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# Acting on three arenas: A multidimensional approach to understanding ministerial turnover

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## Abstract

Understanding why cabinet ministers are terminated early is still underexplored. Most existing studies focus on performance on one arena. We argue that ministers operate in many different arenas and to fully understand the complex nature of ministerial termination we need to consider ministers' performance in several arenas and their relation to one another. We focus ministers' performance in three arenas; the public/electoral, the parliamentary and the cabinet. We test our argument on over 40 years of ministerial turnover in Denmark. Our results show that ministers' performance in all three arenas each have an effect on ministerial turnover (mostly the parliamentary). Moreover, adding interaction terms in our statistical models between ministers' performance in these different arenas affect the impact hereof on ministerial turnover. Our findings show the need to engage more with the competing arenas in which ministers perform to increase our understanding of ministerial turnover.

## KEYWORDS

approval ratings, cabinet committees, Denmark, ministerial turnover, parliamentary questions

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## INTRODUCTION

In democratic systems stable governments are a key indicator of good governance, and a key element of this is ministerial turnover. How often a government experiences turnover of its ministers is often viewed as an indicator for (in)stability (Bright et al., 2015; Dewan & Dowding, 2005; Sasse et al., 2020). Ministerial turnover will always involve a transitional period, especially when the new minister is politically inexperienced (Kerby & Snagovsky, 2021) and

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perhaps even more so if the minister has no prior ministerial experience (see e.g., Dowding & Dumont, 2009a: 5).<sup>1</sup> High ministerial turnover can arguably decrease fulfillment of legislative pledges in certain policy areas (Belchior & Silveira, 2023). These are all factors that together makes it crucial to understand the causes of ministerial turnover.

Yet, when it comes to determining *why* ministers are terminated early, there are still many underexplored aspects to consider (see Fischer et al., 2012; King & Allen, 2010). One approach to investigate determinants of ministerial turnover has been to focus on the potential effect of a specific factor, such as for example, the importance of ministers' portfolios (Bright et al., 2015; Hansen et al., 2013), characteristics of the individual ministers (Berlinski et al., 2007), public calls for resignation (Berlinski et al., 2010; Søyland, 2017), and individual ministers' popularity (Nielsen, 2022). This approach limits studies' scope of inquiry to events occurring in a fixed sphere. However, it is a multifaceted job to be minister, where you are required to act and perform in quite different arenas and roles (Andrews, 2024; Headey, 1974; Marsh et al., 2000). Ministers are subject to public and media scrutiny, continuously responsible to parliament, members of cabinets which can be internally competitive, and eventually they are facing the voters. They also know that there are other MPs ready to take over their portfolio if they should fail to deliver.

In this article we present a new perspective on ministerial turnover by combining some of the existing perspectives in order to explore ministerial turnover as a consequence of ministers' performance in three arenas; the electoral, parliamentary and intra-cabinet arenas. Individual ministers' performance differs sometimes markedly from one of these arenas to another, and performance in each of these independently could potentially affect the probability of ministerial turnover. In this article we argue that ministers' performance in different arenas in combination may be just as important as their performance in each arena separately. Poor performance in several arenas and not only one could increase probability of turnover. Studies have so far neglected to focus on the interplay between factors occurring in different arenas as determinants of ministerial turnover. In fact, recent works argue for the need to include measures of ministerial performance in office for studies of ministerial careers (Andrews, 2024; Pedrazzani & Vercesi, 2023: 70). Andrews (2024: 339) goes even further and state that "...ministerial life is one of political enactment in multiple arenas."

Ministers are not moved around and in and out of cabinet constantly. We argue that there is good reason to believe that ministerial turnover is, or can be, an event that occurs after being nurtured over time with various factors occurring in different arenas building up to and eventually causing the minister to be moved out of office. Ministers may survive in office despite performing relatively worse than their fellow ministerial colleagues in one arena if they perform better in other arenas. But if they continuously fall behind the rest of the ministers in multiple arenas, a Prime Minister's incentive to remove that minister either to another post or out of cabinet completely increases.

Consider the fate of one Danish minister as an example. In the general election in September 1994 the Minister of Agriculture suffered a 15% loss of personal votes, and he lost his position as member of cabinet's Coordination Committee, a *de facto* inner cabinet. He was, however, moved to the more prestigious post as Minister of Justice. In the following two years holding this post he received disproportionately more questions from parliament than any other minister in that government and more than both his predecessor and successor on the post. Furthermore, according to opinion polls, he went from being a relatively popular minister of Agriculture<sup>2</sup> to become a relatively unpopular Minister of Justice.<sup>3</sup> Then in December 1996 he was moved to the far less prestigious post as Minister of Transportation in a cabinet reshuffle. The mentioned minister and his tenure in the justice department serves as an example of a minister under severe pressure in several arenas. In this example, the ministerial turnover occurs in a case of a minister who is not member of one of the cabinet's crucial cabinet committees, who is asked a disproportionately high number of questions from parliament, and who has limited and decreasing public popularity.

In this article we explore ministers' likelihood of being moved from their post due to their relative public popularity, their ability to handle large levels of parliamentary questions, their membership status of central cabinet committees, and, most importantly, the interrelatedness of ministers performance in these three arenas. We examine these factors on the case of Denmark from 1977–2022 and by using a Cox proportional hazard model we show that all three factors have some influence on the risk of ministerial termination. We argue that these findings require us to take a step back and view ministerial termination in a multidimensional perspective including ministers' performance in multiple arenas. Stability of governments and ministers should be considered important in many regards. Exploring ministerial turnover as a result of ministers' performance in several arenas is, furthermore, important for our understanding of the complex and multifaceted role of ministers' parliamentary democracies. The “skills demanded of ministers are many and are even contradictory” as Blondel (1991: 6) stated. Ministers are expected to perform in various roles requiring different skills (Headey, 1974; Marsh et al., 2000), but whether ministers' performance in the different roles each and in combination has any consequences for themselves and thereby the cabinet they are part of remains less clear in the literature.

## SEPARATE AND ENTANGLED EVENTS IN MULTIPLE ARENAS CAUSING MINISTERIAL TURNOVER

Why does ministerial turnover occur? Studies on ministerial duration are often framed in Principal-Agent terms (Bright et al., 2015: 442). In this view parliamentary democracy can be defined as a chain of delegation and accountability from voters, to parliament, government, and ultimately the state level bureaucracy (Strøm, 2000). With Prime Ministers as the principal in

government a further link is added to the chain in so that Prime Ministers delegate authority to ministers, who are responsible to the Prime Minister and to parliament. Party leaders in coalition governments are in this regard widely recognized as an intermediate principal in charge of appointing the ministers from his or her party (e.g., Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008: 171). That makes Prime Ministers and party leaders pivotal actors in deciding when ministers' tenure starts and ends, unless the minister decides to go on their own accord.

