

ARTICLE

# Cabinet Reshuffles in Latin America: A Function of Presidential Reputation

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## Abstract

In this article we propose an innovative comparative analysis of cabinet reshuffles in Latin American presidential systems, focusing on personal incentives as drivers of ministerial turnover. We analyse when and why risks of reputational damage to a president drive cabinet changes. These risks are contingent and dependent upon the interaction between a president's reputational assets, on the one hand, and the high 'walk-away value' of the minister, on the other. We argue that ministerial turnover is a function of presidents' political and reputational resources as well as of exogenous factors. However, who is fired from the cabinet depends on the ministers' walk-away values and how threatened the president feels by them. We analyse cabinet changes in single-party and multiparty presidential governments in Latin America. Our results confirm the explanatory power of personal incentives to better understand the mechanisms that drive cabinet reshuffles.

**Keywords:** cabinet reshuffle; presidents; presidential cabinet; reputation; Latin America

Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right and anti-establishment candidate who became Brazil's president in 2018, has ruled in permanent confrontation with Congress, subnational governments and his own cabinet. Between February and July 2020 Bolsonaro fired eight ministers, two of whom were popular personalities with the potential to threaten his re-election ambitions. The first was the minister of health, Henrique Mandetta, whose popular approval rate had reached 68% in April 2020, when he personally led the fight against the coronavirus pandemic in a vacuum of presidential leadership that saw the president's popularity rating fall to 32%. Diverging from the president's political position, the minister directly reported to voters and stated that the doctor does not abandon the patient. Bolsonaro retorted that patients may change their doctor and fired the popular minister. The second minister to be fired was the justice minister, Sergio Moro, a popular former judge who had become the country's main face in the fight against corruption. He left the government, denouncing Bolsonaro's interference in criminal investigations involving the president's family and acquaintances.

Cabinet changes are puzzling events. The Brazilian example shows a cabinet reshuffle orchestrated by a president who felt himself in personal competition with two popular ministers. Personal conflict as a driver of ministerial turnover is not always grasped by the specialized literature, the dominant view being that partisan conflicts are a decisive vector of such crises. However, the mix of incentives and constraints triggering cabinet changes has been called into question in the face of the growing personalization of political executives alongside the increase in the number of outsiders, newcomers and candidates with weak or non-existent party attachments.

This article offers three main contributions, theoretical and empirical, to advance our understanding of cabinet changes. First, we develop a novel comparative framework for analysing a president's motives for dismissing ministers. Within this framework, we explore the interactions between political factors and personal incentives as the main drivers of ministerial turnover. Second, we propose a new approach to understanding personal incentives in cabinet changes with a focus on the reputational challenges that president and ministers face over the course of government. We discuss the risks of reputational loss presidents face, which we assess as conditional on the 'walk-away values' of ministers, as will be explained below. Third, we empirically test a set of hypotheses about the effects of the president's fears of reputational loss on the length of ministerial tenure.

We test the explanatory power of these factors vis-à-vis cabinet turnover and ministers' survival in the presidential systems of Latin America, a region that made transitions to democracy in the 1970s and 1980s and where the make-up and dynamics of ministerial cabinets have varied considerably over the decades. Some governments have been led by experienced politicians and established parties whose reputations precede their arrival to the presidency. But outsiders, non-partisan entities and newly formed parties have increasingly made their way to the latter, too.

Our empirical analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we analyse ministerial turnover in 17 Latin American presidential countries. This study connects turnovers with two types of endogenous risks presidents face, namely political and reputational risks, as well as with exogenous shocks. Second, we analyse ministerial tenure as a function of the personal attributes of both the president and the relevant ministers. Here, the main variable of interest concerns the reputational assets with which the president comes to power in interaction with the attributes of individual ministers, which are explored through a survival analysis.

The next section reviews the state of the literature on ministerial turnover in Latin America. Afterwards, we present the theoretical framework, including our concepts of presidents' political leverage and reputational assets as well as ministers' 'walk-away values'. We also include the hypotheses guiding our analysis. The fourth section presents the data, methods and results of the statistical analyses. The last section offers some concluding remarks.

### **Cabinet reshuffles in Latin American presidentialism**

Hiring and firing ministers, collectively or individually, constitutes a turning point in cabinet politics. The focus on agency problems and the use of principal-agent

models represented a major step forward in the study of cabinet politics, particularly of cabinet reshuffles (Elgie 2020). These studies have shed light on critical aspects of delegation while pointing to the analysis of political executives' motivations for threatening – or, in fact, firing – ministers, as problems either of adverse selection (Berlinski et al. 2010; Dewan and Dowding 2005; Dewan and Myatt 2007; Huber and Martínez-Gallardo 2004) or moral hazard (Indridason and Kam 2008; Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015).

From this perspective, cabinet reshuffles are a strategic choice of chief executives, of which the incorporation of political parties into government constitutes a key element. This is so because of the impact cabinet politics may have on executive–legislative relations in all systems of government. In effect, party-centred analyses of cabinets have paid close attention to the relationship between the disproportional allocation of portfolios to political parties and political instability (Neto 2006). They have also examined how chief executives have sought to overcome policy disagreements among party ministers by reshuffling the cabinet (Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015; Sedelius and Ekman 2010).

Cabinets reshuffles allow for fine-tuning of the political command of government in all systems thereof, though the motivations and reversal points of these changes may vary considerably across system types. In those with fixed terms and independent mandates, reshuffles have proven to be a strategic way to improve legislative support for the government and, thus, to overcome the risk of presidential instability through the threat of impeachments, forced resignations or coups (Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015; Sedelius and Ekman 2010). In fact, comparative studies on presidentialism have shown that the institutional power presidents hold for legislative and interparty bargaining is crucial to overcoming their lack of partisan power during the course of their presidential mandate (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Shugart and Carey 1992). In particular, the literature on coalitional presidentialism has demonstrated how the presidential power to appoint and dismiss ministers unilaterally has shaped those interparty bargains and the make-up of presidential cabinets (Chasquetti 2001; Limongi and Figueiredo 1998; Neto 2006).

Recent comparative studies, however, have called attention to the variety of motives and criteria by which ministers are selected and deselected, thus moving the academic debate away from analyses centred on partisan motivations to uncover the multipurpose nature of cabinet reshuffles. Albeit incipiently, some studies have gathered empirical evidence of these variations in presidential cabinets (Camerlo and Martínez-Gallardo 2018; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015; Chaisty et al. 2018). There appear to be three main motivations behind ministerial turnovers, detailed below.

