

Bureaucratic Change in the European Administrative Space: The Case of the European Commission

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In this article, we compare bureaucratic change in the European Commission with developments in the public administrations of the member states of the European Union using two standard features of the study of comparative public administration: the degree of politicisation of the higher management and the degree of openness of the career system. The empirical data shows that the Commission started as a public administration in the Continental tradition and over time partially moved towards the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian models. At the same time, the majority of the member states remained rather stable with regard to their position along the two administrative dimensions under study. We argue that none of the mechanisms commonly invoked to explain organisational change – functional adaptation, path dependency, isomorphism or policy windows – can convincingly account for the complete pattern and the magnitude of change that we observe in the case of the European Commission. While we find no convincing support for the relevance of functional adaptation or path dependency, the concepts of isomorphism and policy windows provide a more promising basis for understanding at least some aspects of the empirical development.

Compared to national bureaucracies, the supranational administration of the European Commission constitutes a rather young institution. As a result, the Commission has often been characterised as an ‘adolescent bureaucracy’, meaning that its structures, organisational practices and routines are still in an evolutionary stage and not yet completely institutionalised. Compared to national administrations, we should therefore expect a higher degree of malleability of the supranational bureaucracy and greater responsiveness to internal and external pressures for administrative reforms. This perspective, however, could easily be challenged by the fact that the Commission bureaucracy is rooted in institutional choices that date back to the foundation of the Community in the mid-1950s. Although

the Commission in its current structure was only established in 1967, it is based on the merger of three organisations that were set up in the early days of the Community, namely the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (established in 1952), the Commission of the European Economic Community and the Commission of the European Atomic Energy Community (both established in 1958). From this perspective, the Commission bureaucracy reflects an institution with a tradition of more than 50 years – a period of considerable length when compared to other institutions. Thus, the institutionalisation and consequent rigidity of supranational administrative structures and routines might be more pronounced than the picture of the ‘adolescent bureaucracy’ suggests. At the same time, we should expect more incremental patterns of administrative change along existing institutional paths rather than smooth responses to internal and external challenges or pressures such as performance crises, the global reform wave of the New Public Management, or respective demands from the member states.

Against the backdrop of these considerations, it is the central objective of this article to shed some light on patterns of administrative change within the European Commission. More specifically, we are interested in the following questions: (1) To what extent can we observe administrative change at the supranational level and to what extent are these changes characterised by a general trend or point in a specific direction? (2) How can the observed developments be understood? Are they simply the consequence of functional adaptation in light of internal challenges? Do they reflect immediate responses to administrative developments and respective preferences of the member states? Or can they be best interpreted as path-dependent adjustment?

To answer these questions, we do not limit our analysis to the investigation of persistence and change of administrative traditions at the Commission level. We pursue instead a more comprehensive approach, embedding and interpreting the Commission development in light of the administrative trends and reform developments that took place in what can be termed a European administrative space. This means that we do not exclusively focus on the Commission, but compare supranational administrative changes to respective developments in the public administrations of the member states of the European Union. This more encompassing comparative perspective provides an innovative scheme for the interpretation of the Commission’s development in a broader context. In conducting our analysis, we concentrate on two central dimensions of administrative change. First, we analyse the nexus between the administrative and political spheres, i.e. the degree of politicisation of the supranational bureaucracy. Second, because a policy-oriented organisation such as the Commission depends largely on the quality of its personnel to realise its aims, we examine how issues of recruitment and career development are organised and have changed over time.

The paper is structured as follows. We first specify our research design and explain the selection of our indicators for measuring administrative change. In the next section, we present our empirical findings and compare the developments within the Commission to those within the broader European administrative space. The question of how these empirical developments might be interpreted in theoretical terms is addressed thereafter. We argue that none of the mechanisms commonly invoked to explain administrative change – functional adaptation, path dependency, isomorphism or policy windows – can convincingly account for the complete pattern and the magnitude of change that we observe in the case of the European Commission. While we see no convincing evidence for functional adaptation or path dependency at all, the concepts of isomorphism and policy windows appear to help explain at least parts of the empirical puzzle. In the concluding section, we discuss the general implications of our findings and outline promising approaches for future research.

Research Design and Method

To measure administrative change within the Commission and the broader administrative space, we compare the development of respective administrative arrangements in the EU member states over time. On this basis, we are not only able to identify if and to what extent administrative characteristics within the Commission have changed. It is also possible to assess whether these changes constitute moves towards institutionalised patterns and traditions in the member states (Dyson 1980; Knill 1998; Schnapp 2004). To measure such developments, we focus on two analytical dimensions that have been identified as important yardsticks for the distinction between different types of public administration systems (see Auer *et al.* 1996; Knill 1999, 2001; Peters and Pierre 2004; Schnapp 2004).

The first dimension draws on the distinction between open (position-based) systems and closed (career-based) civil service systems (Auer *et al.* 1996; OECD 2004). Patterns of an open system are typically found in countries associated with the Common Law or Scandinavian tradition of public administration; almost pure representatives of this model are the United Kingdom and Sweden (Bauer 2005; Schnapp 2004: 298). These countries adopted a career system that can be compared to the private sector (Bossaert *et al.* 2001: 87–96). It is based on the merit principle in order to find the best-suited candidate for each position. In the United Kingdom, for example, there exist no formal recruitment procedures for civil servants in the sense that ‘departments and agencies are themselves responsible for organising staff recruitment with respect to timing, needs, requirements’ (Bossaert *et al.* 2001: 92). Moreover, in an open career system salary depends upon duty and not merely on years of service and formal rank, as is the case in the closed system. If the United Kingdom and Sweden are usually referred to as ideal types of open systems, Germany and France represent

civil services of the more closed Continental tradition (OECD 2004). Table 1 lists the indicators we use to measure the degree of openness of the recruitment and career system in the member states and the European Commission. The assignment of 'yes' and 'no' to the two different systems was done in accordance with previous studies (Auer *et al.* 1996; Bossaert *et al.* 2001; Schnapp 2004). To calculate an additive index, we coded an indicator of an open system with '1', while a value of '0' is assigned if the characteristics of a closed system are given.

