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To cite this article: Pierre Squevin, Nadège Carlier, Marleen Brans & David Aubin (22 Jul 2024): The multifaceted nature of trust in the uptake of advice: policy advice utilization in ministerial cabinets, *Policy Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/01442872.2024.2381529](https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2024.2381529)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2024.2381529>



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Published online: 22 Jul 2024.



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The multifaceted nature of trust in the uptake of advice: policy advice utilization in ministerial cabinets

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ABSTRACT

What makes policy advice circulate more easily towards the apex of governments and shape the opinions of its users along the way? This article investigates the utilization of policy advice in ministerial cabinets, by focusing on the individuals appointed to work as closest aides of ministers: ministerial advisers. While we know quite a lot about the operation of policy advisory systems at the macro and meso levels, the micro-dispositions affecting the circulation and utilization of policy advice are under-researched topics. Building on recent research waves on policy advice and policy advisory systems, we expect that trust between ministerial advisers and their advice-suppliers is a pivotal driver of policy advice utilization. Based on an original survey conducted in the ministerial cabinets of French-speaking Belgium, this article provides evidence that ministerial advisers' overall propensity to trust advice-suppliers tends to boost policy advice utilization. Yet, we show that the characteristics of advice suppliers also come into play in advisory relationships and that ministerial advisers have various needs in that regard, depending on them being high or low trust individuals. Our findings speak to the importance of paying attention to relational dynamics and informality in policy advising.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 December 2023
Accepted 12 July 2024

KEYWORDS

Ministerial advisers; policy advice utilization; policy advisory systems; trust; trustworthiness; policy formulation

Introduction

Ministerial advisers are individuals who are appointed mainly on political criteria to serve as the closest aides of ministers and do so temporarily (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2017). Once installed in ministerial offices, or what are called ministerial cabinets in countries of the Napoleonic administrative tradition¹ (Meert et al. 2023), ministerial advisers find themselves at the core of the executive and take up a key role in the machinery of government (Elgie 1997; Gaffney 1991). Although they are entrusted with political affairs, such as managing political conflict or dealing with the media or public relations, their major tasks otherwise revolve around the formulation of public policies (Craft 2016). This type of internal government advisory institution has spread to Westminster countries, where a

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phenomenon of “cabinetisation” (Brans et al. 2017, 5) is also observed. This development and entrenchment of ministerial offices in different contexts makes the understanding of the functioning of ministerial cabinets and of the actors in these, paramount.

Despite sometimes far-reaching expertise, the pool of information and knowledge available in-house in any given ministerial cabinet might prove insufficient. The demand may thus be high for inputs from other actors in the policy advisory system (Craft and Howlett 2013; Halligan 1995). Ministerial advisers are in fact dependent on useful and relevant information about the merits of policy options and their potential to deliver the desired outcomes. They solicit or receive advice, and then deal with it, which shapes their opinion, that of ministers and in turn influences the course of policy formulation. In other words, policy advice gradually makes its way to the final decision-maker and arbiter, that is usually the minister. Although fully relevant theoretically, such a policy advice and policy advisory system perspective on ministerial advisers and their use of knowledge and information has rarely been applied (Veit 2023). We intend to contribute to this emerging research agenda by answering the following research question: how does trust between ministerial advisers and their advice-suppliers affect policy advice utilization in ministerial cabinets?

This article investigates the relationships between government advice-takers working in ministerial cabinets and their advice-suppliers, from the perspective of ministerial advisers who are the actors situated at the receiving-end. Policy advice utilization (PAU) refers to the actual use of pieces of advice supplied to the decision-maker in the formulation of public policy. As a whole, the utilization process is composed of five stages that go from the simple reading and understanding of the advice to the incorporation of its contents into draft legislation. The most often mentioned conditions to PAU are sources’ location or proximity to government decision-makers (Halligan 1995). Recently, a call was made to reconsider these conditions and look more closely at various aspects of relational compatibility (Craft and Wilder 2017). From policy networks research, it appeared that trust deserved particular attention. Trust is supposed to increase PAU because it helps coping with the vulnerability and uncertainty of ministerial advisers, who are confronted with an overflow of information and contradictory advice from multiple senders (Edelenbos and Klijn 2007). Following Hardin (1993), the concept of trust is split into three dimensions: general propensity to trust, trustworthiness and thicker versions of trust (e.g. history-based and personalized trust). We hypothesize that a high overall propensity to trust of advisers and favourable perceptions of the trustworthiness of their sources of advice jointly increase PAU. Our three hypotheses on the role of different versions of trust on PAU are tested with OLS regressions using original survey data collected among ministerial advisers (response rate 67.7%) in two Francophone Belgian governments from 2018 to 2019.

In the first section, the concept of PAU is introduced and developed. After a review of the literature on policy advisory systems, ministerial advisers, and trust in the second section, the third section presents theoretical expectations on how trust facilitates PAU within ministerial offices. The fourth and fifth sections discuss methodology and the results of statistical analyses.

What makes policy advice hold sway on decision-makers?

Since the 1980s and evolving in different waves, continuous research in public policy and administration has been examining the advising process, that is how governments seek,

receive, use, or deliberately ignore policy advice (Craft and Howlett 2013; Migone and Howlett 2024; Peters and Barker 1993; Veselý 2013). Looking at policy advice has so far been a way to figure out how decision-makers get support in the conduct of policy making, especially when it comes to nurturing the flow of knowledge and information at their disposal.

Per se, policy advice formulates recommendations or opinions about future courses of government action (Halligan 1995; 1998; 2021). Not limited to transmission of policy-relevant information, it proposes an analysis of problems, an assessment of possible solutions, or both (Halligan 1995; 1998; 2021).

