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# The politics of government reorganization in Western Europe

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## Abstract

The reorganization of governments is crucial for parties to express their policy preferences once they reach office. Yet these activities are not confined to the direct aftermath of general elections or to wide-ranging structural reforms. Instead, governments reorganize and adjust their machinery of government all the time. This paper aims to assess these structural choices with a particular focus at the core of the state, comparing four Western European democracies (Germany, France, the Netherlands, and United Kingdom) from 1980 to 2013. Our empirical analysis shows that stronger shifts in cabinets' ideological profiles in the short- and long-term as well as the units' proximity to political executives yield significant effects. In contrast, Conservative governments, commonly regarded as key promoters of reorganizing governments, are not significant for the likelihood of structural change. We discuss the effects of this politics of government reorganization for different research debates assessing the inner workings of governments.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Bureaucratic structures are a vital tool of government. They are the vehicles to set policy agendas, deliver policy goals, shape policy decisions and develop and implement government

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policies (Downs, 1967; Hammond, 1986; Hammond & Knott, 1996; Mortensen & Green-Pedersen, 2015; Strøm, 2000; Workman, 2015). Political executives “manipulate the machine” (Pollitt, 1984) regularly in order to shape how government policies are processed within governments. Simultaneously, these inner structures of governments allocate and distribute authority, expertise, and resources (Weber, 1922). As a consequence, scholars of various debates have studied the dynamics of government reorganization.

Recent studies show the importance of partisan features such as new parties or prime ministers in office to explain changes at the level of ministerial portfolios after general elections (Saalfeld & Schamburek, 2014; Sieberer et al., 2019; see also Götz et al., 2018). Other studies relate ministerial jurisdictions to policy agendas and policy output (Mortensen & Green-Pedersen, 2015). They also show that structural changes at the level of ministerial portfolios, through name changes, not only signal the salience of a policy issue but also help accomplishing these policy priorities (Tosun, 2018). However, these perspectives all focus on the level of ministerial portfolios, which is a limited part of structural changes in government organizations. Ministerial portfolios are seen as hierarchically integrated monoliths without paying attention to the varieties of changes taking place inside bureaucracies. In contrast, public administration scholars discuss structural changes within government organizations and pay more attention to the changing dynamics and complexity inside ministerial structures (Davis et al., 1999; Pollitt, 1984). However, this literature treats politics as rather ‘peripheral’ as early noted by Arnold, 1974, p. 206), insufficiently understanding administration as a political process (but see Seidman, 1970; Kuipers et al., 2021). A very notable exception are studies on delegated agencies that explicitly analyze the relevance of politics for the structural design of these government organizations (Epstein & O’Halloran, 1999; Lewis, 2002; Gilardi, 2002; Elgie & McMenamin, 2005; Bertelli, 2006; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2010; Greasley & Hanretty, 2016; James et al., 2016). These studies found that when executive power shifts to an enacting coalition’s opponent (or when substantial ideological changes in government occur) delegated agencies face an increasing risk of being structurally reorganized or terminated (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015; Boin et al., 2010; Carpenter & Lewis, 2004; Yesilkagit, 2020).

Both debates lack systematic empirical studies on the politics of structures *within* ministerial departments, despite their crucial role in government policymaking. In this article, we therefore examine to what extent and how deep politics influences structural choices *within* ministerial departments across four Western European governments (France, Germany, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) for a longer time period between 1980 and 2013. We focus on the core of the modern democratic state, that is, the ministerial departments for Foreign Affairs, Defense, Finance, and Interior. While our case selection expresses different major administrative traditions and cultures, we suggest that cabinet formation and composition are more relevant for understanding structural choices in the core executive. Our empirical analysis is based on a novel comparative large-N dataset that tracks all structural changes to units at the two top administrative levels inside these ministerial departments (see Carroll et al., 2020). Our focus on the two top levels enables us to assess all potential structural changes that these units may experience, including those changing their functional profile and material resources, for example, by mergers and absorptions or by splits and secessions. To identify and distinguish such change events properly, information on their subordinated units is necessary. As most ministerial bureaucracies entail three main hierarchical levels, the identification of structural change is thus only comprehensive for units at the two top levels. We explore to what extent structural choices inside ministerial departments are shaped by political dynamics expressing policy preferences. We argue that this takes place at different levels. First, during government formation

political parties and future cabinet ministers bargain over portfolio allocation and portfolio design in order to fulfill their office-seeking but also policy- and vote-seeking (Strøm, 1990). Second, they also decide over transferring and rearranging pre-existing inner structures of ministerial departments to transform the direction or governance of the policies under their responsibility. Third, structural choices are also made throughout legislative periods, not only to follow up changes in portfolio reallocation and design but also to express policy preferences or to respond to exogenous dynamics such as policy scandals or government-wide structural reform programs (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015). We argue that these continuous structural choices are crucial to understand the politics of government reorganization. Not only do such reorganizations change how governments make policy, but they also shape individual bureaucratic behavior (Wynen et al., 2019, 2020). In this article, we then propose to disentangle and test the different types of political influence over inner bureaucratic structures—cabinet's turnover, cabinet's extremism, and cabinet's ideology—, just after elections and throughout legislative periods.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents our theoretical arguments following structural choice theory and formulates our hypotheses. The following section introduces our dataset of structural changes inside ministerial departments across four European democracies between 1980 and 2013. We employ Cox mixed effects models to estimate the explanatory relevance of various political features on the likelihood that ministerial units are restructured. Our results show that strong shifts in the ideological profile of cabinets in light of the immediate past and compared to all cabinets in the long term increase significantly the hazard of structural change. Besides, units at the lower level in less proximity to political executives face a higher risk of structural change. In contrast, Conservative cabinets, which are well-known as promoters of large-scale structural reforms, have no significant effect on the hazard of structural change. The final section discusses our findings and their implications for coalition governance and public administration research.

