

19. Strategic decision making: Ministerial advisors

Strategic decision making relies on effective co-ordination to enhance the coherence of government actions, continual monitoring of and responsiveness to the external environment, and providing evidence-based data for informed decisions. The provision of high-quality advice and support to government leaders is essential in achieving these objectives and informing the decisions of government. Alongside the public service, ministerial advisors have the potential to contribute to each of these functions.

It is not a new phenomenon in many OECD member countries that government leaders appoint ministerial advisors, and in general the influence advisors have with Ministers and heads of government has grown over time. Their appointments are mainly motivated by the need to increase the agility and responsiveness of government and help address government's strategic challenges (identified by 84% of countries in both cases). There is no single definition of what constitutes a ministerial advisor across OECD member countries; however, there are common characteristics in terms of their appointment process and the range of functions they carry out. In 70% of countries, for example, the appointment of ministerial advisors is at the sole discretion of the Minister or the head of government and their employment is tied to his/her mandate.

The most common functions of ministerial advisors include providing strategic advice in the design of policies or reforms (95%); co-ordinating with stakeholders including parliament, interest groups, lobbyists, political party, etc. (84%); and giving political/partisan advice in light of the Minister's political outlook or governing party's priorities (79%). In some countries that have a strong tradition of political neutrality in the public service such as Finland and the Netherlands, the functions of ministerial advisors may be more confined (e.g. focusing on political/partisan advice or media assistance).

Due to their co-ordination function with the private sector and their potential influence on policy making, ministerial advisors are potentially vulnerable to undue influence of private interests. Ministerial advisors have become a source of public concern in 70% of responding countries in the last decade, often due to their increasing number. In some countries, the rising use of ministerial advisors has been seen as increasing the distance between Ministers and the bureaucracy, resulting in a lack of connectedness between the government and the public service which could in turn threaten capacities for strategic foresight, particularly if critical flows of information are hindered. Despite the concerns raised in countries about the lack of transparency in government decision making, information

is still not readily available on ministerial advisors. Although the number of advisors is made public in 55% of countries, public information on profiles of advisors (15%), job descriptions (25%) and their total cost (25%) is sparse.

Methodology and definitions

Data were collected via two surveys conducted in 2010 by the OECD. The first consisted of a survey on existing legal, institutional and procedural frameworks governing ministerial advisors. Respondents were OECD senior civil servants in charge of integrity policies in central government. A total of 23 OECD member countries responded as well as Egypt and Ukraine. A second survey was designed specifically for ministerial advisors to gather their direct insights, and was completed by 17 member countries.

"Head of government" usually refers to the Prime Minister although depending on the political-administrative systems it may be President of the Republic, President of the Council of Ministers, Chancellor, Taoiseach, President of the Government, etc.

Further reading

Matheson, A. et al. (2007), "Study on the Political Involvement in Senior Staffing and on the Delineation of Responsibilities between Ministers and Senior Civil Servants", *OECD Working Papers on Public Governance*, No. 6, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (forthcoming), *Transparency in Strategic Decision-making: Ministerial Advisors*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2007), "Political Advisors and Civil Servants in European Countries", *Sigma Papers*, No. 38, OECD Publishing, Paris.

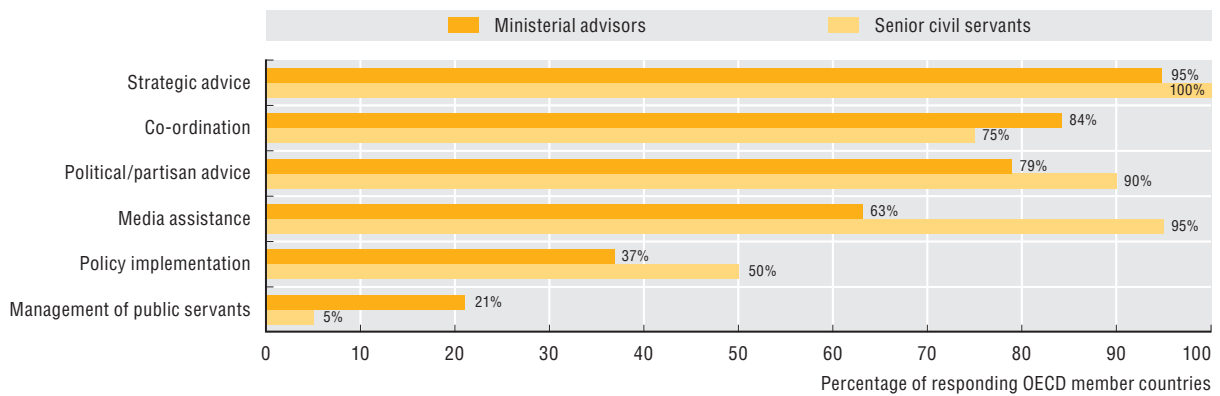
Zussman, D. (2009), *Political Advisors*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Figure notes

19.1: Based on the responses provided by senior civil servants in 20 countries and ministerial advisors in 17 countries.