Traditionally, policy advice had been generated by bureaucratic officials located inside public organizations to guide policymakers and support their decisions, but the monopoly of contemporary bureaucracies on expertise and policy advice has been increasingly contested (Brans and Fobé 2021). Nowadays, governments rely on policy advisory actors that extend far beyond the remits of the public sphere (Halligan 1995), such as trade-unions, employers' federations, interest groups, or think tanks. Moreover, boundaries are blurred between inside and outside suppliers as well as between brokers and proximate decision-makers (Craft and Howlett 2012; Craft and Wilder 2017). After a wide range of activities were outsourced or transferred to the private sector and other actors outside governmental arenas, claims have been made that the impact of the workings of policy advisory systems on policymaking must be re-assessed (Craft and Wilder 2017; Howlett 2015; Veselý 2013). At the macro-level, studies look at the consequences on policy advice of the different configurations of policy advisory systems across countries or subsystems and their change over time. At the micro-level though, the determinants of actors' influence within the policy advisory system remain under-investigated. Given that the boundaries between inside and outside suppliers of advice have become more porous and permeable, we argue that it is of heightened importance to go down to the micro level and to also appraise the interpersonal aspects of advising, beyond formal and organizational considerations.

It is still unclear what makes policy advice more or less acceptable or why some advisory sources may have an upper hand in the policy process (Manwaring 2018a; Marchevska and Steen 2022). Partial accounts of PAU have focused on the content and characteristics of advice (Bossens, Van Damme, and Brans 2014) or on the contextual or environmental aspects of the supply of advice. Few policy and public administration studies, however, have contributed to disentangling the relational dynamics amidst policy advisory systems (Manwaring 2018b). Following a granular approach, this article attempts to do exactly that, by scaling down to individual ministerial advisers active in ministerial offices (i.e. as advice-takers or receivers) and by investigating the micro-dispositions affecting the circulation and utilization of policy advice.

Several conditions have been proposed to explain when policy advice gets more leverage on decision-makers. The most common is the locational model, which hypothesizes that the closer the adviser is to the government, the more influential she is (Craft and Wilder 2017; Halligan 1995). Other propositions evoke the characteristics of the advice, notably its content (Craft and Howlett 2012), its timeliness (Bossens, Van Damme, and Brans 2014), or its context (Van de Graaf and Hoppe 2006).

More recently, Craft and Wilder (2017) proposed a revised analytical framework on policy advisory systems where they suggest that "compatibility among adviser and advisee has been central to advisory system scholarship but underspecified" (231).

Among multiple dimensions like policy contents (ideational alignment pertaining to policy aims, instruments, etc.) or policy issue characteristics, they highlight the importance of relational factors to explain influence: “In sum, relational compatibility is multifaceted and may be a product of the resource or capacity exchange requirements, or a product of trust or influence that exists in policy subsystems for policy advice components” (230). This focus on relational compatibility is inspired by findings in policy networks research about preference formation (Leifeld and Schneider 2012; Weible and Sabatier 2005). In this literature, trust is a key variable explaining the strength and density of relations between policy actors (Agranoff 2007; Riche, Aubin, and Moyson 2021; Siddiki, Kim, and Leach 2017). It is considered as a positive predictor of advice utilization for decision-making as it facilitates the acquisition of new knowledge (Gerlak and Heikkila 2011; Temby et al. 2017). Thus, trust deserves special attention in the understanding of the patterns of influence among actors in policy advisory systems.

Trust as unclogging and catalysing policy advice circulation

Trust is an important relational element for explaining why policy advice sometimes gains acceptance and sometimes does not. Trust matters in a context of uncertainty or a risky situation that makes the advice-taker vulnerable (Oomsels and Bouckaert 2014). Using advice exposes ministerial advisers to the risk of relying with disproportionate confidence on irrelevant, suspicious, or erroneous information and recommendations, which would potentially jeopardize the position of ministers or tarnish the reputation of the political leadership.

Trust is defined as “a state involving confident positive expectations about another’s motives with respect to oneself in situations entailing risks” (Boon and Holmes 1991, 194), as well as in situations of vulnerability and uncertainty (Edelenbos and Klijn 2007). Endorsing, relying, and acting upon third parties’ advice is risky for decision-makers. Advice-suppliers are unpredictable and may give priority to their own interests or may supply partial or inaccurate information (Vangen and Huxham 2003). Any interference from private, societal, or vested interests in the policy formulation process makes decision-makers vulnerable. For instance, the endorsement of an advisory committee’s advice could eventually be contested by the wider public or lead to the formulation of a policy proposal shaping an injudicious course of action, which would later require backpedalling.

For advice-takers, trust means consenting to a suspension of the risks and uncertainties inherent to their activities (Möllering 2001), in an act equivalent to a “leap of faith” (Lewis and Weigert 1985). Even in a “cut-throat world”, investing in trust and interacting with the other members of the policy advisory system can be a constructive approach (Maley 2011). A state of trust favours the disclosure of information (Jacobsen 1999) and facilitates knowledge transfer between organizations (Muthusamy and White 2005). Therefore, trust between an advice-taker and an advice-giver is expected to have a positive effect on policy advice utilization overall.

Trust arises from different conditions. Trust theory has singled out various components of the concept. In line with Hardin (1993), trust depends on the propensity to trust of a given actor (in our case, the advice-taker), the attributes of the actors to whom trust can be granted (in our case, advice-givers), and the matter or domain

over which trust is conferred, in this case, the supply of policy-relevant information. This article explores those different components of trust: the dispositional trust of an advice-taker, and the attributes that make an advice-giver worthy of being trusted in the eyes of the advice-taker. It is assumed that policy advice will have greater purchase if it reaches not-too-cautious advice-takers and comes from trustworthy sources that have certain attributes and qualities.

