Studying the core of European politics

To a large extent, the questions connected to the processes of making and breaking governments that have attracted a considerable group of scholars since the rebirth of the discipline of political science after World War II (WWII) are reminiscent of some of the crucial issues traditionally raised in the works of ‘classic political science’ dating back to the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

In particular, a clear connection is evident between the empirical study of the contemporary class of rulers and the normative questions at the core of the so-called ‘classic elitist school’ on the distinction between ruling classes and ruled people and the maintenance of links between the two. Similarly, the arguments raised by Max Weber in his political writings – the claim for a strong parliament legitimating and controlling executive leaders, and the view of parliamentary arenas as ideal environments in which to grow responsive classes of professional politicians selected by modern and organized parties – have nurtured the democratic theories that emerged during the past century, inspiring different generations of scholars who have built the discipline of the empirical analysis of political phenomena.

The crux of representative democracy is the accountability of government through the electoral process. In parliamentary democracies, which was the typical form of democratic government in Europe for most of the post-1945 period (see Chapters 17–20), all executive power is responsible to the legislature, whilst in the semi-presidential forms chosen in most of the new Central and East European democracies and already well established in only a few West European ones, a cabinet headed by a prime minister is accountable both to the president and to parliament. The relevance of these executives, given their dominance over the legislative branch in policy-making and the not straightforward – indirect – link between electoral outcomes and government composition due to the frequency of ‘minority situations’ (‘hung parliaments’, in Westminster parlance) in fragmented West European parliamentary assemblies, has boosted the interest of generations of political scientists and led to the development of a sub-field dedicated to explaining and predicting government composition in parliamentary democracies, what is usually referred to as ‘coalition formation’ studies. After about five decades of research by game theorists, country experts and comparative politics scholars on why some
coalition governments form while others do not, how they distribute office and policy payoffs to their components, how they make arrangements to guarantee a certain level of stability, how they eventually collapse and the electoral consequences of their downfall, this field has become highly developed. This maturation can be seen in terms of the diversity of theoretical approaches and models that are competing, their degree of formalization, the sophistication of statistical methods applied and the richness of data sets used for testing hypotheses derived from theory. However, in a ‘state of the art’ piece on parties and government, De Winter (2002: 205) pointed out that of all the aspects of government formation – party composition, definition of the government policy platform, allocation of ministerial portfolios among partisan actors and ministerial personnel selection processes – the last had received least attention from scholars. Even more recently, Strom et al. (2008) rightly argued that what happens between government formation and collective termination is still poorly documented and understood. This is all the more true when one considers the motivations, actions and fates of the individual ministers De Winter (2002) referred to, those who form, populate and leave cabinets. What do they actually represent? Can they personally impact upon policy, to what extent are they individually accountable for their own actions or the actions of their department? How do they relate to the actors who selected them, be they prime ministers (or presidents in semi-presidential systems), party or faction leaders who could also decide to end their ministerial term, and how do they fare with the convention of collective responsibility in cabinet?

In a nutshell, political scientists, but also sociologists, anthropologists, historians, psychologists, economists and lawyers and the public at large should be interested in studying executive government and the individuals who populate governments because of their relevance to the decisions that may affect diverse aspects of our lives. Taking the contribution of political science to this study into consideration in the context of this Handbook, there are a number of reasons why our knowledge remains limited. First, our discipline is still young and its continental Europe brand has long been dominated by constitutional lawyers and their formal and often parochial approach to the specificities of the legal and institutional setting under study. Second, institutional accounts – even when they are explanatory and not merely descriptive, as in the research tradition just referred to – are bound to be incomplete. Although they provide incentives for actors involved in them, institutions leave some scope for human agency, as seen by the comparative successes and failures experienced by individual elites evolving either in the same cabinet, succeeding ones in the same country or across similar institutional contexts. Such a basic observation suggests both agency for individuals and also strategic behaviour on the part of the relevant actors. The former in turn raises methodological and epistemological problems for political scientists having to deal with phenomena which have to be connected to many explananda, are not easily comparable from one case to another and are less amenable to systematic enquiry, such as individual personality, competence or ‘style’. In addition, both discovering such idiosyncratic characteristics and tracing the strategic moves of elites involved is rendered particularly difficult given the level of secrecy surrounding the high circles of executive politics. Collecting and coding biographical data and policy documents is a long and often frustrating job; getting interviews from ministers and witnesses of governmental practices is also painstaking, and the propensity of these actors to report somewhat biased accounts of events in order to justify their behaviour or overstate their personal impact must be accounted for. Such an intensive type of research has long prevented large-scale comparative projects with potential from developing. The situation has recently changed, with the development of international networks of scholars dedicated to the systematic collection of data and therefore extending the number of cases and variety contexts under study, allowing for the use of sophisticated statistical methods to confront alternative hypotheses in multivariate tests. Innovative techniques of data collection are also increasingly available, which
can, for instance, help in inferring party or individual preferences from automatic content analysis of the massive amounts of official documents, in reconstructing chronologies of events with a mention of the presence or actions of individual actors from press accounts, or yet other potentially powerful (yet sometimes messy) techniques of data mining, retrieving information from a variety of websites. All these tools are now in the toolkit of scholars dealing with the study of executives, including ministerial selection and de-selection.

