

Policy advice utilization in Belgian ministerial cabinets: alternating current from internal and external sources.

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Abstract

Ministerial cabinets hold a central place in the Belgian politico-administrative system, carrying out the bulk of policy formulation. However, they do not operate in isolation and rely on other actors of the policy advisory system for information supply and advice. They request and receive advisory inputs from these actors and use them to formulate policy proposals. This article investigates how ministerial advisers utilize policy advice when they formulate policies. Based on a survey targeting ministerial cabinet members, it shows that policy advice utilization varies according to the source and its location in the policy advisory system. The sample consists of ministerial advisers from eleven ministerial cabinets, from the two Belgian federated entities' governments of Wallonia and the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Ministerial advisers still predominantly use advice from civil servants, which points to the continued importance of advice provision from internal, in-house sources. However, advice from external actors, such as trade unions, civil society, or consulting firms have been observed to have a rather high incidence on policy formulation activities too. Advisory bodies appear to be very much active in supplying advice, but this same advice does not yield comparatively higher utilization scores.

1. Introduction

Ministers usually have personal offices for support and assistance, and these vary in size and role. In Belgium, these offices, called ministerial cabinets, are particularly dominant in the functioning of government. Within ministerial cabinets, ministerial advisers perform a myriad of tasks and activities on behalf of executive officials and serve as an extension of ministers' political personality (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2017: 471). A sub-group of advisers work more specifically on the formulation and the implementation of policies, while other staffers take care of political-strategic tasks, communication, secretariat or logistics. In policy formulation, ministerial advisers take part in activities both substantial and procedural (Craft, 2016). Substantial means that these activities are oriented at the definition of policy contents, while procedural activities are mainly about processes, coordination, and management of the actors involved in policy delivery, for example located in ministries.

In Belgium, the bulk of policy formulation is produced in ministerial offices instead of ministries (Brans et al., 2006; Brans and Aubin, 2017; Aubin and Brans, 2020). The policy formulation phase is particularly information-intensive insofar as it involves preparing and consolidating proposals prior to final decision-making (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2017). Ministerial advisers are often in a position of intermediation or brokerage, trying to accommodate the policy positions and preferences of ministers, public servants, non-state actors and stakeholders. They gather and integrate the contributions of other actors in policy formulation (Eichbaum and Shaw, 2017: 472). This article focuses precisely on these 'bridging' activities, which refer to the process-based integration of advisory inputs by ministerial advisers (see Craft, 2015). Currently, little is empirically known about the utilization made of policy advice. Where does policy advice come from and how is it actually used in top governmental circles, especially in policy formulation activities? Why is policy advice more extensively used in some circumstances than in others?

This article presents results from a survey conducted in the Belgian federated entities' governments of Wallonia and Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB), between 2018 and 2019. Considering that mere description can already reveal a lot about social and political phenomena (Gerring, 2012), we largely rely on descriptive statistics to show how policy advice is used in ministerial offices. We also attempt to examine some of the characteristics of the advice that come across not only as most frequently mentioned but also as most intensely used by ministerial advisers.

Firstly, we review the literature on policy advisory systems and ministerial offices. Secondly, we present the analytical framework based on policy advice utilization conceptualization and the identification of some of its conditioning factors. Thirdly, we then tackle case selection and methodological issues such as survey data collection and analysis. Finally, we report and discuss this

article's results, in an effort to make sense of the observed patterns of policy advice circulation and utilization.

2. Ministerial offices in the policy advisory system

Since the 1990s, scholars have proposed tools to identify and locate policy advisers, replacing them in a broader context. This perspective has moved away from an actor-by-actor approach to understand policy advisory systems as a whole, which are defined as systems: "of interlocking actors, with a unique configuration in each sector and jurisdiction, who provide information, knowledge and recommendations for action to policy makers" (Craft and Halligan, 2012: 80). Accounts of policy advisory systems sometimes take a dynamic turn where shifts toward the outsourcing, externalization or re-internalization of policy advice are pinpointed within specific sectors (Hustedt and Veit, 2017; Veselý, 2013).

