

Strong Prime Ministers under Pressure: Leadership Capital and the Appointment of Non-Partisan Ministers in Spain

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Abstract

Why do prime ministers in parliamentary democracies recruit ministers from outside their governing parties? Existing accounts have generally associated non-partisan appointments either with technocratic penetration or with political weakness, often understood in terms of parliamentary support. This article develops a different argument by distinguishing the institutional capacity to bypass the party from the political incentives to do so. Prime ministers with extensive autonomy over cabinet formation may normally benefit from appointing party politicians, who provide organizational resources and connect party and government. Yet the relative attractiveness of recruiting beyond the party may increase as the political resources of the prime minister decline. We examine this argument using an original dataset of ministerial recruitment in Spain from 1977 to 2026. The findings suggest that non-partisan ministerial recruitment should be understood neither simply as technocratic penetration nor as a consequence of formal parliamentary weakness. Instead, it reflects two distinct processes: changes in the political resources with which prime ministers exercise their appointment autonomy and the availability of candidates possessing portfolio-specific expertise. More broadly, the Spanish case shows that formal parliamentary status is a poor proxy for the political vulnerability relevant to ministerial recruitment.

Keywords

Non-partisan ministers; ministerial selection; prime ministers; leadership; party government; cabinet formation; Spain

Political parties have traditionally occupied a central position in democratic government, particularly in parliamentary systems, where they linñ electoral competition, legislative majorities and executive authority (Katz, 1987; Budge and Keman, 1990; Keman, 2006; Mair, 2008). Ministerial recruitment is one of the clearest expressions of this role. The cabinet office has commonly represented the culmination of a career within party and parliamentary organizations, and the recruitment of leading government officeholders from political parties has been regarded as a defining feature of responsible party government (Katz, 1986; De Winter, 1991; Andeweg, 2000). Ministers without formal party affiliation should therefore constitute an exception in parliamentary democracies.

Yet this expectation does not travel equally well across countries. In several parliamentary systems, particularly in Southern and Eastern Europe, non-partisan ministers have formed a recurrent component of cabinet recruitment (Semenova, 2020; Vittori et al., 2023). This raises a fundamental question: why do prime ministers sometimes select ministers from their own parties and, at other times, recruit from outside them?

Addressing this question requires distinguishing concepts that are often conflated. We define a non-partisan minister as someone not formally affiliated with a governing party when entering cabinet. Non-partisanship is not synonymous with technocracy, political inexperience or outsider status. Ministers without party membership may have extensive governmental experience or close political relationships with governing parties, while technical expertise can characterize both partisan and non-partisan ministers. Distinguishing affiliation from expertise is therefore essential to identify whether recruitment outside the party responds primarily to candidates' knowledge or to the political advantages associated with their independence.

Existing research suggests two broad explanations. The first emphasizes expertise. Growing policy complexity, economic crises and changing demands on government may increase the value of specialists, senior administrators and candidates with relevant professional experience, expanding the recruitment pool beyond conventional party politicians (Alexiadou, 2015, 2016; Verzichelli and Cotta, 2012; Costa Pinto et al., 2018). From this perspective, non-partisan recruitment is one manifestation of broader processes of technocratic penetration.

A second perspective emphasizes the political position of the chief executive. Research on presidential and semi-presidential systems has shown that cabinet composition depends partly on executive autonomy, legislative circumstances and relationships with political parties (Amorim Neto, 2006; Amorim Neto and Strom, 2006; Samuels and Shugart, 2010). In parliamentary systems, however, these relationships are more complex. Prime ministers normally depend on their parties for political survival, yet the degree to which parties constrain cabinet appointments varies substantially. Where prime ministers possess extensive appointment powers, they have the capacity to bypass conventional party recruitment when political circumstances make doing so attractive.

This distinction between capacity and incentive is central to our argument. Strong appointment powers give prime ministers the capacity to recruit outside the party, but they do not necessarily provide a reason to do so. When a prime minister enjoys high political authority and the governing party constitutes a valuable pool of loyal and politically experienced candidates, extensive appointment autonomy may reinforce rather than weaken partisan recruitment. By contrast, declining leadership resources can alter the

relative attractiveness of party and non-party candidates. Recruiting beyond the formal party organization broadens the available pool and may provide ministers whose governmental position depends more directly on the prime minister.

This argument differs from explanations that equate political weakness with minority government. Parliamentary minority is an important institutional constraint, and previous research has repeatedly linked government status to ministerial selection (Bakema, 1991; Amorim Neto, 2006). Yet formal parliamentary support and prime-ministerial political authority are not equivalent. A prime minister may lead a minority government while maintaining strong control over the governing party, just as a leader with a more secure parliamentary position may experience declining political authority. We therefore examine leadership capital and minority status separately rather than treating the latter as a proxy for prime-ministerial weakness.

Spain provides a particularly useful setting in which to examine these competing explanations. Spanish parliamentary government combines strong political parties with unusually centralized authority over cabinet formation. Parliament invests the prime minister, who subsequently enjoys wide discretion to appoint and dismiss ministers, while the head of state exercises no substantive role in ministerial selection (Jerez and Real-Dato, 2009). Spain has consequently been described as a highly prime-ministerialised or presidentialised parliamentary system (Van Biezen and Hopkin, 2005; Olmeda and Colino, 2017). At the same time, the partisan composition of Spanish cabinets has varied substantially despite the stability of these formal appointment powers. Non-partisan ministers have been recurrent rather than exceptional, but their presence differs markedly across governments and over time (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2020).

This within-country variation provides analytical leverage. It allows us to hold the basic institutional framework relatively constant while examining whether changes in the political position of prime ministers are associated with changes in their propensity to recruit outside the party. It also provides an opportunity to distinguish this political mechanism from the alternative expertise explanation.

Using data on ministerial recruitment in Spain from the democratic transition to 2026, we analyse ministers at the point of their first entry into cabinet. The results reveal three main patterns. First, lower levels of prime-ministerial leadership capital are consistently associated with a greater propensity to appoint non-partisan ministers across model specifications. Second, contrary to an influential expectation in the literature, minority government shows no independent association with non-partisan recruitment once leadership conditions and other relevant factors are taken into account. Third, portfolio specialization has a robust relationship with non-partisan status, whereas broader indicators conventionally associated with technocratic recruitment (such as portfolio type, enterprise background, career civil-service status) are considerably less consistent.

