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The Comparative Politics of Cabinet Reshuffles

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Abstract

This special collection is devoted to cabinet reshuffles, which are understood as personnel-related changes within the lifetime of a cabinet. Scholars agree that cabinet reshuffles matter in many respects. To begin, they may shape intra-governmental relations, by either intensifying or helping solve cabinet conflicts. Further, they are important instruments for party leaders to promote or demote party representatives, with far-reaching possible consequences for the party and beyond. Last but not least, reshuffles may be used to increase governmental efficiency and often trigger policy change. The ever-increasing personalization of politics has fuelled the public interest in any ministerial personnel-related issues, and turned cabinet reshuffles into events of undisputed political and scholarly relevance. Despite the apparent importance and ubiquity of reshuffles, the international literature displays at least two major flaws: first, a lack of systematic comparison across countries and regimes and second, a strong notional and empirical bias towards Westminster democracies. This collection seeks to overcome these weaknesses and their limiting effects on the knowledge and understanding of key aspects of executive politics and executive–legislative relations. With that aim, it gathers novel comparative research on the different types, causes and effects of cabinet reshuffles in a variety of democratic and authoritarian systems. The theoretical approaches and empirical findings of the six articles featured mark a major contribution to the scholarship on political executives and executive elites in the contemporary world. This introductory piece offers a succinct historical overview of cabinet reshuffles in different contexts, and the study thereof.

Keywords: cabinets; ministers; presidents; prime ministers; turnover

Cabinet reshuffles, understood as changes of personnel in the group of ministers during the lifetime of a cabinet, tend to be considered major events, even in contexts in which the cabinet itself has conspicuously limited clout. This is true, for example, for the United States where the cabinet has been famously characterized as a 'secondary political institution' (Fenno 1966: 5). Despite the notably limited status of the cabinet in post-1945 US politics (see Helms 2005: ch. 2), cabinet reshuffles have continued to draw the attention of present-day political observers

with a liking for putting current developments in historical perspective. For instance, President Trump's reshuffles launched in 2017 and early 2018 were highlighted as the most intensive reshuffling activities of elected first-term presidents in 100 years (Keith 2018). From the beginning of modern democracy, cabinet reshuffles have been about more than simply hiring or dismissing a minister considered for just one particular portfolio. Intriguingly, the very first genuine reshuffle under the US constitution in operation since 1789 – the change in the office of postmaster general in 1791, from Samuel Osgood to Timothy Pickering – took place even before President Washington ever convened his cabinet; until then, the opinions of his secretaries were invited separately and in writing.[1] Pickering was also involved in two later instances of ministerial turnover, becoming secretary of war early in 1795 (taking over from Henry Knox) and eventually secretary of state later that same year (following Edmund Randolph, who had himself 'inherited' this post from Thomas Jefferson early in 1794).

With regard to the relationship between the power of the cabinet and the perceived importance of issues of cabinet reshuffles, the US is no singular exception. More generally, the actual and/or perceived political importance of issues of cabinet-building – and rebuilding – is not predicated on the existence of advanced levels of collective or collegial forms of executive decision-making (on this distinction, see Andeweg 1997). Even if the functions of a cabinet are essentially limited to issues of representation, changes to the cabinet team may be considered important, and not just by the (would-be) protagonists but also by their party colleagues and the public at large. After all, reshuffles change the collective face of government, and usually also alter the existing patterns of descriptive and symbolic representation in the executive branch. Moreover, even replacing a single cabinet minister without changing the patterns of party control over individual cabinet departments can make a significant difference in terms of both politics and policy (see Alexiadou 2016).

The Westminster bias of extant research

While cabinets are built and rebuilt around the world, cabinet reshuffles – in terms of regular, even ritualized events within the lifetime of a government – have been widely considered as a defining element of British politics, and several other major Westminster-type democracies (such as Canada or Australia).[2] The UK's established status as a role model regarding cabinet reshuffles is primarily due to its unchallenged pioneering role in the historical evolution of parliamentary and cabinet government, backed by the continued prominent exposure of the UK on the international stage.

