

## Parliamentary, Presidential, and Semi-presidential Systems of Government: Representation or Policy-making Effectiveness?

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### *Abstract*

*Perdebatan mengenai tipologi dan stabilitas institusi demokrasi telah berlangsung selama lebih dari 2 dekade. Perdebatan tersebut mendiskusikan dampak dari tipologi institusi demokrasi terhadap proses politik, output kebijakan, dan kinerja ekonomi. Artikel ini menganalisa kekuatan dan kelemahan demokrasi parlementer, demokrasi presidensial, dan demokrasi semi-presidensial dalam kaitannya dengan isu-isu tersebut. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa demokrasi semi-presidensial merupakan pilihan yang paling sesuai guna mencapai berbagai tujuan dari pemerintahan, yang demokratis.*

**Kata-kata Kunci:** *Institusi demokrasi, demokrasi semi-presidensial*

### **Introduction**

The causal relationship between the types of democratic institutions, i.e., parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential democracies,

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and the stability of democracy has been a heated debate for nearly two decades since the circulation of Juan Linz's paper in 1984, "Democracy: Presidential or Parliamentary. Does It Make a Difference?" A great deal of empirical evidence has been submitted ever since and scholars have come to tentatively opposite conclusions. Along the way, some others have stretched out the range of debate by exploring the effects of the types of democratic institutions on political process, policy outputs, and economic performance.

One tentative conclusion says that parliamentary democracy is superior to presidential democracy in terms of the survival of democracy. Most stable democracies – predominantly Western democracies – are parliamentary democracy. However, another view says that presidential system has many virtues that can contribute to the achievement of various democratic goals and does not necessarily lead to the breakdown of democracy.

Equally important is effort to see how different institutional formats affect the governments' ability to deal with problems of conflict management, representativeness, responsiveness, policy-making effectiveness, and the protection of minorities' interests. Endeavors to materialize these multiple democratic goals also deserve the same amount of attention for two reasons. First, they are relatively unexplored sub-field in comparative politics (Weaver and Rockman, 1993; Gunther, 1997). Second, governments' achievements in dealing with these problems are crucial to gain confidence from their people, and accordingly, may contribute to the durability of democracy.

This essay will assess the strengths and weaknesses of three forms of democratic government in dealing with these issues. It is worth noting here that this essay does not go beyond the institutional format as the independent variable. Variables other than institutions are treated as constant.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it focuses on the incentives and disincentives devised by different institutional arrangements that potentially de-

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2 This is not to say that variables other than political institutions do not play a role in the process of achieving all the democratic goals. Several works even conclude that the effect of institutions is minimal (Bunce, 1997; Weaver and Rockman 1993) or depends on its social, economic, and political contexts (Gunther 1997).

termine the governments' success in achieving the democratic goals. An assumption should be made here that political actors are rational. I will argue that the semi-presidential democracy is the most appropriate option for achieving multiple goals of democratic government.

## **Stylized Parliamentarism and Presidentialism:**

### **Incentives and Disincentives**

The five democratic goals mentioned above are not always mutually compatible. Trade-off among them is likely to happen when a democratic government tries to achieve these goals simultaneously. The desire to preserve proportional representation – hence the likelihood that government's policies to be responsive to all competing interests in the society is great – might be detrimental to efforts of making effective economic or political decisions. A broad interparty consensus on policy-making, on the one hand, will turn out to be a logrolling, time-consuming process because it requires a long negotiation among parties; while making and effectively implementing an economic or political policy, on the other, assumes that the government has a certain degree of autonomy from all partisan interests in the assembly. Policy-making effectiveness, to quote Larry Diamond, requires "sufficient concentration and autonomy of power to choose and implement policies with energy and dispatch." (116). And he further describes this dilemma of democracy:

*" ... democratic governments and parties must have some autonomy from group demands in order to make and implement tough decisions. If political parties are too weak or too penetrated by other social groups; if the bureaucracy is a captive of such parties or interests; if the elected government cannot stand above, reconcile, and at times resist interest-group pressures; then that government may be unable to formulate workable policies. Such weakness could produce a regime-threatening crisis of confidence." (117).*

If the essence of democracy is the process of policy-making that involves all segments of society and to be responsive to people's interests, this process entails two dimensions: the degree of representation or inclusion and the content of the policy. Thus the democratic objectives

can all be attributed to these dimensions. The degree of inclusiveness will affect whether a democratic government is able to successfully manage group-conflicts within the assembly or society. The more inclusive the government the greater the likelihood of successful conflict management. Representativeness also strengthens the possibility of policies to become more responsive and to guarantee protection of minorities. Expectedly, the content of the policy will be close to these ideals. Every policy goes through a bargaining process among parties and ends with a consensus among them on various policy issues.

