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Safety first: MPs in safe seats are more likely to become ministers in the UK

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# Safety first: MPs in safe seats are more likely to become ministers in the UK

Elad Klein and Resul Umit

*Members of parliament (MPs) have multiple goals but limited resources. Where MPs make up the vast majority of ministerial positions as in the United Kingdom (UK), they have to confront the trade-off between their goals of vote-seeking (i.e. staying as an MP) and office-seeking (i.e. working as a minister). PADEMIA members Elad Klein and Resul Umit examine the relationship between the size of MPs' majority and likelihood that they will hold ministerial office, finding a strong correlation. This suggests that there is a hierarchy between the legislative goals and hence that voters can affect the allocation of ministerial positions in the UK.*

Voters elect their members of parliament (MPs) in general elections, but a large majority of MPs have very little to do with the day-to-day governing of the country. It is rather the ministers in government, as selected by the victorious party leaders, who do. Hence there is an obvious link between the general elections and government formation with regard to *who* selects ministers. In a recent study, we show that there is another – albeit a less obvious – connection in terms of *who* gets selected as ministers; MPs in electorally safe seats are more likely to become ministers.



## **Electoral safety of MPs affects their chance of being selected as ministers in the UK**



This is based on an analysis whether the constituency results from the elections to the House of Commons over the period 1992-2015 influenced the likelihood of MPs being selected as ministers in the United Kingdom (UK). The House of Commons provides the perfect case to assess the electoral connection of ministerial selection due to the single-member districts, large government

size, and the relatively decentralised candidate selection process in the UK.

Electoral safety affects the ministerial selection because elections are a constraint over the preferences of MPs and their parties. 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.

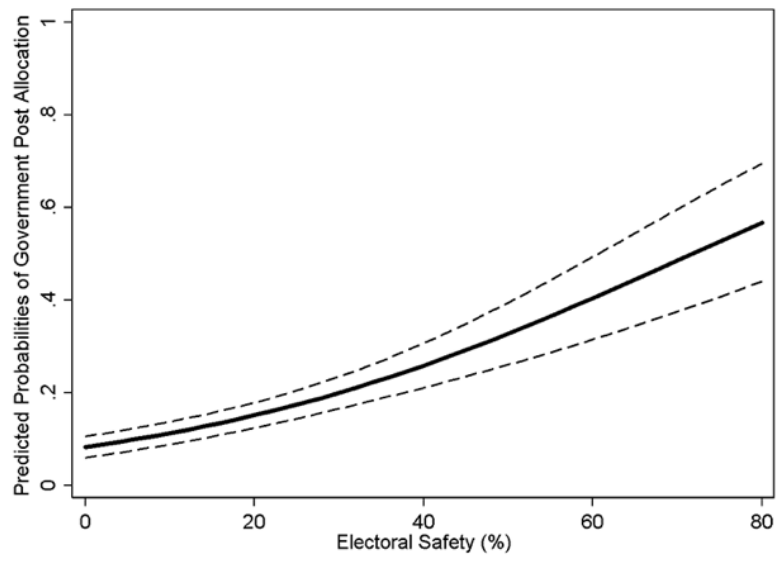
Electoral constraints differ with the marginality of seats for each MP in Westminster systems. In single-member districts, it is comparatively clear to members and to their leaders how electorally safe their parliamentary seats are. As the electoral marginality of a seat increases, or in other words as the number of votes separating success from failure to secure a seat decreases, re-election becomes the dominant motivation.

Our results show that there is indeed a positive relationship between MPs electoral safety and their probability of securing a ministerial office. Figure 1 below plots the predicted probabilities of government post allocation across the different degrees of

electoral safety, where dotted lines indicate the 95% confidence interval around the fitted line. For an MP with 5% electoral safety, which is often considered as marginal, the probability

of becoming a minister is one in 10. In contrast, a 35% majority more than doubles this probability for MPs.

