



# Collaboration Between Ministers and Civil Servants in Finland: A Qualitative Analysis From the Ministers' Perspective

Andreas Eklund<sup>1</sup>

Scandinavian Journal of  
Public Administration  
Vol. 29 No. 3 (2025)  
p. 1 - 15

DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.58235/sjpa.30958>

## Abstract

The article explores the collaboration between cabinet ministers and civil servants in the Finnish political system from the minister's perspective. The relationship between politicians and public administration is a classic topic, and an in-depth analysis from the politician's perspective is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of politico-administrative relations. Although there are many theoretical frameworks for politico-administrative relations, there has been less focus on the individual perspective and how politicians perceive their role. The focus is on how ministers view their role in relation to civil servants and how they describe their collaboration with them. The article draws on 29 interviews with persons who have served as cabinet ministers in Finland between 2000 and 2019. The depictions of how the ministers perceive their role and collaborate with civil servants include some variation. From a theoretical perspective, there are both classic views on the role of civil servants and understandings that emphasize a complementary relationship to a greater extent. A focus on the individual perspective reveals clear variation in the experiences of cabinet ministers, and an analysis focusing on their perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of politico-administrative relations.


## Keywords:

public administration;  
representation;  
Nordic countries;  
politicians;  
civil servants

## Practical Relevance

- The study brings more insights and depth to understanding politico-administrative relations both from a Nordic perspective and more specifically within the Finnish context.
- A functioning democracy with a capable public administration needs to be both receptive to democratic input and base its decisions on the best available expertise. The article brings deeper insights into how to understand this balance.
- The article contributes to the discussion about how democracies function by presenting the politicians' perspective on their role in relation to civil servants in a developed democracy.

---

<sup>1</sup>[Andreas Eklund](#) , is a project researcher at Åbo Akademi University. His postdoctoral research focuses on political participation and representation. Other research interests are comparative politics and democratic innovations.

---

Article first published as an article in press: June 30, 2025  
Article published in Vol. 29 No. 3: September 24, 2025

## Introduction

The relationship between politicians and public administration is a classic topic in political science and is central to understanding how a modern democracy functions and implements decisions (Peters 1987). From a classic perspective, political decisions should be made by elected politicians and implemented by the public administration, but subsequent research has emphasized the active role of civil servants and their important role in shaping policy (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Peters 1987; Torfing and Triantafyllou 2013). More recent research has shown that civil servants and politicians can act in a complementary way (Svara 2001) and that mutual respect, reciprocity, and discretion are the fundamental rules that guide the relationship between politicians and administration (van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). Research from the perspective of local politics (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew 2022) also suggests that the roles between politicians and civil servants are more dynamic than portrayed in classic works. The relationship between ministers and civil servants is impacted by many different factors. Functional aspects such as different forms of cabinet decision-making but also cultural aspects should be taken into consideration when analyzing the relationship between ministers and civil servants (Laver and Shepsle 1994; Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). In addition, there are also differences between ministers on the individual level and how they perceive the role of a minister (Blondel 1993; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000; Alexiadou 2015) which can also influence the relationship between politicians and civil servants.

There is a vast amount of literature on politico-administrative relations and there are several frameworks and theoretical perspectives on how politicians and civil servants collaborate. Much of the research on politico-administrative relations has either a comparative approach or are based on broad surveys with politicians and civil servants. A less prevalent perspective is on firsthand depictions of high-ranking politicians and on their experiences from serving as ministers. An analysis that highlights the individual perspective gives further insights into the possible differences in not only how politicians perceive the role of a minister, but also how they collaborate with the civil servants. The article's contribution is to highlight the individual role and the politician's perspective in relation to the research on politico-administrative relations. The article focuses on Finnish cabinet ministers and their experiences. Previous research from the Finnish context has shown that ministers in Finland are often satisfied with the civil servants (Nousiainen 1992) and that they can be detail-oriented and have to a limited degree adopted strategic-steering principles (Tiili 2007). Studies by Tiihonen (2006) and Murto (2014) have, in turn, examined leadership within ministries and the collaboration between ministers and civil servants from a broader, more empirical perspective. Research focusing on civil servants has shown differences in how public officials across the Nordic countries understand their roles. In Finland, civil servants consider aspects relating to performance and to the traditional role of implementing and providing expertise, as more important than collaborative and agenda setting functions (Virtanen 2016). Several studies emphasize that civil servants have much influence because administrative processes are complex and time-consuming (Murto 2014; Koskimaa, Rapeli and Hiedanpää 2021).

The article has two research questions: 1) How do ministers describe their role in relation to civil servants and 2) how do ministers expect civil servants to act, and what are their experiences of working with them? The aim of these research questions is to understand the relationship between ministers and civil servants and to explore possible variations in their descriptions. The article uses a unique dataset of interviews with individuals who have served as ministers in Finland between 2000 and 2019. The article utilizes directed content analysis and provides a deeper understanding of politico-administrative relations. It also places the findings from the Finnish context into the more general research about politico-administrative relations, with an emphasis on Nordic political systems. There is some variation in both how the ministers describe their role as ministers and their collaboration with civil servants. The depictions include both classic understandings of how civil servants should act and depictions that emphasize collaboration and a complementary relationship to a greater extent.

## The Relationship Between Politicians and Public Administration

The chapter begins with an overview of general perspectives regarding politico-administrative relations, followed by a review of the literature on minister-civil servant relations. It also includes a description of the Finnish political system within the Nordic context.

