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From Gender Equity to Gendered Assignments? Women and Cabinet Committees in Canada and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This article explores women's access to ministerial power in an important but understudied arena of executive politics: cabinet committees. Specifically, we analyse the gendered patterns in the distribution of cabinet committee assignments in two 'typical' Westminster cases, Canada and the United Kingdom, and under two prime ministers, Justin Trudeau (2015–2021) and David Cameron (2010–2016), who both made explicit gender-equity pledges. Informed by previous research into gendered allocation of ministerial portfolios, we investigate the overall extent of women's committee assignments, the gendered dimensions of these assignments and the status of assignments, namely the 'prestige' of committee remits, whether committees were chaired by the prime minister and the allocation of chairing responsibilities across committees. In both cases, overall assignment broadly matched shares of women ministers at the cabinet level, but less so during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition in the UK (2010–2015). Women's shares of committee assignments were likely to be lower on 'masculine' and 'high-prestige' committees compared to 'neutral', 'feminine' and 'low-prestige' committees, but commitment to gender equity is more evident in the Canadian case. While our aim is exploratory and descriptive, we offer several explanations for these patterns, including the supply of women ministers, departmentalism, party branding and the low public profile of cabinet committees.

Keywords: gender; cabinet committees; Canada; United Kingdom; ministerial power; executive politics

A growing body of research into women's access to ministerial power highlights the relevance of both the numbers of women appointed to cabinet-level positions and the portfolios that they are assigned (Annesley et al. 2019; Davis 1997; De Geus and

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Loewen 2021). Women have often been kept from the most prestigious positions and instead assigned responsibilities that limit their influence and opportunities for attaining higher office (Curtin et al. 2023; Goddard 2019; Krook and O'Brien 2012). It is partly for this reason that leaders' pledges to appoint more women to their cabinets should be given qualified support: the actual portfolios assigned matter as much as the total number of appointments.

At the same time, an additional institutional dimension should feature in assessments of women's access to ministerial power: their positions within the wider structures of cabinet decision-making. In most parliamentary systems, ministers may achieve influence beyond their immediate responsibilities through their memberships of cabinet committees, groups of ministers assigned by prime ministers to specific policy or functional mandates (see Andeweg 1997; Blondel 1997; Ie 2022; James 2020; Mackie and Hogwood 1985; Savoie 1999). Though the general and particular importance of committees varies, membership is a 'passport to involvement' in the structures of cabinet decision-making (Dunleavy 2003: 344). On this basis, committee assignments provide analytical leverage in examining the 'black box' of cabinet power relations (Dunleavy 1995, 2003; Ie 2019, 2021; Royal Holloway Group PR3710 2012). Knowing how women are assigned to committees can shed light on their access to power and the gendering of core executives (Annesley and Gains 2010).

In this article we broaden existing research into women and executive politics by exploring women's inclusion in cabinet-committee systems. We focus on assignments to Canadian and United Kingdom (UK) cabinet committees over the first six years of Justin Trudeau's premiership (2015–2021) and during David Cameron's six years in office (2010–2016). Institutionally, Canada and the UK are 'typical' of 'Westminster model' systems (Flinders et al. 2022; cf. Russell and Serban 2021). In both cases, prime ministers wield the powers of cabinet appointment and committee assignment, and cabinet committees enjoy significant delegated authority. Trudeau and Cameron themselves serve as critical cases for assessing women's inclusion in cabinet decision-making because of the political importance of their prior gender-equity commitments (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Trudeau promised gender parity in his cabinet in 2015, while Cameron, when leader of the opposition in 2008, promised to appoint women to one-third of government jobs (Annesley and Gains 2012: 720; Franceschet et al. 2017: 488). Both men's records have been assessed at the portfolio level (De Geus and Loewen 2021; Heppell 2016) and regarding some aspects of committees (Everitt and Lewis 2020), but neither has been assessed comprehensively at the collective decision-making level. As public champions of gender equity in executive office, how they assigned seats on cabinet committees merits particular scrutiny.

Our analysis is organized around three theoretical perspectives on women's inclusion in executive politics. First, we investigate descriptive representation and the relevance of Robert Putnam's (1976: 36) 'law of increasing disproportion', which suggests a negative relationship between arenas of power and women's inclusion: the more powerful the arena, the more women are excluded. We assume that membership of cabinet committees gives ministers greater power to influence collective decision-making than mere membership of a ministry. We examine women's overall shares of committee assignments and, in the process, consider

the extent to which Trudeau's and Cameron's gender-equity commitments were met. Second, we investigate the tendency for women to be excluded from 'masculine' policy areas based on traditional stereotyping of gender roles (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Specifically, we explore the relationship between 'masculine', 'neutral' and 'feminine' remits and committee assignments. Lastly, we return to the 'increasing disproportion' idea by considering the status of committee assignments in three respects: the 'prestige' of committee remits (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Nyrup and Bramwell 2020), whether committees were chaired by the prime minister, and the allocation of chairing responsibilities across committees. This approach recognizes the fact that, in the context of collective decision-making, there is variable power or influence both across and within cabinet committees (Dunleavy 1995, 2003).

We employ multiple methods with a focus on exploratory, descriptive analysis to examine gendered patterns in depth and detail. Our first general finding is a correspondence between the distribution of committee assignments and the number of women ministers. In this sense, Trudeau's superior record on appointing women to ministerial office was reflected in women's inclusion in his cabinet-committee systems. At the same time, we find evidence of gendered patterns in both Trudeau's and Cameron's committee assignments, and we also find evidence that women's shares of committee assignments were likely to be greater on the least prestigious committees. Explaining the patterns in our two cases is hampered by several institutional and political differences and by conventions of cabinet secrecy. However, we offer several macro-level explanations that should help to organize future work, including the initial 'supply' of women ministers, system-specific considerations that shape the 'demand' for committee assignments, party ideology and branding, and the low public profile of cabinet committees.

The article proceeds as follows. The following two sections review existing research on cabinet committees and women in executive politics. We then set out our research questions and hypotheses and describe our data and methods before presenting our findings. A final section considers the similarities and differences in the Canadian and UK cases and suggests directions for future comparative research.

Cabinet committees

In many parliamentary systems, government is organized around systems of cabinet committees that bring together smaller sets of ministers to fulfil the cabinet's deliberative, decision-making and policy-coordination functions (Andeweg 1997; Blondel 1997; Ie 2022; Mackie and Hogwood 1985). Committees play an important role in framing a government's policy priorities and structuring ministers' interactions (Ie 2022; Mackie and Hogwood 1984: 311, 1985; Vercesi 2012: 17). In systems where coalition government is the norm, committees also help to coordinate policymaking and manage interparty relations (Moury 2012: 77–78; Müller and Strøm 2000: 574). Although cabinet committees are widespread institutions, they are perhaps most clearly established in the traditional Westminster model systems,

such as Canada and the UK (OECD 2015: 288). Here they enjoy significant delegated authority to make binding collective decisions on ministers.

