

Out of the Golden Cage: PR and the Career Opportunities of Policy Professionals

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This article focuses on “policy professionals”—people employed to affect politics and policy making rather than elected to office, and their career motivations and considerations. What do they see as career opportunities and limitations? What resources do policy professionals offer on the job market? How are status and hierarchy on their particular labor market perceived? Special attention is paid to the possible transitions from current job into other positions and arenas. The study pinpoints the “golden cage” problem: the problem for organizations positioned outside party politics to properly evaluate the distinct skills of policy professionals. The key position of the public relations agencies in this regard is highlighted. The article closes with a discussion of some democratic implications of the arguments and findings, such as anticipatory adjustment of behavior in public office, the potential merging of political elites, and the supply driven growth of the policy professional stratum.

Keywords: Policy Professions, Public Relations, PR, Policy Professionals, Policy Makers, Policy Organizations, Policy Careers, Career Motivations, Policy Work, Think Tanks, Jobs, Job Market, Career Opportunities, Career Limitations, Job Satisfaction, Lobbying, Revolving Door, Policy Making, Europe, Sweden.

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Este artículo se enfoca en los “profesionales de las políticas públicas”—es la gente que se contrata para intervenir en la política y la hechura de políticas públicas en lugar de ser elegida electoralmente para puestos públicos, así como sus consideraciones y motivos de carrera. ¿Qué es lo que ven como oportunidades y limitaciones de su carrera? ¿Qué recursos ofrecen los profesionales de las políticas al mercado laboral? ¿Cómo son percibidos su estatus y jerarquía en su particular mercado de trabajo? Se da especial atención a las posibles transiciones de un empleo actual hacia otras posiciones y arenas. El estudio esboza el problema de la “jaula de oro”: el problema para las organizaciones que están ubicadas fuera de los partidos políticos y que por tanto están impedidos para evaluar con precisión las distintas habilidades de los profesionales de las políticas. La posición clave de las agencias de relaciones públicas es resaltada. El artículo cierra con una discusión de algunas implicaciones de los argumentos y hallazgos tales como el comportamiento de ajuste anticipatorio en el sector público, el potencial de integración de las élites políticas, y la oferta impulsada por el crecimiento del estrato de los profesionales de las políticas.

This article focuses on a specific category of political actors: policy professionals. These are people who are employed to affect politics and policy making in places such as government offices, political parties, interest organizations, public relations (PR) agencies, and think tanks. They are different from regular politicians, in that they are employed and not elected to office. But they also differ from civil servants and public administrators by being employed to further certain values and interests rather than as impartial and merit-recruited administrators.

This category has grown substantially in numbers and importance across practically all advanced democracies (Blick and Jones 2013; Campbell and Pedersen 2014; Dahlström 2009; Eichbaum and Shaw 2010; Medvetz 2012; Rich 2004; Tyllström 2013). But comparatively little is still known about exactly who they are, what they contribute to politics and policy making, and what their main resources are. One increasing concern, however, has been the existence of a “revolving door” between politics and policy making on the one hand and the world of lobbying on the other (Blanes i Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen 2012; Lindström and Bruun 2012). Concerns about illicit influences on political decisions and the worrisome influence of monetary resources on political processes and outcomes have been aired, not only in the United States, but across many polities and societies (OECD 2007, 2011).

The issues concerning the careers of policy professionals are, however, broader than what is implied about the discussion of the revolving door. They relate more generally to questions concerning how skills and contacts acquired in politics and policy making can be marketed and made into sellable products (Tyllström 2013, 2015). These issues also extend to how this marketization of political know-how may affect the democratic qualities of a polity.

In this article, I analyze the career motivations and considerations of the broad category of policy professionals. What are seen as career opportunities and limitations? What resources do policy professionals offer on the job market? How is status and hierarchy on their particular labor market perceived—what is “up” or “down” in terms of career? I will put special focus on the possible transitions from current jobs into other positions and arenas—how does the road forward look?

The setting is current Sweden, a country that was for long characterized by a stable and social-democratic-led political-institutional formation that has recently experienced quite far-ranging changes (Svallfors 2015c). Among these changes, we find a substantial increase in the numbers of policy professionals, in particular among the PR agencies, but also among political parties, in the Government Offices¹ and other organizations. In this way, a substantial labor market that is defined by its particular relations to politics has emerged, where the skills of policy professionals are bought and sold (Allern 2011; Tyllström 2013, 2015).