Cabinets emerged as a political factor in British politics in the 17th century, but remained a body without an acknowledged power status and set of competencies for many decades. Most authors consider the Edwardian and Victorian periods, or roughly the years between 1832 and 1916, as the classic period of cabinet government (see Mackintosh 1977). However, 'prior to the 1916 reforms' that fundamentally transformed the British executive and significantly strengthened the position of the prime minister, 'cabinet was almost comically inefficient in its conduct of business. It often operated without an agenda and hardly ever kept minutes' (Burch and Holliday 1996: 13).

Like many other elements in the constitutional history of the UK, the power of prime ministers to dismiss a minister did not emerge overnight. Several sources suggest that it was a contemporary of US President Washington – William Pitt, the Younger (1759–1806) – who established the right of the British prime minister to ask ministers to resign, and thus to trigger a cabinet reshuffle (see The National Archives n.d.), which until then had been considered a power resting in the hands of the monarch. This notwithstanding, as Brian Harrison notes, 'Gladstone in the 1880s' – operating some twenty premierships after that of Pitt the Younger – 'doubted whether he had the right as prime minister to dismiss a cabinet member' (Harrison 1996: 279). Yet, any such doubts were abandoned for good after World War I, with even politically weak prime ministers having no constitutional concerns when seeking to rebuild their cabinet team according to their taste.

The nature of Westminster-style cabinet reshuffles is complex and contested. Importantly, their occurrence cannot simply be assessed as an indicator of political instability. Reshuffles are often also an opportunity for exercising leadership, committed to further improving the reasonably good performance of a government or changing the political course. Both the public focus on the actions of the prime minister and the expectation that few ministers will be carrying on in their respective departments until the next election are defining elements of British politics. Long-term political observer Peter Riddell, writing on the politics of British cabinet reshuffles, refers to a recurrent 'reshuffle season … with weeks of speculation in the media' (Riddell 2019: 200). The hustle and bustle of cabinet reshuffles in the UK is indeed difficult to exaggerate. As Patrick Weller, Dennis C. Grube and R.A.W. Rhodes contend,

> You have to love a cabinet reshuffle. The excitement is palpable. The rumour-mill goes into overdrive. Ministers flock to and from Downing Street. The famous Number 10 door opens to reveal both the smiling faces and the forlorn as they are discharged onto the pavement. The winners and losers are confronted by the flash of press bulbs in every direction. (Weller et al. 2021a)

Apart from their impressionistic value, these observations suggest that reshuffles are usually not just about mere 'replacements' (even though the latter can be considered one possible manifestation of reshuffles). Most reshuffles are rather the observable and carefully documented elements of immensely complex and political struggles for power, or the continued hold on power for that matter. In contemporary parliamentary democracies, and not just in the UK, the protagonists are not aristocrats who have been asked by the crown to play a specific role; they are normally party members (or sometimes technocrats serving at the pleasure of party leaders) enjoying greater or lesser political authority.[3]

The special status of the UK in the ongoing history of cabinet governance and cabinet reshuffles includes a long-standing tradition in British political commentary to assess any cabinet reshuffle in great detail, with many of those pieces qualifying as genuine scholarly work (see e.g. Allen 2015, 2018, 2019; Brown 2020; Smith 2018). There is even a culture of publicly commemorating particularly spectacular reshuffles, such as Harold Macmillan's 'Night of the Long Knives' of 1962 (see BBC 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, there is some work looking into the larger picture (see

e.g. Allen 2017; Keaveney 2021; Sasse et al. 2020). Interestingly, deselecting ministers has fascinated observers more than selecting them in the first place. Anthony King and Nicholas Allen described the power of the prime minister to dismiss cabinet ministers as 'probably his most important single power' (King and Allen 2010: 249) and provided ample evidence of the stunning ruthlessness of some prime ministers when it came to reshuffling their cabinets. Other authors used harsher words, such as Richard Crossman in his introduction to Bagehot's, *The English Constitution*, where he famously contended that 'a prime minister can liquidate the political careers of his rivals as effectively as any Soviet leader' (Brazier 1999: 82).

