is conducted. In that way, the research will be replicable (reliability), the variables used in this research will be properly measured (internal validity) and the findings can be generalized to a larger population (external validity). Below, the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis regarding reliability and validity are discussed.

Because of the quantitative nature of this research, the reliability of this thesis will be strengthened through a transparent dataset of all the secretaries-general in the examined period.

Working with data derived from online curricula vitae has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the biographical data regarding the secretaries-general are collected from publicly available curricula vitae. All the data will therefore be traceable. In that way, it is likely that other researchers will get the same results using this data, which contributes to reliability (Toshkov, 2016, p. 117). However, since data in the curricula vitae are self-reported, the risk exists that some of these data are fabricated or portrayed favourably, and valuable information may be excluded (Dietz, 2000, p. 421). These limitations may weaken the reliability of the thesis, since the online curricula vitae that are studied may not be entirely complete.

The internal validity will be secured by using indicators that are used in earlier research, for example concerning portfolio salience and political, technical, and managerial expertise. It must be noted that some indicators still have flaws. This may have an effect on the internal validity. As Steen & Van der Meer notice, “hard evidence on political party patronage is lacking. Therefore, political party membership of top-level civil servants is often taken as an indicator. This evidence is rather weak, as it provides no information on the actual recruitment and selection procedure” (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 225). Furthermore, it must be noted that the party affiliation of top civil servants may not always be known. Indeed, earlier research stated that “it is perfectly possible, even likely that the data gathered on individual party affiliation are incomplete” (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2014, p. 405). This may lead to a certain bias in the analysis. However, this bias should not have significant influence, since earlier research

(Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014; Steen & Van der Meer, 2011) showed that the party affiliation of most Dutch secretaries-general is known. In addition, the measurement of political expertise is also questionable, since a person who did not work for a political party can still possess political skills and political sensitivity. However, despite their limitations, these indicators are still helpful. Since the indicators are measured in an objective way and the measurements are derived from earlier research, they are valuable for this thesis.

The external validity is high in the sense that all secretaries-general in recent history –that is to say, the period between 1994-2020- are included in the research, instead of a sample of secretaries-general. This avoids problems that may lead to a lack of generalization, such as sampling bias. However, it must be noted that the research cannot be generalized to the top civil service as a whole, because this top civil service also includes the directors and directors-general of ministries and government agencies, who are not included in this research. Given that solely the Dutch secretaries-general, the highest-ranking top civil servants, are the focus of this research, this is not problematic, since a generalization of the whole top civil service is not a goal of this research. Since the theoretical arguments are applied to the Dutch case and to a relatively recent period, the research cannot be easily generalized to earlier periods and other countries as well.

Chapter 4. Analysis

As outlined before, the analysis section is divided in a descriptive and explanatory part. Firstly, descriptive statistics of all the variables in the research will be presented. After that, the population of the secretaries-general in the period 1994-2020 will be described based on their demographic, professional and political backgrounds. In the explanatory part, the results of the logistical regression will be presented, addressing the explanatory part of this thesis, namely the extent to which party-political criteria influence appointments.

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Below, the descriptive statistics of the data that is being used are presented, for the interval and binary variables (*Table 2*) and the nominal variables (*Table 3*). Looking at *Table 2*, several remarks should be made. It must be noted that for several secretaries-general, the exact birth date is unknown. Hence, the number of observations of the variable ‘age at time of appointment’ is lower than 63. Studying the descriptive statistics of the variables that are used in this research, it is seen that there is considerable variation in the independent variables, with both left-wing ministers (-22,07) and right-wing ministers (22,63). Additionally, the absolute deviation from the minister’s party relative to the cabinet varies widely as well, ranging from 0,40 to 17,21. The mean ideological position is right-leaning (6,12). Looking at the dependent variables, it is seen that over a quarter of all secretaries-general was affiliated with a different coalition party than their minister (*SG as watchdog*) and another quarter was affiliated with the same party as their minister. There are few secretaries-general who gained private sector experience. However, almost two-thirds of the secretaries-general are considered to have professional expertise.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of the interval and binary variables

Descriptive statistics interval and binary variables					
Variables	Observations	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max
<i>Dependent variables</i>					
SG as watchdog	63	0,27	0,45	0	1
Party match	63	0,25	0,44	0	1
Private sector experience	63	0,13	0,34	0	1
Professional policy expertise	63	0,65	0,48	0	1
<i>Independent variables</i>					
Ideological position minister	63	6.12	12.58	-22.07	22.63
Ideological deviation minister (absolute)	63	8,77	5,54	0,40	17,21
<i>Control variables</i>					
Portfolio salience	63	1,18	0,36	0,74	2,02
Seats of minister’s party	63	33,87	8,87	5	45
<i>Variables regarding demographic, professional and political backgrounds</i>					
Political expertise	63	0,25	0,44	0	1

Ministerial managerial expertise	63	0,94	0,25	0	1
Gender	63	0,19	0,40	0	1
Age at time of appointment	55	51,9	5,04	42	62

In *Table 3* below, the descriptive statistics of the nominal variables are set out. Of one secretary-general, no information about the education was obtained. Hence, the *N* of the variable of educational degrees is 62. The observations of the variable of educational subjects lies above 63 (69), because some secretaries-general have obtained degrees in multiple studies (indeed, one secretary-general studied no less than three different subjects).