First, the costs of changing the cabinet may be lower for presidents (than for prime ministers) because they are elected for fixed terms and have a mandate that is independent from the parliamentary majority (Schleiter 2020). The system of separation of powers gives the president – the government's *formateur* – and politicians in general ample choice (Neto 2006). Presidents may opt to work with their own party (if they have one) to share their cabinet with other parties or to include either non-partisan experts or loyalists. Even if they opt for a coalition cabinet with other parties, presidents still count on their having broad appointment

and dismissal powers. Although there is evidence that cabinet reshuffles are less likely in coalition governments because of the costs of going against the parties that form them (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008), minor changes are still possible and these may be strategic to change the cabinet to the president's liking (Bäck and Carroll 2020). In the end, the separate mandates of presidents and legislators make party and coalition agreements fluid, informal or even non-existent.

As Paul Chaisty et al. (2018) have comparatively demonstrated, the reward value that partisan agreements have for governments, while still decisive, differs across parties and legislators together with the tools chief executives employ to reach them – ranging from pork barrel, patronage and informal exchange of favours to the exchange of cabinet positions. The high proportion of non-partisan ministers and the disproportionality in portfolio allocation across parties and governments are signals that presidential cabinets operate under different institutional incentives (Amorim Neto and Samuels 2010; Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2008; Neto 2006). Therefore, if presidents are able to forge majorities through means other than intra- and interparty agreements, the latitude of their choices in terms of appointing and dismissing ministers increases.

Second, cabinet changes have a strategic value for the political ambitions of presidents. Direct election in presidential systems favours the entry of candidates coming from different paths and with different personal capacities to manage the cabinet and to lead a successful administration. Presidents with different backgrounds can use the deselection of ministers to solve adverse selection problems (Huber and Martinez-Gallardo 2004) or to overcome moral hazards (Indridason and Kam 2008), thus boosting their chances of re-election, if that is permitted, or of maintaining their political influence by making their allies their successors, while diminishing those of their challengers. Even though most presidential candidates have had political experience, mostly coming to power from other electoral offices, since the last wave of democratization in the 1970s an increasing number of outsiders and newcomers have made their way to the top in their first electoral attempt. In Latin America, approximately 10% of presidents have arrived to power without any previous political experience (Alcántara et al. 2017), while others have done so with foundations in their reputation in the private sector or having forged their leadership in anti-democratic or military insurrections against the government (Carreras 2012). In all these cases, presidential reputation must be built during the term in office, which makes partisan, policy or personal conflicts within the cabinet likely – and risky.

Presidents who face the risk of reputational loss may end up personalizing their cabinets through the appointment and dismissal of ministers. Latin Americans coined terms such as 'hyperpresidentialism' (Nino 1992) and 'delegative democracy' (O'Donnell 1994), showing the failure of checks and balances to contain the executive, especially when unexpected shocks and emergency situations put the executive centre stage and weaken civil society as well as political actors' willingness and ability to counteract power concentration (Ackerman 2004; Cheibub et al. 2020; Ginsburg and Versteeg 2021). Personalization not only concerns presidential relations with the other branches of government; it can also take place within the executive. Typical actions are subtle and do not appear with 'any concomitant change in ... formal institutional structures' (McAllister 2007), although

some presidents do change the executive's structures to concentrate authority (Inácio and Llanos 2016). Presidents facing intra-cabinet conflicts may resort to the appointment of loyalists and to the consequent displacement of opponents from core cabinet positions. Cabinet personalization may boost a president's sense of power for a while, but it becomes risky for presidential survival if the administration's performance is compromised.

Third, it is worth noting that institutional changes have also affected the longer-term expectations of presidents, which in turn has impacted cabinet politics. In the last 30 to 40 years constitutional reforms have increased presidential powers, and presidential term limits have been relaxed to allow for immediate re-election in a number of countries (Negretto 2013). If re-election is not forbidden, presidents and ruling parties are motivated to run again, needing a performing government to do so. As not all presidents are created equal, the ways they use their powers of dismissal to change the cabinet so as to safeguard their political futures vary, too. Cabinet ministers may be cooperative when it comes to presidents' ambitions, if they are close to the president or if they belong to the same political party. Otherwise, the success of particular ministers in their assigned portfolio may encourage the launch of their personal political careers, leading to clashes with the president – and eventually to their dismissal. Even when immediate re-election is constitutionally forbidden, presidents may still be allowed to run at a future point in time and thus be concerned with the political success of their individual administrations. In fact, a growing number of former Latin American presidents remain in politics, acting as party leaders or holding elective positions. Some of them will seek a new presidential term at some point in the future, and thus appeal to the electorate's memories of their previous period(s) of rule – forming the basis of their reputational assets.

In short, because presidents enjoy broad constitutional powers, may or may not have political experience and may appoint ministers with quite different backgrounds, we argue that ministerial turnover will be frequent in presidential systems.

### Theoretical model

According to a vast literature on these matters, a minister's party attachment and their party's legislative strength are central aspects in cabinet reshuffles. In general, cabinets are not subject to parliamentary approval in presidential systems and, as explained before, they usually include a significant number of non-partisan ministers. Thus, a minister's exit does not necessarily correspond to the entry or exit of parties vis-à-vis the cabinet. Presidents use their power to appoint and dismiss ministers in a complex and purposeful way, and the scope of cabinet reshuffles ranges from minor change to a substantial reshaping of government. They may promote, demote or retain ministers while reassigning them to other portfolios, or they can simply take them out of the cabinet altogether.

We assume that presidents seek the success of their government and thereby strive to maximize the expected returns from the presidential position for themselves, their party and supporting groups. The presidency is an electorally and politically strategic position, and presidents fear their reputations being damaged due to endogenous and/or exogenous challenges. They count on a variable number of

both political and reputational assets, which either support them or leave them more exposed to the challenges of governing. They will seek either to maintain, build or expand such assets throughout their term in office, and ministerial turnovers will be connected to this reputation-building aspiration. However, when resorting to ministerial turnovers, presidents will confront the ‘walk-away value’ of their ministers. In the following we present our theoretical model of cabinet changes by discussing: (1) the political and reputational factors involved in presidential calculations and (2) how the effects of these factors are not linearly distributed, but rather conditional on the potential threat the minister’s profile may pose to the president. Next, we further develop the concepts and hypotheses that we tested in this study.

### ***Political leverage of the presidents***

In presidential systems, cabinets depend on the president’s assessment of what makes government rule most viable. Under this institutional design, the president can unilaterally decide the composition of the team and the survival of each partner. Of course, the support of a legislative majority is not a trivial factor, particularly since party systems have become increasingly fragmented – and have even collapsed in some instances (Chaisty et al. 2018). At the same time, the self-recruitment of presidential candidates has also increased (Carreras 2012; Inácio and Llanos 2020). Minority presidents secure interparty support in fragmented legislatures through coalition governments – a recurrent phenomenon in Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Uruguay. However, ‘ghost coalitions’ involving legislative majorities without the formation of multiparty cabinets are also observed in Ecuador (Mejía Guinand and Botero 2018) and Peru (Vera and Carreras 2018). Majority presidents usually lead one-party cabinets, particularly in countries with less party fragmentation, such as Argentina and Mexico.

