

The Electoral Connection of Ministerial Selection in the UK

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Abstract

Many studies have examined the determinants of ministerial selection. However, the effect of electoral incentives on government post allocation has so far not been studied in the literature. Drawing on data from the United Kingdom over the period 1992–2015, this article investigates the relationship between the selection of ministers and the electoral interests of the actors in this selection process—party leaders and members of parliament (MPs). The findings demonstrate that the greater the electoral safety of constituencies, the more likely are MPs to have a higher office. The results reveal a broader conception of party strategy in government formation than previously documented. The paper thus suggests that electorates can affect the allocation of ministerial positions in the UK.

Keywords

electoral incentives; ministerial selection; legislative behaviour; United Kingdom

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The selection of a group of people to govern a country is one of the first and most noteworthy choices to be made in every democracy. Citizens elect their parliamentary representatives in general elections, but it is only a portion of these representatives—the members of government selected by party leaders—that exercises the all-important executive authority. As a result, the determinants of this critical selection arise as a socially and academically relevant question. In this article, we analyse ministerial selection in the UK to understand whether the electoral interest of the selectors and candidates in re-election is one of the determiners.

Existing literature keeps the election of members of parliament (MPs) and the selection of government members apart as two separate processes. Once the votes are cast and counted, it becomes clear within hours who the MPs are and who has the support of the majority of them. At this stage, it is argued, ‘the main matter which is left undecided after the voters’ choice is the nomination of individuals to specific ministerial post or responsibilities’ (De Winter, 1995, p. 117). Understanding the ministerial selection as a rational choice of the leader, empirical studies show that personal attributes (Alderman & Cross, 1986; Buck, 1963; Heppell, 2012; King, 1981; Macdonald, 1987; Rose, 1971; Willson, 1959), party loyalty (Becher & Sieberer, 2008; Jun & Hix, 2010; Kam, 2009), and policy preferences (Kam, Bianco, Sened, & Smyth, 2010) of candidates are the determinants of ministerial selection. However, none of these studies considers ministerial selection as a process affected by electoral incentives.

This article questions whether general elections influence not only who gets to choose but also who is chosen as government members. Theoretically, this puzzle refers to an important gap because electoral incentives are one of the central concepts in the rational choice approach to legislative behaviour – the very approach that underpins research in ministerial selection and informs our understanding of the phenomenon. Understanding of

ministerial selection as a rational choice remains incomplete without a reference to electoral politics. Empirically, we still do not know whether there is a connection between the individual and partisan electoral incentives on the one hand, and the selection of team members to govern countries on the other. The literature on ministerial selection is yet to answer whether and how electoral incentives constrain the allocation of ministerial positions to MPs. Does the electoral performance in terms of winning the last elections with a big margin, achieving a vote share above party average, or winning an election after election increase the likelihood of parliamentarians being appointed to the government?

Our main finding is that electoral safety is indeed related to having a higher office: the greater the electoral safety of constituencies, the more likely are MPs to have a government post. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. First, we review the literature on ministerial selection. We then present our understanding of electoral connection, and argue how electoral interests might affect the process of ministerial selection. This theoretical framework leads to two hypotheses. We provide justifications for having the UK as the case to study in the same section with the explanation of the ministerial selection process therein. This provides a solid basis for the discussion of the results before the conclusion.

Ministerial Selection

With the allocation of parliamentary seats to representatives completed in general elections, Carroll, Cox, and Pachón (2006) argue, the democratic electoral cycle enters into the ‘chapter 2’ stage, in which members of governments, committees, and boards are selected. As in the case of the ‘chapter 1’ stage, i.e. the election of parliamentary representatives, scholars have long been trying to find determinants of success in this new chapter as well, analysing first and foremost the ministerial selection in the British House of Commons. One early line of literature concentrates on the importance of personal attributes

of parliamentarians. In one of the earliest examples, Willson (1959) showed that relevant experience in or outside parliament was an important criterion to becoming a member of the government as well as to graduating to the Cabinet in the UK. In the following decades, scholars reported an increasing importance of experience *within* the House of Commons because more and more government posts went to ‘career parliamentarians’, who entered parliament at a younger age, had a promotion early on, and showed an ambition towards politics as a profession (Buck, 1963; King, 1981; Macdonald, 1987). As for increasing the representativeness of the government, other personal attributes also proved to be important, e.g. the social origin (Rose, 1971), gender (Heppell, 2012), and possibly ethnicity (Sobolewska, 2013) of parliamentarians.

A subsequent line of study shares the rational choice approach from the early line, however, it frames ministerial selection particularly within the principal-agent model (Dewan & Hortala-Vallve, 2011), and therefore emphasises preference concurrence between party leadership (Kam, 2009) or backbenchers in general (Kam et al., 2010) as principals on the one hand and ministerial candidates as potential agents on the other. Party leaders prefer to allocate power and responsibilities to those MPs who share their policy preferences in order to minimise the agency loss and to maximise the desired policy outcomes (Allen & Ward, 2009). Besides, MPs looking for advancement opportunities do not want to ‘displease those with the power to promote them’ (Gallagher, Laver, & Mair, 2011, p. 68). As a result, according to the main argument of this line of study, ministers are more likely to be among those MPs who share the preferences of the leadership or the collective ideals of the party as a whole. Likewise, empirical studies show that there is a strong positive relationship between voting with the party and the prospects of acquiring a higher office for parliamentarians (Becher & Sieberer, 2008; Jun & Hix, 2010; Kam, 2009). Checking the assumption from the other way around, Benedetto and Hix (2007) also find similar evidence among those

parliamentarians whose progressive ambitions are frustrated by lack of appointment or those who were once office holders but were then sacked. These groups of MPs are found to be significantly more likely to rebel against their party.

