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3 **Objectivity *and* falsehood: Assessing measures of positional influence with**  
4 **members of David Cameron’s cabinets**  
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14 **Abstract**  
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17 This paper analyses the distribution of power among ministers during David  
18 Cameron’s premiership. More specifically, it reports both the application of  
19 Dunleavy’s measures of positional influence to successive lists of cabinet committees  
20 and our efforts validate them by drawing on insider feedback. It charts how the  
21 cabinet-committee system changed between 2010 and 2016, and interprets successive  
22 rankings of ministerial influence. It further investigates the nature of power in  
23 Cameron’s governments by detailing a number of former ministers’ responses to our  
24 measures. Those we spoke to were generally sceptical of the importance of cabinet  
25 committees and especially of our attempts to derive measures of ministerial influence  
26 from them. Overall, our findings emphasise the dangers of attributing too much  
27 importance to formal structures and instead draw attention to how contemporary core-  
28 executive politics are shaped by informal networks and structures.  
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## Introduction

Empirical research rarely goes according to plan. Evidence is often only partly consistent with expectations, and sometimes it entirely contradicts them. This paper reports findings that fall into the second category. We set out hoping to validate Dunleavy's (1995; 2003) measures of 'positional-influence', a way of scoring ministers' intra-executive power on the basis of cabinet-committee memberships, by speaking to former ministers and officials. But instead of confirming the measures' validity, the feedback we received strongly cautioned against them. In the words of one former minister, there was 'a charming naivety to this idea [but] at some point, the gain in transparency and objectivity is outweighed by falsehood' (interviewee, 2).

Our engagement with Dunleavy's measures was prompted by their relevance to our immediate interest in the formal structures and informal dynamics of power in David Cameron's governments. Cameron's premiership was remarkable by any account. He led the first peace-time coalition since the 1930s and the first single-party Tory government since 1992 (see Hazell and Yong, 2012; d'Ancona, 2013; Bennister and Heffernan, 2014; Riddell, 2015; Byrne et al., 2016; Dorey and Garnett, 2016; Seldon and Snowdon, 2016). He was also the first British prime minister to leave office as a result of calling and then losing a referendum (Smith, 2018). With early accounts of his premiership suggesting a revival of cabinet committees as decision-making arenas (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 53-55; d'Ancona, 2013: 37; Dorey and Garnett, 2016: 37-38), there was a clear rationale for using the measures to examine changing power relations among his ministers.

At the same time, our engagement with Dunleavy's measures was also driven by their potential broader utility. The relative standing of prime ministers and other senior ministers can have an enormous effect on government cohesion and unity, on

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3 policy decisions, and on a government's broader political fortunes. But if we are to  
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5 relate power dynamics to such outcomes, we first need accurately to describe or  
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7 measure them. Unfortunately, there are few options available for political scientists  
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9 wishing to do this. Most indices of governmental power or authority tend to focus on  
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11 single actors in the core executive, usually prime ministers (Bennister et al., 2015;  
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13 O'Malley, 2007). Dunleavy's approach, by contrast, offers a way to measure  
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15 influence consistently and systematically among all ministers. Over two decades since  
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17 they were first proposed, his 'wonderfully innovative' measures remain a rare  
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19 example of 'rigorous positivism' in core-executive studies (Elgie, 2011: 74). They  
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21 deserve to be taken seriously.  
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26 This paper makes several contributions to the existing literature. Its principal  
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28 contribution is as a methodological case-study of using insiders as 'co-  
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30 researchers' (James, 2018) to validate measures, in this instance positional-influence  
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32 scores derived from cabinet committees. To this end, we first applied Dunleavy's  
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34 measures to successive lists of committees covering the entirety of Cameron's  
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36 premiership, relating our findings, where appropriate, to a range of other sources,  
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38 including memoirs, newspaper reports and other insider accounts. We then elicited  
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40 direct feedback on the results from former ministers and officials in Cameron's  
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42 governments, either in the form of face-to-face interviews or via correspondence. The  
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44 paper's secondary contribution, which stems from its first, is to shed light on how  
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46 Cameron organised and used the institutions of collective decision-making. Existing  
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48 accounts have tended to focus on the early years of the Conservative-Liberal  
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50 Democrat coalition (Hazell and Yong, 2012; Dorey and Garnett, 2016), but this paper  
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52 covers the whole of Cameron's premiership. In the process, it further contributes to  
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3 our knowledge and understanding of cabinet committees in contemporary British  
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5 government.  
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8 The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews  
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10 Dunleavy's measures, while the third section reports our application of them to  
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12 Cameron's governments. The fourth section reflects on issues of validity and our use  
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14 of insiders as co-researchers. The fifth section summarises the feedback we received  
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16 and our respondents' general scepticism towards the measures. It also reports  
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18 respondents' wider views about cabinet committees and the nature of power in British  
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20 central government. The final section discusses the implications of our findings, both  
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22 in terms of measuring power in Britain's core executive and the wider analytical value  
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24 of studying cabinet committees.  
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### 30 **Power and influence in cabinet committees**

