



How Governing Cabinets That Include Many Women are Becoming the New Normal for Democracies

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In 2015, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau filled Canada's first cabinet with appointments equally distributed between women and men. "It's 2015" was Trudeau's explanation for such gender parity – not surprisingly, as Canada joined Chile, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and several other countries that had already constructed such governing cabinets, in some cases more than once. Less common are cabinets with a majority of women, although Finland, Costa Rica, and Sweden have all had at least one. In June 2018, Spain got its second female-majority cabinet, and the world reached a historic milestone given that its cabinet had a super-majority of women, 11 of 17, including those in the powerful posts of Finance, Justice, and Defense. Spain's example offers important insights about the gendered process of cabinet appointments. Our research reported in *Cabinets, Ministers, and Gender* explains how gains occur and how progress for women is sustained over time.

Gains are Cumulative and Rarely Reversed

We analyze women's cabinet appointments in seven presidential and parliamentary democracies – Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and arrive at some arresting findings:

- Increases in the numbers of women in cabinets are often large and cumulative, while decreases in such appointments are relatively minimal and rare. In 1984, for example, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney quadrupled the previous record number of women in the Canadian cabinet, appointing four female ministers. Prior to Prime Minister Tony Blair's election in 1997, no British cabinet had ever had more than two female ministers, but his initial cabinet included five women. In 2000, the number of women in the Chilean cabinet nearly doubled, from three in 1994 to five, and by 2006, Chile had its first gender parity cabinet.
- Leaders who increase the number of women in cabinet are applauded by observers and media pundits – and those who appoint dramatically more women often explicitly claim to be responding to changing norms and repudiating a less inclusive era. For example, in 2014, when he appointed Italy's first gender-parity cabinet, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi explained, "[We were the country of 'bunga bunga' – now women are in charge of Foreign Affairs and Defense, and they lead the biggest Italian companies.](#)"
- Because leaders who take bold steps in increasing women's representation are praised and not punished for doing so, subsequent leaders have incentives to follow suit. In at least three cases, gender parity cabinets appear to be the new normal. France, Spain, and Sweden have all had successive gender-parity cabinets, across different presidents and prime ministers. And in France and Sweden, parity persisted across different political parties. In France, President Nicolas Sarkozy, of the center-right Union for a Popular Movement, appointed seven women to his 15-member cabinet in 2007. His successor, Socialist [François Hollande](#), appointed 17 women to his 34-member cabinet; and current President [Emmanuel Macron](#), having promised to do the same, appointed 11 women and 11 men. The three presidents come from different political parties, suggesting that gender equality in cabinet formation has become an established norm in France.
- Gender parity cabinets raise the bar for the next government. For example, Chile's first female president, Michelle Bachelet, appointed an equal number of male and female ministers in 2006 and, in 2011, her successor, Sebastián Piñera, appointed a cabinet with almost one-third female ministers (six of 22). Short of parity, a cabinet in which women constitute 30 percent of all ministers is nonetheless impressive, far higher than the global average of [18 percent of government ministers](#). Although we do find some cases where leaders appoint fewer women than their predecessors, the declines are modest.

We find no evidence that leaders are sanctioned or punished electorally for increasing women's cabinet representation. On the contrary, leaders who fail to meet their country's standard for women's cabinet inclusion face substantial [negative press](#).

The Concrete Floor for Cabinets – and Its Broader Implications

We coin the term “concrete floor” to capture the phenomenon whereby gains in women's cabinet appointments are locked in, increase over time, and are not significantly reversed. The concrete floor identifies the minimal threshold of women's inclusion for a cabinet to be perceived as politically legitimate. For each country we studied, such legitimacy is satisfied when the president or prime minister takes into account criteria ranging from gender, to region, to race and ethnicity – criteria that all leaders, regardless of party, must include in their ministerial teams.

Representational criteria vary. In Canada, Germany, and Spain, prime ministers must ensure regional representation when selecting ministers, but this is not the case in Chile or the United States. In Canada and the United States, an all-white cabinet is virtually unthinkable, but [in Germany](#) and Spain, cabinets lacking in racial diversity appear to be entirely acceptable. Only one criterion appears across all cases: women must be included. Among our cases, all-male cabinets have been extinct for a quarter-century, with Australia in 1993 the last country to have one. Cabinets now must include women as ministers, and one is not enough.

When the appointment of many women becomes the expected cabinet standard, controversies about women's “insufficient qualifications” cease. The practice of challenging female appointments by declaring that “merit” should prevail over sex becomes no longer viable. In countries where multiple gender parity cabinets have been formed, the media now routinely report on the policy expertise and political experience of all cabinet appointees and rarely question women's qualifications. Given the relatively small size of cabinets, any advanced democracy should be able to find highly qualified women – and increasing numbers of countries are doing so. As our research shows, advances in women's cabinet appointments accumulate, locking in progress and making it harder for leaders to return to exclusionary practices. Gender parity cabinets normalize women's presence at the highest levels of democratic governance.

Read more in Annesley, Beckwith, and Franceschet, *Cabinets, Ministers, and Gender* (Under Review, 2018).