

## The Executive Revolving Door

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# The Executive Revolving Door: New Dataset on the Career Moves of Former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries<sup>☆</sup>

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Concerns have been raised that transfers of bureaucrats and politicians into the private sector might create unfair advantages for their future employers and even lead to distrust in government. Not surprisingly, the study of the revolving door has therefore gained prominence in the academic literature. Importantly, however, less attention has been paid to the executive branch. We add to the study of the revolving door by presenting the first dataset on the executive revolving door in Denmark. To do so, we trace the frequency, timing and character of the career moves of Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries who held office from 2009 to 2019. Our data document that the Danish executive revolving door is widespread: more than a third of Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries end up in a private job within the same year or the year after they stop their job. If we extend the period and investigate the entire period after public service, the number is above 60 percent. Moreover, a substantial share of the jobs obtained is in companies and at a senior level. Our note concludes with reflections on how our data can be used to fill existing research gaps and should be complemented in future research.

<sup>☆</sup>We thank the editors and our three anonymous reviewers for the excellent feedback. Data and code are available here: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OYW9GF>.

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## Introduction

In recent years, the movement of public servants into the private sector (the ‘revolving door’) has become a fulcrum of the political debate in most Western democracies. Denmark is no exception to this pattern. It has witnessed an increased discussion about the revolving door after a number of former Ministers and top officials have moved into the private sector. Some of the better-known examples include former Permanent Secretary from the Danish Ministry of Finance David Hellemann, who became CEO of a major bank, and a number of Ministers, including former Minister for Justice Karen Hækkerup, who became CEO of the largest Danish agricultural industry lobby organization, and former Minister of Finance Bjarne Corydon, who became Global Director of McKinsey.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion about the revolving door in Denmark and abroad has not seldom revolved around the potential conflicts of interest, which might exist when former Ministers or top officials make use of knowledge acquired in their former job to benefit their new employers.<sup>2</sup> It has also been discussed how the prospects of moving into a private sector job might already affect the incentives of Ministers and officials while being in office. Critics have for example speculated that ‘the risk of ruining a good career opportunity can probably deter many politicians from making themselves too unpopular with the private sector’ (own translation).<sup>3</sup> In line with this, US Members of Congress behave in a more pro-business fashion before leaving office (Egerod 2017), and those who employ more soon-to-be revolvers have been shown to grant more access to special interests (Shepherd & You 2020). Finally, it has been argued that the revolving door could facilitate patronage and clientelism and decrease trust in government (see, e.g., Blach-Ørsten & Mayerhöffer 2020). Therefore, the revolving door holds the potential to skew political representation further in favour of the already-mobilized and wealthy interests. To assess these concerns, we need systematic data on the career moves of former politicians and civil servants as well as how these career moves affect decision-making.

It is therefore no surprise that we have seen an expansion in the academic research on the topic. While scholars still focus on the US system (e.g., Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012; Bertrand et al. 2014; LaPira & Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018; Shepherd & You 2020), research has gradually been expanded to a number of other political systems, for example, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the European Union (e.g., Selling 2015; Coen & Vannoni 2016; 2020a; 2020b; Baturo & Arlow 2018; Selling & Svallfors 2019; Egerod et al. 2020; Luechinger & Moser 2020; Claessen et al. 2021). These studies demonstrate that, even if the frequency of career moves between the political and private sector varies between political systems, the revolving door is a phenomenon across advanced democracies.

Denmark is no exception. Here, an increasing number of Members of Parliament (MPs) have taken up jobs in lobbying after leaving parliament (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017b). Moreover, many special Ministerial advisors in Denmark use their job as a stepping stone for a career in public affairs (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2020). This has motivated the Council of Europe's watchdog on corruption, GRECO, to call for policy that regulates revolving door career moves.<sup>4</sup> Yet, we still do not know how widespread the revolving door phenomenon is among former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, just as we know little about how important the revolving door is among executives in many other political systems. Hence, most research on revolving door has tended to focus on legislatures instead of the executive branch (e.g., Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017b; Claessen et al. 2021).

Ministers and Permanent Secretaries – who make up the top of the bureaucracy – should be highly valuable employees for companies and interest associations. For one, they are likely to have substantial technical expertise about key issues within their former policy portfolios. Hence, it is likely that their political clout and networks can be used by their new employers to obtain both access and policy influence (Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012). Since most rule-production takes place in the bureaucracy, these networks and substantive insights are likely to exceed the value of any single backbencher in parliament. Learning more about the revolving door among these former executives and top civil servants in Denmark (and elsewhere) should thus be of key importance for judging the impact of the revolving door on decision-making and democratic governance.

To do so, the aim of our research note is to examine how extensive the revolving door is in the executive branch of the Danish political system. After a brief literature review on the revolving door, we present a new open-access dataset<sup>5</sup> detailing both whether former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries moved into private sector jobs, which types of jobs they moved to and what the timing of these job moves was. By doing so, we add knowledge of both the frequency of the revolving door and the responsibilities involved in the jobs that former top civil servants and politicians take on in interest associations and companies.