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33 The starting point for our research was Dunleavy's (1995; 2003) innovative  
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35 framework for analysing ministers' influence in government on the basis of their  
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37 memberships of cabinet committees. Cabinet committees have long been a feature of  
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39 British government, bringing together smaller groups of ministers to prepare or  
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41 formally approve policy (Gordon Walker, 1972; Hennessy, 1986; Burch and Holliday,  
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43 1996; Cattrall and Brady, 1998). Yet, their work was shrouded in official secrecy until  
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45 1992, when John Major established the practice of publishing their names, remits and  
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47 memberships. Dunleavy (1995: 303-304) used this information to assess  
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49 systematically the distribution of influence over collective decision-making within the  
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51 committee system. The underlying logic was summarised in a follow-up study of  
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53 power in Tony Blair's government: 'Policy making inside government is like a lottery  
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55 process in one small respect – you have to be in it to win it' (Dunleavy, 2003: 343).  
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3 Deriving measures of ministerial influence from cabinet committees was a  
4 two-step affair. The first step was to identify the relative importance of every  
5 committee in the system. To do this, Dunleavy (1995: 306) calculated a 'weighted  
6 influence score' for each committee, which reflected its status as either a full  
7 committee or a sub-committee (full committees were assumed to carry twice the  
8 weighted influence of sub-committees), and the proportion of its members who were  
9 full cabinet ministers (the higher the proportion, the more important the committee).  
10 The calculation was based on a simple formula:  $100 * S * (C/N)$ , where S was the  
11 official status of a committee (full committees scored 1, and sub-committees scored  
12 0.5), C was the number of cabinet-level members and N was the total membership.  
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26 The second step was to divide this score among the committee's members.  
27 Every member received an equal share except for the chair, who received a double  
28 share (Dunleavy, 1995: 307).<sup>1</sup> Individual ministers' shares of all weighted scores were  
29 then aggregated, creating a single composite score for every minister that could be  
30 expressed as a percentage of the sum of all ministers' scores across all committees.  
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38 Dunleavy's initial study, which focused on Major's government in 1992,  
39 showed the prime minister to have the highest share of positional influence. The next  
40 most influential ministers were the foreign secretary, defence secretary and chancellor  
41 of the exchequer (Dunleavy, 1995: 308-309). His follow-up study of Tony Blair's  
42 government in 2001 revealed a decline in the prime minister's overall share of  
43 positional influence in the cabinet-committee system (Dunleavy, 2003). Meanwhile, a  
44 later study of the 2010 coalition government, using the same method, suggested a  
45 further decline in the prime minister's influence (Royal Holloway Group PR3710,  
46 2012). It also suggested the Liberal Democrats enjoyed disproportionately greater  
47 influence than their ministerial representation in the government.  
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3 Like many innovative approaches, Dunleavy's has its detractors. One criticism  
4 concerns its imprecise conceptualisation of influence (James, 1999: 63). Ministers  
5 might have broad strategic influence, or they might exert influence over very specific  
6 decisions. Both can be important, but they are very different things.  
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12 A second criticism concerns the use of committee memberships to measure  
13 ministerial influence (Catterall and Brady, 1998: 74). There has always been variation  
14 in how committees function in practice. Under Blair, for example, there was a general  
15 downgrading in their importance as 'sofa government' replaced cabinet government.  
16 Key decisions were often made in informal gatherings, while committees were  
17 characterised as 'hollow shells' (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 50). More generally,  
18 committees have tended to function as deliberative decision-making bodies only when  
19 prime ministers have wanted them to (Catterall and Brady, 1998: 76). Power and  
20 influence, in other words, are exogenous to the cabinet-committee system. Using  
21 committees to measure influence confuses cause and effect.  
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35 In fairness, Dunleavy was open about the measures' limitations, as well as the  
36 assumptions on which they were based. He recognised that there were other decision  
37 arenas in government, and a great deal could be agreed in advance in discussions  
38 between key departments or in bilateral meetings between spending departments and  
39 the Treasury or Downing Street: 'but at some stage all the threads of these diverse  
40 forms of discussions have to run together in a Cabinet Committee decision'  
41 (Dunleavy, 2003: 344). Even under Blair, committees continued to ratify decisions  
42 and confer collective authority upon them, structure inter-departmental relations and  
43 provide a mechanism for departments to clear policies, and even occasionally allow  
44 ministers to meet, share information and talk politics. Dunleavy was also clear, as he  
45 put it, that the scores 'should not be fetishised, nor should any fine or precise  
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3 significance be attached to them'. Rather, they were a 'heuristic' and served as 'pegs  
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5 which help us to think further about the ways cabinet committees and ministerial  
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7 influence over decision making can be patterned' (Dunleavy, 1995: 319-320). In this  
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9 respect, the scores had the great virtue of reliability: they opened up the possibility for  
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11 undertaking systematic comparisons over time.  
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### 17 **Structure and influence in Cameron's committee system**

