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Survival of Democracy in Parliamentary and Presidential Systems

Rachel James

Abstract

Survival of democracy is a key question in the creation and maintenance of governing structures, with Presidential and Parliamentary being two of the more common systems. This paper investigates the characteristics of a well-functioning democracy: political stability, human development, and economic performance to see which system might best serve this function, while also addressing a potential error made in comparative politics regarding a selection bias in the normal analysis of these nation cases.

The presidential and parliamentary systems differ in their own ways regarding governing structure and the salient distinction of a constitutionally vested power. However, the question of one system being better suited for the survival of democracy over the other is not a new one. With a multitude of factors to consider, comparative scientists often focus on the core features of the systems to gain an idea of ranking. Through the analysis of the three main areas of a well-functioning democracy—political stability, human development, and economic performance—the benefits, as well as the consequences, of both systems become evident. This research makes no claim to an exact answer nor attributes a set winner but does look into key characteristics that tend to improve a nation’s chances of a healthy, stable democracy and the nuances that come with discussing these two different systems’ applications.

The areas of evaluation are important when discussing the two systems in terms of survival of democracy. With so many elements of a nation’s life affected by their governing structure, it was imperative to pare down these elements to core areas that can be empirically studied and therefore, are a better fit for this analysis. The section over political stability addresses the debate over maintenance of the status quo versus the flux of everchanging politics, the nature of coalition building, and crisis response. Human development branches into human rights questions involving access to information, morality rates as well as addressing smaller party representation. Lastly, economic performance focuses on the benefits each system has in stimulating growth and controlling market volatility.

Before moving forward, it is important to explain briefly the key differences between the two systems. To begin, presidentialism has an executive that is selected through an election, for example through the electoral college in the United States’ case. This executive, in theory, could be of an opposite party than that of the majority in the legislative. The executive is a separate

branch of government than the legislative. It is also important to note that when discussing parliamentary systems, this research focuses mainly on the Westminster model in Europe as little research exists for countries in Asia, especially regarding survival of democracy. In a parliamentary system, representatives serve their constituencies, and they are who make up Parliament. The leader of whatever party wins the majority is who is Prime Minister. This role has no term limits, and the Prime Minister is tasked with forming a government. This government tends to set the tone for what bills are to be proposed and passed in a session as representatives are also part of the government. Whereas in a presidential system, they are separate. As will be discussed later, this core difference in executive structure and the role of the government in the legislative process is a key factor in the stability and function of the systems.

Political stability is a vital factor in the survival of a democracy. How the government reacts to the sudden changes in politics, how they build coalitions with opposition parties and how they are in turn, equipped to react to crisis is based off the initial structure of the system. The debate over maintaining the status quo versus responding to the ever-changing politics of a nation is ongoing. With some advocating for the political stability that comes with steady behavior from key political actors, while others believe that very status quo is the issue. Proponents of a parliamentary system say that the core goal is to adapt to the changing demands of a government, as “the only consequential difference between these two constitutional molds is that one system (presidentialism), by virtue of greater institutional fragmentation, offers greater resistance to change.”¹ A parliamentary system is more flexible and responsive, utilizing tools such as urgent questions, immediate issues can be addressed by the government.

¹ Gerring, J., Thacker, S., & Moreno, C. (2008). Are Parliamentary Systems Better?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(3), 327-359. doi: 10.1177/0010414008325573

There is also the issue of the ability for parties to form coalitions and work through gridlock. In a presidential system, there are no incentives to work through gridlock. Those in opposition are worried about their own re-elections and are willing to block things in hopes of the majority changing in the next cycle. Under presidential regimes, a key factor for why majority coalitions cannot be formed is the cost-benefit analysis the opposition runs:

If the opposition believes that its vote share will increase in the next elections, it may be willing to stay out of the government, in which case a majority of legislators unite against the president and the president remains in office for the duration of the term. This is an outcome that is structurally unavailable under parliamentarism.²

The desire to form the necessary grand coalitions is simply not there in a presidential system. Coalitions in presidential systems are difficult because the system itself is not set up to encourage cooperation among party or governing lines. Furthermore, if it were, the coalitions would still be much smaller simply because of the nature of presidential systems.