**Figure 1.** Electoral safety increases the probability of being selected as ministers



There are at least two important implications of this result. First, if electoral safety increases MPs' chances of becoming ministers, voters can affect not only who selects the ministers but also who get selected as ministers. Second, if MPs and party leaders prioritise electoral safety before ministerial office, the results also mean that there is an empirical evidence for the hierarchy of legislative goals – an important theoretical assumption in rational approaches to legislative behaviour.



**Voters can affect not only who selects the ministers but also who get selected as one**

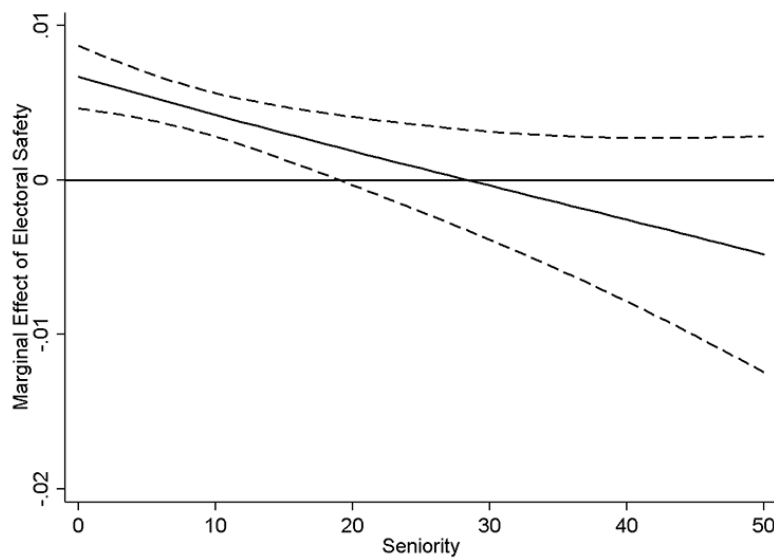


Electoral safety is particularly important for junior MPs to become ministers. Once they spend long enough in parliament, which roughly 20 years according to Figure 2, electoral safety does not significantly affect their chances of entering the government anymore. Senior MPs enjoy the reputation

that they have built in time among their constituents, and those who have done so can then spend more resources on other goals, such as attaining a ministerial office, and less on the goal of re-election. Think about for example a senior MP with 30 years' experience in the parliament. She is less likely to be alarmed about a 5% electoral majority than a newly elected MP. The former is less likely to feel unsafe with the same amount of a cushion of votes, and therefore more likely to go for a ministerial position with all the experience that comes with seniority.

Do MPs get rewarded for exceptional electoral performance such as achieving a vote share above their party average? That also depends on electoral safety. Our findings suggest that party leaders are more likely to reward successful MPs and offer them a ministerial post when they hold a safe seat. This indicates the way parties prioritise re-election goals; they will be reluctant to reward successful MPs if this reward jeopardises their re-election.

**Figure 2.** The effect of electoral safety disappears after 20 years in parliament



A risk of linking election results to ministerial selection is that the causality might run in either direction, depending on the candidate selection processes in political parties. If party leaders in the UK “parachuted” their would-be ministers to safe seats before general elections, it would not be meaningful to talk about any effect of electoral safety on ministerial selection. However, the effect of electoral safety continues to hold among those MPs who lost an election before entering the parliament. It is reasonable to assume that such MPs, who had unsuccessful attempts at being elected, were not centrally posted to these constituencies become ministers later on.



***Females might be less likely to be elected as MPs. But those who can make it to the parliament are more likely to become ministers***



One of the other controls in the study relates to gender. On the one hand, as evident in the increasing but still unfair share of female MPs

in the House of Commons, female citizens are less likely to become parliamentary representatives. Those females who make it to the parliament, on the other hand, are more likely to become ministers according to the results. This confirms the commitment of political parties in the UK to increase women’s representation in government.

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 note represents the views of the authors and not those of PADEMIA. It is based on [Elad Klein and Resul Umit's article](#) in the *Journal of Legislative Studies*. [An earlier version of this note](#) appeared on the *Democratic Audit UK*.*



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