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19 Any analysis of cabinet committees and ministerial influence in David Cameron's  
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21 governments must begin by recognising that his was a premiership of two halves.  
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23 Between 2010 and 2015, he headed a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. From  
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25 the 2015 general election until just after the June 2016 Brexit referendum, he led a  
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27 single-party Conservative government. These different circumstances placed different  
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29 demands on the cabinet-committee system and affected its organisation and structure.  
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33 Before he became prime minister, Cameron had talked about wanting to  
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35 restore 'cabinet government' and the institutions of collective decision-making  
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37 (Clarke, 2016: 460). Following the outcome of the 2010 general election, he had an  
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39 added incentive to do so. For Cameron and Liberal Democrat deputy prime minister  
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41 Nick Clegg, cabinet committees were an obvious means to manage inter-party  
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43 relations and 'coalitionise' policy (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 53-55; d'Ancona, 2013:  
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45 37; Dorey and Garnett, 2016: 37-38). Cheered on by civil servants, who wished to  
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47 restore more orderly decision-making (Hazell and Yong, 2012: 51), the *Coalition*  
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49 *Agreement for Stability and Reform* committed the new government to making 'full  
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51 use' of the committee system to deliver collective responsibility (Cabinet Office,  
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56 2010: 3).  
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3 The result was a slimmed-down committee system, first unveiled in May 2010  
4 (see Figure 1). It comprised three types of committee. The first and most important of  
5 these were the *standing policy committees*, which included the National Security  
6 Council (NSC), the Home Affairs Committee, the Economic Affairs Committee, the  
7 Social Justice Committee and the European Affairs Committee. These were  
8 permanent features of the committee system, had wide remits and coordinated major  
9 areas of policy. The second type was the *policy sub-committee*, usually a smaller body  
10 with a narrower remit that nominally reported to one of the standing committees, such  
11 as the NSC's Nuclear Deterrence and Security Sub-Committee.  
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31 The third type was what might be called '*staff*' committees, bodies that were  
32 created to help manage government business. They included the Parliamentary  
33 Business and Legislation Committee and the Coalition Committee, a body chaired  
34 jointly by Cameron and Clegg that was intended to act as a final court of appeal for  
35 inter-party disputes in other committees. They also included at this stage the Coalition  
36 Operation and Strategic Planning Group, an entity that was explicitly not a cabinet  
37 committee but which was intended to support the Coalition Committee.  
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47 This initial configuration did not last. Some bodies were disbanded, and  
48 additional committees and sub-committees were established, usually in response to  
49 the changing agenda and press of events. In late 2012, for example, a Scotland  
50 Committee was established to prepare the government's strategy for the planned  
51 Scottish independence referendum, while a Flooding Committee was established in  
52 early 2014 in response to that year's winter floods.  
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3 After the 2015 general election, Cameron re-oriented the committee system to  
4 meet the demands of single-party government (see Figure 2). He retained the major  
5 standing policy committees but introduced several new committees, most notably the  
6 Europe Committee to prepare for the planned EU referendum. He also introduced an  
7 entirely new class of body, *implementation task forces*. These were not policy-making  
8 committees but ministerial groups responsible for monitoring and driving forward key  
9 cross-cutting policies (Letwin, 2018: 233-235).  
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26 Taking a step back, Figure 3 draws on all the lists of committees published  
27 between May 2010 and April 2016 to chart how the committee system changed across  
28 Cameron's premiership. It shows that the total number of committees proliferated  
29 after 2010. By June 2013, the mid-point of Cameron's premiership, there were 28.  
30 The total number of committees also proliferated after the 2015 general election. The  
31 return to single-party government saw an initial cull in the number of committees and  
32 sub-committees, as well as the advent of a number of implementation task forces. By  
33 the end of Cameron's premiership, the number of committees, sub-committees and  
34 task forces had all increased, taking the total number of all types to 31.  
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54 We now turn to our application of Dunleavy's measures to Cameron's  
55 governments. We made three minor adjustments to the measures in order to  
56 accommodate developments in the composition and organisation of cabinet  
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3 committees. First, when calculating a ‘weighted influence score’ for each committee,  
4 we counted as cabinet ministers all those who ‘attended cabinet’, as well as full  
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6 members. This category of ministers has grown in recent years as prime ministers  
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8 have sought to confer ‘cabinet status’ more widely.<sup>2</sup> Second, we assumed that  
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10 implementation taskforces had the same basic importance as sub-committees i.e. half  
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12 the weight of full committees on the basis of their narrower remits.<sup>3</sup> Third, while  
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14 chairs and co-chairs alike earned a double share of each committee’s weighted score,  
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16 deputy chairs and co-deputy chairs earned a share and a half. The role of deputy chair  
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18 was central to the coalition government: all committees had a chair from one party  
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20 and a deputy chair from the other, each of whom could escalate decisions to the  
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22 Coalition Committee if need be. This adjustment to Dunleavy’s measures recognised  
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24 their importance.  
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31 Table 1 reports the resulting standardised scores of the 20 most influential  
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33 ministers at the beginning of Cameron’s premiership in May 2010 and after three  
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35 extensive cabinet reshuffles: in October 2012, December 2014 and July 2015.<sup>4</sup> The  
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37 chancellor of the exchequer, George Osborne, accrued the highest share of influence  
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39 at all points between the 2010 and 2015 general elections, and the second highest  
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41 share in 2015. Another notable high-scorer throughout Cameron’s premiership was  
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43 Oliver Letwin, first as a minister of state in the Cabinet Office, and later as chancellor  
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45 of the Duchy of Lancaster.  
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56 Cameron, meanwhile, never ranked higher than third, and had only the fifth highest  
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58 score in 2012. During the period of coalition government, Nick Clegg was  
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3 initially placed second, before moving further down the rankings. In 2012, his score  
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5 was lower than that of two other Liberal Democrats, the chief secretary to the  
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7 Treasury, Danny Alexander, and business secretary, Vince Cable. Of the two other so-  
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9 called 'great offices state', the home secretary, Theresa May, was outside the top ten  
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11 until 2015, when she was ranked third, while the foreign secretary's highest ranking  
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13 was fourth and usually much lower.  
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17 If we follow Dunleavy's (1995: 319) counsel about not attaching 'precise  
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19 significance' to the measures, the scores seem to have some value. They highlight, for  
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21 instance, the strategic influence of Osborne throughout the whole of Cameron's  
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23 premiership, and also the prominence of Letwin, the government's policy-fixer in  
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25 chief (Rentoul, 2015). A behind-the-scenes minister, it was Letwin's job to ensure that  
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27 decisions were consistent with Cameron's preferences. From a Liberal Democrat  
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29 perspective during the period of coalition government, the scores also highlight the  
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31 reputed influence of Danny Alexander (Scottish secretary in 2010 and chief secretary  
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33 to the Treasury in 2012 and 2014) and David Laws (chief secretary in 2010 and  
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35 education minister in 2012 and 2014). Alexander and Laws were, in many respects,  
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37 their party's counterparts to Osborne and Letwin. Just as Cameron, Osborne, Clegg  
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39 and Alexander constituted 'the Quad', a semi-formal grouping that effectively  
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41 managed the coalition, so Letwin and Laws were in the next tier of seniority and  
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43 joined them in 'the sextet' (Grice, 2012).  
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50 The rankings also highlight Hague's personal standing in the Cameron  
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52 government between 2010 and 2015. A former Tory leader, Hague had notably more  
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54 influence as foreign secretary (in 2010 and 2012) relative to Hammond (in 2014 and  
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56 2015), and certainly more influence as leader of the House of Commons (in 2014)  
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58 relative to his predecessors (Sir George Young in 2010 and Andrew Lansley in 2012)  
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3 and successor (Chris Grayling in 2015). Likewise, the scores accord with another  
4 former leader's more limited standing in the government. Iain Duncan Smith was  
5 appointed as work and pensions secretary in May 2010, but was required to share the  
6 task of delivering welfare reform with Osborne. Osborne and Cameron almost  
7 governed as duumvirate and reportedly did not rate Duncan Smith all that highly  
8 (d'Ancona, 2013: 86-92). The latter's measured influence placed him thirteenth,  
9 eighteenth, eighteenth and ninth respectively.  
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### 21 **Validity, value and realist interviews**

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23 The scores and overall rankings we report undoubtedly bear some resemblance to  
24 previous accounts of Cameron's government. In this sense, they appear to have some  
25 degree of 'face validity' (Bryman, 2016: 159). But how confident can we be that they  
26 adequately capture the concept of positional influence? After all, the scores' practical  
27 value, even as heuristic 'pegs' for thinking about ministers' intra-executive power,  
28 ultimately depend on their measurement validity (Adcock and Collier, 2001). If the  
29 scores end up providing a wholly misleading representation of who has influence,  
30 there is little point in employing them. Alternatively, if the goal is simply to produce  
31 a set of measures that serve as a starting point for thinking about intra-executive  
32 power, then simpler indicators, for instance the number of committees that ministers  
33 sit on, may serve just as well. Either way, the validity of the measures needs to be  
34 established.  
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51 Following Adcock and Collier (2001: 531), measurement is valid when scores  
52 derived from indicators can be meaningfully interpreted in relation to a systematised  
53 concept. For our purposes, the key question is how far the scores can be interpreted  
54 meaningfully in terms of ministers' influence in the committee system. In an ideal  
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3 world, we might pursue a strategy of what they term ‘convergent validation’ (Adcock  
4 and Collier, 2001: 540-542) by relating the scores to alternative indicators of  
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6 influence, such as the number of new policies successfully proposed by each minister  
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8 or successfully vetoed. The goal, of course, would be to infer the number of decisions  
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10 made in line with ministers’ preferences. In practice, however, there are no readily  
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12 available indicators. Because of official secrecy, we know very little even about how  
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14 frequently committees meet, who actually attends them, how many papers are  
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16 circulated or what positions ministers take on each item.<sup>5</sup>  
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22         Instead we pursue a strategy of ‘content validation’ (Adcock and Collier,  
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24 2001: 538-540) and seek to establish whether the positional-influence measures fully  
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26 capture the nature of the cabinet-committee system during Cameron’s premiership.  
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28 To this end, we sought feedback on the scores and measures from those who had  
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30 expert knowledge of Cameron’s governments: former cabinet ministers and officials.  
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32 We did so through a combination of face-to-face interviews and written  
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34 correspondence. Our approach was thus consistent with what Pawson and Tilley  
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36 (1997: 155) call ‘realistic interviews’: we used the respondents as ‘co-researchers’ to  
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38 help us confirm, falsify or refine our measures, not as subjects of study in their own  
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40 right (see also James, 2018). More specifically, we sought feedback on three  
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42 particular aspects of Dunleavy’s measures: first, the assumptions surrounding the  
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44 relative importance of committees and sub-committees and the plausibility of their  
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46 weighted influence scores; second, the assumptions surrounding the division of  
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48 committees’ influence scores, in particular the nominal equality of members and the  
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50 special positions enjoyed by chairs and deputy chairs; and finally, the plausibility of  
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52 the resulting scores.  
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58         We approached a number of individuals with first-hand experience of cabinet-  
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60 level decision making between 2010 and 2016. In the event, we conducted four

