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Citation
Otjes, S. P., & Brandsma, G. J. (2026). Staff Matters: the effect of political group staff on MP activity in the Netherlands. *Politics And Governance*, *14*. doi:10.17645/pag.10588

Version:	Publisher's Version
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Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4292341

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Politics and Governance
2026 • Volume 14 • Article 10588
https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.10588

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Open Access Journal

Staff Matters: The Effect of Political Group Staff on MP Activity in the Netherlands

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Submitted: 24 April 2025 **Accepted:** 8 August 2025 **Published:** 7 January 2026

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Understanding the Role of Political Staff and Parliamentary Administrations" edited by Gijs Jan Brandsma (Radboud University) and Anna-Lena Högenauer (University of Luxembourg), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i445

Abstract

The small but growing literature on parliamentary staff is largely composed of qualitative descriptive studies of staff roles and activities. A key assumption that underlies all of these studies is that "staff matters" for parliamentary activity, but this assumption has never been formally put to the test. This article presents a first cut at filling this lacuna and attempts to quantify the effect of political group staff. We examine the Dutch lower house. Our central question is: How does the availability of different forms of staff support within political groups affect the activity of MPs? For each political group in the lower house, we gauged how many ghostwriters and marketeers they employ. We then relate this to a variety of indicators of parliamentary activity of individual MPs, such as the number of motions, written questions, and amendments submitted, as well as activity on social media (specifically X, formerly Twitter). For questions, motions, and amendments, we do see a staff effect on MP activity, but with social media presence, the results suggest that staff constrains rather than promotes the number of tweets.

Keywords

parliamentary activity; parliamentary staff; social media; the Netherlands

1. Introduction

The literature on the role of parliamentary staff in politics has traditionally been little more than a "cottage industry" (Otjes, 2023, p. 374), but has seen renewed interest in recent years. Thus far, this literature consists mainly of descriptive analyses that map out the organization, role, and backgrounds of specific staff types in specific parliaments (e.g., Christiansen et al., 2023; Crewe, 2017; Egeberg et al., 2013). Even though

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conceptualizations and the selection of relevant staff types vary between studies, they all take as a starting point the presumption that parliamentary staff have a certain effect on the activities of MPs, party groups, or parliaments more generally. In other words, they argue that staff matters.

Only more recently, US-focused studies started moving beyond descriptive accounts by gauging the extent of staff impact on various aspects of parliamentary behaviour (e.g., Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019; Montgomery & Nyhan, 2017; Ommundsen, 2023). In this article, we join this explanatory turn in parliamentary staff studies. Our central question addresses the key presumption in parliamentary staff studies directly and asks: How does the availability of different forms of staff support within political groups affect the activity of MPs?

We understand parliamentary activity as all the work that MPs do individually or collectively, focused on the functions of parliament to shape legislation, scrutinize the government, and represent the people. We look at different specific activities of MPs: their use of motions, amendments, and questions, and their use of social media. These are related to different roles MPs play: as co-legislator (amendments), as those who oversee the government (questions), and their work as representatives communicating with citizens (social media). While we generally have the same expectation for each of these roles (more staff means more activity), we look at them separately because staff may play different roles in different areas.

Our study does not just contribute to the study of parliamentary staff, but also to the study of MP activities, which so far has mainly focused on individual characteristics to explain behaviour (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018; Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). MPs are not just individuals, but they are part of parliamentary organizations that supply them with resources to do their work. We place individual MPs into their organizational context by studying how staffing affects their level of activity both in parliament and on social media.

We focus our study on the lower house of the Dutch parliament (*Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*). We do so for two reasons: Firstly, because the lower house is the only parliament (that we know of) where there has been a comprehensive survey of the size and role of the staff of parliamentary party groups (PPGs; Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). This gives a unique opportunity to study whether staff matters. Secondly, as Louwerse and Otjes (2016) argue, the electoral system of the Netherlands (a single national district with relatively little influence of preference votes) creates relatively few incentives for MPs to pursue personal votes through parliamentary activity. This means that this is a likely case to observe how another factor, in our case, organizational structure, affects behaviour, without the need for strong controls.

We now turn towards discussing the existing theory on staff, which we use to formulate expectations about how they affect MP behaviour. Subsequently, we introduce our case, data, and methods. We then discuss our results and the conclusions that can be derived from these.

2. Staff as the Crucial Resource for MP Activity

The central theoretical assumption of our contribution is that the work MPs do is not just produced by themselves but co-produced by them and a team of parliamentary staffers. This is perhaps best exemplified in the image of a US congressman as an "enterprise" by Salisbury and Shepsle (1981) or the congressional office as a "small business" by Loomis (1979). Most of the words an MP says in parliament have been prepared by the staff who write their speeches and who practice the parliamentary interactions with them,

suggesting possible interventions and responses. Staff also draft the motions, questions, and amendments that MPs submit, and they write or produce the messages, memes, and videos that MPs post on social media—or they post them on their MP's behalf.