To the extent that reshuffles are studied as a function of prime ministerial power in other contexts, one could easily arrive at the conclusion that in many consensus democracies with strong parties but weak prime ministers few if any prime minister-led 'genuine reshuffles' have ever happened.[4] Even in some countries with a tradition of coalition governments chaired by a powerful head of government, such as Germany, 'firing' ministers has remained a notably rare occurrence. For example, the long-term chancellorship of Angela Merkel (2005–2021) witnessed just a single clear-cut case of a minister being dismissed by the chancellor against his will.

The truth is, of course, that even in the UK and other Westminster systems only a fraction of cabinet reshuffles are launched and controlled by the prime minister alone. Quite a few changes are forced upon the prime minister rather than being prompted by him or her. The historical record of ministerial resignations at Westminster – which become elements of a reshuffle themselves as soon as the prime minister has accepted them and moves on to fill the vacancy left by a resignation – amounts to a grand narrative in its own right (e.g. Dewan and Dowding 2005; Dowding and Kang 1998). Unexpected resignations, alongside many other contingent and uncontrollable events, can let the prime minister look rather hapless and helpless at times, belying the widely suggested doctrine of 'prime ministerial government'.[5] The height of Theresa May's troubled premiership witnessed the publication of a political cartoon featuring the prime minister on the phone, 'Hello, is that IKEA? I need a new cabinet.' The premiership of her successor, Boris Johnson, was dramatically brought to an end in July 2022 by the resignation of nearly 30 ministers.[6] Even if not fatal to their prospects, voluntary departures can come as a serious blow to a prime minister, forcing him or her to carry out a 'fixing reshuffle' in order to continue.[7]

The wealth of factors actually at play when ministers 'turn over' makes the construction of general theories of cabinet reshuffles a challenging undertaking. This may, at least in part, explain the lack of comprehensive, systematic and comparative studies on this topic. To date, the Westminster democracies are in fact the only contemporary political systems for which cabinet reshuffles have been studied comparatively in any detail (see, in particular Fleming 2021; Indriðason and Kam 2008; Kam and Indriðason 2005).[8] As always, exceptions prove the rule: for example, Ian Budge's empirical analysis of party factional behaviour as an explanatory variable for reshuffles in 20 democracies is a major contribution displaying all the qualities of large-N comparative analysis (Budge 1985).[9] The work by Hanna

Bäck et al. (2012) can be mentioned as another, more recent example of truly comparative research in that field.

This special collection of articles, which have all gone through the standard reviewing procedure of this journal, aspires to lay the foundation for a genuinely comparative study of cabinet reshuffles across time and space, including not just different regions, but also different types of political regime from beyond the Westminster world.

Towards a comparative politics of cabinet reshuffles

As this collection seeks to mark the start to what we refer to as a Comparative Politics of Cabinet Reshuffles, it is also an opportunity to briefly recapitulate earlier attempts to provide insights into this topic. If only English-language contributions are being counted, the beginnings of cabinet studies that offer some comparative perspective date back to the years surrounding World War I. Back then, the leading political science journals of that era, the *American Political Science Review* and the *Political Science Quarterly*, ran a whole series of articles on cabinet government (see e.g. Fairlie 1913; Garner 1914; Learned 1909a, 1909b; Reinsch 1909; Schuyler 1918, 1920), to be followed by a remarkable outpouring of research focusing specifically on issues concerning the cabinet personnel (see Graper 1927; Heinberg 1931; Laski 1928).