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3 anonymous semi-structured interviews.<sup>6</sup> Three of those we spoke to agreed to  
4 participate in part because they were sympathetic to the basic premise of developing  
5 measures. In all cases, we discussed at length both the assumptions underpinning  
6 Dunleavy's measures and the resulting scores and rankings as reported in Table 1.  
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8 Because we had difficulty in convincing more former ministers to speak to us, we  
9 solicited additional feedback by correspondence. Altogether, we received written  
10 feedback from nine former cabinet ministers (out of 32 individuals contacted). They  
11 included eight Conservatives and one Liberal Democrat. Their anonymised comments  
12 constitute an invaluable source of data for assessing how insiders view influence in  
13 the cabinet-committee system and the validity of the positional-influence measures.  
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## 28 **Findings**

### 29 *Committee influence scores*

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31 The first aspect of Dunleavy's measures on which we sought feedback related to the  
32 assumptions surrounding the calculation of committees' weighted influence scores.  
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34 Dunleavy assumed, not unreasonably, that committees varied in importance, partly on  
35 the basis of whether they were full committees or sub-committees and partly on the  
36 proportion of members who were of cabinet rank. Did former ministers agree?  
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44 In one sense, there was some support for the underlying rationale: there was  
45 unanimous agreement that committees varied in importance. As one respondent  
46 wrote, 'all committees are not equal', and went on to point out that the Social Justice  
47 Committee's Child Poverty Sub-Committee was obviously inferior to the National  
48 Security Council (NSC), which Cameron used to develop his thinking on foreign and  
49 security policy (correspondent, 5). Another told us that the Parliamentary Business  
50 and Legislation Committee, which reviewed legislation to determine its readiness for  
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3 Parliament, had more “active” influence than, perhaps, a policy committee’  
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5 (correspondent, 8). But there was no support for the idea that the importance of  
6  
7 committees could be calculated consistently on the basis of their membership or  
8  
9 formal status. As one former minister told us, a sub-committee did not automatically  
10  
11 carry half the weight of a full committee: this approach was ‘falsely precise’  
12  
13 (interviewee, 4). Some sub-committees were more important than full committees,  
14  
15 notably the NSC sub-committees, which were ‘essentially the NSC minus one or two  
16  
17 people’ (interviewee, 2). Similarly, another former minister could not recall ever  
18  
19 convening a meeting of the sub-committee he chaired; its business was always  
20  
21 covered in the main committee’s meetings (interviewee, 1).  
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26 Two clear points emerged from the feedback. There was a clear pecking order  
27  
28 of committees, and different committees were important in different ways. For  
29  
30 instance, the NSC was consistently identified as the most important deliberative body.  
31  
32 As one former minister told us, ‘there were genuine discussions, and the weight of  
33  
34 opinion [in meetings] mattered, especially on issues that the prime minister was less  
35  
36 certain about’ (interviewee, 2; see also Clarke, 2016: 465). The Home Affairs  
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38 Committee too was reckoned by interviewees to have been ‘very important’ for  
39  
40 discussion (interviewee, 1), at least during the early stages of the coalition  
41  
42 government when it served as a key venue for ‘throat-clearing’ and managing inter-  
43  
44 party differences (interviewee, 4; see also Willetts, 2015). Its most important role,  
45  
46 however—which it performed exclusively after 2015—was to enable departments to  
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48 clear policies via correspondence through the ‘write around’. Meanwhile, some  
49  
50 committees focused ‘on matters of implementation rather than policy making’  
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52 (interviewee, 3) or ‘operational’ matters, monitoring decisions taken elsewhere  
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3 (interviewee, 4). It was not just the post-2015 implementation task forces that  
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5 performed this role.  
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8         Formal structures also missed informal importance. On paper, the Coalition  
9  
10 Committee was arguably the most important body between 2010 and 2015 and served  
11  
12 as a capstone to the committee system. But it met on only a few occasions, and its  
13  
14 work was almost entirely superseded by the Quad (see Hazell and Yong, 2012: 53;  
15  
16 d’Ancona, 2013: 36). Indeed, one respondent was ‘extremely cautious about using  
17  
18 memberships of Cabinet Committees as any kind of proxy for “power”’, because ‘real  
19  
20 decisions’ were generally made informally (correspondent, 1). Similarly, another  
21  
22 former minister insisted that committees were ‘vastly over-rated as decision-making  
23  
24 bodies’, and their work was generally ‘formal and routine’ (correspondent, 7).  
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29         A number of our respondents also highlighted cases where committees were  
30  
31 important not as institutions of collective decision-making but as instruments of  
32  
33 individual ministerial control. For example, the Economic Affairs Committee chaired  
34  
35 by George Osborne was important, not because it met and discussed policy—it did  
36  
37 not—but because it was used by the chancellor to control policy in this area  
38  
39 (interviewee, 2). During the period of coalition, the Banking Reform Committee was  
40  
41 also important for a while, again not because it met and discussed policy—according  
42  
43 to one of its principal members, it did not hold a single meeting (correspondent, 7)—  
44  
45 but because it enabled Osborne to develop an approach to the subject in conjunction  
46  
47 with Vince Cable (interviewee, 4).  
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51         Another point to emerge from the feedback we received was that context  
52  
53 mattered enormously. As one former minister put it, some committees were ‘more  
54  
55 important at some times than others [and] even each committee fluctuates’, making it  
56  
57 ‘hard to meaningfully quantify’, and ‘probably inadvisable to do so’ (correspondent,  
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3 5). Some committees undoubtedly carried more weight in the early part of the  
4 coalition government precisely because there was a coalition. The Home Affairs  
5 Committee during this period was ‘a powerful and important decision-making  
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8 Committee during this period was ‘a powerful and important decision-making  
9  
10 committee with real checks and balances’, because it served as means of structuring  
11  
12 inter-party discussion over a broad swathe of public policy (interviewee, 1). As the  
13  
14 relationship between the two parties deteriorated, the committee’s value diminished,  
15  
16 and it ‘came to be seen as a constraint by Conservatives and thus an object of  
17  
18 dislike’ (interviewee, 4). After 2015, the committee ‘no longer mattered’ (interviewee,  
19  
20 2).  
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24 The implications of this variety are clear: categorising a committee’s influence  
25  
26 without paying attention to what it actually does leads to measures that bear little  
27  
28 resemblance to a committee’s practical importance. To illustrate this point, in  
29  
30 November 2013 three committees obtained the highest possible weighted score of  
31  
32 100: the Coalition Committee, the NSC and the Public Expenditure Committee. Yet,  
33  
34 the first essentially existed on paper, and the last made no policy but existed simply  
35  
36 ‘to bash departments into submission at relevant moments in relevant spending  
37  
38 rounds’ (interviewee, 2). Only the NSC performed anything akin to a policy-making  
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40 role. All three committees, however, had the same weight according to Dunleavy’s  
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42 measures.  
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47 An alternative indicator of committee importance that several respondents  
48  
49 suggested was whether or not a committee was chaired by the prime minister. In  
50  
51 Dunleavy’s original framework, the proportion of members of cabinet rank  
52  
53 determined the weighted score of a committee or sub-committee. But while the  
54  
55 presence of key ministers could well signal importance, prime ministerial  
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57 participation was a virtual guarantee of it. Certainly, Cameron’s presence on a  
58  
59 committee usually indicated that it was likely to be an important forum, and  
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3 attendance at committees was usually much greater when he took the chair. As one  
4 former minister said about the weighted scores for prime ministerial committees, 'I'd  
5 probably give a rocket boost to it for attendance of the PM, which I think hugely  
6 raises the stakes' (interviewee, 1).  
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#### 14 *Apportioning committee influence*