### General perspectives on government and cabinet decision-making

There are several theoretical perspectives for understanding the relationship between politicians and public administration. Classical public administration, new public management and new public governance differ in how they assign roles to politicians and civil servants (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2013). In classical public administration, civil servants are expected to follow the directives of the politicians and make their decisions impartially and based on their best available knowledge. New public management places greater emphasis on strategic steering and competition, whereas new public governance emphasizes collaboration (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2013). In addition to these general characteristics, there are several perspectives from which politico-administrative systems can be analyzed. The comparative literature has pointed out aspects that relate to structural, cultural and functional perspectives (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). Of these, the functional perspective focuses on the executive government, for example, on how the cabinet makes decisions or on collaboration between ministers and civil servants. Cultural perspectives on public administration study different forms of values and traditions, and this perspective can also be applied to policy processes and on who is participating in formulating policies (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017, 47-48). There are also different forms of cabinet decision-making that affect political-administrative relations and the respective roles of ministers and civil servants. Laver and Shepsle (1994) list six forms of cabinet decision making: 1) bureaucratic government, 2) legislative government, 3) prime-ministerial government, 4) party government, 5) cabinet government and 6) ministerial government. Cabinet government refers to a decision-making model in which the government makes collective decisions whereas ministerial government means that individual ministers wield considerable power and thus the appointment and allocation of ministerial portfolios can themselves determine the policy (Laver and Shepsle 1994, 5-8).

### The relationship between politicians and civil servants

In a classic work on politician-civil servant relations, Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981, 4-17) present four “images” of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. The first image depicts a dichotomy between politics and administration, where politicians are decision-makers and civil servants implement decisions. The second image suggests that politicians and civil servants both play a role in crafting policy, in that politicians represent ideas and interests, while civil servants contribute knowledge. The third image indicates that both politicians and civil servants shape policy and take politics into consideration, but politicians express general interests, whereas civil servants are narrower in their focus. The fourth image is in turn a hybrid where the roles between politicians and administration are mixed. The research by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981, 20-21) relates to policymaking and does not focus on the day-to-day management or implementation of decisions. The authors also note that the four images can function differently depending on the level at which the civil servant works. Images one and two are thus likely to exist on lower administrative levels, while images three and four are more relevant to relationships between politicians and civil servants higher in the hierarchy (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981, 20-21). A different conceptualization of the relationship between politicians and civil servants is presented by Peters (1987) who identifies five ideal types. The formal model is the classic arrangement where politicians decide, and civil servants only implement decisions. The second and third ideal types, village life and the functional model are quite similar and imply that politicians and civil servants pursue similar goals and are therefore quite close to each other. The adversarial model depicts a more hostile relationship and indicates a struggle for power taking place between politicians and civil servants. The fifth ideal type is called the administrative state model, which indicates that the bureaucracy has significant influence and that political matters are so complex that civil servants are more knowledgeable than politicians. (Peters 1987, 258-265)

Another perspective has been presented by Svava (2001), who questions the idea of a dichotomy between politicians and administration and highlights that politicians, who have control, and administrators who have independence can form a complementary relationship. The two dimensions, control and independence are complementary, indicating that too much political control without independence of administrators leads to political dominance, while a low degree of political control means bureaucratic autonomy. The complementary relationship between politicians and administrators requires that politicians show respect for the commitment and competence of civil servants, while civil servants in turn are accountable and responsive (Svava 2001, 179). A slightly similar perspective presented by van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) mentions three “rules of the game” in which the politician–civil servant relations function: mutual respect, discretionary space, and reciprocal loyalty. This means that politicians show respect and loyalty towards the institutions that they represent while public servants are loyal towards the office of minister and show respect for ongoing politics. It also implies that politicians and public servants respect their different roles in serving the public good (van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). A study by 't Hart and Wille (2006) has, in turn, analyzed the relationship between ministers and civil servants in the Netherlands and what they expect from each other. Ministers expect that civil servants are effective, loyal and provide good advice. They also expect civil servants to demonstrate some form of political understanding and have “political antennas” ('t Hart and Wille 2006, 129-133).

A study by Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew (2022) re-evaluates the images presented by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) with a quantitative analysis on the relationships between local politicians and top civil servants in different countries. Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew (2022) state that evidence from several countries suggests that most politician–civil servant relations fall somewhere between images II and III presented by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981). Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew (2022) identify six different types of understandings of how local politicians perceive themselves in relation to top civil servants: outsiders, skeptics, fatalists, unconcerned, insiders and mainstreamers. Of these different patterns, the insiders and mainstreamers are highly similar to images II and III as described by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981). In addition, Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew (2022) identified other behavioral patterns, which they refer to as outsiders, skeptics, fatalists and unconcerned. Outsiders and fatalists believe that the influence of civil servants is strong, while the unconcerned perceive them as having little influence. The skeptics, in turn, have low trust in civil servants and doubt their impartiality (Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew 2022).

There are also different roles and types of ministers. A study by Marsh, Richards and Smith (2000) identifies four different ministerial roles relating to policy, politics, management, and public relations. In the policy role, a minister has a role in initiating and setting the agenda, as well as legitimizing policies. The political role includes negotiating with other political actors and representing their department. The management role relates in turn how the minister functions as a manager and leader of their department. The communication role implies that a minister should communicate and explain politics for a broader audience and interest groups (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000). The different roles of a minister have been further developed by 't Hart and Wille (2006) who mention that civil servants expect ministers to be effective in expressing and developing policies. In addition, civil servants expressed reservations about ministers who were not receptive to their input or who wanted to be too involved in directing policy work in too much detail. Civil servants also expected the minister to be clear in formulating priorities and capable of leading the department ('t Hart and Wille 2006, 127-129).

In addition to the different roles that ministers have, there is also research on different minister types. A typology by Blondel (1993) classifies four minister types: activists, generalists, departmentalists and spectators. An *activist* is both active within their department and in the government generally, while a *spectator* is the opposite. A *generalist* participates actively in the work of the government but is not necessarily deeply involved in their own department, while a *departmentalist* limits themselves to the work of their own department (Blondel 1993). More recent research has distinguished between ideologues, loyalists and partisans (Alexiadou 2015). A *loyalist* is trusted by the party leadership and serves more as a

manager and without a strong personal agenda. A *partisan*, in turn, has a stronger profile, political ambition, and a leadership role in their own party. Finally, *ideologues* have strong ambitions on the policy level and are primarily focused on advancing those goals (Alexiadou 2015).