These findings suggest that non-partisan ministerial recruitment cannot be reduced either to technocratic penetration or to the formal parliamentary weakness of governments. Instead, two distinct mechanisms operate simultaneously. Expertise broadens the recruitment pool by increasing the attractiveness of candidates possessing portfolio-relevant knowledge, while changes in prime-ministerial leadership capital alter the political incentives for recruiting beyond the governing party. More generally, the findings suggest that formal minority status is a poor proxy for the kind of political vulnerability that shapes ministerial recruitment. Understanding when prime ministers bypass their parties therefore

requires attention not only to institutional powers and parliamentary arithmetic, but also to the changing political resources of the leaders who exercise those powers.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Party government, ministerial recruitment and prime-ministerial autonomy

Ministerial selection takes place within a structure of institutional and political constraints that defines both the pool of potential candidates and the discretion available to the head of government (Dowding and Dumont, 2009, 2015; Alexiadou, 2016). One of the most persistent differences in this respect concerns the separation of powers. Presidential systems generally provide a broader recruitment pool and greater opportunities to appoint individuals from outside political parties, whereas parliamentary systems have traditionally linked ministerial careers much more closely to parties and parliaments (Dogan, 1989; Blondel, 1985). Accordingly, ministers in parliamentary democracies tend to display longer political careers and greater mobility between portfolios, while presidential cabinets have historically provided more opportunities for specialists and individuals recruited from outside conventional party careers.

These differences reflect the distinctive logic of party government. In parliamentary democracies, political parties perform a central role in connecting electoral competition, parliamentary representation and executive authority (Katz, 1986). Ministerial appointments constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which this relationship operates, together with policymaking and patronage (Blondel and Cotta, 1996). Party leaders and senior parliamentarians frequently enter government, and cabinet office can itself become an important resource in intra-party careers. Ministerial recruitment therefore does more than fill executive positions: it distributes political authority within the governing party and can be used to reward supporters, integrate internal groups, promote future leaders and reinforce links between government and party.

This helps explain why non-partisan ministers have traditionally been considered unusual in parliamentary democracies (Strom, 2000; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2009). Their presence weakens one of the conventional links in the party-government chain of delegation. A minister who does not formally belong to the governing party lacks some of the organizational resources possessed by party politicians: participation in internal decision-making, an established constituency within the organization, and the capacity to mobilize party actors independently of the prime minister. Non-partisan ministers may be politically close to the governing party and may even have previous governmental or political experience, but their position within the cabinet is less firmly anchored in the organizational structure of the party.

Yet parliamentary governments vary considerably in the degree of discretion enjoyed by prime ministers over cabinet formation. Coalition agreements, internal party rules, parliamentary constraints, heads of state and factional bargaining may all restrict ministerial choice (Dowding and Dumont, 2009). Conversely, when heads of government acquire substantial autonomy over appointments, cabinet recruitment can become an important instrument of prime-ministerial control. The presidentialization literature has interpreted this growing autonomy as one manifestation of the strengthening of political leaders vis-à-vis their parties (Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Bäck et al, 2009; Rahat and Kenig, 2018).

The implication, however, is not that greater prime-ministerial autonomy should mechanically produce a larger number of non-partisan ministers. Autonomy expands the set of choices available to prime ministers; it does not determine which choice they will make. A prime minister with substantial appointment powers may use them to strengthen the presence of party politicians in the cabinet or, alternatively, to recruit outside the party. The crucial question is therefore not simply whether prime ministers are strong enough to appoint outsiders, but under what political circumstances they have incentives to do so.

This distinction between capacity and incentive is particularly important for single-party parliamentary governments. Where prime ministers exercise considerable discretion over ministerial appointments, institutional strength constitutes an enabling condition for strategic recruitment outside the party. Within that setting, however, changes in political authority and in the relationship between the prime minister and the governing party may alter the relative value of partisan and non-partisan candidates.

Prime-ministerial autonomy and leadership capital

Party politicians possess resources that normally make them attractive candidates for ministerial office. Their organizational experience can facilitate coordination between party and government, their parliamentary networks can support legislative activity, and their position within the party can help prime ministers mobilize political support. Cabinet appointments may also be used to reward loyalty, accommodate internal groups, promote future leaders or integrate potential rivals. In parliamentary democracies, recruiting ministers from the governing party is therefore not merely a consequence of convention. Party politicians constitute a politically valuable recruitment pool.

The existence of strong prime-ministerial appointment powers does not necessarily alter this logic. A prime minister who enjoys substantial autonomy in cabinet formation may use that discretion to promote trusted party politicians rather than to bypass the party. Institutional capacity and actual recruitment choices should therefore be kept analytically separate. Extensive appointment powers determine the range of options available to the prime minister, but they do not by themselves explain why one option is preferred over another.

This distinction is particularly important for understanding non-partisan appointments. Prime ministers who possess substantial control over cabinet formation have the capacity to recruit beyond the governing party. Whether they have an incentive to do so depends on their political circumstances. When the party provides a reliable pool of loyal, experienced and politically useful candidates, partisan recruitment may remain the preferred strategy. When the political position of the prime minister becomes less favourable, however, the relative value of broadening the recruitment pool may increase.

We capture this changing political position through the concept of leadership capital. Leadership capital refers to the political resources that sustain a leader's authority and ability to exercise influence. These resources may vary over time even when the formal institutional powers of the office remain unchanged. Electoral setbacks, declining popularity, political crises or other forms of deterioration in a leader's position can reduce leadership capital without altering the constitutional authority to appoint and dismiss ministers.

This distinction produces an apparently paradoxical expectation. Non-partisan recruitment may become more frequent precisely in systems in which prime ministers possess considerable formal autonomy, but at moments when the incumbent's political resources are declining. There is no contradiction between institutional strength and political vulnerability. The former provides the capacity to broaden cabinet recruitment; the latter may increase the attractiveness of using that capacity.