Policy advisory systems include a whole range of actors who coexist and interact. They are internal to ministerial government, internal to the bureaucracy and the wider public sector, or external, that is, non-state, societal actors or private organizations (Craft and Howlett, 2013). Policy advisory systems therefore "transcend the boundaries of internal government expertise and knowledge transmission activities" (Howlett and Migone, 2013: 241). Within advisory systems, ministerial advisers occupy a special position in that they are both receivers of advice (both internal and external) and providers of advice (to the ministers). They transform and adapt advisory flows to the necessities of policy work (Hustedt et al., 2017; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2018, 2010).

One can take out from the relevant scholarship that policy advice utilization depends on the privileged position of certain advisory sources, policy domains, broader contexts, and the state of politico-administrative relationships such as varying levels of trust between public servants and ministerial offices (de Visscher et al., 2013).

In previous research specific to policy advisory systems, the use of advice has often been addressed at the macro or meso levels of policy sectors or organizations. In this article, we shift the focus onto the micro-level of individual-users, which represents a new contribution to the fields of inquiry about ministerial advisers and policy advice. Moreover, the analysis of policy advice as an informational or knowledge base, along with its characteristics, enables examinations that are more concrete and embedded in ministerial offices' practices.

3. Policy advice utilization in ministerial cabinets

This section provides a definition policy advice and meet the challenges of its measurement. Furthermore, a series of factors associated with the policy advice utilization are identified.

3.1. Policy advice

Conceptual vagueness generally characterizes the definition of policy advice. A first definition considers that policy advice covers the “analysis of problems and the proposing of solutions” (Halligan, 1998). A second view policy advice as offering “*suggestions* and support for action, not the action itself” (Veselý, 2017: 143). Based on these particular definitions, we define policy advice as a piece of information concerning policy, which is processed in order to help and/or influence an actor to make a decision. Against this background, an advice does not correspond to raw information, mere facts and data (for example, a statistical report informing about unemployment rates). Indeed, in addition to being informative, policy advice remains a more or less transformed and interpreted message pointing at directions for decision-makers to take action (Peters and Barker, 1993: 10).

Of the few explicit conceptualizations of policy advice (including our working definition), there are two underlying dimensions: a prescriptive dimension and an informative dimension. The prescriptive dimension refers to recommendations for action. Issuing and sending policy advice to an advisee is done to incite and persuade the latter to adopt a certain course of action, to pursue certain goals and objectives or to tackle certain problems.

The informative or supportive dimension is because policy advice relays potentially relevant information or knowledge. One of the defining feature of advice is that this information or knowledge transfer can be done explicitly or more implicitly (Benson, 2019). As an illustration of implicit transfer, if a decision-maker follows the advice from a scientist to take a specific course of action, the decision-maker makes use of scientists’ accumulated experience and body of knowledge, sometimes without being fully conscious of this knowledge transfer being at play. In other instances, the transfer is more explicit, for example, when a recommendation issued by an advisory body contains more clearly articulated and explicit knowledge (figures, charts, graphs, references to scientific research...). Hence, policy advice supports and supplements an actor’s decision, providing a grounding in facts, data or in the knowledge available.

3.2. The gradual process of policy advice utilization

Policy advice utilization is not conceived as a mere and instantaneous transmission of a ‘message’ to a receiver, but rather as a process of acquisition, understanding and mobilization. This process takes several stages, which together constitute a graduated scale of utilization (Knott and Wildavsky, 1980; Van de Graaf and Hoppe, 2006). For the purpose of operationalization, we have adapted the knowledge utilization scale (Landry et al., 2001b) to advice utilization in ministerial cabinets (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. The five stages constitutive of the policy advice utilization process



Source: Adapted from Landry et al. (2001b)

In the first stage of utilization, after having received policy advice, a ministerial adviser simply takes note of it (*cognition*). Advisers may then refer to the advice, mentioning it in written or oral exchanges with their colleagues (second stage, *reference*). In a more advanced stage of use, advisers adhere to the advice and promote it so that other ministerial cabinet colleagues recognize its merits (third stage, *effort*). In the fourth stage, policy advice comes to influence a minister’s position, choice, and decision (*influence*). Finally, in the highest stage, the advice leads to concrete measures partially or fully derived from it (fifth stage, *application*). Thus, the utilization of advice is understood as a progressive scale of utilization.