### **The role of minister and civil servant in Finland**

The Finnish public administration is part of the Nordic model which is characterized by large public sectors, extensive welfare states, low levels of corruption and a public administration with a high level of meritocracy and professionalism (Greve, Læg Reid and Rykkja 2016). Despite these general similarities, there are also differences in the countries' administrative cultures. A traditional approach is to separate between an East Nordic (Finland, Sweden) and West Nordic (Denmark, Iceland, Norway) administrative culture (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016). This classification implies that administrative traditions in Finland and especially Sweden are characterized by a high level of collective decision-making and restrictions on the powers of a minister. This is different from Denmark, Iceland and Norway where there is more ministerial governance and individual ministers have more possibilities to steer and direct the work of the government authorities (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016, 59). The traditional divide into East and West Nordic models has been questioned, especially concerning the role of Finland and recent research highlights Sweden as an exceptional case with a low level of ministerial governance, smaller ministries and more autonomous and powerful state agencies (Ahlbäck Öberg and Wockelberg 2016; Greve and Ejersbo 2016).

Finland used to be regarded as a semi-presidential republic, which implied that there was simultaneously in office an elected president and a government that had to secure confidence in parliament (Duverger 1980). A study focusing on the relations between ministers and civil servants during this era stated that ministers expect civil servants to be loyal, skilled and get things done, while civil servants expect ministers to be effective in representing the ministry in relation to the government and the Ministry of Finance (Nousiainen 1992, 107). Nousiainen interviewed 41 ministers in his study and a majority said that they had very good relations with civil servants. Only six interviewees stated that they had correct but rather distant relations with civil servants, while one mentioned that the civil servants were biased. The study concluded that ministers in Finland were generally satisfied with the loyalty, skills and cooperation of the civil servants (Nousiainen 1992, 108).

The political system in Finland began to change in the late 1980s and this process culminated in the new constitution in 2000 which also meant that the role of Parliament and the role of Prime Minister was strengthened (Paloheimo 2003). Due to these changes the Finnish political system can nowadays be characterized as a parliamentary, rather than a semi-presidential republic (Isaksson 2017; Niemi, Raunio and Ruostetsaari 2017). The relationship between politicians and administration has previously been studied from the perspective of new public management (NPM) and strategic steering. An important aspect of strategic steering in the Finnish context is the government program, which is a document where the main goals of the government are listed (Tiili 2007). From the perspective of strategic steering, ministers should focus on more general and strategic goals and function as visionaries and communicators, but research has suggested that ministers in Finland have had difficulties to adopt to this model and were often more focused on details (Tiili 2007).

Research from a comparative Nordic perspective suggests that Finnish civil servants either think that aspects related to performance, such as efficient use of resources and reaching results, or traditional aspects, such as implementation and providing expertise, are more important than tasks related to facilitating collaboration between public organizations or agenda setting (Virtanen 2016, 85-87). The research by Murto (2014) emphasizes the considerable influence of civil servants, which partly is dependent on that the work processes often are intricate and require a lot of time. Other studies have in turn focused on the key role of the public administration in policymaking (Koskimaa, Rapeli and Hiedanpää 2021). In addition to career civil servants, there are also political advisers and State Secretaries to the minister who are politically appointed, but according to the law civil servants (Ruostetsaari 2023, 266). These positions as political aides and advisors can be compared to what in research has been described

as political employees (Svallfors 2017) or a third element (Shaw and Eichbaum 2015). There has been much discussion about the extent to which political advisers blur the roles between politicians and civil servants. It is possible that tensions between political aides and civil servants to some extent depend on different leadership cultures in the ministries, but there are also indications that the influence of political aides has increased (Ruostetsaari 2023, 259-261). Although this discussion is highly interesting for understanding politician–civil servant relations, this article will not focus on advisors but will instead focus only on career civil servants.

### Theoretical conclusions

There are several aspects that can impact the relationship between a minister and civil servants. One aspect relates to the administrative system and its culture, such as whether the cabinet decision-making is collective and to what extent the system allows for ministerial governance (Laver and Shepsle 1994; Paloheimo 2003; Greve and Ejersbo 2016). A minister has also several different roles, and there might be differences in how they prioritize these (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000). Another aspect that can impact how ministers act is their individual characteristics, such as experience and knowledge or whether they view themselves as experts or generalists (Blondel 1993; Alexiadou 2015). The notion of a “dichotomy” between politicians and civil servants has been challenged and modern research emphasizes that politicians and civil servants support each other by having different roles. Research from several countries suggests that the relationship between ministers and civil servants can be related to what Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) refer to as image II and III i.e. that a minister should present ideas or have a broader perspective, while civil servants contribute expertise and have a more narrow focus (see Baekgaard, Blom-Hansen and Serritzlew 2022). Civil servants have a role in providing expertise and being effective, while ministers should be clear about what they want and effective in expressing priorities (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000; ’t Hart and Wille 2006). A key aspect of what Svava (2001) refer to as a complementary relationship between politicians and administrators is that both respect their different roles and that civil servants are responsive. Another aspect that has been raised with regards to the expectations of a minister for civil servants is in addition to be effective, loyal and providing advice, civil servants should have an understanding of political realities (’t Hart and Wille 2006). These different perspectives are summarized in Table 1, which lists the key elements of the theoretical framework. The focus of the analysis is to understand how ministers describe their own role as ministers, as well as what roles they expect civil servants to have and their experiences of this cooperation.