In addition, rules for the presidential election differ and were modified during the third wave of democratization in most Latin American countries, with only Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Venezuela using the plurality rule since 1978. The adoption of run-offs altered the conditions for presidential competition and impacted cabinet composition as well (Freudenreich 2016; Pérez-Liñán 2006). In fact, run-offs drive the formation of electoral alliances before the second round, which may later become the basis for coalition governments. However, they also increase party-system fragmentation, may encourage outsiders to participate, give (small and new) parties a chance to test their strength and invite citizens to vote sincerely in the first round for the candidate they like most. All this increases the chances of electing a president who was not the first choice for voters, but probably the least disliked of the first-round winners. Such a president will face strong rivals.

Certainly, the president’s control of the cabinet and the risks of moral hazard depend on the president’s partisan status in Congress and their own electoral performance in the presidential race. However, these do not define in isolation the bargaining conditions between the branches of government and the command of the executive branch. According to Daniel Ponder (2012), a hostile political environment – whereby the president faces popular disapproval and there is a lack of

trust in government – reduces presidential leverage and may spur a cabinet reshuffle, as such an environment can put extra pressure on the performance of individual ministers and the cabinet as a whole. In 2002, for example, when Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo saw his popularity rating shrink to 18% and as his government faced a credibility crisis, he carried out a profound reshuffling of his cabinet – firing the experts in charge of core ministries (Vera and Carreras 2018).

In view of all this, we built an indicator of the president's political leverage as likely impacting cabinet formation and turnover. This variable is based on three political factors considered by the scholarship to be critical drivers of cabinet change. First, the total share of votes the president won in the presidential race – that is, in the first electoral round; second, the level of presidential support in the legislative branch, which may come from a single party or a from a coalition; and, third, the popularity of the president per se. We expect that presidents scoring strongly on these three aspects are more likely to run the cabinet smoothly, to overcome internal conflicts and thus to feel less pressure to implement a reshuffle. Hence, if we observe their relations with ministers, we expect that:

**Hypothesis 1:** *The greater the president's political leverage, the lower the level of ministerial turnover and the risk of a minister's dismissal.*

### **Reputational assets of presidents**

While political leverage refers to the political conditions that accompany presidents in power, there are other conditions – those concerning one's personal profile – also potentially defining the chances presidents have in case of challenges to their rule. Existing studies focus on the interaction of legal and party variables to explain different outcomes in terms of presidential profiles, which particularly vary in the extent to which presidents are party-loyal and depending on what kind of previous political experience they have (Inácio and Llanos 2020). For instance, David Samuels and Matthew Shugart (2010: 67) define 'insiderness' as the nature and extent of a prospective executive's links to a central party organization, measuring it as a combination of partisan and political experience. In general, the lack of political experience at the time of selection to office is regarded as problematic, as newcomers are difficult to work with, may display inconsistent or unpredictable behaviour or take poor decisions (Baturu and Elkin 2021).

We assume that presidents' prior experience regarding the diversity and timing of their political activities in partisan, elective or appointed offices generates important reputational gains for their career and political influence. Hence, we consider reputation to be an asset that allows the president to nurture and respond to the expectations of voters and supporters, differentiates them from opponents and creates barriers of protection against competitors' threats. Ludger Helms (2016) considers a leader's reputation a critical aspect of leadership capital, defining their opportunity structure in politics.

Presidents may come into office with different levels of reputational assets. We propose that presidents who do not count on such assets are more exposed to intra-cabinet conflicts, which may be related to party, policy and/or personal divergences between the president and their ministers. Simply put, outsiders, newcomers or

presidents with little previous political experience will tend to compensate for this reputational weakness by appropriating the reputation and expertise of their ministers. However, these ministers are at the same time the president's competitors, so sooner or later tensions will mark their relations. Presidents who have built robust reputational assets before their path to the presidency, however, are less dependent on the performance of individual ministers and will engage in fewer controversies with them, so that:

**Hypothesis 2:** *The greater the president's reputational assets, the lower the level of ministerial turnover and the risk of a minister's dismissal.*

Operationalizing reputational assets is challenging, but recent works have proposed measures allowing for comparison across countries and regimes. Miguel Carreras (2017) uses biographical data on political positions occupied by democratic leaders before coming to power in the period from 1945 to 2015. Alexander Baturo and Johan Elkins's (2021) measure accounts for the length, breadth and quality of leaders' involvement in politics. The authors use a latent variable model to enumerate the indicators and estimate PolEx, their measure of *ex ante* political experience, which is applied across regimes. We rely on the latter measure for the empirical analysis of Latin American presidents' reputational assets.

Political leverage and presidents' reputational assets are our core variables to capture the effects of political and reputational factors involved in the presidential calculus on cabinet changes. They seek to grasp how the presidents' strength or weakness drives them towards more costly strategies, such as changing their governing team. However, we argue that the effects of these variables are relational: that is, they are conditional on the potential threat the ministers pose to the president. We incorporate into our model this potential threat via ministers' 'walk-away value' – or their chances of political survival outside the government as well as personal factors prospectively driving greater autonomy from their side, thus leading eventually to ministerial opportunism within the cabinet.

### ***Walk-away value of ministers***

Ministers' attributes, expertise and political or professional networks matter: if such factors are desired by the president, they increase ministers' bargaining power; if the latter are dismissed from the cabinet, these factors serve to reduce the losses they experience. This defines the minister's 'walk-away value'<sup>1</sup> – a minister with a high 'walk-away value' is one more likely to act in a discretionary way and pursue their own policy positions, even if they diverge from those of the president. Ministers with high 'walk-away values' can be seen as a threat to a president with few reputational assets.

Studies on cabinet conflicts have increasingly focused on the incentives for ministerial discretion (Laver and Shepsle 1990) and the risks of ministerial opportunism (Indridason and Kam 2008), by which ministers can defy the president even in the face of the threat of being fired. For ministers, being in office is playing a game with mixed motivations for participation, one in which collective responsibility and



the success of the government as a whole are balanced against ministers' opportunities to leverage their own electoral futures or those of their respective parties. Opportunities to leverage one's career or the party's reputation are more attractive in contexts where the ministerial position offers greater resources and increased chances to influence policymaking. In Latin American presidentialism, the ministers who are ultimately appointed reflect not only presidential choices but also the strategies of parties, politicians and interest groups alike.