Table 3 Descriptive statistics of the nominal variables

Descriptive statistics nominal variables			
<i>Nominal variables regarding demographic, professional and political backgrounds</i>			
Variables	Category	Observations	Frequency
<i>Educational degrees (N=62)</i>	PhD	7	11,3%
	Master	55	88,7%
<i>Political parties SG (N=63)</i>	PvdA	16	25,4%
	CDA	12	19,0%
	VVD	8	12,7%
	D66	4	6,3%
	GroenLinks	1	1,6%
	No known party affiliation	22	34,9%
<i>Educational subjects (N=69)</i>	Economics (1)	21	30,4%
	Law (2)	13	18,8%
	Political/administrative sciences (3)	13	18,8%
	Technical sciences (4)	7	10,1%
	Natural sciences (5)	1	1,5%
	Social sciences (6)	1	1,5%
	Medicine (7)	1	1,5%
	Humanities (8)	6	8,7%
	Police/Defence (8)	2	2,9%
	Other (10)	4	5,8%

4.2 The backgrounds of the secretaries-general described

In this section, first the demographic data concerning the age and gender of the secretaries-general are presented. Then, the educational background of the secretaries-general will be outlined, followed by the party affiliation of the secretaries-general. After that, the competencies of the secretaries-general are described. By doing so, the question *which competencies the Dutch secretaries-general possessed in the period 1994-2020*, is addressed.

Age and gender

It is striking that in the examined period, very few women were appointed as secretary-general. Out of the 63 secretaries-general, 51 were men (81%). However, of the twelve female secretaries-general, nine were appointed since 2014, during the last six years of the examined period. Therefore, there might be a trend towards the appointment of more female secretaries-general and, accordingly, a more diverse and inclusive top civil service.

The average age of the appointed secretaries-general was 51,9 years. The youngest appointed secretary-general was 42, while the oldest was 62. Since many secretaries-general had a long ministerial career before they were appointed as secretary-general, the relatively seniority of secretaries-general may not be surprising.

Educational background

Almost all secretaries-general were highly educated. No less than 62 out of the 63 secretaries-general had received a Master's degree at the minimum. Seven of the secretaries-general (11%) had received a PhD degree, the highest academic degree. It can therefore be said that the educational level of the Dutch secretaries-general is very high.

Economics was by far the most studied subject among the secretaries-general, followed by law and political and administrative sciences. Indeed, 21 secretaries-general studied economics, while thirteen studied law and another thirteen studied political or administrative sciences. This may not be surprising, since all of these subjects are certainly useful in a political-administrative context; all policies have, in some degree, a financial and social-economic aspect. Furthermore, political and administrative sciences focus on the political and administrative system, in which the secretary-general and his or her political superior, the minister, play an important role. In addition, law is often seen as the “prototype” of administrative generalist civil servants (Bach & Veit, 2018, p. 259). Indeed, since policies and laws have a substantial judicial context, law might be an useful educational subject when working in the civil service.

Party affiliation

A considerable majority of the secretaries-general in the examined period had a known party affiliation. Indeed, 41 out of 63 secretaries-general were affiliated with a political party, which is almost one third of the examined population (65%). As *Figure 2* below shows, most of the secretaries-general (16) were affiliated with the social-democratic party PvdA, followed by the Christian-Democratic Party CDA (12), the liberal-conservative party VVD (8) and social-liberal party D66 (4). Interestingly, only one of the examined secretaries-general had a party affiliation of an opposition party (GroenLinks). No secretary-general was affiliated with either the right-populistic party LPF or the social-Christian party ChristenUnie, though these parties were represented in three of the nine cabinets in the examined period.