Ministerial selection and deselection is, however, complicated. Upon appointment party leaders would want ministers to endure at least for some time to carry out certain initiatives. Yet, any delegation of responsibility to a minister involves a risk of agency loss (Strøm, 2000: 270). Selection of agents, ministers, will contain risks of "adverse selection" and "moral hazard" (Bright et al., 2015: 443). Principals may choose unfit agents, and agents may end up acting against the interest of the principal. This can happen for several reasons. Internal party dynamics between various factions needs to be considered in setting a well-functioning ministerial team, gender and regional balance is also important, as is some variation between less and more experienced MPs (Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008; Kam & Indridason, 2005). Some ministers can be good for specific posts, while others may be capable of holding quite different portfolios (e.g., Andeweg, 2014: 534).<sup>4</sup> For some parties there may not be particularly qualified personnel available for all portfolios. Appointments in coalition governments can especially be difficult, as wishes of other party leaders must be considered. For larger parties an added problem occurs as more MPs will be disappointed when they are not appointed ministers, as posts must also be given to coalition partners. When ministers are selected from outside of parliament, it can also spur frustrations among party MPs. In Denmark this approach is sometimes used. The Danish use of non-MP ministers doesn't, however, fit the narrative of technocratic ministers entirely (see Helms, 2022). Danish ministers have been expected to become members of their respective party and in some cases the non-MP minister was either a former MP or one that would run for election.<sup>5</sup>

While recognizing all the difficulties in ministerial appointments we assume principals to want to minimize the risk of agency loss. Therefore, in depth screening of ministerial candidates *ex ante* to appointment is expected of Prime Ministers and party leaders (Bright et al., 2015: 443). In general, Prime Ministers will know most of the potential field of candidates, but, as mentioned, several factors will complicate the realization of the intended plans for the ministerial team. Furthermore, *ex post* appointment, we assume that that party leaders will use obvious measures to monitor ministers' performance. We would expect Prime Ministers to take these into account in considerations of potentially firing, degrading or promoting ministers.

These complexities have given rise to a large number of studies on ministerial duration including ministerial selection and deselection (see e.g., Amorim

Neto & Accorsi, 2022; Curtin et al., 2023; Müller-Rommel et al., 2022; Seixas & Costa, 2021). There is a considerable literature on themes such as ministerial appointments (Dewan & Hortala-Vallve, 2011; Fleischer & Seyfried, 2015; Kam et al., 2010) and portfolio allocation in coalition governments (Bäck et al., 2011; Bergman et al., 2021: 696ff; Falcó-Gimeno & Indridason, 2013; Warwick & Druckman, 2006), while there remains a lack of studies on intra-party portfolio allocation (Smith & Martin, 2017: 131). Studying when ministers' tenure ends have also been approached in a number of ways. Dowding and Dumont (2009b) especially paved the way for numerous studies with their edited volume on hiring and firing of ministers (see Helms & Vercesi, 2022a, 2022b: 5). Especially in recent years, many scholars have also paid attention to cabinet reshuffles (Fleming, 2023; Fleming et al., 2022; Helms & Vercesi, 2022a, 2022b; Indridason & Kam, 2008).

Yet, within this literature there is still unexplored territory regarding the actual reasons for ministers' terminations. As mentioned in the introduction, studies have often focused on particular events in particular arenas causing ministerial turnover. Our approach is different in that we consider that events playing out in different arenas can cause ministerial turnover, and the interplay between ministers' performance in different competitive arenas affects risk of ministerial termination. We focus on events occurring in three different arenas. These are the electoral and public sphere, parliament, and the cabinet.

## Ministers' public popularity as a determinant of turnover

In screening of ministerial candidates party leaders are expected to consider potential candidates' popularity. After appointments she would also want her cabinet to be popular among in the electorate, not least when the next election gets closer. Or, “in essence, politics is a popularity contest” as a Danish minister had it, who at that time had held seven very different ministerial posts over a course of some eight years and served 22 years in parliament Jensen 2023.<sup>6</sup> Popularity for a political leader such as a minister is considered a power resource that strengthens the leader's authority (Bennister et al., 2015, see also Helms, 2019: 274). Selecting only unpopular ministers could reflect poorly on party leaders' judgment and appear strategically questionable. Ignoring particularly popular candidates could spur frustrations in the party's parliamentary group. These are all good reasons to appoint and keep popular ministers. Next, moral hazard could occur for unpopular ministers who feel insecure about their re-election. Such a minister may not be likely to carry out controversial policies a Prime Minister wants them to as it would harm their potential for (re-)gaining popularity. On the contrary, a minister with high levels of personal popularity may be able to weather political storms, even when they are to handle a controversial initiative.

In this article we turn attention to two more obvious measurements of popularity, which Prime Ministers can use for screening and monitoring ministerial candidates and ministers. First, our main focus is publicly published opinion polls on individual ministers' popularity (approval ratings/competence rankings). These can be used as a monitoring device by the Prime Minister *ex post* ministerial appointment. Ministers' popularity may not be stable once they have entered office, and approval ratings are then a performance indicator that ministers have to consider on an ongoing basis. Unambiguous and ongoing bad approval ratings suggests adverse selection, which reflects poorly on the party leader who appointed the minister. Approval ratings for individual ministers as data is almost absent in political science studies, but some studies have linked poor standings in approval ratings to ministers' definitive exits from cabinet (Kristinsson, 2009; Nielsen, 2022) while not focusing on ministerial turnover in general (e.g., including being moved from one post to another). Similarly, Dewan and Dowding (2005) found that firing ministers involved in political scandals can correct for the negative consequence of these on the government's popularity. Danish ministers who are personally rated poorly in opinion polls appear to be less likely to be re-elected despite their ministerial incumbency advantage (Nielsen, 2022, online appendix). These are good reasons for party leaders to remove unpopular ministers before the electoral term ends.

Second, as a supplement to opinion polls on popularity, we also include ministers' personal votes as a robustness check. This is an indicator of popularity, which Prime Ministers can consider *ex ante* to ministerial appointments. Receiving relatively more personal votes could arguably increase chances of being appointed minister in the first place, but more importantly it could increase a ministers' duration in office and thus lowering risk of turnover. To our knowledge no studies have linked preferential voting to ministerial turnover, but it has been suggested that more studies are needed on the "effects of preferential voting" (Passarelli, 2020: 3). All things considered, we assume the following hypothesis regarding ministers popularity.

**H1.** Popularity in the electoral arena will decrease probability of termination.

## Parliamentary scrutiny and ministerial turnover

Asking questions to ministers is a central instrument for parliaments to perform oversight (Martin, 2011). As ministers are responsible to parliament for matters related to their portfolio, one central aspect of ministers' parliamentary performance is that they must answer questions asked to them by MPs. It is of course only one part of performing in the parliamentary arena, but as noted by Andrews (2024: 345) performance in the parliamentary arena is critical to ministerial success and failure in terms of their careers.