In this chapter we aim to illustrate the main questions arising from the literature, some significant findings and the questions still under discussion in what concerns the comparative study of selection and de-selection of ministerial teams in Europe. Given the complexity of the problems and the vastness of the relevant literature, we operate a somewhat drastic choice and reduce the scope of the chapter to the three following dimensions, which are of course very much interrelated:

- the selection of cabinet ministers, ministerial circulation and the career paths of European ministers;
- the allocation of portfolios and the individual accountability of ministers within European cabinets;
- the patterns of governmental and ministerial stability, dismissals, resignations and reshuffles within European cabinets.

Hence, we will start with works dedicated to the selection of democratic rulers, mainly derived from the classic elite theory, then move to another traditional question: ‘Who gets what?’, that is the study of portfolio allocation and of the other possible payoffs distributed during the process of government formation. Later, we will get into more recent developments in comparative analysis of government formation, developed along the lines of the principal–agent theory. A short final section will provide ways forward in the study of ministerial selection and de-selection.

First, however, we need to delineate the object under study: ministers are cabinet members, the cabinet generally consisting of around 20 senior officials, sitting in weekly meetings chaired by a prime minister (PM), through which all major policy initiatives from the government pass and receive final and collective approval. This body is considered to be the highest decision-making level of government in parliamentary democracies. One of the main differences from presidential systems such as the US one is that the cabinet, with the technical resources of the different departments of the civil service at its disposal, has the exclusive right to draft and present the budget to parliament for ratification. Individual ministers cannot go to parliament on their own to seek funds for their department; they are bound to the collective deal arrived at and presented as such to the parliament, to which the cabinet is collectively accountable. Therefore a cabinet can be defined by its respective organs: the PM, individual ministers and the collective body which is also referred to as the council of ministers. Generally ministers have voting rights (even though actual voting does not often take place) at the table of the council, they take part in specialized cabinet committees related to their assigned policy jurisdiction and they head a government department; hence their role is to initiate and then implement policy in their department; hence their role is to initiate and then implement policy in their department, provided that in the meantime they convince their colleagues to adopt the policy in question collectively in a cabinet meeting. But all these typical characteristics need not be met for a variety of ministers who either do not head a department because they were attributed no ministerial portfolio, or are not de jure/permanent members of the council but may be invited to address issues related to their policy remit, such as junior ministers, who often are delegated full responsibility for specific sectors by the PM or the holder of relevant ministerial portfolio. Given their importance in terms of apprenticeship and therefore in the career paths of senior
ministers, as well as their role as an oversight/monitoring mechanism in coalition governments, we consider junior ministers as well in our account of the selection and de-selection of ministers in Europe.

Selection and circulation of ministers in Europe: a late reappraisal

*Nemo prophet a in patria.* No other dictum can be more appropriate to describe the imbalance in the spread of ideas of the classic social scientists between the two sides of the Atlantic. This applies indeed to Gaetano Mosca and Wilfredo Pareto – the most celebrated classic elitists – but to a large extent even to other authors like Robert Michels and Moisei Ostrogorski, whose reflections on the structure of political parties were extremely influential, and even to Max Weber, whose works on the selection of the ‘top layer of the society’ were analysed and deeply re-elaborated by a number of American scholars.

The debate on elitism and the diffusion of the *myth of the ruling class* (Meisel 1962) and the development of the behaviouralist movement paved the way for a massive body of research in the study of political leadership and top political elites in North America. Some of the American (or Americanized) scholars who during the 1960s were among the protagonists of the ‘revolutionary age’ of social sciences in the North American academic environment included, to some extent, the study of government formation and ministerial elites in some Western European democracies, thereby ensuring some comparative dimension in their research (see, for instance, Stanley Hoffman, Samuel Barnes, Joseph Schlesinger, Donald Matthews and, later, Robert Putnam, amongst others). In 1967 Lewis Edinger, probably one of the most representative researchers in the field, published an important edited collection titled *Political Leadership in Industrialized Societies* where the topic of governmental leadership was explored in several comparative chapters.