The Electoral Connection

The rational choice theories in political science share the assumption that political actors behave purposefully in pursuit of their preferences under the constraints of political institutions. The preferences are various but somehow compatible: while parliamentarians are motivated by re-election, power, and policy (Fenno, 1973), political parties pursue policy, office, and votes (Müller & Strøm, 1999). Elections loom large as the biggest constraint over these preferences. On the one hand, MPs need to stay in the parliament by being re-elected to be able to pursue other goals, including attaining promotion to government ranks. On the other hand, party leaders need to maximise the number of their MPs in order to stay in the government to achieve their policy ideals. This is why legislative behavioural strategies are shaped by the electoral conditions under which legislators compete for parliamentary seats (Fenno, 1978).

Electoral constraints differ with the marginality of seats for each MP in Westminster systems. In single-member districts, it is comparatively clear to members and to their leaders how electorally safe their parliamentary seats are. As the electoral marginality of a seat increases, or in other words as the number of votes separating success from failure to secure a seat decreases, re-election becomes the dominant motivation. Empirical analyses of legislative behaviour repeatedly show that MPs who only marginally won the previous election prioritise re-election seeking activities before anything else during their time in parliament (Cain, Ferejohn, & Fiorina, 1987; Gaines, 1998; Heitshusen, Young, & Wood,

2005; Norton & Wood, 1993). Those who have to fight for their re-election have fewer resources to pursue other goals. For example, defining legislative roles over the motivations of British MPs, Searing (1994) finds that '[n]o one has sufficient time and energy to pursue vigorously all backbench roles at once' (p. 81), and that those MPs who would like to be a minister should not specialise too much in policy areas such as constituency affairs.

The effect of electoral marginality on ministerial selection emerges even before the elections. While still in the candidate selection process, safe constituencies of parties create higher demand and therefore tougher competition among potential candidates (Denver, 1988). The relationship between safety and the competitive candidate selection process is perhaps most evident in electorally hopeless constituencies where parties fail to find any candidate to nominate for elections. As a result of demand and competition, safe constituencies yield a different and better incumbent profile – a profile that benefits incumbents in their search for ministerial office and a profile that party leaders would like to see in their government.

A second source of effect becomes clear with the elections. After a general election, having been invited to form a government as the leader of the party with an overall majority of seats in the parliament (or in the absence of such a party, on the eve of signing a coalition agreement), the office is secured for the victorious party. What is left for the leader to do is to confront the trade-off between vote-seeking and policy-seeking goals while offering offices to the members of his party. In other words, allocating government offices is a constrained behaviour of the prime minister (Alderman, 1976), although it is at the same time 'probably his most important power' (King & Allen, 2010, p. 249). Therefore, as King and Allen argue, '[e]very prime minister makes, in effect, some kind of cost–benefit analysis every time he or she decides to appoint or dismiss someone' (p. 254). Office allocation carries varying degrees of costs. The party leader needs to offer the offices to the right parliamentarians among the

members of his party in order to achieve the desired policy outcomes. At the same time, he needs to ensure that his decision does not cost his party votes, and thus seats, in the next election. It carries the risk of losing votes and seats because having an office changes the legislative behaviour of parliamentarians. Office holders spend less time in their constituency serving their electorates and become more oriented to national politics. The degree of risk varies from one parliamentarian to another because the electoral safety of parliamentarians differs significantly. Offering a full time office to an MP with a large majority in her or his district is less dangerous than offering it to one with a very small majority for the next election. As a result, in balancing vote-seeking and policy-seeking goals, party leaders need to consider the electoral safety of the candidates for office.

Thus, in order not to jeopardise their re-election, we assume that parties offer offices disproportionately to MPs with safe seats. Likewise, we assume that MPs from safer seats might already have better profiles or resources to be selected.

Hypothesis 1: The higher the electoral safety of a constituency, the more likely is the MP to have a government post.

Constituency support is accumulative. MPs with longer tenure have more time and thus higher chances of accumulating personal votes for their name among their constituents. Those who have done so can then spend more resources on other goals and less on the goal of re-election. In other words, senior MPs may have more room than junior MPs to manoeuvre in prioritising their goals (Heitshusen et al., 2005, p. 37). Senior MPs have the chance to develop their personal vote over a longer period than their junior colleagues. As Martin (2011) argues, ‘longer-serving legislators can rely on past reputation for constituency-centred behaviour and may have less incentive towards contemporary constituency-centred

behaviour' (p. 481). Norton and Wood (1993) show that first-time incumbents do considerably better than MPs with longer tenure in increasing their votes in Britain. Similarly, Heitshusen et al. (2005, p. 39) find that the priority of constituency service for MPs decreases with their seniority in the parliament.