To instil trust, even prior to any engagement in relationships and in the virtual absence of information or personal experiences with a specific advice-giver, an advice-taker's overall "propensity to trust" matters (Oskarsson, Svensson, and Öberg 2009). Also called generalized, moralistic or dispositional trust, the propensity to trust is often viewed as a trait of character, an attitude, or a personal inclination to believe in the goodwill or well-meaning intentions of others (Oskarsson 2010). It varies across individuals but also across organizational or national contexts (Uslaner 2002).

Trust generally comes with the willingness to absorb and act upon shared information and knowledge (Levin and Cross 2004). In this study's case of advice-takers, namely ministerial advisers, an overall propensity to trust should allow for intensive utilization of policy advice because they are open to the inputs and contributions of everyone in the process of policy formulation. Too much cautiousness and prudence from advice-takers act as a constraint for policy advice to filter through and leave its mark in ministerial offices. Therefore,

if ministerial advisers display an overall propensity to trust their information suppliers, then the extent of PAU increases (hypothesis 1).

Another driver for the emergence of trust in a relationship is the perception that an advice-giver is trustworthy (Hardin 2002). In this form of trust, the trusting actor gives credit to another actor or type of actor. "Trustworthiness" usually counts three dimensions: ability, benevolence and integrity (ABI) (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995). The perceived ability of an advice-giver lies in competence, expertise, and technical mastery. Benevolence pertains to the perception that an advice-giver is caring, sensitive and receptive vis-à-vis others. Finally, integrity comes with the perception that an advice-giver is reliable, honest and acts in a fair manner.

Separately, the three dimensions of trustworthiness are probably not equally significant in every context and situation. For example, the ability is emphasized in activities that demand technical competence, eliciting more trust in those instances (Schmidt and Hunter 2000). Transposed to the specific context of policymaking, the perceptions of ability, benevolence or integrity might not have the same weight. At this point, it is expected that competence-based, integrity-based, and benevolence-based trust all have a positive effect on PAU, without any ranking of importance between them. This positive effect is contingent upon advice-takers being already more or less trustful, with stronger effects among the most trustful. That way, ministerial advisers' initial high propensity to trust can be conceived as fertile ground for trustworthiness-based relationships to kick-in between them and their sources of advice.

The extent of PAU increases as advice-suppliers are deemed trustworthy (i.e. on the basis of competence, integrity and benevolence signalling) by advice-takers, even more so when the latter are already high-trust individuals (hypothesis 2).

A thicker version of trust, as opposed to thinner versions of trust, should also come about in two configurations. First, previous encounters, interactions, and recurring situations of interdependence between trusting and trusted parties in a given relationship (Kramer 1999, 2010) generate what has been termed here “history-based trust”. Second, thicker versions of trust go further than mere interactions that occurred in the past but might at times even include more personal connections and contacts. This form of trust is called “personalized trust” and corresponds to a state where intimate knowledge and understanding reach high levels. In a similar way, recent qualitative research findings on policy advising emphasized the importance of trust as stemming from both previous professional relationships and personal connections (Marchevska and Steen 2022, 11).

Past interactions, personal knowledge and connections are neither positive nor negative as such. They simply refer to whether advice-takers and advice-suppliers had prior contacts or knew each other personally, without prejudging whether such contacts generated good or bad relationships, or even, whether advice-suppliers and advice-takers like each other. These thicker versions of trust are probably harder to develop but would be even more valued and sought-after in advisory relationships. As for trustworthiness, this expected positive effect of thicker versions of trust depends upon ministerial advisers being generally predisposed to trust their advisory sources in the first place. Hence:

The extent of PAU increases as advice-suppliers are more trusted due to past interactions with advice-takers (i.e. history-based trust), even more so when the latter are high-trust individuals (hypothesis 3a).

By the same token,

the extent of PAU increases as advice-suppliers are more trusted because they are known personally to advice-takers (i.e. personalized trust), even more so when the latter are high-trust individuals (hypothesis 3b).

Ministerial advisers as advice-takers: the case of Belgium

Ministerial advisers are the personal “appointments of trust” of a minister who provide assistance and offer advice and support (James 2007, 8). They act as the extension of the ministers’ political personality (Brans et al. 2017). Overlooking ministerial advisers creates serious blind spots as these individuals are a key entry point for policy advice and policy-relevant information inside ministerial offices.

Belgian ministerial advisers are a relevant case given the strong presence of ministerial staff in Belgium’s core executive. The Belgian policy advisory system is highly politicized, with ministerial cabinets being very active and engaged in the policy process (Brans, Pelgrims, and Hoet 2006). Belgium is a federal state composed of two layers of federated entities, three regions with territorial competences, such as transport or agriculture, and three communities responsible for “person-related” competences, such as culture and education (Deschouwer 2012). Each entity is autonomous, and each has a legislative and executive branch.

This research is embedded into the policy advisory system of two francophone federated entities: Wallonia (a “region” in the Belgian federal terminology) and the Federation Wallonia-Brussels (a “community”). On top of the fact that their ministerial offices very

much resemble those installed at the federal level (Brans et al. 2022), these entities were selected as cases because of a greater accessibility to the researchers. Initially, the plan was to begin collecting data in these two governmental entities, and then working on translating our data-gathering instrument in other languages to extend our coverage to Flanders (Dutch language), and finally to the federal level (Dutch and French languages because of bilingualism). Due to obstacles (like the dissolution of the government coalition in place at the Belgian federal government, elections in different parts of the federation ...), we had to give up on covering more than just two Belgian federated entities.