The second dimension under study refers to the degree of politicisation of the higher management within a civil service. Following the pertinent literature, we define politicisation broadly as the level of 'substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service' (Peters and Pierre 2004: 2). In this regard, the appointment procedure for senior staff and the use of political-administrative structures created to provide government control over bureaucracy are crucial (Bekke and van der Meer 2003: 281–282). Again, we can distinguish between two major groups of countries that differ in this respect. In the Continental countries, such as France, Belgium and Greece, ministers have so-called cabinets at their disposal that ensure the political control of the bureaucracy and coordinate the ongoing work of the service (Page and Wright 1999; Peters and Pierre 2004). In Germany, the same functions are fulfilled by deputy ministers and personal advisors. By contrast, in the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian systems we find a stricter separation between politics and administration. The advisers of the ministers have no formal role in the bureaucracy, and ministers normally abstain from interfering in appointment processes according to inherited norms of appropriateness (Knill 1999, 2001; Page and Wouters 1995: 200).

TABLE 1
INDICATORS MEASURING THE OPENNESS OF RECRUITMENT AND CAREER SYSTEMS

Indicators	Open system	Closed system
Recruitment only to entry level	no (1)	yes (0)
Specific diplomas needed for specific career	no (1)	yes (0)
Probationary period for beginners	no (1)	yes (0)
Formal recruitment procedures	no (1)	yes (0)
Maximum age limits in recruitment	no (1)	yes (0)
Recognition of professional experience outside the public sector	yes (1)	no (0)
Public advertisement of jobs	no (1)	yes (0)
Life-long employment/tenure	no (1)	yes (0)
Statutory remuneration scheme	no (1)	yes (0)
Set progression in pay	no (1)	yes (0)
Performance-related pay	yes (1)	no (0)
Seniority system for promotion	no (1)	yes (0)
Specific regulations for labour negotiations	no (1)	yes (0)

Source: own specification on the basis of Auer *et al.* (1996) and Schnapp (2004: 145).

Table 2 shows the indicators for measuring the degree of politicisation in the European Commission and the EU member states. In this context, we take into account the fact that in the national systems, politicisation primarily emerges from party politics. In the Commission, by contrast, this pattern is substituted by nationality cleavages. Once again, we calculate an additive index assigning '0' to low or no politicisation and '1' to high politicisation.

To analyse administrative changes over time, we have compiled values for our indicators at the beginning of the 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s. The selection of the time period is based on the objective of covering the potential impact of different EU enlargements on administrative change at the Commission level. While there is general consensus in the literature that the Commission bureaucracy was strongly influenced by the Continental administrative traditions of the founding members of the EU (especially France and Germany), the 1973 enlargement led to a considerable increase in administrative heterogeneity in the EU administrative space. This can be traced to the fact that the then new members (United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark) belong to 'administrative families' that are quite different from the Continental model (Peters 2003). Focusing on administrative arrangements of the Commission several years after this enlargement can thus reveal the extent to which the increasing administrative variety of the member states is reflected in the supranational bureaucracy. The analysis of the current status quo thus provides the opportunity to study the potential effects of further enlargement rounds during the 1980s and 1990s and hence the increasing heterogeneity within the EU administrative space.

TABLE 2
INDICATORS MEASURING THE LEVEL OF POLITICISATION

Indicators	Low	High
Senior staff is usually recruited from the administration itself	yes (0)	no (1)
Senior staff is recruited through formal procedures prior to the appointment	yes (0)	no (1)
Senior staff can be dismissed by the minister without cause	no (0)	yes (1)
Senior staff can be replaced when the government changes	no (0)	yes (1)
The incumbent minister can appoint senior staff	no (0)	yes (1)
A formalised cabinet system exists	no (0)	yes (1)
The appointment of cabinet staff is formalised	yes (0)	no (1)

Source: own specification based on Auer *et al.* (1996) and Schnapp (2004: 149).

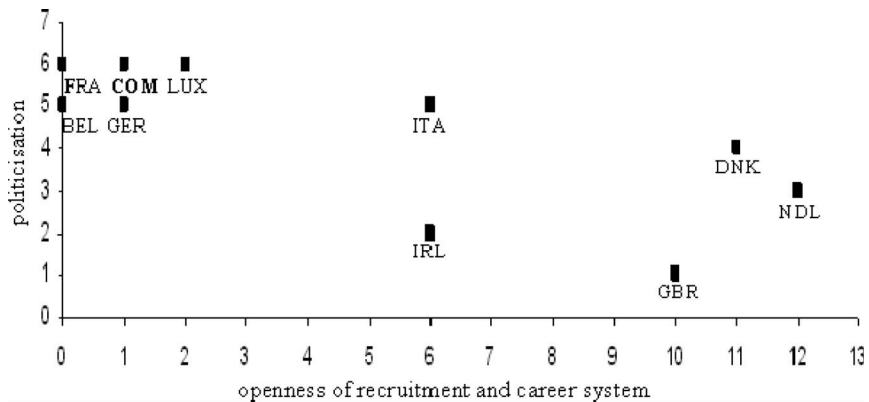
Notes: Data on the member states are taken primarily from an index developed by Schnapp (2004) and were partially supplemented (Auer *et al.* 1996; Bossaert *et al.* 2001; Millar and McKeivitt 1999; Nies-Berchem 1992; OECD 1996, 2004; Page and Wright 1999; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). For reasons of their rather recent accession, we excluded from our sample the member states that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Data on the European Commission is based on our own empirical investigations covering the administrative changes as triggered by the recent Kinnock reforms up to 2006 (Bauer 2006, 2007b; European Commission 2004a, 2004b; Knill and Balint 2008).