## 2 | THE POLITICS OF GOVERNMENT REORGANIZATION

The US scholarly debate on the institutional design of the executive branch has been the main contributor to a theory of “the politics of structural choice” (Moe, 1995) explaining how presidential preferences are aggregated into bureaucratic structures. In seminal contributions, Moe argues that political executives engage in structural choices in order to address their political uncertainty over future officeholders' policy preferences. Accordingly, presidents build insulated structures to make their policies survive (Moe, 1989, 1995; Hammond, 1986; Hammond & Knott, 1996; see also Bendor & Hammond, 2010; Carpenter & Lewis, 2004; Lewis, 2002, 2003). However, applying structural choice theory on parliamentary and semi-presidential systems comes with a crucial conceptual reorientation. Differently from presidential regimes, powers are unified in parliamentary systems: the political executive is accountable to the legislature, making the executive “an agent of the majority in the Parliament” (Shugart, 2005). It follows that governments may decide over governmental structures very freely, even in the semi-presidential system of France where the political executive is sometimes split, the legislature has relatively little influence on such structural choices. As identified by Moe and Caldwell (1994, p. 177): “in the parliamentary politics of structural choice, formal structure does not work as a protective mechanism (...). Agencies and programs cannot be insulated from opponents and future authorities by embedding an intricate ex ante control structure in the law.”

Besides, the executive and the legislative do not struggle over the design and control of government entities as much: “what the executive wants, it gets” (Moe & Caldwell, 1994, p. 178).

From this, we expect bureaucratic structures in European ministerial departments to face quite strong political pressures of structural reorganization, both directly after elections and throughout legislative periods. Structural choices are thus shaped by the political concern of newly elected coalitions to reshape and redirect their policies as well as to signal policy changes to its constituencies (see also Moe & Caldwell, 1994). Indeed, it is particularly vital for new parties getting into office to imprint their ideological stands into the inner structures of their ministerial departments. As reminded by Holmgren (2018) quoting Riker (1980), “preferences over institutions tend to be inherited from preferences over policies.” Hence, our first hypothesis stresses that cabinets express their ideological preferences in structural changes, and these are expected to be particularly strong when cabinets change and their ideological profile shifts. This turnover hypothesis has been tested in much of the literature on portfolio design (e.g., Sieberer et al., 2019) but is also considered by public administration scholars analyzing changes in the machinery of government (Hood & Dunsire, 1981; Pollitt, 1984). Hence,

**H1.** The hazard of structural change is higher after a greater ideological cabinet turnover.

Moreover, cabinets vary in their ideological profile. More extremist ideological cabinets, in comparison to the average of a given country’s cabinet, come into office with a set of more extreme policy preferences, departing from their immediate predecessor but also from the overall policy consensus reached in a distinct policy area thus far. It is equally possible, though, that such parties gain gradually more and more voters’ support over time and instead of a landslide ideological shift, they reach office after several smaller ideological shifts accumulating to an ideologically most extreme cabinet. In both scenarios, more extreme ideological positions at either end of the ideological spectrum and the related more extreme policy priorities arguably require more structural change, both to signal and to aggregate these policies in structural terms. Thus,

**H2.** The hazard of structural change is higher under cabinets with more extreme ideological positions, compared to other cabinets in that country.

Another widely tested partisan predictor for structural changes at the level of ministerial portfolios is the cabinet’s ideological profile, reasoning that the left–right continuum displays the variation of policy objectives and preferences of political parties (Carroll et al., 2020; Sieberer et al., 2019). Also comparative public administration studies follow this argument when explaining why some governments engage in large-scale reorganization programs (Bertelli, 2006; Yesilkagit & Christensen, 2009). However, while the idea that the ideological position of governments matters for the restructuring of ministerial portfolios is widely shared, scholars underspecify whether governments on different sides of the left–right spectrum are equally inclined (in frequencies and intensity) to change the structures within ministerial departments. First, governments are likely to differentiate along their preferred policies and corresponding policy sectors and ministerial departments. One may therefore expect that right-wing governments are more engaged in reorganizing ministries in sectors such as Defense, Interior or Economic Affairs while left-wing cabinets would prioritize domains like Labor and Social Affairs or Education. Second, right-wing government

ideology on government structures is widely associated as core underpinning of New Public Management (NPM), a global reform wave which emphasized private sector mechanisms for the public sector to enable a lean state, prominently pledged by Conservative parties during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Accordingly, some of the most prominent and radical attempts in administrative reorganization across our four Western European countries and time period can be related to the NPM-wave of administrative reforms reaching central government, including France (Bezes & Le Lidec, 2016), the Netherlands (deVries & Yesilkagit, 1999; Kuipers et al., 2021), and the structural reforms in the United Kingdom (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015; Campbell & Wilson, 1995; James, 2003; Light, 1999). Yet, in some countries also Labor parties reorganized government structures quite radically, for example, New Zealand (Boston, 1991). One may, therefore, not unequivocally associate Conservative parties with a stronger engagement in the politics of government reorganization. We test this argument, also acknowledging that formal changes of units within ministerial departments can be linked to party preferences addressing the efficiency of government structures explicitly. Moreover, our empirical focus on those ministerial portfolios at the core of the modern state makes the structural attention of Conservative parties even more likely: Next to covering those units responsible for government-wide reform activities (Interior and Finance), these also refer to areas of sovereignty and security (Foreign Affairs, Defense) that are widely regarded as crucial for these parties' electoral base (see Green-Pedersen, 2007). Therefore,

