

Government ministers



What are the different types of minister?

The most senior government ministers, except the prime minister, are secretaries of state. Two senior ministers carry different titles: the chancellor of the exchequer – the senior minister at HM Treasury – and the lord chancellor, though the latter is held in conjunction with the secretary of state for justice.

Beneath secretaries of state are two ranks of junior ministers: ministers of state and parliamentary under-secretaries. While ministers of state are politically senior to parliamentary under-secretaries, they are constitutionally similar and the responsibilities of both are delegated from the secretary of state.

Most junior ministers are given a title to signal both their policy responsibility in a department and the government’s policy priorities – such as the minister of state for immigration in the Home Office and the parliamentary under-secretary of state for mental health, inequalities and suicide prevention in the Department of Health and Social Care.

Whips are also ministerial positions but serve different functions to senior and junior ministers. Parliamentary private secretaries are unpaid and act as departmental assistants to ministers, being the eyes and ears of the minister and communicating with the backbenches. They are required to vote with the government but are not constitutionally ministers.

How are ministers appointed?

Ministers are ceremonially appointed by the Queen, on the advice of the prime minister. The allocation and organisation of portfolios for secretaries of state is decided by the prime minister, and is published online. Ministers can be chosen from either the House of Commons or the House of Lords.

Ministers are chosen for a range of reasons – as a reward, to build allies, to signal a shift in policy or, sometimes, on assessment of objective performance. The appointment process of junior ministers has been criticised as “random and arbitrary”.

Sometimes prime ministers make changes to the structure of government departments. This can change the portfolio of ministers, even in departments which do not change. For instance, after Theresa May’s departmental restructuring in 2016, skills, higher education and the apprenticeship levy were brought into the Department for Education, making the secretary of state for education responsible for policy areas previously outside of their control.

How many ministers are there?

The legal maximum number of paid ministers is 109, including the prime minister, as set out in the Ministerial and other Salaries Act 1975. However, some ministers are unpaid.

As of May 2019, there are eight unpaid ministers, including one unpaid cabinet minister: Brandon Lewis MP, who is minister without portfolio. The same Act limits how many ministers can be paid in certain posts.

Number of ministers allowed
22
Including Cabinet ministers and lord chancellor
50
Including Cabinet ministers, ministers of state, and other ministers heading government departments
83

Including Cabinet ministers, ministers of state, other ministers heading government departments, and parliamentary secretaries