However, critical aspects of the formation of executive bodies such as the characteristics of the elite people involved in these processes were still almost completely neglected. If this was true for research on US politics, where the Congress and the presidency represent the two pillars around which most of the literature is concentrated, the gap in knowledge was even greater in the European context: here, the predominance of parliamentary systems and the role played by strong political parties, collective actors considered to behave as unitary ones, in the processes of government formation (Laver and Schofield 1990) made the analysis of these processes at the individual elite level appear less relevant. In an oft-quoted book from the mid-1980s which marked a first general worldwide assessment on the topic, Jean Blondel argued that the study of ministers and ministerial careers was still in its infancy (Blondel 1985: 8). At that time, only a handful of single-country studies had been produced, focusing on the biographical and motivational characters of cabinet ministers in European democracies. Some were foundational, such as the research by Bruce Headey on British cabinet ministers (Headey 1974a), which led to a first discussion of the different ministerial skills in a comparative perspective (Headey 1974b). But the most active scholar in the comparative study of ministerial selection was probably Mattei Dogan, the French founder (1971) and first chair of the Research Committee on Elites of the International Political Science Association. Dogan was particularly proactive in the construction of a systematic ‘trans-Atlantic’ comparison between European and North American elite systems (Dogan 1975, 1989) that significantly strengthened our knowledge of the specific patterns of leader selection and ministerial careers in Europe.

The 1980s marked a turning point in the study of comparative government and the widespread occurrence of coalition governments in Europe (Browne and Dreijmanis 1982; Bogdanor 1983). The specific topic of governmental leadership was explored in a trilogy written
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by Jean Blondel during that decade (Blondel 1980, 1985, 1987). In his 1985 book dedicated to the components of governmental teams, Blondel explored the similarities and differences among ministers of democratic regimes after 1945 and laid down some fundamental questions about the growth of the scope and the increasing specialization of ministerial personnel that can be considered as the skeleton of a broader research agenda he later led on the internal life of West European cabinets (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1988, 1993; Blondel and Thiébault 1991). This enterprise marked the first pan-European attempt of systematic data-gathering on the careers and the circulation of ministers in Europe as well as on the internal workings of cabinets. This provided for rich edited volumes that built a body of empirical research marrying detailed country expertise and genuine comparative analysis, for instance on the differences in decision-making processes between and within single-party and coalition cabinet types.

A study of the characteristics of individuals involved in the cabinets of 13 European countries was undertaken in The Profession of Government Ministers in Western Europe (Blondel and Thiébault 1991). Among the main findings of this volume, we may mention the variety of typical ministerial backgrounds across European countries, between those where many outsiders – ministers with no parliamentary and leading party background – are recruited in government and those where the traditional paths from the parliamentary (and the party) ranks to the ministerial inner circle are strictly observed (De Winter 1991). In the first group we find the Netherlands, some Nordic democracies and the semi-presidential systems, while Italy, Denmark, Belgium and Ireland are good examples of the second type. A second intriguing result is the variety among European countries with regard to ministerial duration. As was also documented by Dogan (1989) and in previous country studies, certain groups of ministers last much longer in office than the cabinets they were hired for, and through these successive appointments they can provide some continuity in state leadership even in times of cabinet instability (such as inter-war Belgium or the French Fourth Republic). It was found that, on average, West European ministers remain in office twice as long as cabinets survive, even though this rate may be much greater in some cases, such as in post-WWII Italy.

Widening and deepening the analysis of an increasingly complex elite: recent developments

The phenomena of ministerial selection and ministerial careers studied in the seminal works mentioned above have undergone a series of transformations over the past three decades or so. The collapse of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have led to an increase in the number and variety of comparable cases to be analysed. Other relevant phenomena impacting on the processes of elite selection and circulation were the deepening of European integration and the reforms introducing decentralization or federalization of powers in some European countries, and phenomena of de-alignments and realignments of European electorates, leading to an historical decline in support for some of the most stable parties in the traditional Western European political landscape. This has determined new patterns in the party composition of governments (see Chapters 17, 20 and 27). All these aspects affect in many ways what goes on in – and therefore what we should expect to observe in terms of the skills, the scope of action and the durability of ministerial personnel evolving in – these transforming secret rooms of our political systems.