The Commission between De-politicisation and Aperture of Recruitment and Career

Based on the indexes introduced in the previous section, we are able to assess the characteristics of a public administration in two dimensions. Figure 1 is a ‘snapshot’ of the early 1980s showing the position of the public administrations of the then nine EU member states and the European Commission. Due to the additive logic of the indexes, a value of ‘13’ on the horizontal axis corresponds to full openness of the recruitment and career system. In a similar vein, a value of ‘7’ on the vertical axis corresponds to the maximum level of politicisation of an administrative system.

Figure 1 shows that the European Commission is almost perfectly aligned with its supposed public administration ‘parent model’ France. The only odd-man-out from the founding members is the Netherlands, which phased out its career-based system in 1982 (Demmke 2005: 105–107). The United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark – all joined the EU in 1973 – enriched the European administrative space with a quite open recruitment and career system and an institutionalised separation of politics and administration. Nevertheless, the administrative features of the European Commission in the 1980s remained similar to patterns of the early Commission administration (see for an overview Heyen 1992). Since 1961, a set of staff regulations (the Statute) has determined the recruitment and career of the Commission’s civil servants (Stevens and Stevens 2006: 455). These regulations define the rights and obligations of officials, underscoring the privileged position of civil servants as guardians of European interests. In

FIGURE 1
ADMINISTRATIVE PATTERNS IN THE EU-9 AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION
(IN THE EARLY 1980s)



GRC = Greece, FRA = France, BEL = Belgium, ESP = Spain, GER = Germany, POR = Portugal, AUT = Austria, LUX = Luxembourg, COM = European Commission, IRL = Ireland, DNK = Denmark, ITA = Italy, NDL = the Netherlands, FIN = Finland, GBR = Great Britain, SWE = Sweden.

Source: own illustration.

the founding years, the formalisation of recruitment and career was understood as a crucial step towards safeguarding the independence of the emerging European civil service and as a commitment of the six founding members to the supranational nature of the 'European project' (Coombes 1970: 140).

Entry into the European civil service usually took place at the first grade, and the recruited civil servants received life tenure with set progression in payment (Coombes 1970; Getz and Jüttner 1972; Rogalla 1973; Scheinmann 1966; Scheinmann and Feld 1972; Stevens and Stevens 2001). Moreover, the French method of recruiting civil servants (also used in Belgium and Italy) – the *concours* system – was adopted. It is based on a competitive entry examination with prior public advertisement in order to choose the best-suited candidates. Furthermore, age limits (candidates had to be younger than 45) as well as a probationary period of six months for every civil servant (apart from the senior staff) were specified (Getz and Jüttner 1972: 130).

The career structure was based on strictly segregated functional categories (A, B, C, D), being nearly totally impermeable (Coombes 1970: 138–141; Stevens and Stevens 2001). Similar to the German and French custom, specific diplomas and educational achievements served as entry criteria for a particular career track and were valued more highly than professional experience or specific skills (Rogalla 1973: 333). To join category A, the candidate needed a university degree, and for category D at least several years of high school were required. The categories were divided into eight grades with two to eight seniority steps, respectively. Possible promotions were restricted to narrow ranges (Coombes 1970: 138–141). As a consequence, most officials reached the highest grade after 15 to 20 years of service, i.e. on average 15 years before their retirement (Stevens and Stevens 2001: 98). The deficiencies of the promotion and appraisal system had been emphasised already in the Spierenburg report of 1979, but until recently, seniority, good connections to senior managers and nationality continued to carry more weight than individual performance with regard to promotions (Davies 2002: 178; Spence 1997: 75). Finally, the statutory remuneration scheme was fixed by the budget of the European Communities and the 'method of annual salary adjustments' that linked the salaries of European civil servants automatically to the development of the respective salaries in the member states (Stevens and Stevens 2001: 48).

The closed patterns of recruitment and career coincided with a high degree of politicisation within the Commission bureaucracy. In the 1980s, the recruitment and selection of senior staff was poorly formalised and heavily influenced by individual Commissioners, cabinets and member states (Lequesne 1996: 405; Rogalla 1973: 338). The staff regulations even foresaw the possibility of initiating 'a procedure other than the competition procedure', thus giving the Commissioner a high degree of discretion when making appointments to his DG (Coombes 1970: 157; Stevens and Stevens 2001: 82–84). Directors-General could be replaced 'in the interests of

