

1

Introduction

What difference does the form of government make for the chances that a democratic regime will survive? There are two basic forms of democratic governments. In one the government depends on the confidence of the legislature in order to exist. In the other the government, or more precisely its head, serves for a fixed term; thus the executive and the legislature are independent from one another. In systems of the former type, which are parliamentary, a legislative majority may remove the government from office – either by passing a vote of no confidence in the government or by rejecting a vote of confidence initiated by the government. When this happens, one of two things takes place: either a new government is formed on the basis of the existing distribution of legislative seats or, if this proves impossible, new elections are held in the hope that the new seat distribution will be such that a government will become viable (i.e., will not be immediately subject to a vote of no confidence from the legislative majority). In systems of the latter type, which are presidential, no such mechanism exists for removing the government. The head of the government may or may not be chosen by the legislative body, but once chosen he or she serves a fixed term in office: in presidential systems, the head of the government cannot be removed from office even if he or she favors policies opposed by the legislative majority. This book is thus about the impact of parliamentary or presidential institutions on the survival of democracy.

Presidential democracies are considerably more brittle than parliamentary ones. A cursory look around the world will show that there is only one long-lived democracy that is also presidential: the United States. At the same time, Latin America – the region of the world where presidential institutions have dominated since the nineteenth century – is also the region with the highest level of regime instability, understood here as shifts between dictatorship and democracy. The 18 countries that comprise the core of Latin America are home

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy**

to only 9% of the world's population, yet they experienced 37% of the 157 regime transitions that took place between 1946 and 2002. Finally, whereas the expected life of a parliamentary democracy that existed during the 1946–2002 period was 58 years, that of presidential democracies was only 24 years.¹

One of the questions that have driven a great deal of research in recent years is whether the difference in longevity between parliamentary and presidential democracies is due to the intrinsic features of the respective systems or rather to the conditions under which these systems emerged and function. Linz (1978, 1990a,b, 1994) has been the foremost proponent of the first thesis, whereas several scholars have attempted to find exogenous conditions that would account for this difference (see e.g. Shugart and Carey 1992; Power and Gasiorowski 1997; Shugart and Mainwaring 1997; Bernhard, Nordstrom, and Reenock 2001; Fowleraker and Landman 2002).

In explanations based on the intrinsic features of parliamentarism and presidentialism, survival is endogenous to the form of government. Such theories spell out causal chains beginning with the separation of powers that defines presidentialism, derive the claim that this system is prone to irresolvable conflicts, and conclude that such conflicts undermine democratic institutions. Yet, as I will show in this book, attempts to validate endogenous theories have not been successful: at least some of the hypothesized links that need to exist in order for these theories to be true are just not there. However, efforts to find exogenous conditions under which the difference in longevity would disappear have fared no better. Whatever one controls for, a difference in the survival rates of parliamentary and presidential democracies is still there. Hence, the puzzle remains open: either we have not correctly identified the mechanism by which the intrinsic features of democratic institutions affect their longevity, or we have not found the exogenous conditions that account for the observed difference in the survival rate of presidential and parliamentary democracies.

In this book I argue that intrinsic features of presidentialism are not the reason why presidential democracies are more prone to break down. On the basis of an original data set covering all democratic regimes that existed between 1946 and 2002, I show that the alleged consequences of presidential institutions are either not observed or not sufficient to account for the difference in the survival prospects of presidential and parliamentary democracies. In line with those who have advanced “exogenous” explanations, I claim that what causes presidential democracies’ brittleness is the fact that presidential institutions have been

¹ The probability that a parliamentary democracy would die at any time during the 1946–2002 period was 0.0171, against 0.0416 for a presidential democracy.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

adopted in countries where any form of democracy is likely to perish. Existing work has singled out the level of economic development in addition to the size of the country and its geographic location as explanatory factors for the higher instability of presidential democracies.² I shall demonstrate that none of these factors, important as some of them may be, is sufficient to account for the variation in the survival rates of parliamentary and presidential democracies.

The reason for the instability of presidential democracies, I argue, lies in the fact that presidential institutions tend to exist in countries that are also more likely to suffer from dictatorships led by the military. I show that there is a nexus between military dictatorships and presidentialism that fully accounts for the differences in democratic survival. Democracies that are preceded by military dictatorships are more unstable than those that are preceded by civilian dictatorships; in turn, presidential democracies are more likely to follow military dictatorships. It is therefore the nexus between militarism and presidentialism, not the inherent institutional features of presidentialism, that explains the higher level of instability of presidential democracies.