Although ministers perform several roles in and related to parliament, there are good reasons to assume that number of questions asked of ministers both is an important indicator of their parliamentary performance and also one that can be associated with higher probability of turnover. We are, however, not aware of any previous study that have explored the relationship between parliamentary questions and ministerial turnover.

Questions are asked of ministers by MPs, and there is no limit to the number of questions a MP can ask to any minister. It is the responsibility of the minister to answer the questions in timely and truthful manner. Prime Ministers can monitor the number of questions asked of the different ministers. A very high number of questions asked of a particular minister will attract attention also from the media, and it is likely to reflect that something is going wrong in that ministry. With regard to parliamentary behavior such as questioning of ministers, coalitions in most countries act disciplined, with important exceptions of Belgium, France and the Netherlands (Bergmann et al., 2021: p. 704). As such, high question rates at least signal a strong interest for that minister's portfolio from the opposition. Questioning ministers is, accordingly, in Denmark more used by MPs for “advertising” or “position taking” rather than to gather information about legislation (Christiansen & Jensen, 2021, p. 73–74), which indicates a conflictual element entailed in asking the questions. MPs from the opposition ask by far most questions and in Denmark it is “very rare” for any government party MP to ask questions to ministers (Christiansen, 2021, p. 152. See also Christiansen & Jensen, 2021, p. 73). A study in parliamentary questions in Belgium and Denmark holds that the opposition pose questions that are strongly influenced by media coverage (Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2011). Such media coverage would arguably be negative in many cases. So, in all, questions are asked from parties in opposition and not necessarily with the interest of only gathering information, and a high question rate in this way denotes a conflictual element between the minister and (some) members of parliament. If ministers' fail to address these questions adequately question may continue to come and may lead to public calls for resignation, which again is entangled in inadequate performance by a given minister. This would seldom be in the interest of a Prime Minister, which could link high question rates to higher probability of turnover. A real world example of such a process could be the Danish minister of Transportation 2019–2022, who eventually resigned after being unable to answer an increasing number of questions from MPs adequately and was facing a vote of no confidence.<sup>7</sup>

A high number of parliamentary questions may increase risks of agency loss because they pose a major burden for the minister and the ministry, at least in the case of Denmark (Dybvad-udvalget, 2023, p. 225). Some studies indicate that parliamentary questions are asked in an attempt to stress or bother ministers (Otjes & Louwerse, 2018; Whitaker & Martin, 2022). As it is time consuming to answer many questions it will also affect the minister's possibilities of



carrying out the initiatives that the Prime Minister wants them to. Previous studies have shown that parliaments with strong oversight powers can constrain the agenda-setting ability of ministers (Bäck et al., 2022, see also Silva & Medina, 2023). In situations where parliamentary questions attract considerable media scrutiny, a substantial amount of a minister's time will necessarily be diverted from for example, promoting new policies.

One could perhaps argue that the number of questions asked to a given minister has more to do with the portfolio than the conduct of the minister. It should be noted in this regard that in our dataset there is large variation in number of questions asked to different ministers in different cabinets holding the same portfolio.<sup>8</sup> In all, we consider there are plausible arguments for expecting the frequency of parliamentary questions to increase risk of ministerial turnover.

**H2.** The larger the share of questions asked to a minister, the larger the likelihood of termination.

### Ministerial turnover across the cabinet hierarchy

The team of ministers, the cabinet, also compose an arena in which a minister operates. Within cabinet there is a vast difference in the importance of the portfolios (Bucur, 2018; Druckman & Warwick, 2005), and ministerial candidates will in most cases strive for more important posts. Studies have found that the importance of the post, which the minister holds, will determine the minister's duration, namely that ministers holding important posts last longer (Bright et al., 2015; Hansen et al., 2013). A Prime Minister would not want to change her most close and important advisors or their portfolio, especially not too frequently, as this would have a larger impact on the overall cabinet decision making processes. It would also reflect more poorly on the Prime Minister's judgement to fire a minister on an important post than firing one holding a peripheral post in cabinet. Supposedly, Prime Ministers have also considered candidates to important post more than those to less prestigious posts (Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008, p. 172), which would decrease the risk of adverse selection on senior ministerial positions.

We employ a measure of ministers' importance as whether they are members of a central all-round cabinet committee. This is perhaps the most institutionalized expression of an internal hierarchy in cabinet as long as these committees holds de facto authority in taking decisions on behalf of the full cabinet (Ie, 2019; Nielsen, 2024). Such committees demarcate the center from the periphery within cabinet in both single party cabinets and coalitions and are found in many countries (Bergman et al., 2021; Nielsen, 2024: 700–702). They serve as means to coordinate cabinet policy making and to contain agency loss when responsibility is delegated to line ministers, and due to their

intra-executive prestige and importance it will be a competitive arena for most ministers to become members of them. Two cabinet committees have for many years—with variation from one cabinet or Prime Minister to the other—been central to cabinet decision making in Denmark. These are the so-called Coordination Committee and the Economic Committee (Christiansen, 2021; Nielsen, 2020a, 2024). The Coordination Committee chaired by the Prime Minister serves as a strategic veto point in cabinet decision making. The Economic Committee will often do more in-depth control of line ministers' initiatives, and according to one study membership of this committee entails increased legislative activity—or policy influence—compared to nonmembers (Nielsen, 2024). Each committee is typically composed of a handful of ministers of the roughly 20 ministers that is the norm in Danish cabinets. Members of each committee can engage in matters on other ministers' areas, which does not work the other way round. Holding a more important post—here, being member of a central cabinet committee—should be considered a result of previous or expected performance as an indicator of some skill that has led the party leader to appoint the minister to that post. Ministers can be appointed to central cabinet committees in the middle of an election term while still keeping the same portfolio. This indicates a party leader's trust in that minister. Likewise, ministers can find themselves losing their position as members of a cabinet committee even during an election term and while still keeping the same portfolio. This should in many cases be regarded as an indicator of poor performance, as it suggests that the party leader does not want the minister as a closer advisor anymore. Besides from the minister of Finance and the Prime Minister no portfolio is guaranteed appointment to any of the committees, and in most election terms they are reshuffled at least once and sometimes on several occasions (especially 2011–2014). Given the importance of these cabinet committees we should expect that membership in one of these would decrease risk of ministerial turnover.

**H3.** Members of central cabinet committees are less likely to be terminated.

### **Interplay between ministers' performance in different arenas and their tenure**

There is good reason to believe that ministers' performance in a certain arena will affect their risk of turnover. The main argument put forth in this article is that ministers' performance in one arena must be viewed in conjunction with their performance in other arenas to fully understand the nature of ministerial turnover. Poor performance in one arena may be accepted if a minister performs well in another arena. Performing relatively poor in two arenas should on the contrary add up to risk of turnover, and even more so if a minister performs

poorly in three arenas. Thus, we explore four interactions between the included independent variables.