3.3. The conditions for policy advice utilization

While this article’s purpose is to provide a description of the use of policy advice in ministerial offices, it goes further by offering some tentative explanations of this phenomenon and formulates associated theoretical expectations.

First, intrinsic characteristics of policy advice should affect how it is used. Like any means of communication, policy advice includes, in addition to the contained message, a sender (here, the advice-giver), a medium and a receiver (here, the advice-taker). It appears that decision-makers are

more sensitive to the sender (or source) of information and, by the same token, to its reputation, than to informational content and qualities (Doberstein, 2017).

There are potentially countless sources of advice within a policy advisory system. From a pluralistic perspective, the policy advisory system is analogous to a marketplace where policy ideas are supplied and seek to meet demand, with intermediaries facilitating exchanges (Maloney et al., 1994; Craft and Howlett, 2012). Policy advisory systems are seen as relatively open spaces, where potential advice-providers coexist and compete for government attention. Access to government is not equal, however, and depends on the nature of the actor network (e.g., pluralist, neo-corporatist, etc.), resources of the advice-giver, and its ideological congruence with the government (Craft and Wilder, 2017).

In conformity with locational models, the source of advice is valued as a function of its proximity to the government. Policy advice literature suggests that the location of a source matters substantially in the take-up of advice: *the closer an advice-giver is vis-à-vis the government, the more likely the advice should be used* (H1) (Halligan, 1995, 2001; Craft and Howlett, 2012). According to Halligan (1995, 2001), proximity proceeds from a proximate location to the government and a higher government control over the source. Location is either internal, typically when advice comes from ministerial offices (i.e., ministerial government) and public service, or external, when it comes from social partners, interest groups or civil society, among others.

Government control over the source of advice reinforces proximity dynamics H2) (Halligan, 1995; Veselý, 2013). Actors external to the government (re)gain centrality within the policy advice system due to being under government control. These are actors involved in policy implementation, such as service providers or formally consulted parties, who are under contract or depend on public resources. They are associated to policy-making through specific schemes or the assignment of particular tasks and missions (Halligan, 1995, 2001; Veselý, 2013). Conversely, internal actors who are part of the political-administrative system should sometimes be sidelined insofar as the government has little control over them, for example statutory civil servants or formal, permanent (as opposed to *ad hoc*) advisory bodies.

A second characteristic of advice emanating from the relevant literature is whether the advice is requested by ministerial advisers or ministers (Bossens, 2013). Therefore, *advice that is neither requested nor expected, or that is the result of an imposed consultation, should be less used. Conversely, advice that is solicited is more likely to be used* (H3).

4. A Survey of Ministerial Advisers in Belgium

4.1. Case selection

Belgium, once a unitary state, has undergone processes of federalization, which have led to the creation of two types of federated entities: regions and communities. Both the federal government and federated entities have their own exclusive competencies, with no hierarchy between the laws of the former and the latter (i.e., the principle of equipollence of norms)¹. Regions (Wallonia, Flanders, and the Brussels-Capital Region) are mainly responsible for economic matters, and communities (French-, Flemish- and German-speaking) for 'personalized' matters (education, culture, sport, etc.). Each government acts in its own field of competence and in its own jurisdiction².

. Currently, each minister disposes of a cabinet (a maximum of nine ministers in Wallonia and eight in Wallonia-Brussels Federation). For a matter of transparency, lists of ministerial cabinet members are published on government's official websites, but remain indicative only. However, these lists make it possible to estimate staff size in ministerial offices. On average there are 61 ministerial advisers per minister in Wallonia and 52.5 per minister in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation³.

Here add a few words about ministerial advisers, most are seconded civil servants, but also we also find individuals coming from politics/partisan organizations (like party headquarters or research centers) and civil society, recruitment, (some work half time or less), loyalty to ministers, non-impartiality compared to civil servants. At least in Belgium, one main chief of staff at the top, sometimes assisted by vice-chiefs of staff who oversee the working of specific policy cells.

Choosing the two French-speaking Belgian governments as case studies is due to the complexity of the Belgian federation as previously described (government resignations, coalitions, regional divide, three different spoken-languages, etc.), but offers good validity and generalizability. Belgian federated governments work on policy proposals, which are submitted to parliaments, with legislative outputs. Moreover, regional and community governments, when combined, already cover a large field of competencies⁴. Therefore, the size, scope and functioning of these governments are quite comparable to those of national governments.