Cabinet committees tend to focus on similar areas of government activity across political systems, but there are national differences in their organization and general function. In Canada, for instance, prime ministers have traditionally established coordination committees that set and direct whole-of-government priorities and policy implementation. In the UK, prime ministers have traditionally created much larger networks of committees and sub-committees to develop policy, chase progress and sometimes take binding decisions across a broad range of policy areas. After the 2015 general election, Cameron even experimented with ‘implementation task forces’ – groupings of ministers established solely to monitor and implement key policies in cross-cutting areas (Letwin 2018: 233–235).

The organization, function and importance of committees also vary within political systems. Committees differ by longevity and size of membership. Some committees are chaired by an ‘interested’ minister whose portfolio directly overlaps with the committee’s remit, while others are chaired by ‘neutral’ senior ministers and sometimes by the prime minister. Moreover, some committees meet regularly but others exist largely on paper as networks to clear policies developed elsewhere. Even the distinction between committee and sub-committee is an unreliable guide to workload and divisions of labour. Much depends on circumstance, the governing party’s programme and prime-ministerial preferences. Traditions of executive secrecy make it extremely difficult to code committees based on how they operate in practice. But other characteristics, such as their size, membership and policy focus, can be coded reliably from published information.

At an individual level, committee assignments can affect ministers’ access to power, with those assigned chairing responsibilities enjoying agenda-setting and other powers that elevate them above other members (James 2020: 116–117). Although prime ministers may allocate most assignments on functional grounds – that is, to ministers with relevant departmental portfolios – they retain discretion to include or exclude individual ministers depending on their motives. Such powers can be used to achieve preferred policy outcomes or to placate potentially troublesome ministers by including them in key decisions (Allen and Ward 2009; Lawson 1992: 128). While there are informal constraints on prime-ministerial discretion, ministers generally have very little say over their assignments; most do not formally request nor are even asked to provide input into these choices (James 2020; Savoie 1999). From the ministerial perspective, the relationship between committee assignment and influence depends on how prime ministers and senior figures utilize committees, relative to other decision-making mechanisms (Institute for Government n.d.).

Memberships of committees is never a precise indicator of power, and we should be cautious when interpreting any measures derived from them (Allen and Siklodi 2020; James 2020: 101; see also Dunleavy 1995, 2003). Nevertheless, committee memberships are important and have been used to explore the impact of gender and region on ministerial influence in Canadian committees (Ie 2021), and the distribution of influence among Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers in the UK’s first peace-time coalition government (Royal Holloway Group PR3710 2012). Even if influence tends to originate outside of the committee system – from a

minister's portfolio, personal standing, closeness to the prime minister or leadership of a coalition-partner party – it tends to be reflected, however imprecisely, in memberships of cabinet committees. Knowing who has been assigned to which committees indicates, at the very least, who prime ministers think should have access to collective decision-making.

Women and executive politics

Given cabinet committees' pervasiveness and institutional persistence, it is surprising that they have rarely been explored as arenas for gendered power relations or women's representation in executive politics (cf. [Ie 2021](#)). This gap in the literature can be attributed to conventions of cabinet secrecy and the historically small number of women appointed to ministerial office. The priority has been to explain when and why women are appointed in the first place.

Scholarship on women and ministerial office rests on the assumption that the executive branch is gendered 'masculine' ([O'Brien and Reyes-Housholder 2020: 252](#)). Certainly, most executive institutions in most systems have been designed by men and/or have evolved around male actors with masculine traits. Feminine qualities have tended to be undervalued in this arena, and women have tended to be confined to the periphery of decision-making ([Annesley and Gains 2012: 722](#); [Jacob et al. 2014](#); [Krook and O'Brien 2012](#)), consistent with a 'law of increasing disproportion' ([Putnam 1976](#)). Until comparatively recently, all-male cabinets were the norm ([Jacob et al. 2014: 322](#)), and women, when they were appointed to cabinet-level positions, were often treated as token appointments. Gender parity still remains the exception rather than the rule, however ([Annesley et al. 2019](#)). As of February 2023, women constituted just 27% of the world's ministers ([Inter-Parliamentary Union 2023](#)); among the developed OECD countries, the average is still well below parity, at 34% ([OECD 2023](#)).

Why does this matter? Although arguments about women's inclusion in executive office often mirror those applied to women's descriptive representation in legislative institutions ([Phillips 1995](#)), there are important differences. Ministers in parliamentary systems are not directly elected and are generally not expected to act as substantive representatives for particular social groups unless it is part of their portfolio, such as 'ministers for women'. Ministers do, however, wield considerable power and authority. If women are systematically underrepresented in the ministerial ranks, the quality of the available talent pool is likely to be reduced ([Besley et al. 2017](#)). Holding ministerial office is also symbolically important ([Franceschet et al. 2017](#)). Women may be less trusting of government and less likely to participate in formal democratic procedures if government is seen to be a primarily male occupation ([Barnes and Taylor-Robinson 2018](#); [Liu and Banaszak 2017](#)).

Research into women's underrepresentation in executive politics has drawn attention to the importance of multiple supply- and demand-side variables. In parliamentary systems, the number of women MPs is obviously a crucial factor driving the number of women ministers ([Claveria 2014](#); [Krook and O'Brien 2012](#)). Indeed, there is evidence of a gendered form of Gamson's law underpinning ministerial appointments, with the proportion of women MPs in governing parties correlating

closely with women's share of cabinet-level positions (Scherpereel et al. 2021). Meanwhile, leaders from left and liberal parties are more likely to consider gender (and other diversity) issues when appointing cabinets (Goddard 2019). Prime-ministerial discretion also plays a significant role: prime ministers often use 'affiliational' criteria, such as prior loyalty and friendship, when assembling their cabinets, thereby benefiting would-be ministers who are already trusted members of their networks (Annesley et al. 2019: 33–54).

Women's access to executive power is not just a matter of descriptive representation and the number of women appointed to ministerial office, however. It also relates to the portfolios assigned to women and their consequent ability to exert influence across government. One approach has been to categorize portfolios by 'gender', underpinned by the classic distinction between the male 'public sphere' and the female 'private sphere' (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Portfolios associated with policy areas substantively and symbolically tied to the former can be viewed as 'masculine', whereas those associated with the latter can be considered 'feminine'. While many portfolios do not fit clearly with either traditionally male or female roles, women are more likely to be assigned 'feminine' portfolios, such as education, health and especially women's issues, and kept away from 'masculine' posts, such as those covering security, foreign policy and, especially, finance (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009).