Why should declining leadership capital make recruitment outside the party more attractive? We do not assume that non-partisan ministers are politically neutral or necessarily detached from the governing party. They may share its ideological orientation, have worked with its leaders or possess substantial previous governmental experience. Their distinctive characteristic is narrower: they do not hold formal membership in the governing party at the time of entering cabinet. Consequently, appointing them allows the prime minister to widen the pool of potential ministers beyond the set of formally affiliated party politicians.

As leadership capital declines, such flexibility may become increasingly valuable. A wider recruitment pool allows the prime minister to respond to changing political and policy requirements without relying exclusively on established party careers. Non-partisan ministers may therefore become attractive not because weak prime ministers lose control over cabinet formation, but because leaders who continue to control ministerial appointments may use that discretion differently as their political circumstances change. This argument leads to our first expectation:

H1. The probability of appointing a non-partisan minister increases as the prime minister's political leadership capital declines.

Parliamentary minority as an alternative explanation.

A different interpretation associates non-partisan recruitment with the parliamentary position of the government. Minority governments face greater constraints in the legislature and depend, by definition, on actors outside the governing party or coalition for at least some of their parliamentary support (Field, 2016). This may provide prime ministers with incentives to broaden the political profile of the cabinet. Non-partisan ministers may signal moderation, facilitate cooperation with opposition parties or reduce the partisan visibility of appointments in policy areas where cross-party accommodation is valuable (Helsm, 2023).

For this reason, government status has frequently been treated as an indicator of executive vulnerability (Amorim Neto and Strom, 2006). Yet parliamentary weakness and leadership weakness are not equivalent. A prime minister can lead a minority government while exercising strong authority over the governing party and retaining considerable political capital. Conversely, a prime minister supported by a parliamentary majority may experience a substantial decline in political authority over the course of a term.

The distinction matters because the two forms of vulnerability imply different mechanisms. Minority status describes the government's relationship with parliament. Leadership capital captures changes in the political resources of the individual who controls cabinet appointments. Treating minority government as a general proxy for prime-ministerial weakness risks conflating these dimensions.

Spain is particularly useful for distinguishing them. Minority government has been recurrent, yet prime ministers have generally retained extensive formal authority over ministerial appointments. This makes it possible to examine whether parliamentary arithmetic itself is associated with non-partisan recruitment or whether variation is more closely related to changes in the prime minister's broader political position. We therefore retain minority government as a theoretically important alternative explanation:

H2. The probability of appointing a non-partisan minister is higher under minority government.

The comparison between H1 and H2 is substantively important. Both concern political vulnerability, but they operationalize it differently. If minority status drives non-partisan appointments, formal parliamentary weakness should be sufficient to explain variation in recruitment. If leadership capital matters independently of parliamentary status, by contrast, this would suggest that the political resources of the prime minister provide a more informative account of when leaders broaden cabinet recruitment beyond the governing party.

Expertise and alternative recruitment pools

Political circumstances are not the only reason why prime ministers may recruit ministers from outside their parties. A second explanation focuses on the characteristics of potential appointees. Governments may expand the recruitment pool because candidates outside conventional party careers possess knowledge or professional experience that is particularly valuable for a given portfolio (Alexiadou, 2016).

This argument is commonly associated with technocratic penetration. Increasing policy complexity, economic constraints and changing forms of governance may increase demand for specialists, managers, senior public officials and professionals whose qualifications derive partly from expertise rather than from conventional party careers (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2012; Costa Pinto et al., 2018). From this perspective, recruitment outside the party results at least partly from the search for competencies that may not be readily available within the normal partisan pool.

It is nevertheless essential to distinguish expertise from non-partisanship (Blondel and Thiebault, 1991; Camerlo and Costa Pinto, 2026). A party politician may possess considerable professional or policy expertise, while a minister without party membership may have no particularly technical profile. Non-partisanship refers to organizational affiliation; expertise refers to knowledge and experience. Treating the two as equivalent would make it impossible to determine whether governments select ministers from outside the party because of what candidates know or simply because of where they stand organizationally. In Spain, previous research has shown that technocratic recruitment has been recurrent but selective, and that technocratic profiles should not be treated as synonymous with non-partisan status (Real-Dato and Rodríguez-Teruel, 2016; Rodríguez Teruel and Jerez-Mir, 2018).

Among the different dimensions of expertise, portfolio-specific specialization should be particularly relevant. A candidate whose previous professional, administrative or governmental experience is closely connected to the responsibilities of the ministry brings knowledge that can be directly applied to the portfolio. Such expertise can increase the attractiveness of candidates who lack the organizational resources of conventional party politicians. Previous research on Spanish ministers has similarly distinguished portfolio-specific expertise from generic political competence, emphasizing specialization and relevant professional or managerial experience as distinct dimensions of ministerial expertise (Rodríguez-Teruel, 2011a).

This argument does not require specialists to be politically neutral or detached from government. Nor does it imply that specialization is absent among party members. Rather, it predicts that, other things being equal, specialization increases the likelihood that the person selected for a ministry comes from outside the formal party organization.

Other career characteristics may also shape the composition of the recruitment pool. Senior administrative experience, previous executive office, public-sector careers and the absence of previous political positions can all be associated with weaker or stronger links to political parties (Rodríguez Teruel, 2011b). These characteristics are therefore

included in the empirical analysis, but we do not treat each of them as a separate theoretical mechanism. In particular, the absence of a prior political career is closely related to candidates' location outside conventional party recruitment channels and is best understood as a characteristic of the recruitment pool rather than as an independent explanation of prime-ministerial strategy. Our expertise hypothesis therefore focuses on the most direct and theoretically distinctive indicator:

H3. Ministers with portfolio-specific specialization are more likely to be non-partisan than ministers without such specialization.

Overall, the argument consequently identifies two distinct routes to non-partisan ministerial recruitment. The first is political. Prime ministers operating in an institutional setting that gives them substantial discretion over cabinet appointments may make greater use of candidates outside the governing party as their leadership capital declines. The second is based on expertise: portfolio-specific knowledge increases the attractiveness of candidates who may not belong formally to the governing party.