First, probability of turnover related to a minister's popularity *ex post* appointment may intersect with number of questions addressed to the minister. Ministers who are widely criticized by the public may find themselves under even greater pressure to perform well during parliamentary sessions. The opposition may “smell blood” when a minister is facing a hard time in the media and then ask more questions. Similarly, many difficult questions may harm a minister's popularity if the minister isn't fit to answer them adequately, or at least take up much of their time, which could have been spent on profiling themselves and their policy proposals. At least in some instances, limited public popularity may be related to ministers' media performance, which again could be entangled with a certain problematic case related to that minister's portfolio, which in itself could be reason for MPs to ask questions to ministers. Consequently, while ministers' performance in each arena may be relevant for turnover, there could be an interplay between these two arenas.

Second, the effect of popularity on ministers' potential replacement may depend on whether the minister is member of a central cabinet committee or not (see also Nielsen, 2022). In general, party leaders will meet committee members more often, which makes the use of other performance indicators less needed in the ongoing evaluation of them (this also holds for the third interaction mentioned below). As members are more close advisors to party leaders a larger degree of unpopularity may be accepted for these without leading to turnover.

Thirdly, number of questions asked to ministers may also vary from members of central cabinet committees to nonmembers, which again may affect risk of turnover. Likewise, a large number of questions as a potential indicator of problems in ministers' departments may be tolerated for these ministers more than others. Furthermore, because of committee members' crucial position in cabinet the opposition would perhaps want to harm the minister by asking many questions, as this could have a negative impact on the overall cabinet leadership. Yet, on the other hand and more importantly, it may also be, that more unpopular or controversial issues and initiatives are delegated to nonmembers by the committees. Such initiatives are more likely to spur questions from parliament. That would increase the questions asked to nonmembers, and in so increase nonmembers risk of termination.

Finally, we explore an interaction of ministers' performance in all three arenas. A minister who is not particularly popular, is asked disproportionately many questions, and who are not given a central position in inner-cabinet decision making processes could be expected to have increased risk of turnover. One case of this was the minister of Justice 1994–1996 mentioned in the introduction. We argue that while poor performance in two arenas will increase a minister's probability of turnover, that minister could still be safeguarded by

strong performance in yet a third arena. Failing to perform in three arenas and not only one or two would on the other hand add up to risk of turnover.

## CASE, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

### Dependent variable: Ministerial turnover

Our dependent variable is events on which a politician leaves a ministerial office. Ministerial turnover is defined as changes in ministers or portfolios “during the lifetime of a single cabinet” (Helms & Vercesi, 2022a: 4). The lifetime of a single cabinet ends when one of the three following conditions occur: Change in cabinet's party composition, change of Prime Minister, or a parliamentary election, of which more than one often occurs at the same time (Helms & Vercesi, 2022a). When a minister is replaced by another person but remains in cabinet holding a different office, that is, a ministerial reshuffle of that particular minister, we still count this as a termination. Like most studies on the matter, we do not include information on the particular reason they leave, for example, scandal, international position or leaving politics for private employment.<sup>9</sup>

Our study's point of departure is all ministers in all cabinets in Denmark from 1977 until 2022. Denmark is a multi-party system with a low electoral threshold and coalitions governments are the norm for the period studied. Single-party governments occur only from 1977 to 1978, 1979 to 1982, 2015 to 2016, and 2019 to 2022. In total we have a maximum of 592 observations of which 76 (13%) terminate early and 516 (87%) terminates with the government.

The traditional approach to studying ministerial turnover is to use a Cox proportional hazard model, and we are not diverging from this approach (see Kam & Indridason, 2005). By using an event history model, we are able to estimate the effects of the independent variables on ministerial turnover. In the analysis we report the hazard ratios where a ratio above one means increased probability of observing turnover, while a hazard ratio below one indicates a decrease in probability.

### Independent variables: Popularity, parliamentary scrutiny, and cabinet committees in Denmark

When it comes to measuring ministers' popularity our main focus is, individual ministers' popularity ex post appointment. This is measured as their average position in publicly published opinion polls listing all ministers according to their score of competence approval during their time on the particular post in the given cabinet. Measuring popularity for a minister's entire time in office denotes voters' continuous and general impression of the minister, as opposed to for example, the most recent poll prior to a case of ministerial turnover (see

Nielsen, 2022). Seventy-five polls are included in the study.<sup>10</sup> Measuring the minister's position in the poll entails a logic of the minister's popularity compared to the other ministers. A lot of different scales have been used in the surveys on the ministers' popularity and this makes comparisons of net approval across different scales impossible to do in any reliable way. Cases are excluded in the models in the few instances where no poll was published while that minister held office in that cabinet. This measure benefits from having the nonelected ministers included. It should be noted that ministers from larger parties with widespread electoral support are not consequently evaluated better.<sup>11</sup> We also include ministers' popularity *ex ante* appointment. This is measured as their personal votes as the share of votes they got of all valid cast votes in the constituency in which the minister (to be) was running. This is an obvious measure of support and popularity for a politician, while there is also for every election large variation in personal votes between MPs as well as among ministers. Naturally this measure does not include nonelected ministers and consequently the number of cases drop in these analyses that are presented in the appendix and which show similar results to the main popularity measure.

Our second independent variable of interest is MPs questions to ministers, and data stem from the parliamentary yearbooks. This is measured as the number of questions posed to each minister during their tenure in a particular cabinet as a percentage of the total number of questions posed to all ministers in the same period. This ratio of questions posed to a minister during the lifetime of a cabinet denotes the relative scrutiny each minister is faced with during his or her tenure in a given cabinet's lifetime compared to the rest of the ministers.

Finally, regarding ministers' position in the internal cabinet hierarchy we employ ministers' membership status of central cabinet committees as a dichotomous measure. Records on cabinet committees' composition are partly offered by The Prime Minister's Office, partly found at the Danish national archive. The cabinet committees of interest are, as mentioned, the Coordination Committee and the Economic Committee.<sup>12</sup> Ministers are coded for being member of one these cabinet committees by the time of any change in the cabinet composition.

## Controls

To test our hypotheses, we also include control variables to test for the length of parliamentary experience, whether a minister is a first-time minister or not, whether a minister is elected as an MP or whether they are appointed from outside of parliament. We further include variables for those that are elected to test whether it matters which type of seat a minister has, that is, a direct seat or a compensatory seat, whether the minister is also a party leader, and minister parties' ideological "bloc" (either left- or right-wing parties in parliament). We also include a party support variable for the ministers' party in the most recent

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics.

