

The representation of LibDems in the cabinet committee system evinces a greater role for the party in policy making across government than might have otherwise have been supposed

Measures of 'positional power' highlight some interesting features of both the balance of power between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and David Cameron's style of leadership. [Nicholas Allen](#)'s analysis shows that the Liberal Democrats, with 29.4 per cent of committee places and 31.1 per cent of the total weighted score, have a share of power that is clearly disproportionate to their contribution to the government's parliamentary majority and much larger than their share of all government and cabinet posts.



In politics, as in any walk of life, where someone stands on an issue depends in part on where they sit. It is no less true that politicians' ability to shape decisions depends in part on where they sit. Ambitious MPs may have a smidgen of influence over government policy from the backbenches. They may perhaps have a smidgen more through membership of a select committee. They will obviously have a very considerable amount of influence from a seat around the cabinet table.

The idea that where someone sits can affect their capacity to influence policy provides a useful window onto the world of intra-executive power relations. Political scientists have already taken this idea and used it to explore the subject. As is well known, much of the important policy making in British government occurs within a system of cabinet committees. In an innovative study of John Major's cabinet, later applied to Tony Blair's, [Patrick Dunleavy](#) developed measures of 'positional power' based on every minister's position within this system of committees. By establishing, first, the relative importance of the various cabinet committees and, second, which ministers were members of which committees, Dunleavy painted a detailed picture of ministers' potential influence over the whole range of policy.

Inspired by the approach, a group of undergraduate students at Royal Holloway, University of London, and myself set about analysing power relations within the current coalition government [1]. In the process we were able to highlight some interesting features of both the balance of power between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and David Cameron's style of leadership. This short blog highlights some of our key findings. Full and further details can be found in a [recently published article](#).

Re-opening the 'who won?' debate

Commentators began asking the question 'who won the negotiations?' almost as soon as David Cameron and Nick Clegg agreed to form a coalition. Many based their answers on what the parties agreed to do in government. [Writing in the Sunday Times](#), Martin Ivens noted that 164 of the 397 pledges in the coalition agreement could be found in the Liberal Democrat manifesto. [Other analysis](#) undertaken by University College London's Constitution Unit suggested that three-quarters of the Liberal Democrats' manifesto commitments were incorporated into the agreement compared with only three-fifths of the Conservatives' pledges. [Yet other analysis](#) suggested that the coalition agreement was, on balance, closest to the Liberal Democrats' manifesto in 'left-right' terms. The general verdict seemed clear: Clegg's party had performed disproportionately well in securing policy concessions.

The coalition agreement was only the starting point for what the government would do, however. Measures need men and women to be implemented; and men and women may shape and modify measures. Thus commentators also looked to the allocation of jobs in the coalition. Clegg's party constituted less than 16 per cent of the government's MPs, but the party five obtained five cabinet seats

out of 23, nearly 22 per cent, and a further twelve junior ministerial posts. Again, the general verdict seemed to be that Clegg's party had performed fairly well in this respect, if not outstandingly.

When it comes to jobs, raw numbers are just one part of the story. Other factors, not least where those jobs are located, obviously matter. In this respect, some commentators noted that the Liberal Democrats headed only three spending departments, none of them especially large, while others focused on the complete absence of Liberal Democrat ministers from a handful of departments. A few critics even suggested that Clegg blundered in not insisting on taking for himself one of the great offices of state, although quite how he would have been able to monitor government activity whilst running a major department was conveniently overlooked.

Measuring power across the coalition cabinet committees

Surprisingly little attention, however, was paid to the allocation of seats on the various cabinet committees. This oversight was perhaps surprising given the resurgent role envisaged for such committees in the context of organising and managing the coalition. By September 2010, Cameron had established nine formal cabinet committees and a further seven sub-committees. Some 56 ministers had at least one seat on at least one committee or subcommittee.

Full details of how we analysed the memberships of these committees and subcommittees are available [elsewhere](#). For the time being, it is sufficient to note that we adapted Dunleavy's formulae to calculate the relative importance or 'weighted score' of each committee and subcommittee and then every minister's share of all the weighted scores across the committee system.

Figure 1 summarises the inter-party balance of power in the cabinet committee system as of September 2010. As might be expected, the Conservatives had the lion's share of all committee seats and the total sum of all the committees' weighted scores. However, the Liberal Democrats, with 29.4 per cent of committee places and 31.1 per cent of the total weighted score, had a share of power that was clearly disproportionate to their contribution to the government's parliamentary majority and much larger than their share of all government and cabinet posts. In other words, the cabinet committee system concealed a greater role for the Liberal Democrats in policy making across government than might have otherwise have been supposed.