The remaining problem is the policy effectiveness. In many cases – predominantly in new democracies – decisiveness can only be obtained at the expense of consensual, democratic process of policy-making. At this point, the different forms of democratic government play a role in achieving the democratic objectives. In brief, parliamentary, presidential, and semi-presidential governments offer different risks and opportunities for accomplishing their democratic objectives.

Linz, the staunchest critic of presidentialism, reiterates that presidentialism is a risk-prone model. The risks of presidentialism can be summarized in Linz's two major criticisms.<sup>3</sup> First is the problem of dual legitimacy inherent in a presidential system of government. Since the president and the parliament (assembly) are both elected by the people, each of them can fully claim a mandate to represent the people. The problem arises when there is conflict between the two, in the case that president's policies are denied or not supported by the majority of the parliament – especially when the president and the majority of the parliament are not from the same party. Thus we expect political deadlock or immobilism will occur because “no democratic principle to resolve [the conflict].” (Linz 1994; Mainwaring 1993). Worse is that if the conflict between the president

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3 It should be noted here that the two democratic types of government compared here are stylized models – following what Linz did. Variations of institutional arrangements in the presidential and parliamentary democracies are relatively overlooked. There are empirical exceptions that contradict with Linz's assessment of the models. For this, Linz argues that he did not attempt an exhaustive analysis. Rather, his concern was about “the likelihood of certain patterns of politics in the most common types of presidential system ...” (Linz, 1996: 155 – Linz's rejoinder as a response to Horowitz criticism that Linz's sample is skewed, drawn from mainly Latin American cases).

and the parliament coincide with the social and ideological polarization within the society, so that the possibility of the breakdown of presidential democracy is paramount. Another risk is that the immobilism may also lead to create the president's tendency to expand power. As a result, there is a risk of the president to turn to become authoritarian.

The second risk of presidential system is the problem of rigidity. Both the president and the assembly are elected for a fixed term. And both of them are independent to each other in terms of their survival. Once the president makes an error judgment or bad policy, the presidential system is not able to sufficiently deal with it because this system does not allow the replacement of the president because his/her term is fixed. The rigidity then is problematic for maintaining democratic stability.

These two weaknesses of presidential system, following Linz's argument, are not likely to occur in the parliamentary system. The power of prime ministers (as the head of state and government altogether) is derived from the parliament, so that if the prime minister loses confidence from the parliament, he or she must surrender his/her power to the parliament. Deadlock therefore can be minimized in the parliamentary system and further constitutional crises can be avoided. Moreover, as Linz put it, "Parliamentarism allows changes in leadership without a regime crisis and continuity without the fears associated with *continuis-mo* in presidential systems." (64). These are the virtues of the parliamentary system. In short, according to Linz, the likelihood of democracy to be stable in a parliamentary system is higher than in a presidential system.

A great deal of empirical evidence support Linz's claim. In the case of Chile, Valenzuela proves that, "... rigidity of presidentialism and the gradual erosion of arenas of accommodation, particularly the legislature, heightened the politics of confrontation..., making it more difficult to negotiate political compromise." (94). Other works by Conaghan (1994) in the case of Ecuador, McClinthock (1994) for Peru, and Mainwaring (1993) for Brazil are also in accordance with Linz's claim. Does the "superiority" of the parliamentary system as described by its supporters guarantee better results for parliamentary systems in achieving the other democratic goals?