Another approach has been to analyse the relative 'prestige' of women's portfolios, usually a reflection of their public or media profile, their authority within cabinet, their access to resources and their utility in career advancement (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Krook and O'Brien 2012). Problems may arise when coding frames are applied across time and space (Studlar and Moncrief 1999: 383–385), and there may be some overlap between gender and prestige, not least because factors such as media profile and authority often rest on gendered foundations. Nevertheless, the two categories are distinct, and some feminine portfolios, like education and health, carry more prestige than some masculine portfolios, such as science and technology (Krook and O'Brien 2012: 842). Consistent with women's historical exclusion from executive power, multiple studies have shown that women have tended to be kept away from the most prestigious portfolios (Curtin et al. 2023; Franceschet et al. 2017; Goddard 2019; Studlar and Moncrief 1999). For example, the first Canadian woman minister of finance, Chrystia Freeland, was only appointed in 2020, five years after the introduction of gender-parity cabinets. In the UK, no woman has yet been appointed chancellor of the exchequer. Allocating less prestigious portfolios to women tends to exclude them from inner cabinets and can in turn harm their prospects for promotion (Curtin et al. 2023), which may explain the 'glass ceiling' effect in executive office (Allen 2016).

Research questions and hypotheses

The three distinct perspectives on women's inclusion in executive office – the numbers of women appointed, the gender of the portfolios assigned to women and the status of their assignments, including the prestige of their portfolio and their

proximity to the centre of power – directly inspire our study of Canadian and UK cabinet committees under Trudeau and Cameron, respectively. Extrapolating from these perspectives leads to three research questions and associated hypotheses.

Our first research question focuses on women's overall share of committee assignments. All else being equal, we consider committee assignments to strengthen women's access to cabinet influence, though we recognize that in specific cases committee work may undermine a minister's ability to influence policy, for example, by diverting time from other, more productive work. In terms of the overall distribution of assignments, two 'laws' are relevant: the 'law of increasing disproportion' (Putnam 1976), according to which women are increasingly likely to be excluded from more powerful decision-making arenas, and a gendered interpretation of Gamson's law (Scherpereel et al. 2021), by which the proportion of women at different levels correlates. Accordingly, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: *The proportion of cabinet-committee seats assigned to women will tend to track but be lower than the proportion of available women ministers.*

Our second research question relates to the gendered dimension of committee assignments. As has been done with ministerial portfolios, we classify committees based on their remits' association with traditional gender roles. Consistent with previous research on the tendency for women ministers to be allocated 'feminine' portfolios (Davis 1997; Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2009), we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 2: *The proportion of seats assigned to women on 'feminine' cabinet committees will be greater than the proportion of seats assigned to them on 'masculine' and 'neutral' committees.*

Our third research question returns to the 'law of increasing disproportion' and addresses the status of committee assignments. At one level, we consider the prestige of the committees themselves. The prestige of ministerial portfolios, as noted, has usually been linked to their visibility and the scope they provide for controlling policy. On this basis, scholars have distinguished between 'high-prestige', 'medium-prestige' and 'low-prestige' portfolios (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Krook and O'Brien 2012; Nyrup and Bramwell 2020). We can similarly think of cabinet committees' prestige varying according to their remits, analogous to a portfolio, which in turn will determine a committee's visibility, longevity and perceived standing (Allen and Siklodi 2020: 232).

But a committee's status is not only tied to its remit; it is also compositional (Dunleavy 1995, 2003). Of particular importance is prime-ministerial participation. As existing research has shown, the prime minister's chairing of a committee identifies it to other ministers as an especially important forum (Allen and Siklodi 2020: 232).

At another level, we consider individual assignments within cabinet committees, particularly whether an assignment entails chairing duties. Insider accounts make it clear that committee chairs enjoy additional influence. Under Cameron, for example, some committee chairs, notably George Osborne, exercised their agenda-setting discretion by choosing not to convene some of their committees at all

(Allen and Siklodi 2020: 231). The well-established primacy of committee chairs has even been reflected in measures of ministers' 'positional influence' (Dunleavy 1995: 307).

In keeping with existing research that shows women in gendered institutions are likely to be excluded from positions of influence (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2005; Krook and O'Brien 2012), we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 3: *The proportion of seats assigned to women on high-prestige cabinet committees will be lower than the proportion of seats assigned to them on medium- or low-prestige committees.*

Hypothesis 4: *The proportion of seats assigned to women on cabinet committees chaired by the prime minister will be lower than the proportion of seats assigned to them on other committees.*

Hypothesis 5: *Among all committee assignments, most chairing responsibilities will be allocated to men.*

Data and methods

To answer our research questions, we draw on official lists of cabinet committees published in Canada and the UK.¹ New lists are usually issued in the wake of cabinet reshuffles or major changes in committee configuration. We analysed all complete lists published during Trudeau's 2015–2021 terms as prime minister and during Cameron's entire 2010–2016 premiership. For purposes of our analysis, we treated every list as the start of a new committee period and every committee in each period, including sub-committees and other groupings, as a separate entity. We separately analysed every committee membership. In total, we analysed 19 committee periods covering a total of 322 committees, 79 in Canada and 243 in the UK, and included all ministers assigned to committees in these periods.

For each committee, we coded the prime minister, period and organizational type (full committee, sub-committee, taskforces and other). As shown in Figure 1, the total number of Canadian committees ranged from 7 (November 2019) to 10 (from November 2015 through to September 2017), while the number of UK committees ranged from 11 (May 2010) to 28 (February 2012). In addition to being larger, Cameron's committee systems also made greater use of different organizational types: the number of full committees varied from 8 (May 2010) to 14 (February 2014), the number of sub-committees from 2 (May 2010) to 17 (February 2012), while the return of a single-party Conservative government after the 2015 general election saw the introduction of 10 implementation taskforces (July 2015). Trudeau only ever established one sub-committee.

We also counted the number of men and women assigned to each committee and coded committee chairs by their gender, the match between their portfolio and the committee's remit (for example, whether a minister with foreign-policy responsibilities chaired a foreign affairs committee) and their prime-ministerial versus non-prime-ministerial status. We further looked at individual committees' memberships and counted the total number of committees that each minister was assigned to.