Insecurity is felt most strongly among the newly elected legislators (Fenno, 1978; Norton & Wood, 1993). Parliamentarians involve themselves in constituency service more in the early stages of their representative career (Anagnoson, 1987; Cain et al., 1987; Fenno, 1978; Norton & Wood, 1993). Fenno (1978) discovered that congressmen who are relatively new in their seats travelled to their constituency more often than did their senior colleagues. Evidence of similar patterns has been found elsewhere. For one of the earliest examples, Anagnoson (1987) noted higher constituency activity among the parliamentarians who were newer to the New Zealand Parliament.

As Cain et al. (1987) put these findings in a theoretical framework, being involved in constituency service at the early stages of their career is a strategic behaviour of parliamentarians. The potential to cultivate a personal vote is higher for new parliamentarians compared with those who have been in their seat for a longer time. On the eve of elections, a newly elected MP is yet to have any kind of relationship with the constituents as their representative in order to create an electoral support for her or his name. On the other hand, experienced parliamentarians, who survived an(other) election, have been building an image for at least a term, and they can now devote more time to the other functions of legislators. Thus we assume that parties strategically offer government posts in accord with electoral safety, especially among junior politicians:

Hypothesis 2: The magnitude of the relationships assumed by H1 will be smaller among senior MPs.

Research Design

The House of Commons provides the perfect case to assess the electoral connection of ministerial selection due to electoral system, government size, and the candidate selection process in the UK. To start with the electoral system, majoritarian systems are known to turn ministerial selection into ‘a relatively simple and mechanical process’ by excluding elements of negotiation within and between parties during government formation (De Winter, 1995, p. 117). This allows us to examine electoral interests of party leaders and individual MPs. Moreover, the first-past-the-post system in the UK means that there are no ‘safe havens’ at the top of the party lists, which is typically reserved for the favourite candidates of each party in closed list proportional representation systems. Although there are surely safe constituencies for major parties, these seats do not often become available for candidate selection because these seats are invaluable for incumbents, who tend to stay in parliament for a long time (Denver, 1988). Furthermore, single-member districts reveal the electoral safety of every MP explicitly, making the electoral connection more likely to be considered by the decision-makers of ministerial allocation and easier to be assessed by the researchers. Pooling the data on all MPs, we assess the impact of electoral safety on the probability of obtaining an office first in our baseline model. To test the second hypothesis, we consider the interactive model to be the most suitable, conditioning *Seniority* on *Electoral Safety* in Model 2.

Second, ministerial selection affects an increasingly large number of MPs in the UK. The leader with the support of the majority in the parliament allocates up to 120 positions, approximately 100 of which go to MPs from the government benches (Berlinski, Dewan, Dowding, & Subrahmanyam, 2009). This means that almost a third of the parliamentary majority is given an additional duty, although this figure changes depending on the actual

majority of the party in government. Nevertheless, the number of MPs with a ministerial office is comparatively high in the UK, affecting the representative focus of a large portion of the members from the party in power. Some members are allocated such duties repeatedly. We are aware of a possible bias given that an office holder is likely to be offered a post again in the next tenure. That inevitably depends on her or his re-election, and thus indicates the safety of the seat. In order to control for this continuous dependency, we ran Model 3, which excludes all of the MPs who have held an office in the past.

Candidate selection is the final advantage of the parliamentary system in the UK to study the electoral connection of ministerial selection. Although parties are strong actors within the recruitment of electoral candidates (Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Sobolewska, 2013), the overall process remains decentralised (Bille, 2001; Denver, 1988; Hazan & Rahat, 2010; Hopkin, 2001). As a rule, candidates are nominated after a vote in every single constituency among the lists approved by the national party. Nevertheless, intervention of the party leadership and notably the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party (Norton & Wood, 1993, p. 9) cannot be completely ruled out of the candidate selection process. For example, the Labour Party has been using all-woman shortlists since the 1997 elections while the Conservatives introduced the ‘A-list’ of shortlisted priority candidates before the election of 2010 (Criddle, 2010). However, imposition of the list of candidates by the party headquarters, even for relatively principled reasons such as to improve the number of females and ethnic minorities in parliament, does not go down well with the local branches, and partly as a result of this does not always guarantee election (Criddle, 2010; Sobolewska, 2013). Therefore, central candidate selection is not possible in theory, and extremely rare in practice (Denver, 1988). In contrast to systems where the party leadership can decide who stands where on the electoral ballot, decentralised candidate selection in the UK prevents the

practice of nominating future ministers from safe places, ensuring that any causal relationship between safe seats and office allocation runs only in one direction.

Despite the evidence that candidate selection is a decentralised process in the UK and that party leaders cannot ‘parachute’ their favourite ministerial candidates to safe seats before the elections, we take a measure to ensure that causality does not run the other way around. Candidate selection is often referred to as ‘the secret garden of politics’ (Howard, as cited in Gallagher & Marsh, 1988; Ranney, 1965), and there is a risk that practice secretly deviates from rules and theory. To control for this, we have developed an additional model, Model 4, which includes only MPs who have contested and lost elections before entering parliament. We can confidently assume that MPs who have failed in their first election were not parachuted in by the party leader.