Minority government provides an important alternative political explanation. Rather than assuming that parliamentary minority and declining leadership capital represent the same form of weakness, we examine them separately. This allows us to determine whether non-partisan recruitment is primarily associated with the formal parliamentary position of the government or with changes in the political resources of the prime minister.

The empirical analysis therefore evaluates three expectations: declining leadership capital should increase non-partisan recruitment (H1); minority government should increase non-partisan recruitment (H2); and portfolio specialization should be positively associated with non-partisan status (H3). Other portfolio, career and individual characteristics are introduced progressively in order to determine whether these relationships persist once differences in the broader ministerial recruitment pool are taken into account.

RESEARCH DESIGN, DATA AND METHODS

Case selection and research design

The empirical analysis uses a longitudinal within-country design covering Spanish democratic governments from 1977 to 2026. Spain offers a particularly useful setting for examining non-partisan ministerial recruitment because the institutional framework governing cabinet appointments has remained comparatively stable while the political circumstances of prime ministers have varied substantially over time.

Spanish prime ministers enjoy extensive discretion over cabinet formation (Heywood and Molina, 2000). Parliament invests the prime minister, who subsequently selects and dismisses the other members of government, while the head of state exercises no substantive authority over ministerial appointments (Bar, 1988). This concentration of appointment powers has contributed to the characterization of Spain as a highly prime-ministerialised, and even presidentialised, parliamentary democracy (Van Biezen and Hopkin, 2005). For most of the democratic period these powers operated under single-party governments, both majority and minority, while coalition government has become relevant since 2020.

This relative institutional continuity provides a fruitful terrain for analysis. Rather than comparing systems with different constitutional rules for cabinet formation, we examine changes in recruitment within a setting in which prime ministers consistently possess substantial formal appointment powers. What varies is the political context in which those powers are exercised, particularly the prime minister's leadership capital and parliamentary position.

The analysis relies on an original dataset covering ministerial appointments under the governments of Adolfo Suárez, Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, Felipe González, José María Aznar, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Mariano Rajoy and Pedro Sánchez (Rodríguez Teruel, 2011a). The descriptive analysis examines changes in the partisan composition of cabinets over time. The multivariate analysis shifts to the individual level and asks whether the person selected on entering cabinet is formally affiliated with a governing party.

Importantly, the unit of analysis is the minister's first entry into cabinet. Ministers who subsequently change portfolio or are reappointed do not generate additional observations. This decision matches the theoretical question addressed in the article: whether, when initially selecting an individual for cabinet office, the prime minister recruits from within or outside the governing-party pool. It also avoids treating repeated appointments of the same individual—whose party status normally remains unchanged—as statistically independent recruitment decisions.

The dependent variable, Non-partisan minister, takes the value 1 when the individual is not formally affiliated with any party participating in the government at the time of first appointment, and 0 when the appointee is a member of a governing party. For coalition governments, membership in any coalition partner is therefore classified as partisan. Formal membership is deliberately distinguished from ideological affinity, previous political experience and technical expertise: a non-partisan minister may have substantial government experience or close political links to the governing party without formally belonging to it.

Data and dependent variable

Our principal political predictor is the Leadership Capital Index (LCI), a time-varying measure of the political resources available to the prime minister (Bennister et al, 2017). The measure allows leadership strength to vary within individual premierships rather than treating it as a fixed characteristic of particular leaders. Higher values indicate greater leadership capital. Each minister is assigned the LCI prevailing at the time of first cabinet entry. See the Appendix for more detailed information about the LCI.

For substantive interpretation, the LCI is centred around its sample mean and divided by five. Regression estimates therefore represent the effect of a five-point change in leadership capital. This transformation does not alter the underlying information in the index but provides a more meaningful unit in which to interpret the estimates.

We separately measure minority government, coded according to whether the governing party or coalition lacks an absolute parliamentary majority. Treating minority status separately from LCI is theoretically important. The former captures the government's formal parliamentary position; the latter captures the changing political resources of the prime minister. The analysis therefore tests whether parliamentary weakness itself predicts

recruitment outside the governing party or whether leadership conditions provide a more informative explanation.

Two additional political controls concern the timing of appointments. Prime-ministerial tenure measures the stage reached in the incumbent's period in office and is log-transformed to account for its non-linear distribution. Reshuffle distinguishes ministers entering during a cabinet replacement or restructuring from those appointed when a new government is initially formed. These variables capture the possibility that recruitment changes as a premiership develops or according to the circumstances in which cabinet vacancies arise.

The principal expertise variable is portfolio specialization. Ministers are classified as specialists when their previous professional, administrative or political experience provides substantial knowledge directly related to the policy responsibilities of the ministry they receive. This measure captures portfolio-specific expertise rather than generic political competence.

The models also include two broad portfolio indicators, distinguishing economic and social/welfare ministries from other portfolios. Further variables capture characteristics of the ministerial recruitment pool: previous senior governmental office, career civil-service status, and the absence of previous political office. The latter is particularly important for distinguishing formal non-partisanship from a broader outsider profile.

Finally, the fully specified model incorporates gender, age at first ministerial appointment and legal education. Controls for governing-party context distinguish UCD, PSOE, PP and PSOE-led coalition governments in order to account for persistent differences in recruitment patterns across political periods.

Empirical strategy

Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, we estimate binary logistic regression models. The analysis proceeds sequentially so that the contribution of different explanatory mechanisms can be observed rather than relying on a single saturated specification. Thus, Model 1 estimates the political-context explanation, including leadership capital, minority status, prime-ministerial tenure, reshuffle appointments and governing-party controls; Model 2 adds portfolio characteristics and portfolio-specific specialization, allowing us to test whether the relationship between leadership conditions and non-partisan recruitment persists after accounting for expertise; Model 3 adds characteristics of the broader recruitment pool: previous senior governmental office, absence of prior political office and career civil-service status. Finally, Model 4 introduces the remaining individual controls—gender, age and legal education—and constitutes the fully specified model.

The sequential structure therefore mirrors the theoretical argument: political conditions are assessed first, expertise is introduced as a distinct recruitment mechanism, and career and individual characteristics are then added to examine the stability of the principal relationships.

