

Understanding Semi-Presidentialism in Political Science: A Review of the Latest Debate

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Abstract: In the article, a critical review of the most recent debate on semi-presidentialism in political science is presented. The author focuses on five controversial problems: the interpretation of semi-presidentialism as a unique system that differs from presidentialism and parliamentarism; the new view of semi-presidentialism as a form of government with constitutional characteristics and informal political practices; the idea that president-parliamentarism is a risk to the survival of democracy; the firm conviction regarding the negative implications of cohabitation under semi-presidentialism; and the discussion surrounding the role of a strong presidency in a situation of divided minority government and young semi-presidentialism.

Key words: Semi-presidentialism • Form of government • Constitution • Premier-presidentialism • President-parliamentarism • Cohabitation • Divided minority government • Presidency

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, researchers' interest in semi-presidential systems, which, in Shugart's words, are 'a regime type whose time has come' [1, p. 344], has increased. This is due primarily to the popularity of this form of government among institutional 'architects' and political 'engineers'. The first scientific work in this area of research, in which M. Duverger identified semi-presidentialism as a special and separate form of government, came in 1980 [2]. In the early 1990s, G. Sartori, M. S. Shugart and J. M. Carey [3; 4] also turned their attention to this system. The following decade brought a wealth of works (including monographs and dissertations) analysing semi-presidentialism, such as a series of books edited by R. Elgie [5-8] and C. Skach's monograph devoted to a comparative analysis of two semi-presidential systems, those of Weimar Germany and France [9]. One of the last interesting and profound works on this topic is T. Sedelius's book [10].

The main discussions about semi-presidentialism can be grouped into five major themes.

Does semi-presidentialism exist? Several authors oppose viewing semi-presidentialism as a unique form of government. Among these critics is A. Lijphart, who emphasises that 'most systems that appear semi-presidential can be classified either as mainly presidential

or as mainly parliamentary; hence the semi-presidential category becomes a nearly empty cell' [11, p. 127; 12, p. 121-123]. He is echoed by A. Siaroff, who states 'there is really no such thing as a semi-presidential system when viewed through the prism of presidential powers' [13, p. 307].

G. Sartori categorically disagrees with this interpretation of semi-presidentialism: 'To conceive semi-presidentialism as an alternation between two other species amounts to blowing apart the integrated nature of the system and indeed asserts that here we do not have a veritable *system*' [3, p. 124]. He offers to modify the notion of alternation between the two systems by using the term 'oscillation': 'for alternation suggests a passage from one thing to another, while oscillation is a within-system movement'; 'in oscillation something remains itself' [3, p. 124]. R. Elgie notes that semi-presidential countries 'simply exhibit various forms of political practice within the same basic constitutional structure and, in this sense, within the same regime type. In this way, semi-presidential regimes are just as 'pure' as presidential or parliamentary regimes which also exhibit equally varying forms of political practice at different times' [5, p. 8].

Indeed, if we consider a form of government to be a stable constitutional characteristic of power, it is obvious that it cannot simply be changed following elections, as this would imply a change in the balance of political

forces in parliament and government. If we proceed from the premise that a form of government is the actual relationship between the executive and legislative branches established in practice (A. Lijphart insists on this), which radically changes after elections, the characteristics of the 'presidential' and 'parliamentary' are meaningless.

Can we detect semi-presidentialism only in a constitution? Despite the fact that the concept of 'semi-presidentialism' has existed in political science for over three decades, there is still no consensus regarding this form of government and which countries can be considered to fall under semi-presidentialism. Discrepancies between authors are associated with different approaches to forms of government. Most researchers believe that reading a constitution is enough to make an objective judgment as to whether a country is presidential, parliamentary or semi-presidential [14, p. 2-3]. Thus, a semi-presidential regime is defined as 'the situation where a popularly elected fixed-term president exists alongside a prime minister and cabinet who are responsible to parliament' [5, p.13]. Semi-presidentialism is understood in this way in virtually in all recent works [for example, see: 15, 2009, p. 875].