In other words, the problem of presidential democracies is not that they are “institutionally flawed.” Rather, the problem is that they tend to exist in societies where democracies of any type are likely to be unstable. Fears stemming from the fact that many new democracies have “chosen” presidential institutions are therefore unfounded. From a strictly institutional point of view, presidentialism can be as stable as parliamentarism. Given that constitutional frameworks, once adopted, are hard to change, it follows that striving to replace them may be wasteful from a political point of view. It would be a misguided use of resources to attempt to change an institutional structure on the grounds of democratic stability when the source of instability has nothing to do with that structure.

Explaining Presidential Instability

The comparative study of political institutions has made large strides in the past two decades as scholars began paying attention not so much to whether democracy would emerge as to the ways in which existing democracies operate. Prompted by the permanence of democracy in many heretofore unstable

² Democracies are unstable in poor countries, and presidential democracies are poorer than parliamentary ones; large countries are hard to govern, and countries with presidential democracies are larger than countries with parliamentary democracies; Latin America is inherently unstable, and the instability of presidentialism is due to the fact that most presidential systems exist in this region of the world.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy**

countries, by a stronger theoretical integration of political science (with theories developed to study institutional structures in the United States and in European democracies finding their way into studies of democracy in developing countries), by the dissemination of institutionalist and rational choice perspectives in the profession, and by technological advances that have allowed the collection and analysis of large databases, many scholars have shifted their attention to “lower-level” institutions: subconstitutional features of a country’s institutional framework that might account for observed political, economic, and social outcomes. In the face of these developments, a focus on the impact of broad constitutional frameworks may seem a bit anachronistic, particularly if one considers that few people today explicitly subscribe to the Linzian view of presidentialism. Is the endogenous theory of presidential instability, the implications of which will be tested in the chapters to come, a straw man?

My answer, of course, is that it is not. There are several reasons why a thorough examination of the leading explanation for the instability of presidential democracies is necessary from both a practical and a theoretical point of view. For one, the empirical puzzle is there – presidential democracies do have shorter lives than parliamentary ones – and, as I will show, the Linzian explanation is unable to account for it. Second, the form of government is probably the most important aspect of how a democracy is to be organized, and debates about it remain a feature of the political landscape in many countries.³ Finally, although an increasing number of scholars claim not to agree with the Linzian framework, the notion continues to loom large that presidential systems are inherently ungovernable, structurally problematic, likely to generate crises, chronically incapable of dealing with crises once they erupt, and hence bad for the consolidation of democracy. Thus Valenzuela (2004), for example, believes that the presence of presidential institutions is at the root of Latin America’s recent “failed” presidencies. Lijphart (2000), in turn, is optimistic about the prospects of democracy in the twenty-first century as long as the lessons drawn from the twentieth century – including that about “the danger of presidential governments” (p. 21) – are accepted. For O’Donnell (1994), presidential institutions are at the heart of the descent of many Latin American regimes into “delegative” democracy. Van de Walle (2003) lists presidentialism as one of the causes of the weak political parties found in Africa’s recently established competitive systems. Fish (2001) identifies “superpresidentialism” as one of the main causes of “the degradation

³ It re-emerged in Brazil in 2005 in the wake of the corruption charges waged against the Worker’s Party and the Lula government. The possibility of changing the system away from presidentialism is also being discussed in Argentina, Colombia, Indonesia, Mexico, and the Philippines.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

of Russian politics,” a view that is extended by himself and others to many post-Soviet regimes. For Samuels and Eaton (2002:22), minority government under presidentialism “tends to further increase the probability of presidential collapse.” For Shugart and Haggard (2001:82), divided government, which is possible under presidentialism but not under parliamentarism, increases “the potential for stalemate.”