To test the electoral connection behind ministerial selection, we have created our own data set, comprising statistics on parliamentarians from the ruling party or coalitions in the British House of Commons in the last five legislative terms (1992–2015).¹ We obtained data on MPs, post allocations, and electoral majority from the parliamentary website of the British House of Commons and official websites of the political parties and their members. This amounts to 1804 individual-level observations to be analysed in separate cases within four logistic regression models with parliamentary term effects, estimating the probability of a legislator holding an office.

In this article, we study the impact of electoral safety on the probability of obtaining a government post for MPs. We assume that party leaders would be less inclined to offer these posts to MPs who have been elected with a small majority, which might impede them from spending time on the constituency, in order not to jeopardise their re-election. Thus, we define ‘government post’ as an office that is allocated by the prime minister to the elected members of the House of Commons and that entails significant portfolio, parliamentary or

party responsibility. As the prime ministers are the ones who allocate these responsibilities, they are not included in this study. Moreover, although a large majority of government posts are allocated to the government MPs from the House of Commons, British governments can have unelected members, notably among the members of the House of Lords (King & Allen, 2010, p. 250). This study excludes the unelected members of governments because they lack the electoral connection defined above. Also excluded in the study are *Parliamentary Private Secretaries* because they are not appointed by the prime minister but by the senior ministers in the government as their own unpaid parliamentary assistants. Therefore, the following posts are considered as ‘government posts’: *Secretary of State*, *Minister of State*, *Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State*, *Whips*, and *Deputy Whips*. We score the ‘post’ as a dummy variable, where ‘0’ denotes that the legislator does not have any significant portfolio, parliament or party responsibilities, and ‘1’ where she or he does.

As for the main independent variable, we define *Electoral Safety* as the percentage difference between the votes for the incumbent MP and the candidate who came second in the general elections. Therefore, the higher the difference, the safer is the seat. Table 1 presents summary statistics for the *Electoral Safety* variable. The most marginal seat has a majority of 0.03 per cent, while the safest seat enjoys a 74.4 per cent majority.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Continuous Variables (n=1804).

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Electoral Safety	23.67	14.82	0.03	74.4
Seniority	9.01	8.53	0	50

Note: This table presents the statistics of the *Electoral Safety* and *Seniority* variables.

Control Variables

Before testing the hypotheses, we should acknowledge other alternatives that might explain the determinants for selection of ministers and whips:

- (1) *Seniority*: Party leaders tend to respect seniority, mainly in order to keep intra-party politics out of dissent (Müller & Strøm, 1999). This variable aims to reflect the extent to which the MP is senior, by the number of years the MP has been in duty in the parliament.
- (2) *Previous Office*: More often than not, MPs are offered an office only if they have already had experience (Kam, 2009). A dummy variable denotes an MP who has had a ‘government post’ defined above (1) or not (0).² We use this variable only in the baseline model.
- (3) Δ *Vote Share*: Ministerial portfolios may be offered as rewards for electoral success (O’Malley, 2006). The variable mirrors whether the candidate has done better than the average success of her or his party from the previous election (1) or worse (0).
- (4) *Age*: The literature is aware of the negative effect being older has on the chance of holding office (Alderman & Cross, 1986; King, 1981). This variable reflects the age of the MP when elected.
- (5) *Gender*: While there are some implemented programmes for promoting women in politics, political systems are still considered to be a ‘men’s world’. A dummy variable controls for that, scoring ‘0’ for men and ‘1’ for women.

Results

Percentages of MPs holding a government post are presented in Table 2. On average, during each of the five terms analysed one-third (32.82 per cent) of British MPs from the government party obtained a government post. Of the MPs whose election results were below the average national score, 35.2 per cent attained an office, compared with 36.4 per cent of the MPs whose vote share was higher than the average. Seventeen point six per cent of the representatives without any previous office obtained a government post, a much smaller fraction than the 58.6 per cent of the MPs who had held a government post in the past.

TABLE 2. Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables.

		MPs holding an office (%)				<i>Total (Offices)</i>	<i>Total (MPs)</i>
		Decreased Δ Vote Share	Increased Δ Vote Share	Without previous office	With previous office		
1992	Conservatives	35.9	42.3	28.2	57.7	116	332
1997	Labour	31.1	22.7	18.1	60	90	346
2001	Labour	26.8	26.7	15.7	51.6	110	411
2005	Labour	38.2	42	28.1	56.5	139	354
2010	Conservatives	36.9	36.2	15.4	65.1	111	304
2010	Lib Dems	42.3	48.3	0	60.5	26	57
	<i>Total:</i>	35.2	36.4	17.6	58.6		

Notes: This table presents the total government posts allocated to party members in each parliamentary term in the years 1992-2015. Numbers show the percentage of post holders for each category. For example, 31.1 per cent of Labour MPs in 1997 who had achieved worse results than their party held a post, compared with 22.7 per cent of the MPs who had done better. The model excludes MPs who contested in constituencies that were newly created by previous seats, because Δ *Vote Share* cannot be calculated.