Several ministers often enter office simultaneously when a government is formed or reshuffled. Because these appointments share the same political context and contextual predictors such as LCI and government status are constant within the appointment occasion, ordinary independent-error assumptions would understate this clustering. All models therefore use cluster-robust standard errors at the appointment-wave level, defined

by the exact date on which the appointments occurred. The estimation sample contains 238 first ministerial entries distributed across 65 appointment waves.

Results are reported as odds ratios. Because the LCI has been rescaled in five-point units, its odds ratio indicates the change in the odds of a non-partisan appointment associated with a five-point increase in leadership capital.

DESCRIPTIVE EVIDENCE: LEADERSHIP CAPITAL AND CABINET PARTISANSHIP

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the Leadership Capital Index (LCI) across Spanish governments from 1977 to 2026. Leadership capital varies substantially not only across prime ministers but also within individual premierships. This within-leader variation is important for the argument developed above. The formal authority of Spanish prime ministers over cabinet formation has remained broadly stable, whereas the political resources with which they exercise that authority change over time. The LCI therefore captures a dimension of political strength that cannot be reduced to the institutional powers of the office or to the parliamentary status of the government.

Figure 2 presents the corresponding evolution of the proportion of non-partisan ministers in cabinet after successive government formations and reshuffles. The pattern is clearly non-linear. Non-partisan ministers have been a recurrent feature of Spanish governments, but their weight has fluctuated sharply both across and within premierships. This variation is difficult to explain solely through stable institutional arrangements or a gradual process of technocratic penetration.

The González governments provide the clearest example of within-premiership change. Non-partisan ministers accounted for only around 6 per cent of cabinet members in the early Socialist governments, but their presence increased during the later stages of González's premiership. In the government formed in 1993 they represented more than 40 per cent of the cabinet, rising to approximately half—and eventually slightly more than half—in its final years. The same prime minister thus moved from overwhelmingly partisan cabinets to cabinets in which non-party ministers constituted a major component of ministerial recruitment.

Aznar displays a markedly different trajectory. His first government, despite lacking an absolute parliamentary majority, remained predominantly partisan: non-partisan ministers represented around one fifth of the cabinet. Their presence did not increase systematically under minority government and subsequently declined during his second term, reaching less than 7 per cent by the end of his premiership. The contrast with González already suggests that minority status alone is unlikely to provide a sufficient explanation of cabinet partisanship.

Zapatero again relied extensively on ministers without formal party membership. Non-partisans accounted for roughly one third of his first cabinet and reached around half of cabinet membership at several points between 2007 and 2009. Although their share subsequently fluctuated, it remained comparatively high through the end of his premiership. Rajoy's cabinets were more stable in this respect, with non-partisan ministers generally accounting for between one fifth and one third of cabinet membership despite major changes in economic conditions and parliamentary support.

The Sánchez period adds a further distinctive trajectory. Non-partisan ministers accounted for around one third of the cabinet in 2018 and at the beginning of the coalition government formed in 2020. Their share subsequently declined, falling to slightly above 20

per cent by the end of 2021 and to below 20 per cent during the legislature beginning in 2023. By 2024–2026, the proportion remained well below the levels observed during the early Sánchez governments. Once again, substantial change occurs within the premiership rather than simply between governing parties.

These patterns are relevant in two respects. First, they show that non-partisan ministerial recruitment is neither exceptional nor characterized by a secular increase over the democratic period. High and low levels appear at very different historical moments. Second, parliamentary status does not map neatly onto these changes. Some minority governments contained large proportions of non-partisan ministers, but others remained strongly partisan. Conversely, substantial increases in non-partisan cabinet membership also occurred within premierships whose parliamentary and institutional circumstances changed in more complex ways.

The descriptive evidence therefore points towards the distinction developed in the theoretical section. The formal parliamentary position of a government and the changing political resources of the prime minister should not be treated as equivalent dimensions of political vulnerability. At the same time, the descriptive patterns cannot establish whether changes in leadership capital independently affect ministerial recruitment, since cabinet composition may also reflect portfolio requirements, expertise and differences in the available recruitment pool. The multivariate analysis that follows addresses these competing explanations directly.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: THE DETERMINANTS OF NON-PARTISAN APPOINTMENTS

Table 1 reports four sequential logistic regression models of non-partisan ministerial recruitment. All models use the 238 ministers observed at their first entry into cabinet and cluster standard errors across the 65 appointment waves. Results are presented as odds ratios. The models progressively introduce political context, portfolio expertise, characteristics of the recruitment pool and individual controls.

Model 1 examines political conditions. Leadership capital is negatively associated with non-partisan recruitment: a five-point increase in the LCI is associated with an odds ratio of 0.65 ($p = .084$). The estimated effect is therefore in the expected direction, although it does not reach the conventional .05 threshold in this baseline specification. Minority government, by contrast, displays no statistically significant association. Neither prime-ministerial tenure nor appointment during a reshuffle reaches conventional significance in Model 1.

Model 2 introduces portfolio type and specialization. The coefficient for leadership capital becomes larger in magnitude and statistically significant. Prime-ministerial tenure is also positive and significant. The strongest addition to the model is portfolio specialization: specialists have substantially higher odds of being non-partisan than non-specialists. By contrast, neither economic nor social/welfare portfolios are significantly associated with party status. The pseudo R^2 increases from .068 in Model 1 to .159 in Model 2.

Model 3 adds characteristics of the recruitment pool. The negative association with leadership capital strengthens further, while the coefficient for specialization remains large and statistically significant. Prime-ministerial tenure also remains significant. Previous

senior government office and career civil-service status have positive coefficients but do not reach conventional significance.

The largest coefficient in Model 3 concerns the absence of previous political office. Ministers without previous political positions display much higher odds of being non-partisan. The confidence interval around this estimate is correspondingly wide, reflecting the relatively small number of cases in this category. Its inclusion produces a substantial increase in model fit, with the pseudo R^2 rising to .278.