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16 The second aspect of Dunleavy's measures on which we sought feedback was how  
17 committees' weighted scores were subsequently divided. Did insiders agree that all  
18 members should automatically be given an equal share, and chairs and deputy chairs  
19 an extra share?  
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26 The answer was generally 'no'. Although chairs and deputy chairs were  
27 reckoned to have some additional influence (interviewee, 1), the role of committee  
28 chair was 'not a prism through which power was articulated'. Assuming they had  
29 twice the influence was 'bogus' (interviewee, 4). Instead, according to one former  
30 minister, the influence of chairs varies on 'a case by case basis' and depends on  
31 informal rules, in particular 'who has the ear of the PM, who has relations with who  
32 else' (interviewee, 2). He reckoned that the prime minister enjoyed '90 percent of  
33 influence' on the National Security Council, Nick Clegg enjoyed '50 percent' on the  
34 Home Affairs Committee and George Osborne '20 percent' on the Scotland  
35 Committee. At the same time, some chairs were more influential than others as a  
36 result of their approach to the role. While some chairs would do their homework,  
37 'There are some who'd just look at the brief when they get in the room and make a  
38 complete dog's dinner of it' (interviewee, 3).  
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56 The same factors that affected the influence of chairs and deputy chairs on a  
57 committee also affected the relative influence of individual members. Some ministers  
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3 were taken more seriously because of their office and who they were, others because  
4 of their close relationship with the prime minister, and yet others because of their  
5 standing in the party. Again, some ministers could have greater influence because of  
6 their mastery, and acknowledged mastery, of policy. Oliver Letwin, for example, was  
7 known to be Cameron's agent in the committee system but he was also known for his  
8 expertise: in meetings, it was clear that he 'was the type of person who [had] thought  
9 about everything ... and came up with some sensible ideas' (interviewee, 3). Many  
10 ministers, in contrast, were there to make up the numbers and 'might contribute  
11 absolutely nothing' (interviewee, 3). Some senior ministers never bothered to attend  
12 meetings.

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At the same time, ministers differed in their willingness to speak out on areas outside of their immediate area of responsibility (Laws, 2016: 191). Theresa May (interviewee, 3) and Amber Rudd (interviewee, 2) were cited as ministers who tended to stick to their own departmental briefs, whereas Michael Gove (interviewee 1), George Osborne (interviewee, 3) and Philip Hammond (interviewee, 2) were cited as ministers who ranged more widely. Attributing equal potential influence to every member of the same committee was deeply problematic.

#### *The scores' accuracy*

The final and perhaps most important aspect of Dunleavy's measures on which we sought feedback was their overall accuracy. Did insiders find the scores and rankings plausible?

In practice, not one of our respondents regarded the scores and rankings (see Table 1) as precise indicators of actual ministerial influence. One rejected their plausibility outright with a simple 'no' (correspondent, 4), and another with an

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3 equally simple ‘not really’ (correspondent, 8). Yet another former minister who  
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5 examined the rankings from October 2012 said: ‘No one in their right mind would  
6  
7 recognise this list’ (interviewee, 4). Some respondents qualified their rejection of the  
8  
9 results. For one former minister, the scores were plausible to ‘some (v. limited)  
10  
11 extent’ but also ‘overly simplistic’ (correspondent, 5). For another, the initial rankings  
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13 in May 2010 seemed ‘broadly sensible’ at first glance, but he began to quibble various  
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15 rankings upon closer inspection and came to the view that ‘it doesn’t look right’  
16  
17 (interviewee, 1). Nor did longitudinal changes in the scores always make sense to our  
18  
19 respondents. One minister who attended cabinet from 2010 to 2016 rejected the  
20  
21 suggestion that Theresa May was more influential after 2015, even though her ranking  
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23 went up from thirteenth in December 2014 to third in July 2015 (interviewee, 2).  
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28         Insofar as the scores and rankings seemed plausible, it was usually because the  
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30 more senior offices—the prime minister, the chancellor, the home secretary, the  
31  
32 foreign secretary and the deputy prime minister during the coalition—were generally  
33  
34 ranked towards the top. Beyond this, however, there were problems. The biggest  
35  
36 problem for respondents was the relatively low ranking of the prime minister. As one  
37  
38 interviewee told us, ‘You need [the] prime minister and chancellor right at the top.  
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40 Anything that doesn’t have that, just doesn’t get what’s going on’ (interviewee, 3).  
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42 Another simply found it ‘hilarious’ that the prime minister never topped the rankings  
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44 (interviewee, 2). Another former minister told us the rankings were ‘not quite’  
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46 plausible and revised those from May 2010 and October 2012 to indicate the prime  
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48 minister should be top (correspondent, 9). One former minister who sat in cabinet for  
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50 most of Cameron’s premiership observed bluntly: ‘the more I think about it, the more  
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52 convinced I am that this isn’t “research” quality’ (correspondent, 5).  
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3 One clear point that emerged from both our interviews and written feedback  
4 was the importance of informal power structures and the measures' failure to account  
5 for these. During the coalition, the Quad was the most important forum for addressing  
6 inter-party disputes and driving the agenda. Being close to Cameron and part of his  
7 inner team was what mattered most for shaping policy. In this respect, as one former  
8 minister told us, 'the top of government has striking similarities to the Tudor Court'  
9 (correspondent, 2). Another former minister expanded on this point and how court  
10 politics in turn shaped the dynamics of the cabinet-committee system:  
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24 [T]he power structure is best conceived of as a court. Some places are held by  
25 elected politicians, some by peers, some by officials. All are courtiers. In  
26 every committee, for example, a decision is made by the PM or at least  
27 allowed to be made. There is a positive decision to allow it. The PM can look  
28 at minutes and if a decision is made that goes against what he wants, the  
29 decision can be re-run, or, if not, re-written... Court membership is what  
30 matters. (interviewee, 2)  
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42 Needless to say, the measures neglected these factors, both in their assumptions and  
43 results.  
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## 49 **Discussion**

50  
51 David Cameron's premiership began and ended in unusual circumstances. Like all  
52 prime ministers, he was able to shape the character and practice of collective decision-  
53 making (King, 1991; Heffernan, 2003). During his time in office, Cameron  
54 established a relatively small number of cabinet committees, certainly when compared  
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3 to his immediate predecessors. Most committees coordinated, discussed or chased  
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5 decisions made elsewhere. Only a few ever functioned as deliberative decision-  
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7 making forums. Even during the period of coalition, when committees had been  
8  
9 expected to play a bigger role, they tended to ratify and process policy decisions made  
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11 in departments or by the inner Downing Street circle (see Clegg, 2016: 78-79; Laws,  
12  
13 2016: 509-510; Clarke, 2016: 451).