Figure 2 below visualises the party affiliations of the secretaries-general

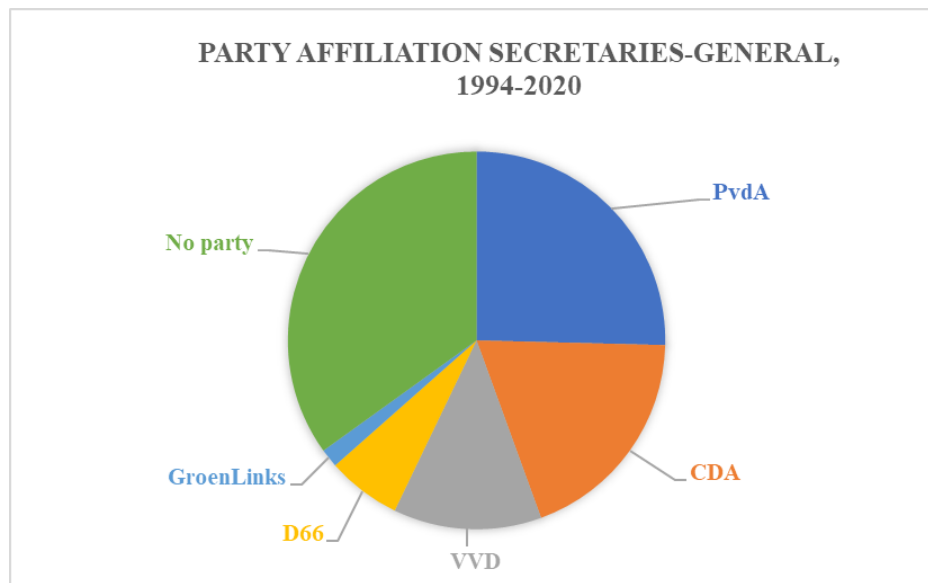


Figure 2 Party affiliation of secretaries-general

4.2.1 Merit-based competencies

The competencies of the secretaries-general will be examined based on three of the main merit-based competencies that may be desired of top civil servants, set out in the theoretical framework, namely professional policy expertise, managerial skills and political craft.

Technical-professional policy expertise

Out of the 63 secretaries-general, 41 can be considered a professional (technical and/or thematic) expert in their policy area (65%). In some ministries, professional policy experts were present in high numbers. In the ministry of Finance, for example, all five secretaries-general had an extensive career in financial policy, four of them having worked at the *Inspection der Rijksfinanciën* (Inspectorate of National Finances), a part of the ministry of Finance. In addition, out of the six secretaries-general at the ministry of Foreign Affairs, five (83%) had a long career at the Foreign Service, being diplomats and ambassadors before their position as secretary-general. In the ministries of Education, Economic Affairs, Justice and Interior, 80% of appointed secretaries-general had professional policy expertise. The ministries with the lowest amount of appointed secretaries-general with professional policy expertise were Defence, Social Affairs (both 40%) and Public Health (20%). The professional policy expertise of secretaries-general was mainly acquired through thematic expertise, or through a combination of thematic and technical expertise. In other words, most of the policy expertise was gained during the careers of the secretaries-general.

Managerial skills

Almost all secretaries-general (59 out of 63, i.e. 94%) acquired ministerial managerial expertise before their appointment as secretary-general. Many secretaries-general climbed up at the ministerial hierarchy, beginning as ministerial employees at the start of their career. During their employment in the ministry, they were being promoted as directors or even directors-general, before, eventually, being appointed as secretary-general. In addition, some secretaries-general had another secretary-general position at another ministry prior to their new appointment. Considering the relatively high amount of secretaries-general who possessed managerial skills in the ministry prior to their appointment, this competence seems to be almost a prerequisite for becoming secretary-general.

Political craft

Despite that almost two-thirds of the secretaries-general had a known party affiliation (see *Figure 2* above), only 16 secretaries-general (25%) can be considered to be having acquired political craft in a formal way, for example by having worked as mayor, alderman, a party official, and assistant to politicians prior to their appointments. Of course, this does not mean that the rest of the secretaries-general did not possess any political know-how.

Combination of competencies

Interestingly, only nine out of the 63 secretaries-general (14,3%) possessed all of the above competencies and are thus considered both a policy expert, managerial skilled, as political experienced. Not a single secretary-general was lacking all these competencies. In other words, every secretary-general possessed one of the above competencies at the minimum.

Summing up: competent top civil servants?

Looking at the results of the analysis of the competencies that the Dutch secretaries-general possess, the following can be noted. Managerial skills in a ministerial context is the most acquired competency within the population of secretaries-general. Almost all of the secretaries-general (94%) had possessed these skills prior to their appointment, by working as the head of a ministry or ministry division. The competency of professional policy expertise, derived from either prior education or work experience, was found in almost two-thirds of the studied secretaries-general (65%). Political craft derived from prior political work experience was found in just a quarter of the secretaries-general (25%).

Figure 3 below presents the competencies of the secretaries-general visually.

