

### *Abstract*

Prime ministers are among the most high profile, and we might assume, important actors in the policy-making systems of modern parliamentary democracies. While much has been written about the individuals who have held the office of prime minister in many countries, less has been written about the role and office of prime minister. Less work still is devoted to a comparative or theoretical understanding of prime ministerial influence on policy.

Ultimately prime ministers are of interest to us because they influence the policies under which the citizens of their (and other) countries must live. The apparent influence of many prime ministers within their countries is somewhat puzzling as, unlike many other institutions and office-holders, prime ministers have very few rights to set policy. This thesis seeks to investigate how prime ministers can achieve their policy goals, and in doing so it also seeks to account for some of the variation in prime ministerial power.

In this thesis it is argued that prime ministers must convince other important actors in the policy-making process (veto players) in order to influence policy outcomes. One can use veto player theory to consider the ease with which prime ministers may achieve policy outcomes close to their own preferences. Where the other important actors have similar policy preferences, prime ministers are more likely to get their way. However, prime ministers can affect the decisions of other important actors in the policy process. This is the crux of this thesis.

The former UK prime minister, Harold Wilson, noted that in trying to cope with a tiny parliamentary majority he continually had to set 'awkward choices' for the opposition. Wilson had to force the opposition to face choices where its most preferable short-term outcome coincided with his. Veto players are vulnerable to pressure from other actors. Prime ministers are sometimes able to apply pressure, primarily by structuring the decision-choices facing those actors. This, prime ministers can do, using the significant institutional prerogatives granted them in their countries' constitutions and legal frameworks. So by using their ability to appoint and dismiss ministers, set confidence motions, call elections and chair cabinet, prime ministers can set 'awkward choices' for ministers, the party in parliament and the cabinet to accept. The ability to set credibly

tough choices is based not only on institutional prerogatives, but also on changeable political factors such as electoral expectations.

In the main body of the thesis I look at many of the institutional prerogatives mentioned in the literature on prime ministers, and using rational choice methods I theoretically investigate how these would assist prime ministers to structure the choices for veto players in the policy process.

From these investigations one can then test hypotheses to see if there is a connection between the ability of prime ministers to formulate the decision-structure others face and prime ministers' influence in policy. This sets two problems. One is, how does one measure prime ministerial influence, and the other is how does one get a good understanding of the freedom of prime ministers to use these prerogatives.

Using original data, derived from an expert survey conducted for this thesis, comparable measures of prime ministerial policy influence for nearly 140 prime ministerial tenures in 22 countries are provided. In the same survey scores were elicited for the use of prerogatives in each of the 22 countries, so it is not necessary to rely on the often misleading or uninformative constitutional rules.

In the each chapter one can see an empirical connection between the ability to structure the choices others face and prime ministerial influence. We can also see the importance of electoral considerations in setting out. Therefore one can conclude that while institutions are important, as much of the literature suggests, on its own a benign institutional is not enough to make a prime minister powerful. Thus, this thesis offers a coherent and generalisable framework for understanding how prime ministers can achieve policy influence.