*Table 1. Key aspects of the minister–civil servant relationship*

Overarching aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Powers of a minister</li> <li>- Culture of governance</li> <li>- Forms of cabinet decision making</li> </ul>
Individual aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minister with general focus</li> <li>- Minister with limited focus</li> <li>- Minister’s knowledge and background</li> </ul>
Key roles of a minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Leading the ministry</li> <li>- Expressing and formulating policy</li> <li>- Communicative and representative roles</li> </ul>
Minister’s expectations for civil servants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide expertise and offer good advice</li> <li>- Show commitment and responsiveness</li> <li>- Respect the office and role of minister and show understanding for the political realities</li> <li>- Use resources effectively and achieve results</li> </ul>

## Data and Method

The empirical material consists of interviews with former Finnish Members of Parliament. The interviews used in this article are part of the Finnish Library of Parliament's Oral History Archive (Library of Parliament 2024). The interviews are administered by the Library of Parliament, and the interviews have been collected since 1988 and as of 2022 there had been made 450 interviews (Krekola 2022). The interviews are semi-structured and cover a wide range of issues, typically focusing on the personal backgrounds of the former MPs and especially on their work in parliament and in government if they served as ministers (Library of Parliament 2024). The interviews have been used to a limited extent and mainly in research on history and political history (Krekola 2022). The substantial number of interviews also makes it possible to use them in research with a more generalized focus. Previous research that has utilized the data for the aforementioned purposes include Hyvärinen, Latvala-Harvilahti and Andrushchenko (2021) where the focus is on how former MPs describe the concept of power.

The criterion for selection is that the interviewees must have served as ministers at some point between the years 2000 and 2019. Of all available interviews, 31 meet this criterion. Two interviews were left outside the article because they did not contain any substantial discussion about minister–civil servant relations that could have been utilized in the article. There are thus 29 interviews with former ministers serving between 2000 and 2019 that are analyzed in the article. The interviewees represent all parties that have been in the government during this time except for the Christian Democrats. In total, 98 individuals have served as cabinet ministers in Finland between 2000 and 2019 (Finnish Government 2024). The material for this article thus covers almost 30 percent of all ministers who have served as government ministers in Finland during this period. Since the interviews were conducted with former members of parliament, the article has a stronger representation of ministers who served in earlier governments. There are nevertheless interviewees from every government that has served in Finland from 2000 to 2019. Interviewees with the most recent experience as ministers served in the Sipilä government, which was in office from 2015 to 2019.

The interviews used in this article are comparable to life stories (see Atkinson 1998) and it should be considered in the interpretation that the interviews are subjective and represent the interviewees' own perspectives. A benefit of the interviews is that they are comprehensive, and the interviewees have the opportunity to reflect openly about their experiences. This is valuable and may provide opportunities to explore new perspectives that do not necessarily appear in other forms of interview data, where the focus can be narrower. The approach to analyzing the material is based on directed content analysis, where a strong emphasis is placed on the theoretical framework and prior research (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The purpose of using this methodological approach is both to analyze how qualitative data corresponds to already known theoretical approaches and to possibly extend a theoretical perspective (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281–1282). This approach suits this article well because the individual interviews and a focus on the experiences of individual ministers can provide a more nuanced understanding of the theoretical perspectives on politico–administrative relations, which tend to be more abstract.

The first round of coding focused on descriptions of the internal procedures within the public administration. The second round of coding was in turn narrowed down to passages where the interviewee focused on their experiences as a minister and their collaboration with the civil servants. Many interviews included direct questions about collaboration with civil servants. In addition, the second round of coding included passages where the interviewees described concrete situations from when they served as minister. There were also some passages where the interviewee made more general statements about civil servants in the state administration and their work. The second round of coding thus highlighted three general types of depictions: answers to direct questions about how they as ministers worked together with the civil servants, descriptions of concrete situations when the interviewee worked with the civil servants, and more general characterizations of the civil servants in the state administration. The passages were, in the second round of coding, read once more and the main task after the second round of coding was to compare the descriptions and look both for variations in the descriptions and for topics that often occurred. There were some differences both in the topics of the interviews and in how comprehensive the answers the interviewees gave were. The interviews offered

several interesting perspectives regarding the role of a minister, but the focus in the article has been limited to how the minister views their own role and collaboration in relation to civil servants in the state administration. A limitation of the data is that the material is quite general in nature, and it is difficult, from this material, to analyze the form of ministerial steering and collaboration on a more detailed level, or to determine whether there have occurred changes over time. Twenty-five interviews were conducted in Finnish and four in Swedish.

## Analysis

The analysis focuses on how ministers describe their role in relation to the civil servants and what their experiences are from working with them. The analysis is structured in two sections. The first section focuses on how the ministers describe their role in relation to the civil servants and the second section is about how the ministers expect civil servants to act and their experiences of working with them. The identities of the ministers are anonymized, and each minister is referred to as M1, M2, M3, and so forth. The interviewee is mentioned in the text when they raised a specific topic in their interview or when one of their answers is used as an illustration of a topic. Every interviewee is mentioned at least once in the text but there are, however, several overlapping and similar answers. There is no requirement for anonymization in the terms for using the data, but it is applied here to shift focus from the identities of the ministers to the issue.

### The role of a minister in relation to civil servants

#### *The powers and leadership of a minister*

A common phrase that appeared in the interviews is that the minister is always the one who decides. This reflection can be linked to the forms of cabinet decision making and to the powers of a minister in the Finnish context (Paloheimo 2003; Greve and Ejersbo 2016). The notion that the minister is the one who decides and has the last word was something that several interviewees expressed. The understanding of the powers of a minister also included variation. One interviewee, for instance, stated that they thought that some ministers do not fully understand that they are the heads of their ministries (M11). This topic was raised from a different perspective by one interviewee (M16), who mentioned not having previously understood how much power a minister has. Several interviewees linked the question about the influence and role of a minister to experience. The discussions about experience often emphasized the managerial aspects of a minister's role and their ability to lead a large organization (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000). One interviewee mentioned, for example, the importance of a minister being involved and understanding the issues and said that unless a minister is capable enough, the civil servants will run the organization (M27). The same interviewee also had a critical stance towards ministers who pay too much attention to the communicative role of a minister (M27). A similar type of response was expressed by another interviewee, who said that a smart and strong-willed civil servant has opportunities to guide the minister's thinking in a certain direction, and that civil servants become more powerful if the minister is inexperienced (M25). Another interviewee discussed the topic from the opposite perspective, mentioning that they listened carefully to civil servants and commended their expertise (M24). At the same time, this interviewee reflected that, perhaps as a first-time minister, they had been a bit too cautious and could have been more confident (M24).