4.2. Surveying ministerial advisers

¹ A decree issued from a Region or a Community in the area where it is competent is equivalent to a Federal law, with no hierarchy of norms.

² In a logic of jurisdictional federalism (as opposed to functional federalism) using Braun's terminology (2000).

³ Making for 427 ministerial advisers for 7 ministers at the Walloon Region and 345 ministerial advisers for 7 ministers at the FWB. These figures are based on lists put on official government websites.

⁴ Except for regalian functions (justice, police, defense, etc.) and social security, which formally remain federal.

We conducted an online survey from June 2018 to April 2019⁵. The questionnaire consisted of 35 questions, among which several were optional. A first part included questions about advisers' profile and function, while in a second; the adviser had to recall a recent policy proposal⁶, on which background and contextual questions were asked. In the third part, the adviser had to give answers about a first piece of advice, specifying the use that had been made of it. Giving answers for a second and third piece of advice on the same policy proposal was possible.

The survey was not sent to the entire ministerial staff, but only to ministerial advisers involved in policy work. We contacted each ministerial adviser individually by email. Survey participation was subject to prior written agreement by the responsible minister and the cabinet itself provided contact list of ministerial advisers. We took those precautions in order to avoid a blockage at the beginning of the survey and to ensure that an accurate list of ministerial advisers was available.

Responses were obtained for 125 pieces of policy advice, and from 113 ministerial advisers working for 11 of the 14 ministerial cabinets of the two governments, and for 10 ministers in total. All three political parties of the two ministerial governments were represented⁷. While the finite and exact population of ministerial advisers is virtually impossible to determine, it is possible to give estimates about the penetration rate of the survey. With a maximum of 250 to 300 ministerial advisers involved in policy-making, the lowest penetration rate of the survey could be situated between 30% and 40%. The survey response rate (i.e., ratio between the invitations sent and the number of returned questionnaires) is 67.7%, which is particularly high for both an online survey and research on ministerial cabinets.

4.3. Variables operationalization

4.3.1. *Measuring policy advice utilization*

The magnitude of policy advice utilization is measured for each of the one to three pieces of advice selected by respondents, using a scale adapted from Landry et al (2004). With regard to the magnitude of policy advice utilization, the question is worded as follows: "To what extent do the following statements describe the utilization that was made of this piece of advice?". Five items were then proposed to respondents, each of which reflecting a stage, phase or gradient, of the utilization

⁵ Using Limesurvey

⁶ In this case, a draft piece of legislation.

⁷ More responses were collected from Christian democrat ministers (CDH), than from social democrats (PS) and liberals (MR), most probably because CDH was the only political party participating in both governments.

process⁸⁹. For each item, respondents had to place the cursor on a point of a scale ranging from 0 ('not at all') to 10 ('completely'):

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

The overall intensity of the utilization process is measured by a utilization index that includes all five items. Scores associated with the five gradients of utilization are weighted to give them increasing importance from the first to the second, from the second to the third and so on¹⁰. The score for the first item is weighted with 1, the second with 2, the third with 3, etc.¹¹. For example, a piece of advice rated 10 on each of the utilization items, after weighting them, would obtain a score on the average utilization index of 10. An advice rated 10 on the first four items and 9 on the last one would obtain a utilization index score of 9.6. Finally, an advice rated 9 on the first item and 10 on the other four, would obtain a score on the utilization index of 9.93. Therefore, the weighting means that a small change in use at the top of the scale has a greater impact on the index than a similar small change at the bottom. The idea is to give extra weight to a more definitive instrumental use of policy advice as opposed to mere consideration or reference.

4.3.2. Measuring the conditioning variables of policy advice utilization

With regard to advice providers, the first conditioning variable, survey respondents answered the following question: "What was the source of this specific piece of advice?" by selecting a response from the 16 proposed categories (see *Table 1*). List effects were mitigated with random changes for each respondent in the order of appearance of categories.

⁸ These items were taken and adapted from Amara, Ouimet, and Landry's study of scientific research utilization (2003). Lundin and Öberg used the same items, although the reference stage was split into two: 'oral discussion' and 'written reference' (2014). Depending on the study, utilization scales are constructed with a varying number of stages, sometimes with a single stage (see Pattyn et al., 2020).