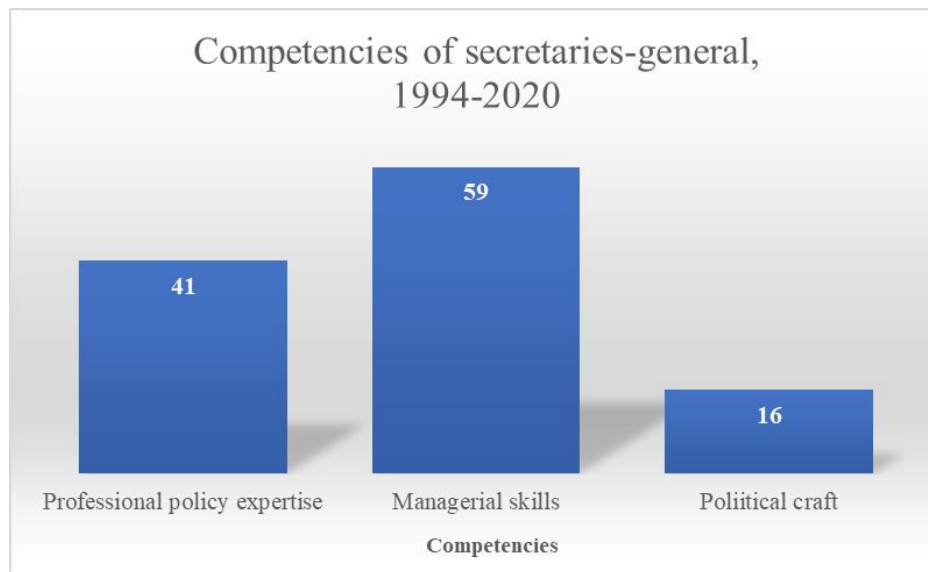


Figure 3 Competencies of secretaries-general, in absolute numbers

4.2 Political considerations in the appointments of secretaries-general

In this section, the hypotheses that were formulated in the theory section in chapter two, about the role of the ideological position of the minister on the political criteria that are sought in top civil servants, will be tested, so that they can either be confirmed or rejected. In that way, the question *how party-political considerations played a role in the appointment of secretaries-general* is addressed.

As explained in chapter three, the statistical test that is being used is a logistic regression. Below, the outcome of the simple logistic regression is presented in *Table 4*. The outcome of the multiple logistic regression, which includes the control variables, is presented in *Table 5*. The outcome of the multiple regression shows somewhat similar results in terms of the odds ratios (*Table 5*). However, the scores of the pseudo R-squared are slightly higher in the multiple regression model. This is not surprising, since the pseudo R-squared explains the proportion of the variation that is explained by all independent variables.

Table 4 Simple logistic regression analysis

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval)	Standard Error Odds Ratio	P-value	Pseudo R-squared
SG as a watchdog	Ideological deviation minister	-.020	.980 (.886; 1.084)	.050	.692	.002
Party Match	Ideological position minister	-.026	.975 (.932; 1.020)	.022	.264	.018
Private sector experience	Ideological position minister	-.023	.977 (.923; 1.035)	.029	.430	.013
Professional policy expertise	Ideological position minister	.000	1.000 (.960; 1.043)	.021	.986	.000

Note: results rounded down to three decimals.

Table 5 Multiple logistic regression analysis

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Coefficient	Odds Ratio (95% confidence interval)	Standard error Odds Ratio	P-value	Pseudo R-squared
SG as a watchdog ¹	Ideological deviation minister	-.019	.981 (.886; 1.087)	.051	.716	.003
Party Match ²	Ideological position minister	-.021	.979 (.935; 1.026)	.023	.377	.092
Private sector experience ²	Ideological position minister	-.022	.978 (.924; 1.035)	.028	.446	.015
Professional policy expertise ²	Ideological position minister	.001	1.001 (.959; 1.044)	.022	.981	.016

¹ Controlled for portfolio salience. ² Controlled for seats of minister's party. *Note:* results rounded down to three decimals.

Hypothesis 1: 'watchdog' secretaries-general

The first hypothesis stated that “the more a minister's ideology differs from the mean ideology of his cabinet, the higher the amount of secretaries-general that are affiliated with a different coalition party as their ministers”.

The simple logistic regression analysis shows an odds ratio of 0.980 (*Table 4*), meaning there is a very small negative relationship between the absolute deviation of the minister's party from the coalition centre and the presence of a secretary-general from a different coalition party than their minister. However, the effect is not statically significant and the confidence interval includes the value '1'. Because it was expected that the absolute deviation of the minister's ideology has a positive effect on the appointment of a 'watchdog' secretary-general, the hypothesis is rejected. There is thus no evidence that secretaries-general are appointed as a 'watchdog'.

Hypothesis 2: party match between secretaries-general and minister

According to the second hypothesis, it was expected that “the more right-wing a minister's ideology is, the fewer secretaries-general are appointed that are affiliated with the minister's political party”.

The simple logistic regression analysis shows that there is an odds ratio of 0.975 (*Table 4*). There is thus a very small negative relationship between the right-wing ideology of the minister and the appointment of a secretary-general from the same party as their minister. This is in line with the hypothesis. However, the relationship is not statistically significant and in addition, the confidence interval includes the value '1', a value that means that there is no relationship. There is thus no scientific evidence that ministers with a left-wing ideology appoint more secretaries-general with the same party affiliation. Hypothesis 2 is therefore rejected.

Hypothesis 3: private sector experience of secretaries-general

The third hypothesis stated that “the more right-wing a minister's ideology is, the more secretaries-general with private sector experience are appointed”.

The simple logistic regression analysis shows that there is a very small, negative relationship (odds ratio of 0.977, *Table 4*) between the degree of right-wing ideology of the minister, and the appointment of secretaries-general with private sector experience. This relationship goes against the expectation of the hypothesis and again, the relationship is not significant. Additionally, again the confidence interval includes the value '1'. Therefore, the third hypothesis is rejected as well.

Hypothesis 4: professional policy expertise of secretaries-general

Following the fourth hypothesis, it was expected that “the more right-wing the ideology of the minister is, the more chance a secretary-general is a professional expert in his policy area”.

The logistic regression analysis shows that a relationship is negligible (a rounded odds ratio of 1.00, see *Table 4*). In addition, the p-value is very high (.986). According to the regression results, there is thus no relationship between the degree of right-wing ideology of the minister and the appointment of professional policy experts as secretaries-general. This means that the fourth hypothesis is rejected as well.