We examine all Ministers and Permanent Secretaries in the 2009–2019 period and document that a substantial share of them passes through the revolving door. More than a third of them end up in a private sector job within the same year or the year after they stop their job. A quarter of them even get a senior position in the organization of their new employer during this period, though some senior positions in the private sector are in organizations with no large political or economic presence. Moreover, if we look at the entire 2009–2019 period, the share of former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries getting a job in the private sector is even above 60 percent.

We conclude with some reflections on how our new dataset can serve as a crucial starting point for a future research agenda with researchers tracing the consequences of the career moves we demonstrate. Finally, we call for more comparative research projects on the revolving door using joint conceptual and operational definitions since the different analytical foci and definitions employed in studies make it hard to compare existing findings.

## The Revolving Door in European Political Systems

We have evidence of a revolving door in a number of European political systems. Starting with the European Union, it has been demonstrated that, even if the revolving door is not used to the same extent here as in the US system, it occurs (Coen & Vannoni 2016; 2020a; 2020b). Similarly, Vaubel et al. (2012) found that 39 percent of EU commissioners leaving the Commission between 1981 and 2009 later became lobbyists (see also Freund & Bendel 2016). There is also some evidence that these career moves might make a difference. Luechinger and Moser (2020) show that EU employers hiring revolvers see improved results in the stock market, and a recent paper (Egerod et al. 2020) finds that interest groups hiring former Commission officials increase their access to meetings with the Commission subsequently.

Research also documents a revolving door for executives and top civil servants in Ireland (Barturo & Arlow 2018), for parliamentarians in Germany and Netherlands (Claessen et al. 2021), for politicians and civil servants in Norway (Allern 2015) and for policy professionals such as consultants and political advisors in Sweden (Selling & Svallfors 2019). In Denmark, Blach-Ørsten and colleagues (Blach-Ørsten et al. 2017a; 2017b) find an increased tendency from 1981 to 2015 for MPs to get jobs within what they referred to as ‘policy professional’ industries, such as lobbying, communication and think tanks. Blach-Ørsten et al. (2020) have also examined career paths of Danish Ministerial advisors and shown that many of them use these jobs as a stepping stone for a career in public affairs.

The studies mentioned earlier all have a slightly different research focus and do not always use the same definitions. While this creates challenges comparing their findings, they all underline the relevance of the revolving door phenomenon in a European context. The dataset we present in this note builds on this existing body of work in a way that allows us to fill some of the research gaps. First, we use a detailed coding of the new employers of the revolvers, which allows us to include career moves to a broad range of employers (including but far from limited to firms). Second, our study registers not only *where* revolvers move to but also the *job function* they get. This allows us to code the nature and level of responsibility of their new positions. Third, we explicitly account for *the timing* of career moves by tracing the date of job changes for our revolvers. Fourth, and most importantly, our



focus is on career moves of former Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, who have so far not been studied in Danish research on the revolving door, even if they can be expected to provide important assets for their future employers.

## Theoretical Framework

We leverage existing research to guide the construction of our dataset as well as the descriptive statistics we present later in this paper. Overall, previous research emphasizes two key reasons that hiring revolvers should be beneficial: they bring *political connections* and *expertise* to their new employers (e.g., Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012; Bertrand et al. 2014; LaPira & Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018; Shepherd & You 2020). Former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries can be expected to contribute with both types of resources. Additionally, ideological proximity has been suggested as an asset for revolvers. Hirsch et al. (2019) suggest that influence-seeking groups hire people who share their goals, because they can trust them to pursue the organization's goals faithfully. Conversely, a connection-based view would predict that groups hire revolvers from the opposing ideological side, since the connection could be used to persuade politicians that disagree with the group's goals.

We focus on Ministers and Permanent Secretaries as they are, respectively, the political and civil service heads of the bureaucracy. We also distinguish between the different types of employers hiring revolvers. Hence, previous research suggests that groups with a broad representational base are viewed as more legitimate and are less dependent on political connections to access the political system. On the other hand, firms with a weaker representational capacity may be more dependent on revolvers to secure access and influence (Egerod et al. 2020).

## The Dataset

We collected information about future jobs<sup>6</sup> of all Danish Permanent Secretaries and Ministers that held office in the 2009–2019 period, which include both left- and right-wing governments. Data were collected from the webpage of the Danish Parliament (ft.dk) as well as LinkedIn, proff.dk, ownr.dk and the print media (for more details on period of study and sources, see Online Appendix S2). We designed a detailed codebook allowing us to code both the position and types of employers revolvers move to (see a detailed codebook available in Online Appendix S3). Employers are coded according to whether they belong to the state (e.g., another ministry or a state agency), form a political party, are companies or different types of interest organizations (e.g., employers' associations, trade unions and public

interest groups). We draw a key distinction between employers and jobs that (1) belong to the public sector, political parties, or politically elected or appointed offices<sup>7</sup> and (2) jobs that fall outside this category and can broadly speaking be seen as private sector jobs.<sup>8</sup> For jobs within the second category, we also distinguish between whether positions are senior (i.e., C-Suite or directorships) or not.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the private sector in this broad conception includes not only firms (as stated earlier) but also organized interests that seek to shape public policy.

