

Politics for Hire: Policy Professionals in the Age of Neoliberalization

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In this paper I focus on a particular category of political actors, who are neither elected representatives nor public administrators. These actors, whom I call *policy professionals*, are people who are *employed* to affect politics and policy rather than elected to office. They are increasingly found as political and policy advisors in government agencies and political parties, in interest organizations, think tanks, and private firms, such as public relations (PR) agencies. They include political advisors, political secretaries, press chiefs, trade union, and business association experts, Public Affairs specialists, lobbyists, and think-tankers.

Policy professionals are not politicians, because they are not elected to office. But at the same time they are not civil servants or public administrators. What makes policy professionals distinct from other categories of professionals involved in policy-making is the specific partisan element of their work. They are employed or hired by organizations (such as private companies, political parties, think tanks, or interest organizations) in order to promote the interests of these organizations and their constituencies, and they are expected to share the basic values of the employing organizations. They are expected to be partial, regardless of whether this partiality is on a semi-permanent basis (such as political advisors to a leading politician) or varies from task to task (such as Public Affairs consultants acting on behalf of paying customers).

Policy professionals thus represent a third category of actors involved in politics and policy-making, one that has so far attracted considerably less research interest than elected politicians and public administrators. Although their numbers have grown substantially in recent decades, comparatively little is known about their composition, influence, motivations, or careers.

The growth in their numbers seems to be driven by several factors: (i) the increased complexity of politics and policy-making, which leads to demands for increased steering capacity and for more elaborate advocacy and policy advice skills; (ii) the intensified mediatization of politics, which is now a 24/7 pursuit in which the demands for constant media presence necessitate a large staff of political and media specialists; (iii) endogenous growth, in which the fact that one's opponents employ scores of skilled specialists necessitates that one follow suit and employ such people oneself, at the same time as the supply of professional advisors grows in tandem with the demand for such specialized skills.

Policy professionals are a heterogeneous set of actors, but with common characteristics. It is not clear whether policy professionals should best be conceptualized as a *category*, or whether it would be more fruitful to see partisan policy professionalism as a *field* in Bourdieu's sense, in which actors struggle for recognition and in which the boundaries of the field are themselves the object of political struggle. Regardless of all this, I think it is important to take a broad view of who and where policy professionals are. Policy professionals often move between different positions in a broad organizational landscape, but they essentially do very similar things and use similar skills, irrespective of their exact organizational location and whether such positions are inside or outside government.

Modi operandi: Skills and networks

Starting with the typical modi operandi of policy professionals, one thing that emerges very clearly from the comparative interviews is the peculiarly “glocal” structure of their activities. What they do is at the same time almost completely context-bound and almost context-free. Policy professionals are extremely dependent on their local networks, which provide local information. Their social capital is transferrable between contexts only to a very small degree; they cannot move from Riga to Stockholm or The Hague and expect to be efficient in their role; they would have to start almost from scratch. Moreover, physical presence is key to what they do; all politics is local, even in the age of instant global communication. Trust has to be built and that requires physical meetings. So everything that policy professionals do takes place within “a square mile” within each capital city, and both their day-to-day activities and their careers are more or less bound to this particular context.

At the same time, the skills and operations they apply in their respective settings are of a fairly generic kind. Policy professionals in Riga, Brussels, and Stockholm do very similar things regardless of the organizational-institutional structure in which they are embedded.

The key skill that policy professionals bring to bear on politics and policy-making is the deployment of context-dependent politically useful knowledge, in three main forms. *Problem formulation* involves highlighting and framing social problems and their possible solutions, using research and other relevant knowledge. *Process expertise* consists of “knowing the game” and understanding the “where, how, and why” of the political and policy-making processes. *Information access* is the skill of finding very fast and reliable relevant information.

The services that policy professionals supply are not only local and global at the same time, they are also both personalized and professionalized. They are personalized because based on personal reputation, trust, loyalty, and reciprocity. The relations between

policy professionals and their principals are often close and tied to these specific persons rather than based in meritocracy and impersonal formalized relations. Their networks need constant tending and the exchange of mutual benefits (such as information). At the same time, their operations are of a highly professionalized kind, based both in science and on-the-job socialization, and marketable.

The typical style of advocacy and advice among European policy professionals is soft-spoken rather than brazen, as Cornelia Woll put it. This implies learning what the other part needs, and finding common ground in issues and arguments. *I'm a lobbyist, and I'm here to help you* would be the typical European style of advocacy, rather than the American *Do as my client wants, or bad things will happen*. US-based lobbyists often have to be re-educated in this respect when they come to Brussels or elsewhere in Europe; they have to learn that implicit or explicit threats will only shut them out, while providing “help” will go down much better among decision-makers.

It is important to note that policy professionals are rarely ideology-free or free-floating. They are not simply “guns for hire” who will work for any and all aims and purposes: not even PA consultants or hired communication advisers are in it only for the money; they are committed to causes and principles. Policy professionals are deeply embedded in organizational structures and driven by values and commitment.