This inability to work together brings in the gridlock question. Presidentialism is based on the notion of the executive and the legislative branch's ability to come to agreements. That being said, there are vulnerabilities that allow for gridlock, such as government shutdowns that last for long periods of time. In a parliamentary system, they are structurally set up so that the government and the legislative overlap, preventing that gridlock, "the cabinet is accountable to the elected assembly and can be discharged by a vote of no-confidence-deadlock between the two branches can be avoided and its ability to make public policy can be enhanced... control over

² Limongi, F., & Cheibub, J. (2002). Democratic Institutions and Regime Survival: Parliamentary and Presidential Democracies Reconsidered. Retrieved 9 February 2020, from <http://www.columbia.edu/~gjl10/CheibubLimongi.pdf>

the bureaucracy is strengthened by the fusion of powers; officials are responsible to an integrated center of authority.”³ This fusion helps keep order and accountability when it comes to party coalition and keeps the legislature from derailing. That centralized power setting the policy tone shows that “lack of coordination on policy-making and the probability of deadlock increase with the decentralization of the decision-making process. Often, we find parliamentary regimes that have a centralized decision-making process, one in which the executive has the monopoly over the policy agenda.”⁴

Lastly, this all ties into each systems ability to respond to crisis. This aspect seems to favor presidentialism as the parliamentary system lacks the important check of term limits to help in the case of grievances with the executive. “Since there is no inherent mechanism to stabilize the government in a parliamentary system (such as fixed terms), government instabilities may induce extra-constitutional measures to resolve the crisis,” for example, in Thailand, there is a correlation between grievances and attempts ousting the incumbent government through votes of no confidence and the coups that followed.⁵

The area of human development investigates whether these systems allow for robust access to information necessary for a well-informed decision at the ballot box. When the executive and legislative are separate, some argue that this increases the amount of information available. When the government is intrinsically tied to the legislative, there are limits to what

³ Riggs, F. (1997). Presidentialism versus Parliamentarism: Implications for Representativeness and Legitimacy. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique*, 18(3), 253-278. Retrieved February 8, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/1601343

⁴ Limongi, F., & Cheibub, J. (2002). Democratic Institutions and Regime Survival: Parliamentary and Presidential Democracies Reconsidered. Retrieved 9 February 2020, from <http://www.columbia.edu/~gjlw10/CheibubLimongi.pdf>

⁵ Hiroi, T., & Omori, S. (2009). Perils of parliamentarism? Political systems and the stability of democracy revisited. *Democratization*, 16(3), 485-507. doi: 10.1080/13510340902884598

will be published whereas “advocates of presidentialism rightly point out that the division of power between executive and legislature creates an information-rich environment. Each branch has an incentive, and the requisite constitutional authority, to investigate the other branch; each also has an incentive to publicize (either by formal proclamation or informal leaks) information favorable to the achievement of its political power and policy preferences.”⁶ Research also looks at the presidential system’s core control mechanism of term limits and how it is argued to help increase the autonomy of voters:

Presidential term limits are important because they affect the link between the president and voters. Elections are normally considered to be one of the most important instruments to induce governments to act in the interests of voters. This is how it is supposed to work: anticipating voters’ future judgment of their past performance, politicians are induced to pursue the interests of voters in order to be re-elected. Whether elections are actually sufficient to induce this kind of behavior on the part of politicians is a controversial matter.⁷

While the jury is still out on the direct connection between term limits, elections, and behavior of elected officials, presidentialism does have the benefit of the executive only being able to serve for a set amount of time. The ability for the executive to be of a different party than the majority in the legislature means that officials are at least cognizant of the chance to flip the executive and therefore, base their behavior on their hopes of that. This is also true in

⁶ Gerring, J., Thacker, S., & Moreno, C. (2008). Are Parliamentary Systems Better?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(3), 327-359. doi: 10.1177/0010414008325573