On the issue of representation, if we follow Linz's arguments, the parliamentary system seems more promising in preserving it. The very incentive of the parliamentary system is that it encourages a healthy bargaining among political parties in the parliament to come to consensual decisions. In the case of a multi-party system where no party obtains a majority of the seats,<sup>4</sup> it is essential for all parties to cooperate in order to secure the executive power or at least influence the policy-making process. It is the norm that the party with plurality has the right to lead coalition and secure the prime ministerial position. But, most important is that the parties' different interests can be accommodated. We can expect then that government's policy will also take these various interests into account in the policy-making. Protection for minorities is more probable to be accommodated in parliamentary systems. In addition, if the prime minister happens to make bad policies, the parliament secures the constitutional right to replace him. The same process of coalition-building may start again and a new consensus is installed.

In contrast, presidentialism does not offer this kind of incentive. Since the power of presidents derive from the vote of people there is a tendency of the presidents "to assume the mantle of messiah" (McClintock, 1994: 304) and ignore the pluralist politics. Moreover, party and legislative politics are considered irrelevant and "unfit" to policy-making process. A new rational economic arrangement of allocating economic resources may cancel out particular interest of certain groups in the society. This is especially true for new democracies or countries that are facing double transitions – market and democratic transitions. The technocratic nature of economic policies only weighs the problem because it may challenge the interests of parties in the coalition. Presidents who fail to acquire political support from the parliament will find it difficult to execute his/her economic policies.

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4 In assessing the effect of institutions on the achievement of democratic goals, Weaver and Rockman (1993) suggest a model of three-tier level of analysis. Analysis of the first tier focuses on the presidential or parliamentary system; second tier analysis focuses on the government type that includes party system and electoral laws; and, third tier analysis that discusses secondary institutional characteristic, political conditions and policy makers' goal, and socioeconomic conditions (see also Gunther, 1997). This essay mostly deals with the first tier analysis only.

In terms of accommodating diverse interests, presidentialism also has a tendency to exclude "the losers." This is what Lijphart calls the majoritarian tendency in the presidential system (Lijphart, 1994: 91-92). The winner-take-all rule – because the president's power is indivisible – does not provide an opportunity for the defeated parties to participate in the policy-making. As a result, minorities' are not well protected. In dealing with conflict management, the parliamentary system seems to be superior to the presidential system.

So far, the strengths of the parliamentary system and the weaknesses of the presidential system have been highlighted. But this is not to say that presidentialism does not generate opportunities for democracy to develop and to be stable. Neither is the absence of the parliamentarism's weaknesses.

A striking weakness of parliamentarism, I would argue, is the logrolling process of policy-making. The process of gaining consensus in many occasions is a weary, sluggish process – especially in a multiparty-system. It is time-consuming since parties in the coalition have to negotiate their political agendas that are not always compatible to each other. True that one of the coalition theories suggests that the coalition will form among parties that have more or less similar ideology – in addition to fulfilling the minimum winning size (Powell, 1982; Lijphart, 1984). However, it is not always the case in non-Western democracies. This problem becomes central in new democracies because of the "nonbargaining" culture of [political] parties" (Bunce, 1997: 172). Predictably, the policy-making effectiveness in the parliamentary system turns out to be problematic. Stated differently, the degree of decisiveness of the government in the parliamentary system is likely to be low.

In contrast, the presidential system can compensate this drawback. The independency of the president makes him/her able to impose policies for the sake of decisiveness. Here, Mettenheim (1997) points out the virtues of presidentialism:<sup>5</sup>

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5 Kurt von Mettenheim provides a solid theoretical ground for why the presidentialism should be defended. The legacy of political theories, from Plato to Locke to Montesquieu to American Federalists suggests a view that sees the importance of the idea of division of power. The division of power function as a check-balance mechanism in political process. A "unified

*"... presidentialism can reconcile the heady popular appeals of mass democracy with more sober liberal notions of indirect representation; that direct executive elections can generate significant political change through critical elections and party realignment; and that, once elected, presidents can deftly renegotiate legislative coalitions because they are free to appoint professional politicians to administrative posts." (p. 136).*

With his/her independency from the parliament, a president is able to make political maneuvers, overcoming the sluggish political process. Thus, the presidential system provides multiple opportunities for the achievement of democratic goals. This system gives the president a tool to introduce policy innovations while imposing losses on powerful groups. This strength of presidentialism will play a crucial role when the country is facing simultaneously economic transition towards a market economy and democratic transition (Bunce, 1997: 172-76).