The attractions of power

This means that policy professionals, regardless of their exact organizational location, are just as political as politicians (even though most of them say they are *not* politicians). They are typically not simple assistants, or “helpers”; they are deeply involved in political strategy and policy-making. And they are driven by the attractions of power, in a twofold sense. Power is attractive both as agency, having the ability to change the course of affairs, and as proximity, being present in the rooms where power is wielded and important decisions are made.

Policy professionals are typically not interested in the media spotlight; many of them are even repulsed by the thought of being exposed to the same degree of personal media attention as leading politicians are. They prefer to stay behind the scenes, in the shadows. But they are interested in affecting how society and policies change – or just how the next debate plays out.

Becoming a policy professional can be a step towards becoming a leading politician or policy-maker oneself. Some political advisors or parliamentary assistants clearly see their current job as a training ground for eventually taking the helm themselves.

But many more policy professionals see their jobs as part of an alternative political career to trying for elected office. In becoming policy professionals, they have found a way to work full-time in politics, affecting the course of events and being part of all the political buzz and excitement – but without having to expose themselves to intrusive media attention, difficult party members, and an unappreciative public.

A market for political skills

The skills and experiences that policy professionals acquire can be turned into commodities to be sold in the market. A politically defined labor market has emerged over the past few decades, in which skills, contacts, and information are bought and sold. The prime buyer of this very specific form of human capital is the lobbying industry, broadly defined. Large companies, business associations, think tanks, PR and communication advice agencies are constantly looking for people with political skills and experience that may be useful for their organizations and clients. But in many European settings, trade unions and civil society organizations are also employers in the policy professional labor market.

In this particular labor market, skills are typically more important than contacts. Individuals are replaced, and in strong party-based systems personal contacts with individual politicians and policy-makers are not as important as in more individualized political systems. But know-how about the political system, about where, when, and how decisions are made, and how best to approach politicians remains crucial. These are the particular skills that the lobbying industry covets most of all.

But between government and lobbying is a two-way street. Research interest has usually focused on people who leave government for lobbying, focusing on the skills they bring with them and how they use their political contacts in their new lobbying positions. But people also come back from lobbying to government, because they are attracted by being once again at the center of political decision-making, or because they found lobbying morally vacuous or dubious. In this back-and-forth between politics and business, both institutional spheres are to some extent transformed.

What ultimately determines hierarchies in this political labor market, and what is seen as upward or downward movement in terms of a career, is access to power. Money is important, but there are other professional lines of work where it is possible to make much more money. But there is no other labor market that may give access to the highest offices of decision-making, and opportunities to affect the course of events, and that is regardless of whether you are working inside or outside government.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the skills and activities of policy professionals seem to represent some broader trends in the current political economy of advanced capitalist societies. One is that their activities represent a blurring of institutional boundaries, in this case between business corporations and government, between markets and politics. This amounts to a dual development: the corporatization of politics and the politicization of the corporation. The former means that concepts, strategies, and ways to communicate that originate in the corporate world are to an increasing extent becoming the standard operating practices of politics and policy-making. The latter means that corporations' relations to the political sphere, and their ways of handling their affairs in this respect, become key to their commercial success, quite contrary to expectations of an increasing irrelevance of the state in a globalized business environment.

The skills and activities of policy professionals also represent a curious return of the medieval, although in a post-modern format. They to some extent represent the return of the personal "trusted advisor" – with a diffuse mandate and a personalized access to power: present-day Thomas Cromwells, if you like, circling around government and very much dependent on their personal relations to decision-makers and their know-how of the practical working of the inner circles of power. And yet they are different from their pre-democratic predecessors, of course, in that their abilities are now for sale in a particular market rather than offered as personal services to the king and the court.

Therefore, it seems that policy professionals are perfectly adapted to the neoliberalization of the world, because their rise represents the mediatization, flexibilization, and commercialization of political know-how. In this particular sense, politics is now for sale or at least for hire for those who can afford the services of a class of actors specialized in political know-how.

In this regard, the growth of the policy professionals also implies increased political inequality. This is both because hiring policy professionals is expensive, regardless of whether they are employed in-house or contracted for special missions, especially compared with relying on the voluntary work of activists and party members. This makes effective political action even more dependent on financial resources. But the rise of policy professionals also accentuates the unequal distribution of political know-how, because they are at the extreme end of a highly skewed distribution of political skills and know-how. They inhabit a world of which most lay actors know little, and in which they therefore have little ability to participate effectively.

It is therefore a distinct possibility that the rise of policy professionals is *one* (albeit surely not the main) element in stoking anti-establishment political sentiments among the general public. The existence of a political class of smooth operators, the ultimate political insiders, is probably one element contributing to the feeling of being shut out of politics and decision-making, which is now pervasive among large sections of the

population in the European democracies. Policy professionals are, perhaps even more than elected politicians the “ideal enemy” for populist movements, radical right-wing parties, and those who paint themselves as outsiders and who promise to “drain the swamp” – if only we give them our support.