Data: collecting survey data from Belgian ministerial advisers

We collected cross-sectional data using an electronic survey of ministerial advisers working for the governments of two Belgian federated entities: Wallonia and the Federation Wallonia-Brussels. The survey took place between June 2018 and April 2019 and targeted the ministerial advisers who were back then committed to policy-related tasks and work (excluding support staff such as secretaries, accountants, IT specialists, media advisers, drivers ...).

Before launching the survey, we asked for official consent from each minister. Once we obtained such approval, ministerial offices communicated lists of contacts with the email addresses of ministerial advisers. We used LimeSurvey to prepare, pilot, host and distribute the questionnaire.²

In total, more than 110 individuals responded to the survey and provided information about 125 pieces of advice and their utilization.³ Returned questionnaires were not always 100% complete, which explains that a smaller number of observations are sometimes included in our statistical analyses (i.e. descriptive statistics or statistical models) depending on variables. Considering a maximum overall population of 250–300 ministerial advisers engaged in policy-related tasks in both governments (Wallonia and Wallonia-Brussels Federation), the estimated survey coverage is 30–40%, while the response rate is 67.7% (i.e. number of respondents divided by the number of electronically sent questionnaires). The targeted population is notably very difficult to access, which makes such a high response rate quite exceptional. This rate is also as good as rates found in previous elite surveys in Belgium that adopted a more personalized and face-to-face approach than ours (Walgrave and Joly 2017). Eleven ministerial cabinets participated, out of 14 in total, representing the 3 political parties in government.⁴ This also ensures a good representativeness of the sample in terms of policy domains (see the list in Appendix). In addition, ministerial advisers' characteristics (gender, age, seniority, educational and professional backgrounds) are consistent with the descriptions of their profiles found in other studies (Brans et al. 2017; Moens 2023).

Operationalization of policy advice utilization

For operationalizing PAU and the development of empirical measures of the link between supply from policy advisory systems and policy formulation activities, this study largely draws upon the knowledge utilization literature.

Table 1. The five stages of PAU and associated survey items.

	Stage of advice utilization	Item wording
1	Cognition	I read, understood and assimilated the piece of advice
2	Reference	I made reference to the piece of advice in written or oral communication with colleagues or my minister
3	Effort	I endorsed the piece of advice and defended it in front of other colleagues or my minister
4	Influence	The piece of policy advice successfully influenced my minister
5	Application	The piece of advice contributed to the implementation of concrete policy measures deriving from it

Source: authors adapted from Landry, Amara, and Lamari (2001).

Any transmission of policy advice followed by its receipt in ministerial offices may have consequences and may inform policy formulation occurring there. As we learned from knowledge utilization studies (Landry, Amara, and Lamari 2001; Landry, Lamari, and Amara 2003), a straightforward way to make these processes observable is to get a testimony about the penetration and percolation of a “piece” of advice in a given organizational setting (like ministerial offices).

PAU, the dependent variable, is conceived as a process and operationalized based on five survey items reflecting that process: cognition, reference, effort, influence, and application (see Table 1). Such an operationalization closely follows Landry, Amara, and Lamari (2001), who conceived a ladder composed of five steps of knowledge utilization. In this study, the scale applies to policy advice and taps into recounts of use from advice-takers, that is ministerial advisers in the survey.

Ministerial advisers were asked about the extent to which the various stages described the actual utilization of a piece of policy advice (on a scale ranging from 0 “not at all” to 10 “completely”). We calculated a simple index of PAU by first summing the scores of all five items of utilization and then dividing the obtained sum by 5. We performed this mean calculation for each piece of advice that ministerial advisers fully reported about in the survey (i.e. pieces of advice for which we have complete information on the five stages of PAU).⁵ As a result, the variable “PAU” has a potential score ranging from 0 to 10. Higher index scores indicate a more pronounced utilization of policy advice.

Cronbach’s alpha for the five items assembled together reaches 0.81, which indicates a good internal coherence between the items. Having put these items together into an index is hence reasonable. Moreover, the measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) is 0.72, which is “good” (Hair et al. 2013). The Bartlett test of sphericity is very highly significant as well (p -value = .000).

Operationalization of trust

Propensity to trust is measured using a standard question about the general feelings of individuals (Uslaner 2007, 2015): “Would you say that in general most of the individuals and organizations that give information and advice related to your policy work can be trusted or that one can never be too careful in dealing with them?”. Survey participants could select the answer on a scale ranging from 0 “one cannot be too careful” to 10 “they can be trusted entirely”.

In the absence of a dyadic dataset to study interpersonal trust between ministerial advisers and their advice-suppliers, we rely on more general measurements about the

importance of some specific characteristics of the advice-supplier in the eyes of advice-takers, with the following question: “In general, how important the following supplier characteristics are when you process a piece of advice?”. The corresponding scale ranges from 0 “not at all important” to 10 “extremely important”. Three items capture the trustworthiness of advice-suppliers (ABI):

- Ability: “The supplier is known for his/her professionalism, he or she draws from his/her expertise or his/her own resources”.
- Benevolence: “You think that the supplier proves himself/herself to be open and receptive to stakeholders’ position”.
- Integrity: “The supplier provides you with factual data and reliable information”.

The importance of history-based and personalized trust was measured using two other items:

- History-based trust: “You have previously relied on the supplier to get information and advice”.
- Personalized trust: “You know the supplier very well, even personally”.