In more recent times, the seminal volume by Keith Dowding and Patrick Dumont (2009) on ministerial selection and de-selection in Europe clearly deserves to be acknowledged as something of a major overture to our project. Displaying the typical features of an edited volume with country experts contributing single-country chapters, this volume has (largely unavoidable) limits in terms of comparative analysis. Like the follow-up volume focusing on a sample of non-European countries (Dowding and Dumont 2015), this study shows little interest in addressing reshuffles and their possible effects. This notwithstanding, Dowding and Dumont's work did inspire a wealth of related research on ministerial turnover, a considerable proportion of which is of an unquestionable comparative nature and immediately relevant for understanding specific aspects of reshuffles (see, e.g. Bäck et al. 2012, 2016; Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo 2018; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015; Curtin et al. 2022; Field 2021; Fischer et al. 2012; Nielsen 2022; Olivares L. 2022).

Finally, the publication of this special collection coincides with the publication of another major and genuinely comparative study by Patrick Weller et al. (2021b). Again, this study is not specifically on cabinet reshuffles, yet it testifies to the remarkable resilience and continuing importance of cabinet governance in five democratic countries: the UK, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and Switzerland (Weller et al. 2021b), and it impressively underscores the relevance of our complementary agenda.

As to the more specific subject of cabinet reshuffles, the heavy Westminster bias identified above has continued to mark the international literature, and we concur with authors from other fields that have evolved in the shadow of Westminster that there is much to be gained from breaking that mould. As, for example, Thurid Hustedt (2019) argues regarding the politics of political advice, sticking to the open and latent Westminster bias comes at the expense of running into major

'blind spots' and facing substantial limits in understanding phenomena in other contexts that are similar if distinct (Hustedt 2019: 261). For this reason, we do not simply add new cases from beyond the sample of Westminster systems but also seek to deepen our understanding of Westminster-style reshuffles themselves by putting them in a broader comparative perspective, both conceptually and empirically. More specifically, we seek to study features of cabinet governance and turnover that may be specific and distinct yet nevertheless sufficiently similar to be meaningfully investigated from a comparative perspective. This is possible, and important, because the observed 'Westminster bias' in the study of cabinet reshuffles is to a considerable extent a perceptual problem. Just as many British observers tend to think that reshuffles are largely 'unique' to Westminster contexts, most observers socialized in other contexts have paid little attention to this issue in their respective countries. However, with suitable conceptual and analytical tools, many, if not most, elements marking reshuffles in Westminster systems can indeed be identified across different types of political regime.

The first contribution to this special collection, by Ludger Helms and Michelangelo Vercesi (2022), presents a typology of cabinet reshuffles in parliamentary democracies, which should prove useful for single-country studies as well as for future comparative inquiries. The analytical manageability and empirical value of the conceptual distinctions put forward are illustrated by a comparison of cabinet reshuffles in four West European parliamentary democracies.

While there is an established link between cabinet reshuffles and parliamentary government, no comparative agenda can miss taking into account the experience of Latin American presidential regimes. These regimes have long established themselves as a variant of presidential government, with a much more pronounced role of the cabinet than is typical of US presidentialism (see Chaisty et al. 2018; Pereira et al. 2022). The article by Magna Inácio, Mariana Llanos and Bruno Pinheiro focuses on the personal incentives of presidents as drivers of cabinet reshuffles. In this piece, covering single-party and multiparty presidential governments across Latin America, cabinet changes are identified as being primarily a function of the political and reputational resources that presidents can bring to bear (Inácio et al. 2022).

One of the novel facets of studying cabinet reshuffles in the advanced 21st century relates to the increasing coverage of hybrid and authoritarian regimes. Recent research on cabinets and the politics of ministerial turnover in authoritarian regimes in Africa suggests that 'all ministers and ministries experience significant volatility, in line with how regimes manage, maintain and limit the influence of inclusive coalitions. … Leaders keep power by spreading it around, but limiting the chances of others to capture it' (Raleigh and Wigmore-Shepherd 2022: 22). There is also important recent work on the more particular issue of how and when dictators purge their cabinets or individual members after failed coups. Using a new data set, which covers some 23,000 cabinet members from 115 autocracies in the period 1967–2016, Laure Bokobza, Suthan Krishnarajan, Jacob Nyrup, Casper Sakstrup and Lasse Aaskoven reveal that 'failed coups induce autocrats to increasingly purge their cabinets', 'and that they do so selectively by targeting higher-ranking cabinet members and those who hold strategic positions, while keeping more loyal and veteran ministers in posts' (Bokobza et al. 2022: 1437).