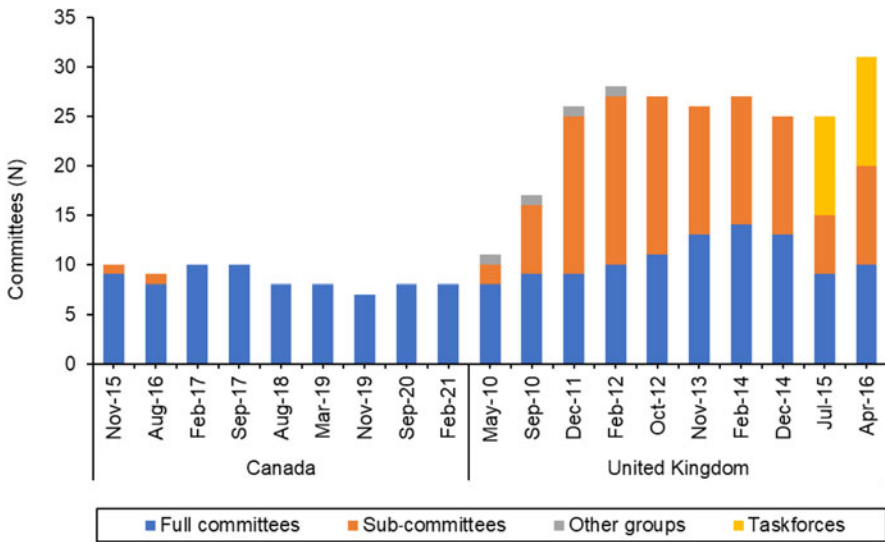


Figure 1. Types of Canadian and UK Cabinet Committees by Committee Period

Lastly, we coded each committee according to its ‘gender’ and ‘prestige’. To do so, we drew on the highly influential frameworks developed by Mara Escobar-Lemmon and Michelle Taylor-Robinson (2005, 2009) and refined by Mona Lena Krook and Diana O’Brien (2012: 844–6).² Although designed for coding individual portfolios, these frameworks can be applied to committees since they ultimately reflect policy priorities or functional areas of government activity. A committee’s gender (‘masculine’, ‘neutral’ or ‘feminine’) reflects how closely its remit touches either upon concerns that are tied to the public sphere and have been historically associated with male roles, or upon concerns that are tied to the private sphere and have been historically associated with female roles. As one of three indicators for assessing the status of committee assignments, prestige (‘high’, ‘medium’ or ‘low’) corresponds to a committee’s remit and reflects its visibility and control over core functions of government. A full breakdown of how we coded each committee is available in the Supplemental Material.

Though created for broad comparative analysis, we did not encounter problems applying Krook and O’Brien’s framework to our cases, supporting their contention that there is wide, cross-country consensus for broad categorical measures (2012: 845). Some categories that might have been problematic, such as religious affairs, which is of limited political importance in the Canadian and UK contexts but is treated as ‘medium’ prestige in the framework, were not applicable.³ In most cases, a committee’s remit had a direct analogue in the frameworks. For instance, Trudeau’s Agenda, Results & Communications Committee, which served as one of his central coordinating or ‘super committees’ (Brodie 2018: 73), corresponded to ‘government affairs’ and was coded as ‘masculine’ and ‘high-prestige’. Likewise, Cameron’s Child Poverty Sub-Committee corresponded to ‘children and family’ and was coded as ‘feminine’ and ‘low-prestige’. In the small number of cases

Table 1. Cabinet Committees in Canada and the UK by Gender and Prestige of Policy Area

		Feminine	Neutral	Masculine	Total
Canada	High-prestige	0	0	52	52
	Medium-prestige	5	13	0	18
	Low-prestige	4	5	0	9
	Total	9	18	52	79
UK	High-prestige	0	0	122	122
	Medium-prestige	5	43	46	94
	Low-prestige	12	15	0	27
	Total	17	58	168	243

where there was no direct analogue, we considered the scope of the committee's remit in the context of the government's programme and related these to the portfolios in the templates. For example, Cameron's Social Justice Committee covered a policy agenda that included family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, housing and criminal justice. The balance of policy areas suggested this was a 'neutral' committee in terms of gender and 'medium-prestige'.

Table 1 shows the overall distribution of Canadian and UK committees by gender and prestige. This classification shows that most committees in both cases are coded 'masculine' and 'high-prestige'; indeed, in Canada the two are coterminous. In both cases, there are no high-prestige committees coded as feminine or neutral, and no committees are coded as low-prestige and masculine. This provides empirical support for the expected relationship between the gender and prestige of committees, given that they are meant to be distinct but theoretically strongly correlated (Krook and O'Brien 2012: 842). While the 'empty cells' mean that we cannot fully disentangle committee gender and prestige, it serves our primary empirical goal: to explore gendered access to cabinet committees in the Canadian and UK cases from three broad perspectives. Indeed, the absence of previous research into the relationship between gender and cabinet committees makes exploratory analysis a 'preferred methodological approach' (Stebbins 2001: 9).

Results

Committee assignments by numbers

Our first research question focuses on the distributions of committee assignments overall and whether they support H1: that the proportion of cabinet-committee seats assigned to women will tend to track but be lower than the proportion of available ministers. Figure 2 shows women's total share of all ministerial posts and committee seats during each committee period. For the UK, the percentages are broken down by party because Cameron between 2010 and 2015 led a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. Under the terms of their coalition agreement, the choice of Liberal Democrat assignments rested with Nick Clegg, the party's leader and deputy prime minister (Royal Holloway Group PR3710 2012).

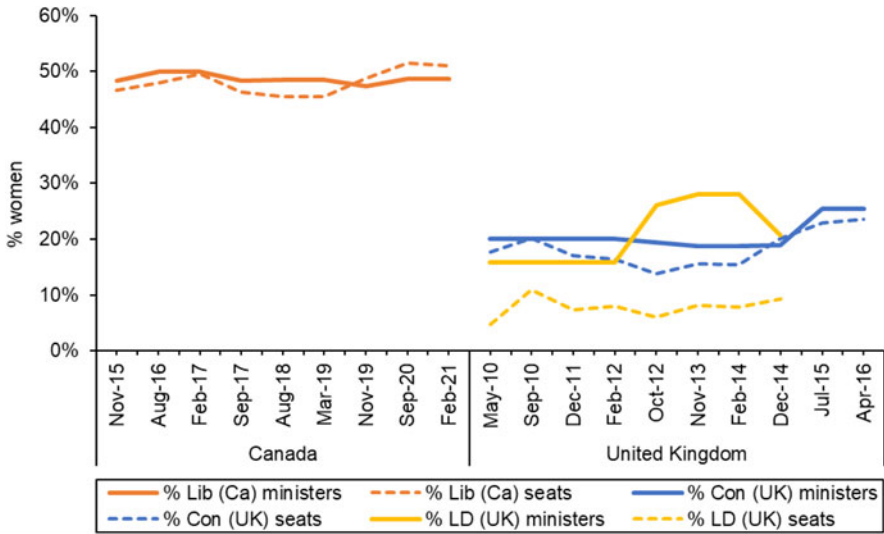


Figure 2. Women’s Shares of Ministerial Posts and Committee Seats

The data are broadly consistent with H1. The proportions of women ministers in both countries are reflected in women’s shares of committee seats, with the correspondence generally greatest in Trudeau’s Liberal governments and most lacking on the Liberal Democrat side of Cameron’s coalition government. Under Trudeau, the difference was at most three percentage points, and in the 2019–2021 term women held more committee seats than men. Conversely, in 2014 almost 30% of Liberal Democrat ministers were women, yet these ministers only held 8% of the party’s committee seats. The irony that the ostensibly more progressive Liberal Democrats, rather than Cameron’s Conservatives, had the greatest gap between their ministerial appointments and committee assignments stems from the further irony that Clegg never appointed a single woman to his party’s allocation of cabinet-level positions, only to junior ministerial posts.