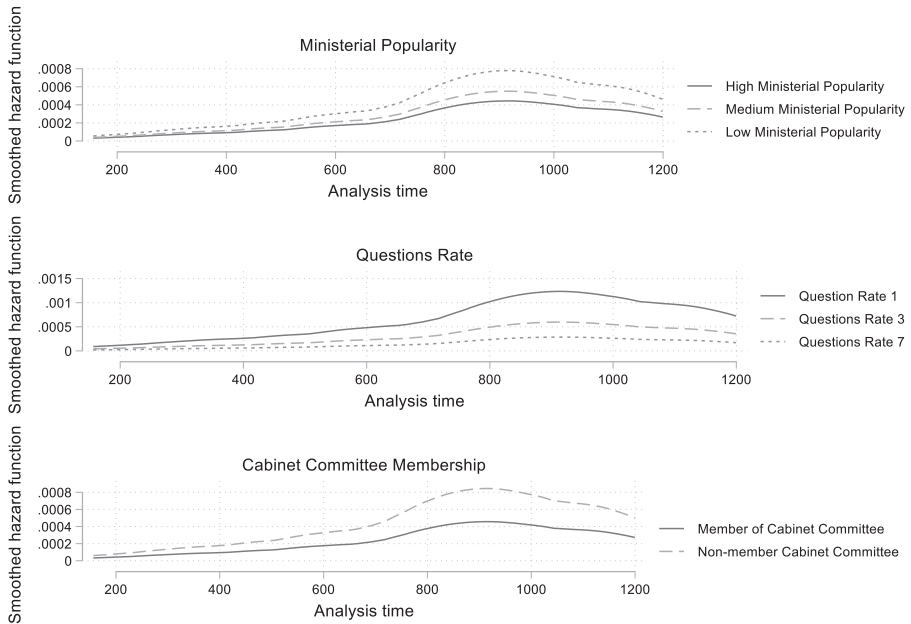
<b>Variables</b>	<b>(1) N</b>	<b>(2) Mean</b>	<b>(3) SD</b>	<b>(4) Min</b>	<b>(5) Max</b>
Ministerial popularity	528	10.41	5.546	1	21.80
Share of votes	539	4.022	3.442	0.0704	24.90
Rate of questions	592	3.547	2.894	0	24.26
Cabinet committee member	592	0.387	0.487	0	1
Party support	592	21.10	10.51	1.700	40.60
Party leader	592	0.0929	0.291	0	1
Male	592	0.706	0.456	0	1
Parliamentary experience	592	0.554	0.497	0	1
First-time minister	592	0.333	0.472	0	1
Age	592	49.68	9.172	27	75
Direct seat	592	0.791	0.407	0	1
Left bloc	592	0.480	0.500	0	1
Elected minister	592	0.910	0.286	0	1

opinion poll before the ministerial termination. Finally, we also control for gender and age. The descriptive statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1.

## ANALYSIS

In the following we present our results first with the relationship between ministerial turnover and our three independent variables of main interest separately (Figure 1) and then second in six Cox proportional hazard models (Table 2).

Our first hypothesis relates to ministers' popularity after appointment according to competence rankings. Our measurement is that a low value equals high popularity (top of the list), and a high value equals low popularity (bottom of the list). In the top panel of Figure 1 we present the hazard rate for three different values of popularity. In line with our expectation ranking at the top of the list as number 1 (high ministerial popularity) entails the lowest hazard rate of the three. The ranking of 6 (medium ministerial popularity) increases the hazard rate slightly compared to the most popular minister, while a ranking of 14 (low ministerial popularity), which roughly denotes the lowest third, makes



**FIGURE 1** Hazard rates of popularity, questions rate and cabinet committee membership. The higher the value, the higher the risk of termination.

the hazard rate double that of the most popular minister. The relationship also presents as significant in model 1 in Table 2.

Our second hypothesis relates to the rate of questions answered by a minister as a share of the total number of questions asked to the particular cabinet. In the middle panel of Figure 1 we see the hazard rate for three occurrences of question rates: 1 (low), 3 (medium) and 7 (high) percent. There is a clear difference between all three with nearly five times lower risk of early termination for ministers who answers the high rate of 7% of the questions than those answering only the low rate 1%. In general terms this means that answering a smaller share of questions increase the risk of termination, which is exactly the opposite of what we hypothesized (elaborated on below). The corresponding model can be found as model 2 in Table 2 where the relationship is significant, this finding is counter to the hypothesized relationship which stated that a higher rate of questions answered would see an increased risk of termination. Here the opposite is established to be the case.

Our final hypothesis states that membership of a central cabinet committee is associated with a lower risk of turnover. In line with our expectation the results (low panel of Figure 1) show an impact of cabinet committee membership, as those ministers in the inner circles of cabinet have a much lower risk

TABLE 2 Hazard ratios—Cox regressions.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Ministerial popularity	1.07*** (0.03)			1.04* (0.03)	0.98 (0.04)	0.99 (0.05)
Rate of questions		0.76*** (0.04)		0.78*** (0.05)	0.53*** (0.11)	0.54** (0.13)
Ministerial popularity × rate of questions					1.03** (0.01)	1.02 (0.02)
Cabinet committee member			0.53** (0.15)	0.54* (0.18)	0.34 (0.27)	0.40 (0.46)
Cabinet committee member × ministerial popularity					0.96 (0.06)	0.95 (0.10)
Cabinet committee member × rate of questions					1.34* (0.21)	1.26 (0.41)
Cabinet committee member × ministerial popularity × rate of questions						1.01 (0.03)
Parliamentary experience	0.68 (0.18)	0.86 (0.21)	0.88 (0.21)	0.72 (0.19)	0.74 (0.20)	0.73 (0.20)
First-time minister	0.70 (0.22)	0.63 (0.18)	0.60* (0.17)	0.63 (0.20)	0.57* (0.18)	0.57* (0.18)
Elected minister	2.68 (2.17)	4.01* (3.21)	3.57 (2.86)	2.59 (2.14)	2.42 (1.99)	2.43 (2.00)
Direct seat	1.16 (0.52)	1.15 (0.48)	1.02 (0.42)	1.49 (0.69)	1.37 (0.64)	1.37 (0.64)
Red bloc	1.18 (0.35)	1.05 (0.28)	1.08 (0.29)	1.18 (0.35)	1.27 (0.38)	1.26 (0.38)
Party leader	0.39 (0.24)	0.42 (0.22)	0.51 (0.29)	0.62 (0.40)	0.57 (0.37)	0.57 (0.37)
Male	0.98 (0.29)	0.80 (0.21)	0.89 (0.23)	1.17 (0.36)	1.20 (0.37)	1.20 (0.37)

(Continues)



TABLE 2 (Continued)