Model 4 adds gender, age at first appointment and legal education. None of these three controls is statistically significant. Their inclusion produces relatively little additional improvement in model fit, with the pseudo R^2 increasing from .278 to .289. The main coefficients also remain similar in magnitude. Portfolio specialization continues to display a large association with non-partisan status ($OR = 4.37$, $p < .001$), as does the absence of previous political office. Prime-ministerial tenure remains positive and significant ($OR = 1.88$, $p = .019$).

The coefficient for leadership capital in the fully specified model remains negative and similar in magnitude to the previous specifications, although its statistical precision decreases. Across the four models, the estimated odds ratio for a five-point increase in LCI ranges between 0.51 and 0.65. Thus, while the level of statistical significance varies across specifications, the direction and approximate magnitude of the association are stable.

Minority government shows a different pattern. Its coefficient is statistically insignificant in every specification and changes from above one in Model 1 to below one after expertise and recruitment-pool variables are introduced. In the full model, the estimated odds ratio is 0.77 ($p = .684$). Reshuffle appointments and broad portfolio categories likewise remain statistically insignificant throughout the models.

The governing-party controls reveal sizeable differences across political periods, although the estimates are imprecise. Relative to UCD governments, PSOE and PP governments generally display higher odds of non-partisan recruitment, while the estimates for the PSOE-led coalition period are less precise. These coefficients vary as additional individual and career characteristics are introduced and are treated primarily as controls for persistent differences across governing contexts.

Overall, the sequence of models produces a relatively stable empirical pattern. Leadership capital is negatively associated with non-partisan recruitment across all four specifications; portfolio specialization shows a large and consistently significant positive association; and minority status does not display an independent effect. Prime-ministerial tenure becomes positive and significant after expertise is introduced, while the absence of previous political office is strongly associated with non-partisan status in Models 3 and 4. The following section considers the substantive implications of these results.

Discussion of the results

The multivariate analysis points to a relatively clear pattern. Leadership capital is negatively associated with non-partisan ministerial recruitment across all four specifications. The size of the coefficient remains remarkably stable as expertise, recruitment-pool characteristics and individual controls are introduced, although its statistical significance varies across models. By contrast, minority government shows no independent association with non-

partisan recruitment. Portfolio specialization, meanwhile, has a strong and highly consistent positive effect, while broader indicators of technocratic background are much less systematic.

These findings qualify explanations that equate non-partisan recruitment either with executive strength or with parliamentary weakness. The Spanish case does not suggest that prime ministers recruit outside their parties simply because they possess extensive appointment powers. Such powers are a relatively stable feature of the institutional setting, whereas the use of non-partisan ministers varies considerably over time. At the same time, parliamentary minority does not appear to provide a sufficient explanation. Governments lacking an absolute majority are not systematically more likely to appoint non-partisan ministers once other political and individual characteristics are taken into account.

The results instead support the distinction between the capacity to recruit outside the party and the political circumstances under which that option becomes more attractive. Spanish prime ministers retain substantial formal autonomy over cabinet formation throughout the period, but the association between lower leadership capital and non-partisan recruitment suggests that this autonomy is exercised differently as their political position changes. A decline in leadership resources is associated with a broader use of candidates who are not formally incorporated into the governing party.

This does not mean that the analysis identifies a single mechanism through which declining leadership capital affects recruitment. Leadership capital may deteriorate for different reasons, including electoral setbacks, declining public support, political crises or difficulties in maintaining authority over the governing coalition or party. The present evidence establishes that these broader changes in the prime minister's political resources are more closely associated with non-partisan recruitment than the formal distinction between majority and minority government. Identifying which particular components of leadership vulnerability are most consequential requires more fine-grained measures than those employed here.

The expertise results point to a second and distinct mechanism. Portfolio specialists are substantially more likely to be non-partisan even after political conditions, previous careers and individual characteristics are taken into account. This relationship is considerably more robust than those associated with broad portfolio categories, senior government experience or career civil-service status. The results therefore support a relatively specific expertise explanation: what matters is not a generic technocratic profile, but the possession of knowledge or experience directly related to the portfolio received.

The very strong association between the absence of previous political office and non-partisan status further shows that organizational affiliation and political career patterns are closely connected. This result should not, however, be interpreted as an independent political mechanism comparable to leadership capital or specialization. Rather, it reflects an important feature of the recruitment pool: individuals who have developed their careers outside conventional political office are much more likely also to remain outside formal party membership.

Prime-ministerial tenure also deserves attention. Its positive coefficient becomes statistically significant once expertise is introduced and remains so in the subsequent specifications. This suggests that non-partisan recruitment becomes more likely as premierships advance, independently of the measured level of leadership capital. The

present analysis does not distinguish among possible explanations for this temporal effect, which may include changes in recruitment needs, cabinet renewal or the accumulation of political constraints over time.

Taken together, the findings suggest that non-partisan ministerial recruitment in Spain is best understood as the outcome of more than one process. Political conditions matter, but not in the simple form of parliamentary minority. Expertise matters, but not as a generalized shift toward technocratic government. Instead, the evidence indicates that changes in prime-ministerial leadership capital and the availability of portfolio specialists independently shape the likelihood that cabinet recruits come from outside the governing party. This combination helps explain why non-partisan ministers recur in Spanish cabinets without following either a linear trend of technocratic penetration or a straightforward pattern of parliamentary weakness.

CONCLUSIONS

Why do parliamentary prime ministers sometimes recruit ministers from outside their governing parties? The Spanish case suggests that non-partisan recruitment cannot be understood simply as a consequence of technocratic penetration or parliamentary weakness. Instead, cabinet partisanship varies with the political resources available to prime ministers and with the characteristics of the candidates from whom they recruit.

The analysis provides consistent evidence that lower prime-ministerial leadership capital is associated with greater recruitment of non-partisan ministers. The magnitude of this relationship remains relatively stable as portfolio characteristics, expertise, career backgrounds and individual controls are introduced, although its statistical precision varies across specifications. By contrast, minority government has no independent effect in any of the models. This distinction is important because parliamentary status has frequently been used as an indicator of executive weakness. The Spanish evidence suggests that formal parliamentary vulnerability and the changing political strength of the prime minister should instead be treated as analytically distinct.