With respect to the logistic regression analysis of our variables, Table 3 shows the results in the four models defined above. We find statistically significant support for both of our hypotheses. To start with *Hypothesis 1*, the effect of *Electoral Safety* is positive and statistically significant in each of the four models. These results thus confirm our theory and

TABLE 3. Logit Models of Government Post Allocation in the UK, 1992–2015.

	Model 1 All MPs: Baseline Model	Model 2 All MPs: Interactive Model	Model 3 MPs with no government post experience	Model 4 MPs contested and lost, before entering parliament
Electoral Safety	0.034*** (0.005)	0.041*** (0.007)	0.043*** (0.006)	0.056*** (0.01)
Previous Office	2.18*** (0.159)	2.143*** (0.162)		
Seniority	-0.0109 (0.012)	0.033 (0.019)	0.024 (0.015)	0.004 (0.024)
Δ Vote Share	0.0178 (0.125)	-0.427 (0.26)	-0.008 (0.167)	0.194 (0.266)
Seniority X Safety		-0.002** (0.001)		
Δ Vote Share X Safety		0.019* (0.009)		
Age	-0.089*** (0.01)	-0.091*** (0.01)	-0.089*** (0.013)	-0.068*** (0.019)
Gender	0.429** (0.125)	0.426** (0.161)	0.579** (0.195)	1.09*** (0.304)
<i>Parliamentary Term Fixed Effects</i>				
1997	-0.948*** (0.214)	-0.853*** (0.219)	-1.17*** (0.266)	-0.956* (0.434)
2001	-0.93*** (0.196)	-0.849*** (0.199)	-1.02*** (0.25)	-0.755 (0.428)
2005	-0.025 (0.193)	-0.015 (0.193)	0.116 (0.242)	0.339 (0.417)
2010	-0.526** (0.193)	-0.439* (0.198)	-0.991** (0.3)	-0.748 (0.446)
N (Obs)	1804	1804	1187	475
N (Cluster)	1209	1209	852	358
Constant	2.511*** (0.446)	2.397*** (0.477)	2.202*** (0.562)	0.682 (0.855)
Log Likelihood	-900.401	-892.606	-523.812	-197.692

Notes: This table shows the logistic regression model results. Table entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Model 3 excludes MPs who have held a post in the past. Model 4 excludes MPs who won elections the first time they contested them. All MPs are from government parties. The model excludes MPs who contested constituencies that were newly created by previous seats, because Δ *Vote Share* cannot be calculated. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed test.

demonstrate that MPs are more likely to obtain an office if they are from safer seats.³ This continues to be the case even when we control for a variety of other variables. For example, being a female would increase the chance of getting an office. Moreover, being elected at a late stage in life significantly decreases the probability of having an office. The model concludes that seniority does not play a role in the chances of obtaining a post. Table 4 further demonstrates that an MP who had an office in the past is almost four times more likely (60 per cent) to obtain an office in the current term than an MP without office experience (16 per cent).

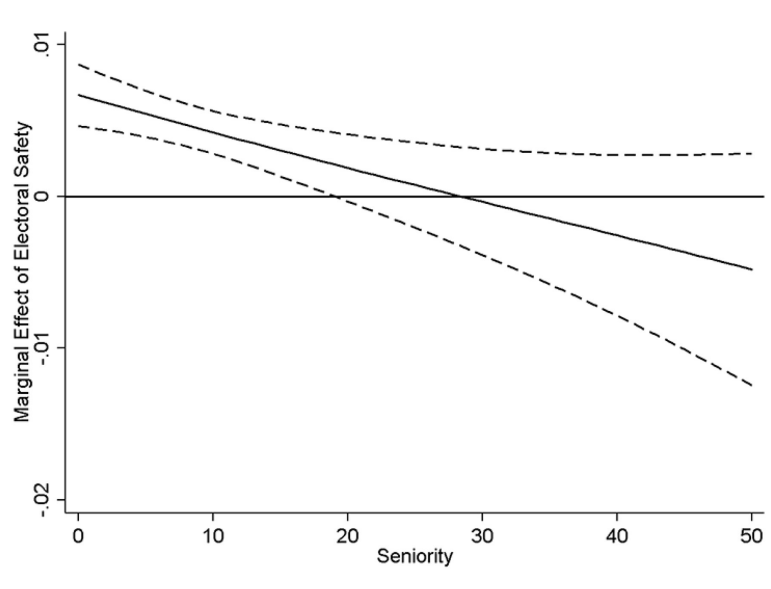
TABLE 4. Predicted Probabilities for Government Post Allocation.

Variable	Predicted Probability
All at mean	0.29
Electoral Safety	
at minimum	0.08
at maximum	0.49
Previous Office	
no	0.16
yes	0.6
Seniority	
at minimum	0.17
at maximum	0.11

Notes: This table presents the predicted probabilities of ministerial selection, based on Model 1. All other variables held at their median (ordinal) or mean (continuous) values.