The wave of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe has not simply broadened our perspective in terms of enlarging the number of ‘comparable cases’ for the study of democratic governments and their ministerial elites. The characters of the elites and the conditions of the rise of some patterns of cabinet government show a number of similarities with the West European
democracies, but the resilience of the past administrative and political structures, as well as the presence of very different party systems, explains the high level of diversity in the making of democratic governments in Central and Eastern Europe today. This is the main conclusion from the first systematic comparative assessment of the experience of the first two decades of democratic governance in ten countries from the CEE area stimulated, once again, by Jean Blondel (Blondel et al. 2007). Evidence suggests a difficult and somehow uncertain process of consolidation of one or more pattern(s) of government formation, and the role played by country-specific factors and difficult institutional circumstances. All these reasons appear to account for a low average ministerial duration, which is, contrary to what was found in Western Europe, only marginally higher than average duration of cabinets as a whole, so that government instability could not be compensated for by ministerial experience. This greater turnover in personnel was reported to be particularly felt in the phase of transition following the demise of communism (Blondel et al. 2007: 50–2), but again differences loomed large between ministerial terms of less than two years in countries such as Bulgaria and Lithuania and the more stable ministerial terms found in Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Fettelschoss and Nikolenyi (2009) provide further information on the reasons why ministers leave office (80 per cent of the time at the end of a cabinet rather than during its term in office) and relate national patterns to the institutional settings of the countries studied.

The background and careers of the core ministerial elite evolved somewhat in long-standing democratic Europe as well. Broadly speaking, we could mention a number of trends that are not limited to the European experience, such as an increased popular scrutiny of executives through the media and, in recent years, internet-based social media. This has led to a gradual modification of the notion of individual responsibility in a series of countries (see Dowding and Dumont 2009, 2014; Berlinski et al. 2012), testified to by a greater number of ‘affairs’ or ‘scandals’ involving ministerial elites being uncovered by the press (we see both an evolution of and a variety of thresholds and criteria for ministerial personal misconduct leading to ministerial exits, with, for instance, Scandinavian ministers being expected to resign for reasons that may be seen as minor by public opinion in other countries), discussed by the public and debated in parliament. For instance, Dowding and Dumont’s edited volume (2009) reports the increasing numbers of resignation calls and their actual consequences in the UK, Germany and Iceland, amongst others. The other side of the coin when it comes to the increasing importance of political communication is the perceived personalization of politics and the so-called ‘presidentialization’ of politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Although this terminology is widely debated (see the debate in Parliamentary Affairs, 2013), and indeed qualified in a number of the country chapters in Dowding and Dumont’s (2009) volume, a greater degree of autonomy of PMs with regard to their party and parliament may have emerged in some contexts, aided by a number of other factors.

Another main cross-national transformation of the past few decades involves the (still slowly) improving representation of women in cabinet. This has been triggered in some systems by the imposition of quotas on electoral lists and in some cases by the inclusion of new parties, such as the Greens or new Left parties campaigning for gender equality in European cabinets. Incoming chief executives in France or, more recently, in Italy (2014) have, for instance, tried to showcase an alleged drastic renewal of political personnel by appointing younger and more female ministers. The supply of greater numbers of citizens with high levels of education since the democratization of university studies has led to a path to ministerial office which is increasingly characterized by a university or even PhD degree. The education gap between elites and the general population therefore cannot be said to have been much reduced, and the differences in both
political preferences and levels of trust in politics between poorly and highly educated citizens may be increasingly worrisome in ever more complex and interdependent polities.

Relatedly, a characteristic that emerged in those democracies where anti-party sentiments and the populist challenge have developed the most has been to employ a growing number of independents within (as ministers) and around (in different advising and consulting roles) ministerial teams in Europe. This ‘technocratic’ solution is therefore seen as an answer to the deficit of responsiveness showed by the political parties in many European polities (Mair 2008), especially when governments have to cope with economic policies of retrenchment, but also when other and more ethical decisions concerning the individual sphere and civil rights are being discussed. Thus it is not only in some systems (semi-presidential democracies, because the cabinet not only relies on parliament), such as France, where presidents often refrain from selecting majority parliamentary heavyweights, in ‘difficult democracies’ such as Italy, or in more recent democracies combining some of the preceding characteristics with a popular distrust in political parties and the political class, like Portugal or Romania, that we see a higher recourse to different sources of expertise and technical personnel. Indeed, such a trend has been felt even in the most stable models of party government, as seen in Gordon Brown’s ‘government of all talents’ in the UK (Yong and Hazell 2011). The situation is even more complicated when the head of government position is temporarily offered to a non-political actor, who can therefore select a whole team of independent personalities which can be made up of ministers with quite varied skills, or by mixing politicians and non-politicians together, in a sort of technocratic-led cabinet. Such a situation of full abdication of political parties of their essential function of leadership selection has occurred during the recent financial and economic crisis in Europe, when different countries have been ruled by fully technocratic governments (among the most notorious, the Monti government in Italy and the Papademos government in Greece, governing the two countries during the peak of the crisis, between 2011 and 2012) which were not pure caretaker cabinets given the stakes they faced and the scope and complexity of the decisions they had to consider. Such an interesting variance and the local and general explanations of the increasing and multifold phenomenon of technocratic governance are currently being studied, and comparative contributions are particularly useful in this respect (Costa Pinto et al. 2014).