⁷ Cheibub, J. (2003). Systems of Government: Parliamentarism and Presidentialism. Retrieved from https://cic.nyu.edu/sites/default/files/en_cheibub_sys_gov_parl_pres.pdf

parliamentary system as at any moment, a new party could become the majority and take over. The direct response to voter mood and tone gives representation that can aid in human development. As public opinion shifts, the legislative is more likely to respond in hopes of re-election. Supporters of parliamentarism push back that as “critics of this ideal point out that undue partisanship may blind voters and legislators to the public interest and may prevent them from reaching compromise. Good public policy, not the interests of a party, should guide behavior in the ballot box and on the floor of the assembly,” as while the strong party politics that follows presidentialism may be responsive to voter interests, it may not represent actual good governance and policy.⁸

On the topic of representation, parliamentarism advocates argue that it is easier to have a change in public opinion be represented with the system because it allows for more parties to be part of the legislature. With its proportional representation model, “parliamentarist regimes can more easily increase the representativeness of governance for their citizens by accommodating to the growing demands generated by electoral and party systems rooted in proportional representation, and they can enhance the legitimacy of governance by reliance on parliament (including the cabinet) to express a nation's sovereignty,” this means that each voter’s voice is being heard and that they are being represented via members. This may also be because the absence of a national presidential race does not funnel competition into a two-horse race as seen commonly in a presidential system. By allowing for a multitude of views to be involved, parliamentary systems can utilize the marketplace of ideas and focus on the best steps in human

⁸ Gerring, J., Thacker, S., & Moreno, C. (2008). Are Parliamentary Systems Better?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(3), 327-359. doi: 10.1177/001041400832557

development and responding to the needs of the nation.⁹ Both minority and majority voices are more likely to be heard and accounted for. This system arguably has something going for it because “in two out of three cases, parliamentarism is associated with higher levels of human development. With all else being equal, longtime parliamentary systems have lower levels of infant mortality and longer life expectancy,” the results show that parliamentarism is associated with the tenets of good human development.¹⁰ That being said, it is important to weigh both the conditions surrounding the nations that are parliamentary and the sheer number of them in comparison to presidential systems when analyzing the results.

Lastly, it is important to consider the economic performance and potential for growth under these two systems. The parliamentary system, due to the ability to have coalition building and deliberation, allows for a more responsive government. When a nation is better able to represent a vast array of people, it makes sense they are better equipped to respond if changes in the economy need to occur:

There are two good reasons why parliamentary systems are better for the economy. First, greater separation of power combined with greater public deliberation, which underlie parliamentary systems, allow for wider representation and broader participation in decision making. This has significantly positive consequences. Second, parliamentary systems offer much greater stability across consecutive governments. In contrast,

⁹ Riggs, F. (1997). Presidentialism versus Parliamentarism: Implications for Representativeness and Legitimacy. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique*, 18(3), 253-278. Retrieved February 8, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/1601343

¹⁰ Gerring, J., Thacker, S., & Moreno, C. (2008). Are Parliamentary Systems Better?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(3), 327-359. doi: 10.1177/0010414008325573

transitions between leaders in presidential regimes are usually stark and volatile due to the single person nature of the office.¹¹

The stability and smooth transitional nature of parliamentary systems mean that there are no major fluxes in the economy from lack of faith in the transition or the upcoming government. In a presidential system, the market forces are terribly volatile based on the support and trust that the executives will somehow manage to transition and work with the legislature. Parliamentary systems are most often found in nations that also are fairly wealthy, whereas presidentialism is often the structure used in less developed countries or counties with larger income gaps. The annual output from parliamentary systems is 1.2 points higher than presidential and has an overall general lower income inequality rate.¹² Perhaps this is due parliamentary systems ability to serve as a coordination device, the accountability on the national level, and party responsiveness. There is at the very least some validity to this perspective as “in most policy areas, particularly in the areas of economic and human development, parliamentary systems are associated with superior governance.”¹³

Having addressed the principal areas of importance when considering good governance, it is necessary to look at the nuances and complexities that might affect the results. As discussed earlier, much of the key economic differences are clustered geographically, with some research

¹¹ Ozkan, G., & McManus, R. (2020). Parliamentary systems do better economically than presidential ones. Retrieved 9 February 2020, from <http://theconversation.com/parliamentary-systems-do-better-economically-than-presidential-ones-111468>