In this study, we have opted for a particular operationalization of the trustworthy qualities of advice-givers. The five above-mentioned survey items indeed tend to treat advice-suppliers mostly as individual actors and therefore give trust relationships between ministerial advisers and their sources a more interpersonal character. Consequently, this study has more to reveal about the *relational* and *informal aspects of advising* than about its interorganizational and formal aspects (e.g. advice-givers being outward representatives of this or that interest or belonging to this or that formal organization).⁶ The organizational, or even institutional, origins of trust are elements we cannot accurately reconstruct with our data and thus remain unexplored in this study specifically.

We also control for a few variables, namely, seniority in ministerial offices, education level, roles of ministerial advisers (policy experts versus other types of roles, see Connaughton 2010; Gouglas, Brans, and Jaspers 2017), and gender, which can all affect or confound the relationship between trusting advice suppliers and PAU.

Data analysis and results

Multiple robust linear regressions with robust standard errors were run to analyse the survey responses and assess the relative importance of the three dimensions of trust in accounting for variation in PAU. Standard errors were clustered at the level of policy domains (a list of these 14 domains is provided in the Appendix). Clustering is justified by PAU and trust having a strong sectoral dimension. Each policy sector/domain has its own minister and ministerial cabinet in charge, with its own policy advisory system configuration, where a limited number of actors, including ministerial advisers themselves, have repetitive interactions with one another. Additionally, non-negligible intra-cluster correlations were measured for relevant variables. Interaction terms were also included in the models to explore the observed mutual effects of

independent variables on the dependent variable, given the interactive character of some of our hypotheses. The next section presents descriptive statistics as well as the results of multivariate regressions, followed by regression results. The tests and diagnostic plots reveal no real outlier problems, the presence of linear relationships, normality of errors, and no major problem of collinearity.⁷

Descriptive analysis of dependent, independent and control variables

The survey results show surprisingly high scores for the two final stages of PAU (i.e. influence and application), despite a general pattern of decreasing utilization moving from the first to the last stages (see Table 2). A relative discontinuity appears between the “effort” stage and the first two stages of “cognition” and “reference”. It is likely that the effort stage is more demanding for advisers, as it requires a real endorsement and *de facto* transforms them into promoters of particular pieces of advice inside the ministerial cabinet. An alternative explanation of the lower scores at the “effort” stage might be that advisers do not need to engage in lengthy argumentation to convince their ministers, due to ministers being already trustful enough of their personal advisers. Previous studies have shown that politicians entrust the task of information selection to some considerable extent to their staff members, and then, process the information themselves by applying heuristics (Walgrave and Dejaeghere 2017).

Passed the effort phase, the two last stages of utilization obtain similar scores and the correlation between both items is positive and significant ($r = 0.65$, p -value: .000), which suggests that a piece of advice that successfully influences a minister, shaping his or her thought process about how the policy should look like and opening his or her eyes to new realities, also has a fair chance of having an impact on policy formulation by generating concrete policy measures.

The mean PAU for the whole sample is 7.21, with a standard deviation of 1.57, which points towards a rather high but varying utilization of pieces of policy advice overall. The design of the survey is partially responsible for this, as survey respondents probably recalled nontrivial pieces of advice, which markedly affected their work. They left inconsequent pieces of advice aside. We believe that this is not problematic as our study goal is to explain relative variations in use, rather than explaining use versus non-use.

The summary statistics, displayed in Table 3, show that on average, with a mean of 4.851, ministerial advisers’ propensity to trust reaches intermediate levels. However, given the variable’s spread, advisers vary in that propensity. Looking at trustworthiness, they seem to value honesty signals the most – when suppliers are honest and do not attempt to deceive them with inaccurate information or flawed data (i.e. integrity). They also prefer when advice-suppliers are competent and able actors (i.e. ability). In contrast, benevolence appears less important.

Table 2. PAU reported by ministerial advisers.

	Obs.	Mean	95% Confidence intervals	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
Cognition	125	8.05	[7.75–8.34]	1.67	1	10
Reference	123	7.71	[7.32–8.09]	2.15	1	10
Effort	121	6.26	[5.82–6.69]	2.4	0	10
Influence	120	6.66	[6.25–7.07]	2.28	1	10
Application	119	6.68	[6.23–7.13]	2.48	1	10

Table 3. Descriptive statistics about dependent and independent variables.

Variable	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
PAU (Index)	113	7.21	1.57	3.6	10
<i>Independent variables</i>					
Propensity to trust	94	4.851	2.531	0	9
Ability	90	7.8	1.961	0	10
Integrity	90	8.167	1.75	0	10
Benevolence	90	6.789	2.479	0	10
History-based trust (i.e. previous interactions)	89	5.876	2.852	0	10
Personalized trust (i.e. personal connections)	90	4.767	2.74	0	10

Past interactions and personal connections with advice-suppliers are even less valued, although those two variables are more dispersed than the previous trustworthiness-related components. Therefore, advisers are slightly more divided amongst themselves over the importance of history-based and personalized trust in advisory relationships.

Moving to control variables (see Table 4), 42.9% of the ministerial advisers in the sample were women. Most advisers spent between 6 months and 10 years in total working in ministerial cabinets, and act as experts, that is, they have a profile of policy specialist (as opposed for example to partisan liaison advisers and coordinators). The sample is balanced in terms of government representativity between Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels federation (roughly 50% each).

Results of multivariate regression models

Multivariate regressions were run to test our hypotheses. We do not report results for full models including all variables (independent and control variables at the same time) because of a low *n* relative to the number of variables. In model 0 (covariates only), two variables stand out: the gender of ministerial advisers and their level of education ($p < .1$ and $p < .05$, respectively) (see Table 5). For highly educated ministerial advisers, especially those holding a PhD, scores reflecting PAU are driven down significantly,

Table 4. Descriptive statistics about control variables.