Importantly, we count the time period of job changes for all Ministers and Permanent Secretaries during our 2009–2019 observation period. In other words, if a person resigns as a Minister in 2018 and gets a job in the private sector in 2019, she will be counted as a Minister obtaining a job outside the public sector, a political party, or a politically elected or appointed office in the same or the year after leaving office.

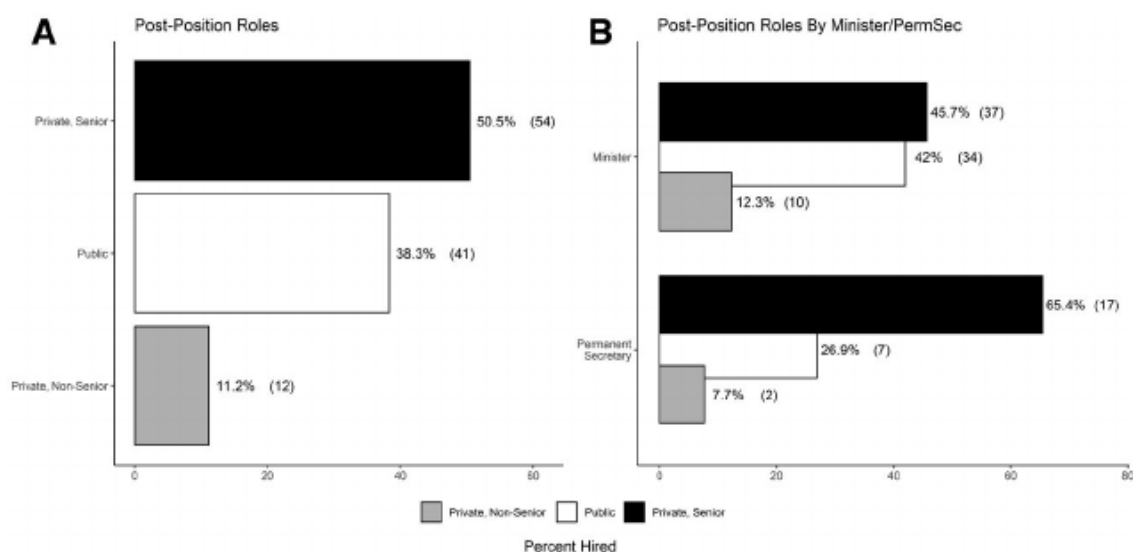
A challenge involved in coding Ministerial jurisdictions is that they have undergone several changes during our observation period. Ministries are coded according to uniformity of area of responsibility so that, for example, the ‘Ministry of Children and Education’, the ‘Ministry of Children and Social Affairs’ and the ‘Ministry of the Interior and Social Affairs’ belong together, and the ‘Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Interior’ and the ‘Ministry of Economic and Business Affairs’ belong together. Finally, the political affiliation of Ministers is coded based on the party she represented during her term of office.

## The Extensive Executive Revolving Door in Denmark

Our data on the revolving door among Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries document that the revolving door is quite prevalent among these top politicians and civil servants. According to panel A in Figure 1, approximately 62 percent of all former Ministers and Permanent Secretaries took up non-elective senior and non-senior positions outside of the public sector and political parties in the 2009–2019 period. Panel B shows that among Permanent Secretaries, 65 percent get a senior position in the private sector, while 46 percent of former Ministers land such a job. It should be noted that some senior positions in the private sector are in organizations with no large political or economic presence.