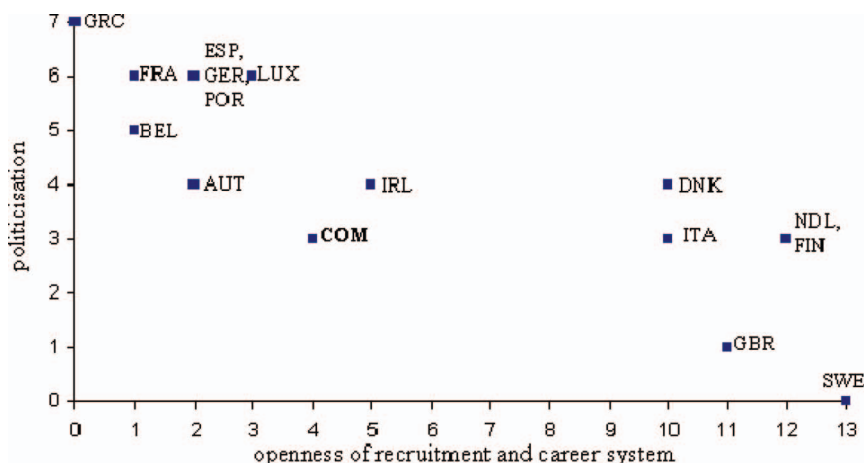
service', i.e. they were forced into early retirement if they did not get along with the Commissioner. Furthermore, the member states intervened in the selection procedure by parcelling out the positions among each other in a process of 'horse trading' (Michelmann 1978: 23). Although an official quota system had not been introduced, member states typically tried to ensure a high representation of their compatriots by influencing the appointment procedure in their 'inherited' Directorates-General (Cini 1996). As a consequence of the high level of politicisation, the positions of Directors and Directors-General were not considered to be an achievable step in the career of European civil servants under normal circumstances (Coombes 1970: 146; Stevens and Stevens 2001: 74).

By contrast, the members of the Commissioners' cabinets had the best chances of getting quick promotion or circumventing ('parachuting') the standardised selection procedure for normal officials (Stevens and Stevens 2001). They had a formalised rank in the administration and became 'the centre of a complex web of policy pressures, negotiations and package deals and an indispensable part of the policy-making process in the European Community' (Ritchie 1992: 106). Early on, Walter Hallstein, the first President of the Commission of the EEC, saw the danger of a politicised European civil service because both the Commissioners and the member states used the cabinets as instruments to push through their interests (Cassese and della Cananea 1992: 94). A Commissioner could appoint more than six cabinet members, and only one cabinet member was required to come from a country different from that of the Commissioner (Donnelly and Ritchie 1997: 43–45). 'Any dominance of single nations in the policy process is more possible in the College of Commissioners itself than in the civil service, since the *cabinets* are dominated by members from the commissioner's home state' (Page 1997: 136). In a nutshell, the nexus between politics and administration in the European Commission was quite firm, and the Commission thus scores high on the politicisation axis.

Twenty years later, we observe profound changes in the Commission administration. Figure 2 shows that the European Commission has departed considerably from its Franco-German parent models. While patterns of recruitment and career have remained rather stable in these countries, the Commission has made a clear move towards an open career system. The changes on the politicisation dimension are even more evident. The arrangements in the Commission are now much closer to the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries. This is even more significant since the French and German parent models are just as or even more politicised than in the early 1980s.

The composition of the administrative space in the EU-15 suggests that the EU is indeed characterised by two distinctive groups of public administration models, with one group clustered around the right end of the horizontal axis (including primarily Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon models) and the other located at the left top of the vertical axis (comprising countries

FIGURE 2
ADMINISTRATIVE PATTERNS IN THE EU-15 AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION
(POST-KINNOCK AND BEFORE 2004 ENLARGEMENT)



GRC = Greece, FRA = France, BEL = Belgium, ESP = Spain, GER = Germany, POR = Portugal, AUT = Austria, LUX = Luxembourg, COM = European Commission, IRL = Ireland, DNK = Denmark, ITA = Italy, NDL = the Netherlands, FIN = Finland, GBR = Great Britain, SWE = Sweden.

Source: own illustration.

with Napoleonic and German traditions). Exceptions hold for the Netherlands, Italy and Ireland. As mentioned above, the Netherlands had opened up its recruitment and career system in the 1980s. Italy, generally seen as a representative of the Napoleonic tradition, has moved considerably towards de-politicisation as well as openness of the career system of the civil service since the massive political crisis in the 1990s (Kickert 2007: 37–48). Ireland represents the third exception. The politicisation of the Irish civil service generally departs from the Common Law ideal type (see Millar and McKeivitt 2003). Notwithstanding these exceptions, our two-dimensional classification still fits very well with the overall assignment of EU member states to specific administrative traditions. Although all EU member states have reformed their public administration in certain – and sometimes profound – ways (see OECD 2005; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004), reforms did not imply a complete departure from the pre-existing administrative traditions, nor did the reform developments lead to an overall convergence of civil service systems (see Pollitt *et al.* 2007).

Against this backdrop, the patterns observed in the European Commission constitute a rather exceptional case. The Commission has clearly departed from its Continental roots and – for both administrative dimensions under study – has moved somewhere in between the positions of the Continental and Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian models.

Regarding the recruitment and career system, the move towards a more open approach first becomes apparent with the ending of the maximum recruitment

age. Initially, the reform advocates within the Commission as well as the President of the European Parliament sought to maintain this entry criterion for the European civil service (see European Ombudsman 2002). In the context of the Commission reform, however, a joint recruitment office was set up that is responsible for the selection of candidates for all European institutions, including the Council, Parliament, and the Committee of the Regions, as well as the office of the European Ombudsman. Here, the veteran ombudsman Jacob Söderman refused to sign the regulation that would make the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), the new common recruitment office, operational. His major critique was that age limits were discriminatory and contradicted the EU's own life-long learning and ageing policies. 'An own-initiative inquiry by the Ombudsman has shown that more modern bodies such as the European Central Bank, Europol and most of the executive agencies have never used age limits. Perhaps this is because they never formed part of the old-fashioned traditional administrative culture, which is proving so resistant to change' (European Ombudsman 2002). Eventually, Jacob Södermann got his way, and the age limit was abolished.