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17 Cameron may have tolerated discussion and promoted collegiality, but he had  
18  
19 no apparent wish to revitalise Clement Attlee's style of government built around a  
20  
21 powerful cabinet-committee system. Moreover, while Cameron took a leading role in  
22  
23 the National Security Council, other ministers handled the formalities of the system's  
24  
25 domestic work. George Osborne kept a tight grip on economic policy by effectively  
26  
27 neutering the Economic Affairs Committee, while Nick Clegg and later Oliver Letwin  
28  
29 managed the coordination of domestic policy through the Home Affairs Committee.  
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34 Where does all this leave Dunleavy's positional-influence measures? In one  
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36 sense their value is clearly limited. Our respondents did not reckon the scores and  
37  
38 rankings to be particularly accurate, while the measures omitted crucial informal  
39  
40 factors that shaped ministers' capacity to influence decisions. Our respondents also  
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42 said they overstated the importance of the committee system as a forum for decision-  
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44 making. More generally, as one former minister put it, cabinet committees had 'no or  
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46 vanishingly little connection to power' (interview evidence, 2).  
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50 Of course, our respondents might simply have misunderstood the purpose of  
51  
52 the measures. They might not have been thinking about influence in the specific and  
53  
54 narrow context of the cabinet-committee system. They might even have  
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56 underestimated the actual importance of committees. Set against this, however, is the  
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3 certainty with which they rejected the scores. The weight of insider opinion was  
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5 persuasive.  
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8 At the same time, the scores unintentionally demonstrated some utility as a  
9  
10 heuristic for exploring intra-executive power dynamics, insofar as they facilitated  
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12 discussions with those who had direct experience of the top of government. A number  
13  
14 of our interviewees and respondents took the time and effort to engage with the  
15  
16 measures and indicate who, in their opinion, should have received higher or lower  
17  
18 scores. As a basic approach, such conversations can be extremely fruitful, especially  
19  
20 when researchers are told that such and such a minister had very little influence, or so  
21  
22 and so was actually very influential behind closed doors. Nevertheless, we suspect  
23  
24 that such conversations could be prompted just as well by simpler measures, such as  
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26 the number of committees that ministers chaired, or the number of committees on  
27  
28 which they sat.  
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33 In general, our findings are probably best described as a series of cautionary  
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35 tales about applying objective measures to something as concealed and dynamic as  
36  
37 influence within government. In this respect, Converse's (1964: 206) doctrine 'that  
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39 what is important to study cannot be measured and that what can be measured is not  
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41 important to study' might have been written about power in the core executive.  
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45 If we wish to explore cabinet committees as institutions in their own right,  
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47 published lists can only be a starting point. As those we spoke to made clear, there is  
48  
49 enormous variation in the role, remit and importance of committees. This variation  
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51 merits systematic empirical analysis, and the kind of data that can only be gathered  
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53 through in-depth elite interviews. Students of government still have much to do in  
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55 terms of distinguishing between forms and functions, and developing appropriate  
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57 categories.  
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Published lists of cabinet committees may also be useful as a starting point for exploring other aspects of government. As we have demonstrated, they can serve as a starting point for engaging with ministers and officials and talking about influence. We also think they could be used as basis for exploring how individual ministers are networked with one another, as one of our respondents suggested (interviewee, 2). Published lists could even potentially be used as a basis for exploring the changing ‘policy agenda’ of the core executive (John et al., 2013). It is clear, simply from eyeballing successive lists of cabinet committees, that the system is responsive to what happens outside (as well as within) government. As new issues arise that require inter-departmental coordination, so new committees are created. The number of committees in which departments are represented is thus likely to tell us something about the contemporary priorities of collective decision-making structures. Again, such information could only be a starting point for analysis, but it could nonetheless help to advance our knowledge and understanding of Britain’s core executive.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The equal share was calculated by dividing the committee's weighted influence score by  $N+1$ , where  $N$  was the total membership. The division by  $N+1$  was necessary because of the chair's double share.

<sup>2</sup> As one respondent told us, the distinction between ministers who are full members and ministers who merely attend cabinet was one that, in practice, 'doesn't mean very much' (interviewee, 1).

<sup>3</sup> We also calculated post-2015 scores excluding the memberships of implementation task forces. The scores and rankings were not fundamentally different.

<sup>4</sup> Although the new post-election committee system was first detailed in a list published in June 2015, the information was updated less than a month later with the addition of the Economic Affairs Committee's Airports Sub-Committee. Because of their proximity, we analysed the later July list.

<sup>5</sup> Some of this information could be established by consulting official minutes in the National Archives. But individual ministers' positions are generally not recorded, and the minutes relevant to our study will not be released for many years.

<sup>6</sup> Those we interviewed included three former ministers and a very senior official. The three former ministers were all members of the coalition-era 'sextet' (Grice, 2012) and included at least one representative from each of the parties. The interviews were conducted on a non-attributable basis. The sacrifice in transparency was offset by the opportunity to speak to a number of figures with intimate knowledge of the Cameron-era cabinet-committee system.