19.2 and 19.3: Data are based on the responses received from 20 OECD member countries.

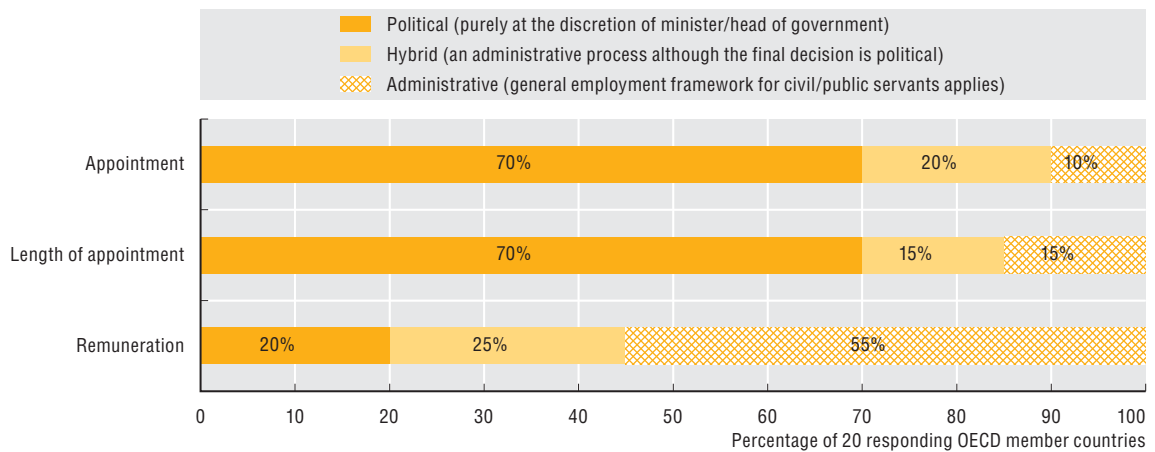
19.1 Functions of ministerial advisors: Views from ministerial advisors and senior civil servants (2010)



Source: OECD (2010), Ministerial Advisors Survey, responses to the questionnaires for senior civil servants and ministerial advisors.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932390443>

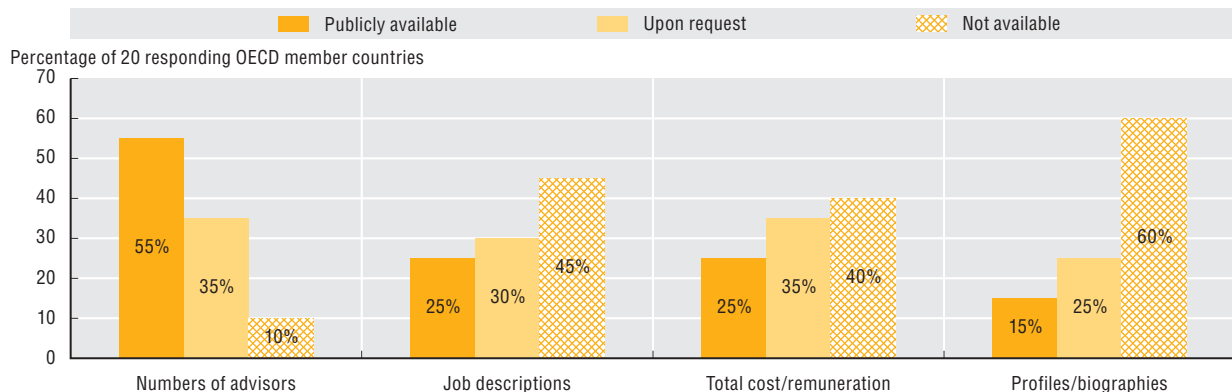
19.2 Ministers' discretion in human resource management of ministerial advisors (2010)



Source: OECD (2010), Ministerial Advisors Survey, responses to the questionnaire for senior civil servants.

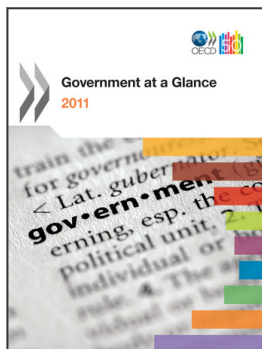
StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932390462>

19.3 Information available on ministerial advisors (2010)



Source: OECD (2010), Ministerial Advisors Survey, responses to the questionnaire for senior civil servants.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932390481>



From:
Government at a Glance 2011

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/gov_glance-2011-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2011), "Strategic decision making: Ministerial advisors", in *Government at a Glance 2011*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/gov_glance-2011-25-en

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.