Other researchers propose assessing the real amount of power wielded by the president and the prime minister in practice, relying on the regime's behavioural rather than institutional characteristics. If the president is powerful and the prime minister is weak (despite the fact that the government is responsible to the legislature), the country falls under a presidential system, as is the case in Russia. In contrast, in the situation of a ceremonial president (despite being popularly elected) and 'strong' prime minister, we should classify this as a parliamentary system, as in, for example, Austria.

Indeed, in determining the form of government in a given country, we should most likely rely on the actual relationships that develop between the institutions and not on the text of the constitution. G. Sartori rightly notes that the material constitution takes precedence over the formal constitution since 'a "dead element" surely cannot establish the nature of a political form and the class to which it belongs' [3, p. 126]. This approach seems more suitable to exploring the forms of government in post-Soviet states, where informal practices play an important role.

J.A. Cheibub rightly notes that 'constitutional features are not sufficient to distinguish mixed systems, in which the president "really" matters from those in

which the president plays no significant role in politics. It is intriguing to observe why similarly designed constitutions entail practices that are as divergent as the ones we observe in Iceland, Austria, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, France, Iceland, Madagascar, Russia and the Ukraine' [16, p. 20].

Today, a new view of forms of government (with semi-presidentialism being no exception) has appeared in political science; specifically, a form of government is not only (and sometimes not so much) the constitutional and legal characteristics of power, but is also a set of informal practices that characterise the relationships within the triangle of 'the head of state – parliament – the government'.

First, the form of government is not only a legal, but also a real design. The relationship between the branches of government depends not only on legal regulations, but also on informal political practices. The case of Russia in the period of 'tandem' (2008–2012) is a good example: without changing the constitution, power 'flowed' from President Medvedev to Prime Minister Putin. Secondly, there may be major differences between the constitution and actual practice: a semi-presidential system in post-Soviet countries actually grew into a superpresidential one. Third, we need to talk about the process of political institutionalisation of a form of government, which is a relatively long process by which government acquires value and sustainability. Fourth, we should note that the design of the form of government requires the creation of the mechanism of its functioning in practice and without such a mechanism a form of government does not work [17, p. 204].

Which subtype of semi-presidentialism is a risk to the survival of democracy? The problems related to subtypes (classes) of the semi-presidential system and the results of these various forms have been much discussed in political science recently [14, p. 265]. Basically, the authors use the classification presented by M. S. Shugart and J. M. Carey, who identify the premier-presidential and president-parliamentary regimes [4]. The premier-presidential system is characterised by the dependence of the cabinet upon the assembly and under the president-parliamentary system the president and the parliament have authority over the composition of cabinet (dual cabinet responsibility to the parliament and the president). In contrast, the president-parliamentary system features a large degree of legislative powers in the hands of the president, as well as presidential powers to form and shift government.

Researchers have found that president-parliamentarism has negative effects on democratic performance and democratic survival [8, p. 189]. S. Moestrup shows that in Africa, 'a much higher degree of democratic breakdown among president-parliamentary than premier-presidential systems: only 20 per cent of president-parliamentary democracies survived, compared to 60 per cent of premier-presidential democracies' [14, p. 266]. The reason for this is that under premier-presidentialism 'the president does not have the power to dismiss the government and the president can only govern through the executive with the support of the legislature. Therefore, there is an incentive for the president to work with the legislature to reach a political deal. By contrast, under president-parliamentarism, where the government is responsible to both the president and the legislature, there is little incentive to broker a comprehensive deal ... With so few incentives for cooperation between the president and the legislature, there is likely to be instability that can be damaging for democratic performance' [8, p. 2].

However, it is not assumed that states with a president-parliamentary form of government have a tradition of concentrating power in the hands of a leader, authoritarian history and undeveloped democratic institutions.

