

Ministerial Cabinets: the Grey Area of Government

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Within French government ministries, cabinet offices are a source of numerous fantasies due to their opaque role and the omnipotence of graduates of the École Nationale d'Administration. A centuries-old institution at the heart of political-administrative power, their composition has nonetheless diversified, and female representation has increased over time.

Ministerial cabinet offices are a traditional and ancient institution. They were established during the Restoration and formed the minister's private secretariat. As such, their employees were responsible for preparing the minister's files and speeches, and making studies and proposals. Under the Fifth Republic, their role has increased in proportion to the considerable strengthening of executive power (Eyméri-Douzans, Bioy, Mouton, 2015). It is in these places of power that laws and decrees are now drafted in the utmost secrecy. The opacity that surrounds them, from their composition — carried out at the minister's discretion — to their 'influence', has earned them a controversial reputation: working in the shadow of ministers, these inner circles of advisors are said to be a bastion of the so-called 'énarchie' (power held predominantly by alumni of the exclusive École Nationale d'Administration — ENA — in Paris), a very male preserve of the major government bodies (Conseil d'État, Cour des Comptes, Inspection Générale des Finances, Corps des Mines and Conseil Général des Ponts et Chaussées). These bodies were originally responsible for controlling State services, but have in fact become management bodies. Given the social selection that

takes place when candidates are recruited into major government departments, cabinet offices are thus largely responsible for the technocratic drift of the Fifth Republic and the growing rift between the government and the governed, of which the Yellow Vests movement is just one example. Politicians themselves, not wanting to be outdone, often point the finger at ministerial cabinets, which they accuse of bypassing the administration and parliament, of 'encapsulating' ministers (i.e. isolating them from the rest of the world), or of fuelling the dilution of their responsibilities. Indeed, ministerial chiefs of staff (*directeurs/directrices de cabinet*) are often used as scapegoats for their ministers in the event of misconduct and, more usually, it is cabinet staff members (and not ministers) who are sent to the front lines in intra-governmental negotiations.

At the beginning of the Fifth Republic (1958), this issue was also causing concern in the field of political science: some researchers saw it as an indication of the increasing autonomy of the State apparatus; others as a tangible sign of the administration's grip on political power. Sixty years on, however, research on ministerial cabinet offices offers a rather more mixed picture (RFAP, 2018). While they do play an undeniable role in politics, their influence in decision-making and their closed nature must be looked at in context. Far from forming a coherent whole, they constitute both hybrid and competitive units at the top of the State. Their recruitment has diversified since the 1980s. Firstly, the share of 'technocrats' has decreased in favour of recruits with a more politics-focused profile. Secondly, they are no longer a male bastion, and female representation is on the rise. However, these major changes do not necessarily mean a better sharing of power.

At the heart of political and administrative power

It cannot be denied that ministerial cabinet offices are populated by civil servants. This is nothing new: they made up 65% of cabinet offices during the Fourth Republic — of which 30-40% worked for the major State bodies — and up to 88-95% of staff according to estimates for the early decades of the Fifth Republic.

The fact that the administrative elites have had so much control over the management of ministerial cabinet offices can be explained in both functional and historical terms. On the one hand, and with very few exceptions, a minister is the head of an administration, and therefore needs men and women who understand it and can

control it, *a fortiori* if he/she comes from outside the administration, which is the case for two thirds of ministers. On the other hand, when a minister leaves office, the tradition is that he/she places his/her collaborators in positions that are filled at the government's discretion. This customary use of the 'ministerial will' (*testament ministériel*), rationalised by a decree in 1911, has had the effect of making a cabinet office position an integral part of the *cursus honorum* of senior civil servants. Having served in one or more cabinet offices has thus become a prerequisite for becoming an administrative director; at the very least, it serves to boost people's careers.