4.3 Linking the results back to the theoretical framework

In this section, a reflection will follow upon the research that was conducted. Below, the results of the descriptive and explanatory analyses will be connected to the theoretical framework of this study. Potential explanations and the interpretation of the outcomes of the descriptive and regression analyses will be discussed.

4.3.1 Merit-based competencies

In the descriptive analysis section of this thesis, it became clear that ministerial managerial expertise was present in almost all secretaries-general. This finding is in line with the theoretical argument that managerial competencies are essential for effective top civil servants (Bach & Veit, 2018). This thesis showed that, also in the Netherlands, managerial expertise in the ministry seems to be an important requirement of a secretary-general.

Considering that political craft is seen as an important competency in parliamentary democracies with assertive parliaments (Goetz, 1997), and that the Netherlands fits this description (‘t Hart & Wille, 2006), the relatively low amount of secretaries-general with political craft is somewhat remarkable. However, it might be the case that the chosen indicator is insufficient to detect political craft. Indeed, informal skills and proven knowledge of the political game may play a role. That is to say, it might be the case that instead of formal political work experience, informal considerations, such as understanding the political game, may be counted as political craft in the appointment process, for example by demonstrating political insight during a job interview. Furthermore, it can be argued that being a politician, in general, demands different characteristics than being a civil servant (think of a short term versus a long term vision). This might also partly explain the relatively low amount of secretaries-general who gained political experience.

Professional policy expertise was found in a majority of the examined secretaries-general (65%). Therefore, despite the academic discussions on the need for generalists versus specialists, there seems to be considerable attention for technical-professional policy expertise in the Netherlands. On the other hand, in terms of education, generalist studies, such as economics, political science and law were the most obtained degrees among the secretaries-general. In that regard, a more generalist view is also present within the population of secretaries-general.

4.3.2 Responsive competencies and political criteria

Since all hypotheses were rejected, it is important to consider the reasons why this might have occurred. Each hypothesis will be discussed separately below.

‘Watchdog’ role (hypothesis 1)

Based on the regression analysis, no evidence was found for the ‘watchdog’ hypothesis. Therefore, it seems that secretaries-general are not appointed based on their potential role to monitor their ministers on behalf of another coalition party. This finding is somewhat similar to the results of the research of Ennser-Jedenastik (2016), which looked at the relationship between portfolio salience and the presence of a ‘watchdog’ secretary-general. This thesis used a different independent variable, namely the ideological deviation between the minister’s party and the coalition as a whole. The analysis showed that there is also no relationship between the ideological deviation of the minister’s party and the appointment of a ‘watchdog’ secretary-general. It is thus unlikely that Dutch secretaries-general fulfil a watchdog role, let alone that they are appointed to monitor ministers. Considering that the secretaries-general are the civil servants who are at the closest proximity of the minister, it is also unlikely that other top civil servants, such as directors(-general) play such a ‘watchdog’ role.

Party match (hypothesis 2)

Although it was hypothesized that ministers at the left-side of the political spectrum would want to appoint more secretaries-general affiliated with the same party, no significant relationship was found between the political ideology of the minister and the party match between the secretary-general and his minister. The theoretical argument that ministers at the left-wing of the political spectrum appoint more party loyalist because they are more suspicious towards a bureaucracy that is relatively conservative and status-quo oriented, does not hold true based on the regression analysis. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are less suspicious than ministers at the right-wing of the political spectrum. It is outside of the scope of this thesis to examine, and somewhat speculative, but ministers might seek other opportunities to address this problem, such as delegating less tasks to civil servants, and listening more to the political appointed political assistant and less to the secretary-general. Another potential explanation may be that the Dutch top civil service is less status-quo oriented than was expected; it was seen that most of the secretaries-general with a party affiliation, were member of the social-democratic party PvdA.

Private sector background (hypothesis 3)

No evidence was found that ministers positioned at the right-wing of the political spectrum appoint more secretaries-general with a private sector background in comparison to ministers positioned at the left-wing of the political spectrum. It must be noted that, given the limited secretaries-general who had a career in the private sector, it would be very hard to see a relationship in the first place. A potential explanation of the low amount of secretaries-general with experience in the private sector, lies in the presence, or absence, of public service motivation (PSM). PSM can be defined as an “individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions” (Perry & Wise 1990, in Perry, 1996, p. 6) and characteristics of PSM are being attracted to public policy making and being committed to the public interest (Perry & Wise, 1990). Individuals may choose to work in the private sector, or in the public sector. If someone has a high PSM, it may be less likely that they choose to work for the private sector in the first place. In addition, if a potential candidate for the position of secretary-general has had an extensive career in the private sector, but lacks ministerial management expertise, it may be unlikely that (s)he is appointed, because of the importance of managerial management expertise as a desired competence. Furthermore, the differences in wages between the private and public sector can be considerable, making a transition from a private to a public career less attractive. Lastly, a secretary-general is a top position that requires a lot of devotion in the centre of political attention. This may not always seem attractive for private sector employees. All these factors may limit the potential pool of candidates with a private sector background.