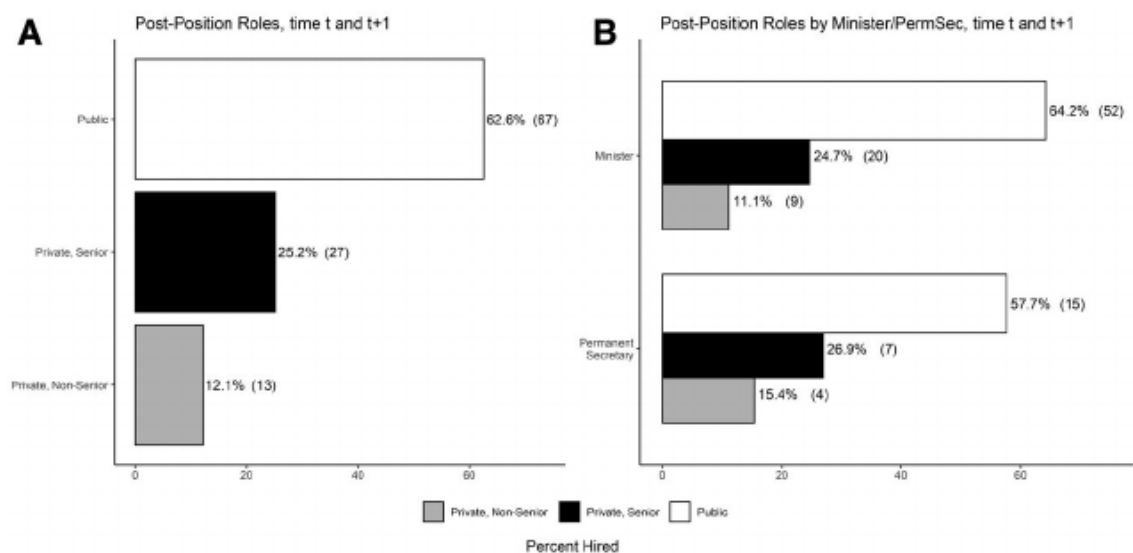
Next, we examine how many take revolving door employment during the year or the year after they leave a position as a Minister or a Permanent Secretary. Panel A in Figure 2 shows that approximately 37 percent walk through the revolving door within the first year of leaving public service, with approximately two-thirds of them getting a senior position.

Figure 1. Revolving Door Moves during the Entire Period after Position as Minister/Permanent Secretary (N: 81 Ministers and 26 Permanent Secretaries).



Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

Figure 2. Revolving Door Movements in the Year of Leaving or the Year after Position as Minister/Permanent Secretary (N: 81 Ministers and 26 Permanent Secretaries).



Note: Number of observations in parentheses.

Panel B shows that Ministers are somewhat more likely than Permanent Secretaries to stay in the public sector in the first period after leaving their post.



### *Which Types of Interest Groups Hire Revolvers?*

As suggested, firms might hire more revolvers as their political connections can potentially make up for their lack of a broad representative base when it comes to securing access.

Figure 3 therefore takes a first stab at which type of actors hire the Ministers and Permanent Secretaries, examining both the entire period after leaving office (panel A) and the period immediately after the end of the positions as Minister or Permanent Secretary (panel B).

We see that among private sector organizations, firms are indeed the largest taker of our revolvers irrespective of which of the two time spans we consider. They include public affairs organizations (around 7 percent of all post-ministerial and 3 percent of all post-secretary firm positions for the entire period are in public affairs firms).

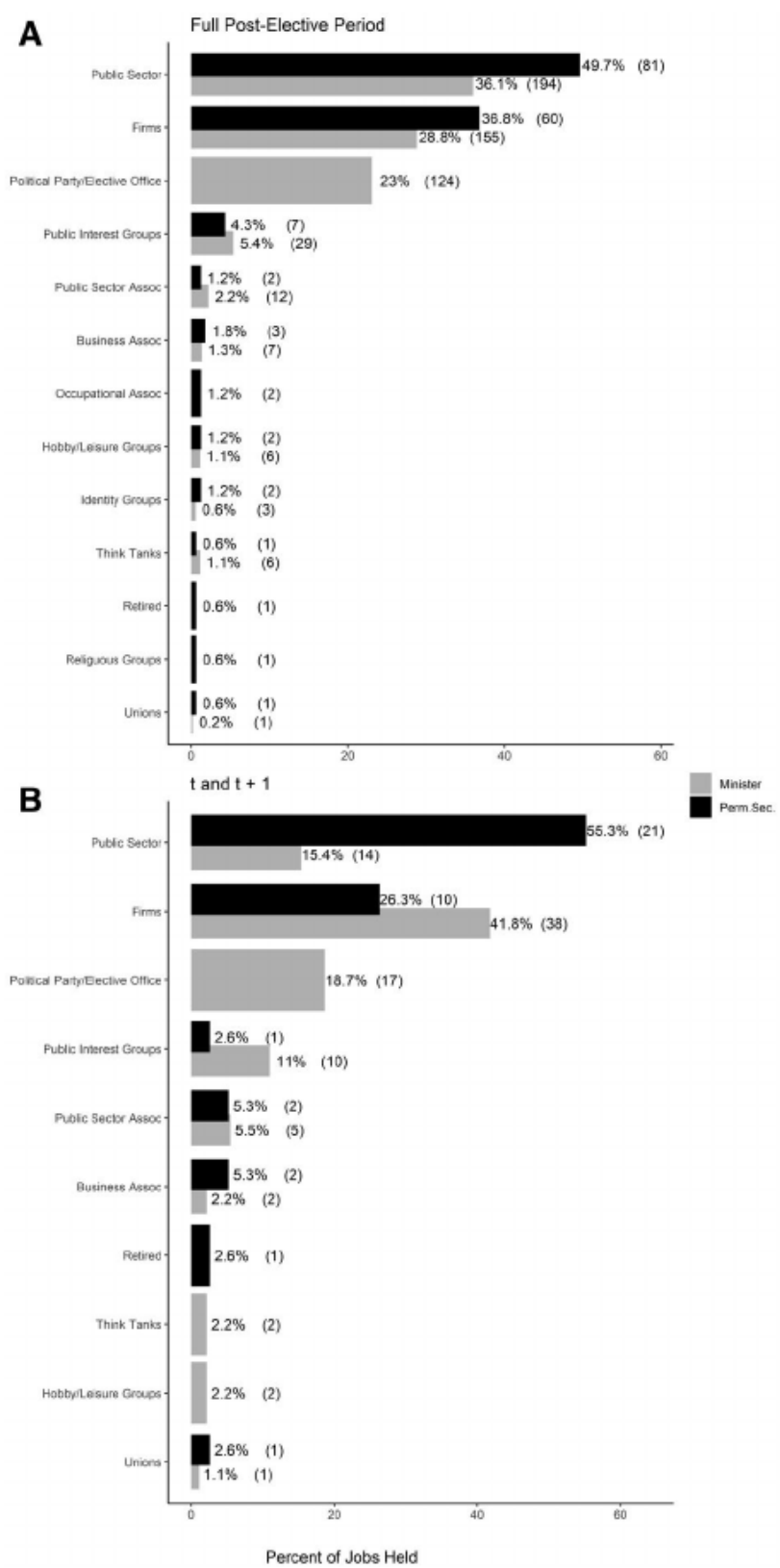
If we compare the two types of revolvers and consider the timing of revolving, the data reveal several interesting findings. Among the revolvers that take a corporate job immediately after their current position, Ministers tend to do so at a higher rate than Permanent Secretaries. However, when we look at the entire period, the picture is different with a larger share of jobs held by Permanent Secretaries than Ministers being corporate jobs. This suggests that Ministers are in the highest demand immediately after they end their term in office. The information and skill they obtain during public service may depreciate relatively quickly. Alternatively, Ministers may have a harder time advancing their career in another public office and, therefore, choose to go the corporate way. Permanent Secretaries, on the other hand, often take another term in public service, before they leave for a corporate job. Finally, we also see that a smaller share of our revolvers join public interest groups (such as environmental and consumer groups) and even fewer become employed by business associations. Interestingly, labor unions are at the bottom of the list. From the perspective of our theoretical framework, this makes sense: these types of organizations get legitimacy from their member-base and (most often) do not need to hire revolvers.