Senior civil servants who held a position in a ministerial cabinet office

From 1945 to 1969, percentage who served in a ministerial cabinet office:

* 65% of the members of the Inspection des finances

* 49% of the members of the Conseil d'État

* 46% of the members of the Cour de comptes

It is true that, in theory, cabinet employees make proposals, while ministers manage. In practice, however, things are quite different. As Jean-Michel Eymeri-Douzans (2003) notes, there is in fact a great deal of porosity between issues, but also between 'political' and 'administrative' tasks. Firstly, because no problem is inherently political or purely technical, *a fortiori* at government level. Secondly, ministers do not have the time to go through all the dossiers. The role of their cabinet office is precisely to sort through all the files and only bring the 'most important' or 'sensitive' ones to their attention. This leaves a minister's employees with considerable room for interpretation and decision-making. One thing should therefore be acknowledged: ministers are often content to take political responsibility for measures prepared and taken by their cabinet staff, under the supervision of the chief of staff. It is therefore easy to understand why ministers want to be able to choose their own chief of staff. However, this seems to be less and less the case.

A variable and conditional influence

The fact remains that all these observations in no way prove the power of ENA alumni under the Fifth Republic; nor do they explain the technocratisation of public action. This requires a leap of logic that is easily proven. On this point, as elsewhere, one should not be too quick to generalise. Not all ministerial cabinets carry the same weight within a government. Their influence is measured primarily by their size, the proportion of large bodies that function within them, or their 'success' rate in inter-ministerial meetings. There is a world of difference between the cabinets of 'technical' ministries with a sectoral remit (sport, transport, agriculture, etc.), which scarcely have more than 7-13 members, and the cabinets of ministries functioning under the prerogatives of the French State (Economy and Finance, Interior, Defence, Justice), which often have a cross-disciplinary remit and exceed 20 members. While the former attract a significant proportion of alumni from the *École Polytechnique* and engineers from the exclusive *grandes écoles*, the latter are mainly recruited from the major government bodies. For example, they make up between one fifth and one third of the cabinet staff in the Prime Minister's office and at the Ministry of Economics and Finance. Their power also comes from the support they receive from powerful administrations, with their deep pool of human resources, unlike other cross-disciplinary cabinets which have none (typically the Ministry for Women's Rights).

It is important to make these distinctions, because the cabinet staff work first for their minister, before serving the Prime Minister's office and the President's office. Thus, far from forming the different components of a team serving a single interest, the cabinet offices are often in competition. As a sign that conflict prevails over cooperation, requests for arbitration are on the increase, and the number of inter-ministerial meetings has soared. In addition to the structural divisions that have always pitted them against one another (e.g. Justice vs the Interior, the high-spending ministries of Social Affairs and National Education vs the thrifty Budget ministry), other issues are now at stake, such as the allocation of financial resources in a frozen budget, and the tabling of legislative bills in the Council of Ministers. This process of tabling legislation tends to become increasingly competitive and uncertain in a calendar pressurised by the five-year term and regularly disrupted by crises and mid-term elections. Every minister aspires to marking his/her time in government with a law bearing his/her name. For the cabinet staff, it is therefore a question of "hitting hard and fast" in order to be able to get ahead of the others (Dulong, France, Le Mazier, 2019). The question is therefore not so much to know how much influence the

ministerial cabinet offices have, but rather which ones have influence on government decisions and under what conditions.

In this respect, the unity of the cabinet office, in other words its internal cohesion, is undoubtedly a necessary condition for success in this intra-governmental competition. Yet cabinet offices are less and less homogeneous. Like other teams, they are hybrid human groupings, in which graduate elites rub shoulders, admittedly, but with varying habitus. To simplify things a little, there are two profile types: on the one hand, the 'activists' who enter the ministerial cabinet office by following 'their boss' (or, more rarely, a leader of their party), whose political career and ideas they defend; on the other hand, the 'technocrats', often chosen by the chief of staff for their prestigious academic qualifications and their reputation for competence in a particular field. The latter are less attached to the minister as a person, and have a more professional, even careerist, relationship with the cabinet office. In any case, the question is: Who do they serve — the President, their minister, the general interest, the interest of their profession, or their own interest?