Professional policy expertise (hypothesis 4)

No relationship was found between the ideology of the minister and the appointment of professional policy experts, going against the hypothesis that right-wing political parties put a higher value on technocracy and, consequently, appoint more experts as secretaries-general. In fact, this finding can actually be seen a strengthening of the argument that professional policy expertise is primarily a merit-based competency, which is desired from civil servants regardless of the ideologies of the ministers they serve. Furthermore, while it was shown empirically that in Belgium, civil servants and politicians on the right-wing of the political spectrum were more in favour of technocracy, this may not apply to the Netherlands.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This chapter will give a summary of the research that was conducted. In addition, this chapter will answer the research question that was posed in the introduction of this thesis and will elaborate upon this thesis's findings. Furthermore, there will be reflected upon the research that was conducted. Limitations of this study will be set out, several suggestions for further research will be made and lastly, a normative judgement is given, and several concrete policy recommendations will be presented.

While top civil servants play an important role within government, empirical data of their backgrounds is limited. More importantly, because of mixed signs about the potential politicization of the top civil service, it is not clear how party-political considerations influence the appointments of top civil servants, or, in other words, if the appointment of top civil servants is politicized.

Hence, this thesis asked the following research question. *“Which competencies did Dutch secretaries-general possess in the period 1994-2020, and how did party-political considerations play a role in the appointment of these secretaries-general?”* Through descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses, this thesis aimed to answer this question.

The research question can be split into two parts. The first part of the question is of a descriptive nature: *Which competencies did Dutch secretaries-general possess in the period 1994-2020?*

Reviewing the literature about top civil servant competencies, three main competencies are essential for an effective top civil servant. A top civil servant must efficiently administer a complex ministerial machine, which asks for ministerial managerial skills. Additionally, a top civil servant must give his or her minister technical advice on policies. Therefore, having technical knowledge about the policy area is important. Furthermore, facing assertive parliaments and considerable media attention, a top civil servant must see the political implications of policies, and give political-strategic advice to their minister, which asks for political craft.

Studying the 63 secretaries-general appointed between Augustus 1994 and November 2020, it was seen that almost all of them acquired managerial skills in a ministerial context. Almost two third of them can be seen as an expert in their ministerial policy area. However, only a quarter acquired political craft prior to their position.

Next to merit-based, neutral competencies, ministers seek responsive competencies that help them to pursue their political preferences. Since the appointment procedure leaves ample scope for political considerations in the appointment process of top civil servants, it is important to know if these considerations indeed play a role. The second part of the question posed is therefore of an explanatory nature: *how did party-political considerations play a role in the appointment of secretaries-general?*

Studying the academic literature, several hypotheses about the role of ideology in the appointment of civil servants were set out. Based on the ‘watchdog’ theory, coalition parties have the incentive to monitor ministers from another party, so that they do not deviate from the agreements made in the coalition. Since ministers whose ideology differs a lot from the mean

ideology of the coalition have the most incentives to deviate from the coalition agreement, it was expected that ‘the more a minister’s ideology differs from the mean ideology of his or her cabinet, the higher the amount of appointed secretaries-general that are affiliated with a different coalition party as their ministers’. Furthermore, it was argued that ministers at the left-wing of the political spectrum, generally in favour of high government spending and progressive policies, would be more inclined to appoint party loyalists, because of the conservative and status-quo oriented nature of the bureaucracy. Therefore, it was expected that ‘the more left-wing a minister’s ideology is, the more secretaries-general are appointed that are affiliated with the minister’s political party’. It was also argued that ministers positioned at the right-wing of the political spectrum, who have a more positive view about the merits of the market, would favour individuals with a private sector experience in their appointments. Hence, it was expected that ‘the more right-wing a minister’s ideology is, the more secretaries-general with private sector experience are appointed’. Lastly, it was argued that ministers at the right-wing of the political spectrum would be more in favour of technocracy and expertise-driven policymaking, leading to the last expectation: ‘The more right-wing the ideology of the minister, the more chance a secretary-general is a professional expert in his policy area.

Based on the logistic regression analyses, all hypotheses were rejected. Therefore, based on the findings of this thesis, it seems that party-political considerations did not play a significant role in the appointment of secretaries-general. It should be noted, however, that on a limited scale, undetected by the statistical analysis of this thesis, political considerations still might have played a role in the appointments.

It might be somewhat surprising that all hypotheses were rejected, and that politicization based on party-political preferences did not seem to play a substantial role. Especially given the relatively high share of secretaries-general with party affiliation that was not only found in this research, but also in earlier research (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016, Steen & Van der Meer, 2011). However, there is a potential explanation for this high percentage of secretaries-general with a political party affiliation. This may be due to a sincere interest in politics and social engagement. Secretaries-general have an important role in a political-administrative context and are often dealing with policies that have a huge impact on society. Therefore, it may be only logical to be affiliated with a political party, showing interest in the political game. So, although many secretaries-general are a member of a political party, the appointment of secretaries-general is not necessarily politicized.