Despite the long pedigree of the "small business" or "enterprise" conception of staff-MP relations, empirical studies that recognize the collective nature of parliamentary work are sparse (but see Crosson et al., 2020; Madonna & Ostrander, 2014; Ommundsen, 2023; Squire, 1993). Earlier explanatory studies focused on individual-level and party-level incentives for parliamentary activity, without bringing the organizational resources that staff provide into the equation. These individual-level explanations largely focus on the vote-seeking motivations of individual MPs (Mayhew, 2004). The central argument is that MPs who are less sure of their re-election are likely to be more active in order to showcase their performance to the voters and the party selectorate. The extent to which this explains the behaviour of individual MPs, however, strongly depends on the electoral system (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). The opposite image of this notion is that MPs who will not seek re-election will become less active (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018).

Variables at the party level offer an alternative explanation of individual-level parliamentary activity. A party's ideological position, participation in government, and size all matter for explaining between-party differences in parliamentary activity: MPs from parties that are in the opposition, are more likely to use formal tools to obtain information or to convince the government to pursue particular policies as they lack the informal pathways available to coalition parties (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016; Otjes et al., 2023). MPs from parties that are ideologically far away from the government may be more likely to desire changes to proposed policies and use formal tools to force such change (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018). Populist parties may use particular formal instruments more often as they better allow them to voice their opposition (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021).

Staff resources may well be an additional driver of parliamentary activity. Their support can be conceptualized in a qualitative and a quantitative sense. Qualitatively, staff activities feed into the content of questions, amendments, tweets, resolutions, debate contributions, and any other kind of activity—for instance, by drafting these, advising MPs on formulation based on policy, political or legal expertise, or by obtaining information from academic experts or interest groups. From this perspective, the congruence between a staff member's opinions and those of her MP and their constituents is of key relevance in studying staff impact on parliamentary behaviour (cf. Hertel-Fernandez et al., 2019). In a quantitative sense, staff allow the MP to boost activity (cf. Salisbury & Shepsle, 1981). By distributing tasks over specialized staff, MPs can generate more output than they would be capable of producing alone. More staff thus simply means more amendments, more questions, and more motions, to name only a few examples. It is this last, quantitative perspective that guides our present analysis. Notwithstanding any qualitative impacts on parliamentary work through staff inputs, at the very least, we may expect a correlation between staff size and MP activity if we assume that staff matters from a quantitative perspective.

Brandsma and Otjes (2024) have proposed a grid to map the diversity of staff types and their activities. Building on role theory (Andeweg, 2014), they argue that staffers play many different roles. They recognize five, which are not mutually exclusive: information broker, advisor, compromise facilitator, marketeer, and ghostwriter. For our discussion, the latter two roles are crucial. Information brokers collect and filter information from society and experts. Advisors present with possible courses of action, based on their own

expertise (be it subject matter expertise or political expertise). Compromise facilitators explore zones of potential agreement within or between parties (see Brandsma & Otjes, 2024, for a more extensive description). These roles have in common that they still leave much work in the hands of the MPs themselves, as they only seek to facilitate parliamentary behaviour—staff may send information or advice to the MP, but the MP still has to decide on any course of action. In other words, for these three roles, staff activity does affect parliamentary activity directly, but the relation with generating outputs is only indirect, which makes it difficult to observe a staff effect on MP activity quantitatively.

This is markedly different for the other two roles: marketeers and ghostwriters. Marketeers communicate on behalf of MPs with citizens and journalists, and in particular, while managing the social media presence of MPs, they directly control outputs. Ghostwriters draft documents on behalf of MPs that they can submit under their own name. Those can be speeches, motions, amendments, and written questions, but also op-eds and press releases. Of course, both categories of staff may enjoy varying degrees of discretion in carrying out their tasks, but the crucial difference with other staff roles is that they prepare specific expressions inside or outside of parliament *in full*, and thus can act as near stand-ins for the MP for those. It therefore seems reasonable to expect a correlation between the availability of these staff roles within a party group and the number of outputs generated by MPs.