The diversification of profiles

Linked to this, since the 1980s the profiles of government staff have become increasingly diverse. While the central administration remains "a gateway to government" (RFAP, 2018), the share of civil servants is decreasing, and the political orientation of the government has little influence. Thus, in the first governments of the five-year term of former president François Hollande, only half of the recruits came from the public administration. There were half as many ENA alumni as at the end of the 1970s, and members of the large corps were increasingly in the minority (21% under Nicolas Sarkozy and 16.4% under François Hollande). On the other hand, they still take the lion's share. They hold the highest positions in the cabinet offices: under Hollande, 53% of chief of staff positions were held by ENA graduates, usually a member of a major institution (40.7%, as opposed to 11.5% for other members). However, even though the cabinet offices are still controlled by the State nobility, they are nonetheless opening up to actors with a more political profile, due in particular to the growing importance of political communication and the professionalisation of political entourages (Boelaert, Ollion, Michon, 2017). Parliamentary assistants, party employees, members of the presidential campaign team and members of local

authority cabinets accounted for almost a quarter of the staff in ministerial cabinet offices between 2012 and 2014.

Moreover, the career paths of these staff are far from being as uniform as is often assumed, including for senior civil servants (RFAP, 2018). There is a lack of comparative elements here. But if we look at the five-year term of François Hollande, the vast majority of recruits had a career marked by at least two different employment experiences. Thus, although cabinet office staff in the Hollande government were rarely recruited directly from the private sector (just over 10% compared to less than 5% in the ministerial offices of Raymond Barre's government in the late 1970s), many more had come via the private sector. Nearly a quarter (24%) had held a position in the private sector, and of these 43.7% had done so for more than five years. This trend is most common among communication advisors, but senior civil servants, particularly chiefs of staff, are not immune. The time when civil servants were content to go and work in the private sector after several years in the senior administration is certainly over. Today, the trend is to go back and forth between the two spheres, as illustrated by Emmanuel Macron's career, and the grey areas where private and public spheres intermingle have expanded (France and Vauchez, 2016). In this sense, the question that arises is no longer so much that of the technocratisation of public action as that of the managerialisation of the state, i.e. importing techniques specific to the world of private enterprise to the top levels of the government.

The feminisation of the workforce: a paradox?

One final development deserves further exploration: the place of women within the 'headquarters' of the Republic. Their share is constantly increasing, although it is not easy to explain this trend, which is both well established and paradoxical.

Under President Macron, 40.5% of the staff in ministerial cabinet offices are women, a share that has been steadily increasing since the 1970s. Even so, one might have expected women to be broadly under-represented, for at least two reasons. Firstly, the secretive nature of these institutions, their opaque recruitment and the influence they are thought to have, *a priori* do not work in women's favour. Indeed, it is an established finding of many surveys that in the context of gender parity, women are willingly put on the front line of politics and excluded from the corridors of power. Secondly, the very high workloads associated with these responsibilities may deter

women from taking up these positions (the average age of the staff in cabinet offices is around 40, with no gender gap), as there are significant and persistent gender inequalities in the handling of domestic and parental responsibilities.

This robust process of feminisation is particularly intriguing because it is taking place with no legal constraints. The various laws on parity passed since 2000 in France say nothing about the gendered composition of government and cabinet offices. However, they have orchestrated the forced feminisation of elected political assemblies (laws of 2000, 2007, 2013 and 2014)¹, of the boards of directors of large companies (2011)² and of their management bodies (2021)³, and of management positions in the civil service (2012)⁴. By cross-referencing the available data (which is scarce for the first decades of the Fifth Republic), it is possible to build a comparative table of the share of women in these different places of power.

¹ The so-called parity laws were made possible by the constitutional amendments of 1999 and 2008 (art. 1: "The law promotes equal access of women and men to electoral mandates and elective functions, as well as to professional and social responsibilities"). Since then, the municipal councils of towns with more than 1,000 inhabitants, the regional councils, the departmental councils (and their executives), the French delegation to the European Parliament, are all equal or almost equal. There are strong financial incentives for political parties to nominate equal numbers of women and men in legislative elections.

² The "Coppé-Zimmerman law" states that the proportion of board members of either gender cannot be less than 40%, since 2017 (for CAC 40 and SBF 120 companies).