The study starts by surveying some of the relevant research on careers and labor markets for policy professionals. The next section presents the data on which the analysis builds. The first empirical section probes the problems of converting political know-how into labor market opportunities and the specific position of PR agencies in this process. The second empirical section points to some important career restrictions that are inherent in the policy professional labor market in terms of political allegiances, human capital, and national contexts.

Political Skills and the Revolving Door

The skills that policy professionals use in their work—and one of the things that motivates one to see them as participants in a particular professional field—consist primarily in applying various forms of politically useful knowledge. In this way, policy professionals are clearly part of “the political economy of expertise” that Esterling (2004) and others (see e.g., Moffitt 2014) see as a fundamental aspect of contemporary politics and policy making. But their expertise is of a different kind than that of the traditional public administrator in being more focused on politically applicable skills. *Problem formulation*

¹In Sweden, the Government Offices form a single, integrated public authority comprising the Prime Minister's Office, the government ministries, and the Office for Administrative Affairs.

involves highlighting and framing social problems and their possible solutions, using research and other relevant knowledge. *Process expertise* consists of “knowing the game” and understanding the “where, how, and why” of the political and policy-making processes. *Information access* is the skill to find very fast, reliable, and relevant information (Svallfors 2015a).

These skills not only make up the main resource that policy professionals use, they are also their main commodities on the market (Tyllström 2015). Studies of lobbying in the United States often concentrate on the importance of personal contacts and access to leading politicians. For example, Blanes i Vidal, Draca, and Fons-Rosen (2012) show that U.S. ex-government staffers who become lobbyists experience an income drop of almost 25 percent when “their” elected representative leaves office—strong indirect evidence that lobbyists often sell access to leading politicians.

But just as important as contacts—and probably more important in a European context—is specific know-how about how the political system works and what kinds of arguments are useful in which contexts. Allern (2011, 134-5) maintains that “policy advisors are generalists. . . Their real expertise is their knowledge about the political environment, the decision-making processes and how cases should most effectively be presented.” He adds that the PR agencies are “one of the few areas outside politics where their political communication competence could be exchanged on the market.” As shown by Tyllström (2013), political (communication) advice has been constituted as a marketable product in Sweden since the mid-1990s, a much later development than similar trends in the United States and many other countries but by now an established state of affairs. In applying their skills in the service of paying customers, much of the efforts of the PR consultants and lobbyists are spent on helping allies rather than trying to persuade opponents (Carpenter, Esterling, and Lazer 2004; Hall and Deardorff 2006). This is a way to relieve political allies of preparatory work, thus enhancing their capacities as political actors. It is also a way to focus the attention of leading politicians on problems that are important for the PR agencies’ clients. In both these respects, the know-how acquired in political office is of fundamental importance for success in the PR industry and lobbying (Tyllström 2015).

The focus of most existing research on the careers of policy professionals is set on transitions from government offices to the PR industry and lobbying. This is highly warranted, as discussed later, since PR and lobbying are two of the few outlets outside party politics for the specific forms of political knowledge that characterize policy professionals. However, a broader perspective on the careers of policy professionals is also highly motivated, as their skills and networks span a broad organizational landscape where they frequently move between different positions. In spring 2012, the median employment time in a specific job among policy professionals in Sweden was only two years (Garsten, Rothstein, and Svallfors 2015, table 4). At the same time, many of them stay for extended periods or even their whole career in this politically defined labor market, and far from all

Table 1. Interviewees and InformantsInterviewees ($N = 71$; Interviewed 2012-13). Informants ($N = 21$; Interviewed 2013)

<i>Organizational Type</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
Government Offices	8	4	12
Parliamentary Party Office	5	7	12
Local/Regional	6	7	13
Trade Union	5	8	13
Interest Organization	6	3	9
Think Tank	3	2	5
Public Relations Agency	5	2	7
Total	38	33	71
(Former) Government Minister	3	1	4
MPs	4	2	6
(Retired) Civil Servants	1	1	2
Recruiters	5	1	6
Private Companies	3	0	3
Total	16	5	21

job shifts within this particular labor market are from the Government Offices to PR and lobbying. This makes it highly pertinent to ask the kind of broader questions concerning policy professionals' careers outlined in the introduction above.