In the Dutch case, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) found that the vast majority of the support that MPs receive from ghostwriters and marketeers is provided by party group staff. Each party group receives a budget that derives directly from its size in parliament plus a fixed amount, and it is at the party's discretion how many staff to recruit, how many MPs to team them up with, and which specific roles to assign to them. Parties can therefore make strategic choices in allocating more or fewer staff resources to (social) media presence, providing policy advice, and supporting speechwriting, question writing, or other parliamentary activities. Ghostwriters tend to work as specialists on a specific subject (e.g., education or housing) and they are often responsible for drafting both speeches, motions, and written questions; although small differences may exist between PPGs and individual staffers (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). The leeway enjoyed by the staffer in approaching this task may vary: the MP may significantly edit the drafts produced or simply submit the draft unchanged. In any event, delegating the task of drafting texts to a ghostwriter should allow MPs to work more efficiently.

The level of activity reflects the opportunities MPs have for such activities (which may be more or less constrained), their willingness to engage in these, and the staff resources available. Consider the difference between parliamentary speeches, amendments, and written questions. An MP can only speak in parliament when a debate is scheduled, which oftentimes requires the consent of a majority of parliament (Döring, 1995; Otjes & Louwerse, 2021). Moreover, how much MPs can say will often be determined by the speaker, who decides speaking times (Otjes & Louwerse, 2021). Motions can only be proposed when a debate has been held on a specific subject, meaning that MPs are also constrained in this respect by parliamentary majorities. An MP can only submit an amendment when the government or another MP has proposed a bill. Finally, the number of written questions an MP can submit is typically unconstrained by rules and regulations—how many questions an MP can submit is only dependent on their own willingness and resources. In this contribution, our focus is on identifying to what extent levels of activity can be explained by the availability of staff resources. Therefore, we do not examine the number of words spoken but focus on activities like submitting questions where MPs have some freedom in deciding their own level of

engagement: from most to least free, these are submitting written questions, submitting motions, and submitting amendments.

The existing evidence from the US shows mixed patterns: Madonna and Ostrander (2014) show that the more staff a US congressperson or senator has, the more bills and amendments they introduce. Ommundsen (2023) shows that for US Senate Committees, the number of experienced staffers increases activity, while Crosson et al. (2020) show the same for the staffs of individual representatives.

With this background, we formulate the following hypotheses:

1. *Question Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of questions, the more questions MPs of that PPG will submit.
2. *Motion Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of motions, the more motions MPs of that PPG will submit.
3. *Amendment Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for the ghostwriting of amendments, the more amendments MPs of that PPG will submit.

The role of a marketeer refers to staff whose responsibility it is to communicate about the activities of MPs to the wider public, either through traditional media or through social media. In a nutshell, they should "sell the member like a product" (Loomis, 1979, p. 53). To what extent we can see the effect of the activity of staffers depends on the interplay between gatekeepers, on the one hand, and MPs and their staff, on the other. Marketeers focused on traditional media (often known as press officers) seek to "sell" journalists specific stories and dissuade them from writing others (Fox & Hammond, 1975). The success of their efforts is, however, difficult to measure: in the end, the decision whether or not to publish a story lies with editors and is not in the hands of the ones selling the story. Moreover, the success of this work is reflected in what is written in newspapers and said on TV and radio about an MP, not necessarily how much. A press officer may, in fact, be most successful if they quash a specific story. This is markedly different in social media, where the "politician-as-enterprise" is both subject and broadcaster in one. Marketeers focused on social media (often known as social media managers) directly post the stories, tweets, memes, and videos online. Their activity is directly visible without any gatekeeping by journalists (Jacobs & Spierings, 2016). We can see their productivity reflected directly in the social media activity of their MP.

There is some reason to believe that staff plays this intermediary role. For one, earlier research by Squire (1993) indicated that the perceived responsiveness of US state legislatures by citizens reflected the level of professionalization of that legislature's staff. Secondly, Jacobs and Spierings (2019) found that relatively few MPs of Dutch populist parties have Twitter (now X) accounts, which suggests an effect of party structure on social media activity. In all, it seems reasonable to expect a higher production of social media content when dedicated staff manage the production thereof:

4. *Social Media Hypothesis:* The more staff a PPG has that is responsible for contact with citizens via online media, the more social media messages MPs of that PPG will send out.

3. Data and Methods

Our study quantitatively examines the activity of Dutch MPs in the first half of 2023 as a function of staff size. We will discuss our reasons for studying this case, our data sources, and our methods in the following paragraphs.