Figure 1: The intra-coalition share of government posts, cabinet committee seats and cabinet committee weighted scores

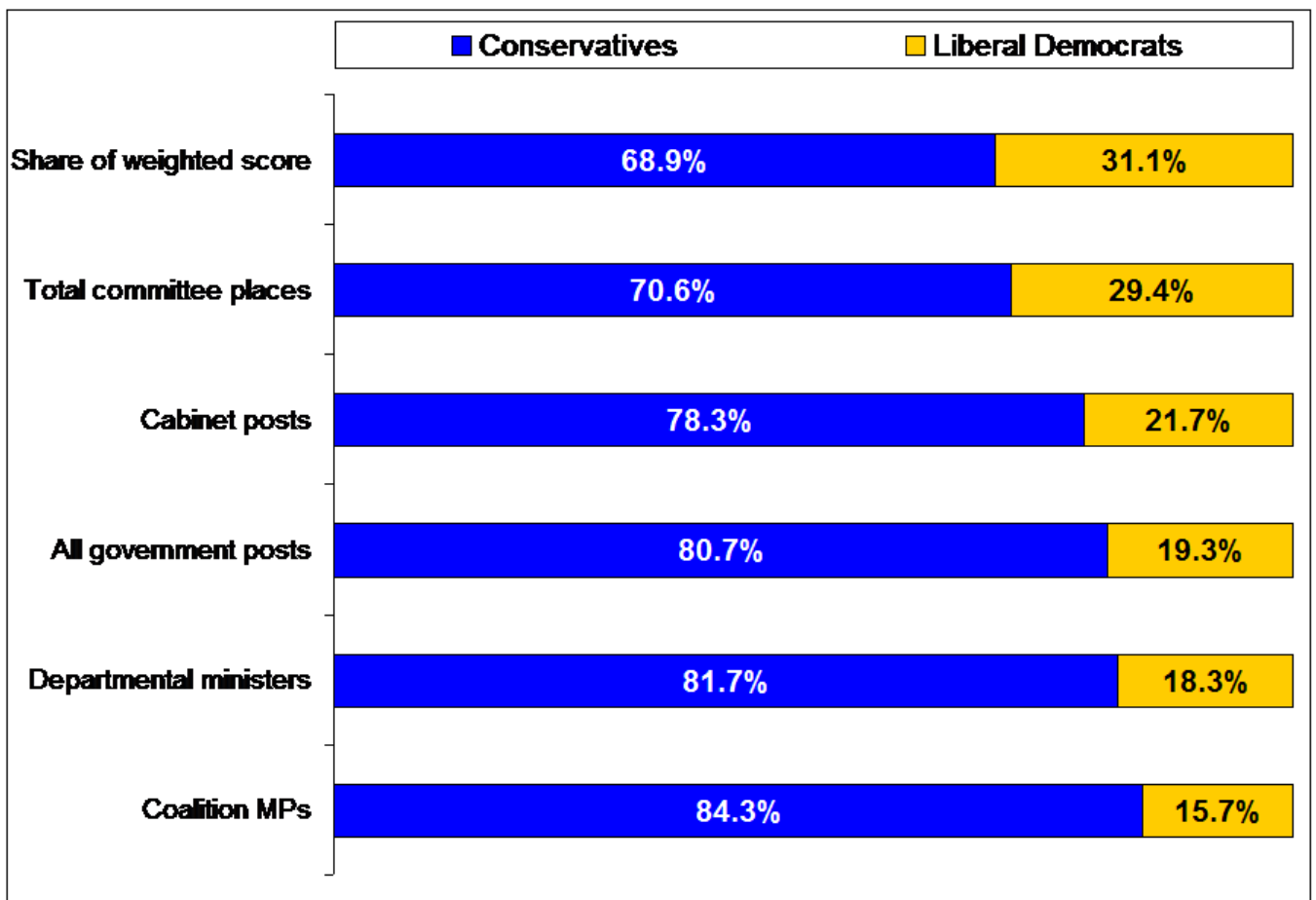
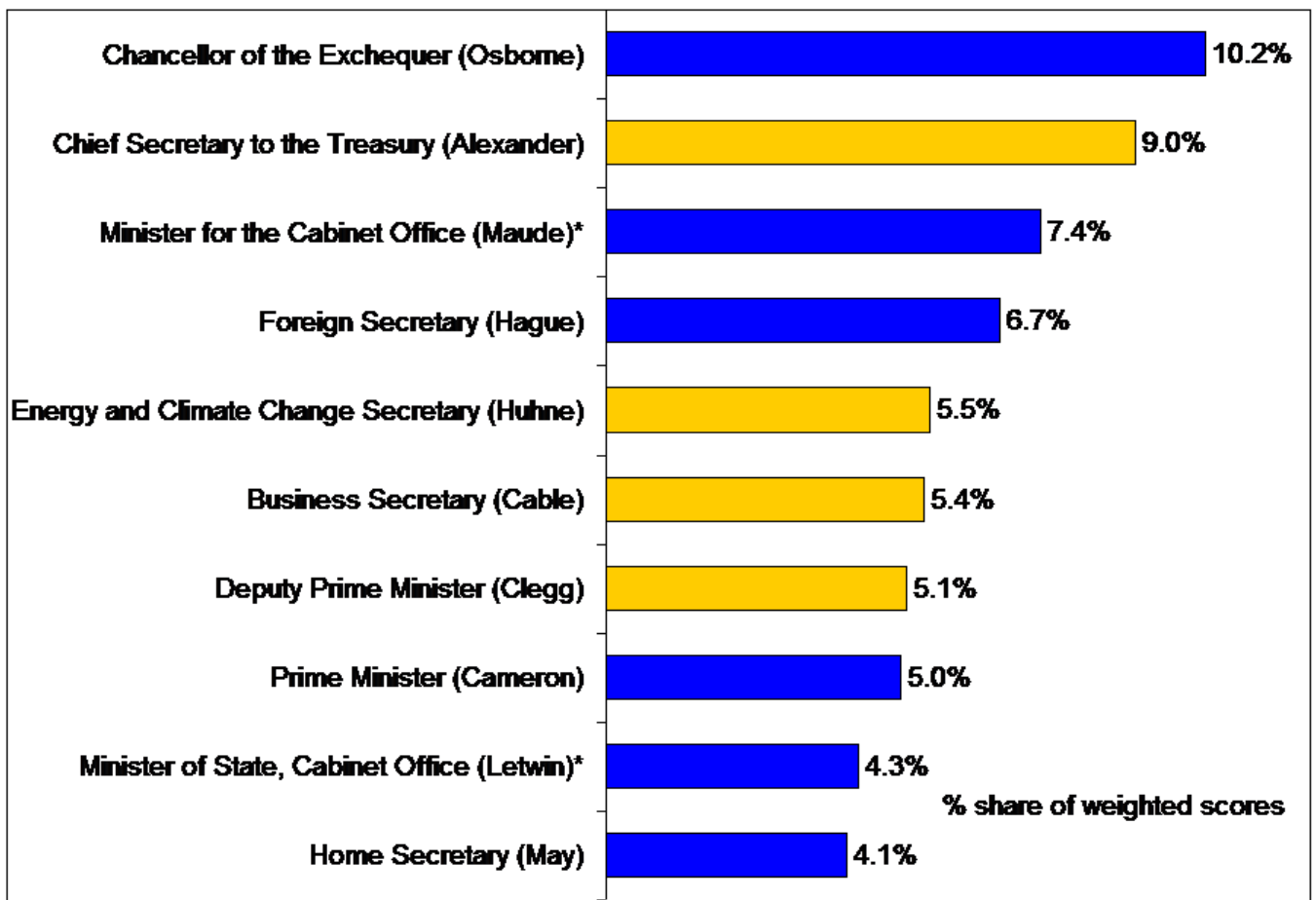