### H3. The hazard of structural change is higher under Conservative cabinets.

Structural changes *within* ministerial departments also highlight the importance of the vertical fragmentation of bureaucratic apparatuses (Hood & Dunsire, 1981; Pollitt, 1984; Ranney, 1954; Wilson, 1989). Following structural choice politics, political executives change those structures most often for which they lack information over their policy compliance (Carpenter & Lewis, 2004). This overall argument inspired wide-ranging research into the structural choices over delegated agencies and their variation in policy compliance. However, for units inside the ministerial bureaucracy, civil service regulations and the hierarchical bureaucratic organization ensure that ministers can rely on utmost compliance across all levels. Despite the formal hierarchical supervision and subordination inside ministerial departments, though, we expect that those units less proximate to political executives at lower levels of the formal hierarchy face more regular reorganizations, following the notion that government structures are not “neutral hierarchies” (Hammond, 1986, 1993). Accordingly, political executives have strong incentives to change those ministerial units that are less proximate from them and located at lower hierarchical levels because these units are directly in charge with government policy making and, at the same time, less often in direct contact with them. Therefore, political executives cannot directly monitor their compliance and delegate this task to senior officials. In the day-to-day work of ministerial bureaucracies, it is still meaningful and beneficial to reorient those units structurally toward ministers' preferences: These units are in charge of crafting government policies and in constant interaction with other units in other ministerial departments as well as external stakeholders and organized interests, at times also with citizens. Imprinting their policy preferences into these structures has therefore direct effects for the ways how government policies are formulated and presented and signaled toward other actors. Therefore, we assume that ministerial units at the lower level are restructured more regularly than those at the higher level. Hence,

**H4.** The hazard of structural change is higher for ministerial units more distant from the political executive.

Various existing studies on the politics of structural choice at the level of ministerial departments refer also to the explanatory relevance of cabinet tenure (Götz et al., 2018). From a structural choice politics perspective, the time presidents are in office may shape their structural choices because the closer the next election, the more likely is turnover and therefore insulating bureaucratic structures appears more necessary to the sitting president. For parliamentary systems, studies confirm the relevance of elections rather than cabinet tenure (Sieberer et al., 2019), as these events bring up new parties in office with new preferences for the office bargain. We are particularly interested in structural choices below the level of ministerial departments that occur not only in the direct aftermath of general elections. To consider this, we incorporate cabinet tenure as a control variable in our empirical analysis.

### 3 | DATA AND METHODS

Our empirical analysis studies the politics of government reorganization below ministerial departments, which are characterized by a formal horizontal and vertical division of tasks and responsibilities (Hood et al., 1978; Hood & Dunsire, 1981). We focus on those ministerial units located at the first and second level below the ministers as political executives. These levels perform all bureaucratic functions, advisory and operating tasks, they process information and generate expertise, and formulate government policies and implement them (Hammond, 1986; Mayntz & Scharpf, 1975; Workman, 2015). Given that most modern ministerial bureaucracies are organized on a maximum of three formal hierarchical levels, we therefore capture a relevant portion of the machinery and ensure to identify the structural choices accurately as we may consult the lowest level for assessing the type of change event. We compare structural choices addressing these ministerial units for four Western European countries, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. These four countries express different major administrative traditions and civil service systems and are also characterized by different cabinet formation processes. In France, the president nominates a prime minister after general elections to form a cabinet based on pre-electoral party alliances. The formation period is therefore short yet frequent because of the dual executive and corresponding regular elections for the presidency and parliament. In Germany and the Netherlands, cabinets are formed between several parties, whereby Dutch parties engage in sequences of negotiation rounds and German parties usually probe potential coalition partners and eventually start one round of coalition negotiations. The United Kingdom is governed by single-party governments and only a few years of coalition government throughout our time period of analysis, thus cabinet formation is stronger driven by intra-party dynamics. Consequently, the four countries vary in the frequency and scope of ideological profiles and turnover among cabinets. However, they are rather similar in the structure and organization of their ministerial bureaucracies, most notably the horizontal and vertical fragmentation of ministerial departments. Moreover, we focus on four distinct ministerial departments, namely Foreign Affairs, Defense, Finance, and Interior. These four ministerial departments are at the core of any democratic government and in charge of key responsibilities of the state. Following the coalition governance literature on portfolio salience, they are also the most salient to any party coming into office (Druckman & Warwick, 2005). From a comparative public administration perspective, they are regarded as procedural ministerial departments with stronger interactions within and across central governments (Gulick, 1937). Taken together, this case

selection enables a solid and suitable comparison as the organizational prerogatives of ministerial departments are very similar while key features of cabinet formation and profiles differ.

We expect systematic differences between structural choices that political executives take on the inner structures of these four ministerial departments: Foreign and defense policy are characterized by significantly lower ideological conflicts between government parties and require predominantly interactions and engagement with other countries and other actors at international level. It follows that making formal changes to the inner structures of these ministerial departments is less suitable to express policy preferences to domestic voters and less strongly shaped by party competition than structural changes of ministerial units inside the ministries of Finance and of Interior. We model these expected variations in our empirical analysis to account for their potential effects.

Our primary data are gathered from the French Civil Service Yearbooks (*Bottins Administratifs*), the German organizational charts and task allocation plans of federal ministries, the Dutch Civil Service Yearbooks (*Staatsalmanak*), and the British Civil Service Yearbooks as well as supplementary government documents. These primary data sources are issued for internal and external information and communication; therefore, we also avoid potential bias due to a different authorship of documents to understand structural changes at the level of ministerial departments (Ryu et al., 2020; Sieberer et al., 2019). Moreover, we follow findings in comparative public administration research on the functional and formal equivalence of public sector units across different country contexts (see MacCarthaigh & Roness, 2012) to ensure that our dataset entails truly comparable units of analysis. Our dataset covers all ministerial units at the two top levels in the four ministerial departments between 1980 and 2013. To our knowledge, it is the first comparative assessment of the politics of government reorganization that goes below the portfolio level and assesses the formal changes of internal branches and units within ministerial departments.