A contextual factor that might also partly explain the lack of politicization, can be found in the practice of coalition governance. Although the ‘watchdog’ hypothesis is based on coalition governance, in general it might be more difficult to politicize appointments in coalitions. Coalitions consist of multiple parties with different preferences. For example, if a social-democratic minister wants to appoint a party loyalist, it might be the case that the conservative-liberal ministers in the same cabinet strongly advise against it. This in contrast to the US Presidential system, where one party has much influence on appointments, especially when the majority of Congress match the party affiliation of the President.

Additionally, it may be the case that political assistants, who unlike the rest of the civil service are appointed purely on political grounds, bring the responsive competencies that ministers

seek, such as partisan loyalty and sharing the minister's worldview. However, their role is informal (Vancoppenolle, Noordegraaf & Van der Steen, 2011) and they have no formal control over the bureaucracy. In other words, unlike top civil servants, their role and rank are limited, and there is only one political assistant per minister at the maximum (Bekker, 2012, p. 389). Therefore, this does not seem to be a very convincing explanation.

Another potential reason why politicization of appointment does not seem to occur, may be the desire to have critical top civil servants who truly speak 'truth to power', and who do not necessarily share the ideologies or world views of the ministers they serve. If a top civil servant is appointed who shares the ideological line and worldview of the minister, this might lead to 'tunnel vision' and less effective policies. Discussions about what is needed may lead to better policies.

Lastly, despite a shortening of the terms of secretaries-general and consequently, increasing opportunities to politicize appointments (Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016), the fact that the top of the civil service stays in position after a shift in government, may limit the potential to politicize. Other than the United States, where top-level positions become vacant after a change of government, positions do not come vacant that often.

However, it should not be ruled out that at a limited scale, politicization of appointments still occurs. While the regression analyses showed no associations between political ideology and responsive competencies, that does not mean that no minister introduced political criteria in the appointment process. For example, the five ministers who served in cabinets on behalf of the social-democratic PvdA might still have appointed party-loyalists because they are suspicious of the 'conservative' civil service, as pointed out in the party match hypothesis. Additionally, some secretaries-general might still have been appointed as 'watchdogs'. Thus, while no systematic evidence was found on politicization, it does not mean that it does not occur at all.

5.1 Contribution to existing scholarship

This research aimed to address the theoretical and empirical gaps in the literature. Thereby, this thesis has had, though somewhat incrementally, a theoretical and empirical contribution to the existing literature.

The empirical contribution to the academic literature, lies in the identification of the core competencies of Dutch top civil servants. By analysing the backgrounds of all secretaries-general in recent history, the competencies of ministerial management expertise, professional policy expertise and political craft were identified in the highest-ranking Dutch top civil servants.

The theoretical contribution of this thesis is the examination of the role of political ideology on the responsive competencies and political criteria that are sought in top civil servants. The theoretical arguments were not confirmed in this thesis, which is an interesting finding. Based on the findings of this thesis, the role of political-ideological considerations in the appointment process seem to be very small at best. A good thing is that this research looked beyond purely party affiliation, which is the main focus on existing research about politicization, but also on

factors of ‘sharing the minister’s worldview’, such as private sector experience and technocratic- professional expertise that were expected to be favoured by ministers at the right-wing of the political spectrum.

Concerning the PSB-framework, mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, a few things can be noted as for the Dutch context. In the introduction of this thesis, it was argued that the exact competencies civil servants possess and the degree of loyalty that is expected varies greatly (Christensen & Yesilkagit, 2019). This thesis showed that managerial skills are one of the most possessed competencies. This is in line with the notion that since the ‘new public management’ approach, managerialism became a dominant vision in the administrative sphere (Steen & Van der Meer, 2011, p. 210). However, in contrast to Steen & Van der Meer, who stated that rather than specialized knowledge, generalist views are more important, it was seen that a considerable majority of the secretaries-general had gained knowledge on the policy field of the ministries to which they were appointed. As for loyalty, it was seen that appointments are not necessarily based on responsive criteria. However, this does of course not imply that the secretaries-general are not loyal.

A generalisation of the outcomes of this study to other contexts is hard to make, because of “the huge cross-national variation in administrative traditions and civil service systems” (Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2016, p. 468). However, it can be expected that, since secretaries-general have a lot of influence and a high profile, incentives for politicization might be greatest for these highest-ranking positions, in contrast to lower levels of the civil service. Thus, it is not expected that lower-level civil servants face politicized appointments. In terms of competencies, it might be expected that there is more professional policy expertise present in directors, since they are focused on a single policy area.

5.2 Limitations of the research

This research has some important limitations that should not be left unmentioned. Therefore, they will be discussed below.

First of all, with a *N* of 63, there is a relatively limited number of observations. This may have contributed to the statistical insignificance of the outcomes of the logistical regressions. More observations could lead to more significant results. However, as explained in chapter three, there were good reasons to focus on the chosen period (1994-2020) and the chosen actors (secretaries-general). This relatively narrow focus consequently did not provide a large number of observations.

The scope of this thesis is restricted, which has some implications. The explanatory part of this research only looked at the role of the ideological position of ministers, which was the independent variable in this thesis. However, political criteria and responsive competencies also focus on sharing the minister’s worldview. For example, ministers might have more subtle and informal political or personal criteria such as the requirement of the secretary-general to have studied at the same university, or to have studied the same subject as his or her minister. Therefore, there may be other independent variables that might explain the desire for responsive

competencies. In addition, there might be other responsive competencies that this study did not capture. In other words, there might be more dependent variables.