Two other important administrative changes concerned aspects of the career structure and the linkage of promotion to the individual performance of civil servants (Bauer 2006). With the new staff regulations, the European Commission abolished its rigid career structure by reducing the former four categories to two, namely Administrators (AD) and Assistants (AST). The new system contains 16 grades, each having five seniority steps (European Commission 2004b). The career system is now more permeable, with enhanced opportunities for horizontal differentiation (at the same grade) and many more merit-based promotions than before. Promotion itself occurs automatically if the individual has attained a certain number of merit points (annually distributed from a fixed pool by its Head of Unit and the Director-General). European civil servants are now unlikely to reach 'fin de carrière' long before reaching their retirement age (Knill and Balint 2008). The seniority principle is still important, but the salary increase now proceeds digressively and is even frozen after five consecutive seniority steps without prior promotion.

As is typically the case in closed recruitment and career systems, remuneration is statutory but in practice negotiated by the government, the public employers and the staff unions (Bossaert *et al.* 2001: 152). Whereas the 1980s were characterised by various pay disputes between member states, Commissioners and staff unions, the integration of the 'method of annual salary adjustments' into the staff regulations valid until 2013 avoids yearly negotiations and ensure social peace (Ahrens 2004: 447). Furthermore, the European Commission increased the probationary period from six to nine months and also extended it to the recruitment of senior staff (European Commission 2004b).

By contrast, the other features of the recruitment and career system have remained unchanged. Entry into the civil service still takes place at the first

grade, and the category AD is only open to applicants possessing a university degree. The recruitment procedure in the European Commission is still based on a highly formalised approach; specific professional experience and skills are still of minor importance. All permanent Commission staff are recruited through open competitions that are publicly advertised and published in the *Official Journal* of the European Union. Finally, the officials are employed on a lifelong basis and receive no performance-related pay.

While the changes related to the openness of the recruitment and career system can still be characterised as relatively modest, the nexus between politics and administration has changed more profoundly. To be sure, the Commissioners still have the authority to appoint Directors-General and Directors, and informally there is the exit option for Directors-General in terms of 'voluntary' early retirement (Wille 2007: 44). However, Commissioners have lost discretionary power since the positions of higher management undergo a formalised selection procedure in which the Consultative Committees of Appointments (CCA) plays a crucial role in evaluating the quality of the candidates (European Commission 2004a). The CCA serves as the 'interviewing and evaluation board' and prepares a shortlist of candidates from which the Commissioner may choose. The CCA tries to avoid unbalanced representation of certain nationalities. In the case of appointment procedures for Directors-General, the CCA is now composed of the Secretary-General, the Director-General for Personnel and Administration, the Head of Cabinet of the President, the Head of Cabinet of the Commissioner for Personnel and Administration, the Permanent Rapporteur, the Rapporteur for the case and supporting actors. The Permanent Rapporteurs and the supporting actors are specialists in human resource management techniques and are responsible for making objective recommendations. At the same time, neither cabinets nor national governments seem to have much real influence over the selection procedure (Egeberg 2006: 39–41).

For senior staff coming from new member states or for external candidates, the European Commission has introduced an additional layer in the selection procedure which is quite commonly applied in the private sector: the 'assessment centre method'. Here, candidates are subject to one-day tests and examinations in order to assess through the use of sophisticated tools whether they have the generic competencies to become senior managers and whether they have the sense of leadership and communication (European Commission 2004a: 3). At the end of the selection procedure, the CCA sets up a shortlist of candidates (sometimes these are even ranked), which are recommended to the appointing Commissioner. The Commissioner is not obliged to choose a candidate from the shortlist, but, as shown by empirical studies, he/she generally accepts about 95 per cent of the proposed candidates (Egeberg 2006: 38).

A large majority of Directors-General are now appointed from within the European Commission (Wille 2007: 41). There is evidence that the positions of Directors and Directors-General increasingly constitute a potential step

in an administrative career track. As a general rule, a Director-General should not have the same nationality as his/her Commissioner, nor should the distribution of nationalities in one Directorate constitute national clusters of senior officials (Peterson 2004: 26; Spence 2006: 143). National influence is also diminished by the new compulsory job rotation policy introduced in 1999 (European Commission 2004a). Directors and Directors-General have to move to another post after at least five to seven years.

While the formalised cabinet system and its influence on the establishment of informal policy networks still exist, potential channels for transmitting national interests were greatly restricted by formalising the appointment of cabinet members. As one of his first actions in office, the then Commission President Romano Prodi decided that at least three nationalities had to be represented in the six-headed cabinet (Nugent 2001: 121; Spence and Stevens 2006: 175). Furthermore, the positions of *Chef du Cabinet* and Director-General should be filled with nationalities different from that of the respective Commissioner.

Explaining Administrative Change inside the Commission

Based on our indicators, we find substantial administrative change inside the European Commission. In 2004, the relationships between higher management and Commissioners were considerably less politicised, and the career system had become more open than 20 years before. However, compared to the developments in the member states, administrative change at the supranational level can hardly be interpreted as the product of a general trend within the emerging European administrative space. When focusing on the EU-9 – apart from a few exceptions – national public administrations remain fairly stable; according to our indicators, member states have hardly changed their positions over time. By contrast, the European Commission is the public administration in the sample that changed most significantly. How can this development be explained? To answer these questions, we will examine theories developed in organisation sociology and public sector reform in more detail. We argue that the observed developments cannot be fully understood from perspectives that emphasise functional adaptation or institutional path-dependency. To understand both the direction and timing of the administrative changes, we must rely instead on a combination of theories of institutional isomorphism and Kingdon's (1984) policy windows.