The examples can go on. Shugart and Carey (1992), who must be credited with calling our attention to the fact that presidential regimes are not all alike, remain within the Linzian framework insofar as their work presupposes an inherently conflictual relationship between the executive and the legislature in presidential regimes. It is this view that leads them to believe that regimes whose constitutions endow presidents with considerable legislative powers have a greater probability of breaking down. Strong presidents, they argue, have the institutional means to impose their will on congress and, for this reason, will have fewer incentives to negotiate with the legislature. Paralysis and crisis become more likely. Weak presidents, in turn, know that they have no alternative but to negotiate with congress. Thus, interbranch conflict dominates cooperation and the possibility is not considered that presidents with strong legislative powers may operate, much like prime ministers in parliamentary systems, as organizers (and not antagonists) of the majority.

We find traces of the traditional view of presidential and parliamentary systems even in Tsebelis’s work on veto players, work that was motivated by a desire to overcome the pairwise structure of institutional analyses and to provide a “consistent framework for comparisons across regimes, legislature and party systems” (1995:292; see also Tsebelis 2002). Thus, the consequences of policy stability, which is determined by the number of veto players in a system, is a function of the broad constitutional framework. In parliamentary systems, policy stability is associated with government instability because governments that have become immobile may be changed through constitutional means (a vote of no confidence); in regimes where “government change is impossible (except for fixed intervals like in presidential systems), policy immobilism may lead to the replacement of the leadership through extra-constitutional means (regime instability)” (p. 321).

It is clear from these examples that the notion of presidential regimes undermining democracy is alive and well in the comparative literature. Although not explicitly elaborated, the reasons are invariably related to presidentialism’s defining feature – the separation of executive and legislative powers – and the difficulties that are supposed to follow from it. The sense that there is something inherently problematic about presidential institutions, something that needs to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

be neutralized in order for the system to operate properly and generate positive outcomes, is as present in the comparative analysis of institutions today as it was twenty years ago.

The goal of this book is to make a strong statement that this view is not defensible. One of the book's main messages is that there is nothing wrong with presidential institutions per se. Or, to be more precise, presidential institutions do not cause the instability of presidential democracies. This conclusion will follow from a detailed examination of the implications of the so-called Linzian view. As will become clear, this view generates specific empirical predictions about the operation of presidential systems. If this view is correct, then: incentives for coalition formation in presidential democracies will be minimal or nonexistent; we will rarely observe coalition governments in presidential democracies or, if we do, they will be flimsy and ephemeral; presidents who do not form coalitions to govern and/or whose governments do not reach majority status should be unable to see their legislative agenda approved in congress; and, most importantly, presidential systems that produce such presidents will be much more likely to die – to become dictatorships – than presidential systems that are governed by presidents who belong to majority parties. As I will show in the chapters to follow, these implications find no support in the evidence and thus call into question the validity of the theory that underlies them: although presidential democracies are more unstable than parliamentary ones, this is not because presidential institutions provide the wrong type of incentives for democratic consolidation.

Part of the value of this book, therefore, lies in its systematic refutation of the leading explanation for the higher level of instability of presidential democracies; in this sense it establishes a “negative finding.” Yet there are several positive things about how presidential democracies work that we learn in the process of subjecting the Linzian view to empirical testing. Thus, we learn about the conditions under which presidents will make coalition offers and the conditions under which parties will accept them, and we learn that the rate of coalition formation is lower in presidential democracies than in parliamentary ones but that it is higher than what we would have expected under the prevailing theory. We also learn that presidential democracies are able to survive as such under all sorts of governmental configurations and that minority presidential governments do as well legislatively as majority coalition ones; we see how the legislative powers of the president vary across presidential constitutions and how there is a wide range of configuration of constitutional presidential powers under which presidential democracies survive; and we learn that party discipline in presidential democracies can be enforced by mechanisms other than the parliamentary democracy's vote of no confidence. In sum, as we test and reject a theory based

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

on the deleterious effect of presidential institutions on the survival of democracy, we are able to learn quite a bit about how presidential democracies actually operate.

But that is not all. In this book I also propose an alternative to the Linzian explanation of presidential instability. I suggest that the instability of presidential democracies is due to the fact that we observe presidential institutions in countries where democracy of any type would be unstable. Thus, I argue, it is not the institution itself but rather the conditions under which it exists that leads to the instability of presidential democracies. I provide some evidence in support of this explanation, but my main concern is more with clearly and precisely formulating the theory than with testing all its implications. This choice does not come from the belief that such testing is not necessary, as I do hope the theory of presidential instability proposed in this book will be the object of an examination no less meticulous than the one I perform of the Linzian view. However, before we proceed with building new theories we must be sure that the path is clear of old ones, and it is toward that end that I have devoted a significant part of the resources available to me.