One further point stands out from Figure 2: in Canada, women constituted around half of Trudeau’s ministry, consistent with his gender-equity pledge, whereas they were only ever a small minority of Cameron’s government. The total proportion of women ministers (not shown) between 2010 and 2015 never exceeded one-quarter, achieved after May 2015. This is significantly below Cameron’s gender-equity pledge to appoint women to one-third of ministerial posts.

Was there equity in terms of the burden of committee assignments? Table 2 reports the average number of committee assignments among women and men during each committee period in Canada and the UK. It suggests broad equality in Canada, with women and men, on average, being assigned to comparable numbers of committees. Between 2015 and 2019, men on average tended to be assigned to a slightly larger number of committees, with this pattern reversed after the October 2019 federal election. In the UK, women on average tended to be assigned

Table 2. Average Committee Assignments per Minister (and Ministers Assigned to Committees)

Canada			UK		
Committee period	Women	Men	Committee period	Women	Men
Nov 2015	3.2 (15)	3.4 (16)	May 2010	1.9 (9)	3.2 (34)
Aug 2016	3.2 (15)	3.5 (15)	Sep 2010	2.9 (11)	3.4 (45)
Feb 2017	3.4 (15)	3.5 (15)	Dec 2011	3.8 (12)	4.0 (67)
Sep 2017	3.3 (15)	3.6 (16)	Feb 2012	4.0 (12)	4.2 (69)
Aug 2018	2.4 (17)	2.7 (18)	Oct 2012	3.0 (14)	4.3 (74)
Mar 2019	2.1 (17)	2.3 (18)	Nov 2013	3.0 (16)	4.4 (70)
Nov 2019	2.1 (18)	2.0 (20)	Feb 2014	2.9 (17)	4.6 (70)
Sep 2020	2.8 (18)	2.5 (19)	Dec 2014	3.2 (20)	4.5 (64)
Feb 2021	2.8 (18)	2.6 (19)	Jul 2015	4.5 (14)	5.0 (42)
			Apr 2016	5.3 (15)	5.8 (45)

to a smaller number of committees than men. None of the differences was significant at the 0.05 level, however.

Although some women were assigned to large numbers of committees – Home Secretary Theresa May’s assignments, for instance, sometimes ran into double figures – a far larger number of men were given assignments, and most were given more. A large part of the explanation rests on the prestige and seniority of the portfolios allocated to women. Throughout Cameron’s premiership, May was the only woman allocated an ‘elite’ portfolio (Curtin et al. 2023) of the type that required her presence on a large number of committees. Moreover, no women were appointed to positions that play a traditional role in coordinating government and its finances, like minister for the Cabinet Office or chief secretary to the Treasury. Trudeau’s core of ‘senior’ ministers, by comparison, were reasonably balanced, with ministers such as Chrystia Freeland and Jody Wilson-Raybould playing central roles on committees.

Assignments by committee ‘gender’

Our second research question focuses on the gendered dimension of committee remits and whether women were assigned disproportionately more seats on ‘feminine’ committees than on ‘masculine’ or ‘neutral’ committees. We hypothesized that this would be the case (H2). An important caveat here is that relatively few cabinet committees covered feminine policy areas in either Canada or the UK. The overwhelming majority were masculine, as reported in Table 1.

Our hypothesis is supported by the data. Figure 3 provides clear evidence that women generally had higher shares of seats on committees coded as feminine. Across the first four committee periods of Trudeau’s premiership, women dominated the lone feminine committee, Diversity and Inclusion. During the same time, the proportion of seats assigned to women on the more numerous neutral

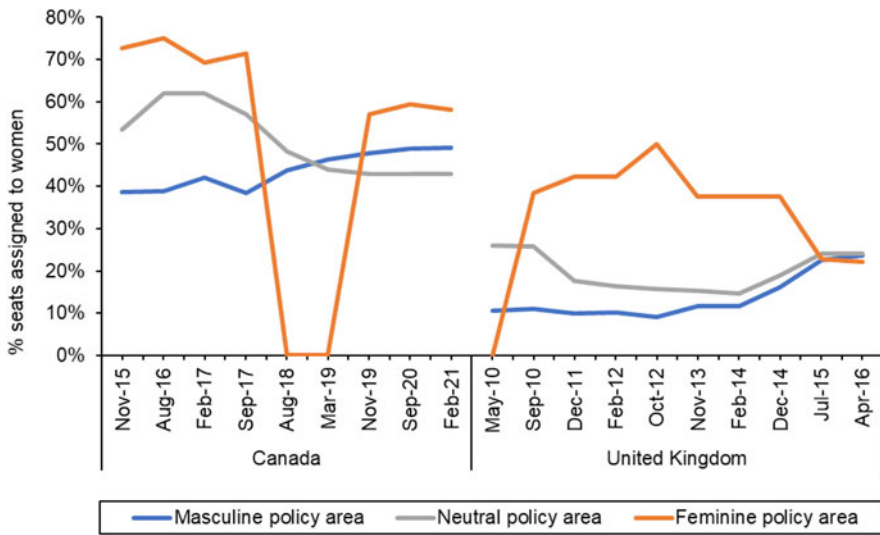


Figure 3. Women's Share of Committee Seats on Masculine, Neutral and Feminine Committees

committees was always greater than on the masculine committees. After the 2019 federal election and the re-institution of two feminine committees, women again featured most heavily among their members.

These patterns of gendered assignments were even more pronounced in the UK during the period of coalition government. At times, women's share of seats on feminine committees was four times greater than their share of seats on masculine committees, and it was also consistently greater than on neutral committees. It was only after the return of a single-party Conservative government in 2015 that these gendered patterns largely vanished. Thus, in both cases, women's share of committee assignments was generally much greater on feminine and neutral committees than on those coded masculine.

The status of committee assignments

Our final research question focuses on the status of committee assignments. Our expectations are that women are less likely to feature on the more prestigious committees (H3) and on committees chaired by the prime minister (H4), and that among all committee assignments, most chairing responsibilities are allocated to men (H5).