3.1. Case Selection

We focus on the lower house of the Dutch parliament. Our primary reason for studying this case is data availability. To our knowledge, Brandsma and Otjes (2024) offer a unique, comprehensive survey of the PPG staff. Moreover, due to the high fragmentation of the Dutch lower house and the significant variation of how Dutch political party groups have organized their staff, this case includes sufficient variation for detecting staff effects. At the time of data collection, the 150-member lower house was very fragmented. It included no less than 17 PPGs, with the largest groups, VVD and D66, having respectively 34 and 24 seats, and only 4 groups winning over 10 seats. Roughly 500 staff members worked for the political groups in parliament. Finally, the different levels of activity of MPs in the Netherlands offer somewhat of a conundrum: Dutch MPs have few individual incentives to be active in parliament. Where in many systems, individual vote-seeking motivation helps to explain behaviour (Mayhew, 2004), the Dutch parliament, because of its semi-open list system with a single national district, lacks meaningful individual electoral incentives for MPs to act in parliament (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016)—nearly all MPs are elected on the coattails of the party leader. Even for social media activity, Spierings and Jacobs (2014) show that the number of preference votes MPs receive is only weakly related to their social media activity.

3.2. Dependent Variables

We look at the relationship between MP staffing and MP activity in the Dutch parliament in the first seven months of 2023. In this period, 162 people served as MPs, as some people left parliament and were succeeded by others. The limited *N* means that we must be cautious in our conclusions.

We look at four different dependent variables: the number of motions, the number of amendments, the number of questions, and the number of tweets per MP. The first three are derived from Louwerse et al. (2018; update provided by the lead author in 2025 through personal communication). This data offers the number of motions, amendments, and questions per MP on a day-to-day basis. In this article, we look at the number of motions, amendments, and questions for which the MP was the first sponsor. In the context of the Dutch parliament, the first sponsor usually is the MP who took the initiative for a particular proposal, while other MPs co-sign it to express support for the proposal—either from different parties (in which case it is a way to build a majority or to signal cross-party salience), or from the same party (in which case it signals that the issue does not fit neatly into the portfolio of a single spokesperson). Note that there is no procedural difference between questions, motions, and amendments with different numbers of co-sponsors. As not all MPs were in parliament for the entire term, we divide the number of motions, amendments, and questions by the number of days the MP was in parliament, and multiply it by the total number of days in the seven months.

We focus on Twitter (now X) because in the first half of 2023, this (still) was the dominant social media platform used by individual Dutch politicians to communicate with journalists and other MPs; though Facebook and Instagram were also used, but mainly by parties to reach out to voters directly. The shift to BlueSky by progressive politicians occurred after our research period (in the fall of 2024). The number of tweets was collected by the Documentation Centre for Political Parties (DNPP), which kept a database of Twitter activity for all (Dutch) political accounts ("handles"), both MPs and parties. DNPP offered us the number of tweets per MP per month for the first seven months of 2023. This data is available for 150 of the 162 people who were MPs in this period. As not all MPs were in parliament for the entire term, we divide the number of tweets by the number of full months the MP was in parliament, and multiply this by the total number of months in the seven-month period.

3.3. Independent Variables

Our key independent variable is the number of relevant staffers who work for the party group. We derive this from Brandsma and Otjes (2024), who interviewed the personnel from PPGs to count the number of staff and map out their activities. They collected this information for 14 out of the 17 PPGs that were active in the first half of 2023 (with radical right-wing populist parties PVV, FvD, and JA21 refusing to participate in the study). Therefore, we have staffing data for 131 out of 162 MPs. For each, we look at the total number of staffers in each PPG in a certain ghostwriting role, divided by the number of MPs in that PPG as an indicator of ghostwriting staff resources per MP. For questions, motions, and amendments, we look at those who ghostwrite these documents. For questions and motions, these are mostly the same staffers; parties report on average 25.5 staff members who ghostwrite both motions and questions. This amounts to a share of 55% of all staff within a PPG, or 1.6 ghostwriters per MP. For amendments, however, the number of staffers specifically focused on ghostwriting these is quite low. The average party reports only one staffer focused on this task. This is, on average, one in four MPs or one in 20 staffers. This can be explained by the fact that most PPGs rely on the legislative counsels, who are part of the institutional staff (the so-called *Bureau Wetgeving*), to actually write the text of the amendment, with the (limited) staff who ghostwrite motions liaising with the legislative counsels in the institutional staff about the text (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024). In the text, we focus on the number of staff who *either* write amendments or motions. This is 25.9 per party, which is 1.6 per MP and 55% of staff. Furthermore, in the Supplementary File, we look at a number of alternative operationalizations: firstly, we look at the actual number of staffers in each role; secondly, we look at the share of the total staff of each PPG in a specific role.

For tweets, we look at the number of marketeers per MP who are supposed to communicate to citizens directly, e.g., through social media. About one in eight PPG staffers does so, with the average PPG employing five such social media marketeers. The average per MP is 0.46, meaning that a party has one for roughly every two MPs. We calculated our variable for every PPG to account for between-PPG variation.