⁹ Responses for each item was mandatory to progress into the survey questionnaire.

¹⁰ This type of weighting has been done before in several studies that focused on the use of scientific knowledge or expertise based on a comparable scale of use (Lester, 1993; Landry et al., 2001a; Crona & Parker, 2011).

¹¹ Cronbach's alphas for the weighted and unweighted items together in the utilization index are both over 0.7, which is normally considered a more than acceptable measure.

Table 1. Sources of policy advice, proposed categories

1	Your colleagues from the ministerial office
2	The civil service or a governmental agency
3	Another minister or her/his ministerial office
4	MPs
5	The political party to which your minister belongs (including political parties research centers)
6	Advisory bodies (for example, the Economic and Social Committee of Wallonia)
7	Consulting firms
8	Unions
9	Employers' associations and sectoral federations
10	Non-profit sector (for example, mutual companies)
11	Citizens and organized civil society (NGOs included)
12	International organisations (OECD, World Bank, IMF...)
13	European Union
14	Universities/Academia
15	Think Tanks
16	Other

We did not ask respondents to name the organization providing the advice in order to depersonalize answers and ensure that advisers did not have to point to a specific organization. The goal was to avoid socially desirable responses or even no response at all.

Regarding the second explaining variable, the desired or solicited nature of the advice, we asked the following question: "Have you received this piece of advice because you asked for it in the first place?", with a binary response choice 'yes-no'.

5. A fairly high utilization overall

The pieces of policy advice described by the respondents are, on balance, quite extensively used. The mean of the weighted magnitude of utilization is 6.97 and the median is 7 on a scale from 0 to 10 (see *Table 2*). The range of utilization magnitude is 7.5, with a minimum value of 2.5 and a maximum of 10. Considering a standard deviation of 1.76, the variable has relatively little dispersion. This higher-than-expected utilization of advice is partly imputable to ministerial advisers self-selecting the pieces of

advice they were responding about, choosing advice that was particularly significant in their eyes and made an impression on them.

Table 2. Policy advice utilization index, overall scores

Policy advice utilization Index	Obs.	Mean	Standard deviation	Min.	Max.	Med.
Wallonia	58	6,898	1,675	3,733	10	6,83
FWB	55	7,042	1,867	2,533	10	7,13
Total	113	6,968	1,764	2,533	10	7

The overall policy utilization scores also vary by federated entities' government (see *Table 2* above). The magnitude of policy advice utilization is, on average, slightly higher in Wallonia-Brussels Federation than in Wallonia. Organizational features are quite similar between the two federated entities' governments, but the portfolio of competences of each varies more substantially.

Decomposing the index back to its five original component items shows fairly high averages for the more advanced stages of utilization (see *table 3* below). Logically, the average (unweighted) utilization scores generally follow a downward trend, moving from one stage to the next. The later stages generate less utilization than earlier stages. In other words, policy advice is more often considered or mentioned in oral or written communications by ministerial advisers, than it has an impact on the responsible minister or generate concrete policy action.

Table 3. Policy advice utilization, by stage:

	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

There is, however, a slight discontinuity between the ‘effort’ stage and the ‘influence’ and ‘application’ stages. These last two final stages overlap almost perfectly, that is, any advice that succeeds in influencing a minister would more be more likely to generate concrete policy measures. The ‘effort’ stage may be more behaviorally demanding for ministerial advisers (i.e., endorsing, pushing and championing an advice). At the same time, it may only infrequently happen that a single piece of advice is so remarkable that a ministerial adviser becomes its supporter and passes it on to other cabinet colleagues. That may be why the ‘effort’ stage yield comparatively lower utilization average scores.

6. A high utilization conditioned by the advice characteristics

This section presents the apparent saliency and ascendancy of certain advisory sources used by ministerial advisers, and the destinies of solicited or unsolicited advice.