Figure 4 shows women's shares of committee seats across high-, medium- and low-prestige committees. The results for both Canada and the UK are only partially consistent with our expectation in H3. In both cases, the initial committee-system configuration is wholly consistent insofar as the shares of seats assigned to women are much greater on low-prestige committees than on medium-prestige committees, which are greater than on high-prestige committees. Thereafter, the cases diverge: women generally continue to feature most heavily on low-prestige committees in the UK, albeit by smaller margins, but in Canada from the August 2018 committee

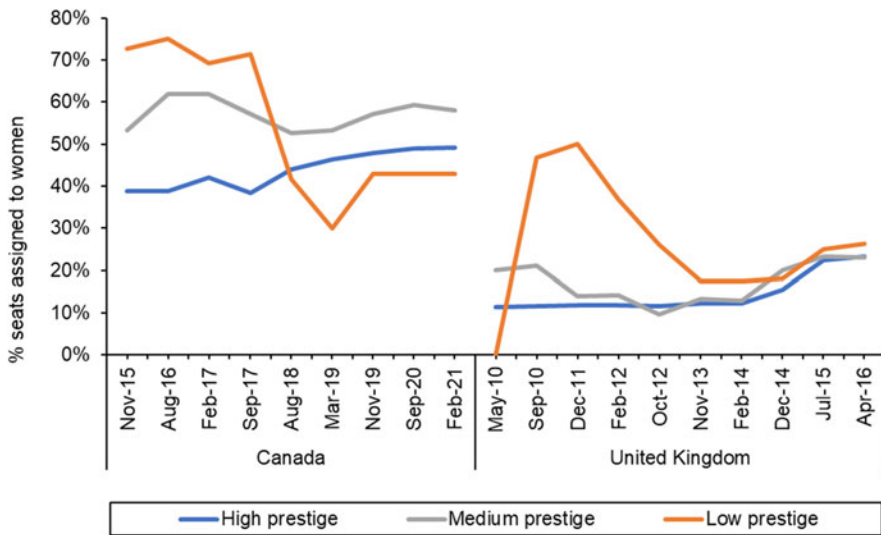


Figure 4. Women’s Share of Committee Seats on High-Prestige, Medium-Prestige and Low-Prestige Committees

period, the proportion of seats assigned to women is greatest on medium-prestige committees, and greater on high-prestige rather than low-prestige committees.

Figure 5 speaks to H4, our hypothesis that the proportion of seats assigned to women is lower on committees chaired by the prime minister. Here the evidence seems clear: across all Canadian committee periods and across all but one UK

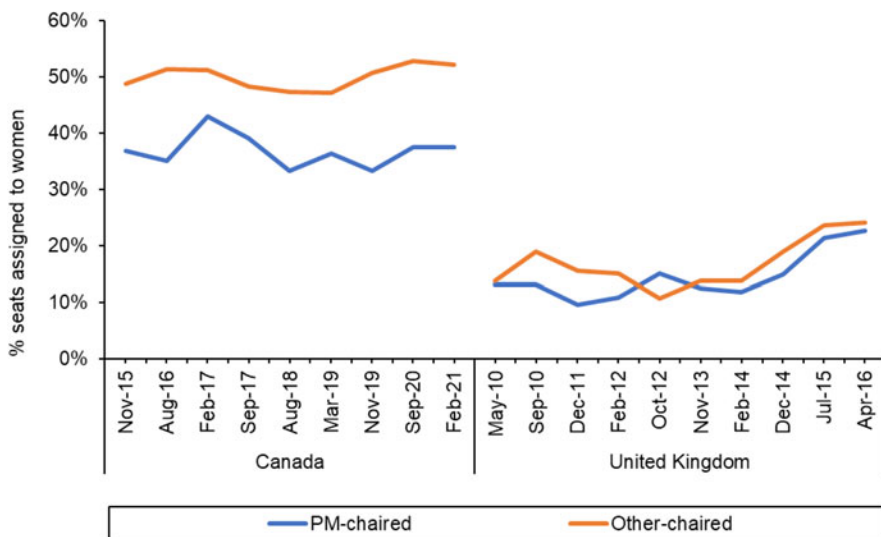


Figure 5. Women’s Share of Committee Seats on PM-Chaired and Other-Chaired Committees

committee period, the proportion of seats assigned to women on cabinet committees chaired by the prime minister is lower than on other committees. Both Trudeau and Cameron seemed to prefer to surround themselves with men – but the gap between women’s presence on prime-ministerial and non-prime-ministerial committees was consistently more pronounced under the former. Part of this difference stems from Trudeau only chairing one or two committees consistently – Agenda, Results & Communications and Intelligence and Emergency Management – while Cameron chaired many more committees with wide-ranging policy responsibilities.

Given the overlap between a committee’s prestige and its chair, we briefly consider the relative significance of these factors, as well as a committee’s gender, by estimating ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models of the percentage of women on cabinet committees. Our independent variables are the gender and prestige categories previously introduced, and a dummy variable for when a committee is chaired by the prime minister (a score of 1 denotes it is). Because of the theoretical and empirical correlation between gender and prestige, we run separate models for these two perspectives. We also control for three other factors: each committee’s existence in the lifecycle of a government via a variable that chronologically indexes the within-country order of committee periods, the committee size (the number of ministerial members) and, in the case of the UK models, whether the committee existed during the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition (a dummy variable where 1 denotes a coalition-era committee). The estimates are shown in [Table 3](#).

The results for the gender models clearly indicate that the share of women on feminine committees are significantly higher than on masculine committees. In the UK, the share of women ministers on neutral committees is also significantly higher than on masculine committees, although the same relationship falls short of conventional statistical significance in the Canadian case. When it comes to prestige, there is also clear evidence that the share of women on high-prestige committees is likely to be lower than on other committees. In Canada, the medium-prestige category is consistently significant, and in the UK, it is the low-prestige category. Once we control for either gender or prestige, the PM-chair variable ceases to matter. Taken together, these results reinforce our descriptive evidence of the gendered patterns of cabinet-committee assignments.

Finally, [Table 4](#) speaks to H5 and our hypothesis that among all committee assignments, most chairing responsibilities will be allocated to men. Here we find evidence of gendered patterns in both cases. Across all Canadian committees, only 28 of 79 committees (35%) were assigned a woman chair. In the UK, the corresponding numbers were 10 of 243 (4%), with a further eight committees (3%) assigned a woman as deputy chair. The latter position was important in the context of the 2010–2015 coalition government because it gave both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats a voice in setting each committee’s agenda. When one party provided the chair, the other usually provided the deputy. If anything, expanding ‘chairing positions’ to include deputy chairs merely reinforced the absence of women from leadership positions in Cameron’s committees. Moreover, all chairing and deputy-chairing assignments were on sub-committees, which often, but not always, prepared policy for the ‘parent’ committee, and on the policy-chasing implementation taskforces.