The Pitfalls of Presidentialism: The Linzian View

Most (if not all) of the arguments claiming the existence of a causal relationship between presidentialism and the instability of democracy are based on the work of Juan Linz. The point of departure of Linz and his many followers is that the separation of powers that defines presidentialism implies a relationship of “mutual independence” between the executive and the legislature, which contrasts with the relationship of “mutual dependence” that is presumed to characterize executive–legislative relations under parliamentarism (Stepan and Skach 1993). Thus, it all starts with the separation of powers that defines presidentialism and, through a series of implications that are summarized in Figure 1.1, ends with the breakdown of democratic regimes.

Incentives for Coalition Formation

Presidential constitutions, contrary to parliamentary ones, are supposed to provide few or no incentives for coalition formation. According to Mainwaring and Scully (1995:33), they “lack the institutionalized mechanisms of coalition building that exist in parliamentary democracy.” For Linz and Stepan (1996:181), “parliamentarism over time develops many incentives to produce coalitional majorities” whereas “presidentialism has far fewer coalition-inducing incentives.”

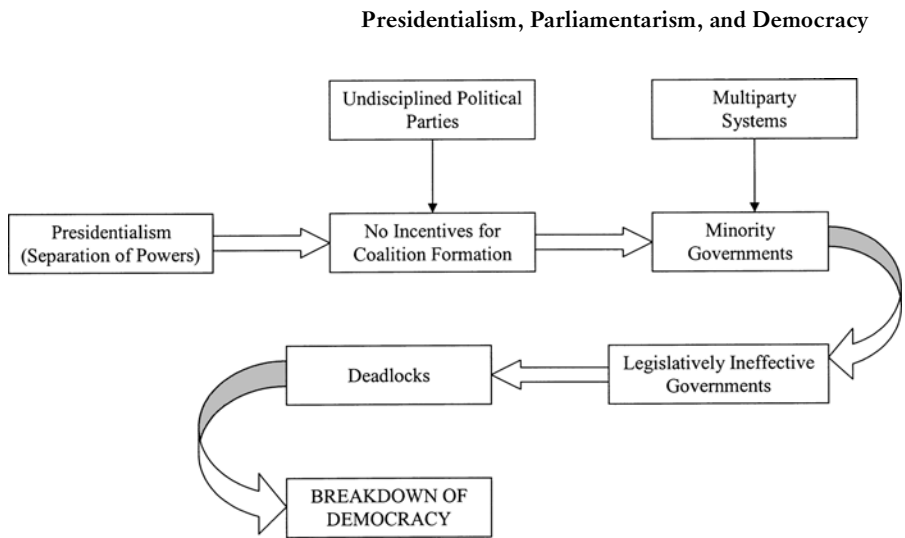


Figure 1.1 From Presidentialism to the Breakdown of Democracy.

For Valenzuela (2004:16), “parliamentary regimes are based on a political logic that urges cooperation and consensus within the context of coherent policies” yet “the underlying logic of presidentialism is far more conflict-prone.”

There are three reasons why presidential democracies would lack incentives for coalition formation. The first follows directly from the principle of separation of powers: because the president’s survival in office does not depend on any kind of legislative support, a president need not seek the cooperation of political parties other than his or her own; moreover, parties are not committed to supporting a government even if they join it. As Mainwaring and Scully (1995:33) put it:

in [parliamentary systems] party coalitions generally take place after the election and are binding; in [presidential systems] they are often arranged before the election and are less binding after it. Executive power is not formed through post-election agreements among parties and is not divided among several parties that are responsible for governing, even though members of several parties often participate in cabinets. Parties or individual legislators can join the opposition without bringing down the government, so a president can finish her/his term with little congressional support.

