

The Ministerial Condition: Political Survival and Cabinet Reshuffles

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My dissertation explores how leaders extend their time in office by manipulating the tenure of their cabinet members and how this affects government performance as reflected by the occurrence of interstate war. Political leaders face both internal and external threats to their tenure as leaders. To retain office leaders need mass support, for instance to win elections, but they also need to deal with potential internal party rivals. The dissertation examines both theoretically and empirically how the incentives created by these competing pressures affect the retention of ministers and the overall competence of the cabinet across different political systems.

Members of government (i.e. leaders and cabinet members) differ in their ability to implement policy. Intuition would suggest that leaders have incentives to keep competent ministers in the cabinet, as this improves the chances of reelection. The dissertation demonstrates that this is not always the case. *Leaders in autocratic systems maintain incompetent ministers in the cabinet in order to clear the political landscape from potential internal rivals. In democratic systems, prime ministers maintain a combination of competent and incompetent ministers, whereas presidents keep a much larger proportion of capable cabinet members. This maximizes control over the leadership of the party and the probability of reelection.*

The mix of competent and incompetent cabinet ministers produces different types of policies. The dissertation emphasizes interstate war as a foreign policy instrument which reflects the competence of cabinet members. This measure of competence builds on a well known theoretical result that shows that leaders can reach *ex ante* bargains to avoid the costs of fighting, hence effectively preventing war. In short, through bargaining, governments should be able to extract at least what they expect to gain via war. In the context of the dissertation, competent governments are simply more able to reach these prewar bargains. Therefore, governments run by competent cabinets are comparatively more associated with peace than governments run by mediocre cabinet members. This suggests that “bad policy” is in fact good politics for ministers in autocratic systems, while “good policy” is not always good politics in democratic settings, particularly in parliamentary systems.

To test the hypotheses derived from a novel game theory model of cabinet reshuffles, I constructed an original database of 7,500 ministers of foreign affairs spanning three centuries. I test the hypotheses using bivariate probit models in the spirit of seemingly unrelated regressions. These models are modified to take into account time dependence, thus effectively transforming them into bivariate discrete survival models. These are then used to estimate the relationship between the tenure of leaders and cabinet ministers and how it is determined by their competence as measured by interstate war occurrence. The empirical results provide evidence in favor of the arguments developed in the dissertation.