Table 3. OLS Regression Analysis of Percentage of Women Ministers on Cabinet Committees

	Canada		UK	
	Gender	Prestige	Gender	Prestige
Neutral policy	5.107 (3.537)		6.671*** (1.784)	
Feminine policy	18.075*** (4.923)		23.279*** (2.922)	
Medium-prestige		9.538* (3.692)		2.992 (1.696)
Low-prestige		7.629 (4.876)		17.632*** (2.654)
Chaired by PM	-6.853 (3.973)	-6.667 (4.126)	1.440 (1.677)	-0.020 (1.805)
Committee period order	0.175 (0.553)	0.285 (0.573)	-0.132 (0.395)	-0.349 (0.414)
Committee size	0.408 (0.497)	0.793 (0.496)	0.489** (0.166)	0.512** (0.174)
Coalition			-8.924*** (2.593)	-11.020*** (2.686)
Constant	39.721*** (5.734)	35.196*** (5.699)	13.809*** (4.217)	17.110*** (4.378)
<i>N</i>	79	79	243	243
Adj. <i>R</i> ²	0.23	0.17	0.28	0.21

Note: Entries are OLS coefficient estimates, with standard errors in parentheses. Statistical significance: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. Reference categories for gender and prestige models are masculine and high-prestige, respectively.

Table 4. Women Chairs by Type of Committee in Canada and the UK

	Canada		UK	
	Total committees	Women chairs	Total committees	Women chairs (deputies)
All committees	79	28	243	10 (8)
Full committees	77	26	106	0 (0)
Sub-committees	2	2	112	5 (6)
Other committees	0	0	4	0 (0)
Taskforces	0	0	21	5 (2)
Masculine	52	13	168	2 (4)
Neutral	18	12	58	2 (0)
Feminine	9	3	17	6 (4)
High-prestige	52	13	122	2 (3)
Medium-prestige	18	14	94	2 (1)
Low-prestige	9	1	27	6 (4)

Analysing the gender and prestige of committees chaired by women reveals further evidence of gendered assignments. A greater proportion of feminine committees in Canada were chaired by women (33%) than were masculine committees (25%), although neutral committees were most likely to be chaired by women (67%). By contrast, chairing responsibilities on low-prestige committees were less likely to be assigned to women (11%) than those on high-prestige committees (25%), but they were still more likely to be assigned to women on medium-prestige committees (78%). Notably, most of the gender-neutral and medium-prestige committees chaired by women ministers were chaired by only two ministers, Carla Qualtrough and Melanie Joly (10 and 9, respectively). Of the masculine and high-prestige committees, Chrystia Freeland and Jane Philpott chaired almost half. Women chairs were clearly not confined to feminine or low-prestige committees, but there was still a tendency for the most prestigious and masculine assignments to be given to men. Additionally, if chairing salient committees is an indicator of prime-ministerial confidence, men made up Trudeau's 'inner circle', with only a few highly trusted women ministers, such as Qualtrough and Freeland, granted the same opportunity.

In the UK, a far higher proportion of feminine committees (35%) were chaired by women than were neutral (3%) or masculine committees (1%). Deputy-chairing responsibilities on feminine committees were also disproportionately likely to be assigned to women. Meanwhile, women were largely excluded from chairing responsibilities on high-prestige (1.6%) and medium-prestige committees (2.1%). Only on the low-prestige committees (22%) were women chairs assigned in any sizeable number.

In all cases, the chairing minister's individual portfolio overlapped closely with the committee's remit. For instance, between 2010 and 2012 the Social Justice

Sub-Committee on Child Poverty was chaired by Sarah Teather, the Liberal Democrat minister for children and families, while Caroline Spelman, the Conservative environment secretary, briefly served as a co-chair of the Home Affairs Sub-Committee on Green Government during the same period. After 2015, Theresa May, Priti Patel and Nicky Morgan served as chairs or co-chairs of the Syrian Refugees, Childcare and Child Protection Taskforces, respectively, but that was because they were the 'lead' ministers. Overall, then, the evidence for the UK suggests that gendered patterns of ministerial portfolio allocation extended to assignments within individual cabinet committees.

Discussion

In this article we sought to broaden existing research into women and executive politics by exploring how women are included in cabinet-committee systems. Drawing on official lists of cabinet committees, we examined committee assignments in Canada and the UK during the first six years of Trudeau's premiership and the entire six years of Cameron's. We recognize that committee assignments represent only an opportunity to exert influence, and that the importance of assignments may vary in ways not covered by our analysis. Nevertheless, assignments are an important first step in exploring this subject area. They are also symbolically important because they reflect an opportunity for women to be involved in key areas of collective decision-making (Franceschet et al. 2017).

We found that women's overall share of committee assignments broadly reflected but lagged behind women's share of ministerial posts. We also found that women's shares of committee assignments tended to vary according to the gender and status of committees, with women tending to have lower shares of assignments on 'masculine' committees than on 'neutral' or 'feminine' committees, and lower shares on more prestigious committees and on committees chaired by the prime minister. We further found evidence of women tending to be allocated fewer chairing assignments than men, especially in the UK. In all these respects, our findings were largely consistent with previous research into the role of gender in shaping the appointment of women ministers and the allocation of ministerial portfolios. While the meaning of gender and historically based gender categories continues to evolve towards conceptual ambiguity and fuzzy categorization, we are still in a moment in which traditional gender stereotypes continue to be politically and socially powerful; as long as this is so, measuring progress from a historical baseline is meaningful.

On this basis, our findings suggest that both Trudeau and Cameron failed to live up fully to the spirit of their gender-equity commitments in their cabinet-committee assignments, though Trudeau's overall performance is markedly better in absolute terms. Trudeau has been criticized for 'Facebook feminism', focusing on social-media performance over concrete action (Ashe 2020: 69). His feminist commitments can be seen at the level of cabinet numbers but less so in the institutions of collective cabinet decision-making. Cameron, too, has been criticized for failing to internalize fully his feminist commitments. They were not followed by 'clear and tangible outcomes' even where it was possible to follow through, as in his pledge to appoint women to one-third of ministerial posts (Annesley and

Gains 2014: 778). While we do not question the sincerity of the two prime ministers' commitments, it is unlikely that much thought was given to women's representation on cabinet committees. This is perhaps unsurprising. Cabinet committees have low public visibility. Their memberships receive minimal media attention, and their work takes place behind closed doors. It is perhaps unfortunate that prime ministers face limited political or public pressure to place representation at the heart of their committee choices.