An interesting finding is that those interviewees who had previous work experience as civil servants often were very aware of the roles of ministers and civil servants and showed clear self-confidence in how they had acted as ministers. One interviewee with this background said that their understanding of the work processes was of great benefit (M2). Another interviewee emphasized the managerial aspects and stated that it is a challenge if a minister has no prior experience leading a large organization (M3). An interviewee with a similar background said, in turn, that it is unfortunate if the minister has no experience of leadership because it means that the role of the staffers and political aides will be too significant (M23). A similar form of confidence was expressed by interviewee (M11) who mentioned that it was easy to adapt to the



work as minister because the roles of a minister and civil servant were clear to them due to their previous work experience as a civil servant.

### *Expertise of civil servants*

A topic that often arose in the interviews when discussing the influence and role of a minister was related to the expertise of civil servants. A classic perspective in politico-administrative relations is that politicians give directives and civil servants provide expertise (Torfing and Triantafyllou 2013). A key topic raised in terms of the Finnish context is that civil servants have considerable influence because of the complexity of the issues and their role in the preparation of legislation (Murto 2014; Koskimaa, Rapeli and Hiedanpää 2021). Several interviewees respected and commended the civil servants' expertise and knowledge. At the same time, many also expressed an awareness that this expertise constitutes a source of influence for civil servants and that a lack of knowledge is a limiting factor in one's ability to function as a minister. A phrase that often appeared in this context was that civil servants become very influential if the minister lacks sufficient knowledge and understanding of the issues. This aspect of knowledge was discussed from several perspectives. One interviewee stated that a minister should also listen to other experts and more broadly to colleagues in the parliamentary group and follow the government program (M12). Another reflection related to knowledge was expressed by one interviewee who described a sense of discomfort with some of their ministerial responsibilities (M4). The interviewee mentioned that they adopted a humble approach, avoiding pretending to be more knowledgeable than they were (M4). At the same time, the interviewee acknowledged that in such situations, one is largely at the mercy of the civil servants (M4).

The question of knowledge and expertise was in some interviews linked to the different roles of politicians and civil servants. One interviewee mentioned that a minister has a distinct role in that they should represent the views of the citizens and function as interpreters towards the citizens, explaining complex bureaucratic language in a way that people can understand (M8). This answer emphasized the minister's role in communication and representation. Other aspects related to the democratic role of a minister emphasized that it is disadvantageous for democracy when parties nominate individuals who lack experience in the administrative branch they are to manage (M9). One interviewee more clearly emphasized the notion that a minister should approach issues from a different perspective (M10).

I noted when I was minister that you sometimes needed to wake up the civil servants. They don't necessarily understand at all how the public will react to something. They are in good faith and prepare with their best ability, but don't necessarily reflect what the reaction might be. That also makes the minister's role difficult, because sometimes you need to challenge the civil servants as well. (M10)

The excerpt reflects the notion that a minister should view issues from a different perspective than civil servants. The response is partly linked to the idea that civil servants should understand how different questions appear from a political perspective and have "political antennas" ('t Hart and Wille 2006, 131). It also emphasizes the different role of a minister being not an expert but a representative of democracy. Even though the ministers often are highly appreciative of the civil servants' knowledge, they also emphasize the importance of having a good understanding of the issues themselves and being effective in delivering their own input. In addition to the roles related to management, policy formulation and communication, there were also discussions in the interviews about how they, as ministers, negotiated within the government (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000). These discussions were often about their other colleagues in the government and did not to the same extent involve discussions about the civil servants.

### *Forms of leadership*

There were also some differences in how the interviewees approached their role as minister. Some interviewees described the role of a minister as someone who should give general guidelines, while civil servants function on the operative level. One interviewee, for example, mentioned that the minister should remain on the level of a minister and define the goals to be achieved, like in management generally (M12). The same interviewee (M12) also stated that

those on the operative level know best how to organize the work, but that they must be able to justify what they do. A similar approach was expressed by another interviewee (M18), who described their relationship with civil servants as follows:

They were very good. I liked to work with them. I said from the beginning that its quite easy to get along with me. We have a program for the government and the ministry. This is our program, and we will work to advance this. If we stay within these frames, I will give all my support. (M18)

Both interviewees (M12, M18) mentioned the government program as a key steering document for their work. The role of the government program is especially important in the Finnish context due to the tendency to form large coalition governments, and the government program becomes the common denominator that keeps the coalition together (Tiili 2007). While there were answers that depicted the role of the minister as expressing more general goals related to implementing the government program, there were also interviewees who mentioned having steered the work in greater detail. Some interviewees emphasized that the minister has an important role in formulating policies, and they had therefore taken a more hands-on approach. An example of this perspective is expressed by an interviewee (M1) who mentioned that some of their colleagues in Parliament and the government had expressed reservations about a minister being involved in the preparation of legislation. The interviewee took a different approach and emphasized that it is the role of a minister to give clear instructions, while the civil servants should produce analyses and proposals (M1). A slightly similar answer was given by an interviewee (M20) who had a clear vision and goals but had also occasionally been involved in the work at a very detailed level, which is generally carried out by civil servants. The interviewee mentioned a desire to advance the goals that had been stated in the government program and had therefore occasionally behaved more like a civil servant (M20).