These findings support the distinction between capacity and incentive developed in this article. Spanish prime ministers possess extensive formal discretion over cabinet appointments throughout the democratic period. Such autonomy provides the capacity to recruit beyond the governing party, but does not necessarily produce less partisan cabinets. The relevant question is when prime ministers find it advantageous to use this discretion to broaden their recruitment pool. The association between declining leadership capital and non-partisan appointments suggests that changing political circumstances, rather than formal appointment powers alone, help shape this choice.

Expertise constitutes a second, independent component of the recruitment process. Portfolio specialists are substantially more likely to be non-partisan, and this relationship remains strong across specifications. At the same time, broader indicators commonly associated with technocratic recruitment—such as general portfolio type, senior governmental experience or civil-service background—produce much less consistent effects. This reinforces the need to distinguish non-partisanship from technocracy. What appears particularly relevant is portfolio-specific expertise rather than a generic technocratic profile.

The Spanish case therefore qualifies both traditional conceptions of party government and simple accounts of presidentialization. Strong parties and powerful prime ministers can coexist with substantial recruitment outside party organizations, while extensive prime-ministerial appointment authority does not automatically erode partisan cabinet government. Cabinet partisanship is better understood as a variable outcome of recruitment decisions made under changing political and professional constraints.

The analysis also has clear limitations. Spain represents a parliamentary system in which prime ministers enjoy unusually extensive appointment powers, and the extent to which these findings travel to coalition-dominated systems or countries where parties exercise stronger control over cabinet selection remains to be tested. Moreover, leadership capital captures several dimensions of political authority simultaneously. Future research should identify more precisely which components of leadership vulnerability alter ministerial recruitment and should compare these dynamics across parliamentary democracies.

More generally, the findings suggest that the study of non-partisan ministers should move beyond asking whether cabinets are becoming more technocratic or whether weak governments recruit more outsiders. The more useful question is how the political position of the prime minister changes the relative value of the party as a recruitment pool. In Spain, non-partisan ministers appear most frequently when declining leadership resources make recruitment beyond the governing party comparatively more attractive, while portfolio-specific expertise provides an additional and powerful reason to look outside conventional party careers.

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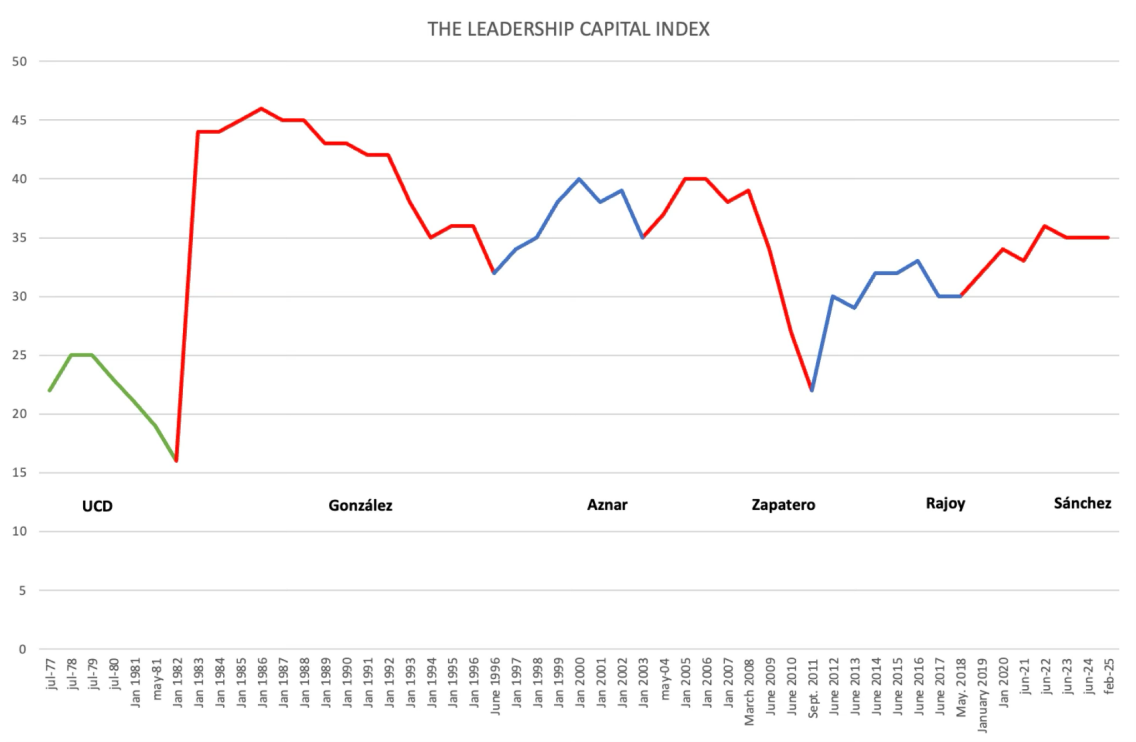
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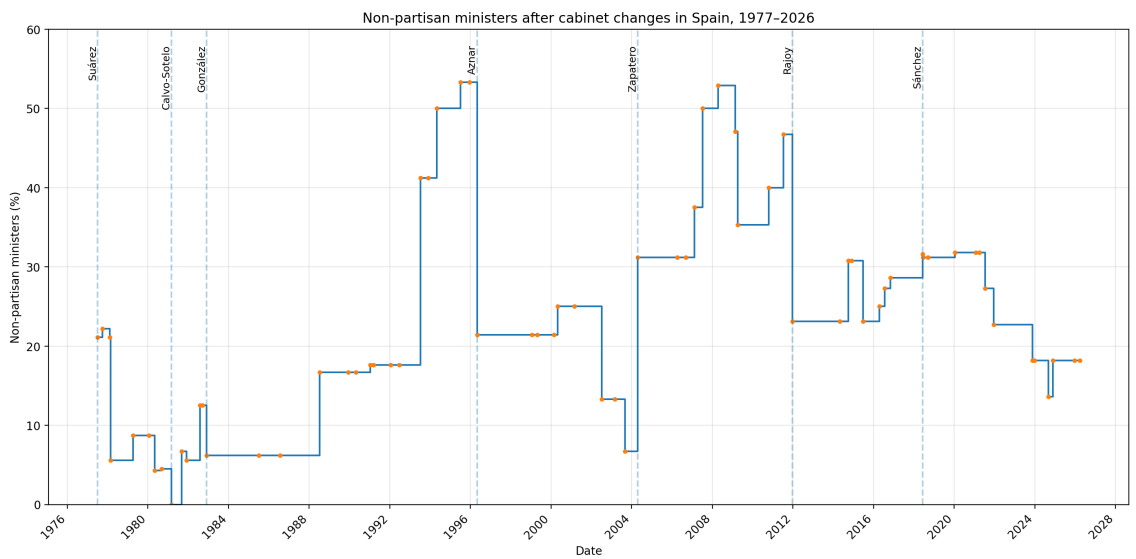
TABLES & FIGURES

Figure 1. Leadership Capital Index in Spain 1977-2026



Author's own data.