So far, our exploration of committee assignments has examined the Canadian and UK cases in tandem but separately. Here we consider the differences between them and propose some possible explanations. We discount the relevance of societal norms, political development and regime type, since the cases are broadly similar in these respects. But the two cases also differ in several important ways, and these differences serve as possible lines of inquiry for future comparative research.

The first and most obvious difference concerns the supply of women ministers, the pool from which committee assignees are drawn. Trudeau fulfilled his promise of appointing women to half his cabinet, whereas Cameron fell short of his pledge to appoint women to one-third of all government posts. Just as the share of women MPs in governing parties correlates closely with the share of women in cabinets, so the share of women ministers correlates with women's share of committee assignments. But a larger number of women ministers is also likely to have other effects on committee assignments, since the chance of women holding 'masculine' or 'elite' portfolios will also increase, which in turn increases the likelihood of them being assigned to masculine and high-prestige committees.

This matters because of a second difference: the strength of departmentalism in government culture and practice. Departmentalism is not unknown in Canada, but the institutionalization of centralized decision-making over departmental autonomy is stronger (Howlett et al. 2005; Savoie 1999). Despite prime-ministerial efforts to centralize decision-making, departmentalism is deeply entrenched in the UK, with ministers acting as 'medieval barons presiding over their own policy territory' and departments jealously guarding their interests (Bennister 2007: 334). Others have described departmentalism as the 'besetting sin of British government' (Kavanagh and Richards 2001: 1). Departmentalism has many drivers, but it matters for cabinet committees since it encourages ministers to engage primarily in their policy areas and in others only when their interests are threatened. It also fosters functional considerations on the part of prime ministers when assigning committee seats: they tend to assign them primarily if not exclusively to ministers with departmental stakes in a committee's business (James 2020: 106). Existing research suggests that ministerial appointments may have 'second-order' policy effects via committee assignments (Allen and Ward 2009). However, an additional second-order effect of committee assignments is the reproduction if not exacerbation of representational imbalances at the ministerial level. Put simply, the ability of British prime ministers to 'fix' descriptive underrepresentation at the cabinet-committee level is limited given a group's underrepresentation in ministerial posts.

The impact of departmentalism may be more pronounced in the allocation of chairing responsibilities. If we exclude those committees chaired by prime ministers, 41% of Canadian committees were chaired by a minister whose portfolio directly matched its remit, whereas 67% of UK committees were chaired by such

ministers. If women were not allocated relevant portfolios, they stood little chance of being made a committee chair. Yet, weaker functional norms and greater prime-ministerial discretion in choosing chairs carry their own risks. When rules are relaxed around ministerial appointments, ‘affiliational’ criteria, such as loyalty, prior relationships and common social backgrounds, may become more important (Annesley et al. 2019). These criteria come with their own gender biases. Trudeau often entrusted committee chairing assignment to personal friends, such as Dominic LeBlanc, or trusted senior Liberals, most of whom were men. The ‘inner core’ of influential ministers in Cameron’s governments was entirely made up of men (Annesley and Gains 2012: 722), some of whom, notably George Osborne, William Hague and Oliver Letwin, were assigned significant chairing duties.

A third difference between our cases concerns the character of the governing parties, since party ideologies or traditions might affect both the supply of women and leaders’ priorities. Generally, leftist or liberal parties tend to be more supportive of affirmative action on ideological grounds, as reflected in the Canadian Liberal Party’s rule requiring local candidate nominations to conduct searches for underrepresented candidates, including women and people of colour (Liberal Party of Canada 2021). Moreover, Trudeau’s progressivism was a central feature of his branding and communications strategy (Lalancette and Cormack 2020). He self-declared as a feminist and took several symbolic and policy actions correspondingly (Dangoisse and Perdomo 2021). Although women only constituted 27% and 33% of Liberal MPs, respectively, after the 2015 and 2019 federal elections, Trudeau still delivered on his commitment to appoint a gender-balanced cabinet, which had knock-on consequences for women’s cabinet-committee assignments, at least in terms of raw numbers.

The UK’s Liberal Democrats were an exception to this ideological or party-family rule, having resisted the introduction of all-women shortlists until the 2017 general election (O’Brien and Reyes-Housholder 2020: 258). Their prior reluctance can help explain the dearth of women MPs whom Clegg could appoint to senior ministerial office between 2010 and 2015 and thereby assign to cabinet committees. Cameron was also something of an outlier among Conservatives since his modernizing agenda as party leader included the ‘feminization’ of his party (Bryson and Heppell 2010: 31). He had some success in raising his party’s share of women MPs to 21% in 2015, and this enabled him to appoint a greater number of women ministers, who could then be assigned to cabinet committees. Nevertheless, his ultimate reluctance to prioritize a gender-balanced government à la Trudeau chimes with others’ conclusions that the actual ‘feminization’ of the Conservatives under Cameron was limited (Campbell and Childs 2015). Thus, the gendered patterns we observe in committee assignments is at least partly attributable to the explicit ‘gender’ lens of Trudeau, and Cameron’s unwillingness to fundamentally reorient his party in such a direction.

The institutional and political differences between our cases, as well as the gendered patterns we identify, all merit further investigation, ideally in larger-N studies. Cabinet committees are widespread institutions, and our analysis could easily be applied to other parliamentary systems, including Australia, Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Spain (Ie 2022; Mackie and

Hogwood 1985). Our study investigated both committee gender and prestige, while acknowledging the significant overlap in these two factors. Broadening the number of cases in future analyses would help to better disaggregate the separate effects of gender and prestige, since examining a wider variety of systems would likely reveal more cross-cutting committees. Future research could also build on the multivariate regression analysis offered here, by expanding across countries and time periods and adopting a multilevel design, where contextual factors at the committee period level could be more thoroughly assessed. Finally, further research is needed to explore how the gendered composition of cabinet committees affects policy choices. Lists of assignments can only be a starting point. Researchers may well need to focus on specific policy initiatives or government bills and seek to ascertain through interviews and/or archival research how gender affected committee deliberations. At any rate, further research can only add to our growing understanding of how power is dispersed and gendered in cabinet committees and political executives more broadly.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2023.18>.

Notes

- 1 In Canada, details of cabinet committees are available on the prime minister's website (see Ie 2019). In the UK, these lists are posted on the government website (see Allen and Siklodi 2020).
- 2 The categorization of prestige has since been incorporated into the WhoGov dataset (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020).
- 3 One potentially debatable coding decision was to treat energy and natural resources as being medium-prestige in the Canadian context since these portfolios have been regarded as high-prestige or 'important' for two provincial governments (Studlar and Moncrief 1999: 388). However, in the absence of any universally agreed authoritative Canadian national-level ranking, we adhered to Krook and O'Brien's framework.

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