In Figure 4, we delve deeper into these patterns by looking at the type of positions revolvers obtain for the different types of future employers. The data show that firms not only employ most of the former Ministers and Permanent Secretaries who walk through the revolving door, but they also employ a large share of revolvers in a senior position. For the other types of employers, we refrain from interpreting the patterns, as they are based on few observations. We still present them for transparency, however.

### *Which Ministries and Political Parties Produce Most Revolvers?*

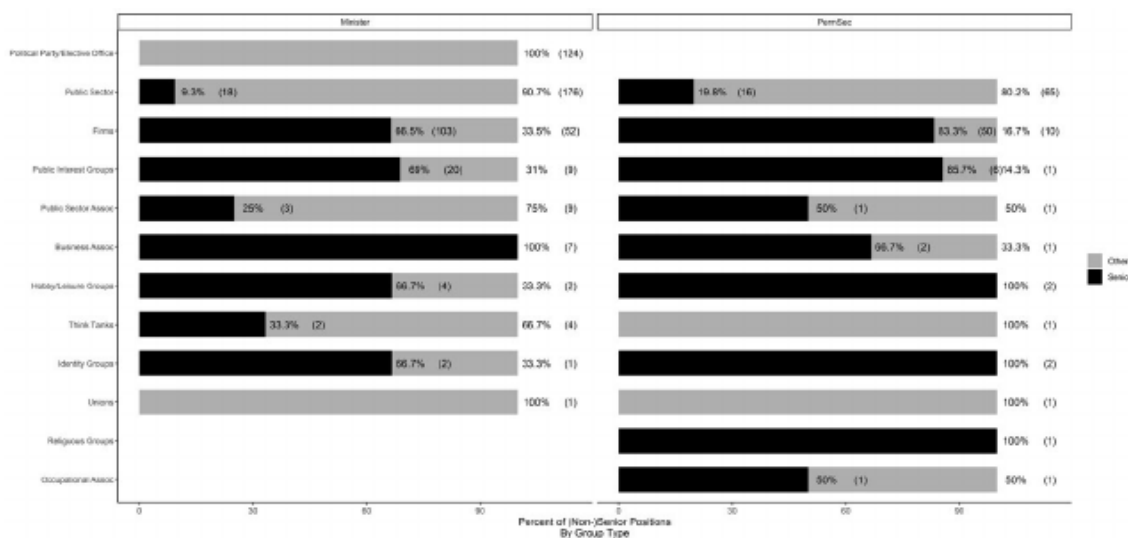
Previously, we have suggested that revolvers may be hired because of their knowledge, their political connections and their ideological proximity to

Figure 3. Share of Jobs Held by Ministers/Permanent Secretaries in Different Types of Organizations.



