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Debate

Presidents vs. Parliaments

THE VIRTUES OF PARLIAMENTARISM

Juan J. Linz

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The critical comments that Professor Horowitz and Professor Lipset have offered on my essay provide stimulating contributions to the debate over the respective merits of various forms of democratic politics. This debate is most timely, as controversy seems to be subsiding about the merits of democracy versus other types of government. My essay, itself an abbreviated version of a much longer paper still in progress, was meant as a spur to further study of the problem.[1] By raising more questions than can be answered given the current state of our knowledge about how democracy works, Horowitz and Lipset confirm the need for more research and reflection.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I must stress that I did not argue that *any* parliamentary system is *ipso facto* more likely to ensure democratic stability than *any* presidential system. Nor was I suggesting that any parliamentary regime will make better policy decisions than any presidential government, which would be an even harder case to make. There are undoubtedly bad forms of both these types of government. My essay did not discuss possible new forms of presidentialism, confining itself instead to the existing democratic presidential systems and excluding detailed consideration of the United States, which I consider quite exceptional.[2] I do not think that I have constructed a "straw-man" version of presidentialism; my analysis is based on careful study of many prominent presidential systems, though I did not include the Nigerian and Sri Lankan versions of presidentialism that Professor Horowitz so skillfully discusses. Yet my article (like Horowitz's comments) also omits consideration of the many possible varieties of parliamentarism, and of the complex issues surrounding semipresidential or semiparliamentary systems with dual executives. These deserve separate analysis.

I agree with Professor Horowitz that the study of democratic regimes cannot be separated from the study of electoral systems, and acknowledge that my analysis does not cover all possible methods of presidential election. The Nigerian system represents a unique method of presidential election that might be applicable in federal states, particularly multiethnic ones, but I doubt very much that one could justify it in more homogeneous societies, even in the federal states of Latin America. My analysis concentrates on the two most common methods of election: the simple majority or plurality system, and the two-candidate runoff. The case where an electoral college may make a decision irrespective of the popular vote is left out, as is the very special case of Bolivia. The Bolivian Congress chooses among presidential candidates without regard to their popular vote totals, a practice that has certainly not contributed to either political stability or accountability in that country. I also refrained from mentioning the practice of directly electing a plural executive or a president and vice-president to represent two different constituencies (of Greek and Turkish Cypriots, for example). My argument concerns the *likelihood* of certain patterns of politics in the most common types of presidential systems, and does not attempt an exhaustive analysis of all types of directly elected executives. The patterns in question are likely to contribute to instability or difficulties in the performance of presidential executives. I use the word "likelihood" to stress that those consequences need not be present in each and every presidential system, or lead to the breakdown of democracy itself. On the contrary, recent experience shows that even rather inept democratic regimes stand a good chance of surviving simply because all relevant actors find the nondemocratic alternatives to be even less satisfactory.

Horowitz stresses that the majoritarian implications of presidentialism—the "winner-take-all" features that I have emphasized—may also be present in parliamentary systems with plurality elections in single-member districts, especially under the two-party systems that so often go together with Westminster-style parliamentary government. In societies that are polarized, or fragmented by multiple cleavages, a multiparty system with proportional representation may allow the formation of alternative coalitions (as in Belgium, for example), and thus forestall dangerous zero-sum outcomes.

As for parliamentary systems with plurality elections, Mrs. Thatcher is certainly a first above unequals, like a president, and probably has more power than an American chief executive. Certainly, parliamentary democracies in which a single disciplined party obtains the absolute majority of all seats find themselves in what is close to a "winner-take-all" situation. But this is not the most frequent pattern in parliamentary systems, particularly when there is proportional representation. Indeed, Horowitz implies that I should probably extend some of my concerns about the style of politics in presidentialism to take in the case of such majoritarian prime ministers, and that I might have a slight bias in favor of stable coalition government. I must once again note that I am dealing with ideal types that cannot subsume all of the possible varieties of political systems; indeed, I deal only with the more frequent tendencies in those ideal types. Nevertheless, while the actual situation of a powerful prime minister like Mrs. Thatcher might be comparable to that of a president with a legislative majority, the de jure difference is still significant. If Mrs. Thatcher were to falter or otherwise make herself a liability, for instance, the Conservative majority in the House of Commons could unseat her without creating a constitutional crisis. There would be no need to let her linger ineffectually in office like former presidents Raúl Alfonsín of Argentina or Alan García of Peru. Parliamentary elections may be called not only to benefit from popularity, but also when governing becomes difficult because of a lack of cohesion among the parliamentary majority. That was what happened in Spain in 1982, when Prime Minister Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo's dissolution of the Cortes allowed Felipe González to assume power at the head of a Socialist majority. Moreover, in cases where the parliamentary majority remains intact but the prime minister becomes discredited or exhausted (like Spanish premier Adolfo Suárez in 1981), he can resign without having to wait for the end of his term or a coup to remove him from office.