Data

The analyses in the article build on fieldwork conducted in Sweden in 2012-13. The core data material consists of 71 long (average interview time is about 2.5 hours), semistructured interviews with policy professionals in different positions and organizational types. In addition, 21 shorter interviews (about one hour each) were conducted with elected politicians (members of parliament [MPs] and former government ministers), (newly retired) civil servants, recruiters, and policy professionals working for private enterprises. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees and their distribution across organizational types. Interviews were transcribed (about 3,500 pages), and pertinent interview quotes were assembled in a 100-page excerpt document.²

The interviews were designed to cover three main topics: (1) the work of policy professionals as a specific form of political influence, (2) the occupation and career choices of policy professionals, and (3) the labor market for policy professionals. For each topic, a number of themes were covered to provide a comprehensive picture of the work and careers of policy professionals in

²For further details of the data collection and analysis, see Garsten, Rothstein, and Svallfors (2015).

Sweden. The current study builds on a subset of these themes related to the career desires of policy professionals, and perceived opportunities and constraints.³

The research project also included a quantitative mapping of the group in 2012 (including 1,468 individuals), containing descriptive information about gender, age, education, and labor market experience among policy professionals.⁴ Information from this descriptive mapping will be used to support specific arguments.

To mainly rely on interviews brings both advantages and important limitations. The long thematic interviews allowed nuances to be articulated and provided strikingly frank and open discussion of various aspects of the careers of policy professionals (provided under guarantees of confidentiality). At the same time, we must take into account the self-understanding of the interviewees, who may easily misperceive their opportunities and constraints. However, the interviews with (ex-)politicians, civil servants, and organizational recruiters served as important addenda to the interviews with policy professionals. In general, as should be obvious from the analysis, these additional interviews confirmed what emerged from the main interviews: that is, the interviewees' representation of their desires and prospects is shared by groups who come into regular contact with them.

Valuation of Political Knowledge: The Role of PR Agencies

Policy professionals in Sweden typically do not stay very long in a specific job. In spring 2012, the median time in a specific position was only about two years (Garsten, Rothstein, and Svallfors 2015, table 4). Either they move on within the policy professional field—they change organization or move to higher positions within the same organization—or they move outside the policy professional field, for example to private companies or public agencies. When the policy professionals ponder over their career opportunities many of them—and this goes in particular for those who work in the Government Offices and for political parties—identify a specific career problem. This is that the political knowledge they have is hard to evaluate: it is hard for many private companies, public agencies, and other prospective employers to understand and correctly value what, for example, a few years in the Government Offices really entail. In one interview conducted for this research, a political secretary in parliament with previous experience from the Government Offices explains that there “are few who know what the job contains, it’s hard to explain what

³All translations from Swedish for this article were made by the author. To guarantee the anonymity of interviewees, specific organizational titles are in a few places replaced with more generic ones, and the gender of the interviewees is withheld.

⁴Information from this mapping was collected mainly from open web sources complemented with a small-scale survey to local and regional political secretaries.

the job contains, it's hard to explain what competence one has and so on... It becomes some sort of validation problem quite simply." A political advisor in the Government Offices agreed that it is hard to explain what you really know when you apply for other positions. You know "a lot of stuff that surely could be useful in other places but I realized when I was looking for jobs that it wasn't all that easy to explain what I know—explain what I know so that it becomes useful for someone else." Therefore, it may be difficult to secure employment that corresponds with the policy professional's true abilities. Doors are shut just because the using organization cannot value what they really know, all the useful insights they have acquired in politics. A policy professional in a private company states that when employment is sought in private businesses, one often encounters questions that indicate skepticism like the following one, expressed by an interviewee: "What have you done then? Well, you have worked in the Government Offices, in parliament, for an employer organization or a trade union. And what are we to do with that knowledge?"

Both political employment and elected office could, therefore, turn into a "golden cage." You are what you are and you know a great deal about politics, and you do not want to go back to your previous (nonpolitical) job or to finish a university education. As put by a policy professional working for a private company but with long-standing experience from public offices,

most political employees and politicians are trapped in a golden cage. That is to say, they have rather good remuneration. Maybe they make 50,000 per month. They do what they basically have done since they were teenagers... Work opportunities outside politics for these people are very small unless they choose to have a conscious career planning from the very beginning. So they become serfs in a sense and many of them do not feel well because they want to try something different but they never get invited to start anywhere.