Variable	Obs.	%
Seniority in ministerial offices		
<6 months	1	0.92
6 months–1 year	6	5.5
1–2 years	24	22.02
3–5 years	36	33.03
6–10 years	29	26.61
11–20 years	11	10.09
21–30 years	1	0.92
31–40 years	1	0.92
Gender		
Male	52	57.14
Female	39	42.86
Level of education		
Bachelor or below	9	9.89
Master's degree	79	86.81
PhD	3	3.3
Expert role in ministerial offices		
Expert	72	66.67
Other roles	36	33.67

Table 5. Multivariate regression on the role of trust in PAU.

Variables	Model (0) PAU index	Model (1) PAU index	Model (2) PAU index	Model (3) PAU index	Model (4) PAU index	Model (5) PAU index	Model (6) PAU index
Independent variables							
Propensity to trust		0.157* (0.082)	0.391** (0.146)	0.129 (0.135)	−0.131 (0.198)	0.223** (0.101)	0.295*** (0.065)
Advice suppliers' ability			0.104 (0.075)				
Propensity to trust × advice suppliers' ability			−0.031* (0.017)				
Advice suppliers' integrity				0.114* (0.063)			
Propensity to trust × advice suppliers' integrity				0.001 (0.017)			
Advice suppliers' benevolence					−0.065 (0.170)		
Propensity to trust × advice suppliers' benevolence					0.041 (0.027)		
History-based trust						0.178** (0.063)	
Propensity to trust × history-based trust						−0.019 (0.014)	
Personalized trust							0.228** (0.103)
Propensity to trust × personalized trust							−0.036** (0.014)
Covariates							
Seniority in ministerial offices	−0.017 (0.127)	−0.003 (0.117)	−0.004 (0.104)	−0.013 (0.112)	−0.088 (0.139)	−0.015 (0.100)	0.026 (0.097)
Men	−0.529* (0.270)	−0.402 (0.267)	−0.439 (0.277)	−0.416 (0.264)	−0.332 (0.293)	−0.364 (0.309)	−0.438 (0.281)
Level of education: Master	−0.433 (0.489)	−0.415 (0.606)	−0.476 (0.556)	−0.324 (0.596)	−0.718 (0.541)	−0.333 (0.508)	−0.275 (0.365)
Level of education: PhD	−1.077** (0.449)	−0.954 (0.615)	−0.967 (0.556)	−0.999* (0.538)	−1.313 (0.909)	−0.943 (0.590)	−0.798 (0.516)
Expert role within ministerial office	−0.129 (0.286)	−0.100 (0.286)	−0.110 (0.271)	−0.094 (0.310)	−0.063 (0.279)	−0.144 (0.239)	−0.051 (0.218)
FWB government	0.129 (0.407)	0.003 (0.337)	0.019 (0.336)	0.085 (0.356)	0.172 (0.281)	−0.049 (0.325)	0.027 (0.314)
Constant	8.085*** (0.821)	7.143*** (1.309)	6.482*** (1.205)	6.203*** (1.218)	8.060*** (1.692)	6.394*** (1.084)	6.032*** (1.189)
Fit statistics							
Observations	103	103	103	103	103	103	103
F statistic	3.02**	9.86***	16.78***	13.25***	172.36***	43.89***	25.88***
R-squared	0.036	0.096	0.108	0.110	0.158	0.122	0.129
BIC	411.71	409.766	417.616	417.392	411.681	415.999	415.229
Likelihood. ratio chi ² (null model)		6.58**	8.00**	8.22**	13.93***	9.61**	10.38**

Notes: Clustered robust S.E in parentheses, base for comparison for the educational level is "Bachelor or below". *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

compared to the scores of advisers having no university degree or merely a bachelor's degree. The most educated advisers may be less prone to intensively relying on advice and pushing the process of utilization further. However, as the number of sampled advisers with PhDs is very limited (only 3.3%) and considering the high standard errors for this variable, strong conclusions about the effect of advisers' education cannot be reasonably drawn. For men ministerial advisers, scores reflecting utilization tended to decrease (p -value = .072).

In Model 1, propensity to trust is added to the model as a single variable, and its effects are worth noting. Regression outputs show that this variable is probably a “baseline” predictor of PAU, as expected in hypothesis 1. The regression coefficient is positive and significant (p -value = .079). When ministerial advisers’ propensity to trust increases by 1 (scale ranges from 0 to 10), their PAU index score increases by 0.157 on average (on a scale from 0 to 10).

Model 2 tests the interactive effect on PAU of ministerial advisers’ propensity to trust and suppliers’ ability in advisory relationships. When the ability (or competence) of suppliers is deemed unimportant (a coefficient value of 0), advisers’ propensity to trust has a positive and significant effect on PAU ($\beta = 0.39$; $p < .05$).

Model 3 inserts integrity, the second dimension of advice suppliers’ trustworthiness, and checks its interaction together with the level of ministerial advisers’ overall propensity to trust. Here, supplier’s integrity is associated with an increase in degree of PAU, when ministerial advisers are the most distrustful or prudent (when propensity to trust = 0), although the beta coefficient is not particularly large and high significance levels are not reached ($p < .1$). This result tends to partially contradict hypothesis 2, which expected that advice suppliers’ trustworthiness was dependent on ministerial advisers’ pre-existing high (and not low) propensity of trust to intensify PAU.