Functional Adaptation

According to the perspective of functional efficiency, organisations adjust their structures and routines in light of new challenges and problems. From this perspective, administrative changes are primarily problem-driven; the emergence of new tasks, performance crises or the perception of functional inefficiencies should trigger respective organisational adjustments in order to

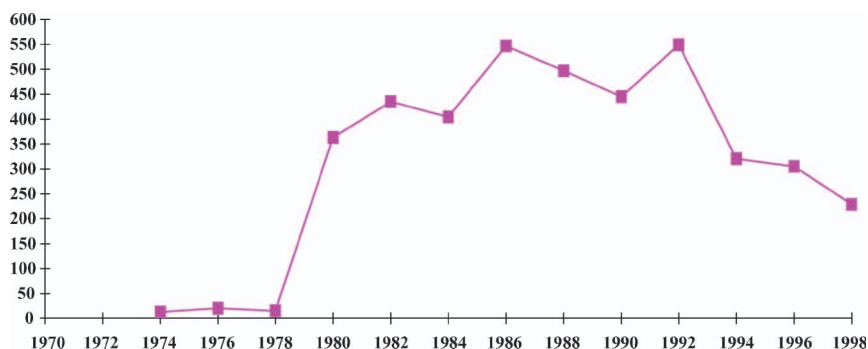
cope with these challenges (March and Olsen 1989, 1995). The mechanism behind this explanation for change is functional adaptation. As needs and tasks change or new challenges emerge, organisations react in a deliberate and conscious way to fulfil their changing duties and live up to new expectations.

If the mechanism accounting for administrative change in the European Commission were functional adaptation, we would be able to link the observable reforms to new challenges. In the case of the Commission, two potential challenges can be identified. The first refers to the strong expansion of the Commission's tasks and duties caused by the intensifying and deepening of the European integration process over the years. The second – and related – challenge emerges from a vast and growing 'management gap' in the Commission, resulting from the lack of organisational adjustments needed to manage the increasing level of integration reached by the European Union (Metcalf 1992).

These challenges and problems, however, did not result in respective administrative changes. It is thus highly unlikely that functional adaptation has been driving administrative change in the Commission. First, empirical findings show that there was a peak of activity towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s – usually related to the programme of completing the Single Market and the successful years of the Commission presidency under Jacques Delors (see Figure 3). Administrative changes, however, occurred more than ten years later rather than parallel to – or even prior to – the peak of the task expansion.

Second, a similar argument can be made with regard to the internal organisational needs of the Commission. It has been known since the end of the 1970s, i.e. roughly since the Spierenburg report, that the Commission's organisation is haunted by a number of grave organisational deficits, which

FIGURE 3
COUNCIL OUTPUT – REGULATIONS AND DIRECTIVES



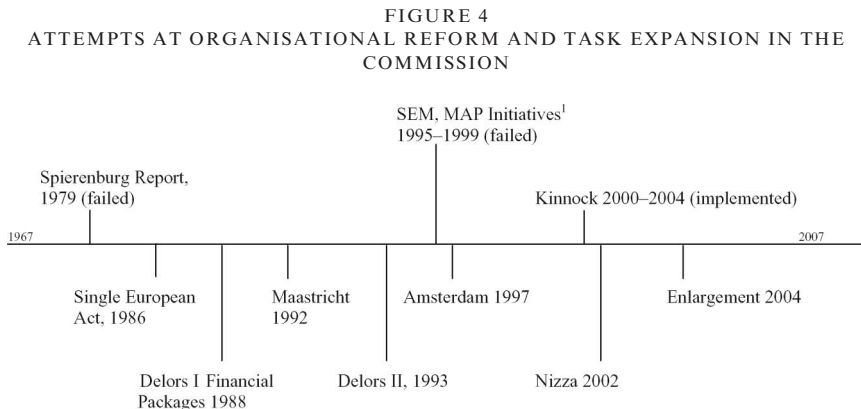
Source: Bauer (2001: 49).

resulted mainly from the unstructured merger of the three forerunner organisations in 1967 and the organisational expansion since that time.

There is no discernible connection between attempts at administrative reform and windows of opportunity in terms of grand constitutional bargains (see Figure 4). Reform attempts and organisational challenges are completely disconnected. For example, task expansion peaked under Jacques Delors while in terms of administrative change his presidency was very passive, almost consciously disengaged (Bauer 2007a). In sum, there is no evidence that supports an interpretation of administrative change in the Commission as functional adaptation to organisational challenges. Given the large time lag between the emergence of new demands and internal response, functional adaptation does not appear to explain much about the observed patterns of administrative change.

Institutional Path Dependency

The lack of an immediate and swift response to increasing problems points to the need for a more differentiated theoretical perspective that takes into account the role of institutional factors. According to the theories of the new institutionalism (Hall and Taylor 1996), institutions matter. Existing institutional arrangements influence not only the strategic opportunities of the actors involved, but also shape the preferences and ideas of these actors (March and Olsen 1989; Thelen and Steinmo 1992). As a result, institutions are generally expected to be rather autonomous with respect to responding to emerging challenges; respective adjustments should follow an incremental logic of change along trajectories or paths that are determined by earlier institutional choices.



Source: own illustration.

Note: ¹The acronyms stand for Sound and Efficient Management and Modernisation of the Personnel and Administration Policy of the Commission, see Bauer (2001).

Accordingly, we would expect the Commission's administration to change alongside and in harmony with those traditions and models that gave rise to its very inception. There are two crucial empirical implications that would be discernible if organisational change within the Commission could be explained by the concept of path dependence. First, we would expect a rather low level of change. In addition, change would follow the original 'path' chosen when the Commission was created. Second, given that the initial administrative arrangements of the Commission were based on a melange of its French and German parent models, a path dependent logic would imply that administrative changes in the Commission occur within the same development corridor that could be observed for the parent models.