A radical change from a heavily planned-economy to a market economy will unavoidably eliminate the economic privilege previously enjoyed by certain groups. Thus any government's policies will find a serious challenge from these groups. Without a degree of autonomy, the government will not be able to impose losses to them in political as well as economic terms. The same holds true for economic reforms taken by Latin American countries. In addition, the presidential system also offers another opportunity to overcome the problem of severe partisanship in a conflict-ridden situation. Presidents can be a "unifying symbol" when conflict between parties emerges – an important factor that is usually overlooked by the supporters of the parliamentary system. Here, the weaknesses of the presidential system as viewed by its critics, in certain circumstances, can be the source of opportunity. In other cases, when the parliament is weak, the presidential system may become an appropriate option.

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government" in which the parliament is the sole agent of power can preclude the interest of minorities and may lead to the abuse of power. Presidentialism then institutionalize the checks and balances mechanism (pp.4-6).



Considering all the virtues of the presidential system, it seems to me that the presidential system is not necessarily always inferior to the parliamentary system. Each system has its strengths and shortcomings. The question is, is it possible to combine the strengths of the two systems into a single system?

### **Semi-Presidential**

One of the characteristics of this system, according to Linz, is the existence of dual executive: It has a president and a prime minister. Based on the case of French's Fifth Republic, Linz adds two more characteristics that the president is directly or indirectly elected by the people; and that the tenure of the prime minister depends on the confidence of the parliament. In addition to these characteristics is that the president appoints the prime minister and cabinet member with the support of the parliament. The president also secures the power to dissolve parliament (Linz, 1994: 48). Shugart and Carey also use these defining criteria of semi-presidential system for what they call premier-presidential and president-parliamentary systems. The difference between these two is the right of the president to dissolve the parliament. President in the premier-presidential system cannot dissolve the parliament while in the president-parliament the president can (Shugart and Carey: 1992: 23-27).

The weakness of the semi-presidential system is that the personality and the abilities of the president play a very crucial role in maintaining democracy (Linz, 1994: 48). That the president is elected for a fixed term and that the president secures a popular legitimacy create the same problem of immobilism just as the pure presidential system does. Accordingly, consensus is difficult to achieve from which the problem of representation may emerge. In short, summarizing the critics's remarks, the semi-presidential system will also suffer from the same weakness as the presidentialism's.

However, I would argue, this kind of problem is not unavoidable. If dual legitimacy is a problem in a pure presidential system, a degree of flexibility offered by semi-presidential system provides moderation. The prime minister can bridge agendas from both sides, the president and the parliament. Thus we can expect that immobilism or political deadlock

can be relatively minimized. The unique position of the prime minister makes the semi-presidential system able to accommodate various interests in the process of policy-making and, at the same time, to minimize the logrolling legislative process. Theoretically, the semi-presidential model of government offers an interesting option that meets contradictory democratic objectives.

The Fifth Republic of French can be an empirical model for this case.<sup>6</sup> This is the case that proves the possibility of a stable and workable semi-presidential system and may become a model for new democracies (or old Latin American democracies marked by populism) to achieve various democratic goals. The strong populism in Latin America may not be ignored. Mettenheim's paraphrase as quoted earlier may additionally support this line of argument: the semi-presidential system fits the popular appeal of mass democracy. In other words, particular contexts and problems where a democratic system of government works will determine whether a type of institutional format provides more opportunities for achieving various democratic goals.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I argue that the basic principle of presidential government is worth preserving. The endeavors to achieve the democratic goals that are not always mutually compatible can partly be enhanced through the semi-presidential system.

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6 Juan Linz actually discussed the Fifth Republic of French in a relatively detailed manner. He contends that the stability of the republic is not solely caused by the virtues of semi-presidential system. But it is due to many non institutional factors such as the international context (the breakdown of communist regimes) and the evolutionary changes of the Fifth Republic's institutional arrangement. In several points, I do not agree with his arguments.

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