3.4. Control Variables

We control for a number of factors. At the MP level, we control for whether the MP is a PPG leader or the speaker. We expect that these MPs are less active in using these tools. As there were two PPG leadership changes during the period of our investigation, we control for the share of the period that an MP was a PPG leader. We control for year of birth (in years) and length of service in days (at the end of the seven-month

period) with the expectation that older and more experienced MPs are less active than younger and less experienced ones (Bailer & Ohmura, 2018). We derive this data from the Dutch Parliamentary Documentation Centre, via www.parlement.com. We control for relative list position with the expectation that MPs with a less secure, lower relative list position will be more active (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). We also control for the MP's gender without a specific expectation.

At the party level, we add a number of controls. We control for the number of seats a party has, with the expectation that MPs in larger groups are less active (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). We also control for whether a party is in government with the expectation that MPs in governing parties will be less active, particularly in their use of motions, amendments, and questions (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). Next, we control for the left–right distance to the weighted government mean. We derive the party positions from the Populism and Political Parties expert survey (Zaslove et al., 2024). We expect that parties further away from the government are more likely to use formal parliamentary tools (Louwerse & Otjes, 2016). Finally, we also look at the level of populism (also derived from Zaslove et al., 2024). We expect that populist parties are more likely to ask questions but are less likely to introduce amendments (Louwerse & Otjes, 2019).

3.5. Methods of Analysis and Robustness Tests

In Table 1, we present negative binomial regressions with standard errors clustered at the party level, and Figure 1 visualises the central results. Given that our dependent variable has a clear left skew, a count model is justified. We use negative binomial regression instead of Poisson regression, due to the overdispersion of our dependent variable (detailed in Table A1 of the Supplementary File). Given that our variable of interest is at the party-level, clustering standard errors at the party-level (where our variable of interest varies) is justified.

In the Supplementary File, we look at a number of alternative models. First, we look at different operationalizations of the main independent variable: firstly, we look at the absolute number of staffers with the relevant role (model A1 for motions, A8 for amendments, A16 for questions, and A23 for tweets); secondly, we look at the share of staffers with that role (models A5, A13, A20, and A27). For amendments, we also look at the number of staffers per MP who actually write amendments (A10). We also include models without control variables (A2, A9, A17, and A24). Given the possibility that outliers might drive the results, we look at models without the 10% highest number of staffers on a task (A3, A11, A18, and A25). These outliers are mostly smaller PPGs: as PPG staff budgets are composed of a fixed amount for each PPG plus a variable amount by size in parliament, this results in more staffers per MP for smaller groups. Differences between these results and the one in the main text would indicate that these outliers drive the results. Given the possible role that PPG size can play, we replace our control of the number of seats with logged party seats (A4, A12, A19, and A26). Next, we look at different ways to operationalize the dependent variable: one can look at the absolute number of tweets, motions, questions, and amendments, and include a variable that measures the number of days the MP was in parliament (A6, A14, A21, and A28). Finally, as we observed in Section 3.2, MPs can co-sign motions, amendments, and questions. In Model A7, A15, and A22, we look at the total number of motions, amendments, and questions with the MP's name that were submitted (independent of whether they were the first sponsor or not).

Table 1. Negative binomial regressions with standard errors clustered at the party-level.

Model Dependent variable	Model 1 Questions	Model 2 Motions	Model 3 Amendments	Model 4 Tweets
PPG question ghostwriters per MP	0.11** (0.04)			
PPG motion ghostwriters per MP		0.23*** (0.07)		
PPG motion and amendment ghostwriters per MP			0.35*** (0.09)	
PPG social media marketeers per MP				−0.52*** (0.15)
PPG seats in parliament	−0.02*** (0.00)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.05*** (0.01)	−0.02*** (0.01)
PPG left–right distance to the government	−0.10* (0.05)	−0.15*** (0.06)	0.08 (0.05)	0.18** (0.07)
PPG = in coalition	−0.46*** (0.15)	−0.64*** (0.20)	−0.47** (0.23)	−0.07 (0.28)
Level of populism	0.09*** (0.03)	−0.02 (0.04)	−0.15** (0.06)	0.08 (0.07)
MP = PPG leader	−1.26*** (0.25)	−1.20*** (0.26)	−1.13*** (0.35)	−0.24 (0.24)
MP = Speaker	−21.56*** (0.96)	−18.09*** (1.13)	−16.85*** (0.99)	−1.05*** (0.18)
MP = Male	−0.13 (0.09)	0.03 (0.06)	0.09 (0.19)	0.08 (0.11)
MP year of birth	0.00 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)
MP experience	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
MP relative list position	0.07 (0.10)	−0.18 (0.14)	−0.36 (0.31)	−0.40*** (0.11)
Constant	2.98 (15.52)	10.61 (9.44)	14.42 (14.74)	31.04* (18.56)
Number of cases	131	131	131	123
Aikake's Information Criterion	891	1057	584	1549

Notes: * $p < 0.1$ ** $p < 0.05$ *** $p < 0.01$.