The interviews showed on a general level slightly different interpretations of what the role of a minister is and how political leadership should be exercised. The topic of political steering was discussed, with the interviewees emphasizing the importance of a minister being clear about what they want and the direction in which they want things to develop. Managerial aspects, such as leading the organization and having a good knowledge of the issues, were also discussed. The differences in the descriptions can be related either to prioritizing different aspects of the minister's role (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000) or to the extent to which they saw their role more generally within the government (Blondel 1993; Alexiadou 2015). Some interviewees emphasized to a greater extent that the minister should formulate general goals, while others had more focus on the details. The depictions by the former ministers show that there are differences in how they perceive the role of a minister and which aspects should be emphasized.

### **The ministers' views about civil servants**

Several interviewees emphasized how well they worked with the civil servants and characteristics most often mentioned were that the civil servants were helpful, loyal, had good expertise, and showed solidarity. These are, as mentioned by 't Hart and Wille (2006), traits that politicians often view as desirable in civil servants. They also to some extent correspond to classic views on civil servants (Torfing and Triantafillou 2013). A commonly repeated description was similar to that of interviewee (M5) who noted that one could ask the civil servants all kinds of questions and that they approached the minister in a good way. Another interviewee described the civil servants as helpful, loyal and supportive and that there was mutual respect (M21). Interviewees (M26, M28) also recounted how well they had worked together with the civil servants. The form of collaboration discussed in images II and III by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) were often mentioned in terms of the interviewees working with the civil servants as a team. The kinds of reciprocity and mutual respect discussed by van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) were also expressed in several interviewees. One interviewee mentioned that a minister does well to view civil servants as allies, colleagues, and advisors rather than as adversaries or tools for achieving their goals (M13). Interviewee (M17) stated that sincerity is one of the main characteristics of a good civil servant and emphasized that a civil servant should provide all relevant information and explain the consequences of different decisions.

I appreciate those who are honest and sincere and who say don't do this, the consequences are such and such. That is how a civil servant should act, then the minister takes responsibility if they do it anyway, but they should make sure that the minister has all the information they need. (M17)

There are several passages where the interviewees mentioned how well they worked with the civil servants. Several descriptions of the collaboration with the civil servants nevertheless emphasized that it is the minister who decides. This is especially noticeable in the answer by one interviewee (M6) who described the collaboration with civil servants in terms of teamwork but also made clear to them that the minister is the one who ultimately decides. There were small variations on this topic and another often-repeated statement is that civil servants should express their views, but the minister does not have to agree with them. A typical depiction is that civil servants should tell their opinion without considering what the minister's stance is, and the minister should then form their opinion, which might be different from the civil servant's proposal (M23). One interviewee (M29) emphasized that it is important to clearly distinguish between the political decision-making and the work that belongs to the civil servants. Another example of this type of response is that the minister and civil servants might sometimes have differences in opinion (M19).

Interviewee M16 provided an intriguing depiction and mentioned their own habit of thinking aloud and discussing different options, but this habit was sometimes misunderstood by the civil servants as direct orders. The same interviewee remembered that the civil servants immediately changed their reasoning when the minister expressed their stance (M16). By illustrating it as a debate, the interviewee told the civil servants that the minister will always win, but criticism is still needed to avoid mistakes (M16). The depiction is intriguing in that it illustrates a wish from the ministers' side to create a more complementary relationship, while the civil servants, based on the description, seemed to behave in a more traditional manner (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Svava 2001).

The ministers' depictions of their collaboration with civil servants were often positive, and several interviewees emphasized how well they worked together. There were, however, also some interviewees who had more mixed assessments. One aspect which may lead to friction between the minister and civil servants relates to perceptions that civil servants had a political agenda. Some interviewees did not mention this as a challenge, stating that the collaboration went well even though the minister and a leading civil servant were from different parties, but that disagreement occurred in relation to other questions (M7). Another interviewee mentioned in turn that the civil servants showed solidarity with the minister regardless of the minister's political stance (M15). One interviewee who gave a more mixed assessment mentioned that they had generally worked well with civil servants but also acknowledged that some had difficulties staying within their role and had a political agenda or even a party-political agenda (M13). Interviewee M17, in turn, mentioned that in addition to civil servants who were cooperative, some had their own agenda and were uncooperative, while others were neutral and waited to receive instructions. There were also more critical assessments, where interviewees stated that civil servants can take positions aligned with a certain political party (M22) or that some questions can be very ideological (M14). Much of the critique centered on civil servants being uncooperative or having their own agendas. Other topics discussed related to disagreement about processes and the forms of ministers' political steering. It was also noted that some questions could be delayed or were too technical for a layman to understand, which in turn gave the civil servants leverage.

There is some variation in how the ministers describe their work with the civil servants and whether disagreements occurred. Although some interviewees expressed criticism towards civil servants, there were no systematic patterns of distrust. Most interviewees described their work with civil servants as well-functioning and seamless, but there were also descriptions of situations where there was friction between the minister and civil servants. Positive traits of civil servants followed classic ideas of providing information and showing loyalty. Negative characteristics, in turn, included being uncooperative or to have an own political agenda. The differences in the relationship between the minister and civil servants may possibly depend on the leadership culture within the ministry (Ruostetsaari 2023). Other aspects that might have an impact relate to the experience of the minister and their understanding of the role.