The dependent variable of our study is the length of time, measured in years, that a given ministerial unit exists before it experiences a structural change event. Following seminal work on mapping formal government structures (Hood et al., 1978; MacCarthaigh & Roness, 2012; Pollitt, 1984), we define structural change events as formal decisions expressed in official directories that range from a change of the unit's official denomination or its formal affiliation and level, to the simultaneous change of several units via mergers or splits, or the full termination of a ministerial unit (see Carroll et al., 2020). Our dataset includes 5,464 observations of unique timespans in which a given ministerial unit existed until it experienced such a structural change event. We stratified the data on an annual basis to test the explanatory relevance of our time-dependent covariates, resulting in 20,493 observations with 19,795 change events, that is, 3.4% of all ministerial units in our analysis did not experience any change since their creation.

Our independent variables include three different cabinet ideology measures and are based on parties' policy positions on a left–right continuum collected and coded from their manifestos by the Comparative Manifesto Project (Volkens et al., 2018; see Table 1). For coalition governments, we took the mean value of all coalition parties' ideology measures. The cabinet's *ideological turnover* assesses the distance between the ideology of an incumbent government to its immediate predecessor. The *ideological extremism* of a cabinet relates each cabinet's ideology to the country's overall distribution of cabinet ideology during our time period of analysis. We therefore calculate this measure by dividing a cabinet's ideological distance to the country's mean ideology from the standard deviation of this country mean. The *cabinet ideology* takes the ideological measure on the left–right continuum as such. The ministerial unit's level is a dichotomous variable assessing its proximity to the political leadership. Following the bureaucratic



TABLE 1 Summary statistics

	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Time until change event (in years)	20.493	0.02	30.77	4.03	4.22
Cabinet's turnover	20.493	-34.30	53.50	-1.96	13.77
Cabinet's ideological extremism	20.493	-0.72	2.75	0.80	0.90
Cabinet's ideology (left-right)	20.493	-34.26	30.47	0.47	15.30
Ministerial unit's level (1 = lower level)	20.493	0.00	1.00	0.76	0.43
Cabinet's tenure (in years)	20.493	0.08	5.06	2.48	1.59
Cabinet's parliamentary seat share	20.493	0.35	0.82	0.57	0.09
Ministerial unit's name length	20.493	1.00	53.00	5.53	3.51

principles of government organization, the majority of 76.1% of all units in our analysis are located at the lower level with more distance to the political leadership.

Moreover, we include three control variables. The first controls for *cabinet's tenure*, which is defined as the timespan between the structural change event and the latest (repeated) investiture of the head of government (Lijphart, 1984), aggregated in years. The second control refers to a *cabinet's seat share in parliament* and serves as a proxy for government stability and likelihood of premature cabinet dissolution. We assume that the distinct fragility of cabinets plays into their party competition and ministers' expectations over office survival and thus shapes their structural choices. The third control addresses the *length of the unit's denomination* because this is the key empirical information from the primary data for our coding and longer names of ministerial units may offer more opportunities for adding, omitting or resorting their parts.

For our empirical analysis, we employ event history models. To begin with, Cox proportional hazards models (Cox, 1972) allow capturing the hazard for each ministerial unit to experience a structural change event at any point in time and to estimate the effects of covariates on this timespan until the event occurs (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 1997, p. 1432). However, our data are hierarchically clustered, that is, ministerial units are nested within four different ministerial departments that are nested in four different countries. Therefore, we employ Cox mixed effects models that allow to account for within-cluster homogeneity in outcomes. These models do not follow the Cox proportional hazards assumption whereby all covariates need to be proportional over time as they insert random effects. They do require the assumption, though, that each unit is a member of only one cluster at the secondary level. Our case selection complies with this assumption as it does not entail any ministerial unit that is located in one of the four ministerial departments at one point in time and in another ministerial department at another point in time.<sup>1</sup> We run our Cox mixed effects models with the *coxme* package in R (Therneau, 2020), incorporating four clusters at the primary level (countries) and four sub-clusters at the secondary level (portfolios). We selected the gamma distribution of the shared frailty terms that distributes the cluster-specific random effects as the logarithms of independent, identically distributed gamma random variables, having variance  $\theta$  (Austin, 2017).

#### 4 | EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Our descriptive analysis on the time until each ministerial unit experiences a structural change event shows that French ministerial units are least durable, with an average time until a

structural change of 3.2 years. British and German ministerial units survive longer, whereas Dutch ministerial units survive the longest with an average timespan of 5.2 years until they are restructured. Moreover, within-country variation shows that French ministerial units in the Foreign Affairs ministry survive longest, compared to their counterparts in other French ministerial departments, especially the Finance ministry (see Figure 1). In Germany, ministerial units in the Defense ministry exist longest without a structural change, compared to other units in German ministerial departments, again especially in the Finance ministry. In the Netherlands, ministerial units in the Interior ministry experience the longest time without a structural change, as compared to units in the other Dutch ministerial departments, and again the Finance ministry showing the shortest time until such a change occurs. In contrast, the within-country variation in the United Kingdom is lowest and reveals rather similar time lengths until a unit faces a structural change event. Furthermore, a comparison across policy domains shows that all four Finance ministries host units with the shortest time until a structural change, whereas the strongest differences can be seen for units inside Foreign Affairs ministries, and to a lesser extent also for units in Interior ministries.

A longitudinal perspective situating the distinct structural change event into the four decades from the 1980s to the 2010s shows comparatively more observations with a shorter time until a structural change during the first decade, across all countries (see Figure 2). The pattern for ministerial units experiencing a structural change event during the other three decades, however, shows that French and German ministerial units are more skewed toward shorter timespans whereas Dutch and British ministerial units are more broadly distributed between shorter and longer timespans.