For the heads of the executive, the risks of agency losses are connected with the ministers' partisan ties or expertise. On the one hand, ministers belonging to other parties – or even to a different faction of the presidential party – are more likely to cause ministerial drift in response to the demands of their clientele (Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015) or in an attempt to differentiate themselves from other parties in the cabinet (Fortunato 2019; Martin and Vanberg 2011). On the other, non-partisan ministers hold a diverse range of profiles, such as technocrats, 'technopols' or businesspeople, with previous trajectories and political (Domínguez 1997; Inácio 2013) or corporate (Alexiadou 2015; González-Bustamante 2020) career plans that may encourage them to seek greater independence as ministers. Presidents weigh up the costs of removing a minister connected to the political networks that back them, especially in contexts where parties are not the most effective channel for doing so – as is the case, indeed, in many Latin American countries. We assume that prior political experience and ties to different interest groups tend to make ministers less dependent on the president and on their own ministerial position.

The attention to a minister's attributes and whether they are a threat in the eyes of the president allows us to estimate the individual risks of the minister being dismissed. We will use this dimension to test a set of hypotheses about the interaction between the president's reputational assets and the ministers' 'walk-away values'. The relational and contingent nature of ministerial turnover is also examined here.

We argue that presidents with greater reputational assets feel less threatened by ministers with a high 'walk-away value', who tend to survive longer in the cabinet. Their party and extra-parliamentary group ties, as well as their expertise, may be seen by presidents as additional gains on top of their own assets. Contrariwise, presidents with limited reputational assets may see these kinds of ministers as a potential threat to their leadership of government or their political future. If this is the case, they may prefer to get rid of them when they make it convenient to do so or when staying together becomes untenable. Thus, we hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 3:** *The higher the president's reputational assets and a minister's 'walk-away value', the lower the risk of the latter's dismissal.*

Presidents staff cabinets with members of their own party, but also with ministers selected due to political or personal alignments with the president. Even in coalition cabinets, presidents seek to surround themselves with their 'own people' as a deliberately constructed barrier of political protection and a way to pursue their own priorities vis-à-vis other parties or even their own party. We argue, *ceteris paribus*, that presidents with greater reputational assets are more likely to retain their own people, since they are less pressured to negotiate these positions with other political parties or groups.

**Hypothesis 4:** *The higher the president's reputational assets, the lower the risk of dismissal of a minister considered one of 'the president's own people'.*

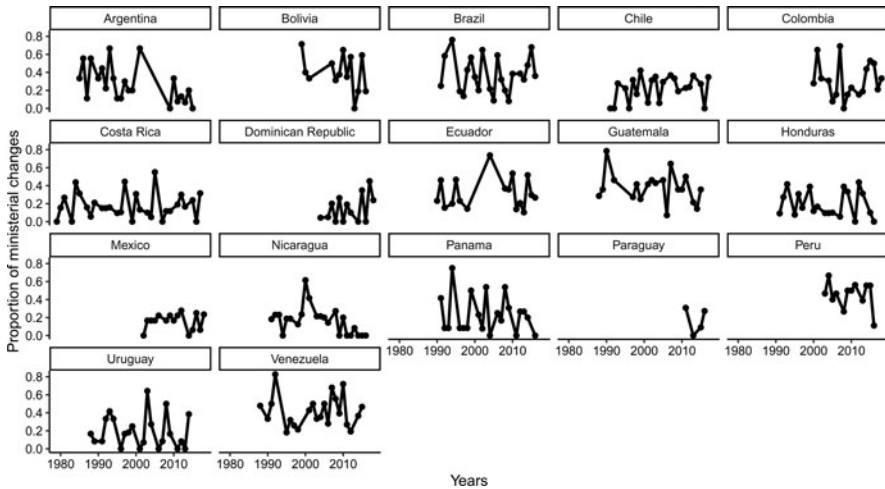
Indeed, presidents' relations vis-à-vis their ministers are embedded in the political context at hand and will inevitably be affected by unexpected situations of crisis during their term in office. Since in presidential systems collective responsibility for government performance is more diluted than in parliamentary cabinets, if an external shock causes a crisis then responsibility will primarily fall to the president. Economic crises, health emergencies or corruption scandals can pressure the president to undertake policy shifts – ministerial turnover being an immediate signal of such turns (Camerlo and Martinez-Gallardo 2018; Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015; Martínez-Gallardo and Schleiter 2015). We assume that if a president's responsibility is considered directly related to those crises, their political leverage will decline and the reputational assets of both president and ministers will become more apparent. As chief executives, presidents will assess the costs of the crisis vis-à-vis those derived from sacking a minister or an entire party from the cabinet.

### Data and empirical strategies

To assess the empirical relevance of the arguments developed above, we analyse data on presidential cabinets in Latin America after the third wave of democratization. Our analysis is conducted in two stages: first, we examine the effect of presidents' political leverage and reputational assets on ministerial turnover in 17 countries in the region. Second, we interact these variables with a set of 'walk-away value' indicators to estimate the survival rate of ministers in presidential cabinets in a smaller set of five countries.

#### **Research strategy: ministerial turnover**

To give an overview of ministerial changes in presidential cabinets, we begin by testing the arguments concerning the effects of the president's political leverage and reputational assets – H1 to H2 – on ministerial turnover in Latin America. The dependent variable Ministerial Turnover measures the proportion of ministers who left the cabinet each year, meaning the overall ministerial turnover rate. We exclude the turnover of the first year only to avoid counting the changes related to the inaugural cabinet. The ministerial turnover rate captures the most radical ministerial makeover because it does not include other types of changes such as the reassignment of ministers across portfolios, which is a common measure to modify the pay-offs of ministers/parties or to signal government policy shifts. To construct this variable we took the ministerial cabinet retention rate from the WhoGov Data (Nyrup and Bramwell 2020), which is calculated as the proportion of ministers who remained from one year to the next, adjusting for the size of the ministerial cabinet. However, as the objective is to analyse the extent of ministerial turnover, we used the inverse of the retention rate as a dependent variable. **Figure 1** below presents the annual proportion of ministerial changes in 17 Latin American countries from 1979 to 2018. We include only the years in which the countries scored as democratic according to Polity2. Different line lengths for each country



**Figure 1.** Turnover Cabinet in 17 Latin American Countries, 1979–2018  
 Source: Authors' own compilation, based on Nyrup and Bramwell (2020).