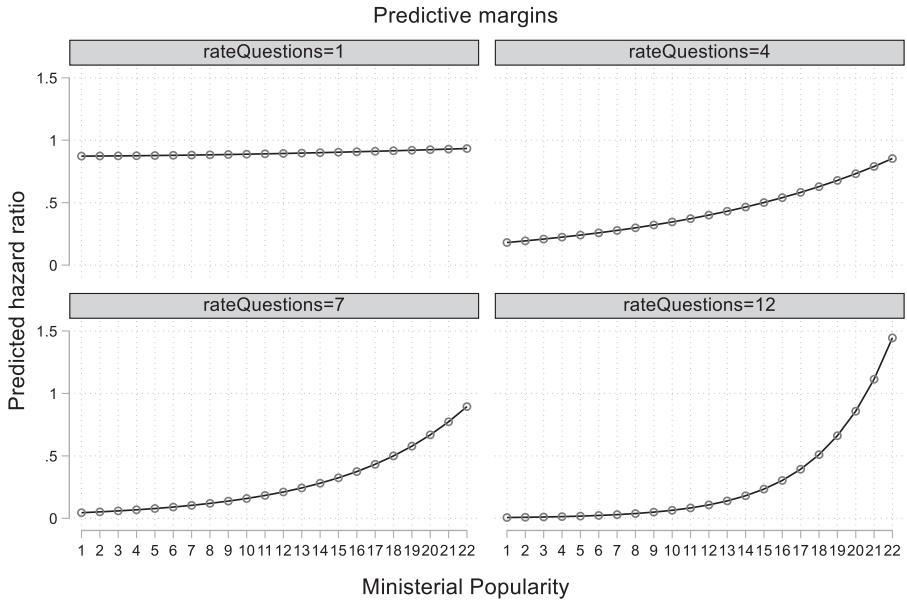
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Age	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.01)	1.01 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)
Party support (opinion poll)	0.98 (0.02)	0.99 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)
Observations	528	592	592	528	528	528

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ .

of termination than those in the periphery. This is also shown by the significant coefficient in model 3 shown in Table 2 where membership of a cabinet committee is associated with a lower risk of termination.

In Table 2 we present the coefficients of our six Cox proportional hazard models. Models 1–3 includes each of the three main independent variables separately. Model 4 includes all three together, while model 5 includes the pairwise interactions between the three variables, with model 6 also including a three-way interaction. We replicate the models in the appendix using personal votes as a measure of popularity leaving out those ministers not elected and find similar relationships. We include the same control variables across all models.

With regards to Models 5 and 6 with the interaction terms included it should be noted that interaction terms in an event history model are slightly different than interactions in traditional linear models. We should understand them as the effect of variable A conditional on variable B as 0, and the hazard ratio should be understood as the increase or decrease of the effect of variable A by the factor that is the hazard ratio. Overall our results suggest that all three of our main independent variables have some influence on ministerial turnover, albeit in different magnitude, and when the interactions terms are included it is only rate of questions answered that remains significant in the main effect. This, to us, is a sign that our theoretical argument, that is, that we need to understand ministerial turnover through ministers' performance in multiple arenas, is broadly true for the Danish case. We present the relationship of the interactions in Figures 2–4 based on the coefficients of model 6. Considering the interaction effect between popularity and rate of questions, we see little impact of popularity for those with a low questions rate, yet already when the average questions rate of 4 is used we see that ministerial popularity has a protective effect of termination, and if we take two of the higher questions rate 7 and 12 respectively, the protective effect of popularity is still present for the more popular ministers, but it decreases sharply with diminishing popularity. In effect, the combination of low positions in lists of ministers' approval ratings (less

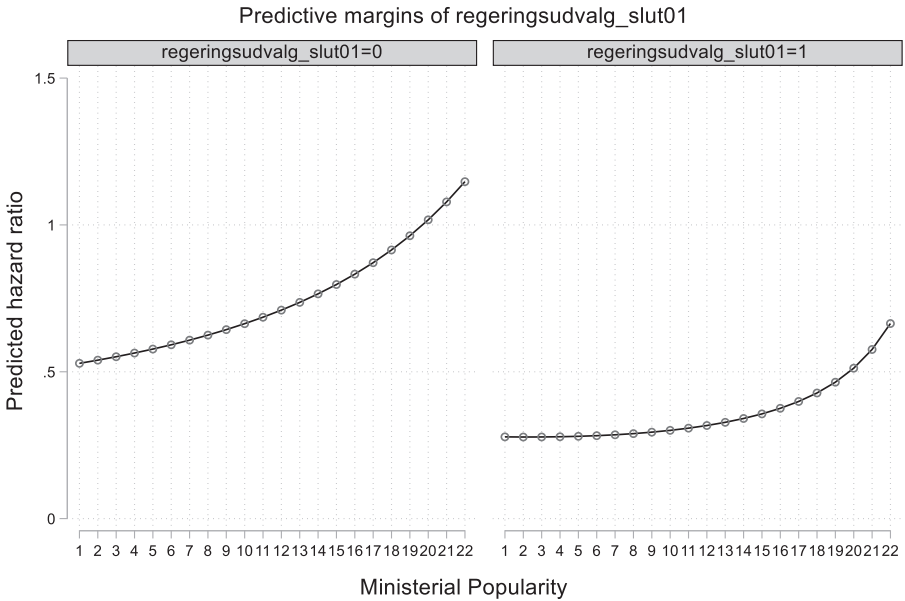


**FIGURE 2** Predicted Hazard ratios for four different question rates in relation to ministerial popularity. The higher the value, the higher the risk for termination. Popularity is coded in such a way that a low score means the most popular minister.

popular) and low rate of questions addressed to them increase the risk of an early termination more than when considering both variables independently, although questions are still significant as an effect of its own. What this tells us is that ministers' performance in the public/electoral arena and the parliamentary arena are not entirely independent of one another, and this should be considered to achieve a full understanding of ministerial turnover.

In Figure 3 we consider the interaction between cabinet committee membership and popularity. For ministers who are member of a cabinet committee the increase in risk associated with decreasing popularity is present, but compared to those ministers who are not member of a cabinet committee it is much less pronounced, suggesting that cabinet committee membership provides a protective layer that can limit the effect of lower popularity. This finding also supports our argument that we should consider how the performance on different arenas interact to fully understand the impact on ministerial survival.

