

# Representation of Canadian Women at the Cabinet Table

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## Abstract

This examination of the appointment of elected women to Canadian federal, provincial and territorial cabinets from 1917 to 2002 analyzes both the numbers of women appointed to cabinets and the nature of their cabinet posts, revealing that while female legislators have had a competitive advantage over their male counterparts when it comes to cabinet representation, the allocation of cabinet duties continues to reflect a gendered division of labour.

## Résumé

Cet examen de la nomination des femmes élues aux cabinets fédéraux canadiens, provinciaux et municipaux de 1917 à 2002, analyse tant le nombre de femmes nommées à des cabinets révélant que tandis que les femmes législatrices ont eu l'avantage compétitif sur leurs confrères quand il en est de la représentation du cabinet, la répartition des fonctions des cabinets continue de refléter une division du travail différenciée selon les sexes.

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## Introduction

This paper examines the representation of women in Canadian government cabinets at both the federal and provincial/territorial levels, across jurisdictions and over time, both with respect to the numbers of elected women who have been appointed to cabinet positions as well as the types of portfolios women have occupied. The analysis draws from a data set of information about all female legislators, and a stratified random sample of male Members of Parliament (MPs) at the federal government level, about whom information was gathered about their personal and political backgrounds and political careers. The data show that, once elected, female MPs and, particularly, Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) are at least as likely as their male counterparts to be selected for cabinet positions. Female MPs have been marginally more likely to achieve cabinet positions than have male MPs. It is important to qualify these positive trends with the observation that women are not winning cabinet positions via "affirmative action" measures; they do have equal, equivalent, or even exceptional qualifications for the job. Moreover, women's chances of serving in cabinet are declining at both levels of government. A final cautionary note is provided by the data on the type of ministry typically held by women. Our analysis shows a continued gendered division of labour at the cabinet table, with women tending to head ministries dealing with social citizenship or social welfare activities, and men holding more portfolios related to the defining and physical resource mobilization activities of government. However, we qualify, and to some extent challenge the assumption prevalent in the literature that so-called "women's portfolios" are less powerful and