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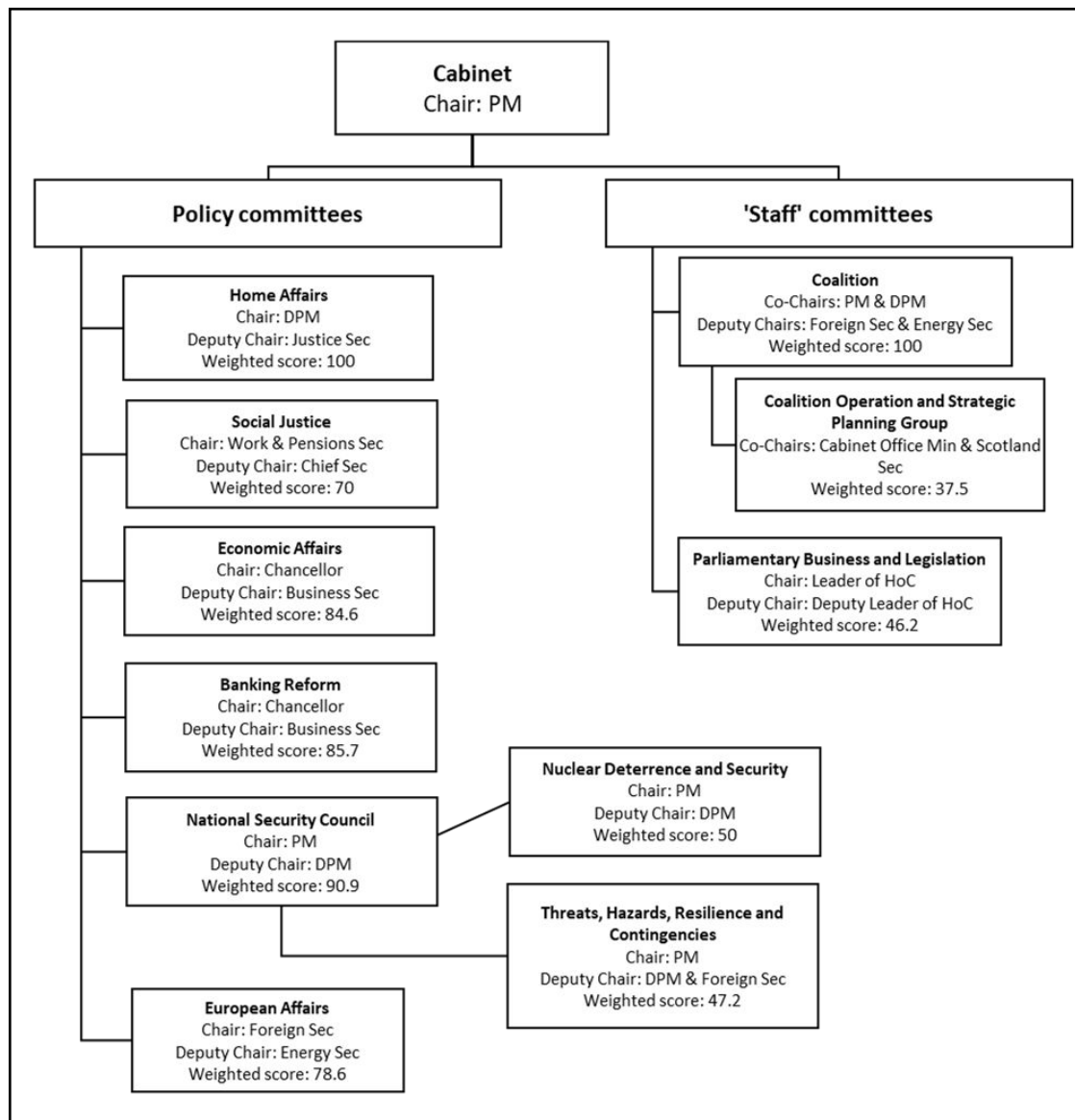
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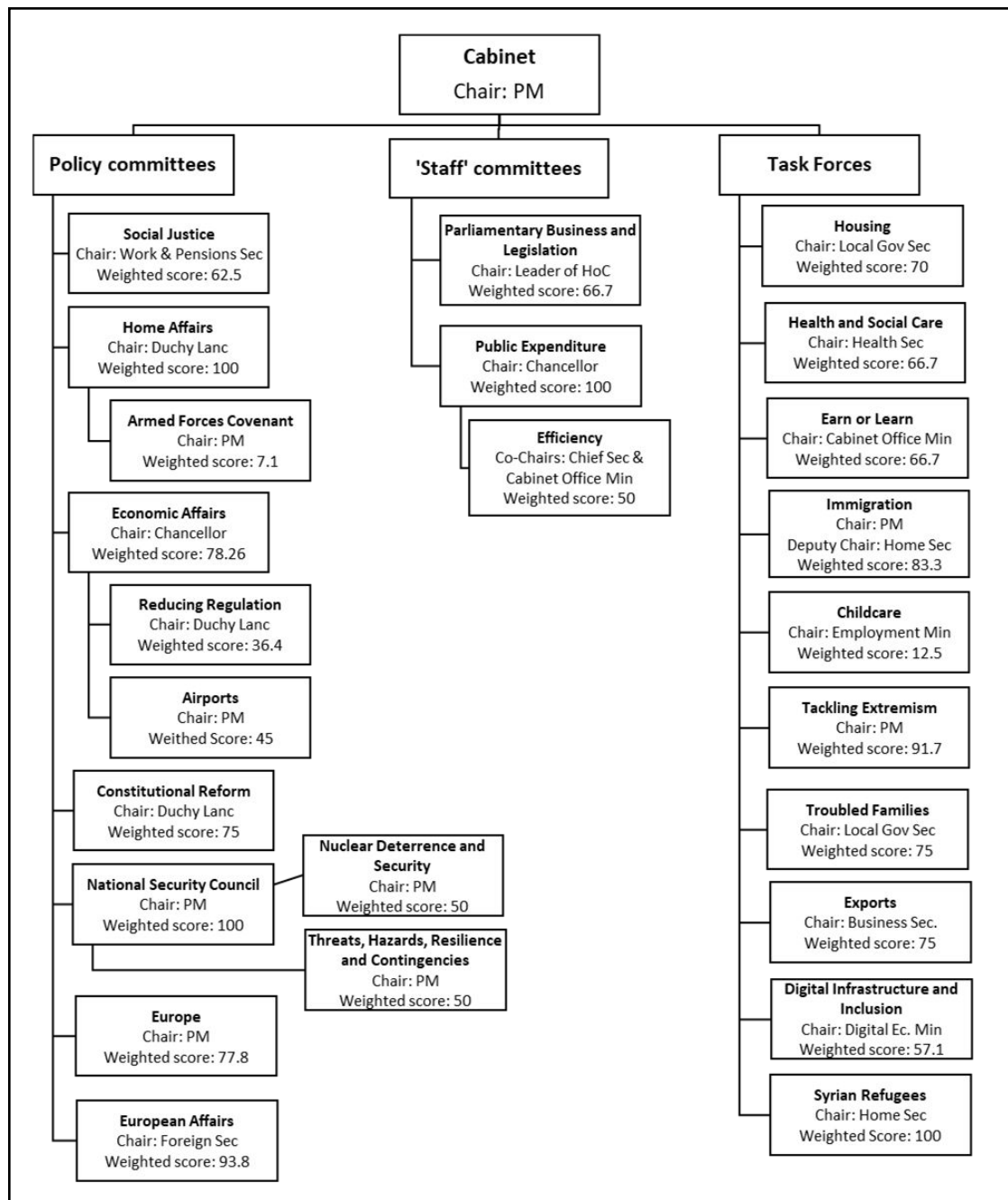
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FIGURE 1: The cabinet-committee system, May 2010