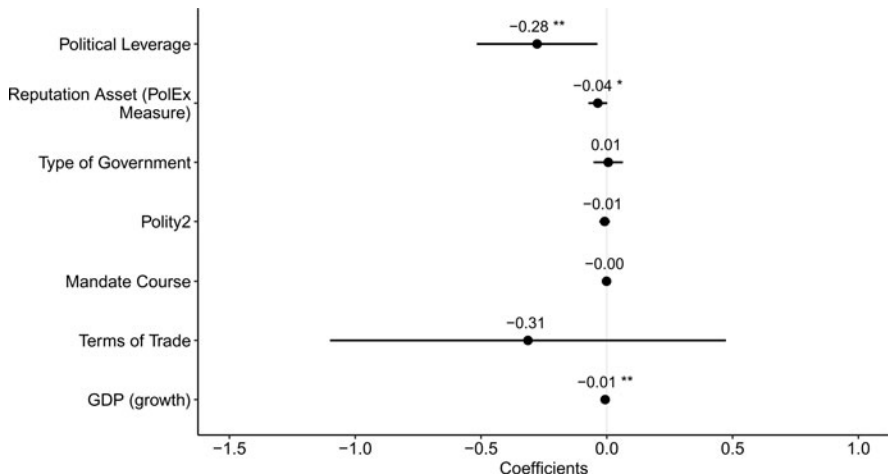
are also due to the availability of data on the two main independent variables: Political Leverage and Reputation Asset.

As explained in the previous section, the president's political leverage is a metric that combines three dimensions. We consider the Political Leverage measure simply as the average of these variables. In turn, to measure the president's Reputational Assets, we relied on Baturo and Elkink's (2021) PoEx measure, which, as previously explained, captures the leader's political experience prior to their term in presidential office.

We also control for the number of years the president has been in office (Mandate Course). We are agnostic about the direction of the effect of this variable. We added two political variables: namely, the type of government (whether a single-party or coalition government) (single-party is the reference category), and the country's democratic status (Polity2).<sup>2</sup> We also control for economic aspects (GDP Growth and Terms of Trade), which in the unstable economic environments of the region can change the configuration of political dynamics.<sup>3</sup> Descriptive statistics for all these variables are available in Online Appendix 1.

### Estimation method

Figure 2 below presents the results of the regression model with the dependent variable Turnover Cabinet, which, as explained above, measures the proportion of ministers who left the presidential cabinet in each year in any given country. The unbalanced panel consists of information from 17 countries.<sup>4</sup> Due to the nature of the data, it was possible to test different specifications on the relationship between ministerial turnover and our two variables of interest: Political Leverage and Reputational Assets. Here, we present the model that best fits the robustness tests. In this way, Figure 2 presents the estimates of the panel model with random effects.<sup>5</sup>

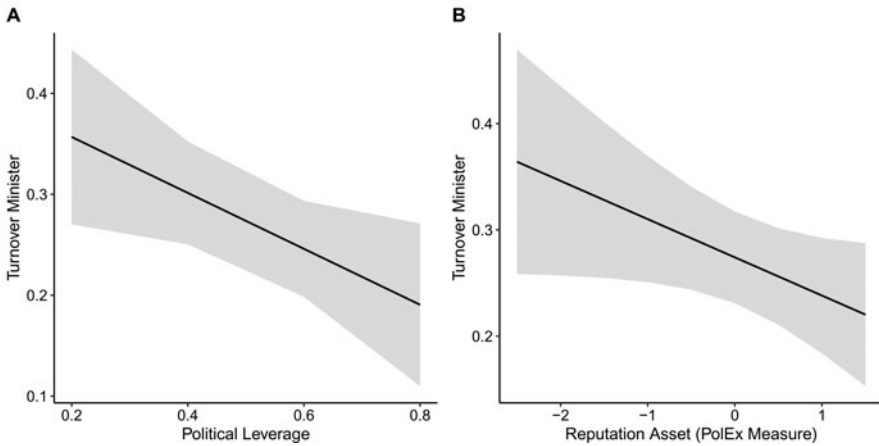


**Figure 2.** Effects of Political Leverage and Reputation Assets on Turnover Cabinet: Regression Models  
*Note:* The coefficients are random-effects panel-data estimators with clustered robust standard errors by country. For the significance level in the estimations: \* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ . All diagnostic test results are provided in Online Appendix 1.

Figure 2 reveals that a one-point increase in the Political Leverage index reduces by 0.28 points the proportion of ministers who leave office each year, this being the strongest predictor of cabinet turnover. Considering the components of this index, we can state that strong presidents – that is, those with high political leverage – retain their ministers more often, while those who are electorally weak and have less legislative as well as popular support adopt the radical strategy of removing their ministers. This finding is consistent with claims that a lower level of presidential political leverage causes government instability and, based on this, ministerial turnover – as posited by H1. Importantly, the president’s political leverage has also proven to be one of the main predictors of ministerial turnover in a region marked by a growing number of minority presidents. The high level of ministerial turnover is linked to the strategies adopted by minority presidents to keep their legislative strength via reshaping their coalitional cabinets, as often happens in Brazil (Inácio 2018), and to a president’s attempts to reconcile with different factions of their own party (Basabe-Serrano et al. 2018).

Regarding the president’s reputation assets, meaning the political experience with which they arrive at presidential office, the effect of our proxy (the PolEx measure) on the yearly proportion of ministers leaving the cabinet is significant and performs in the expected direction – as suggested by H2. Figure 2 shows that this effect is negative: that is, ministerial turnover tends to be lower when the president’s reputational assets are higher. In our view, these results support the idea of testing the effect of this variable further, from a relational perspective with ministerial reputations. Our expectation is that this variable is relevant for predicting the chances of micro-level changes: namely, those in the president’s relationship with ministers who threaten the former’s reputational assets. We explore

## Predicted values of turnover cabinet



**Figure 3.** Marginal Effects of a President's Reputational Assets and Political Leverage on the Minister's Risk of Dismissal

this further in the next section. [Figure 3](#) pictures the marginal effects of our core variables, president's reputation assets and political leverage.

In addition, the model depicted in [Figure 2](#) includes a series of controls. These are contextual or systemic factors potentially conditioning the president's decision to dismiss ministers, thus having an impact on turnover among the latter. The results indicate that the number of years the president has been governing (Mandate Course), type of government, Polity2 and terms of trade have no significant impact on turnover. Interestingly, of the variables controlling for exogenous shocks only GDP Growth has an impact in the expected way. This is somehow strengthened if we assume that shocks indirectly impact political leverage via presidential popularity rates (as covered in the variable Political Leverage). In any case, we see that Political Leverage and Reputation Assets are stronger predictors of cabinet turnover, thus suggesting that this is a tool used more to carry out political adjustments in view of internal (president–minister) conflicts than as a means of directly reacting to exogenous (economic) shocks.