As in other fields that have witnessed the emergence of comparative research agendas reaching across democratic, hybrid and autocratic regimes (see e.g. Helms 2020b; Nyrup et al. 2022; Teorell and Lindberg 2019), scholars of ministerial turnover have increasingly sought to give additional meaning to their findings by putting them in a wider cross-regime perspective (e.g. Lee and Schuler 2020). For example, the empirical focus on ministerial recruitment and cabinet reshuffles in autocratic regimes can be meaningfully combined with more particular theoretical perspectives, such as from gender or feminist research. The piece by Alex Kroeger and Alice J. Kang (2022) from this collection provides a case in point. In particular, the authors find that variations in the percentages of women appointed to authoritarian cabinets in Africa may be explained through the exposure of a country to international norms about gender equality. This means that autocrats tend to appoint women ministers as a deliberate strategic response to the expectations of the international environment.

The article by Karen Beckwith and Susan Franceschet provides impressive evidence, however, that even among the family of established democracies the story of gender-sensitive assessments of cabinet reshuffles, as well as comparisons of originally formed and reshuffled cabinets, is pretty much in its infancy. They inquire if, and how, norms for women's inclusion differ for reshuffled cabinets relative to post-election cabinets, comparing two countries with different political systems and multiple gender-parity cabinets across time, namely France (2007–2021) and Spain (2004–2021). They find that political leaders who construct gender-parity cabinets tend to maintain them. There is no evidence that women ministers are disadvantaged in the process of cabinet reshuffles, though full gender equality continues to remain elusive, with men being considerably more likely to serve in high-prestige portfolios (Beckwith and Franceschet 2022).

The second part of our special collection is devoted to the study of cabinet reshuffles as an 'independent variable', rather than a 'dependent variable'. In this regard, there has been a firm belief that cabinet reshuffles, be they masterly handled or botched, tend to have major effects in terms of politics and policy. However, it is only recently that scholars have begun to look into the effects of cabinet reshuffles more systematically. The core field here is clearly organized around uncovering the different effects of reshuffles on the executive (e.g. Alderman and Cross 1979; Grossman 2009; Miwa 2018). Florian Grotz, Corinna Kroeber and Marko Kucek's contribution to this collection stands in this tradition and offers a comparative assessment of the effects that cabinet reshuffles have on prime-ministerial performance across 11 countries of Central-Eastern Europe from 1990 through 2018. They find that frequent cabinet reshuffles tend to decrease prime-ministerial performance, especially if ministers being affected by a reshuffle belong to another party than that of the prime minister (Grotz et al. 2022).

Only occasionally have scholars looked into the effects of reshuffles on executive–legislative relations (see Depauw and Martin 2009; Kam 2009). Thomas G. Fleming, Bastián González-Bustamante and Petra Schleiter's article, which completes this collection, relates itself to this second strand of literature and looks into how cabinet reshuffles shape the use of no-confidence motions by opposition parties in parliament (Fleming et al. 2022). They find that cabinet reshuffles increase the likelihood of parliamentary no-confidence motions, since they provide opposition parties with

an opportunity to signal the inadequacy of the cabinet. However, the authors also observe that this relation applies only when power concentration in the parliament is high and opposition parties can present themselves as a credible alternative to the incumbent cabinet on its own.

While reshuffles come in countless shapes and forms, many of which appear as 'unique' and 'incomparable', they belong to the truly ubiquitous elements of governance and leadership observed across regimes, which can and should be studied comparatively. As in other fields, comparative perspectives can be married to fundamentally different approaches to studying executive politics (see Andeweg et al. 2020), which increases scholarly pluralism and benefits the overall knowledge of a given subject. Most contributions to this collection have an institutionalist anchoring, including feminist institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism. This leaves ample room for the application of other conceptual and theoretical perspectives in future research on cabinet reshuffles, from resource-oriented (see Helms 2019) to interpretive approaches (see Rhodes 2022), and others. Indeed, if, in politics, cabinet reshuffles have been described as 'political Christmas' (Phillips 2021), the comparative politics of reshuffles, rather than yet reaching its festive season, is just about to enter springtime.