The problems may be particularly obvious on the left of the political spectrum, where channels into private business are not as evident as on the other end of the spectrum. A PR consultant maintains that "it is particularly hard for social democrats." Among the right-of-center parties there are completely different interfaces with business, while social democrats have traditionally gone back and forth between the different organizations of the labor movement (Olofsson 1995). Public agencies are quite cautious in recruiting people with a clearly political background, however. The road ahead may, therefore, be more limited for a social democratic employee, unless a private company is looking for "an S-alibi."

For the policy professional who wants to move into private companies, the concern is how to convert political capital into economic capital. They want to exchange all the political know-how about how the political system works and who the main actors and their driving forces are for a better-paid—and just as

exciting—job as the one they have in politics. But who could correctly evaluate their skills? It is at this point that a particular form of private company—the PR agencies and their public affairs divisions—becomes central in the careers of policy professionals. These enterprises understand how to appreciate and value policy professionals’ know-how, so they act as political capital exchanges. In contrast to most other private firms, PR agencies can fully appreciate and value the political know-how of the policy professionals, as this is the main commodity that they offer to their customers, and as the industry already contains many ex-politicians and ex-political advisors. For this political advisor, the PR agencies can even be seen as saviors.

As soon as I think about the future, I get such anxiety because I have to finish my education. So I don’t really know. But of course a natural step forward that many take is through the PR industry and then onwards. And I suppose I haven’t closed that door completely. And that step, it often comes because that is one of very few branches where political merits can be validated into something else. . . . If an employer is about to hire someone and it says “MP” or “Political advisor in the Government Offices” in the CV, very few know what that means and understand how it may be transformed into something that is useful for the business. But the PR business, it is said, is the validation tool where political [employees] can use their knowledge about how things work but also their personal networks and creativity.

The PR industry can, in this way, work as a stepping stone to other parts of the private sector. Policy professionals can show their abilities in a marketed line of work where they at the same time can use everything they have learned in politics. Once they have shown themselves useful in a profit-oriented industry they also become employable in many other parts of the private sector as communication and policy experts.⁵ For social democrats, a stint at a PR agency is also an opportunity to wash off their party-political mark, “a way to clean yourself from your S-label,” as put by one PR consultant interviewed: a way to show that you have “stepped out of the political niche.” This might be seen as a kind of qualifying period in a profit-oriented firm that will open doors to the wider business community.

There is no doubt that the PR bureaus actively search for people with broad political experience, and aim to recruit from a broad political spectrum. Their main interest is not the personal networks of political employees, even though, of course, a well-filled address book is a resource. It is rather detailed knowledge concerning Swedish politics and policy making, about when and where it is possible to have some influence that they look for. As put by one recruiter at

⁵In this way, the PR industry works as “bridges” to overcome informational asymmetries, in a similar way to the “weak ties” famously analyzed by Granovetter (1973, 1364).

a PR agency, they look for people who can “understand the political game and this informal [part]” that forms the political content, someone who has the right “gut feeling” for what is happening and has happened in politics.

For this young PR consultant on the way into politics, such a stepping stone is seen as very useful in the future career:

I will raise my value considerably. I see this as a way to improve my negotiation position in order to get a better job, higher salary, new work tasks. I will have contacts in politics. That is a very strong currency in the world of consulting. So to have experience of how a political organization works, have contacts there, know political communication, opinion-forming in that way, is something that is sought after. And then I will be able to work much more with that kind of communication work too, even if I would go back to consulting later.

The recruiters at the PR agencies confirm that such interchanges between politics and PR are seen as valuable. One interviewed recruiter stated that the agency directly encourages such movements into and out of party politics: “if you come back later, you are most often a much better advisor.”

However, the stream from the PR industry is smaller than the one from politics to the PR industry. There are two reasons for this. One is simply that the PR industry has grown dramatically over the last couple of decades (Tyllström 2013), which is not the case for the political parties. The second is that salary levels are higher in the PR industry (Garsten, Rothstein, and Svallfors 2015, table 6). The PR consultant who wants to go to, or return to, party politics has to accept a lower salary, for doing a job that is just as demanding. Instead, many stay in the PR industry once they have moved there, or shift to other parts of private business.

But if the PR industry grows and is the instance outside party politics that is best at evaluating the policy professional skills, and in addition is prepared to pay well for skills and hard work, why do not all political employees use this exit route? This is because, in the eyes of many policy professionals, PR is a rather dirty and spineless sector, where profits are everything and values count for nothing. There is thus a large degree of political stigma attached to the PR industry.