Note: The number of observations is different here, as we are looking at the percent of jobs, and some hold several jobs.

Figure 4. Share of (Non)Senior Positions Held by Ministers and Permanent Secretaries by Type of Organization.

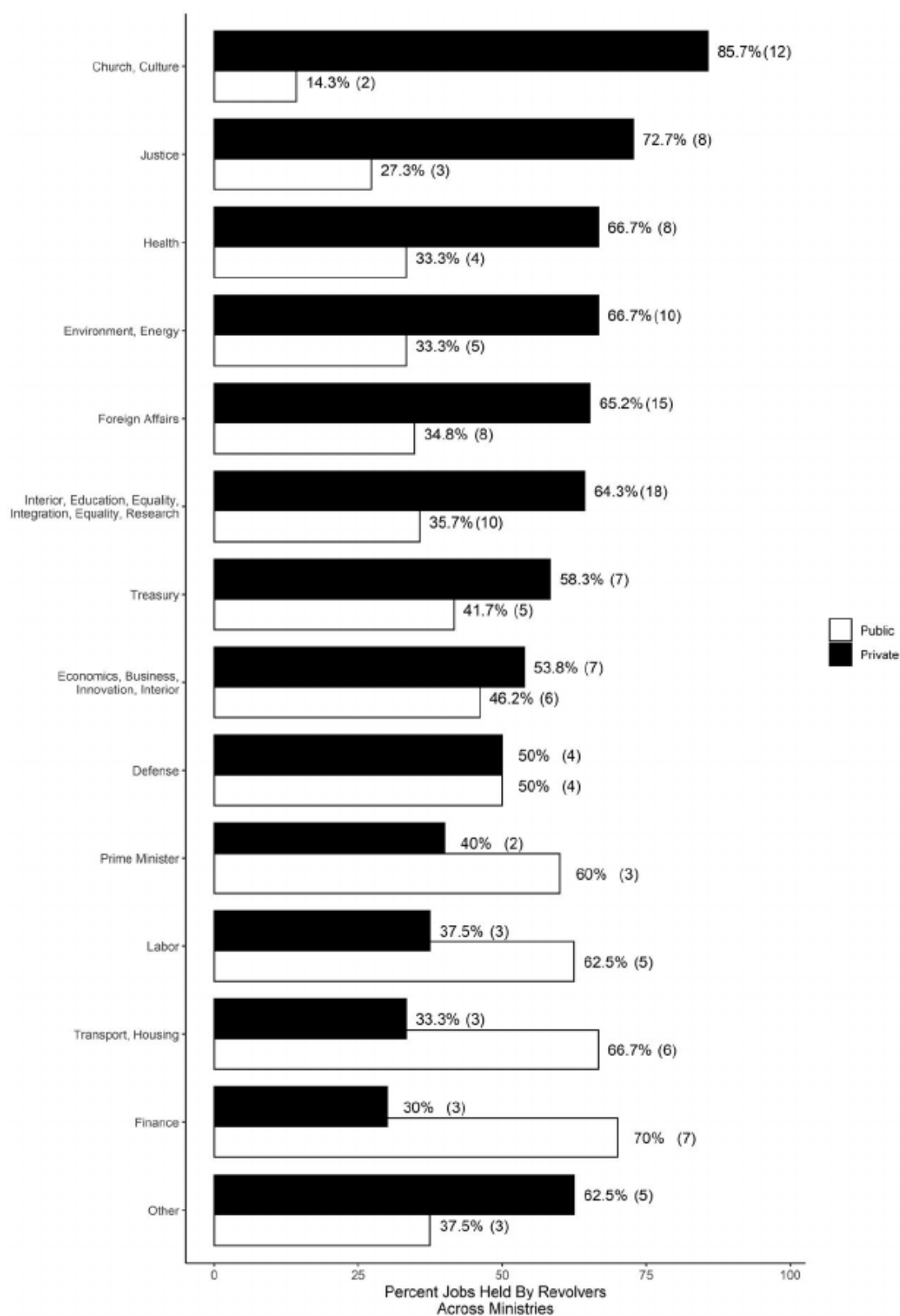


*Note:* The number of observations is different here, as we are looking at the percent of jobs, and some hold several jobs.

a given private sector organization. We investigate these expectations in Figures 5 and 6. Turning first to departures from the ministries in Figure 5, we find the ministries responsible for the ‘softer’ areas (e.g., health, environment, church and culture) tend to see more of their Ministers and Permanent Secretaries walk through the revolving door. Importantly, while many of these ministries each represent few observations in our dataset, the pattern is so strong that, if we collapsed them along a hard/soft divide, the interpretation would be the same. One might have expected more revolvers from the ministries involved with economic policy, as this form of expertise is often valued highly on the private sector. One very tentative interpretation is that this suggests that political connections matter a great deal for hiring decisions, as revolvers from any ministry seem to be valuable. An interesting exception is the Ministry of Justice, which cannot be thought of as a ‘soft’ area, exactly. On the other hand, Ministers and Permanent Secretaries from the economic ministries could also be expected to have a very bright future career in public service. This could weigh against taking revolving door employment.