Second, the nature of presidential elections also gives presidents incentives to avoid seeking cooperation. Cooperation requires compromises and possibly the modification of one’s position in order to accommodate eventual partners, a situation that presidents may well resist. Presidents, after all, run in national districts – unlike legislators, who often have a more parochial base of representation.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Presidents are thus in a position to claim that they are the rightful interpreters of the national interest, superseding legislators' partial and parochial perspectives. Because presidents believe they have independent authority and a popular mandate,⁴ they may view the opposition as irksome and demoralizing and hence may be less inclined to seek its cooperation when needed (Linz 1994). Thus, when it comes to survival in office, presidents' independence of the legislature – combined with the nationwide character of the presidential election – inflates their sense of power and makes them overestimate their ability to govern alone.

Finally, presidential politics is a zero-sum, winner-take-all affair, which is hardly conducive to cooperation or coalition formation. In presidential regimes the presidency is the highest prize in the political process. Because the presidency is occupied by a single person, it is not divisible for the purposes of coalition formation. As Lijphart (2004:7) puts it: "Parliamentary systems have collective or collegial executives whereas presidential systems have one-person, non-collegial executives." As a consequence, "the winning candidate wins all of the executive power that is concentrated in the presidency and it is 'loser loses all' for the defeated candidate, who usually ends up with no political office at all and often disappears from the political scene altogether" (p. 8). Politics, therefore, revolves around capturing the presidency to the exclusion of other political parties. Parliamentary politics is cabinet politics and, as a consequence, the government can be partitioned to accommodate a plurality of political parties. In contrast to presidentialism, politics under parliamentarism is best characterized as a mixed-motive, positive-sum game among political parties.

For these reasons, coalitions are difficult to form and do form "only exceptionally" (Linz 1994:19) under presidentialism (Mainwaring 1990; Stepan and Skach 1993:20; Linz and Stepan 1996:181). As Niño (1996:169) puts it, presidentialism "operates against the formation of coalitions"; for this reason, according to Huang (1997:138), "the very notion of majority government is problematic in presidential systems without a majority party."

Party Discipline

Even if coalitions were to form under presidentialism, they would be fragile and composed of undisciplined parties incapable of offering reliable legislative support to the government. According to Huang (1997:139), the absence of

⁴ As Hartlyn (1994:222) wrote: "Presidents, even minority ones, as both holders of executive power and symbolic heads of state, are more likely to perceive their election as a mandate, even as popular expectations by their supporters may also be greater due to their plebiscitarian relationship."

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-83467-4 - Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

Jose Antonio Cheibub

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy**

disciplined parties is “an unavoidable result of a presidential system.” Likewise, for Linz (1994:35), “the idea of a more disciplined and ‘responsible’ party system is structurally in conflict, if not incompatible, with pure presidentialism.” For him, “the weakness of parties in many Latin American democracies ... is not unrelated to the presidential system but, rather, [is] a consequence of the system” (p. 35). He concludes this aspect of his analysis by stating that, “while the incentive structure in parliamentary systems encourages party discipline and therefore consolidation of party organizations, presidential systems have no such incentives for party loyalty (except where there are well-structured ideological parties)” (pp. 41–2).

The key to this argument is the notion that the threat of government dissolution and early elections – absent, by design, in presidentialism – is necessary and sufficient to induce party discipline. Under parliamentarism, undisciplined parties may mean a failure to obtain majority support in parliament, the defeat of government bills, and consequently the fall of the government. In order to remain in government, political parties enforce discipline so that their members in parliament can be counted on to support the bills proposed by the government. Individual legislators, in turn, have an incentive to support the government in order to prevent the occurrence of early elections in which they might lose their positions. Under presidentialism, since the government and the legislature are independently constituted, office-seeking political parties have no reason to impose discipline on their members; their survival in office does not depend on the result of any particular vote in the legislature. Individual members of congress also lack any incentive to accept the discipline of political parties (if they were to try imposing it) since there is no provision for early elections that could remove the wayward representatives from office.

Thus, given office-seeking politicians, the fusion of power that characterizes parliamentary regimes generates incentives for individual legislators and political parties to cooperate with the government, resulting in a high level of party discipline. The separation of powers that characterizes presidentialism, on the contrary, implies low levels of party discipline. Even a president lucky enough to belong to a party that controlled a majority of congressional seats could not necessarily count on the support of that majority when governing.

Minority Governments

In the Linzian framework, we have seen that parliamentary regimes are supposed to foster cooperation whereas presidential regimes encourage independence. Under parliamentarism, political parties have an incentive to cooperate