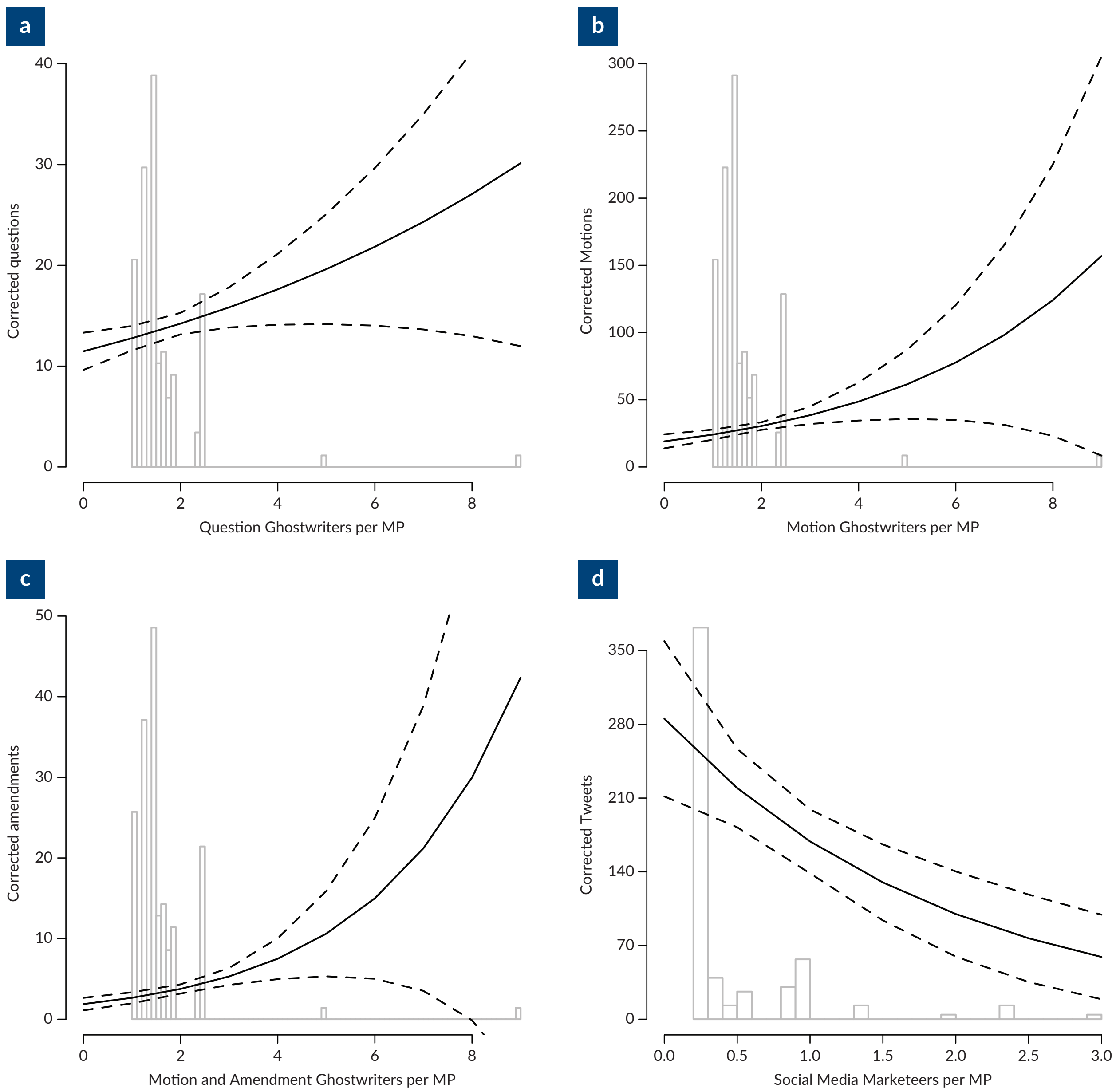

Figure 1. (a) Model 1: Ghostwriters and Questions; (b) Model 2: Ghostwriters and Motions; (c) Model 3: Ghostwriters and Amendments; (d) Model 4: Social media marketeers and Tweets. Notes: (a) Expected number of motions with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 1; (b) expected number of amendments with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 2; (c) expected number of questions with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 3; (d) expected number of tweets with 95% confidence interval; based on Model 4.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the central results and Figure 1 their visualization. Our first hypothesis was the *Question hypothesis*, which suggested that the more staff an MP has available for drafting questions, the more questions the MP will submit. Model 1 in Table 1 and Figure 1 shows statistically significant results. Every additional staffer per MP increases the number of questions by 11%. Table A4 in the Supplementary File offers a number of alternative specifications and shows a mixed picture: staff size has an effect on the number of questions in four out of seven models. In three cases, we do not find a significant pattern: when

we look at the absolute number of ghostwriters (which shows that it is useful to look at the number of staffers per MP), when we omit control variables (the lack of significant results is likely due to omitted variable bias), and when we exclude the parties with the 10% highest relative staff numbers in this role (those are PPGs with 2.5 or more staffers performing this role). These results indicate that the smaller PPGs that have a lot of staff relative to the number of MPs drive the significant result.