Model 4 has the best model fit among the six (low BIC, highest F statistic and R -squared) and tells a different story than the other models. Taking apart the signs of the coefficients of the independent variables, as well as the sign of the interaction term, the outputs show that the propensity of ministerial advisers to trust and suppliers’ benevolence signals have a mutually reinforcing effect on PAU, which is in line with hypothesis 2. Nevertheless, at this point, based only on the regression outputs presented in the table, the low significance attached to all the key coefficients does not provide enough support for hypothesis 2. A more in-depth analysis of the conditional effects of these variables is provided below.

In model 5, history-based trust with advice suppliers seems more determinant when ministerial advisers are very distrustful, with a positive and significant effect on the dependent variable ($p < .05$). Conversely, for advisers who reject the importance of history-based trust with advice suppliers, the effect of propensity to trust on the dependent variable is positive and significant ($p < .05$).

In model 6, personalized trust with suppliers promotes PAU when ministerial advisers are particularly distrustful or prudent ($p < .05$). In contrast, when ministerial advisers tend to reject personalized trust with suppliers, advisers’ propensity to trust has a positive and significant effect on PAU ($p < .01$).

Further analysis must be carried out to probe the conditional effects in greater detail and make them more explicit, as the regression outputs say little about the interaction effects of two variables (Lundin 2006). At odds with hypothesis 2, advice suppliers’ integrity has a significant effect on PAU when advisers display low levels of trust (see Table 6 presenting conditional marginal effects). More in line with hypothesis 2, suppliers’ benevolence stimulates PAU when advisers are highly trustful. History-based or personalized forms of trust with advice-suppliers have a positive effect on PAU for ministerial advisers who have a low propensity to trust. This should prompt a refinement of hypotheses H3a and H3b.

Table 6. Marginal effects of suppliers' characteristics conditional on ministerial advisers' low or high propensity to trust.

	Propensity to trust	
	Low	High
• Suppliers' ability	0.03 (0.06)	−0.12 (0.98)
• Suppliers' integrity	0.12** (0.04)	0.12 (0.09)
• Suppliers' benevolence	0.03 (0.11)	0.23** (0.09)
• History-based trust (previous contacts with suppliers)	0.13** (0.05)	0.04 (0.08)
• Personalized trust (personal connections with suppliers)	0.14* (0.08)	−0.04 (0.07)

Notes: High and low values of the variable "propensity to trust" are calculated by subtracting or adding one standard deviation to the mean. The results are based on regression models 2–6. *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$

Discussion and conclusion

For ministerial advisers, collecting and integrating the advice of other actors in the formulation of policies amounts to a real and decisive activity (Eichbaum and Shaw 2017). This study anticipated that the presence of trust in advisory relations would facilitate the process of PAU, meaning that higher levels of trust would make PAU more pronounced. Adopting a policy advisory systems perspective on ministerial advisers emphasizing compatibility and proximity with their advice suppliers, this article provides novel empirical evidence. Based on a unique survey of ministerial advisers, it is evidenced that trust matters for PAU, although it does so in multiple and intricate ways.

Overall, having more trustful advisers within ministerial offices tends to be associated with more PAU. Thus, hypothesis 1 receives support to some degree, as we found some empirical evidence of a standalone, positive effect of the general propensity to trust on PAU. However, our results add considerable nuance. Findings indicate that trust in advisory relationships is not just a matter of general disposition or propensity on the side of the advice-taker, it is also about suppliers possessing several attributes in order to earn the trust of the recipients of their advice.

Indeed, trusting an information source is not an act of blind, unquestioned, and unconditional faith. Much comes down to ministerial advisers feeling at ease or being in a state of relational comfort (Temby et al. 2017) or psychological safety (Edmonson 2004). When advisers are prudent and cautious by nature, it seems that they feel safer when they share a history of past interactions, or even personally know the suppliers of advice. Therefore, hypothesis 3a and 3b, which introduce the importance of history-based or personalized trust, is not supported, given that these variables operate only with individuals who have a very low or relatively low general propensity to trust (see Tables 5 and 6). Hypothesis 2 tends to be unsupported as well for similar reasons. Individuals with a low propensity to trust tend to believe that honest suppliers, who show integrity and provide sound information, are reliable sources. Trustworthiness for ministerial advisers lacking a general propensity to trust relates more to integrity than competence or benevolence of advice-suppliers. Thus, for ministerial advisers with a low propensity to trust, signals of integrity from suppliers increase PAU.

Ministerial advisers with a high propensity to trust have other expectations. For this group, advice-suppliers' benevolence is a key asset, and the thicker versions of history-based or personalized trust are apparently not needed for these advisers to feel comfortable and (re-)act upon a supplier's advice. Only the benevolence dimension of

trustworthiness matters for these advisers. Nevertheless, high-trust ministerial advisers also appear to be demanding individuals in their own ways since benevolence-based trust develops only over time, contrary to integrity-based trust, which can become salient earlier in a relationship (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 1995, 722).

This article puts the image of distrustful and overly prudent ministerial advisers in perspective. Counterintuitively, such advisers also facilitate the use of policy advice in certain conditions; they simply need to feel secure when they engage with advisory sources. Once this security is obtained, advice utilization occurs as well, although seemingly to a lesser extent than in high-trust situations. Distrust should therefore not be seen as an unsurpassable impediment to the establishment of contacts with ministerial cabinets, preventing policy advice-giving and the transmission of demands (Lee and Dodge 2019).

Another puzzling result is the absence of a link between PAU and suppliers' ability or competence. This was the only dimension of trustworthiness that did not stand out, irrespective of ministerial advisers' propensity to trust. It seems that other kinds of signals are to be sent to earn the trust of ministerial advisers in policy advising. It might not be enough just to enjoy an expert reputation to have the ears of ministerial advisers. On the basis of our results, sound intentions, trust-generating affinities and antecedents are even stronger assets of suppliers, which can give policy advice greater chances to finally hit the mark.