From this first empirical analysis, we conclude that the president's political leverage and reputational assets, as in H1 and H2, are the main reasons for the overall ministerial turnover in the course of such an administration. Next, we move further with the connection of the individual features of both the ministers (what type of minister is more likely to be dismissed) and presidents (what type of president fears a reputational loss in keeping such a minister).

### Research strategy: ministerial tenure

In this section, we provide evidence on H3 and H4, which connect the president's reputational assets and the ministers' 'walk-away values'. We test them as follows: we assume that presidents' fear of reputational losses is related to the reputational assets they hold when coming into office (which we already presented and

measured as PolEx in the previous analysis). This is a key element to understand how presidents handle their relations with ministers, and how they decide who leaves the government and when. It can also spur a minister's dismissal based on their personal characteristics.

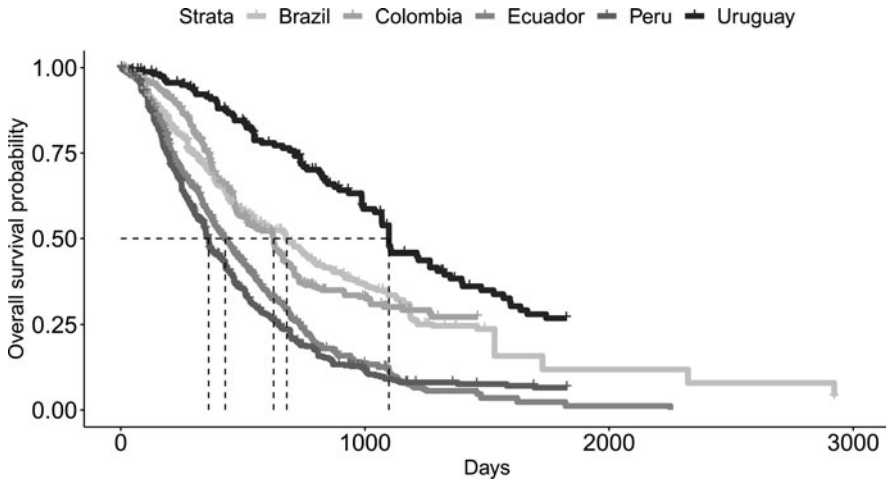
We use the databases produced by country experts from the Presidential Cabinets Project, which provide a diverse set of information on ministers' personal attributes, career trajectories and political networks.<sup>6</sup> The unit of analysis of the panel data, country and year, is each time he or she was appointed. This analysis was conducted for the following countries and time spans: Brazil (1985–2016), Colombia (1979–2014), Ecuador (1979–2015), Peru (1980–2014) and Uruguay (1984–2015).

We test the role that the president's reputational assets and political leverage play on ministerial tenure, applying survival models (or event-study models). Specifically, we apply non-parametric Cox proportional hazard models because we do not need to specify a shape of the hazard function a priori. Differing from the previous analysis, in this one our dependent variable is individual Ministerial Tenure, or the time elapsed between the minister's appointment and their later dismissal. Our data include the minister's departure due to resignation, reshuffling or the end of the presidential term. Thus, the dependent variable, which is essentially a dichotomous outcome (the event has occurred or has not), captures the different risks to which ministers are exposed from reassignment to another position (either a promotion or demotion) in the cabinet to being removed from the latter entirely.

We account for the fact that the effects of our independent variables may vary depending on the type of ministerial departure. On the one hand, the president can decide to make more moderate changes, reassigning ministers between portfolios, promoting or demoting them. We recognize that these are important strategies signalling the president's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the minister or own party and they may threaten removal in future. On the other hand, acting more radically, the president can remove the minister from office. These diverse presidential strategies indicate different motivations for the ultimate removal of ministers, which in turn we expect will be related to the latter's 'walk-away values'. To deal with this heterogeneity, we first estimate models with the whole sample of modalities of cabinet changes (Figures 4 and 5 below) and then for the subset of ministers who are removed from the cabinet (Figure 6).

To analyse ministerial survival, we need to define a cut-off point in time (data censorship) and we consider the ministers who left their posts – regardless of the reason – as events. However, if the minister left office at the end of the presidential mandate, this departure is not considered an event. One way to analyse the ministerial-survival pattern is to consider the Kaplan–Meier survival-estimates process. This allows us to observe temporal behaviour and, in general, illustrates changes in cumulative probability as the curve advances over time. Kaplan–Meier Survival Probability is an initial way to explore ministerial survival, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows that the survival rate is not uniform across countries. Uruguay leads in ministerial endurance while Peru exhibits the greatest instability; these are, indeed, cases of opposing extremes in terms of political personalization, with Uruguay characterized by strong parties and a stable party system (Chasquetti



**Figure 4.** Ministerial Tenure: Kaplan–Meier Survival Probability  
 Source: Presidential Cabinet Project

and Buquet 2018) and Peru by weak parties that are either unstable or context-contingent structures formed around the president (Vera and Carreras 2018). Additionally, the Peruvian Congress has prerogatives to confirm and dismiss ministers – an institutional feature that evinces further checks on the president and is unusual in comparison to the other presidential systems of the region. Politics is also personalized in Ecuador, the country with the second-highest level of ministerial instability – together with marked presidential instability in the 1990s and first decade of the new century, as well as a party-system collapse in the latter time period (Basabe-Serrano et al. 2018).

### Estimation method

We build five models to estimate the hazard rate of ministerial survival in connection with our main predictors of cabinet changes: presidents' political leverage and reputational assets.<sup>7</sup> To test whether the minister's 'walk-away value' tempers the effects of our main variables, we use a set of binary variables on ministerial characteristics. The variable *President's Own People* captures ministers' closeness to the president, classifying in this way the ministers of the president's own party as well as the non-partisan ministers who were directly selected by the president. *Minister's Party Attachment* indicates whether the minister is non-partisan (reference) or partisan. *Minister's Policy Expertise* classifies the ministers as a non-expert (reference) or policy expert. We use four binary variables indicating *Minister's Political Network*: namely, the minister's prior links to extra-parliamentary groups (union, religious, economic and military). In addition, we use two control variables. *Type of Government* takes a value of 1 if the government is a multiparty coalition and 0 otherwise. *Gender*, as a binary variable, has a value of 1 for male and of 0 for female ministers. Descriptive statistics for all these variables are available in Online Appendix 1.