A person who works for a private company after a long career in the Government Offices explains that there was never any interest to work in the PR business although there were repeated offers. In PR you become a “*Mädchen für alles*” [sic]: have to sell your services to anyone who asks for them, and that is not attractive at all. Similarly, a political secretary in parliament interviewed for this study was “quite skeptic about the PR agencies,” as you do not know “where their spine is.” Today, they may work for a sobriety association, the next for the alcohol industry. The PR consultants “charge damn high fees” and sometimes work “a little dishonestly” when they take high fees for actions and strategies that have no chance of actually achieving anything.

Even people who work as PR consultants themselves can sometimes be put off by the cold-hearted calculations and moral spinelessness. One consultant described the basic orientation of the industry as “a kind of parasitic orientation where you see that here we can make as much money as possible.” You create artificial needs among clients and then sell services to fulfill the need that you have created yourself, where the only purpose is to create as much profit as possible for the PR agencies. You are not necessarily evil, but not good either; you simply do not care about the consequences: “But you are just interested in having as much billing as possible. I think it is embarrassing to be in such an industry.” Another PR consultant interviewed for this research had earlier promised never to become one because the industry as a whole has such a bad reputation, has no openness regarding methods and clients and on the whole “is quite bad in managing its own public relations.” A political secretary explains why a much more lucrative job at a PR agency was left for one in parliament:

Ever since my political awakening I have somehow had this naïve will to make a difference, in a good way. You made a difference at [the PR agency] too, but rarely in a good way. And it didn't really want to die, that self-image that “I should be good” [laughs] and that was a bit. . . In particular when you work as hard as you do on [the PR agency] and then feel that you spend late nights and weekends and you don't really believe in what you're doing. That is hard, so I wanted to start to work for something that I believed in.

Career Restrictions and Options

The choice not to enter PR is to a large extent a self-imposed career limitation. But there are other more externally enforced limits that the policy professional has to take into account. Many alternative jobs and careers—both in and outside the policy professional field—demand a higher academic qualification than a bachelor's degree. A direct step from political advisor or political secretary to an expert role at an interest organization may, therefore, be hard to make for someone who lacks the formal educational credentials even if the substantial skills have been acquired in the Government Offices.

In a different way, it may be hard to make the move to an elected political position even from a very prominent position in an interest organization. Few policy professionals are prepared to take the long road via a local unpaid political engagement and slowly work their way up the ladder (Svallfors 2015b). However, to take the step straight into the elected elite may be very difficult, as explained in one interview with a political director at a trade union:

Well, the problem with becoming elected, from the job I now have, is that it becomes this [editor who became MP] Maria Abrahamsson-

syndrome. You cannot be put on a list of candidates for parliament and have the job I now have. Then I must leave from here and have a latency phase for at least a year, without payment. And then I have to run a personal campaign, without money. So I wouldn't have an income and I wouldn't have any campaign money more than the minimum from the party, to do something that I wouldn't know the outcome of. And when I'm finished with that, if I fail, then I have no job to go back to. There is no natural passage from a politically profiled job like the one I now have to becoming elected, unless you are handpicked. What you can do is this [former minister] Thomas Bodström-thing. You get selected directly as a government minister and then, at the next election, you are put on a list and become an MP. . . I don't have the economic space to take leave and go without salary for a year. That bridge is very difficult to imagine because my job now is not compatible with being on a party list. It would be completely delegitimizing for me, in the job I now have. . . Sure, I can think about becoming an elected politician, but then I would have to go via becoming a state secretary or something similar and then come in that way.

Yet another career limitation that is both self-imposed and externally induced is that the political left–right division is quite strong. None of the policy professionals interviewed would ever consider working for some other political party, nor had any of them ever actually worked for any other political party. Furthermore, in the quantitative profiles of close to 1,500 policy professionals used for this study, not a single person was found who had worked for more than one party over the course of their career. The line of division between trade unions and employers is also sharp, and it is unlikely that someone would be recruited from one side to the other, both because of their own stand and the skepticism of those who do the hiring. A personnel officer at a trade union stated in interview that it would be “very strange if you came here from a career in the employer federation, or vice versa” and maintains there are very few examples of this. This is confirmed by the fact that there are only six persons in the database used for this study who have ever worked for both a trade union and an employer's association.