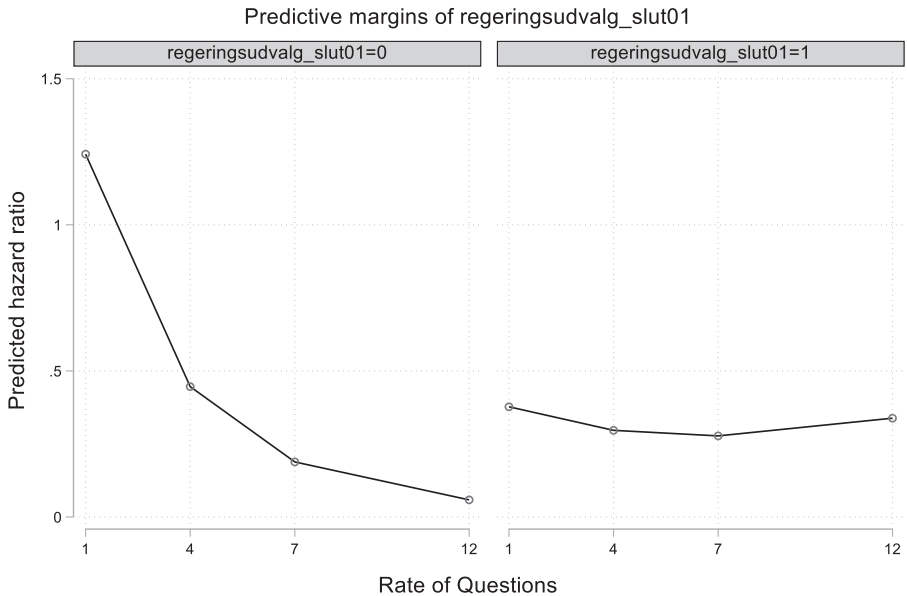
In Figure 4 we consider the interaction between cabinet committee membership and rate of questions answered. Here the results are less clear. There is very little change in risk of termination for cabinet committee members regardless of performance on the parliamentary arena. What the results does show is that the higher the rate of questions a minister answers the more likely



**FIGURE 3** Predicted Hazard ratios for membership of cabinet committee in relation to ministerial popularity. The higher the value, the higher the risk for termination. Popularity is coded in such a way that a low score means the most popular minister.

survival is, and that a higher questions rate can overcome not being a member of a cabinet committee. Which is once again evidence that the questions rate appears to be a salient proxy for some form of performance indicator to explain early turnover of ministers in Denmark. It also confirms other studies showing that cabinet hierarchy is important to consider in studies of ministerial turnover, but in addition to that also that ministers' role and performance in this arena should be seen in relation to their performance in other arenas.

Next, the effect of parliamentary questions is highly significant across all models. With a value markedly below 1 a higher rate of questions to a minister decrease risk of turnover. With the inclusion of the interaction terms the effect of the variable on its own becomes even more stark (model 5 and 6). We also note that the relationship is also present when excluding ministers who are not MPs (see models in appendix). More importantly, questions rate is also part of two moderately significant interaction terms. Besides from that with ministerial popularity, this also goes for the interaction between questions rate and whether ministers are members of a central cabinet committee (elaborated on below). These results suggest that ministerial performance in the parliamentary arena should be considered as important for understanding ministerial turnover, and



**FIGURE 4** Predicted Hazard ratios for membership of cabinet committee in relation to questions rate. The higher the value, the higher the risk for termination.

moreover in relation to intra-cabinet affairs such as the relative importance of ministers for cabinet decision making processes.

This relationship between parliamentary questions and ministerial turnover is completely opposite of what was hypothesized. It suggests a necessity to achieve a better understanding of why MPs ask questions.<sup>13</sup> One can imagine some possible explanations for the effect recovered, which future studies could explore. It might well be that some ministers are capable of handling parliamentary questions in a way that finds favor with the Prime Minister. It could also be that Prime Ministers expect ministers holding certain portfolios to receive a relatively large amount of questions, and therefore selects only politicians that they do not anticipate removing early to these posts. Perhaps ministers can benefit from the attention, or perhaps they do not really care and delegates most of the answering to the bureaucracy. Whether questions it is in fact always used strategically by MPs and why being able to answer more questions appears to be beneficial for a minister would be an important venue for future studies, including some comparisons between two or more countries.

One plausible explanation for the less certain results related to cabinet committee membership could have to do with the type of ministerial turnover. Ministers are in some cases reshuffled due to their good work (cf. Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008: 170) as a promotion disregarding the potential

negative consequences for cabinet instability. Such promotion would not least apply to members of central cabinet committees.<sup>14</sup> Committee members may also be offered a less burdensome post upon handling controversial or stressful posts.<sup>15</sup> Popular ministers who were members of cabinet committees have also in Denmark been appointed EU Commissioners (1984, 2009, 2014) and consequently left cabinet.

Only one control variable, that is, that for first-time ministers, show any effect, which is only moderately significant and only so in model 3 and 6. In all other cases none of the controls appear as significant even at the  $p < 0.10$  level. If a squared age term for ministers are included there is no substantial effect on the hazard ratios, nor if we include measures for whether ministers in the upper or lower quantile of age are more likely to experience early turnover. We also note that there is no difference at all between male and female ministers. What does come out clear is that focusing only on ministers' performance in one arena is not likely to achieve the necessary scope to understanding early turnover of ministers. For that we need to employ a multi-dimensional framework as we have presented in this article.

## CONCLUSION

Existing studies of ministerial duration and turnover often focus the impact of one particular phenomenon at a time. In this article we make the case for including effects of events occurring in multiple arenas to achieve an even stronger understanding of the factors influencing ministerial turnover. We focused on the electoral arena through measuring ministerial popularity, the parliamentary arena, through parliamentary questions and the intra-cabinet arena through the central cabinet committees. We considered these separately and as interactions with one another.

Our results are mixed. Ministers' performance in each arena separately appears to have an effect on ministerial turnover, but all effects aren't significant throughout all the presented models. Only the effect of questions asked of MPs to ministers consequently show a significant effect on ministerial turnover. This an important contribution to our understanding of legislative-executive relations, and interestingly the results are opposite to what we expected to find, whereas a larger rate of questions decreases risk of turnover. There also appears to be increased risk of turnover for unpopular ministers and for ministers in the periphery of cabinet's internal hierarchy, but for these two variables the results are less certain. More importantly, the interactions between ministers' performance in each arena all seem to have an impact in our statistical models, which confirms our main argument, that is, that ministerial turnover is associated with ministers' performance in multiple arenas as opposed to only one. A minister is faced with pressures from both the electorate, their party and from within the government, and not recognizing this and taking it into account

when considering the overall fate of the minister would potentially lead to erroneous conclusions. Performance measures such as these we have used could also increase competition between ministers, especially between those from the same party.