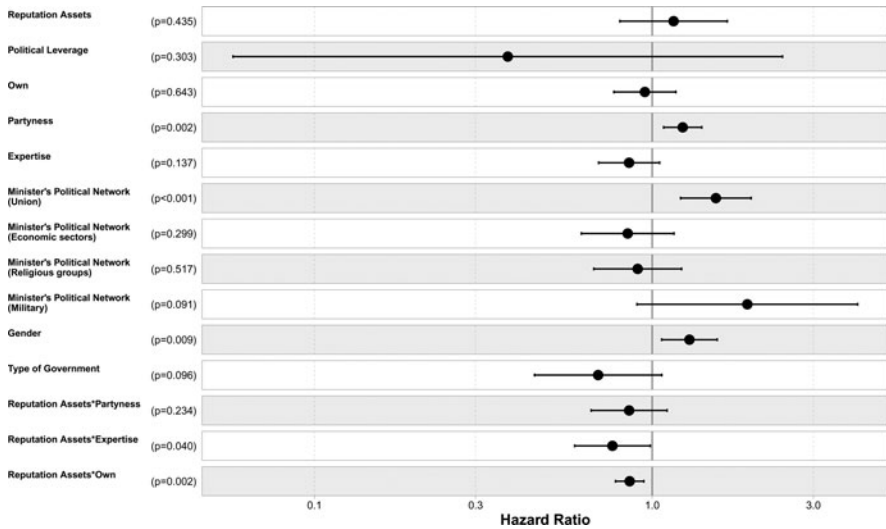


Figure 5. Cox Proportional Hazard Models of Minister Survival (Total Sample)

To interpret the results, it should be noted that the values correspond to hazard ratios. Thus, values above 1 imply an increase in hazard ratios and values below 1 indicate a reduction thereof. The estimates of the basic and extended specifications of our models can be consulted in Online Appendix 1. Figure 5 presents the estimates of the full model (number 5 in the table in the Online Appendix), which includes all variables and three interaction terms between the president’s reputational assets and the minister’s ‘walk-away value’ (own, party-related and expertise). These are meant to estimate a minister’s chances of survival by associating variations in his or her profile with the president’s personal incentives to fire them. This model includes the whole sample of actions that the president can undertake to remove the minister from their position.

The variable Reputational Assets performs as expected in Models 1–4 (see Online Appendix 1): that is, presidents with greater such assets mean reduced risks of ministerial changes. A different picture emerges when we interact Reputational Assets and ministers’ ‘walk-away values’, as depicted in Figure 5. Our findings show that the greater reputation of the president reduces the risk of dismissal for policy-expertise ministers – confirming partially H3 – and the president’s own people – as posited by H4, a finding that is line with other studies (Camerlo and Pérez-Liñán 2015). This effect is not clear in cases of partisan ministers. In fact, in the basic and other models (see Online Appendix 1), partisan ministers face a greater risk of dismissal compared to non-partisan peers. But when we interact this variable and the president’s reputational assets the direction of this effect changes, as we expected, but it is not statistically significant. As the effect of the ‘reputational assets \* own people’ interaction indicates, the protective effect of party attachment on ministerial tenure seems to be unambiguous when treating ministers who are members of the president’s own party and ministers who are loyal and friends.



Political leverage has been shown to be a strong predictor of ministerial turnover. However, its effect is not clear when it comes to identifying which minister profile is more at risk of dismissal. The results indicate that the president’s higher degree of political leverage tends to reduce the risk of ministers’ resignation, as expected in H1, but this effect has statistical significance only in the simple models.

A final interesting result indicates to what extent the dismissal of ministers with extra-parliamentary ties is sensitive to the type of group to which the minister is close. Ministers connected to unions are the ones at greater risk of being displaced, perhaps indicating the large chances that policy orientation and social alliances will experience shifts within the course of a presidential term. Results for other ministers’ connections resulted without statistical significance. The results partially confirm our hypothesis that reputationally strong presidents tend to retain ministers with high ‘walk-away values’, particularly policy experts, and those personally close to them.

Now we move to the results we obtained when accounting solely for the removal of a minister. As previously explained, removals can be understood as a more radical and costly strategy for the president than displacing a minister through a promotion, demotion or reassignment to ministries of different political or administrative relevance within the cabinet. The models presented in the previous figures checked all those cases, but how do the ministers’ and the presidents’ attributes behave if we consider only that they remove ministers from the cabinet? We estimate the effects of the same variables considering only the sample of those who were fired – either individually or as a consequence of a broader cabinet reshuffle. Figure 6 presents the results corresponding to Model 5, the one with all the controls (all models can be consulted in Online Appendix 1).

On the one hand, the effects of the Political Leverage variable are quite interesting in this analysis. Its effects are not significant when all types of ministerial dismissals are considered (total sample), whereas they are very clear when the

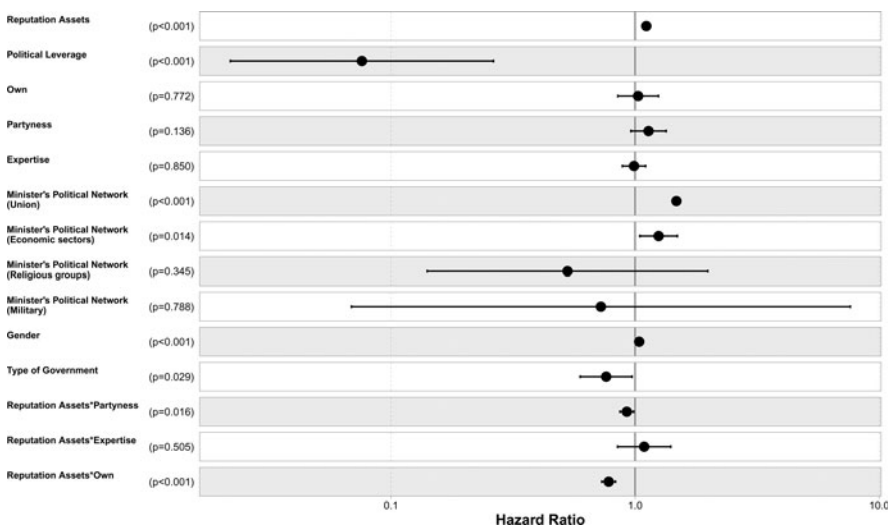


Figure 6. Cox Proportional Hazard Models of Minister Survival (Restricted Sample)

president decides to remove the minister from the cabinet. The higher the political leverage of the president, the lower the risk of ministers being removed permanently from the cabinet, as in H1, thus reiterating results we had obtained in the first empirical strategy (Figure 2). This confirms that presidents with higher parliamentary support and popular approval seem to prefer moderate changes to their cabinet, such as reassigning ministers to other positions, realigning their team or signalling to a minister that they are at risk of dismissal.