The frequencies of citation show which source categories were selected by respondents in the survey, that is, the ones the advisers think of first (see *Table 4*). In terms of internal sources, ministerial advisers more readily think of advisory bodies, the civil service and governmental agencies, other ministers or their offices. As for external sources, social partners (unions and employers) are clearly in the lead. Advice of civil society and academics is much less frequently mentioned. This reliance on internal, in-house advice is consistent with previous research on Belgian civil servants (Aubin and Brans, 2020). Here, we find the possible effects of the neo-corporatist regime and its arrangements on policy formulation activities. The pieces of advice that left the most lasting impression on the minds of ministerial advisers are those from institutional consultations or those of actors most present and influential in this regime, namely the social partners. The flow of internal advice remains important; equally concerning cabinet members and civil servants, even if it appears that on average ministerial advisers are more in contact with private actors or stakeholders than civil servants in their quest for information. While consultations with advisory bodies (which may be imposed), could be judged as excessively formal and not very influential, ministerial advisers have a different perception of them and seem to take them seriously, given that how often advice coming from these bodies is mentioned in the survey.

Table 4. Sources of advice ranked in decreasing order of citation frequencies

	Frequencies	Percentages
Advisory bodies	27	20,6%
The civil service or a governmental agency	24	18,3%
Employers' associations and sectoral federations	19	14,5%
Unions	13	9,9%
Another minister or her/his ministerial office	9	6,9%
Citizens and organized civil society (NGOs included)	6	4,6%
Universities/Academia	6	4,6%
Colleagues from the same ministerial office	5	3,8%
Non-profit sector (for example, mutual companies)	5	3,8%
Inspectorate of Finance	5	3,8%
MPs	4	3,0%
Consulting firms	3	2,3%
Political party of the Minister (including political parties research centers)	2	1,5%
European Union	1	0,8%
Council of State	1	0,8%
Other	1	0,8%
<i>Think tanks</i>	0	0%
International organisations	0	0%

In order to make finer distinctions between the actors providing advice, the sources are cross-tabulated with their associated utilization scores (see *Table 5* below). Surprisingly, policy advice from academia, as a knowledge producer (Craft and Howlett, 2012), generates the highest usage scores. However, this result must be relativized because of the low number of occurrences, which once again suggests that respondents only thought of commenting on the type of advice that particularly influenced them.

Second, policy advice most extensively utilized came from civil service and public agencies. Respondents mentioned this advice very often too, demonstrating the importance of advisory

input from the bureaucracy (Brans and Fobé, 2021), even into the policy work of ministerial offices. Although this may seem obvious at first glance, it remains that both civil servants and ministerial cabinets would at times express little trust in each other. Public servants believe that ministerial offices work in isolation, and in turn, ministerial advisers sometimes complain that they are not sufficiently supported by bureaucrats. These results clearly show the interest of this type of survey, which, through factual questions, might come to challenge preconceptions or commonplace ideas. The Inspectorate of Finance, which is an administrative body that the respondents added on their own initiative is also very much followed in its advice.

Table 5. Policy advice utilization by source categories

	Obs.	Mean
Universities/Academia	5	8.27
The civil service or a governmental agency	22	7.70
Inspectorate of Finance	5	7.56
Unions	9	7.38
Citizens and organized civil society (NGOs included)	6	7.37
Colleagues from the same ministerial office	3	7.35
Consulting firms	3	7.35
Employers' associations and sectoral federations	19	6.74
Advisory bodies	23	6.43
Non-profit sector (for example, mutual companies)	4	6.35
MPs	4	6.12
Another minister or her/his ministerial office	7	5.69

Within the executive branch, advice from colleagues of the same ministerial office is used more significantly than advice from other ministers or their offices. However, the number of occurrences is very low for the former, which can be indicative of a pyramidal work organization where each adviser follows his or her own files. Policy advice from other ministerial cabinets is certainly frequent because of the important coordination work done by those same offices in a multi-party coalition government

(Göransson and Eraly, 2015). Advice coming from the legislative branch (i.e., members of parliament) do not reach a high level of utilization either.

When engaging with stakeholders, ministerial advisers receive policy advice from a variety of sources too. Although advisory bodies are the most frequently cited, it is not their advice that achieves the highest utilization scores, but the advice of unions once taken separately. Quite singularly, the advice of business and industry federations are more frequently cited but less used than that of trade unions. The few pieces of advice cited from citizens and civil society (excluding non-market sector organizations, counted as a separate category) score high in utilization. Consultancy firms, which are used to assisting the Walloon Government at the stage of policy formulation, are not mentioned very often, even though their advice is utilized to a relatively high degree.