Our Cox mixed effects models test the relevance of each of the explanatory variables for the time until a change event occurs separately as well as in one full model (see Table 2). Due to time-varying covariates, the 5,464 observations are split whenever one of these covariates

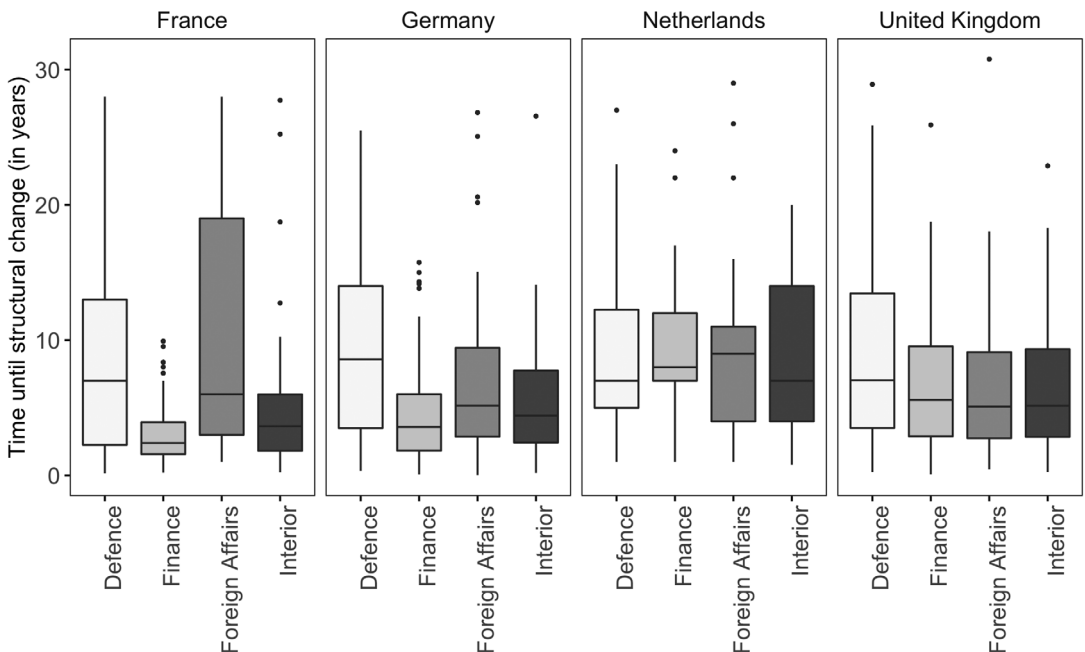


FIGURE 1 Time until structural change by country and portfolio ( $N = 5464$ )

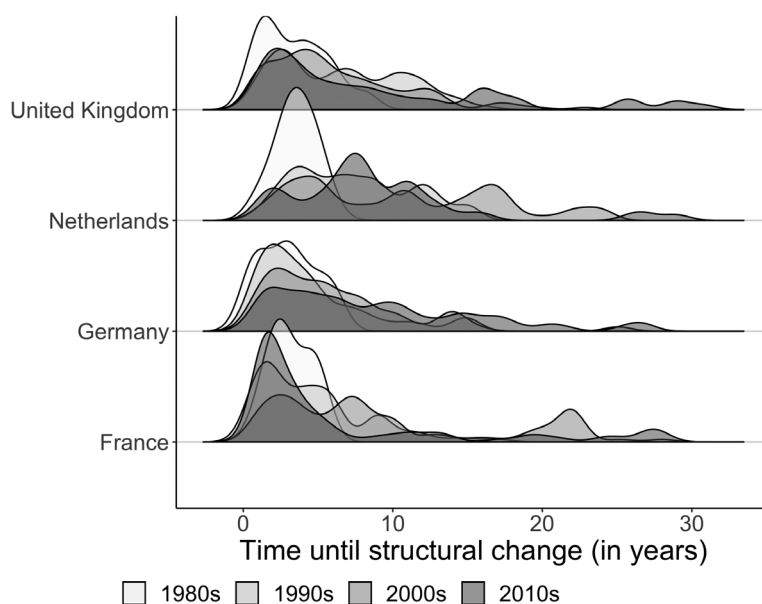


FIGURE 2 Time until structural change by decade ( $N = 5464$ )

changes. We opted for stratifying the dataset on an annual basis and used the specific date of a structural change event for those years with general elections in order to associate the corresponding covariates at the point in time when the structural change occurred. This results in a new dataset containing 20,493 observations. Our data are right-censored for all ministerial units still unchanged at the end of the time period under scrutiny at the end of 2013 and left-censored for all units entering the dataset at the beginning of the time period in 1980. We performed goodness-of-fit analyses for all models using martingale residuals, which indicate an adequate fit to the data.

The first model shows that, all else equal, ideological cabinet turnover has a significant and positive effect on the likelihood of structural change. One point increase in turnover increases the hazard of structural change by approx. 0.5%. Given that the ideological turnover measurement is based on party manifestos, the lowest increase is 0.5% for those ministerial units experiencing a structural change after a cabinet turnover without general elections and thus without electoral campaigns and manifestos allowing for a novel assessment of parties' ideological stands. The highest positive increase of the likelihood of structural change occurred to ministerial units in three of the four countries during the early and mid-1980s: For French units after the turnover bringing the Chirac II cabinet into office in 1986 (an increased hazard by approx. 26.8%), followed by Dutch units under the Lubbers I cabinet from 1982 onwards (approx. 12.7%), and German units under the Kohl I cabinet in office between 1982 and 1983 (approx. 10.4%). For British units, though, the greatest increase in the hazard to experience structural changes due to a cabinet turnover occurred in the early 2010s with the Cameron I cabinet coming into power (approx. 7.1%).