The *Motion hypothesis* proposes that the more staff a PPG employs who are responsible for ghostwriting motions, the more motions MPs of that PPG will submit. Model 2 in Table 1 and Figure 1 shows a strong and significant effect. Every additional staffer per MP increases MP activity by 23%. As we show in Table A2 in the Supplementary File, this pattern persists under different specifications shown with one exception: it is not visible when we exclude the parties with the 10% highest relative staff numbers in this role (these are PPGs with more than 2.5 staffers in this role). This indicates that the significant result is driven by the smaller PPGs that have high staff-to-MP ratios.

Our third hypothesis was the *Amendment hypothesis*. It proposed that the number of staffers per MP working on amendments predicted the number of amendments MPs would submit. Model 3 of Table 1 and Figure 1 shows a significant pattern: Every additional staffer per MP increases the number of amendments by 35%. In Table A3 in the Supplementary File, we look at different specifications. We find a significant pattern under every specification, with one exception: when we look at the number of staffers that PPGs indicate actually work on amendments. This indicates that looking at the staff writing amendments *or* liaising with the Bureau Legislation is likely a better predictor, given that in practice the drafting of amendments is largely outsourced to parliament's institutional staff.

Model 4 of Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate a strong, significant negative relationship between the number of social media marketeers and the number of tweets. Every additional staffer reduces the number of tweets by 52%. This pattern is quite persistent in the Supplementary File (Table A5); we only do not see it when we do not include control variables, indicating that individual characteristics and factors like left–right distance to the government are more important in understanding MP tweeting behaviour.

5. Discussion

What do these results mean for our expectations? Given the small *N*, we have to be cautious in our interpretation. But, independently of how we operationalize our dependent variable, we find significant results in the expected direction for three of our four dependent variables (i.e., that ghostwriters affect the number of questions, amendments, and motions).

Yet, we find that when excluding outliers, we only find a significant result in the expected direction for one indicator, namely, that the number of amendments reflects the number of ghostwriters. This indicates that the results that we found for motions and questions are driven by relatively small PPGs. That does not mean that we should entirely dismiss our expectation on these grounds, but we should rather take into account the nature of staff organization for these small PPGs, where MPs, in relative terms, have quite a lot of staff ghostwriting motions. The differences between the other PPGs (with between 1 and 2 motion ghostwriters per MP) do not affect MP activity. This suggests that staff make more of a difference for small parties than for larger ones, or that the larger parties' staff organization does not vary enough between parties to observe

meaningful differences. Note that we control for group size, so the results do not necessarily reflect size effects but rather how PPG size and total PPG staff interact.

With these caveats, we find substantial differences in the effect size between amendments (strongest effect), motions (medium-sized effect), and questions (weakest effect and also the least consistent results when looking at alternative specifications). While our expectations were based on the idea that the level of freedom that MPs experience was crucial to identify an effect of staff, another factor appears to be more important: labour intensity. Questions are the least labour-intensive form of parliamentary activity, so staff size matters least here. Motions are in between amendments and questions, both in terms of labour intensity and effect size. Amendments are most labour-intensive to write, and it is therefore not unreasonable that we find the strongest effect here. We should, however, note that this effect is constrained by the types of staff that would liaise with the legislative counsels working for parliament as a whole, rather than the number of staff within PPGs who would actually draft legislative amendments themselves. All in all, we need to be cautious in our conclusions for each of these variables: either we find a positive result that is mainly driven by small PPGs with a relatively high number of staffers (motions and questions) or a positive result that is driven by staff that liaises rather than ghostwrites (amendments).