What is “up” and what is “down” in terms of career? Most policy professionals have no difficulty judging what movements are upwards, downwards, or sideways. They have a clear opinion concerning what is a rising, stagnating, or negative career. But what decides what is what? As the primary driving force and attraction of the job for many policy professionals is power (Svallfors 2015a), what is decisive is the perceived influence in a particular position, rather than income or freedom.

A chief of communication at a trades union thinks that “it is the opportunity to make a public difference,” to “shoulder a responsibility that is larger, that includes more people and has importance for more people” that defines what is up or down in terms of career. It is “power defined as the opportunities

to have an influence,” “access to such arenas where it is possible to affect things” that determines the career ladder. Similarly, a political secretary maintained that it is the “influence-power” that defines what is upwards and downwards career-wise, “the opportunities to have an influence,” while salary and other perks are “actually secondary.”

The fact that power is so central to the career creates a clear hierarchical order among the career options in party politics. The parties’ parliamentary offices are not particularly interesting for political employees when their parties hold governmental power. Parliament then becomes more of a “conveyor belt” than a place filled with power and excitement. Then, it may be more interesting to be a political secretary in one of the larger regions or cities. For an ambitious political secretary in parliament the main prize, however, is to move on to the Government Offices:

it is very fun to work in the Government Offices, especially because you are surrounded with such fantastically skilled people. It is really so cool to work with the civil servants who are there, and who can also change their ways between parties and so on. So of course I can, in that way, dream about coming there.

For political advisors who have to leave the Government Offices after an election defeat, parliament may seem like a more attractive place now that it again is the center of the party’s activities. But that door is not necessarily open: in contrast to the political advisors in the Government Offices, the political secretaries in parliament have regular open-ended contracts and cannot be replaced against their own will. In addition, losing the election most often means smaller resources which in turn means parliamentary offices have to be scaled back, something which obviously makes it even harder to move into these positions. Also for these reasons, the PR industry often becomes an important destination for ex-political advisors.

Leaving the world of politics and policy advising completely is something few policy professionals want to do. This is not only because of their specific skill set but also because this is where their hearts lie, as put by one think-tank director.

Sometimes when I think about what I want to do later in life it feels like I have a very hard time to imagine a job that doesn’t contain big elements of politics. Which of course is a restriction of my career opportunities, but that is how I think it is. . . The thought of not working with anything related to politics feels awful.

Among all the possible destinations for Swedish policy professionals, one is conspicuously absent when interviewees were asked about their future plans and dreams: supra- and international organizations. The Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development, the International Labour Organization, the European Commission, the United Nations, and other such organizations are very rarely mentioned when they reflect about their future destinations. Precisely because their daily activities are framed by a national space, their careers are planned and more or less completely played out in a Swedish political space and no transnational aspects and considerations concerning their future jobs are found. This might be an indication that the politically useful knowledge that the policy professionals market is limited to Swedish political conditions and framed by national institutions and, therefore, carries little weight in international arenas. For example, in the European Union domain, specific skills that can only be acquired onsite in Brussels and through specifically designed European Union education programs seem to be essential ingredients for effective actions and successful careers (Büttner *et al.* 2014; Georgakakis and Rowell 2013).

Conclusion

The arguments and findings presented in this study have been focused on the perceptions of career opportunities and constraints among policy professionals in Sweden. The first empirical section analyzed the “golden cage” problem; that is, the problems for organizations positioned outside party politics to properly evaluate the distinct skills that policy professionals in government and party offices acquire and use. Here, the key position of the PR agencies were highlighted as being the profit-oriented organizations that are best able to value, sell, and reward the particular competencies of the policy professionals. At the same time, the skepticism toward PR agencies among many policy professionals becomes evident. They hold a view of the PR industry as a place for cold-hearted calculations and moral spinelessness, a view that keeps them from even trying to enter the sphere, in spite of the fact that this is where it is most economically rewarding to use their specific political skills.

The second empirical section probed the perceived career restrictions for policy professionals. The difficulties of moving to expert positions because of lack of higher academic credentials were emphasized, as were the difficulties in moving into the elected political elite without having to take the long road through a local political engagement. Further, the barriers between the left and right wings of politics are substantial: policy professionals never move between different parties over their careers and few have ever worked for both trade unions and employers. Last, the fact that no supra- or international dimensions were present in the career considerations of Swedish policy professionals was discussed as a possible indication that their skills may be entirely framed in a national context.