Finally, one must mention the effects of the progressive construction of a multi-level institutional system, particularly relevant in the EU area. First, the process of ministerial selection has now to do with a system of multifold institutions where a unidirectional pattern from the local to the national and supra-national political level can no longer be seen as the ‘norm’, but just one of the possible paths (Borchert 2012), and where a national executive position may not be seen by all ambitious politicians as the ultimate prize anymore. Ministers appointed at the national level can indeed be tempted to move to a higher level, which in many European countries is represented by EU institutions. This may only concern a small group of senior ministers, but has been reported to be among the reasons why some Irish or Belgian ministers resign from national office. In addition, the existence of a relevant policy-making level above national institutions has been said to reinforce national executives to the detriment of national parliaments (due to the lack of control of the former’s EU-linked activities) and the autonomy of member states’ PMs with regard to their cabinet colleagues, given their participation in (ever more numerous) European summits and meetings. On the one hand, this increased standing of national executives may actually reduce the odds of seeing office-holders aim at another position (note, however, that research on the characteristics of the appointed members of the European Commission and the attendant system of portfolio allocation within this institutional arena has only been undertaken in recent years; see Döring 2007; Wonka 2008; Franchino 2009). On the other hand, due to this very same increased autonomy of government leaders and because
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more sector-specific expertise is valuable for handling the technical complexities of issues dealt with at the EU level, we may observe gradual changes in the backgrounds of national ministers (Bäck et al. 2009). Second, as was already seen in previous works, executive experience at the sub-national level is valued in national ministerial selection, especially in federal countries such as Germany, for instance. This has been increasingly the case in systems that have accelerated and deepened their decentralization or federalization processes, such as Spain or Belgium, where the opportunities of heading largely autonomous regions have correspondingly become attractive for high-level politicians.

Who gets what? Portfolio allocation and individual delegation within the cabinet

In the introduction to his chapter on another classic question in the study of government formation – the one about ‘who gets what’ – Verzichelli makes the link between the selection of ministerial elites and portfolio allocation explicit: ‘Cabinet ministers are among the most important policymakers in parliamentary democracies, and ministerial offices are one of the most important pay-offs available to political parties. Political parties care about the ministries at their disposal and so do individual politicians’ (Verzichelli 2008: 237). The first reason why both parties and ministers value portfolios is the power and prestige these positions bring them at the apex of government. As the typical ‘battlefield’ of the coalition environment where different parties play the game of portfolio allocation is located in the parliamentary democracies typically found in Europe, an early test by US scholars (Browne and Franklin 1973) of a prediction originally derived by Gamson (1961) showed, indeed, that West European parties tend to distribute cabinet positions proportionally to their shares of parliamentary seats with respect to the overall coalition. This strong ‘parity norm’ with a slight underrepresentation of the formateur (usually largest) party was later confirmed using different periods and country samples as well as refined operationalization of the prizes bargained for. Druckman and Warwick (2005) lifted the assumption of portfolio equivalence (earlier studies assumed that ministerial portfolios could be traded indifferently among parties as each of them would convey the same value in government and across different countries) by collecting data on the relative weights of ministerial portfolios typically found in cabinets. Using their portfolio- and country-specific (but time-invariant) measure of saliency they found this proportional relationship again (Warwick and Druckman 2006). Druckman and Roberts (2005) further found a similar pattern in the more advanced Eastern European countries among the younger liberal democracies and therefore discovered some traces of European convergence with regard to this empirically robust but theoretically puzzling link between party seat and executive portfolio shares.