¹²Hiroi, T., & Omori, S. (2009). Perils of parliamentarism? Political systems and the stability of democracy revisited. *Democratization*, 16(3), 485-507. doi: 10.1080/13510340902884598. Research in article linked to McManus, R., Ozkan, F.G. Who does better for the economy? Presidents versus parliamentary democracies. *Public Choice* 176, 361–387 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-018-0552-2>

¹³ Gerring, J., Thacker, S., & Moreno, C. (2008). Are Parliamentary Systems Better?. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(3), 327-359. doi: 10.1177/0010414008325573

showing that the reason parliamentarism tends to look better could be due to selection bias. Where less developed countries are used to examine presidential systems while more wealthy countries tend to be those in Europe and are parliamentary. Though there are parliamentary systems in smaller countries that break this mold, but they unfortunately rarely get examined in these conversations, perhaps because they do not fit into this selection bias. That being said, what should really be examined is the past history of these nations, “we find that the risk of a democratic breakdown can be higher for parliamentary regimes than for presidential regimes among the countries whose democracy has collapsed in the past,” the success rate of these systems is partially predicated on whether there was an institutional collapse before the system was implemented.¹⁴ The less developed countries are more likely to have experienced prior breakdown and are already more vulnerable to breakdown again, these just happen to be presidential systems.

One could argue that this selection bias mistakes correlation for causation, incorrectly analyzing a set of nations when it comes to presidential systems that are already more inclined to fail due to the nature of the democratic transition. In fact, *ceteris paribus*, presidential systems fair just as well or better than parliamentary systems, as “evidence shows that the propensity of democratic collapse increases for previously failed parliamentary democracies when governments do not command a legislative majority or when governments are fractionalized... neither governments’ minority status nor fractionalization raises the risks of democratic breakdown in previously failed presidential regimes,” the issues of polarization and coalition

¹⁴Hiroi, T., & Omori, S. (2009). Perils of parliamentarism? Political systems and the stability of democracy revisited. *Democratization*, 16(3), 485-507. doi: 10.1080/13510340902884598

building do not affect presidential systems as much if both systems start on the same footing.¹⁵ The reality of both parliamentary and presidential regimes is more complex than what we like to pretend. The basis of their founding, the way they transitioned initially to a democracy, and their constitutional structure shapes the stability of these nations, as "there are other provisions, constitutional or otherwise, that also affect the way parliamentary and presidential democracies operate and that may counteract some of the tendencies that we would expect to observe if we were to derive the regime's entire performance from their basic constitutional principles."¹⁶ The reason the United States is often discussed as the exception, not the rule, is that so much is contingent on the strength of our constitution. The structural stability and framework set by a constitution and how it operates in partnership with the system of government is a big determinant of the success or lack thereof a nation will have.¹⁷ This plays right into the selection bias, those with previous regime failures less likely to have strong constitutions.

These nations are more complicated than just their systems of governing and it is terribly difficult to categorize them in a way that allows for an equal comparison point. Looking at the sections necessary in the survival of democracy — political stability, human development and economic potential —while being mindful of how historical context and constitutional strength play into the selection of the nations we compare, parliamentarism shows some benefits in terms of coalition building and ability to better represent the diverse voices of a nation without total

¹⁵ Hiroi, T., & Omori, S. (2009). Perils of parliamentarism? Political systems and the stability of democracy revisited. *Democratization*, 16(3), 485-507. doi: 10.1080/13510340902884598

¹⁶ Limongi, F., & Cheibub, J. (2002). Democratic Institutions and Regime Survival: Parliamentary and Presidential Democracies Reconsidered. Retrieved 9 February 2020, from <http://www.columbia.edu/~gjl10/CheibubLimongi.pdf>

¹⁷ Riggs, F. (1997). Presidentialism versus Parliamentarism: Implications for Representativeness and Legitimacy. *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique*, 18(3), 253-278. Retrieved February 8, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/1601343

gridlock. However, presidentialism shows that it is important to have strong control mechanisms in place and have those separate branches of power to prevent the abuse of executive power.

Overall, we find no one system is superior, more so each emphasizes a different important element and how one nation views the role of the executive will be the basis for which one will best suit the survival of democracy.

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