Is cohabitation the 'Achilles heel' of semi-presidentialism? Most political scientists consider that cohabitation (the situation in which the president and prime minister, supported by the majority of parliament, belong to different political parties) leads to tensions between the president and prime minister, a deadlock of power and even to government paralysis. M. S. Shugart and J. M. Carey discuss 'the perils of cohabitation': in a situation in which the president, on the one hand and a cabinet with assembly support on the other 'fail to recognize the claims to executive authority made by the other, cohabitation could generate regime crisis', especially in a president-parliamentary system [4, p. 56-57]. However, R. Elgie and McMenamin have analysed individual cases and demonstrated that there is no evidence to support the argument about the harmful effects of cohabitation [18].

In a situation of cohabitation, when the president and the prime minister belong to different political parties, the risk of conflict between them increases. If the president is guided by the principle of French Gaullist politician Jacques Chaban-Delmas 'President presidentializes and the government rules', then there is no foreseeable

problem. If, however, the president would actively 'infringe' on government policy and behave in opposition to the cabinet's ongoing political course, conflicts are inevitable.

Is a strong presidency an *alternative to a divided minority government*? Another problem of semi-presidentialism is the situation in which parliament is highly fragmented and there is no stable and unified majority within it. The formation and operation of the government becomes hard for any actor, be it the president, prime minister or parliament. The president or military may move towards a decree rule in order to overcome the power vacuum; law retreats and democracy is in danger of crumbling. C. Skach calls this situation 'divided minority government': 'neither the president nor the prime minister, nor any party or coalition, enjoys a substantive majority in the legislature' [9, p. 17]. Divided minority government, in the opinion of C. Skach, leads to 'shifting legislative coalitions and government reshuffles, on the one hand and continuous presidential intervention and use of reserved powers' beyond their constitutional limit, for a prolonged period, on the other [9, p. 17-18]. She notes that 'it is from this *impotence* that presidents often attempt to push their constitutional limits, as a substitute for a legislative majority, as the expense of the political parties that are attempting to establish themselves as effective channels between citizens and government'. Thus, 'this is why divided minority government, more than the other subtypes of semi-presidentialism, has greater risk for democratic breakdown' [9, p. 18]. Therefore, C. Skach is seen to oppose semi-presidentialism in young democracies, especially those that do not have a stable party system.

Some researchers do not agree with this argument and indicate the need for the introduction of a president-parliamentary system with a strong president. It should be noted that in the political discourse of most post-Soviet countries, including Russia, the thesis of strong presidential power is widespread [19]. Many politicians and scholars insist that, in the transitional period, Russia needs a strong president and the most appropriate form of government is a presidential or mixed (semi-presidential) model with a president holding considerable powers.

The solution to the problem of the effectiveness of executive power, in my opinion, is not confined to the establishment of a strong presidency. First, a strong prime minister can be as effective as the president in a presidential republic, as evidenced by the activities of the heads of governments in contemporary Western

parliamentary and mixed systems. Secondly, a current worldwide trend is so-called presidentialisation [20], a significant elevation of the role of the prime minister, who resembles the president in a presidential republic. Thirdly, the case of Russian 'tandem' period (Putin – Medvedev) demonstrates that it is not always important to distinguish who the formal centre of power is – the president or the prime minister [17, p. 203].

CONCLUSION

Thus, in the literature, authors indicate that 'the impressive progress that political scientists have made with respect to semi-presidentialism over the last decade' [15, p. 872]. Researchers discuss the pros and cons of semi-presidential systems and different approaches to understanding this form of government, search for the most democratic and effective subtype of semi-presidentialism, rethink cohabitation and try to answer questions regarding the role of strong presidency in young semi-presidential countries. However, despite the expanding research interest and the accumulated body of literature on the problem of semi-presidentialism, this form of government remains an understudied phenomenon of political life in the modern world.

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