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Notes

1 An even earlier case of a change in Washington's cabinet occurred in March 1790, when Thomas Jefferson followed John Jay as foreign secretary. However, Jay had been little more than a caretaker for Jefferson, who was unable to assume office immediately because he was still travelling Europe in his capacity as US ambassador in Paris. Jay had been made foreign secretary by the Continental Congress in 1784.

2 To a lesser extent, this is the case for executive politics in other systems with single-party cabinets and strong prime ministers as well. In Comparative Politics, Westminster democracies have been considered to be characterized in particular by single-party governments, cabinet dominance over parliament and prime ministerial dominance over parliament; see Lijphart (2012). Some authors, such as Wilson (1994), have long doubted the substance of these conventional ways to define Westminster systems. There has been a more recent substantive debate about the pros and cons of distinguishing a Westminster (and 'un-Westminster') model (Mulgan 2003) in Comparative Politics at all (see Flinders et al. 2022; Russell and Serban 2021, 2022). While acknowledging the reservations voiced against notions of a Westminster model, we ally ourselves with those authors arguing that Westminster systems remain a particular type of democratic regime.

3 That said, cabinet reshuffles as such cannot meaningfully be considered to be constituent features of democratic governance, or more specifically parliamentary or party government, only. Like contemporary autocrats, rulers of the pre-democratic age more or less regularly reshuffled their cabinets. In both cases reshuffles mark(ed) political, rather than mere administrative, acts.

4 Crossman's contention is obviously a most controversial overstatement even for the UK, which the author, urged by his publisher, eventually had to revise for a later edition (see Brazier 1999: 82, n. 1).

5 The debate about cabinet government vs prime ministerial government belongs to the 'evergreens' of British executive research. Arguably, no author has done more to defend the idea of cabinet government against the various challenges that have been brought up since the early 1960s than George W. Jones (e.g. Blick and Jones 2010; Jones 1972, 1975, 1994).

6 Altogether, 63 of Britain's 179 government ministers, parliamentary private secretaries and trade envoys resigned in the first week of July 2022.

7 Again, context matters. In many coalition governments, a resignation of a minister from a coalition party not controlling the office of head of government would be considered at least as much as a blow to his or her party leader as to the head of government, who usually has little to no discretion when it comes to replacing a minister from a coalition party.

8 More generally, there is an established tradition of considering cabinets as the institutional centrepiece of these systems (see Barry et al. 2022; Curtin et al. 2022; Helms 2020a; Weller 2003, 2015). At the same time, there are many dynamics concerning the changing composition of the cabinet – from hiring and firing to rehiring ministers, and redefining their responsibilities – that do not pass as reshuffles if they do not take place within the lifetime of a given cabinet. Historically, the Weimar Republic, the Fourth French Republic and the First Italian Republic were infamous for their chronic government instability, and such turmoil is obviously not a thing of the past but has characterized many contemporary democratic regimes too.

9 Needless to say, comparative research is not confined to the various forms of large-N analysis, and this is especially so in the field of executive politics and leadership (see Elgie 2020). Even interpretative approaches that seek to redefine the parameters of political comparison, and of what is thought to be comparable (see Boswell et al. 2020), are gaining ground, with some of their most prominent advocates being also leading figures in the field of cabinet and executive research. Interestingly, cabinet formation is one of the few areas of executive politics in which law-like patterns actually have been observed, with 'Gamson's law' arguably marking the most prominent example (see Cox and Carroll 2007). By contrast, the politics of cabinet reshuffles seems largely resistant to theorizing and to the identification of any firmly established patterns or rules (see, however, Helms and Vercesi 2022).

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