This brings us to *Hypothesis 2*, examining the way in which the seniority of the legislator influences the relationship between electoral safety and the chance of obtaining an office. Model 2 suggests that the effect of electoral safety on office allocation depends on seniority. More explicitly, as opposed to a senior MP, a junior MP would be less likely to receive an office when lacking a safe seat. This is shown by the negative and statistically significant interaction effect between electoral safety and seniority.

Figure 1. Marginal Effect of Electoral Safety on Government Post Allocation Conditional on Seniority.



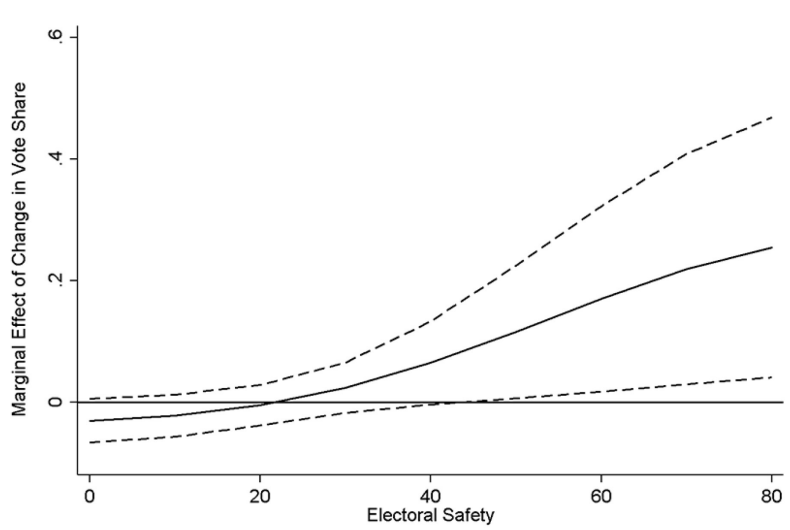
Notes: All other variables held at their median (ordinal variables) or mean (continuous variables) values. All estimates are based on Model 2.

Figure 1 demonstrates that electoral safety has a positive impact on the probability of having a ministerial office only if the MP has spent less than 20 years in parliament. For a newly elected MP in the house, the effect of gaining 1 per cent increases the probability of obtaining an office by 0.7 per cent. For an MP who has served 20 years in parliament, the effect of the same gain in majority will increase the probability of a government post by only

0.2 per cent. However, our argument that a safe seat increases the probability of obtaining a post does not hold among senior MPs, those who serve more than 20 years in parliament. The more senior a politician becomes, the higher the chances are to accumulate her or his personal vote in the constituency, and thus decrease the time required to be spent in the constituency pursuing re-election. Therefore, it should not matter to the party leader whether a senior MP holds a safe seat when contemplating ministerial selection. These findings confirm our main argument about party strategy and the way parties prioritise their objectives. For junior MPs, it is highly relevant to cultivate their reputation in the constituency, especially when they hold a marginal seat. Therefore, party leaders will be reluctant to offer those MPs ministerial responsibilities that limit them from spending time in the constituency. This does not apply to senior MPs, whose reputation is well established, and thus the effect of electoral safety on the probability of attaining an office is insignificant.

There are other findings that confirm the importance of electoral safety on the decision to whom to allocate ministerial offices. We find that individual electoral performance in terms of relative increase or decrease in vote share does not have an effect on ministerial selection in general. However, we also find that *Electoral Safety* conditions Δ *Vote Share*, the extent of electoral success of an MP compared with that of other MPs from the governing party. MPs with exceptional electoral success have been rewarded with an office only when the candidate holds a very safe seat. This also means that decreasing the vote share below the party average is a problem for ministerial selection only for those MPs from safe seats. This is indicated by statistically insignificant results in Model 1 in comparison with the positive and statistically significant interaction effect between Δ *Vote Share* and *Electoral Safety* in Model 2.