The "winner-take-all" character of the presidential election and the "unipersonal" executive (to use Arend Lijphart's term) does not rule out either weak presidents in particular or a weak presidency in general, Horowitz's suggestion to the contrary notwithstanding. The "all" that the winner takes may not include much effective power, especially if congressional support is not forthcoming. This is doubly so if popular support ebbs as the next election approaches. Presidents, especially those who come to power after a plebiscitarian or populist campaign, often find that the power they possess is hopelessly insufficient to meet the expectations they have generated. Constant presidential efforts to obtain new powers or invoke emergency authority are reflections of this fact.

Horowitz fails to address the basic problem of the competing claims to legitimacy of presidents and congresses, and the resulting potential for conflict between the two branches. Presidents occasionally win such conflicts, no doubt, but my argument is about institutions, not about how particular persons will fare in this or that set of circumstances. Horowitz might respond that conflicts between the legislature and the executive are not inevitable in a presidential democracy. That may be, but they are certainly likely. Although they have not caused democracy to break down in the United States, it should be recalled that for most of U.S. history, the party that controlled the presidency also controlled both houses of Congress. More recently, divided control has led to a politics of stalemate and mutual recrimination. Moreover, as a deeply institutionalized democracy, the United States is much better able to survive these difficulties of presidentialism than are many new or weak democracies in the developing world.

Horowitz tends to overstate my position by ignoring the necessarily qualified nature of my analysis. I was merely trying to evaluate the existing evidence and offer an estimate of probabilities; I would never place myself in the absurd position of claiming certitude about matters that remain only partly understood.

Varieties of Presidentialism

Horowitz further claims that my sample is skewed and highly selective, drawing as it does mostly on Latin American cases. I did not do a quantitative analysis, but the presidential systems of Latin America, together with those of the Philippines and South Korea (which I also had in mind), comprise almost all of the world's pure presidential regimes; the only exceptions are the systems of the United States, Nigeria, and Sri Lanka. Horowitz bases much of his argument on these last two countries.[3] I did not limit my generalizations to Latin America, since I think them largely valid for South Korea and the Philippines as well. The South Korean presidential election of 1987, for instance, saw Roh Tae Woo of the Democratic Justice Party (DJP) win office with 36.6 percent of the vote—almost the same percentage of the vote (34.7) as Adolfo Suárez's UCD garnered in Spain in 1977. Roh's victory frustrated opposition leaders Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, who had insisted on a direct presidential election and then split 55 percent of the vote between them.

As for Africa, close attention to the postcolonial history of that continent does not sustain Horowitz's claim that "the institutional villain would surely have been parliamentary systems." It was not simply parliamentarism, but rather democratic institutions as a whole—alien and weakly rooted as they were—that failed in Africa. The British Westminster model has winner-take-all features, to be sure, but these were even more prominent in presidential systems. Indeed, the emergence of authoritarian regimes in countries like Ghana, Uganda, and Senegal coincided with and was consolidated by "constitutional change from a parliamentary to a presidential system, with extreme concentration of power in the presidency and marked diminution of legislative authority."[4]

Horowitz criticizes me for holding a mechanistic and even caricatured view of the presidency. Certainly my main effort was to analyze the mechanics of presidential systems, but I think that my remarks on the style of politics in presidential countries, the responses of voters to presidential elections, the patterns of interaction among political leaders in presidential systems, and so on, raised my essay far above the level of the merely mechanical. I might be guilty of caricature, but many observers of the Latin American scene find my characterizations to be fairly accurate descriptions of events in those countries.