There is nevertheless a downside to trust, as trustful relationships developing between the ministerial advisers and a set of actors enhances compatibility but at the same time can exclude some other potential sources of advice that perform less well in building trust. Repetitive advisory interactions between ministerial advisers and their advisory sources might generate biases in the utilization of policy-relevant information in favour of sources that better fit with the demands and needs of advisers (Hanegraaff and De Bruycker 2020).

Two practical implications can be derived from our findings. The first one concerns the recruitment of ministerial advisers and the demand side. It might be propitious to recruit advisers so that ministerial cabinets are made of a good mix of profiles. Only recruiting highly distrustful advisers could potentially severely limit access and impoverish the flow of advice circulating towards the apex of government while only hiring highly trustful and unquestioning advisers could potentially leave the whole ministerial cabinet staff vulnerable to being misled and deceived. Therefore, maintaining a sense of equilibrium in trusting tendencies appears to be essential.

The second implication concerns the supply side of policy advice. Our findings demonstrate that it might be wise for advice suppliers to keep their eyes open and adapt their strategies of advice-giving to whomever will be the recipient of the advice. With some advisers, it might be wise to invest in personal contacts if these are particularly distrustful. If advice suppliers fail to adjust their strategies for transmitting advice to establish an appropriate level of trust, there is a risk that their advice will never go far nor reach the highest echelons of government.

One might think that in Belgium, coalition governments with multiple parties and partitocracy (Baudewyns et al. 2022) breed pervasive mistrust, including at the level of ministerial cabinets. This study found that more trustful and open attitudes are also present in ministerial advisers operating in such highly politicized context. We

might wonder whether trust is a more stable currency in other countries characterized by a Napoleonic political-administrative tradition. For instance, in France, where ministerial cabinets have long been institutionalized and secondments are common, are advisers' practices and needs better integrated by their advice-suppliers? As the characteristics of the policy advisory system matter, would advisers value even more personalized contacts in larger and more diverse and pluralistic advisory systems than in Francophone Belgium, or would they rather give more importance to the resources, capacity, and competence of their advice-suppliers? These questions have to do with recent scholarship that has found that size has important implications for public administration (Jugl 2022).

In Westminster regimes, where *cabinetisation* (Brans et al. 2017; Halligan 2021; Pickering, Craft, and Brans 2024) has arguably increased but is a more recent phenomenon, expectations towards sources of advice are probably less settled and crystallized. There might be higher levels of distrust between ministerial advisers, as newcomers in the landscape, and advice-suppliers. Further comparative research may improve the understanding of such potential variations in trust levels and may shed light on the foundations of trust across systems.

Obviously, this study has a series of limitations. It is partly impaired by its limited sample size and cross-sectional design, its coverage limited to two Belgian federated entities or its measurement of PAU exclusively relying on one-sided ministerial advisers' perceptions. However, we believe that this study already reveals a lot about the importance of informality and relational aspects in policy advising, especially for members of policy elites such as the ministers' entourage.

We hope that further studies could investigate how trustful relationships are built in the policy advisory system throughout time, by gathering longitudinal and/or dyadic data about the trust perceptions of the actors supplying advice on the one hand and of ministerial advisers on the other. This type of research based on dyadic data could offer the advantage of reconciling the perspectives of the two parties involved, to have a fuller understanding of the relational dynamics of advising and better characterize the needs and priorities of consumers and producers of advice. Future research, adopting quantitative or qualitative designs, may also explore another important dyad, key to policy advice utilization, namely, ministers and ministerial advisers. Finally, there is still much research to be conducted regarding the characteristics and traits of advice-givers that contribute to gaining trust from ministerial advisers, including factors such as organizational affiliation, ideological alignment and goal convergence, and the content and quality of the supplied advice.

Notes

1. Not to be confused with cabinets of ministers, composed of the ministers and junior ministers as a group. Ministerial cabinets as we understand them are strongly institutionalised ministerial offices composed of ministerial advisers and other staffers appointed at the minister's discretion.
2. Only accessible with personal invitations sent by email.
3. Respondents could give answers about up to three pieces of advice.
4. The Socialist Party (*Parti socialiste*), Christian-democrats (*Centre démocrate humaniste*, recently renamed as *Les Engagés*) and Liberal Party (*Mouvement réformateur*).

5. This explains why the PAU index is composed of 113 observations (i.e., pieces of policy advice), instead of 125. 12 pieces of advice are left out of our PAU index calculation, because of missing data about one or more stages of utilization.
6. This ambiguity might arise in trust research, where the trusted actors listed in survey questions can lean towards individuals or towards organizations/institutions. Researchers ultimately have the choice and may insist on the former or the later. In our case, we insist on the former.
7. The VIF values for the main independent variables were modest to moderate and were hence considered unproblematic.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who have helped us and who made precious recommendations on the article. Special thanks go to Tobias Bach and Yves Steinebach.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Belgian National Fund for Research [FRS-FNRS, POLADMIN FRFC research project, grant number T.0252.16]; and the Special Research Fund of UCLouvain [grant number SPLE FSR17].

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Appendix

Table A1. List of policy domains in the Walloon Region's and Wallonia-Brussels Federation's ministerial portfolios.

	Policy domains
1	Agriculture
2	Arts, culture, youth, and media
3	Economy, scientific research and innovation
4	Education and professional, vocational training
5	Employment
6	Energy
7	Environment and nature
8	Finances and budget
9	Local governments
10	Mobility, public transportation and waterways
11	Planning, urban planning, housing and heritage
12	Public service
13	Social action, health, youth, and family services
14	Social economy and non-profit