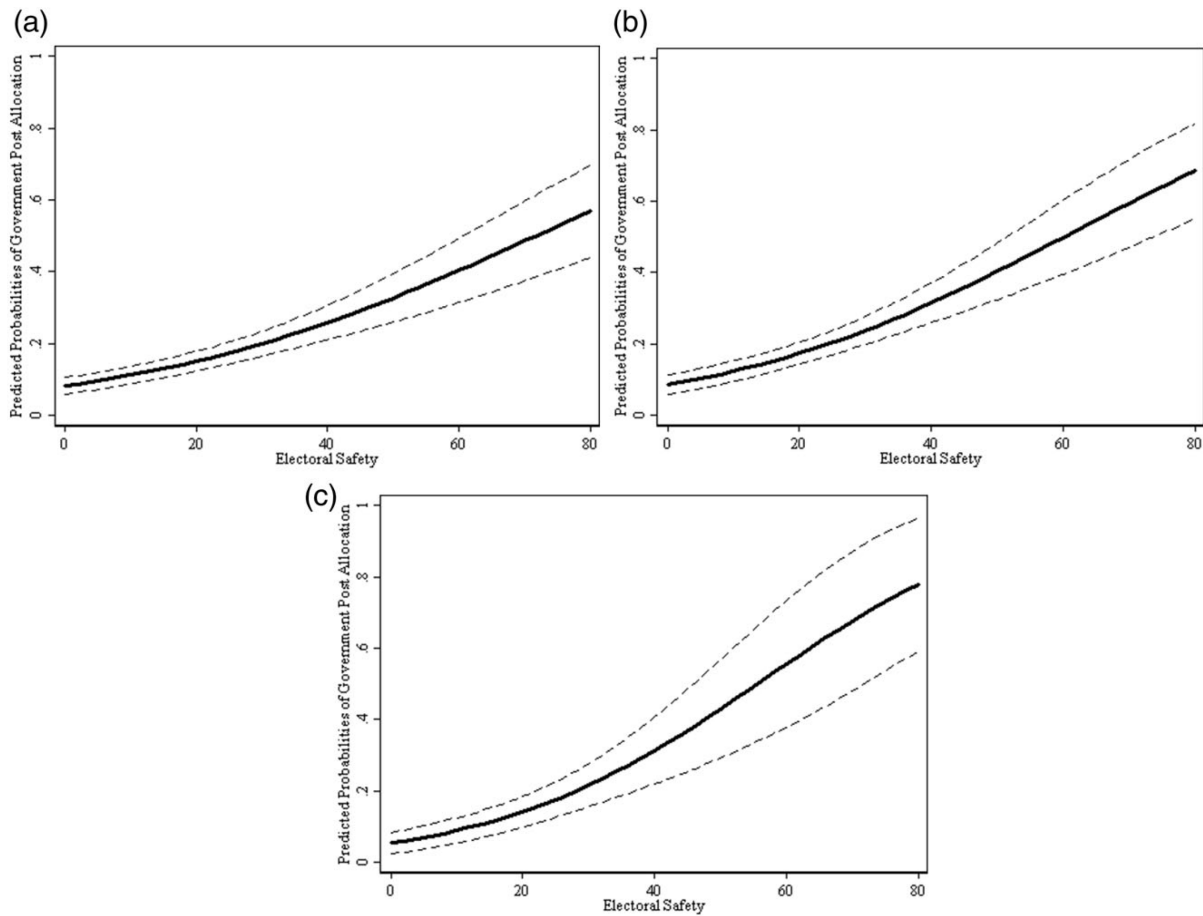
Figure 2. Marginal Effect of Change in Vote Share on Government Post Allocation Conditional on Electoral Safety.



Notes: All other variables held at their median (ordinal variables) or mean (continuous variables) values. All estimates are based on Model 2.

Figure 2 plots how the effect of Δ *Vote Share* on government post allocation is predicated on the extent to which the seat is safe. We find that party leaders allow themselves to reward a successful candidate with an office only when she or he obtains more than a 44 per cent majority. For an MP with a 44 per cent majority, the effect of good results in the elections (better than the average of the party) increases the probability of obtaining a government post by 8 per cent. For a representative with maximum safety, a successful performance in elections will increase her or his probability of getting an office by 23 per cent. However, below a 44 per cent majority, candidates who have performed well in the election are not more likely than other candidates to have an office. These findings provide us with further evidence of the hierarchy of goals that dictates party strategy. Party leaders are primarily concerned with re-election; only when candidates hold a safe seat might they be rewarded for increasing the vote share.

Figure 3. Predicted Probabilities of Government Post Allocation.



Notes: Figure 3(a): Model 1 – For all MPs; Figure 3(b): Model 3 – Only for MPs with no government post experience; Figure 3(c): Model 4 – Only for MPs who contested and lost before entering parliament. The figures present the predicted probabilities of government post allocation, based on Models 1, 3, and 4. All other variables held at their median (ordinal) or mean (continuous) values.

Figure 3 shows the predicted probabilities of ministerial selection for different levels of electoral safety, for each of the three models. Analysing the baseline model, of the MPs with a majority of 5 per cent, one out of 10 is predicted to attain an office. For legislators who achieved a 20 per cent majority, about 15 per cent are predicted to hold an office. More than a fifth (22 per cent) of the MPs who have a majority of 35 per cent are likely to obtain a

government post. The two other models predict roughly the same probabilities of ministerial selection.

We now move to discuss Models 3 and 4, which aim to address causality issues. Model 3 examines the probability of obtaining a government post only for MPs who have not held a post before. The model demonstrates evidence that politicians elected in safe seats are more likely to get a government post even if they lack any office experience. Those findings support our argument even if we control for this strong predictor of ministerial selection. The last but definitely not the least important finding that further confirms the direction of the causality between *Electoral Safety* and *Office* is presented in Model 4. Could it all be ‘the other way around’, i.e. do party leaders send their favourite candidates for ministerial office to safe seats before the elections? As we have discussed above, we have strong theoretical and practical evidence that this is not the practice in the UK. However, if it were the case that the party leadership ‘parachutes’ their future ministers into safe seats, it would be most likely that those candidates would win the election. Model 4 aims to address this complication and examines only MPs who have lost at least one election before a successful election.⁴ The results suggest that even those MPs are more likely to be offered a government post based on the safety of their seat. As already discussed, Figure 3 illustrates the impact of electoral safety on the probability of MPs gaining an office, and it demonstrates that the impact is consistent and positive among all the MPs and likewise among those MPs with no office experience and those who lost elections before entering parliament.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown how electoral incentives shape party strategy in allocating ministerial portfolios. Rational choice theories on the hierarchy of motivations assume that,