Horowitz's third claim—that I did not deal with each and every possible system for electing a president—is accurate enough, though I did cover the predominant ones (with the exceptions he presents). As for his fourth point, concerning the functions that a separately elected president can perform in a divided society, I concede that under certain very special circumstances (like those of Nigeria and perhaps Sri Lanka), a president *might* be able to help build political consensus. Still, there are counterexamples like Cyprus and Lebanon (to mention two other presidential systems) which show that presidentialism cannot overcome certain types of cleavages. Moreover, in view of the failure of Nigeria's Second Republic and the transition from military rule to a presidential Third Republic that is now underway, the jury is still out on the Nigerian presidency. The same might be said about Sri Lanka, where ethnic violence continues to rage and the deterioration of democratic institutions and liberties has yet to be reversed. The political problems of multiethnic societies under whatever system of rule (democratic or authoritarian, for that matter) present complexities that I could not address within the confines of a short essay.

Horowitz insists that a presidential electoral system with incentives for seeking widely distributed support (as in Nigeria) can obviate the winner-take-all politics that prevail in most presidential systems, particularly those with a weak separation of powers, no true federalism, and no strong judiciary. I have no doubt that requiring each candidate to gain, say, at least 25 percent of the vote in no fewer than two-thirds of the states will tend to produce a president with broad support across ethnic-cum-territorial divisions, thereby reducing ethnic polarization. But in any event, none of this did much to mitigate the winner-take-all aspect of Nigeria's presidential system. That system twice gave a minority party the exclusive right to constitute the executive branch, and helped to undermine democracy by spurring the massive rigging of the 1983 presidential election. Such a system can also backfire by leading to the election of a weak compromise candidate. Perhaps I overgeneralized from the cases included in my analysis, but to make contrary generalizations on the basis of highly unusual arrangements seems to me even less satisfactory. I still wonder how easy it is for Sri Lanka's president to make the sorts of unpopular decisions of which he is supposed to be capable (thanks to a method of election that aggregates second and subsequent preferences) in the face of a hostile legislative majority.

Much more research is needed concerning the composition and stability of cabinets in presidential systems. The president's secure tenure in office for the whole of a fixed term does not mean that his cabinet is immune to remodeling. In parliamentary systems, even those with unstable governments, cabinet members tend to accumulate considerable experience. The premiers generally have served in government before, and the system benefits from the accumulated political and administrative experience of the executive ministers. In most presidential systems, that experience is likely to be lost with a change of presidents, since each chief executive is likely to select those persons in whom he has personal confidence. In addition, since the president and his cabinet do not absolutely require the confidence of congress or the parties represented there, he can choose advisors and ministers from outside the political class and, as Brazilian presidents seem to have done, from parties besides his own—even from those that opposed his election. This might seem admirable and occasionally might work well, but it weakens parties by encouraging factionalism and clientelism. Just as a president who cannot be reelected is hard to hold accountable for his performance, a president who forms a cabinet without systematically involving the parties that back him makes it difficult for the voters to hold parties accountable in the next election. My analysis focuses on multiparty rather than two-party systems, but even in a two-party system it is not clear whom the voters will blame: the president's party, or the party with the majority in congress that obstructed his otherwise presumably successful performance.

The Problem of Divided Government

Giovanni Sartori has used the U.S. experience to argue that once the pattern of undivided consonant majorities (the coincidence of presidential and legislative majorities) and consociational practices (especially bipartisan concurrence in foreign affairs) is broken, there emerges an antagonistically divided government whose two main elements perceive that their respective electoral interests are best served by the failure of the other institution. For a Democrat-controlled Congress to cooperate with a Republican administration is to aid the election of future Republican presidents. Conversely, a president whose party is the minority in Congress will seek to restore undivided government by running against Congress. In short, he will play the "blame game." Thus the answer to the question of whether presidentialism provides for effective government is, with reference to its most acclaimed incarnation, a resounding no. The American system works or has worked in spite of, rather than because of, the presidential constitution of the United States. To the extent that it can still perform, it needs three things that tend to unblock it: flexibility or lack of ideological rigidity; weak, undisciplined parties; and pork-barrel and locality-oriented politics.[5]

These considerations weigh against the notion that since the United

States is both a successful democracy and a presidential regime, other presidential systems should also stand a good chance of being similarly successful. I cannot go into greater detail here, but recommend Fred Riggs's excellent study of the uniqueness of the U.S. political system, a system of which the presidency forms but a single part.[6]