On the other hand, the interactions reveal that in the case of cabinets led by a reputationally strong president, ministers with high ‘walk-away values’ due to their party ties and their proximity to the president (President’s Own People) are at lower risk of leaving the cabinet. Interestingly, this discovery indicates that while the effect of partisan attachment is not significant in the previously shown analysis of all types of ministerial changes, it is important when it comes to removing a minister from the cabinet outright (the restricted sample). In this case, party affiliation seems to increase the bargaining power of ministers, and probably of their parties too. The effect of protection is unclear in the case of ministers who are policy experts when the decision is to push them out of office. Regarding network linkages, ministers close to trade unions and economic groups are more likely to be removed from office.

A final remark on two variables. First, the effects of the variable Type of Government for ministerial survival as estimated using these two samples of dismissals. This variable has null effect when all ministerial changes are considered, even though it reduces the risk of removal from the cabinet. These results are consistent with the literature on coalition presidentialism, which points to the smaller leeway of the president who decides to share the government with other parties. The use of the more radical strategy – that is, to definitively dismiss a minister – seems to be avoided out of presidential fear of hurting parties and losing their support. Second, regarding Gender, Figures 5 and 6 indicate that women are less likely than men to be displaced or demoted to other positions.

Overall, the results presented here raise some important questions for the study of cabinet changes. In particular, we found evidence that the risks of a minister being reassigned or fired vary considerably when we consider the interplay between the profiles of presidents and ministers. We identified how the president’s reputational assets matter and have a potential protective effect for some ministerial profiles. Even ministers who may represent a challenge to the chief executive’s leadership – due to their party ties and policy expertise – may survive longer in the cabinet when the president has large reputational assets. Different from the expectation that any president protects their own staff, we showed how this is more likely to occur among those with strong reputations since they are less pressured to move their allies in ministerial changes. A further implication of our findings is that the president tempers the strategies of cabinet changes, from the more moderate to the more radical ones, according to their reputational fragility or strength and to the ‘walk-away values’ of their ministers.

### Concluding remarks

It is hardly controversial that heads of the executive change the cabinet, collectively or individually, to deal with costly partisan challenges. However, there has been

little discussion of how personal motivations also pervade such calculations. In this article, we developed a theoretical model to explore the interplay between different motivations behind ministerial turnover. Our analysis is the first to shed light on the personal incentives behind ministerial turnover in presidential systems. We departed from the established idea that partisan concerns and cabinet performance matter for understanding a president's motivation to change the composition of the latter. However, we are able to assert that the targets and scope of these changes vary (Helms and Vercesi 2022). In effect, to better understand the mixed motivations behind cabinet reshuffles we need to link ministerial changes to the reputational risks that presidents face. Undoubtedly, the post-transitional time span – a period in which the range of expertise in the presidency expands to include a broad palette of leaders, from party people to political outsiders – leaves its imprint on cabinet dynamics and affects the fate of the ministers who come to be part of the ruling government.

Following the relevant literature on cabinet politics in presidential systems, we corroborate the effect of the president's political leverage on ministerial turnover. Further, we consider factors that vary across presidents and capture contextual changes in the political environment of Latin America, a region marked by recurring political instability. Our results capture the main factors at play and account for the variations in cabinet make-up that have been highlighted primarily by the literature on coalitional presidentialism. A key finding of the analyses is that presidents leading single-party governments use their powers to dismiss ministers more extensively than coalitional presidents, who more commonly reallocate ministers to other cabinet posts. This suggests that coalitional presidents use more complex management strategies going beyond cabinet makeovers.

However, the main contribution of this article is in the evidence presented that the risk of a minister being reassigned or dismissed from the cabinet is largely due to personal incentives. First, we theorized the relevance of reputational assets for presidents and how ministers can threaten them. Second, we used new strategies to measure the personal incentives for ministers to be relatively independent of the president and to become a threat to their reputational assets. These incentives – or, what we called here ministers' 'walk-away values' – are related to their policy expertise and their partisan and political networks.

The empirical tests presented here consistently suggest that the reputational assets of presidents matter for ministerial tenure. The chances of a president firing a minister vary according to the aforementioned 'walk-away values' of ministers. A higher proportion of non-partisan ministers is a notable feature of presidential cabinets compared to other systems of government, which is seen as a symptom of the mutual independence of legislative and presidential mandates and the broad latitude of presidential powers, especially in Latin American presidentialism. However, we showed that non-partisan ministers are at risk of change when the president has a strong reputation and is less constrained in reshaping the cabinet. In addition, strong presidents prefer to retain ministers with expertise and who are close to them.

While many studies have examined the attributes we captured, our analysis advances the understanding of the effect of party ties, as an asset of ministers, on ministerial changes. These changes are contingent upon partisan factors, but also on the personal attributes of both presidents and ministers. In combining all

these factors, we can better understand why not only the frequency but also the scope of cabinet changes vary.

As Robert Elgie (2020: 415) argued, more information on presidential cabinets is necessary to better understand the effects of different regime types on ministerial changes comparatively. This is particularly the case for Latin America. This article gathered evidence on cabinet politics collaboratively produced by Latin American scholars and, on the basis of it, contributed new insights to the field that help expand our comparative knowledge and complement existing theoretical approaches.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.19>.

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## Notes

1 We adapt this argument from Lupia and Strøm (2008: 63) regarding the ‘walk-away values’ of coalition parties: ‘In a bargaining session, walk-away values function as implicit threats against other parties. The more easily a party can walk away from the bargaining table and still end up in a good situation, the more concerned the other parties have to be about satisfying that party’s demands – if they want to coalesce with it. Put another way, those who have little to lose from disagreement often have much to gain from negotiation.’

2 The type of government was classified by the project PRILA (Institutional Presidency from a Comparative Perspective), and Polity2 is an indicator provided by the Polity Project – <https://systemicpeace.org>.

3 Fluctuations in the terms of trade (the relative price of a country’s exports in respect of imports) can cause economic volatility and external vulnerability. In Latin American countries, due to the pattern of production specialization, such fluctuations may imply difficulties in financing current-account and external-debt deficits, resulting in economic crises. Here, we use the gap between real GDP on the expenditure side and the value on the output side as a proxy, as described by Feenstra et al. (2015).

4 Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

5 In addition, the model is robust to different specifications (with or without control variables, for example). For a complete analysis of consistency tests, see Online Appendix 1.

6 The Presidential Cabinets Project is a comparative dataset initiative of presidential cabinets in the Americas led by Marcelo Carmelo and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo. In this article, we use the dataset of five countries kindly provided to us by the country experts (Basabe-Serrano et al. 2018; Chasquetti and Buquet 2018; Inácio 2018; Mejía Guinand and Botero 2018; Vera and Carreras 2018) participating in this collaborative project.

7 To deal with inconsistent temporal problems (Ministerial Survival is measured in days and Political Leverage is a measure of the presidential term, year-by-year), we consider for each minister the average Political Leverage over the course of the presidential term.

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