The comparison between Figures 1 and 2 suggests, however, that both expectations are not borne out by our data. First, compared to the 1980s, current administrative arrangements in the Commission clearly departed from the German or French developments. Moreover, the administrative changes in the Commission occurred on a scale that can hardly be classified as incremental.¹ The argument that path dependency does not solve our empirical puzzle is also supported by the fact that the Commission clearly moves in the direction of the Anglo-Scandinavian position, while the arrangements for its French and German parent models have remained stable over time. Although the Commission's position remains somewhere in the middle between the Continental and Anglo-Scandinavian poles, the magnitude and direction of change appear to be so substantial and obvious that it would be reasonable to reject a theoretical explanation based on institutional path dependency.

Institutional Isomorphism

In contrast to the theories analysed so far, the framework of institutional isomorphism places particular emphasis on the explanation of administrative changes as a result of developments in the organisational environment. This framework has been applied in order to account for phenomena of international spreading and diffusion of policy innovations and reform concepts, not least with regard to public sector reforms (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Knill and Balint 2008; Levi-Faur 2002; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer *et al.* 1997). The central argument advanced by DiMaggio and Powell is that legitimacy rather than functional efficiency is the major driving force of organisational change. To increase their legitimacy and ensure their persistence, organisations embrace rules, norms and routines that are widely valued in their organisational environment.

Hence, organisational change is essentially driven by external developments rather than by intra-organisational concerns about the organisation's efficiency. DiMaggio and Powell identify three mechanisms which drive isomorphic organisational change, namely coercive, mimetic and normative

isomorphism. An important driving force of isomorphic organisational change emerges from coercion. Organisations adjust their structures and procedures in line with organisations on which they are financially or legally dependent (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 74). However, organisational adjustment to the environment takes place not only as a result of coercive pressures but may also occur in constellations of high uncertainty, e.g. ambiguous goals, uncertain means–end relations or the confrontation of new problems. In such constellations, it is argued, organisations imitate the structures of other organisations which they perceive to be particularly successful. Instead of a time-consuming search for their own solutions to existing problems, organisations strive to ensure their legitimacy through emulation (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 75; Guler *et al.* 2002: 213). Another mechanism driving isomorphic organisational change is based on similar dominant normative orientations and beliefs of staff members. In this context, the impact of similar professional backgrounds and the role of professional organisations and epistemic communities (Haas 1992) in spreading common understandings and perceptions of policy problems and solutions are emphasised in particular in the literature (Hasse and Krücken 2005: 26).

While our research design does not allow for a sound assessment of the relevance of the different mechanisms for the administrative changes in the Commission, it seems highly plausible to assume that isomorphic mechanisms might have played a role in this case. Coercive changes, for instance, could have emerged from respective pressures of the member states on which the Commission depends financially. According to this logic, the Commission is likely to adapt to the (anticipated) preferences and administrative practices of its member states. At the same time, the Commission might have incentives for emulating successful reforms in the member states, given the high uncertainty emerging from the unprecedented challenges of recent enlargements and deepening integration. Finally, there are good reasons to assume potential effects of normative isomorphism due to the emergence of a European administrative space which is characterised by intensified linkages and exchange among domestic and supranational administrations.

As already mentioned, institutional isomorphism predicts the adoption of such models that are highly valued or dominant in the organisational environment. This implies that isomorphic change requires a certain degree of homogeneity of the environment. In contrast, no clear predications are possible when a high degree of heterogeneity is present. The latter scenario of competing models, however, is given with regard to the administrative space in which the Commission is located. While this space in the early days of the Community was still characterised by the dominance of a Continental administrative tradition, the subsequent enlargement rounds contributed to considerably greater heterogeneity. It is thus hardly possible to identify dominant models of administrative arrangements and structures which might have served as a blueprint for the Commission reforms.

This conclusion, however, does not mean that institutional isomorphism does not constitute a promising framework for our case. Rather, the analysis of the Commission reforms against the background of a heterogeneous environment might serve as a starting point for refining this approach. The reason for this lies in the interesting way the Commission copes with the diversity of its organisational environment. A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 strikingly illustrates that the Commission has moved over time to a position between the two poles of the Continental and Anglo-Scandinavian administrative systems. In other words, the Commission may have increased its legitimacy by adopting a balanced position between these poles rather than simply adopting one of the two dominant approaches. The robustness of this pattern is underscored by the fact that the pattern holds for both dimensions of administrative change (career and recruitment as well as politicisation), although these dimensions encompass rather diverse characteristics. The argument is further supported by the fact that internal changes at the domestic level are unlikely to have had a major impact because, with respect to our indicators, most member states have remained fairly stable over time; hence there has been no dynamic for this source of change. The major discernible dynamic between Figures 1 and 2 emerges from enlargement, i.e. the proliferation of new member states from an administrative tradition distinct from that of the founding members and from the European Commission during the 1980s.

The Impact of Policy Windows

While institutional isomorphism provides a promising framework for understanding the observed patterns of administrative change in the Commission, its central weakness is the neglect of the process dimension. Institutional isomorphism helps us to understand the direction of administrative reforms, but tells us little about the factors that actually led to the adoption of the changes at a certain point of time. Why did the reforms of the Commission only take place very recently, while enlargements and the consequent increase in heterogeneity in the EU administrative space took place many years before?