although rational actors such as parties and their members pursue many goals, they are first and foremost concerned about re-election. We have argued that for this assertion to hold, we should observe that MPs with marginal seats are less likely to be offered portfolio responsibilities because such responsibilities might significantly risk their re-election chances. Our findings confirm this assertion. In the UK, government offices are occupied by MPs with safer seats. Because we had anticipated that previous office experience would have a substantial impact on office allocation, we tested our assumption also on those MPs with no previous experience in portfolio responsibilities. We also acknowledge the risk of opposite causality, and have generated a model that controls for it. All models support our theory, and show that offices are allocated in accord with the electoral safety of the seat.

Our results, furthermore, demonstrate that electoral safety also matters for rewarding successful candidates. The findings suggest that party leaders are more likely to reward MPs and offer them a ministerial post when they hold a safe seat. This also indicates the way parties prioritise re-election goals; they will be reluctant to reward successful MPs if this reward jeopardises their re-election. Because the cultivation of personal vote and reputation is more important for junior MPs, we have assumed that senior MPs would be less sensitive to the electoral safety of their seats than junior MPs, who need to establish their reputation in the constituency. The analysis implies that senior MPs, especially those who serve more than four parliamentary terms, should not be concerned with the safety of their seat in order to attain a government post. Those results highlight the importance of personal vote cultivation both for candidates who seek higher office and for party strategy.

Altogether, these findings highlight the meaningful weight of the re-election ambition both for parties and for parliamentarians, and show that safety comes first. Most obviously, parties pursue ambitions other than re-election, which they trade-off. This paper demonstrates, however, that electoral safety constrains that trade-off. When the prospect of

re-election is in danger, vote ambition outweighs other ambitions. Only when re-election is secured are other ambitions more likely to be taken into account. As a result, elections might be more than the dual mechanism of choosing a legislative representative and a party leader in parliamentary systems. Besides, electorates can affect the allocation of ministerial positions as well.

This study is the first attempt to address the question of whether the electoral safety of MPs has a bearing on their possibility of being selected as ministers. The findings show a strong statistical relationship between electoral safety and ministerial selection, which suggests a causal effect. Nevertheless, these findings open the door for further research in order to bolster this relationship of cause and effect. Although the statistical relationship found in this study is compelling, there is still a clear need for more research testing how the electoral safety of candidates is taken into account within the process of ministerial selection.

Substantively, our study shows a link between electoral circumstance of politicians and ministerial selection. Further research should examine whether this connection holds in other cases. The first-past-the-post electoral system creates a strong incentive to cultivate a personal vote. Because our findings underscore the impact of personal vote cultivation on party strategy, it is important to analyse other electoral systems with different degrees of personal vote cultivation. The electoral incentives stemming from electoral safety could have an additional effect on ministerial selection. Further studies should also focus on the way other determinants of post allocation are influenced by electoral incentives. Post allocation is one of the most influential mechanisms for the elite to control the executive branch. Understanding how electoral incentives affect that process is crucial, both for legislator behaviour models and for electoral studies.

Notes

1. This period provides a sufficient variation of electoral safety for both of the major parties in the UK. On the one hand, it covers the first government terms of Labour (1997–2001) and the Conservatives (2010–2015) with high levels of electoral safety after a period in opposition. On the other hand, it also covers the last terms as the government with declining levels of electoral safety for Labour (2005–2010) and the Conservatives (1992–1997).
2. Experienced MPs can be immediately reappointed as a minister following the general election or after a gap due to reasons such as a period in opposition, resignation, or dismissal. We code this variable the same for all MPs with or without a gap in their experience as a minister.
3. The effect of electoral safety on the probability of obtaining an office is positive and significant for both Conservative and Labour MPs (see Table A1 in the Appendix).
4. It is worth noting that Conservative MPs are more likely to have fought one or more parliamentary elections unsuccessfully (53 per cent) than the Labour MPs (37 per cent).

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Appendix

TABLE A1. Logit Models of Government Post Allocation in the UK, 1992–2015.

	Model 5 Labour	Model 6 Conservatives
Electoral Safety	0.026*** (0.005)	0.033*** (0.009)
Previous Office	2.08*** (0.211)	2.186*** (0.241)
Seniority	0.003 (0.017)	–0.009 (0.017)
Δ Vote Share	–0.199 (0.158)	–0.098 (.017)
Age	–0.101*** (0.015)	–0.071*** (0.015)
Gender	0.341 (0.187)	0.625 (0.333)
N (Observations)	1111	636
N (Clusters)	562	591
Constant	2.742*** (0.668)	1.44* (0.659)
Log Likelihood	–544.711	–341.128

Notes: This table shows the logistic regression model results. Table entries are logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Model 5 includes only Labour MPs; Model 6 includes only Conservative MPs. All MPs are from government parties. The model excludes MPs who contested in constituencies that were newly created by previous seats, because Δ *Vote Share* cannot be calculated. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$, two-tailed test.