The second model addresses extreme cabinet ideology and reveals its positive and significant effect on the hazard of structural change: One point increase in cabinet ideological extremism increases the hazard of structural change of ministerial units by approx. 16.7%. Given the variation of this covariate, the increase in risk is strongest for ministerial units across three of the

TABLE 2 Empirical analysis of the time until ministerial units change

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Cabinet's turnover	0.005*** [1.005] (0.001)				0.008*** [1.008] (0.001)
Cabinet's extreme ideology		0.167*** [1.181] (0.012)			0.189*** [1.208] (0.012)
Cabinet's ideology			0.002* [1.002] (0.001)		−0.005 [0.994] (0.001)
Unit's level				0.371*** [1.448] (0.018)	0.379*** [1.461] (0.018)
Cabinet's tenure	0.029*** [1.030] (0.006)	0.038*** [1.039] (0.006)	0.028*** [1.028] (0.007)	0.025*** [1.025] (0.006)	0.037*** [1.038] (0.007)
Cabinet's parliamentary seat share	−0.406*** [0.665] (0.078)	−0.173* [0.841] (0.079)	−0.385*** [0.679] (0.078)	−0.341*** [0.711] (0.078)	−0.125 [0.882] (0.079)
Unit's name length	0.021*** [1.022] (0.002)	0.021*** [1.021] (0.003)	0.021*** [1.021] (0.003)	0.017*** [1.017] (0.003)	0.018*** [1.018] (0.003)
Variance of random effects					
α (country)	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
η (portfolio)	0.058	0.055	0.060	0.063	0.065
Random effects coefficients (country)					
France	0.005	0.001	0.005	0.003	−0.002
Germany	0.001	0.002	0.001	0.002	0.003
Netherlands	−0.006	−0.006	−0.006	−0.004	−0.004
United Kingdom	0.001	0.003	0.001	−0.001	0.003
N of observations	20.493	20.493	20.493	20.493	20.493
N of events	19.795	19.795	19.795	19.795	19.795
Penalized AIC	2051.18	2138.57	1961.88	2416.41	2747.12

Note: Entries are parameter estimates, their standard errors are in parentheses and hazard ratios are in square brackets.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

four countries in the early 1980s, that is, for Dutch units under the Van Agt II cabinet (an increased hazard by approx. 26.2%), followed by German units under the Kohl II cabinet (approx. 22.8%), and British units under the Thatcher III cabinet (approx. 22.5%). For French units, the greatest increase in risking a structural change occurs in the early 2010s under the

Ayrault II cabinet (approx. 45.8%), thus showing that very Conservative but also leftist cabinets engage significantly in structural changes within ministerial departments.

The third model refers to the cabinet's ideological profile on a left–right continuum and shows a positive yet only weakly significant effect on the hazard of structural change of ministerial units: Conservative governments are slightly more likely to engage in structural changes of ministerial units than leftist governments. Given our results for cabinet's ideological extremism noted above, this finding requires further inspection. We, therefore, applied an optimal equal-HR method on a Cox proportional hazard model (inserting lagged covariates for those violating the basic proportional assumption) to determine the two optimal cut-points of the cabinets' ideological profile covariate (see Chen et al., 2019). We use these two cut-points for binning the units of analysis for a plot of the Kaplan–Meier estimates, which reveals that cabinet ideology and the time until ministerial units experience a structural change have a curvilinear relationship (see Figure 3). Under very leftist cabinets, ministerial units face higher risk to experience a structural change, followed by very rightist cabinets, whereas ministerial units under centrist cabinets experience more structural stability. This hazard pattern continues for ministerial units as long as they remain unchanged for approx. ten years, afterwards the hazards across cabinets with different ideology are rather equal, with more rightist cabinets becoming slightly more hazardous to ministerial units whereas more leftist cabinets are similar to centrist cabinets in triggering structural change. Taken together, the third hypothesis is rejected as formulated but a further analysis applying a somewhat simpler survival modeling strategy reveals a curvilinear relationship between cabinet ideology and the time until a ministerial unit experiences a structural change: Cabinets at both ends of the ideological spectrum are associated with shorter timespans until ministerial units get changed.

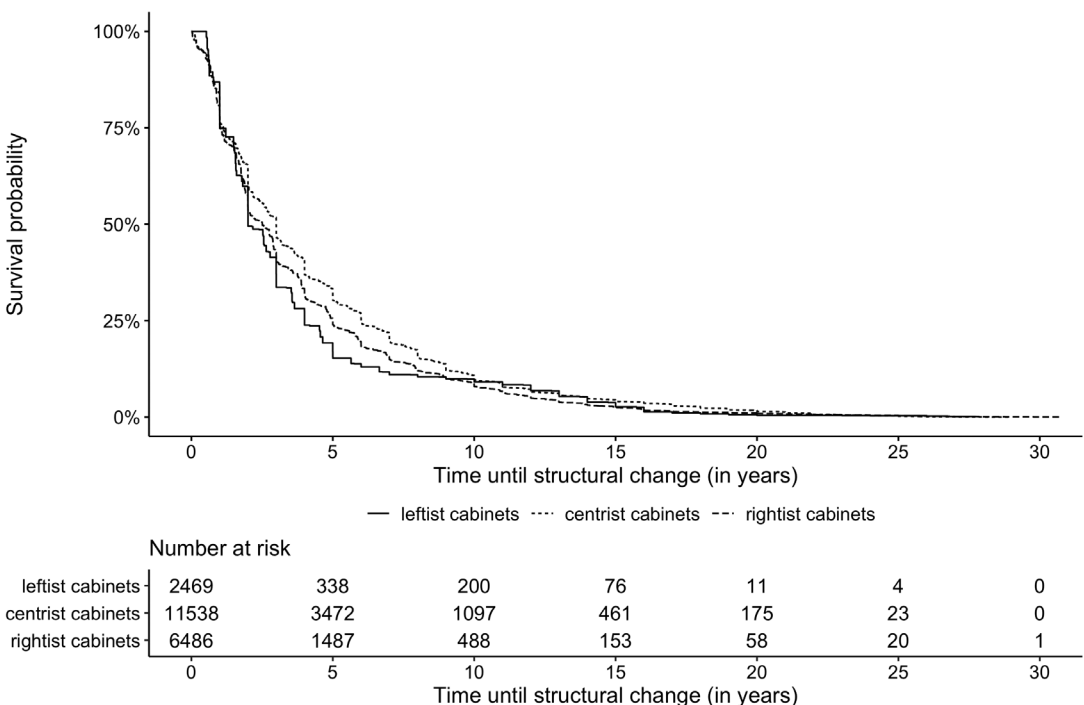


FIGURE 3 Survival probability by binned cabinet ideology (Kaplan–Meier estimates) ( $N = 5464$ )