Another line of research, starting with the most influential studies in the field of coalition theory and democratic governments that emerged in the 1990s (Budge and Keman 1990; Laver and Shepsle 1990, 1996; Laver and Budge 1992), departed from this original ‘quantitative’ empirical question of the repartition of portfolio shares by considering that the control of ministerial portfolios was a crucial intervening link between party preferences and government policy; therefore parties valued portfolios not only for the office perquisites they represent to them and their leading members but also because they are policy-seeking actors. Budge and Keman (1990) showed that socialist, conservative, liberal, etc. party families tended to consistently receive the policy remits corresponding to their respective foundational party priorities and traditional clienteles when in cabinet. Laver and Shepsle (1990, 1996) had a more ambitious agenda as they built a whole theory aimed at explaining the party composition and stability of governments made up of policy-seeking parties on the assumption that the allocation of
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particular policy sectors to particular ministers creates a division of labour within cabinet such that any portfolio holder is able to implement his preferred position in his policy remit. Assuming this, key actors can then anticipate which policy any government could carry on according to the allocation it makes of particular ministries to particular parties. In their early work on this ‘portfolio allocation’ model, the authors had suggested, further, that individual ministers could well matter and that their personal reputation for being more or less socially conservative, or economically left or right oriented, could then be seen as the likely policy of the government if they were assigned a portfolio related to the relevant policy dimensions; intra-party reassignments of portfolios would then make a difference (Laver and Shepsle 1990). However, the volume these authors edited to assess a number of their proposals (Laver and Shepsle 1994) led them to revise such a claim in favour of an empirically verified propensity to see ministers in parliamentary democracies behaving as pure agents of their respective well-disciplined parties, to which they owe their current status.³ Ministers are therefore not fully autonomous in their department; they are ‘constrained optimizers’ pushing the party line in cabinet rather than ‘global maximizers’ or ‘policy dictators’.⁴

New theoretical propositions linking electoral competition to portfolio allocation (Bäck et al. 2011) or suggesting that parties set up mechanisms of coalition control at formation stage by appointing watchdog junior ministers in the ministries held by coalition partners (Thies 2001; Verzichelli 2008; Lipsmeyer and Pierce 2011; Carroll and Cox 2012), based on the same premises that ministerial portfolios allow parties to implement their policies preferences were then empirically tested in large-N studies covering a wide range of European countries. Results showed that parties indeed tend to claim and receive the policy portfolios most salient to them according to the manifestos they present to voters in electoral campaigns. This makes for an as yet underappreciated level of electoral responsiveness in the outputs of government formation, characterized by an indirect link between voters and rules in parliamentary democracies where no single party reaps a majority of seats in parliament (Bäck et al. 2011). The earlier proposition made by Thies (2001) that parties can control each other in order to contain potential policy losses, which the author found most likely to be linked with the presence or absence of institutional checks and for portfolios of greater salience, was verified empirically in the most established and complex coalition systems (with a bicameral parliament and polarized fragmented party systems) of the Netherlands, Italy and Belgium (Verzichelli 2008). Since the 2000s this phenomenon has also been found in other West European countries such as Norway, Germany and Austria (while one can observe a reduction of the occurrence of watchdog ministers in Belgium), as well as in the new coalition systems of Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Carroll and Cox 2012).

Ministerial de-selection and governmental stability

We have already mentioned that the length of individual ministerial terms in office may be quite different from the length of the cabinet. Whilst governments come and go, a proportion of ministers may not ‘survive’ until the collective end of ministerial functions marking a change of cabinet. On the other hand, some ministers may survive across different cabinets, either with the same or different portfolios. What contributes to government durability (Laver 2003) is therefore no guide for the study of individual ministers, a point empirically demonstrated by Huber and Martinez-Gallardo (2008), who showed that ministerial stability is largely independent of cabinet stability. Berlinski et al. (2007) undertook an early investigation of the effects of individual ministers’ characteristics on their chances of survival, while Berlinski et al. (2010, 2012) added the assessment of individual and collective performance on these same odds.
Definitions, methodological issues and factors affecting ministerial duration are summarized by Fischer et al. (2012). But one way of identifying relevant variables affecting the probability of ministerial selection and stability is to study the wide variety of constitutional, partisan and strategic constraints facing actors in charge of putting together and maintaining governments (Dowding and Dumont 2009). Constitutional provisions or customs may regulate who is in charge of choosing ministers to fill cabinet positions, and the roles of the head of state and PM may vary substantially according to the regime types (democratic experience varies within Western Europe as well as in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe), governmental systems (essentially parliamentary democracies and semi-presidential systems) and government types (the latter being distinguished mainly across single-party and coalition types, relying or not on a majority in parliament) one finds in post-WWII Europe. Formal and informal rules directly affect the hiring and firing of ministers in terms of what is allowed or required in the construction of a cabinet. For instance, in Westminster systems the recruitment pool is limited to members of parliament; in Belgium, the constitution since 1970 specifies that the council of ministers has to be made up of an equal number of French-speaking and Flemish ministers (the PM may be excepted from this), but one could imagine appointing actors being constrained in their choice due to the obligatory representation of other minorities (women, ethnic or religious communities). And the small size of the country and/or the size of the pool from which to choose ministers appears to have an effect on the doctrine of collective responsibility and make for greater stability in ministerial personnel, as seen in Ireland, Iceland but also in Luxembourg, for instance.