Figure 2 summarises individual ministers' share of power in the committee system. It is immediately apparent that David Cameron's capacity to influence committee decisions directly appears remarkably limited. He had only the eighth highest share of committee influence, a relative share much diminished when compared with his predecessors as prime minister, and he chaired just two committees and a further two subcommittees. Instead it was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, who possessed the greatest share of committee power. The second-placed minister was Danny Alexander, the Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary and Osborne's number two at the Treasury.

Figure 2: Top ten ministers by % share of total weighted score, September 2010



Note: * Minister 'attending cabinet'. Conservative ministers in blue, Liberal Democrat ministers in yellow

Cameron's diminished role could be interpreted as a desire to re-establish collective decision making and/or as an attempt to create more space for him to focus on managing the coalition and to arbitrate between ministers and departments. It could also be interpreted as an attempt to increase the influence of the Treasury, in the persons of Osborne and Alexander, in an era of austerity and fiscal restraint. However, the analysis also highlights some of the criticisms that have been levelled at Cameron's style of governing amid myriad blunders, u-turns and cock-ups involving his ministers. One distinguished professor has accused him of running a 'ring-donut' government and of having too feeble a grip on policy co-ordination. Another has suggested that Cameron has simply given 'given his ministers free rein to get him, as well as them, into trouble'. Our analysis of Cameron's use of the cabinet committee system gives further credence to these claims.

Any analysis of the formal cabinet committee system necessarily paints a limited picture of power relations within the coalition government. Positions in the system and potential influence are merely the starting point for understanding the exercise of power. Nevertheless, relatively formal attempts to analyse power relations can complement some of the other excellent [in-depth studies of the coalition](#) that are beginning to emerge. They can also lay the ground for systematic comparison of changes over time.

This article summarises 'A Partnership of Unequals: Positional power in the coalition government' by the Royal Holloway Group.

[i] The students were Hayder Allawi, Emily Bentley-Leek, James Hickson, James Lewis, Vishal Makol, Simon Marlow, Miguel Nance, Asad Naqvi, Meera Parmar, Nathan Parsad, Thomas Pratt, Dylan Pritchard, Rachael Squire, Laura Scanlan, Tiana Tandberg and Louie Woodall.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

Nicholas Allen is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. His research interests include the British prime ministership, parliamentary misconduct and public attitudes towards political ethics. He is the co-editor of *Britain at the Polls 2010* (Sage, 2011), and his work has been published in journals such as the *British Journal of Political Science*, the *European Journal of Political Research*, *West European Politics*, *Parliamentary Affairs* and *British Politics*.

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