The negative results between Twitter (now X) activity and staff working on direct marketing to citizens pose a conundrum: why would more staffers lead to less activity? There may be good reasons for this pattern. Firstly, these staffers would not just work on the Twitter (now X) activity of MPs but actually work on the party accounts. On the one hand, they thus may not supply individual MPs with a lot of support, but also, MPs may see less of a need to use social media individually when their party's accounts are strong on this already. The evidence for this is not strong: at the party level, the correlation between the absolute number of direct social media marketeers on staff per party and the number of tweets from the party account is weak (Pearson's R is 0.36, not significant for 13 cases). Secondly, it is the only activity in our analysis that is not purely intra-parliamentary, and the party headquarters may enter the equation. The party headquarters may take more control over the party's entire communication channels during campaign periods: our research period coincided with the provincial election campaign (election on March 15, 2023). The correlation between party Twitter (now X) activity and party staff size in the last four months of the research period is even lower, which dismisses the notion that during campaign periods parties take greater control over communication channels (Pearson's R is 0.34, not significant for 13 cases). Finally, the number of tweets may not necessarily be the best indicator of political activity on social media. A party may want to put well-tested, high-quality, unified messages on social media, including memes, videos, or infographics. MPs putting whatever comes to mind on Twitter (now X) may actually not be in the strategic interest of the party: these messages may distract from the party's well-crafted, unified message (cf. Proksch & Slapin, 2014). Part of what social media staffers may be occupied with is convincing MPs not to tweet certain material (or actually to remove certain tweets). From this last perspective, it is not strange that MPs from parties with a higher number of social media staff post fewer tweets: these staff mediate the relationship between citizens and MPs in the interest of the party's overall strategy and therefore limit their own individual activity on social media.

Our interpretation should also be cautioned by the fact that we missed six PPGs: we did not study three groups that were formed as splits-offs formed during the term, which received less staff than PPGs of equal size formed after the elections. Including these might have shown more nuanced patterns for PPG and staff size. We also did not study three right-wing populist PPGs that refused cooperation (with 17, five, and three

seats). Given that populist parties rely more on scrutiny tools than policy-making tools, this may also have given different insights.

All in all, our results indicate that staff matter under specific conditions (motions), perhaps in different roles than we proposed (amendments), and as a constraint on rather than promoter of activity (tweets).

6. Conclusion

Much of the literature on political and parliamentary staff starts its analyses from the premise that staff matters. In this article, we put this assumption to the test. Focusing on the activity of MPs in terms of asking questions, proposing amendments, submitting motions, and Twitter (now X) activity, we asked to what degree the availability of PPG staff matters in explaining activity levels of MPs. Earlier studies explained these by individual-level electoral incentives or by party-level variables such as participation in government and ideological position. The resources provided by staff, however, have so far been neglected.

While our results generally support the notion that staff indeed matters, they suggest that their effect is not the same for every tool that an MP has at their disposal. We do see a link between staff availability and the production of questions, motions, and amendments, with the strength of the relationship reflecting the labour intensity of each tool. With tweets, we also see a link, but in the opposite direction from what we expected: more staff means fewer tweets, not more. For some types of activity, and in particular motions and questions, the results seem driven by small parties. Having a smaller staff size, these smaller parties also differentiate tasks to a lesser degree, resulting in a higher share of staff involved in ghostwriting motions and questions. This result suggests that the effect of staff differs between small and large parties.

These first results are suggestive but not conclusive. The underrepresentation of right-wing populist parties in our data may well bias results. Furthermore, they only show a rudimentary picture of staff effects on MP activity: we explored purely quantitatively to what degree staff makes a difference for the *number* of outputs produced by MPs, not to what degree or how staff inputs *inform* MP behaviour. Moreover, even though the Dutch case is a clear case of an electoral system without strong individual electoral incentives, it is also a fragmented political system, which at the time of our research was more fragmented than ever before. Despite the variance this yields and therefore also results that may travel well to other parliamentary contexts, larger and/or less fragmented parliaments may display higher levels of task specialization among staff than we have found in the Dutch case, and perhaps also less attenuated results.

While we originally planned to look at a period of one year, the 2023 elections (which were called for in July 2023) and consequent focus away from parliamentary work to campaign work, necessitated us to cut our research period short. As we only have basically the first half year, this may affect our result, as the focus of parliamentary activity, particularly in terms of proposing motions, is in the fall when the budgets are discussed. This should, however, only affect the overall level of activity as this applies to all parties in parliament equally, and not to the variance in their reliance on staff resources.

We see our findings as a call for an organizational turn in legislative studies. While in parliamentary studies, how MPs are organized has been a key factor to explain outcomes (e.g., Krehbiel, 1992), the allocation and role of staff have been conspicuously absent in this debate. In a nutshell, our result shows that staff organization

matters, but that a more fine-grained understanding is called for on the precise choices party groups make in allocating staff resources, and the leeway given to them. Our study, therefore, opens up fruitful avenues for further comparative research on the organization and effect of political staff.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Leiden University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Anna-Lena Högenauer (University of Luxembourg).

Data Availability

Replication data is available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/K1DYQH

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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