Second, the role of parties in European representative democracies has often made party leaders the crucial actors in the appointment of ministerial delegations to coalition governments, and party factions influential in the choice made by the chief executive to be in single-party cabinets. The organizational rules and conventions within parties thereby also enable and constrain the construction of cabinets in ways which vary across countries (for instance, the impact of parties differs between long-standing and newer democracies) and parties within countries. PMs in coalition systems are neither able to choose ministers from the junior party nor free to sack or demote those ministers put under pressure by the opposition or the media, in the way they might in single-party cabinets in the hope of safeguarding their popularity and that of their cabinet (Dewan and Dowding 2005). Nor is it common for coalition cabinets to undergo mid-term reshuffles in which some tainted ministers are discreetly ousted or portfolio ranks and policy remits reallocated among incumbent ministers to offer a refreshed image to voters. It is because coalitions usually rely on subtle equilibria that PMs would rather reconsider such moves given potentially their large transaction costs; they would prefer to keep on good terms with leaders of their coalition partners to avoid government collapse due to the withdrawal of one of its components. The same phenomenon does not materialize to the same extent for single-party governments, even if the party is divided in strong factions, as the latter have a common electoral fate and therefore greater incentives to behave cohesively to enhance the probability of party success in returning a majority in the next election. As a result, and as shown empirically by Huber and Martínez-Gallardo (2008), sacking of individual ministers during a government term is much less frequent in coalition than single-party governments, where PMs are less constrained. The direction of the empirical relationship between the type of government and ministerial stability is therefore the opposite of that found in the literature on cabinet duration.

The third element concerns the strategies that might be adopted by actors in charge of constructing and maintaining cabinets, as these will delegate power to ministers and must then ensure that the latter will not work against their interests. In parliamentary systems the relationship between the PM and her ministers is more complex than a simple principal–agent
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one (Strøm 2000, 2003; Berlinski et al. 2012). Indeed, to some extent all ministers are at once agents of the cabinet through the PM and therefore individual members of their collective principal (Andeweg 2000), inevitably creating tensions between these two roles when it comes to individual and collective responsibility. In the other common type of system in Europe, semi-presidential, ministers may be the agents of the president in the event of a unified majority and of the PM in the event of a divided government (Bucur 2013). In addition, in coalition governments ministers of the junior parties are likely to be pure party agents (as in Laver and Shepsle’s 1996 conception), owing their selection to their party leader or internal bodies rather than to the PM. As a result, ministers of junior parties in a governing coalition which does not include the party of the president may well need to respond to three masters: their party (leader), the PM and the president (Bucur 2013). As argued earlier, presidents in unified governments are less likely to be constrained by their party in the appointment of specific personalities having broad internal support, and may be freer to move and sack their ministers as they see fit, whilst coalition governments, in contrast, would lead to an expectation of longer ministerial terms. Kam et al. (2010) even bring the identity of the principal into question in the allegedly simpler case of a parliamentary democracy typically governed by single-party cabinets as their study concentrates on ministerial selection to British cabinets (and shadow cabinets). Their finding that appointments are more closely related to the collective preferences of their parliamentary party caucuses than to those of the party leader may simply reflect the fact that the latter strategically selects ministers that match the overall profile of backbenchers to increase her chances of not being deposed by her own party. However, this leads us back to the possibility that intraparty organizations may have the upper hand, or at least influence the selection of ministers. Actually, in a survey of country specialists of 17 Western European countries, De Winter (1995: 131, table 4.3) found – when allowing for multiple responses – that the most frequently cited ministerial selectorates (individual or collective actors exercising a significant influence on the selection of ministers) were internal party factions or interest groups close to the party. Only in Denmark and Luxembourg were the latter reported not to play a role. Party executives came second, before individual actors such as parliamentary party leaders and PMs (the latter were actually reported to be important actors in ministerial selection in fewer than half of the 17 countries studied).