Table 6. Policy advice utilization if solicited or unsolicited

	Obs.	Mean
Unsolicited	31	7,092
Solicited	82	6,921

It was expected that solicited advice would potentially be used more extensively than advice sent to cabinet advisers on their own initiative. The survey results show that this is not the case (see *Table 6*). The two types of advice reach very similar utilization scores, with a slight advantage to unsolicited advice. It is interesting to see that ministerial advisers take an active part in soliciting advice and hence, are not passive recipients within policy advisory systems. It also shows that it may not be futile for a public servant or an interest group to take initiatives and send policy advice to ministers and their entourage.

In conclusion, the characteristics of policy advice seem to affect their utilization. The citation frequencies and utilization scores vary quite significantly depending on the sender, whereas the solicited or unsolicited nature of the advice has apparently little effect on utilization.

7. Discussion and conclusion

Belgian ministerial advisers think first and foremost to policy advice from sources internal to the public sphere, like the civil service (i.e., ministries and public agencies) or the Inspectorate of Finance, from the executive branch, or of private, societal actors sitting in organizations internal to government, such

as permanent advisory bodies. Advisory bodies are an integral part of the Belgian political regime, with a consensual functioning and neo-corporatist features (Pattyn et al., 2019; Fobé et al., 2017).

Not only is internal advice frequently mentioned, but it is also among the most extensively used. This is in-line with expectations based on locational models, emphasizing proximity and a core executive, public or private sector insiders' advantage over actors that are more peripheral or outsiders (Halligan, 2001). Internal advice-providers tend to enjoy a privileged position in Belgium's policy advisory systems; they remain determinant and significantly affect policy work in ministerial offices. Nevertheless, this assertion comes with one exception: within the internal arena, the advice of other ministerial offices appears frequent but at the same time more disregarded and less decisive.

Although internal sources remain central in the production and use of policy advice, the full picture is more mixed and diversified because external or peripheral actors release policy advice that is also substantially used. This is the case for the advice given by academia, trade unions, organized civil society and, to a lesser extent, consulting firms (Sturdy, 2021). Advice from these externally located actors taken individually seems to generate more extensive use in ministerial offices, than advice channeled through permanent advisory bodies, where some of these external, societal actors are also represented. Therefore, external advice may take different routes, not necessarily with the same fate in terms of utilization: one direct route from external actors straight to ministerial offices and another, more indirect, where advice from external actors like unions, is mediated through collective consultations and negotiations occurring within advisory bodies. It would appear that ministerial advisers sometimes prefer direct advisory and informational exchanges with one organization rather than having to deal with collectives that represent multiple interests at the same time and where it is more difficult for ministerial advisers to isolate advisory signals and the policy position of one single actor or organization. For consultancy firms, the fact that their advice is purchased may explain the higher-than-average utilization scores.

Some sources of advice are conspicuous by their absence among the actors mentioned. None of the respondents ever mentioned any advice from think tanks. This confirms the weakness of these actors in Belgium and especially in Wallonia where they are marginal (Fraussen et al., 2017). The case of the political parties' research centers is also striking. Possibly, these actors are more active in the background, bring a support function and intervene occasionally in case of a lack of expertise or in case of politically sensible issues. Supranational and international organizations, including the European Union, are advisory actors which appear little present.

Future research, possibly adopting a different methodological approach (e.g., ethnography), should be able to confirm, question or complete this study's findings, by uncovering the various flows of advice

circulating to ministerial offices, and especially the reason why some advisory inputs may figure more prominently in policy formulation activities. Policy advice utilization patterns may also differ between policy domains (Bernstein, 1991), and hence by ministerial portfolios, or may depend on ministerial offices size, as smaller cabinets should be synonymous with weaker internal policy capacity and therefore with a necessity to rely even more on outside actors. This has to be established empirically by future studies.

To conclude, the most decisive advice is not necessarily internal, even if it abounds and comes out as well utilized. Some external advice might find its way into ministerial offices and have considerable incidence on ministerial governments. It also appears that unsolicited advice may have significant repercussions in policy work as well, perhaps because of the unexpected or 'out-of-the-box' ideas it conveys. Advisory flows do not strictly equal one another in policy formulation.

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