Figure 2. The evolution of party ministers and party leaders in Spanish cabinets



Author's own data from official sources. Data show the proportion of each profile at the beginning of each cabinet.

Table 1. Logistic models explaining non-partisan appointments with LCI

	M1 Political context	M2 + Expertise	M3 + Recruitment pool	M4 Full model
Leadership capital, +5 points	0.65† (0.16)	0.57* (0.16)	0.51* (0.16)	0.56† (0.18)
Minority government	1.37 (0.64)	0.94 (0.54)	0.85 (0.54)	0.77 (0.49)
PM tenure (log)	1.45 (0.33)	1.61* (0.37)	1.75* (0.44)	1.88* (0.51)
Reshuffle appointment	0.65 (0.28)	0.60 (0.27)	0.49 (0.27)	0.49 (0.26)
Economic portfolio	—	0.62 (0.23)	0.69 (0.33)	0.68 (0.36)
Social/welfare portfolio	—	0.86 (0.36)	0.80 (0.36)	0.60 (0.33)
Portfolio specialist	—	5.32*** (1.74)	4.12*** (1.61)	4.37*** (1.65)
Previous senior government office	—	—	2.06 (0.99)	2.16 (1.01)
No previous political office	—	—	32.76*** (23.79)	34.16*** (25.97)
Career civil servant	—	—	1.69 (0.57)	1.70 (0.60)
Woman	—	—	—	2.06 (1.06)
Age at appointment (10 years)	—	—	—	1.30 (0.30)
Law degree	—	—	—	0.90 (0.35)
Governing party (ref. UCD)				
PSOE	9.42** (6.65)	11.84** (8.59)	18.17*** (13.72)	9.33* (8.82)
PP	4.92* (3.10)	6.19* (4.36)	10.06** (7.49)	5.16† (4.84)
PSOE–Podemos–IU	2.17 (1.83)	2.25 (2.02)	5.29† (5.27)	2.56 (3.08)
Observations	238	238	238	238
Appointment-wave clusters	65	65	65	65
Pseudo R ²	.068	.159	.278	.289

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Notes: Entries are odds ratios; cluster-robust standard errors at the appointment-wave level in parentheses. The sample includes ministers at their first entry into cabinet. Leadership capital is centred and expressed in five-point units. Reference categories are majority government, appointment at government formation, non-economic/non-social portfolio, non-specialist, no senior government office, previous political office, non-career civil servant, man, no law degree, and UCD government.

Appendix. Construction of the Leadership Capital Index

The Leadership Capital Index (LCI) was developed by Bennister, 't Hart and Worthy as a time-varying measure of the political authority available to an individual leader. Leadership capital is understood not simply as a personal attribute, but as a form of politically granted authority that depends on how leaders are evaluated by their constituencies, peers and the wider public. It can therefore be accumulated, maintained or depleted over time even when the formal powers attached to political office remain unchanged (Bennister, 't Hart and Worthy, 2017).

The index is designed to capture three broad sources of leadership capital: skills, relations and reputation. It combines ten indicators, five based primarily on quantitative or directly observable information ("hard" indicators) and five requiring more interpretive assessment ("soft" indicators). The authors deliberately adopt this mixed-method approach in order to capture dimensions of political authority that cannot be represented adequately by public-opinion data alone.

The ten components of the original LCI are:

1. political or policy vision;
2. communicative performance;
3. the leader's personal poll rating relative to the principal opposition leader;
4. longevity or time in office;
5. the margin by which the leader is elected or re-elected as party leader;
6. party polling relative to the party's most recent election result;
7. levels of public trust in the leader;
8. the likelihood of a credible challenge to the leader within the following six months;
9. the leader's perceived ability to shape the party's policy platform; and
10. perceived parliamentary effectiveness.

Each component is assessed on a five-point scale, from low to high leadership capital. The ten indicators are then combined without differential weighting: each component contributes equally to the aggregate index. The resulting score is intended to represent the leader's overall stock of political authority at a particular point in time rather than any single dimension such as popularity, electoral performance or party control. The original framework interprets aggregate values as ranging from depleted or low leadership capital through medium and high levels to exceptional leadership capital.

The LCI should therefore be interpreted as a composite and dynamic measure. Some components are directly observable—for example, polling, leadership-election margins or time in office—whereas others, such as communicative performance, the credibility of an internal leadership challenge or parliamentary effectiveness, necessarily involve expert judgement. Bennister, 't Hart and Worthy consequently stress the importance of source triangulation, accuracy checks and, where possible, intersubjective reliability through double coding or expert assessment.

Two additional qualifications are important. First, the LCI is not designed as a purely institutional measure. Formal powers attached to an office are deliberately distinguished

from the political authority of its incumbent; indeed, “prestige of office” was excluded from the final index partly because it captures institutional characteristics rather than the leadership capital of the individual office-holder. Second, the index is explicitly time-sensitive: the same leader may experience substantial increases or declines in leadership capital during a premiership. It is this temporal variation that is particularly relevant for the present study.

In the empirical analysis, each ministerial entrant is assigned the LCI score corresponding to the political position of the prime minister at the time of that minister’s first appointment. For ease of interpretation in the regression models, the original LCI is centred on its sample mean and rescaled so that coefficients represent a five-point increase in leadership capital. This transformation changes the unit of interpretation but not the underlying index.