In addition, cabinets are made up of ambitious politicians who may not wait for a principal to sanction them but can also decide to leave the cabinet voluntarily. Some of these politicians will see heading a department as the pinnacle of their career; others might hope for a more important post or aspire to the premiership (or presidency) itself. Refusing a ministerial appointment that does not fit with personal preferences or strategies and voluntarily resigning from office to embarrass the incumbent prime minister may be tactical moves to reach their own goals. Chief executives and party leaders need to anticipate these goals when composing or reshuffling their ministerial team, while keeping an eye on their own. These goals may be to strike a balance within and between parties or to signal policy changes or renewal (this may be done through the appointment of experts with known competencies or policy positions v. generalists with a long-standing party background) to external actors (such as international markets and organizations during the current financial crisis) and their ultimate principals, voters. But these choices may in turn cause principal–agent problems affecting ministers’ durability. Most of the recent literature applying a principal–agent framework has focused on the latter dependent variable (or some variation such as the occurrence of reshuffles) and explain its variation by the (lack of) talent of the agents selected, a problem generally referred to as ‘adverse selection’ (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2004, 2008; Dewan and Dowding 2005; Dewan and Myatt 2010; Berlinski
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et al. 2012), or by their actions while governing (Indridason and Kam 2008), generally called ‘moral hazard’ in the literature (see Dowding and Dumont 2014 for a new distinction between principal–agent problems).

Ministerial selection and de-selection: some ways forward

Given the relevance of institutional settings in providing implicit incentives to actors involved in the formation of cabinets, such as presidents, PMs, party leaders and ministers, we need sustained efforts at building comparative data sets and arenas in which country specialists, together with more theory- and methods-oriented scholars, exchange information on the most relevant variables and operationalizations needed to test hypotheses on a large-N scale. The interactive Parliament and Government Composition Database and Political Data Yearbook internet platforms (http://parlgov.org/; http://www.politicaldatayearbook.com/) are excellent tools that, combined with the collective work of scholars dedicated to the development of common codebooks, exchanges and the dissemination of studies of ministerial elites (http://sedepe.net), pave the way for building such a systematic data collection and analysis through sophisticated techniques. Such a comparative data set could be mixed with others on other aspects of leaders’ careers and complemented with information on their post-office fates (which can be quite different across regimes, from a more or less entrenched ‘revolving door’ system in some democracies to the violent ends of leaders in autocracies; see Theakston and de Vries 2012 for former PMs), and become of wide use for both the academic community and the public at large. But we also need to get our hands dirty and collect first-hand testimonies and accounts of ministerial selection and de-selection to understand the motivations of actors and see how these fare with theoretical advances in the field that can only be probed with more qualitative data (see, for instance, Dowding and Dumont 2014). In other words, better data, through a variety of techniques of collection and for a variety of uses, as well as the coordination of research efforts, are crucial to further scholarly advances on ministerial selection and de-selection.

Notes

1 Note that Blondel (1985) had already studied the composition and circulation of elites in autocratic systems and noted long ministerial duration as a rule under communism, but this line of research was hindered by the limited availability of public data.

2 Note that this trend has not materialized over all European countries. To the contrary, the Netherlands have increasingly relied on ministers with a parliamentary background after having been one of the systems with most ‘outsiders’ as referred to above.

3 On the minister–party relation, note that Laver and Shepsle (2000) later suggested depriving the small parties that happened to be favoured in terms of policy in their portfolio allocation model of government formation of their ability to form a single-party minority cabinet on the grounds that such parties would not have enough ‘ministrable material’ to credibly fill all the ministerial portfolios such a cabinet would comprise.

4 This has not led Michael Laver to abandon investigating whether individual ministers affect policy in an article showcasing his computer-assisted content analysis technique to infer the policy position from documents (here, ministers’ speeches in a single Italian government) and leading him again to a more positive answer than the one country specialists had given him in the previous decade (Giannetti and Laver 2005). A quite different method was used by Chabal (2003) to analyse the efficiency of different individual ministers’ styles in bringing about policy reforms in the context of government alternations in Britain, France, Germany and Spain at the beginning of the 1980s, with similarly more optimistic results for the hypothesis that individual ministers matter. This is also a line of research recently put on the agenda by political economists (Hallerberg and Wehner 2013). The debate is therefore not yet over.
Bibliography


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