In addition, while this thesis described three of the most important merit-based competencies, these three are not the only competencies and in that regard, the descriptive part is not complete. Other, more informal competencies, such as being a networker, being diplomatic, being creative and having high integrity, are not examined in this thesis. However, the three competencies that stood central in this research are among the most important ones and are mentioned in many different academic articles, unlike other competencies. Furthermore, they can be objectively examined, in contrast to, for example, being creative. Therefore, the results are still valuable for both theory and practice.

This thesis had a purely quantitative approach towards answering the research question. As said in chapter three, quantitative methods are eminently useful for the focus of this study. However, by applying only quantitative methods, in-depth knowledge is hard to gain. For example, by interviewing ministers and civil servants, preferences for certain competencies might be tracked down. Additionally, a document analysis, for example, can look at the requirements that are asked from top civil servants in vacancies.

Lastly, the theoretical arguments of this thesis were partly based on literature focusing on other countries than the Netherlands (especially Scandinavia, the United States and Belgium). It might be the case that institutional differences between the Netherlands and those countries might have an effect on the applicability theoretical arguments.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

As the empirical data on the backgrounds of civil servants still remains limited, more cases are desirable. This can be done by expanding the population. Further research might also include other top-level civil servants, such as directors and directors-general, in the population. Because there are far more directors and directors-general than there are secretaries-general, opportunities to politicize appointments may also arise more frequently with these positions. It might also be interesting to examine appointments in public organizations that are at a certain distance from a ministry, such as appointments in the boards of directors of public organizations. There, politicization may be more likely since those organizations are further away from direct control of the minister. Since control is the main motivation for politicization, there might potentially be more incentives to politicize those appointments.

This thesis only looked at politicization through appointments, i.e., formal politicization. However, there can be other forms of politicization as well, such as functional politicization. Functional politicization is a mechanism “by which the civil service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behaviour” (Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014, p. 750). It might be the case that appointments in itself are not politicized, while top civil servants are still performing responsive tasks. Further research can examine if this is indeed the case, for example by sending questionnaires to top civil servants, or interviewing top civil servants, asking for their responsive behaviour.

Another suggestion for further research in line with this thesis is to look at the process that preceded an appointment: the resignations of secretaries-general. Indeed, resignations can also be politicized and can leave scope for an appointment of a more favourable secretary-general. For example, a secretary-general who often disagrees with his or her minister, may be forced to resign by this minister, so that a new secretary-general who shares the minister's preferences can be appointed. In addition, it is important to know the competencies of the resigned secretaries-general, to see if they are significantly different than the newly appointed secretaries-general. In short, it is suggested to look at the political affiliation and the competencies of the secretary-general who resigned, in addition to those who were newly appointed. In that way, a more complete picture may be derived.

Since a generalisation to other governmental and administrative systems is hard to make, more comparative research is needed. For example, the same research design might be applied to European countries that have other contexts than the Netherlands, such as the United Kingdom with its majority system, in contrast to the Dutch system of coalition governance. It might be the case that in other countries, there will be empirical support for the hypotheses that were set out.

5.4 Normative judgements, implications, and policy recommendations

It can be normatively seen as desirable that there is no evidence of an important role of political criteria in the appointment process, since politicization often has a negative effect on legitimacy (Dahlström & Niklasson, 2013). In this light, the findings of this thesis show an optimistic sign, since political-ideological criteria do not seem to play a role in the appointment process. It seems that the merit-system works well and does not seem to be misused for political ends. However, responsive competencies are also an important means to serve the ministers and the government of the day. A normative debate about the desirability of responsive competencies may be helpful.

In the introduction of this thesis, criticism from both politicians and experts concerning a perceived lack of technical expertise among top civil servants was addressed. It turned out that a majority of the secretaries-general can be considered a professional policy expert. Although this does not say anything about top civil servants with a lower rank, who were not examined in this thesis, the concerns seem, as for the secretaries-general concerned, not entirely justified.

Based on the research that has been conducted, there is a policy recommendation that might be worth considering and might improve the quality of the administration. It was seen that only few secretaries-general acquired political craft through the work experience prior to their appointments. Therefore, more attention for political craft may be useful. Especially now, when the parliament is more and more divided, with many different fractions, and when failures of ministry departments receive a spotlight. For example, the recent concerns about the *Belastingdienst* (tax authority) suggest that a better political antenna of civil servants is needed. Therefore, in future appointment processes, it might be helpful to put a greater emphasis on the competency of having acquired political craft, as a complement to the other competencies. However, this should not come at the cost of the other competencies.

For the concluding remarks, it seems only right to address the very first words of this thesis. The question posed in the title of this thesis asks: *'Merit or politicization in the Dutch top civil service?'*. Noting that merit-based competencies, in particular managerial skills, are to a great extent present in secretaries-general, and that this thesis found no evidence for an impact of political ideology on the appointments of secretaries-general, this thesis contributes to the notion that merit is decisive in the appointment of top civil servants.

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