³ The "Rixain law" of 24 December 2021 aimed at "accelerating economic and professional equality" introduced a quota for "senior managers and members of management bodies" in companies with more than 1,000 employees (30% by 2027, 40% by 2030). The share of women in these management positions currently stands at around 5%.

⁴ The Sauvadet law also established quotas for management positions in the civil service: since 2017, the quota is 40% for new appointments.

	Ministerial cabinets	Government	National Assembly	Boards of Directors - CAC40 companies and SBF 120 index	Senior jobs in State civil service
1972-79	Between 7.3% and 9.8%.	Less than 5% of the total	Between 1.6% and 3.7%.	X	x
1981-93	Between 14% and 23%.	Between 9% and 17%.	Between 5.3% and 6.1%.	6%	x
2002-12	24,5%	Between 18% and 28%.	Between 10.9% and 18.5%.	Between 8% and 12.3%.	Between 12% and 26%.
2012-17	35,4%	Between 47.5% and 50%.	26,8%	Between 27.5% and 42%.	Between 26% and 40%.
2017-22	40,5%	50%	38,7%	43,6%	40%

Table 1: Evolution of female representation in different power bodies⁵

The data shows that ministerial cabinet offices have become feminised sooner and to a greater degree than other political institutions, senior government administration, or boards of directors. Only the quotas imposed under the laws on parity in boards of directors have enabled a relative equalisation of the proportion of women in recent years (40-50%). Cabinet offices are also feminising earlier than the government itself. It was only during Sarkozy's presidency, and more clearly those of Hollande and Macron, that gender equality standards and the desire to be seen to implement good practices led the heads of government to appoint as many women as men in the role of ministers and secretary of state.

In the case of cabinet offices, however, this logic does not hold, given that their composition is largely unknown to the public. So how can we explain the regular and significant feminisation of ministerial cabinet offices? Is it a sign that power is now shared equally between women and men? Or does it in fact reveal that cabinet positions are no longer valued by those in power and are therefore becoming

⁵ Sources: C. Achin and D. Dulong, 'Au-delà des apparences : la féminisation des cabinets ministériels durant la présidence Hollande', *Revue française d'administration publique*, 168 (4), 2018, p. 789. The various surveys used to construct this table are indicated. The data has been updated from data made available by the National Assembly and the French government.

accessible to women? Beyond these two somewhat irenic or caricatured views, our study of the composition of ministerial cabinets under the Hollande presidency (between 2012 and 2014) has revealed more subtle processes.

A nuanced process of feminisation

The feminisation of cabinet offices is, on the one hand, the automatic result (although somewhat ahead of time) of the feminisation of the pool of partisan entourages (communication specialists, parliamentary assistants, etc.) and of the privileged recruitment pool that makes up the senior administration. Although the ENA was legally open to women from its creation in 1945, women represented less than 4% of new students until the 1970s, and it was not until the 1980s that their share exceeded 24%. Since the 2000s, no ENA year group has comprised less than 25% women, and their proportion reached an average of 35% between 2001 and 2019 (Favier, 2020). Beyond the ENA graduates, whose proportion in cabinet offices has decreased since the 2000s, over the past two decades women have benefited above all from the gateway between senior government positions and cabinet offices. This recruitment channel favours the entry into cabinet offices of women whose previous career paths as campaigners and professionals are now much like those of their male counterparts, even if they are less likely to have come via the major State bodies.

The recent feminisation of the senior civil service

The senior civil service has long been a male bastion. It was not until 1972 that the first female ambassador was appointed, while the first female Prefect was not named until 1981. However, by the beginning of the 2000s women made up the majority of managers and senior professionals in the civil service. Even so, they held only 12% of senior management positions, a share that has increased very rapidly thanks to the entry into force of the quotas established under the Sauvadet law of 2012 (26% in 2012 and 40% in 2017).