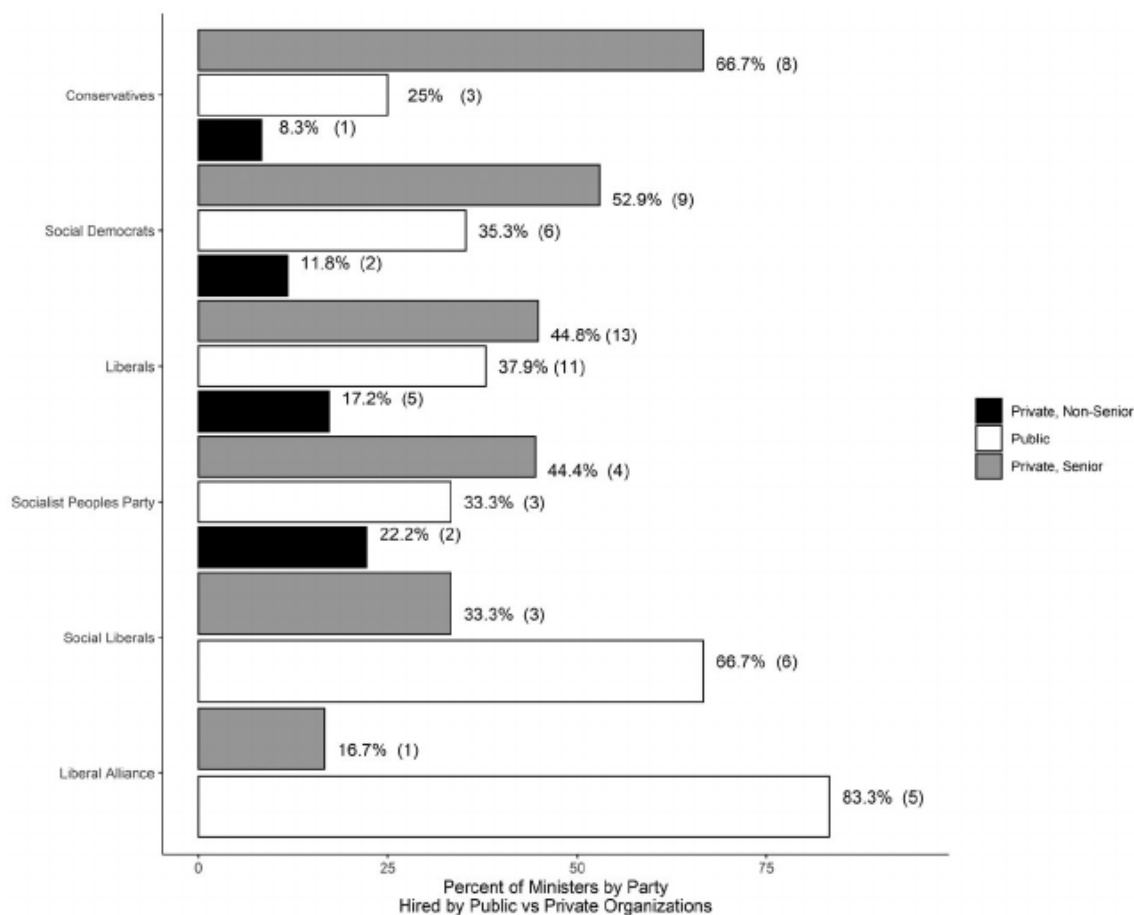
Finally, turning to Figure 6, predominantly former Ministers from the Socialist People’s Party (SF) and the Conservatives have taken revolving door jobs. Respectively, 67 percent and 75 percent of them left office for senior and non-senior private sector employment. Particularly the finding regarding SF is of interest here – ideologically, Ministers from this party could be expected to shy away from revolving door jobs. This pattern suggests that this assumption is either incorrect or that the pay-off from taking private

Figure 5. Share of Revolvers by Ministry ('Interior' is seen in two categories as the Interior-ministry has been included in several different constellations with other ministries (one including 'Economics'), and we wanted to differentiate between ministries including 'Economics', 'Business' and 'Innovation' and those without.).



Note: The number of observations is different here, as we are looking at the percent of jobs, and some hold several jobs.

Figure 6. Share of Ministers Who Take Revolving Door Jobs by Political Party (The number of Ministers in Figure 6 is one higher than in Figures 1 and 2 since one minister has represented two parties).



sector employment has been high enough for SF Ministers to make up for the ideological cost of walking through the revolving door. Importantly, we have also investigated which type of actor SF revolvers became employed with, and a full 85 percent took jobs with firms. Although some of the firms cannot be described as high profile, the fact that many of these firms do not defend the interests of traditional SF voters shows that not only ideological proximity matters for hiring decisions. This is interesting given that shared ideology is often seen as one of the important predictors of which political parties in office interest groups collaborate with (e.g., Otjes & Rasmussen 2017; Allern et al. 2021). Still, we need to not overinterpret these patterns given the relatively low number of Ministers per party.