We must also consider alternative views to the perspectives we have presented. First, it is recognized, for instance by Andeweg (2014: 534) that some ministers might be relatively insensitive to public opinion of their performance as they might be viewed internally as a safe pair of hands in the machinery of government. Second, other measures than cabinet committee membership of portfolios' relative importance may also be relevant to consider in future studies, although portfolio salience is an inherently difficult phenomenon for political scientists to grasp. This becomes relevant when considering the arguments of Bright et al. (2015) who argues that it is possible that important ministers could be dismissed given they are more likely to deal with difficult issues and will face more scrutiny. Nielsen (2022) takes a more positive view towards ministerial turnover in stressing that can also sometimes be used for promotion of a certain minister to a more important position, or keep them in government while removing them from a troublesome position. Third, another tool is also available to Prime Ministers and that is to keep the ministers in place, but change the content of their portfolio. This allows for the responsibilities within a government to be changed without much public scrutiny. It is an area which only recently have seen renewed focus (see Sieberer et al., 2021), and how the Prime Minister use this tool to shape their government is not well understood as of yet. At last, overly long ministerial tenure may also increase risks of agency loss, as ministers' preferences may become more aligned with those in his department rather than those of his party and/or cabinet (see Alderman, 1995).

Finally, we must also recognize that our measures are proxies for the ministerial performances on the arenas. We are not claiming that the measures used are the only ones that can be used. This might be why some of our results are less certain. However, overall the findings in this paper does suggest that there is some support for the argument on concentrating on performance on different arenas. While we naturally will have to be sceptical about findings on only one case, Denmark, we do believe that the Danish case is a case that allow us to fully test our argument. Denmark shares many similarities with other parliamentary systems in Europe, and from a data quality perspective we can have strong confidence in our findings. Regarding generalization of the results the frequency of minority coalitions in Denmark may mean that ministerial turnover is higher here (Huber & Martinez-Gallardo, 2008: 176). The effect of parliamentary questions may also be different in countries with less or even minimal discipline between government parties' MPs. We should also add that we have not included what some might term the fourth arena: the media, which could also have an impact on the performance of ministers as it is well-established that the media plays a significant role for political elites (Aelst

et al., 2010; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2016). However, as mentioned, ministers' media performance may be entangled with our included variables. Thus, we do not claim to have written the last word on ministerial turnover, merely shown that continued necessity to build knowledge in this area and to develop both the theoretical and empirical approach to the topic, also qualitatively.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the Danish case see Knudsen and Nielsen (2023: 397ff).
- <sup>2</sup> *Jyllands-Posten* January 23, 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> See poll in: *Jyllands-Posten* May 26, 1996. The former as well as the following Ministers of Justice from the same party were far more popular. See polls in: *Jyllands-Posten* May 29, 1994; *Berlingske Tidende* September 21, 1997.
- <sup>4</sup> This is not just an academic argument, former Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen argues the same in an interview (Jacobsen, 2019: 43).
- <sup>5</sup> The Minister of Employment 2015–2016 may be the closest to a technocrat minister in contemporary Danish political history, but this remains a rare exception.
- <sup>6</sup> Jensen, M. V. (2023, 26. October): Tror man, at alting nu bliver godt, fordi Jakob stopper, så vil jeg sige, det gør det ikke, *Avisen Danmark*.
- <sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it should be noted, that he wasn't member of any central cabinet committee, and according to the Danish polling company *Opinion* around the time he came in as 16 of the 20 ministers in a public ranking.
- <sup>8</sup> Besides from the case mentioned in the introduction, another example could be the different number of questions asked to the different male ministers of Food and Environment from the Liberal Party in the Lars Løkke Rasmussen III government.
- <sup>9</sup> The most radical form of termination is that of death. In two instances during the period studied have ministers died in office. Both cases are excluded as nonpolitical events.
- <sup>10</sup> Similar to Nielsen (2020b). The first poll was released in May 1978. No published polls exist between September 1987 and June 1990, but besides from that polls have been published every year up until 2022.
- <sup>11</sup> Ministers from even very small parties can be rated as very popular, for example, Minister of Cultural Affairs 1985 and the Minister of Foreign Affairs 1994 (*Jyllands-Posten* June 2, 1985; *Jyllands-Posten* May 29, 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> Both cabinet committees have existed for most of the period studied but neither of them continuously. We have included ministers' membership status of Coordination committees for the years 1978–1980 and 1982–2022 and the Economic committee for the years 1977–1982, 1988–1990 and 1993–2022.

- <sup>13</sup> Martin (2011) lamented that “...the nature and consequences of questioning in parliament remains obscure”, and while there has been an increase in literature (see e.g., Block, 2024; Kroeber & Krauss, 2023; Otjes & Louwerse, 2018) it is certainly still an area requiring further examination.
- <sup>14</sup> For example, Minister of Cultural affairs until 1986, and Minister of Labor until 1989.
- <sup>15</sup> Minister of both Economy and Environment until 1980, and Minister of immigration until 2005.

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## Appendices

Variables	(1) Haz	(2) Haz	(3) Haz	(4) Haz	(5) Haz	(6) Haz
Ministerial popularity	1.06** (0.03)			1.04 (0.03)	0.98 (0.04)	0.99 (0.05)
Rate of questions		0.77*** (0.05)		0.77*** (0.05)	0.52*** (0.11)	0.54** (0.14)
Ministerial popularity × rate of questions					1.02* (0.01)	1.02 (0.02)
Cabinet committee member			0.57* (0.17)	0.54* (0.19)	0.31 (0.26)	0.37 (0.43)
Cabinet committee member × ministerial popularity					0.96 (0.06)	0.94 (0.10)
Cabinet committee member × rate of questions					1.39** (0.22)	1.31 (0.44)
Cabinet committee member × ministerial popularity × rate of questions						1.01 (0.03)
Parliamentary experience	0.73 (0.20)	0.94 (0.23)	0.95 (0.23)	0.78 (0.22)	0.81 (0.23)	0.81 (0.23)

Variables	(1) Haz	(2) Haz	(3) Haz	(4) Haz	(5) Haz	(6) Haz
First-time minister	0.70 (0.23)	0.59* (0.17)	0.55** (0.16)	0.61 (0.20)	0.55* (0.18)	0.55* (0.18)
Elected minister	0.92 (0.05)	0.90* (0.05)	0.86*** (0.05)	0.94 (0.05)	0.93 (0.05)	0.93 (0.05)
Direct seat	1.40 (0.65)	1.47 (0.63)	1.35 (0.57)	1.74 (0.84)	1.67 (0.81)	1.67 (0.82)
Red bloc	1.09 (0.33)	0.97 (0.26)	1.02 (0.27)	1.08 (0.33)	1.18 (0.36)	1.17 (0.36)
Party leader	0.56 (0.36)	0.65 (0.37)	0.93 (0.56)	0.79 (0.54)	0.74 (0.51)	0.74 (0.51)
Male	1.01 (0.31)	0.84 (0.22)	0.91 (0.25)	1.24 (0.39)	1.29 (0.41)	1.29 (0.41)
Age	1.01 (0.02)	1.00 (0.01)	1.00 (0.01)	1.00 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)
Party support (opinion poll)	0.99 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)	1.00 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)
Observations	481	539	539	481	481	481

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \* $p < 0.1$ .