## Conclusions and Discussion

The interviews present variation both in how the ministers describe their role and in their views about civil servants and their experiences working with them. Several interviewees expressed more traditional views, emphasizing that the minister always has the last word and that civil servants should offer their expertise. These depictions relate to more general aspects about the Finnish political system and culture. They reflect the form of ministerial governance in Finland (Paloheimo 2003; Greve and Ejersbo 2016) which also makes the role of the minister more powerful compared to countries that have a more collective decision-making system. Even though several ministers made comments emphasizing the power of the minister, previous research has pointed out the considerable influence of civil servants, which is linked to their expertise and to the often complex processes within the public administration (Murto 2014; Koskimaa, Rapeli and Hiedanpää 2021). This aspect was also raised in the interviews. Many interviewees stated that one cannot be an effective minister without sufficient understanding of the topics and that the less the minister knows, the greater is the influence of the civil servants. An interesting aspect discussed in one interview was that it is disadvantageous for democracy if a minister does not have sufficient knowledge of the issues. Although the knowledge of civil servants was appreciated by the interviewees, some mentioned in the interviews that this expertise should be challenged, or that the minister can decide differently.

The importance of having experience as a politician was often emphasized by interviewees who either had considerable political experience or had previously served as civil servants. The question of knowledge and experience were also reflected upon from a different perspective where two interviewees stated that they could have been more straightforward in their leadership or that they did not feel comfortable with some of their tasks. With regards to the individual characteristics of ministers discussed by Alexiadou (2015) and Blondel (1993), some interviewees had a more generalist approach, while others had a much narrower approach where they focused a lot on policy questions that mattered much to them. The differences could be noted in that some saw themselves more as strategic leaders who should give general directives and focus on the larger picture, while other interviewees described their work more in terms of hands-on management and mentioned occasionally working in a very detailed manner. The tendency to focus on detailed-level questions in the Finnish context has been presented in previous research (Tiili 2007), and other studies have suggested that this characteristic is not highly appreciated by civil servants ('t Hart and Wille 2006). Yet, some interviewees considered it to be part of being an effective minister and saw it as a way to ensure they achieve their goals. The characteristics on the individual level mentioned by Alexiadou (2015) such as a minister's status within their party or their focus, are relevant for understanding differences in how ministers act. Other aspects that also likely determine the role of the minister relate to their political experience and professional experience as well as their responsibilities as minister. With regard to the roles of the minister, there was also some variation where some interviewees to a greater extent emphasized the managerial and policy-related areas, while others emphasized the communicative and representational aspects (Marsh, Richards and Smith 2000).

The interviews showed some differences in views regarding minister–civil servant relations. There were, as mentioned, many depictions that presented a more traditional view in which ministers decide, while civil servants contribute knowledge. There were, however, also many depictions of the collaboration between minister and civil servant that corresponded with images II and III presented by Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981). The notion that the minister and civil servants might disagree and that civil servants should be independent in making their proposals are characteristics more in line with the complementary relationship and mutual respect than with classical views of a dichotomy between politics and public administration where civil servants only implement decisions (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Svava 2001; van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). As presented in previous research ('t Hart and Wille 2006), several of the characteristics that ministers appreciate in civil servants are loyalty, good advice and that they act effectively. Negative attributes of civil servants that were discussed in the interviews included being uncooperative or having an own, or party-political agenda. Even though the ministers occasionally expressed critical views of civil servants, a majority expressed respect for their competence and work. Elements of the dynamics guiding the relationship

between minister and civil servants mentioned by van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) were also reflected, as several ministers expressed respect for the roles of civil servants.

It should be noted in the interpretation that the interviews reflect the minister's own perceptions of their roles and their work with the civil servants. As for life story interviews generally and particularly with former politicians, it is important to consider that the interviewees may want to protect their legacy as a politician. Previous research on this topic has also pointed out that there might be a tendency to remember only the positive aspects of their work (Nousiainen 1992, 108). The results in this article suggest similarly to Nousiainen (1992) that former ministers in Finland have largely positive experiences from working with civil servants. Even though there were no systematic patterns of distrust towards civil servants, the interviews analyzed in this article showed slightly more critical assessments of civil servants compared to the findings in the work by Nousiainen (1992).

As mentioned in the methods section, the article includes a stronger representation of ministers who served in governments during the 2000s than 2010s. It was, however, difficult to find any clear patterns between how ministers described their work and the time since their service. The results are much in line with previous research relating to politico-administrative relations in Finland and they correspond well to the theoretical frameworks of politician-civil servant relations. What should be taken into consideration is that the focus on the individual perspective also reveals variation in how ministers perceive their role and how they expect civil servants to act. The personal background and experience of ministers clearly influences how they view their role and what they expect from civil servants. The relationship between politicians and public administration is not only a classic topic in political science, but it is also central to understanding how democracy functions. It is important that decisions are carefully prepared and based on the best available knowledge. At the same time, the political system must also be receptive of democratic input to be a functioning democracy. This article has only focused on the ministers' perspective, and further research could take into consideration the civil servants' or citizens viewpoints to provide a more comprehensive understanding of politico-administrative relations.

## Acknowledgements/Funding

This research was supported by project "Democratic Government as Procedural Legitimacy" (DemGo; Academy of Finland grant number 342880).

## References

- Aberbach, J.D., Putnam, R.D. and Rockman, B.A. (1981) *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ahlbäck Öberg, S. and Wockelberg, H. (2016) 'Nordic Administrative Heritages and Contemporary Institutional Design', in C. Greve, P. Lægheid, and L.H. Rykkja (eds) *Nordic Administrative Reforms: Lessons for Public Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 57–78.
- Alexiadou, D. (2015) 'Ideologues, Partisans, and Loyalists: Cabinet Ministers and Social Welfare Reform in Parliamentary Democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 48(8), pp. 1051–1086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414015574880>
- Atkinson, R. (1998) *The Life Story Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412986205>
- Backgaard, M., Blom-Hansen, J. and Serritzlew, S. (2022) 'How politicians see their relationship with top bureaucrats: Revisiting classical images', *Governance*, 35(1), pp. 5–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gove.12558>
- Blondel, J. (1993) 'Individual Ministers and their Role in Cabinet Decision-Making', in J. Blondel and F. Müller-Rommel (eds) *Governing Together: The Extent and Limits of Joint Decision-Making in Western European Cabinets*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 179–206.