3

Including Law officers

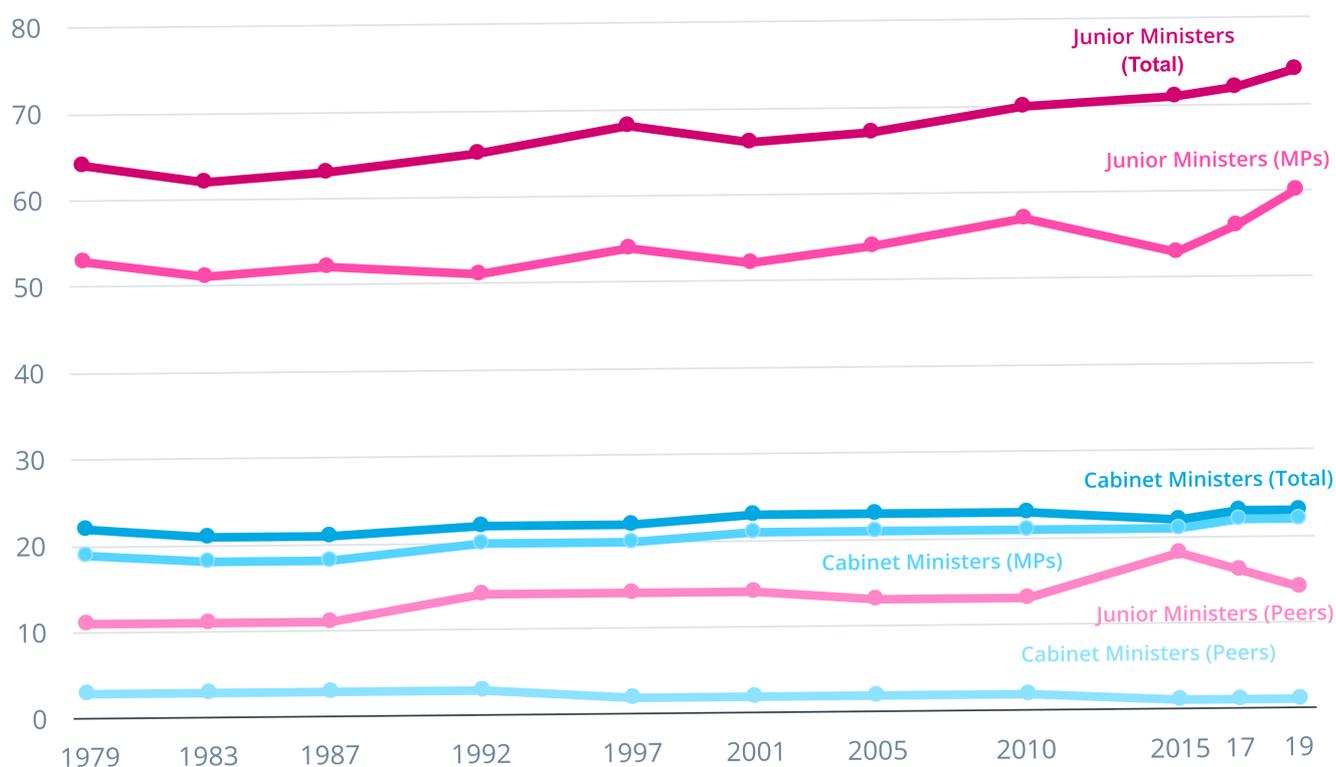
22

Including Whips

Number of ministers allowed	Including
22	Cabinet ministers and lord chancellor
50	Cabinet ministers, ministers of state, and other ministers heading government departments
83	Cabinet ministers, ministers of state, other ministers heading government departments, and parliamentary secretaries
3	Law officers
22	Whips

Number of Cabinet and Junior Ministers, 1979 to 2019

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Source: Institute for Government analysis of Commons Library, *Size of the payroll vote, 1979-2017* and gov.uk/government/ministers. CC BY-NC

Number of Cabinet and junior ministers (Updated: 04 Nov 2019) ^[2]

^[3]

^[4]

The number of Cabinet ministers has remained almost the same since 1979 – increasing from 22 to the maximum of 23 (including the prime minister) – but the number of junior ministers has increased from 31 to 36. This growth has been driven by the number of junior ministers sitting in the House of Lords, which has increased from three to nine. Only one member of the House of Lords is currently a cabinet minister: Baroness Evans of Bowes Park, who is

lord privy seal and leader of the house.

What do cabinet ministers do? ^[5]

Secretaries of state, as the head of departments, are responsible for leading departments, approving key decisions, developing policy objectives and monitoring their progress. As [Caroline Spelman](#) ^[6], former secretary of state for the environment put it, “the secretary of state carries all the responsibility. It is no good blaming other people for something that goes wrong”. Beyond their policy work, they are also expected to answer questions in Parliament and in front of select committees, take legislation through Parliament, build relationships with backbenchers, and negotiate with Cabinet and the Treasury on behalf of the department.

While most ministers will work in government departments, there can also be a minister without portfolio, who will not work in a government department but is often responsible for a specific priority – [Baroness Warsi](#) ^[7], for instance, was given responsibility across multiple policy areas, like foreign policy and constitutional affairs.

Some ministerial titles – such as lord privy seal or the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster – relate to historic roles. The posts are largely ceremonial, and ministers appointed to these titles will normally be given a wider portfolio of work such as being minister for the Cabinet Office or leader of the House.

What do junior ministers do? ^[8]

The roles of ministers of state and parliamentary under-secretaries can vary depending on the size of the departments, but often considerably more responsibility is delegated to ministers of state. This is at the discretion of the secretary of state. As well as their direct policy responsibilities, a lot of the work of junior ministers is “unglamorous” and “an awful lot of the routine stuff, the nuts and bolts”, as [Robert Neil](#) ^[9], a former local government minister described it. This involves dealing with correspondence, taking questions in and guiding bills through Parliament.

Many government departments have a minister in the House of Lords who represents the government in the upper House to guide legislation through that chamber – only two departments currently do not: the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. The Ministry of Justice does not have a Lords minister, but does have a spokesperson in the House of Lords. Beyond this legislative work, ministers are also expected to maintain relationships with public bodies and external organisations.

Some junior ministers also attend Cabinet at the discretion of the prime minister. Under Boris Johnson, the chief secretary to the Treasury (Rishi Sunak); minister of state for business, energy and clean growth (Kwasi Kwarteng); minister of state for the Northern Powerhouse and local growth (Jake Berry); minister of state for housing (Esther McVey); minister of state for security (Brandon Lewis); paymaster general and minister for the Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden); and minister of state at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Zac Goldsmith) all also attend Cabinet.

How are they held accountable? ^[10]

Secretaries of state are accountable to Parliament for the powers of their department.

Junior ministers are also responsible to Parliament, but ultimate accountability lies with their secretary of state. All ministers serve at the discretion of the prime minister and can be dismissed or reshuffled for any reason.

Ministers of all ranks are bound by collective responsibility – meaning that once the government has decided a collective position, all ministers must abide by it and vote together. Ministers who cannot abide by this are expected to resign. Ministers who vote against the government would normally be sacked or asked to resign.

The general expectations of the conduct of ministers is in the [Ministerial Code](#) ^[11]. A breach of the code can be investigated at the discretion of the prime minister.

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[3] [https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Number of Cabinet and junior ministers&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instituteforgovernment.org.uk%2Fprintpdf%2F8598%23chart_1558449431&via=instituteforgov](https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=Number%20of%20Cabinet%20and%20junior%20ministers&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.instituteforgovernment.org.uk%2Fprintpdf%2F8598%23chart_1558449431&via=instituteforgov)

[4] <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/chart-images/Number%20of%20Ministers%201979-2019.png>

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[6] <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/caroline-spelman/>

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[9] <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/ministers-reflect/person/robert-neill/>

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[11] <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/ministerial-code>