## Conclusion

The prospects of walking through the revolving door might affect both the incentives of civil servants and politicians while they are in office (e.g.,



Shepherd & You 2020), and future employers might gain from hiring revolvers (McCrain 2018). It is therefore not surprising that recent years have seen an increase in studies of the revolving door, not least in a European context. We add to this endeavour by presenting the first dataset of the executive revolving door in Denmark, systematically tracing the career moves of former Danish Ministers and Permanent Secretaries in the 2009–2019 period.

Our data show that more than a third of them get jobs outside the public sector, political parties or other political offices in the same year or the year after leaving their job as Minister or Permanent Secretary. A quarter of them even get a senior position in the private sector during this time, though some senior positions in the private sector are in organizations with no large political or economic presence. Looking at the entire 2009–2019 period, the share of Ministers and Permanent Secretaries getting a private sector job is as high as 60 percent, and most of them find employment in private companies. While the main purpose of our research note is to present a new dataset, our descriptive data also allow us to shed some first light on the factors that drive the hiring decisions of revolvers. As an example, the fact that firms hire the vast share of revolvers and that revolvers come from a broad variety of political parties suggests that these decisions may not first and foremost be driven by a motivation to find ideologically proximate revolvers. Similarly, technical expertise may not be a main reason for hiring decisions either. Hence, we see that revolvers are not necessarily those that come from the ministerial portfolios where we would expect them to have had the strongest conditions for building up specific forms of technical expertise relevant for their future employers. Instead, our results tentatively suggest that connections play a key role for whom influence-seeking groups hire. This fits with the descriptive picture we find where the revolving door phenomenon is not isolated to specific parts of the bureaucracy or political parties. As indicated, political connections are likely to be particularly valuable for firms when they hire revolvers, and they can potentially help firms compensate for their lack of a broad representative base.

We hope that our dataset can act as a stepping stone for future research in at least two ways. First, the systematic and open-access dataset of career moves we provide could lay the ground for research examining the actual consequences of the revolving door for their future employers. To date, only a smaller number of studies have started examining the consequences of the revolving door. They have, for example, shown that hiring revolvers helps post-elective employers in the contract lobbying industry produce an economic premium (e.g., Blanes i Vidal et al. 2012; LaPira & Thomas 2017; McCrain 2018) and improve their stock market performance (Luechinger & Moser 2020). Yet, the literature on the consequences of the revolving door is still limited, and studies have rarely considered its impact on lobbying access and success. This could for example be done by linking our data

on who hires revolvers with information about the political strategies and influence of the revolvers' new employers on specific policy issues.

Second, we hope to stimulate more country comparative data collection and research. Hence, while there may be good reasons for the differences in conceptual and operational definitions used in different country studies, we believe there is sufficient ground between them to work towards shared definitions. This would enable us to compare both the scale and effects of the revolving door between countries. What is clear is that there is a large uncultivated potential for expanding our knowledge of the revolving door and its consequences. Such research is vital in a political reality where the revolving door is widespread and where the need to provide policy advice for whether and how to regulate the revolving door is increasing.

## NOTES

1. Online Appendix S1 presents additional examples.
2. See, e.g., <https://www.information.dk/debat/2014/03/svingdoerens-magt>; <https://politiken.dk/debat/debatindlaeg/art7395064/Skift-som-Sass-Larsens-smelter-magteliten-sammen-og-%C3%B8ger-mistilliden-til-politikerne> (retrieved 8 November 2020).
3. <https://www.information.dk/debat/2014/03/svingdoerens-magt> (retrieved 8 November 2020).
4. <https://rm.coe.int/fifth-evaluation-round-preventing-corruption-and-promoting-integrity-i/168097203a>.
5. The dataset is available here: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OYW9GF>.
6. While the revolving door may also swing the other direction, most research focuses on the transition from the public to the private sector.
7. To be retired in our data means having no other jobs than, at most, being self-employed after leaving public office. This is only relevant for one person in our data. In Figures 1, 2, 5 and 6, he is included in the Public category given that he did not leave the public sector before retirement. If a person is recorded as having had, for example, part-time positions on boards even after 'official retiring' from public office, they are not coded as retired but as being revolvers.
8. This classification excludes jobs coinciding with the job as Minister or Permanent Secretary as these will usually be small jobs.
9. This classification excludes jobs in companies with a single or a small number of owners given that they only have few additional employees apart from the CEO (if any). Some of these are also small companies that the revolvers have started themselves.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Danish Examples of an Executive Revolving Door

Appendix S2. Choice of Time Period and Sources

Appendix S3. Codebook for 'The (Executive) Revolving Door in Denmark'