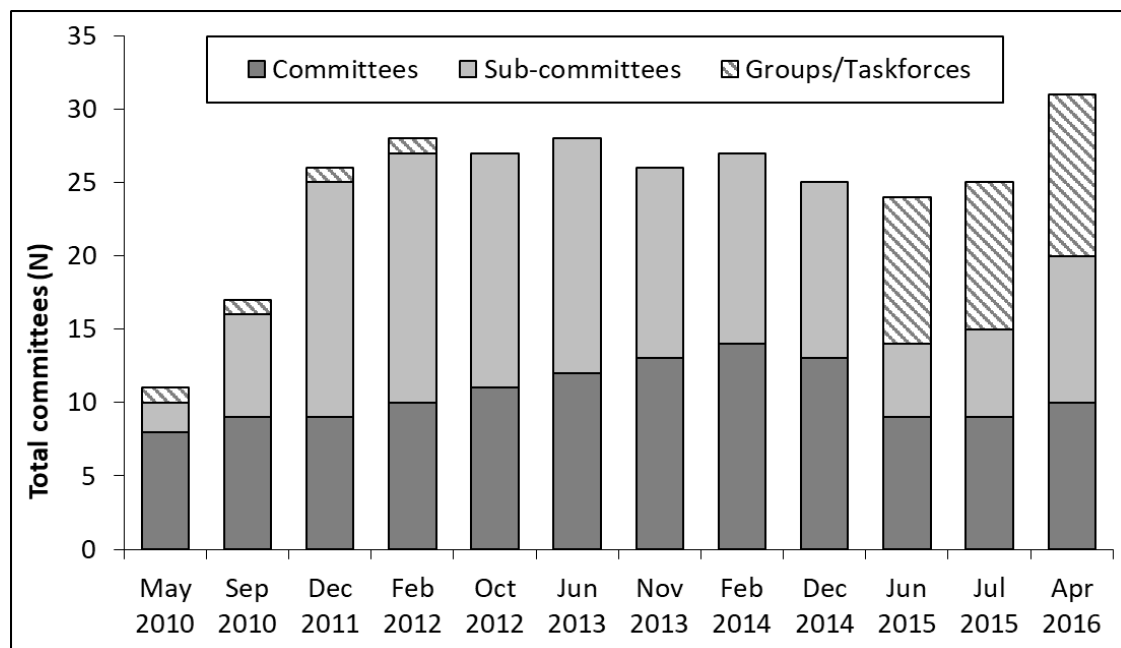
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FIGURE 2: The cabinet-committee system, July 2015



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FIGURE 3: The changing number of cabinet committees, 2010–2016



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TABLE 1: Top-twenty rankings of ministerial influence (standardised influence scores)

	<b>May 2010</b>	<b>October 2012</b>	<b>December 2014</b>	<b>July 2015</b>
1	George Osborne (8.6%) Chancellor	1 George Osborne (8.3%) Chancellor	1 George Osborne (6.9%) Chancellor	1 Oliver Letwin (8.1%) Duchy of Lancaster
2	Nick Clegg* (6.3%) Deputy prime minister	2 Danny Alexander* (7.2%) Chief secretary	2 Danny Alexander* (6.4%) Chief secretary	2 George Osborne (5.0%) Chancellor
3	David Cameron (6.1%) Prime minister	3 Oliver Letwin (5.6%) Cabinet Office minister	3 Oliver Letwin (6.3%) Cabinet Office minister	3 Theresa May (4.8%) Home secretary
=4	Oliver Letwin (6.0%) Cabinet Office minister	4 William Hague (5.5%) Foreign secretary	4 David Cameron (5.7%) Prime minister	4 David Cameron (4.7%) Prime minister
=4	Chris Huhne* (6.0%) Energy secretary	5 David Cameron (4.8%) Prime minister	5 Nick Clegg* (5.5%) Deputy prime minister	5 Greg Clark (4.3%) Communities secretary
6	Danny Alexander* (5.9%) Scottish secretary	6 Francis Maude (4.6%) Paymaster general	=6 Ed Davey* (4.2%) Energy secretary	6 Greg Hands (4.2%) Chief secretary
7	William Hague (5.7%) Foreign secretary	7 Vince Cable* (4.5%) Business secretary	=6 William Hague (4.2%) Leader of Commons	7 Matthew Hancock (3.8%) Paymaster general
8	David Laws* (5.4%) Chief secretary	8 Nick Clegg* (4.4%) Deputy prime minister	8 Francis Maude (3.7%) Paymaster general	8 Sajid Javid (3.7%) Business secretary
9	Vince Cable* (5.2%) Business secretary	9 Ken Clarke (4.2%) Minister w/o portfolio	9 Vince Cable* (3.6%) Business secretary	=9 Iain Duncan Smith (3.2%) Work & pensions secretary
=10	Liam Fox (4.1%) Defence secretary	10 Ed Davey* (3.9%) Energy secretary	=10 Eric Pickles (3.6%) Communities secretary	=9 Philip Hammond (3.2%) Foreign secretary

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5	=10 Theresa May (4.1%)	11 David Laws* (3.7%)	=10 Philip Hammond (3.4%)	11 Chris Grayling (2.8%)
6	Home secretary	Education minister	Foreign secretary	Leader of Commons
7				
8	12 Eric Pickles (3.2%)	12 Theresa May (3.0%)	12 David Laws* (3.3%)	12 Michael Gove (2.1%)
9	Communities secretary	Home secretary	Education minister	Lord chancellor
10				
11	13 Iain Duncan Smith (3.0%)	13 Philip Hammond (2.7%)	13 Theresa May (2.8%)	13 Mark Harper (2.0%)
12	Work & pensions secretary	Defence secretary	Home secretary	Commons chief whip
13				
14	14 Ken Clarke (2.6%)	14 Eric Pickles (2.3%)	=14 Liz Truss (2.5%)	14 Michael Fallon (1.9%)
15	Lord chancellor	Communities secretary	Environment secretary	Defence secretary
16				
17	15 Francis Maude (2.4%)	=15 Michael Moore* (2.2%)	=14 Michael Fallon (2.5%)	=15 Nicky Morgan (1.8%)
18	Paymaster general	Scottish secretary	Defence secretary	Education secretary
19				
20	16 Andrew Mitchell (1.9%)	=15 Lord Green (2.2%)	=16 Patrick McLoughlin (2.2%)	=15 Lizz Truss (1.8%)
21	Int. development secretary	Trade minister	Transport secretary	Environment secretary
22				
23	17 Philip Hammond (1.8%)	17 Michael Gove (2.0%)	=16 Michael Gove (2.2%)	=15 Alun Cairns (1.8%)
24	Transport secretary	Education secretary	Commons chief whip	Welsh secretary
25				
26	18 B. Warsi (1.4%)	18 Iain Duncan Smith (1.6%)	=18 Iain Duncan Smith (2.0%)	=18 Jeremy Hunt (1.7%)
27	Minister w/o portfolio	Work & pensions secretary	Work & pensions secretary	Health secretary
28				
29	=19 Mark Hoban (1.3%)	=19 Owen Patterson (1.5%)	=18 Nicky Morgan (2.0%)	=18 Amber Rudd (1.7%)
30	Financial secretary	Environment secretary	Education secretary	Energy secretary
31				
32	=19 B. Neville-Jones (1.3%)	=19 Maria Miller (1.5%)	20 Sajid Javid (1.9%)	20 David Mundell (1.6%)
33	Minister for security	Culture secretary	Culture secretary	Scottish secretary

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*Note:* \*Liberal Democrat ministers. The standardised scores are in parentheses.

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