- Duverger, M. (1980) 'A New Political System Model: Semi-Presidential Government', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8, pp. 165–187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1980.tb00569.x>
- Finnish Government (2024) *Hallitukset ja ministerit vuodesta 1917, Valtioneuvosto*. Available at: <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/hallitukset-ja-ministerit> (Accessed: 13 September 2024).
- Greve, C. and Ejersbo, N. (2016) 'Reform Context and Status', in C. Greve, P. Læg Reid, and L.H. Rykkja (eds) *Nordic Administrative Reforms: Lessons for Public Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 37–55.
- Greve, C., Læg Reid, P. and Rykkja, L.H. (2016) 'Introduction: The Nordic Model in Transition', in C. Greve, P. Læg Reid, and L.H. Rykkja (eds) *Nordic Administrative Reforms: Lessons for Public Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–21.
- Hsieh, H.-F. and Shannon, S.E. (2005) 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), pp. 1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Hyvärinen, M., Latvala-Harvilahti, P. and Andrushchenko, M. (2021) 'Määräysvalta vai mahdollisuus? Valta kansanedustajien muistitietohaastatteluissa', *Politiikka*, 63(4), pp. 349–372. <https://doi.org/10.37452/politiikka.98555>
- Isaksson, G.-E. (2017) 'Eduskunta – kohti normaalia parlamentarismaa', in M.K. Niemi, T. Raunio, and I. Ruostetsaari (eds) *Poliittinen valta Suomessa*. Tampere: Vastapaino, pp. 139–159.
- Koskimaa, V., Rapeli, L. and Hiedanpää, J. (2021) 'Governing through strategies: How does Finland sustain a future-oriented environmental policy for the long term?', *Futures*, 125(102667). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2020.102667>
- Krekola, J. (2022) "'Siitä on lähdettävä, että tähän on tultu" Veteraanikansanedustajien muistitiedon erityispiirteistä", in U. Savolainen and R. Taavetti (eds) *Muistitietotutkimuksen paikka. Teoriat, käytännöt ja muutos*. Helsinki: Suomalaisen kirjallisuuden seura, pp. 481–495. <https://doi.org/10.21435/skst.1478>
- Laver, M. and Shepsle, K.A. (1994) 'Cabinet ministers and government formation in parliamentary democracies', in M. Laver and K.A. Shepsle (eds) *Cabinet ministers and parliamentary government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–12.
- Library of Parliament (2024) Oral History Archive of Finnish Parliament. Available at: <https://www.eduskunta.fi:443/FI/naineduskuntatoimii/kirjasto/aineistot/eduskunta/arkiston/aineistot-tietopaketti/Sivut/Veteraanikansanedustajien-muistitietoarkisto.aspx> (Accessed: 25 September 2024).
- Marsh, D., Richards, D. and Smith, M.J. (2000) 'Re-assessing the Role of Departmental Cabinet Ministers', *Public Administration*, 78(2), pp. 305–326. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9299.00207>
- Murto, E. (2014) *Virkamiesvaltaa? Ministerien ja virkamiesten väliset valtasuhteet Suomessa viime vuosikymmenien aikana*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Niemi, M.K., Raunio, T. and Ruostetsaari, I. (2017) 'Poliittinen järjestelmä muuttuneessa toimintaympäristössä', in M.K. Niemi, T. Raunio, and I. Ruostetsaari (eds) *Poliittinen valta Suomessa*. Tampere: Vastapaino, pp. 9–30.
- Nousiainen, J. (1992) *Politiikan huipulla: ministerit ja ministeristöt Suomen parlamentaarisessa järjestelmässä*. Porvoo: WSOY.
- Paloheimo, H. (2003) 'The Rising Power of the Prime Minister in Finland', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26(3), pp. 219–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.00086>
- Peters, B.G. (1987) 'Politicians and bureaucrats in the politics of policy-making', in J.-E. Lane (ed.) *Bureaucracy and public choice*. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 256–282.
- Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2017) *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis - into the Age of Austerity*. Fourth edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ruostetsaari, I. (2023) *Huippujohtajat kriisien Suomessa: eliitit ja vallan verkostot 1990-luvulta 2020-luvulle*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

- Shaw, R. and Eichbaum, C. (2015) 'Following the Yellow Brick Road: Theorizing the Third Element in Executive Government', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 38(1), pp. 66–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2014.944987>
- Svallfors, S. (2017) "'Most MPs are Not All that Sharp.'" Political Employees and Representative Democracy', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 40(7), pp. 548–558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2016.1157693>
- Svara, J.H. (2001) 'The Myth of the Dichotomy: Complementarity of Politics and Administration in the Past and Future of Public Administration', *Public Administration Review*, 61(2), pp. 176–183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-3352.00020>
- 't Hart, P. and Wille, A. (2006) 'Ministers and Top Officials in the Dutch Core Executive: Living Together, Growing Apart?', *Public Administration*, 84(1), pp. 121–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-3298.2006.00496.x>
- Tiihonen, S. (2006) *Ministeriön johtaminen: Poliittisen ja ammatillisen osaamisen liitto*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Tiili, M. (2007) 'Strategic political steering: exploring the qualitative change in the role of ministers after NPM reforms', *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 73(1), pp. 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852307075691>
- Torfin, J. and Triantafillou, P. (2013) 'What's in a Name? Grasping New Public Governance as a Political-Administrative System', *International Review of Public Administration*, 18(2), pp. 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2013.10805250>
- van Dorp, E.-J. and 't Hart, P. (2019) 'Navigating the dichotomy: The top public servant's craft', *Public Administration*, 97(4), pp. 877–891. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12600>
- Virtanen, T. (2016) 'Roles, Values, and Motivation', in C. Greve, P. Lægreid, and L.H. Rykkja (eds) *Nordic Administrative Reforms: Lessons for Public Management*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 79–103.