At stake here are two separate issues: the stability of the democratic system, and the quality of its performance. Not all presidential regimes are unstable, nor are all of them weak in spite of their apparent strength. Many, however, have proven unstable and quite weak, though I would never exclude the possibility of a stable and strong presidential system if the president has the support of both an electoral and a legislative majority. Yet such a combination is rare in actual presidential systems, and might not be a good thing anyway: a popular president with a disciplined party behind him might defeat the constitutional scheme of checks and balances, thus obviating a key advantage of presidentialism. Even so, as Michael Coppedge's excellent study of the Venezuelan presidential system shows, a ban on presidential reelection hurts the president's ability to govern in the latter part of his term.[7]

I am grateful to Professor Horowitz for his comments, especially regarding the unusual systems of Nigeria and Sri Lanka. As I said at the outset, we need more systematic comparisons and more research on particular examples of presidential government (a largely neglected subject) before we can reach final conclusions. None of the existing research challenges my basic claim, which is that certain structural problems inherent in presidentialism make it likely that many presidential systems will run into serious difficulties of a sort that some parliamentary systems have successfully overcome. After all necessary qualifications have been made, my conclusion might be reformulated as follows: certain parliamentary systems are more likely than most of their presidential counterparts to solve certain knotty problems of multiparty politics. Even as I make qualifications, however, I am anxious that we avoid the error of forsaking comparative analysis for mere assessment of particular political systems, considered in isolation. Comparative analysis has to settle for probabilities rather than certainties, and therefore will always be open to question. The need for such analysis, however, is beyond question.

The Importance of Institutions

Professor Lipset's comments rightly stress the effect of economic, social, historical, and cultural factors on the fate of democracy in many countries past, present, and future. These factors operate more or less independently of political institutions. Culture, as Lipset notes, is difficult if not impossible to change. Historical legacies do not fully disappear, and socioeconomic transformation cannot be achieved by fiat, so we are left with the search for those political institutions that will best suit the circumstances in this or that particular country. This is a modest quest, but a worthy one. Presidentialism, parliamentarism, or some hybrid of the two; centralism or federalism; one-round or two-round elections—in every case the question is the same: what mix of laws and institutions will direct the contending interests of a given society into peaceful and democratic channels? Here is where I seek to make a contribution.

Lipset's able comparison between the United States and Canada confirms that even when societies are relatively similar, the type of democratic government each one has does make a difference. His observation that prime ministers who command a solid majority (not necessarily from one party) may have more power than presidents indirectly contributes to my argument. Also intriguing are Lipset's assertions about the greater weight of interest groups and local interests in presidential systems; if proven, they would be grist for the mill of those who complain about the invidious clientelism that pervades presidential countries like the Philippines and Brazil. He notes too the weakness both of parties and of presidents who depend on them for support. Will more research confirm my hypothesis that presidentialism helps to make parties weaker and less responsible? Would parliamentarism oblige parties to behave differently?

NOTES

1. See Oscar Godoy Arcaya, ed., *Hacia una democracia moderna: La opción parlamentaria* (Santiago: Ediciones Universidad Catolica de Chile, 1990), for a Spanish version of my extended paper, as well as those by Arend Lijphart and Arturo Valenzuela. I expect to publish it as an introductory essay in a book I will edit jointly with Arturo Valenzuela which will include country studies by many authors and theoretical contributions by Lijphart and Giovanni Sartori that in part support my argument, but also disagree with some of the points I make.

2. Fred W. Riggs, "The Survival of Presidentialism in America: Para-Constitutional Practices," *International Political Science Review* 9 (October 1988): 247-78.

3. Horowitz also refers to Colombia as a more successful case of presidentialism, but that country's transition to and early maintenance of presidential democracy was made possible only by the *Concordancia* of 1958, an arrangement under which the two major parties agreed to suspend their electoral competition for the presidency and accept alternating terms in power instead. While this helped to stabilize the country after a period of civil war and dictatorship, it can hardly be considered a model of democratic politics, or a method for making government accountable to the voters. To call it a deviation may be too mild.

4. Larry Diamond, "Introduction: Roots of Failure, Seeds of Hope," in *Democracy in Developing Countries*, vol. 2, *Africa*, eds. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1988), 3.

5. Giovanni Sartori, "Neither Presidentialism nor Parliamentarism," (unpublished paper given at Georgetown University, May 1989).

6. Riggs, op. cit.

7. Michael Coppedge, "Venezuela: Democratic Despite Presidentialism," (unpublished paper given at Georgetown University, May 1989).