

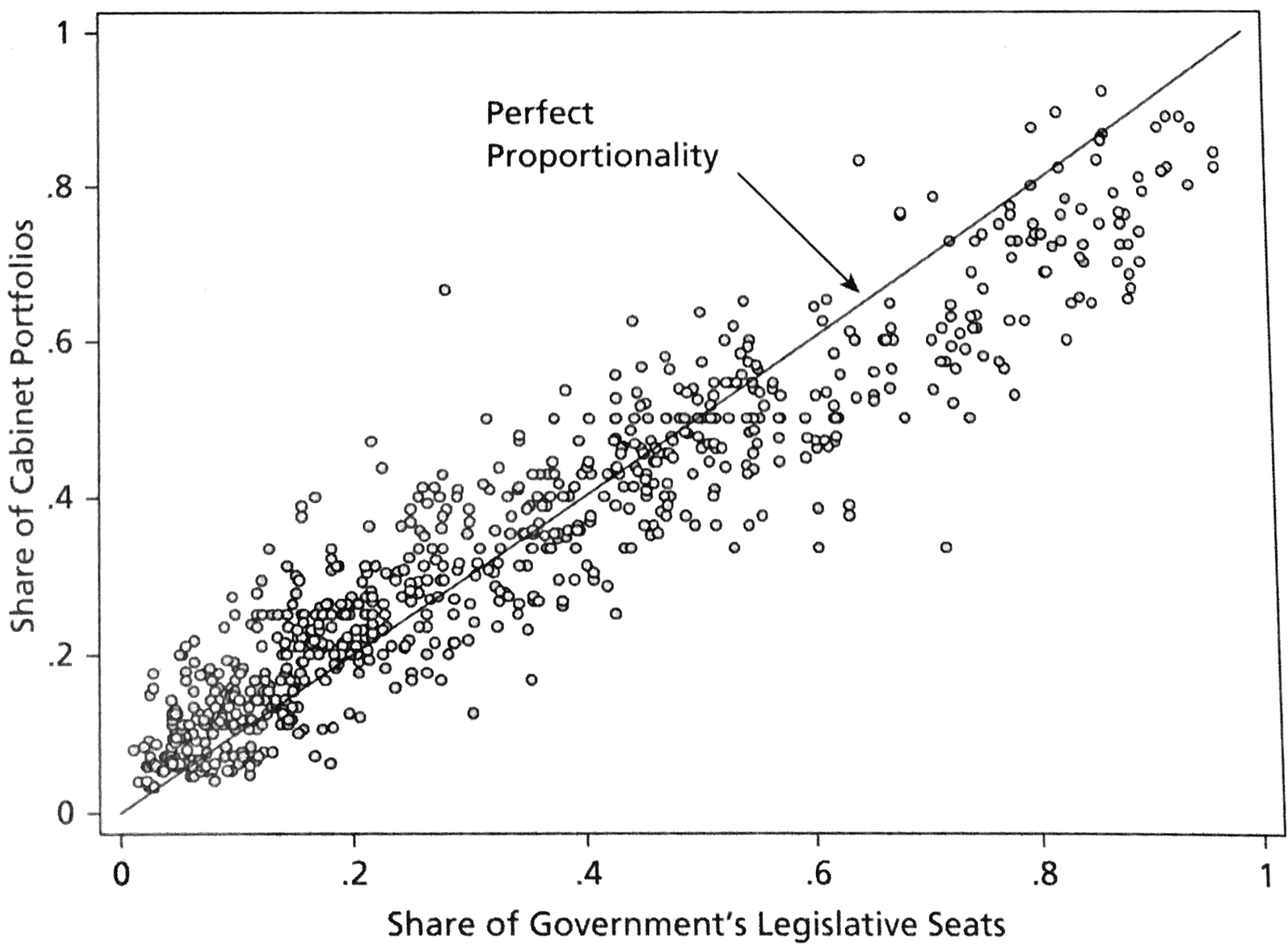
PORTFOLIO ALLOCATION AND GAMSON’S LAW

Gamson’s law: Cabinet portfolios will be distributed among government parties in strict proportion to the number of seats that each party contributes to the government’s legislative majority (Gamson 1961).

Gamson’s law predicts that if parties A and B form a government together, and party A has 80 legislative seats, and party B has 40 legislative seats, then party A will receive two-thirds of the ministerial portfolios because it provides 80/120 of the government’s legislative seats, and party B will receive one-third of the ministerial portfolios because it provides 40/120 of the government’s legislative seats. But what is the empirical evidence in support of Gamson’s law?

In Figure 12.4, we plot the share of cabinet portfolios controlled by a government party against its share of the government’s legislative seats using data from 14 Western European countries from 1945 to 2000. It should be immediately obvious that there is a strong positive relationship between the share of seats that a party contributes to a government’s legislative majority and the share of portfolios that it controls. This positive relationship, which is one of the most robust empirical patterns in all of political science, represents strong evidence for Gamson’s law. Note, though, that this relationship is not *perfectly* proportional (Buttard and Golder 2011; Indriðason 2010). The solid black line in Figure 12.4 indicates the 1:1 relationship that would exist if portfolios were allocated proportionally. It is easy to see that the gray circles tend to be above this line when a government party is small, but below it when a government party is large. In effect, there is some evidence that smaller parties tend to be slightly overrepresented in parliamentary cabinets and larger parties tend to be slightly underrepresented.

FIGURE 12.4 Portfolio Allocation in Western Europe, 1945–2000



Note: Based on data from Warwick and Druckman (2006).

The fact that there is a slight bias in favor of smaller parties when it comes to portfolio allocation turns out to be a bit of a puzzle for political scientists. Most bargaining models that have been developed to explain government formation predict that large parties, not small parties, will do better when ministerial portfolios are allocated (Austen-Smith and Banks 1988; Baron and Ferejohn 1989). So, what is going on?

One possible answer is that although larger parties may be receiving slightly fewer ministerial portfolios than their size would predict, they are getting the more powerful ones such as the prime minister, the finance minister, the foreign minister, or the defense minister. In fact, there is some evidence that this is the case (Warwick and Druckman 2001). Another possible answer, though, has to do with the existence of the vote of no confidence in parliamentary democracies (Indriðason 2010). Rather than give their smaller coalition partners just enough portfolios to make them willing to join the government, large formateur parties may well see it in their interests to give them slightly more portfolios so that they will be less likely to leave the cabinet and trigger a vote of no confidence at a later point in time. By doing this, large formateur parties can expect to receive a slightly smaller share of the overall cabinet pie, but for a longer period of time (Penn 2009). Evidence for this line of reasoning comes from Buttard and Golder (2011), who looked at portfolio allocation at the national and subnational level in France. Although the vote of no confidence exists for governments at the national level in France, this is not the case for governments at the regional level. In line with their predictions, Buttard and Golder found that smaller parties received a greater share of portfolios at the national level where the existence of the vote of no confidence means that large formateur parties must worry about government survival than at the regional level where the vote of no confidence is absent and large formateur parties do not need to worry about government survival.