The fourth model addresses the unit's proximity to the political leadership inside its ministerial department and confirms our hypothesis by showing that ministerial units further down the bureaucratic hierarchy and thus less visible to political executives face an increased hazard of structural change, by approx. 37.1%. This result indicates that structural changes at the lower levels of government departments are also influenced by political executives and thus party competition dynamics actually penetrate deeper into the government apparatus than expected in the wide-ranging portfolio allocation literature focusing on the level of portfolios. Besides, this result may also show some relevance of bureaucratic actors in structural choices. In Germany and France, senior officials are political appointees and in all four countries, civil servants are required to support the government in office. It is therefore very likely that political executives' priorities find their ways into structural changes at lower levels also because bureaucratic actors support or reject the structural status quo in varying accordance to their political masters' preferences.

The final model confirms the estimated effects of the models isolating the different covariates. The positive and significant effect of cabinet turnover is confirmed: All else equal, one point increase in turnover increases the hazard of structural change of ministerial units by approx. 0.8%. Likewise, cabinet extremism yields a positive and significant effect: One unit increase in cabinet extremism increases the likelihood of structural change by approx. 18.9%. Cabinet's ideology shows a negative and insignificant effect on the hazard of structural change. Lastly, the ministerial unit's level yields a positive and significant effect, that is, ministerial units further away from the political leadership face an approx. 37.9% increase of the hazard to experience structural changes.

In all models, our controls show significant effects, cabinet tenure and unit's name length have positive and cabinet's parliamentary seat-share negative coefficient directions. In addition, the size of the variance of the country- and portfolio-specific random effects shows that all models yield a greater variance between countries than between portfolios. This is in accordance with our descriptive results above as well as long-standing findings in coalition governance and comparative public administration research about the importance of institutional contexts.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

We present for the first time a systematic and comparative analysis of the politics of government reorganization that goes below the level of ministerial departments. Following the theory of structural choice politics, our empirical analysis focuses on how political features may explain these structural choices, which occur regularly and not only in the direct aftermath of general elections. Our empirical analyses confirm the relevance of partisan features. Cabinet's ideological viewpoints matter not only in the short term and thus for structural choices throughout their terms in office but also in the long run, when compared to previous (and succeeding) cabinets within a given country. In contrast, left–right leanings of cabinets yield no strong effects on structural choices. Lastly, our analyses show that ministerial units further away from the political leadership face a higher risk of structural change.

This study of the politics of government reorganization improves our current knowledge in various ways. First, we present the first comparative dataset into formal changes of the inner structures of ministerial departments across countries and over a longer time period, contributing a rather neglected yet crucial empirical aspect to the wider debate on portfolio allocation

and portfolio design. These inner branches and levels of ministerial departments present the levers to fulfill policy changes below the portfolio level not only after general elections but also throughout legislative periods. These empirical insights are crucial to complement our understanding of political dynamics shaping the machinery of government.

Second, our theoretical argument stipulates that the theory of structural choice politics can be reformulated for parliamentary and semi-presidential systems. Whereas presidents seek to insulate bureaucratic structures from future officeholders in order to ensure that their policies survive, political executives in parliamentary and semi-presidential systems operate under constant party competition and therefore aim to realize their policy preferences by adjusting the bureaucratic structures while in office. Moreover, we expanded the current view by testing the explanatory relevance of cabinets' ideological extremism and show that both very Conservative and very leftist cabinets engage significantly stronger in structural changes of the government apparatus. However, distinct ideological leanings as such, that is the classic left–right positioning of parties and cabinets, show weak significant effects. Conservative governments, which are regularly portrayed as promoters of large-scale administrative reform programs including reorganizing government structures, have no significant effect on the risk of structural change for ministerial units.

Third, our empirical study provides the first systematic and comparative proof that party competition and ideological preferences penetrate also lower levels of government organizations. This contribution enriches the comparative politics literature on portfolio allocation and design and pledges to take these lower levels more into account. Our results show that government parties and ministers do pay structural attention to them. In the policy decision-making process, these units at the lower echelons are the key places where policy proposals are first crafted. More fine-grained studies acknowledging the political importance of structures inside ministries are crucial and confirm that the politics of reorganization is a strong tool of government (Hood, 1984). In addition, this finding on the importance of vertical fragmentation and organizational layers may also indicate the relevance of top officials for the politics of government reorganization. These officials are crucial gatekeepers and guardians of government policy-making within a ministerial apparatus. They may get involved in structural choices because these express, enable, or limit policy choices. Further research is needed to ascertain whether it makes a difference for structural choices whether top officials are political appointees and closely linked to the minister and their policy agenda and tenure in office or whether they are permanent officials raised through the ranks with considerable knowledge over the interlinkages between policy and structure in a ministerial bureaucracy.

Fourth, our empirical analysis accounts for the fact that ministerial units are nested inside ministerial departments that are, again, nested in different countries. More should be done to compare the patterns of organizational changes in bureaucratic systems across countries but also by comparing policy domains. Our empirical analyses show that ministries in charge of the same policy domains share similar patterns of structural change across countries, which highlights the importance of policy fields and their corresponding actor constellations outside ministerial portfolios, including parliamentary actors but most notably stakeholders and organized interests. Novel data and measures becoming available on a longitudinal scale may support further investigations of portfolio-specific or rather sectoral effects on such structural dynamics in governments.

Lastly, we conclude with a pledge for more theoretical grounding in studying the politics of government reorganization. We tested structural choice theory for parliamentary and semi-presidential systems and our findings suggest that its key theoretical premises hold and political

executives in these systems also seek to aggregate their ideological preferences into government structures below the portfolio level. However, they also indicate some reasoning for bureaucratic agency: These formal structures not only allocate resources and authority, they also channel bureaucratic careers. It is therefore reasonable for bureaucratic agents to seek influence in structural choices and future research may apply theoretical perspectives highlighting bureaucratic agency in the politics of government reorganization (Appendix).