The feminisation of cabinet offices is also a result of the gendered division of labour and the gendered careers of French political and administrative elites, which are characterised by free movement between the public and private sectors, partly related to timeframes and geographical mobility. Unsurprisingly, in ministerial

cabinet offices as well as in elected assemblies and senior government, women do not occupy the same positions as men⁶. First of all, horizontally, and in proportions that vary from one government to another, they are over-represented in small ministerial offices such as the Ministry for Women's Rights and its secretariat, but also in the larger ministries of Culture, Justice, and Labour and Social Affairs. Conversely, they are under-represented in the large cabinet offices of the ministries that function under the prerogatives of the French State (Economy and Finance, Interior, etc.) or in 'innovation' sectors (Business, Ecological Transition, etc.). Secondly, in the vertical hierarchy of each cabinet, women are confronted with the same glass ceiling as elsewhere (Marry *et al.*, 2017), since they are over-represented among advisers (particularly as communication advisers and parliamentary advisers) and under-represented in management positions. In 2012, women represented 19.8% of chiefs of staff (*directeurs/directrices de cabinet*), 22% of deputy chiefs of staff and 29.5% of principal private secretaries (*chefs/chefes de cabinet*). In 2018, the proportion of women has increased slightly among management and deputy management (24%) and more significantly in the more technical positions of principal private secretary and deputy private secretary (38%).

Finally, the scope of the feminisation of cabinet offices must be put into context from the point of view of the gendered development of career paths in the field. It is useful to remember that women are entering senior government positions at a time when these positions are becoming more technical and less valued in the career paths of French elites. In these environments, which are marked by a high degree of social homogamy and increased movement between the public and private sectors, career choices are often negotiated at the level of the 'household', with women in heterosexual couples favouring careers in the public sector so that their spouses can switch securely from the public to the private sector (Rouban 2013). Women's entry into cabinet offices can therefore be understood as a way for them to boost their careers by investing in a demanding, but short-lived position (2.5 years on average), and a 'Parisian' position, sparing them the geographical mobility essential for promotion.

⁶ By cross-referencing data from our survey of ministerial cabinet offices between 2012 and 2014, and ad hoc counts carried out by *Le Parisien* in 2018 (Leparisien.fr, 08/11/2018) and by *Capital* in 2021 (Capital.fr, 29/10/2021) using government sources.

Conclusion

This study of the role of ministerial cabinets thus paints a nuanced picture. These places of power constitute a grey area that escapes some of the fundamental rules of democracy, notably the separation and hierarchy between politics and administration, transparency, and recruitment by competition or election. That said, cabinet offices are no longer the preserve of the major State bodies. Recruitment is diversifying, as shown by the way they have opened up to women. However, this feminisation is not a guarantee of democratisation.

On the darker side, despite their increased presence, women are still largely the "worker bees" of cabinet offices. While it is no longer unusual to find a female chief of staff, few women participate in the restricted strategic meetings where the real decision-making takes place. Although one third of women were present in the cabinet offices of the Prime Minister (33%) or the President of the Republic (34%) in 2021, they are almost absent from the inner circles — the close entourage of those in power — as illustrated by the current hierarchical composition of the cabinet offices of the President of the Republic⁷.

On a positive side, there are now almost as many women as men in these places of power, thus undoubtedly diversifying the experiences and points of view of the staff who draw up most of the laws and decrees. The process of feminisation here goes hand in hand with the decline in the proportion of ENA graduates in favour of male and female employees, and more broadly, professionals who have had experience in the public and private sectors before joining a cabinet office. This diversification is significant but nonetheless relative: all of these people are highly qualified and undergo rigorous social selection, belonging to the white elite that circulates between senior government, corporate management and political circles.

Finally, existing analyses of the contrasts in the composition of ministerial cabinet offices and their role leave out a new key player in political decision-making. The 'influence' may now be coming from other quarters... The investigation conducted by journalists Matthieu Aron and Caroline Michel-Aguirre, published on 17 February 2022, reveals that governments have become 'dependent' on consultants from private consultancy firms. The French government now invests more than 730 million euros a year with consulting firms, particularly from English-speaking countries, devaluing

⁷ <https://www.elysee.fr/la-presidence/cabinet-du-president-de-la-republique-et-services-de-l-elysee>

the expertise of its own firms and administrations. This delegation of consultancy to the private sector further diminishes the power attributed to cabinet offices.

Further Reading

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