For policy professionals, the very definition of careers is based on access to positions of influence. What is upwards, sideways, or downwards in terms of career is defined not primarily by money or status, but by access to power,

either directly or through the connection with influential policy makers. Policy professionals are just as much political animals as any MP or government minister, and their driving force is to be able to affect the state of affairs and course of events (see also Svallfors 2015a).

Such attitudes provide the motivation to discuss some democratic implications of the arguments and findings of this research. The career considerations of people who seek and often wield power are certainly of vital importance for democratic governance. Here, I want to raise some concerns in relation to the findings of the current work, all related to the interface of party politics and PR agencies.

The first is the potentially corrupting influence of the revolving door between politics and business, and in particular the exit door. The primary potential corruption problem here is not that former politicians and political advisors/secretaries would use their personal networks to unduly influence decisions after they have left office. It is rather the risk of anticipatory adjustments of decisions when they are still in office, where considerations about future career options might influence decisions that ought to be guided by less self-serving principles.

This potential problem is compounded by the fact that Sweden lacks not only any regulation of the revolving door between politics, business, and lobbying firms; it is also among the very few European countries without any legal regulation or even disclosure rules regarding private financial contributions to political parties. To worsen the problem even further, most PR agencies do not disclose who their corporate clients are, nor are they under any legal obligation to do so. Leading policy advisors or decision makers can, therefore, go straight from having key responsibilities for policy areas to lobbying the next day in the very same policy areas, on behalf of corporate clients that may be among the funders of their party. The fact that the specific political skills of policy professionals have perhaps their main outlet at the PR agencies, therefore, turns into a major democratic problem even in a political system as free from open corruption (bribes, etc.) as the Swedish one.

The second democratic issue is the potential merging of political elites that the field of PR represents. As we have seen, the left–right division is still of large importance for the policy professionals' careers, with hardly any shifts between political parties or between employers and trades unions. The main exceptions to this political division of the labor market for policy professionals are precisely the PR agencies. They aim at a broad recruitment from a large section of the political spectrum to offer all their potential clients opportunities to work with consultants who share their basic values and outlooks. In this way, the PR agencies tend to become meeting grounds for skilled actors of quite different political persuasions, where mutual learning of the other part's perspectives may take place. Depending on which democratic ideal one subscribes to, this process could either be painted in rosy colors as an important addendum to a consensual democracy, or as a problematic distancing of political actors from their social bases and their merging into an amorphous professional political elite with weak ties to the everyday concerns of voters and citizens.

The third issue is that the growth of political PR seems to a large extent to be driven almost as much by supply as by demand. That is, the increasing supply of policy professionals with skill sets adapted to a very specific labor market, and who need an outlet for selling these skills, may be just as important as the demand for political communication advice in a complex political system, in explaining the meteoric rise of political PR in Sweden (cf., Tyllström 2013, 2015). In this way, the growth of the policy professional stratum may to some extent be endogenously driven by its own momentum. This also implies that the revolving door issue (at least in a Swedish context) needs to be amended in three important ways: (1) the prime commodity for sale is not network contacts, but political skills and know-how; (2) the PR agencies provide solutions to career problems for policy professionals that often override their concerns about the moral deficits of the PR industry; (3) policy professionals, even after they have left public office, are primarily attracted by opportunities to influence the course of events and by life in the circles of power, rather than by purely monetary considerations (see Svallfors 2015a).

Last, it is important to keep in mind that the current study offers an empirical snapshot of a single country at a single point in time. The specificities of Sweden—very strong organizations both among wage earners and employers, comparatively coherent and stable parties, a strong and efficient public administration—clearly affect the opportunity space for policy professionals not only in regard to their everyday political activities but also in terms of their career alternatives. This observation points to the importance in applying a comparative (cross-national and/or longitudinal) perspective on policy professionals, their activities, and their implications for democratic theory and practice.

About the Author

Stefan Svallfors is a professor in sociology at Södertörn University, and research director at the Institute for Futures Studies in Stockholm. His current research concerns “policy professionals”: people employed to do politics and affect politics rather than elected to office. They include groups such as political advisors, political secretaries, PR consultants, think-tank intellectuals, and other groups. The project studies the work of policy professionals as a form of political influence, and their motivations, careers, and labor market. Among his latest publications is *Makt utan mandat: de policyprofessionella i svensk politik* [*Power without a Mandate: The Policy Professional in Swedish Politics*] (with Christina Garsten and Bo Rothstein; Stockholm: Dialogos, 2015).

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