

# Cabinet participation erodes the distinctiveness of junior coalition partners' 'brand'

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*“Cleggmania” preceded the 2010 General Election, where Nick Clegg saw his and his party’s reputation and poll share sky-rocket following his assured performance in the general election debate. However in 2015, Clegg – as Deputy Prime Minister in a minority government with the Conservatives – was almost universally unpopular, leading his party to a disastrous result in which his party lost 48 of 56 seats. Press coverage before and since the election has suggested that this kind of performance for minor coalition partners is inevitable, but **David Fortunato** argues that while it isn’t this straightforward, cabinet participation does dilute the ‘brand’ of the junior partners.*



The Liberal Democrats, junior coalition partner to the Conservatives in the 2010-2015 Cameron cabinet, were trounced in May’s general election, losing 48 of their 56 seats and ultimately costing Nick Clegg his position as leader. This loss has widely been compared to the fate suffered by the FDP (Germany’s liberal party) in the most recent German election. The FDP, junior coalition partner to CDU/CSU in the second Merkel cabinet (2009-2013), lost all 93 of their seats by failing to clear Germany’s electoral threshold of 5% – the portion of the popular vote required to gain seats in the Bundestag (Germany’s lower house of parliament). Popular media accounts of these losses, including a prescriptive post on the LSE Politics and Policy [Blog](#), tend to discuss electoral losses by junior partners as a nearly unavoidable symptom of coalition politics. It is difficult for smaller parties, lacking the stature and exposure of the prime minister and bound by [collective cabinet responsibility](#), to convince voters that they have distinct preferences and are effective at influencing policy outcomes, without risking their role in cabinet. Recently, political scientists have made several advances that speak to this regularity.

The evidence suggests that there are two primary reasons that junior coalition partners tend to suffer electoral

losses. First, recent experimental research by Ray Duch, Randy Stevenson, and Wojtek Przepiorka ([gated](#), [ungated](#)) on ‘responsibility attribution’ – who deserves credit or blame for group decision outcomes, and how much – has found that people tend to heap disproportionate levels of blame (or credit) on the individual that *proposed* choice, rather than on individuals that *consented* to the choice – even if those that consented to the decision hold a majority of the votes. Imagine going to dinner with friends and trying a new restaurant at one friend’s suggestion, let’s call her Linda. If the meal is great, we will likely award all the praise to Linda, and, if the meal is awful, she will likely receive all the blame. But each friend that consented to the suggestion bears some responsibility – they allowed Linda’s proposal to come fruition and so should share in the credit or blame, but that is not how we tend to act in day-to-day responsibility attributions. We want to give Linda all of the credit or all of the blame – perhaps this is why affected indifference seems so common when groups of friends decide on a restaurant...

Prime ministerial parties are overwhelmingly viewed as the “proposer.” They nearly always hold more seats in parliament, they nearly always have a privileged role in the formation of the cabinet, and they receive the lion’s share of media coverage. This tendency to perceive the PM as the proposer and the junior partner as the consenter, or merely the other people in the room when the decisions were made, makes it incredibly difficult for junior coalition partners to claim credit for the policy accomplishments of the government. Thus, the Lib Dems and FDP, who both governed over periods of relatively robust growth, received no reward for that economic performance.

The second reason that junior partners may suffer speaks to their policy profile, or their party brand. In a recent article ([gated](#), [ungated](#)) Jim Adams and I argue that voters tend to view prime ministerial parties as dominant in cabinet formation and policymaking. Yet, people should also intuitively understand that each party in cabinet holds an effective veto over policy outcomes. Given that the junior partner controls a veto, but the prime minister is viewed as the proposer, it makes sense for voters to believe that junior partners have effectively the same policy preferences as the prime ministerial party.

We tested this argument by analysing how voters viewed cabinet parties on the left-right spectrum using data from over 30 electoral surveys administered in 11 European democracies. The results indicate that voters tend to view junior coalition partners as moving closer to the prime minister – particularly when the junior partner has a much smaller share of seats in parliament – but do not view the prime minister as becoming more similar to their junior partners. This suggests that, for junior partners, cabinet participation can erode the distinctiveness of their party brand, which is likely to make them less appealing to voters.

In sum, cabinet participation is a mixed bag for junior partners. While entering cabinet allows these parties to have policy influence, they are rarely able to claim credit for these accomplishments and tend to degrade the distinctiveness of their brand in the process. We believe that this may explain why some parties choose to provide stable support to minority governments from outside of the cabinet (this is common in countries like Canada and New Zealand and the Scandinavian countries), rather than formally entering coalition. This allows them to extract policy concessions from the prime minister, without facing the electoral risk that can seem inherent to junior partner status.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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