The Selection of Cabinet Ministers in the Australian Federal Parliament

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of The Australian National University.
Declaration

The contents of this thesis are the results of original research and have not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. A section of the work in Chapter 3 is due to appear in an abridged form in an ANU publication in 2012.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis reflects a number of influences on my way of thinking. My approach to using statistics effectively began in 1984 at Monash University when the late Professor Keith Septimus Frearson taught me the value of using statistics to try to understand complex phenomena. Several years later as a student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide I was introduced to artificial neural networks and the ideas associated with machine learning. More recently, Dr Fred Gale of the University of Tasmania provided me with encouragement, support and intellectual direction in using these techniques when he supervised my honours thesis.

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Abstract

The two fundamental questions addressed in this thesis are 1) what are the characteristics that are associated with an Australian federal parliamentarian becoming a cabinet minister, and 2) how do these characteristics help a parliamentarian become a cabinet minister? I examine the standard representational and institutional explanations for cabinet appointment decisions such as geography, party/faction, gender and house (Senate vs House of Representatives) and find they do not account for more than 25% of cabinet appointments. I therefore turn to individual characteristics of cabinet ministers. I use education, linguistic/cognitive style, and biographical data to develop a classification model. Using data mining, I isolate three characteristics that explain a high proportion of the appointments to cabinet over the period under examination. These variables are: i) having a legal qualification; ii) entering parliament at an early age; and iii) using abstract language. These three variables explain approximately 78% of cabinet appointments over the period under investigation. I argue that these variables are associated with cabinet appointment because they tap into a particular set of cognitive and behavioural characteristics that are beneficial in demonstrating cabinet potential. An important insight from the analysis is that, in selecting parliamentarians to serve in cabinet, personal factors are more important than representational factors.
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