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Author elects to not share data.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> A few ministerial units were transferred to other portfolios during our time period of analysis, yet never between the four ministerial departments under scrutiny. As an example for Germany, several units were moved from the Ministry of Interior to the newly created Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety in 1986.

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## APPENDIX

The dataset that we use in this paper is a version of the Structure and Organization of Government Dataset that the SOG-PRO research team has collected with the support of an Open Area Plus Grant, which was funded by the national science commissions of Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The dataset contains observations of central government-level administrative reorganizations within Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom between 1980 and 2013. The main sources of the data collected are the civil service yearbooks, organizational charts and task allocation plans of these countries.

### Organizational phases

The unit of analysis is an organizational unit within a central government department. Each line in the dataset represents a single unit, the start and end dates of the unit, and the events by which the unit started and through which it was ended. A unit with a start and end date constitutes a single organizational phase. A unit whose organizational phase has not ended on December 31, 2013 is right-censored. The dataset has a multi-year panel data structure of the years 1980–2013. Organizational units have a line for each year of their phase. For example, an organizational unit that has a start event in 1995 and an end event in 2008 appears with 13 lines in the dataset.

### Transition events

The dataset records the start and end events that mark the beginning and ending of an organizational phase. Following Rolland and Roness (2011) and Hogwood and Peters (1988) our coding scheme captures events beyond the dichotomy of ‘birth’ and ‘death’. Next to events that purely create or terminate a unit, our classification of transition events accounts for events that do preserve parts of units. Successions, mergers or absorptions, splits or secessions, and complex reorganizations are transition events where parts of existing units survive the event as parts of them are reconstituted during one of these events. For a full discussion of the different types of transition events, how they are distinguished from each other, as well as the descriptions of their coding (see Carroll et al., 2020).

### Coding decisions

The core identification of a structural change event is a change in either the formal affiliation of a unit (hierarchical level, affiliation as line or staff unit) or the formal denomination of a unit. For the formal affiliation, we coded the vertical level of units (see below), varying from level 0 to level –2. Our empirical analysis focuses on levels –1 and –2. For the formal affiliation, we coded as line units those units that reside under the direct hierarchy of an ‘Abteilung’ (Germany), a ‘directorate generale’ (France), a ‘directoraat-generaal’ (the Netherlands), and a ‘directorate-general’ (United Kingdom) were tasked with policy mandates. Staff units are units entrusted with generic tasks, for example, communication, legal services, finance, or personnel, or directly attached to the secretariat of the minister. The organizational chart below

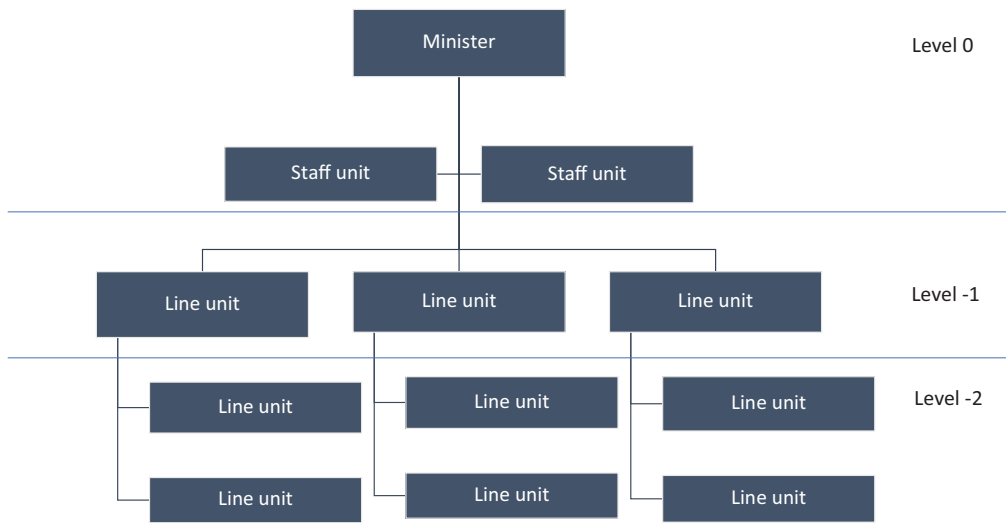


FIGURE A1 Stylized form of a ministerial department with staff and line units at levels 0, -1, and -2

distinguishes between staff and line units. The main source of our coding of the line and staff units are the civil service yearbooks and organizational charts of the ministries as depicted in Figure A1. Staff units are depicted here at level 0, but they were often also found at level -1, serving as staff units for individual directorates.

A change in the formal denomination of unit is coded when nouns and/or adjective in the formal name of the unit are replaced, omitted, added, or reordered. We ignored cases in which the grammatical case of a noun was changed (singular into plural or vice versa). However, it is, therefore, relevant to control for the length of denomination across units in the four countries and over time, as these unit names likely follow national traditions and necessities.

### Coding process and intercoder reliability

The dataset was assembled under an Open Area Plus scheme and was funded by the national science commissions of Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The Principal Investigators, each representing one of the countries, jointly headed the research project. They were responsible for steering and overlooking their respective research teams that consisted of postdocs, PhD researchers and research assistants holding master's degrees. The PIs overlooked the development of the coding scheme, whereas the postdocs managed the data collection and coding process. To ensure a coherent application of the comparative joint coding scheme across coders and countries, all country teams participated in activities strengthening inter-coder reliability, including face-to-face meetings, and Skype sessions across country teams. These were extensive meetings and took place at least every three months. The entire project team convened at least twice a year. At these meetings the most typical and unusual cases from all countries were discussed and decisions were made about how to interpret the observations. These meetings did enhance the joint understanding and application of the coding rules.