We argue that the framework of policy windows as developed by Kingdon (1984) or the garbage can model (Cohen *et al.* 1972) constitute useful approaches to answering this question. As argued by Kingdon (1984), the chance to set reforms successfully on the political agenda depends on the specific constellation of problems, solutions and processes which are needed for opening the famous policy window. In the case of the Commission reforms, administrative problems had been identified and spelled out continuously from the late 1970s and onwards. As shown in Figure 4, until the Kinnock reform several reform attempts had been undertaken, all of which failed (Bauer 2007b). At the same time, there was no shortage of potential solutions. They were developed not only inside the Commission. Their numbers grew

constantly through the enrichment of the EU administrative space in successive enlargement rounds. In addition, the global reform wave of New Public Management offered a large tool box for resolving administrative problems. This process of international diffusion was fuelled to a considerable extent by the communication activities of international organisations, such as the OECD or the World Bank in the early 1990s (Hood 1995; Læg Reid 2002). Notwithstanding these developments, administrative reforms in the Commission only took place very recently.

This phenomenon can be explained through a closer look at the process dimension. The fundamental political crisis of the Commission, which was triggered by highly politicised problems of corruption and fraud, considerably increased the need for political action. The Commission was under enormous pressure to demonstrate its willingness to cope with these problems. Moreover, this fundamental challenge greatly reduced the possibility for reform opponents to veto respective changes. In calibrating these reforms, however, the Commission looked at solutions that had already been developed elsewhere (i.e. the garbage can) rather than going through an ideal-type rational process of problem analysis, search for solutions, evaluation of solutions and finally adoption of the best alternative (Committee of Independent Experts 1999; Schön-Quinlivan 2007). The political crisis thus provided the basis for linking problems and solutions that had been identified long before (Bauer 2001, 2002; Metcalfe 2000). Through this approach, we can understand the timing of administrative reforms whose eventual adoption was not based on a rationalist process, but required an accidental trigger in the form of the Santer resignation crisis (Peterson 1999; Ringe 2005).

Conclusion

In this article we presented data on two administrative dimensions characterising the European Commission, namely the degree of the politicisation of its higher management and the degree of openness of its career system. In a two-dimensional space comprised of these two features, we estimated the position of the Commission in the early 1980s and in the early 2000s. In addition, we compared the position of the Commission at these two points in time with the positions of the respective member states. The data shows that the Commission started from a position close to the Continental model of public administration and over time partially moved towards the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian models. The change of position by the Commission is striking insofar as the position of most member states in the two-dimensional space remained stable, i.e. they did not depart from well-established administrative arrangements (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

As space and data availability did not allow for painting a complete picture of the Commission bureaucracy, our results have to be interpreted carefully. Although we applied established categories from the field of

comparative public administration, we do not claim to depict the full range of possible changes the public administrations in our sample may have experienced. Our results should thus not be misread as claiming that national public administrations which appear 'stable' in our dimensions would not have changed at all. Indeed, the purpose of this article was not to find out why (or why not) national administrations do change but whether and why the European Commission does change in accordance with, or in contrast to, those member state administrations which taken together make up a European administrative space.

To settle this question we explored four explanatory mechanisms of organisational change. Taken individually, none of the four concepts – functional adaptation, institutional path dependency, isomorphism or policy windows – could convincingly account for the pattern of administrative change within the Commission as displayed by our data. However, while none of these concepts explains everything, some solve parts of the empirical puzzle better than others. While we find little evidence for functional adaptation or path dependency, isomorphism and policy windows appear more promising. More precisely, if one takes into account the fact that – due to various rounds of enlargements – there is no longer a single dominant administrative standard but a competition between the Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian models, isomorphism is able to specify the direction of the change we would expect the Commission to engage in. Legitimacy pressure from two peer groups makes it plausible that the Commission seeks a central position in between without fully embracing either way of doing things. Moreover, the long-term stability – some would call it managerial stagnation – that is characteristic of the development of the Commission's administration, which is disrupted by a substantial change triggered by some chance event, accurately describes the logic of a policy window as developed by Kingdon (1984). In other words, the Commission's fixation on the Continental model despite the emergence of a new centre of gravity with the increasingly strengthened Anglo-Scandinavian camp is part of the 'normal' irrationality of inter-organisational change in the public sphere.

We do not claim that bureaucratic change in the European administrative space can always or exclusively be explained by isomorphism and policy windows. But on the basis of our empirical observations, we suggest that these two concepts appear to be the most promising theoretical approaches researchers should address if they want to understand administrative change at the supranational level. In other words, our conclusion should be seen to open rather than to settle the theoretical discussion on bureaucratic change in the European administrative space.

In keeping with our argument, we expect that the future patterns of bureaucratic change in the European Commission will depend on the direction in which the public administrations of the new member states develop. Unlike the EU-15, we see the public administrations of most of the

newcomers – especially those with a background of transition from communism – as still in search of an orientation (Hajnal 2003; König 2002; Randma-Liiv and Connaughton 2005). It is still an open question as to whether the majority will move towards the Continental model (which due to historical reasons lies closest to most of the newcomers) or towards the Anglo-Scandinavian model. If either the Continental or the Anglo-Scandinavian tradition becomes dominant, we expect that future changes in the Commission will converge with the direction taken by the model dominating at the time. If the European administrative space continues to be shaped by two competing models as equal centres of gravity, bureaucratic change should bring the European Commission to a central position between those two models – just as our empirical data showed with respect to recent change in the area of the politicisation of higher management and the openness of the European civil servants career system. These predictions, of course, are subject to further research.

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Note

1. Although admittedly the definition of incremental change is ill-specified in the literature on institutional path dependency; it is obviously difficult to empirically falsify the concept.

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