

Advantages and disadvantages of mixed-presidential systems



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The term semi-presidentialism was developed by Duverger in 1970 to describe the mixed constitutional system that incorporates aspects of presidentialism and parliamentarianism.

The three main characteristics of a semi-presidential systems are that “ a popularly elected fixed-term president exists alongside a prime minister and cabinet who are responsible to parliament.” Semi-presidentialism is unique in that it has a “ a twin-headed executive,” unlike presidentialism and parliamentarianism. This “ bipolar executive,” is a core criterion of a semi-presidential system which has many hybrid constitutional forms and is therefore a highly contested concept. It is possible to have a semi-presidentialist system that is dominated by the president, or by the prime minister or what is known as ‘ cohabitation’ when two opposing parties have leaders in the double executive. This was the case in France in 1988 when Mitterand (left) was elected president and Chirac (right) was appointed prime minister.

Although there are several forms of semi-presidentialism for the purposes of analysis, this essay will maintain the premise that semi-presidential system is one where there is a directly elected president, who appoints a prime minister that is accountable to the parliament because semi-presidentialist systems “ all have presidents who are elected in a direct or direct-like manner and they all have prime ministers and cabinets who are responsible to the legislature.” This essay will discuss the merits and drawbacks of a semi-presidential system, focusing on the French semi-presidential system and comparing it to the Russian model of semi-presidentialism and the America presidential system.

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An advantage of the French semi - presidential system is that it relies on a chain of mutual dependence. According to the French Constitution of 1958 one of the presidential powers is that they can appoint the prime minister whose role as the head of government is to oversee the everyday running of state affairs such as “ governmental, administrative, and information services.” This means that as the head of state the president needs the cooperation of the prime minister, and the prime minister the cooperation of the president in order for France to achieve an efficient government. Elgie supports this highlighting that “ The nature of the French semi-presidential system is such that the president cannot exercise power without the help of the prime minister.”

The French president has the constitutional right to appoint government ministers to the cabinet, however these ministers are chosen from a list that the prime minister has proposed. An effective government therefore is selected by the president and the prime minister. This dependant relationship is mirrored by the prime minister and the National Assembly. The prime minister “ is closely associated with the work of parliament and with the conduct of legislative elections,” because they are responsible to and accountable the legislature. This chain of mutual dependence is a positive characteristic of a semi - presidential system because it creates a strong and efficient government.

France compared to the American presidency, has a system of checks and balances through mutual dependence that is similar to American system.

Both France and the United States have a constitutional system that aims to prevent the executive and legislature having too much power. In the United
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States this is achieved through the separation of powers which “ encourage[s] competition for the share of governing authority.” The fact that both the legislature and executive approve legislation checks and balances political authority and that prevents authoritarian rule forcing compromise. Similarly in France the chain of dependence forces compromise and prevents one executive from having too much power and becoming autocratic. In France the checks and balances are rooted in the principle that in order to govern efficiently the prime minister and president need mutual support. Mutual reliance creates political stability in the French semi – presidential system which is furthered by the fact that semi – presidentialism prevents authoritarian rule in the dual executive and the legislature.

The prevention of tyranny also highlights another benefit of the French semi – presidential system which is that the French president and legislature is directly elected through two ballot system for a fixed term giving semi presidentialism an “ electoral dynamic.” This electoral system is a positive characteristic of semi – presidentialism because “ the president could now claim – and with some justification – to represent the will of the French people.” This aspect of semi presidentialism was not introduced until 1962 when president de Gaulle added article 11 to the constitution so that it “ would give future presidents lacking his unique personal prestige the means to govern effectively.”

The two ballot electoral system emphasised the importance of representation because it was part of what defined France as a semi – presidential system. The French two ballot system can be compared to the Russian two ballot system, where the Russian president is directly elected by <https://assignbuster.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-mixed-presidential-systems/>

popular vote. In Russia however the absence of strong party politics means that presidential competition is low which results in super majority wins for example Vladimir Putin “ w[o]n outright in the first round.” This gives Russia a democratic mandate that means it adheres to the semi -presidentialist criteria. The mandate of representation is core advantage of a semi -presidential system demonstrated in a two ballot electoral system because it strengthens presidential legitimacy and the democratic legitimacy which.

Another advantage of a semi - presidential system is that the president and legislature have a fixed term in government which prevents the creation of an autocratic executive. Currently the presidential fixed term is five years having previously been seven years (article 6) but this was amended in order to reduce the likely-hood of cohabitation. A fixed term allows for the electorate to affirm or alter their choice for president making the president more accountable to the population he or she represents. The fact that the criterion for a semi - presidential system is that “ a popularly elected fixed-term president,” be in office highlights the importance of the fixed term in the constitution. Furthermore the fixed term emphasises France’s democratic legitimacy because constitutionally it would be difficult to make France a totalitarian state. The fixed term and direct election of the French presidency can be compared to the American presidency, which is intentionally set at a different time to that of the legislature in order to maintain a balance and separation of powers.

Another advantage of French semi - presidentialism is that it is more likely to produce strong party politics, which creates strong coalition governments.

Fieschi supports this idea and observes that strong party politics “ forces the <https://assignbuster.com/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-mixed-presidential-systems/>

parties into bi-polar alliances and encourages the personalisation of politics.” In contrast to the Russian semi – presidential system which is fragmented and weak the French party systems reinforces presidential power through the creation of a strong coalition government. Guyomarch, Machin, Hall and Hayward comment that “ executive leadership thus depends on the distribution of power between the parties,” and that “ each president or cohabitation prime minister has needed the loyal support of his own party and reliable backing from its coalition partner or partners.” This highlights the fact that party politics in France is part of the reason why dual executive in a semi – presidential system in France is arguably successful.

An additional advantage of semi – presidentialism in France is that the president is the French “ international spokesperson,” and the national symbol of unity. As head of state the president is the arbiter “ influenc[ing] high politics,” and oversees the running of government. Mazur, Appleton and Brouard comment that French semi – presidentialism “ actively tempers direct presidential leadership,” because the president is the symbol of national unity. The image of the French president can be compared to that of the American president where internationally American politics is directly associated with the president. This has a unifying effect especially since the United States is federal government that represents a large and diverse population. Although France is not a federal state, under a coalition government “ the presidential verb is always a grandiloquent one and the presidential portrait has a regal aspect,” representing political unity which increases the electorate’s confidence in government and in politics.

Over and above the benefits of a semi – presidential system it is important to consider the disadvantages of semi – presidentialism. One of the drawbacks of the concept semi-presidentialism is that it is hard to define because there is no standard agreed clear meaning. The president and prime minister have “ ill-defined constitutional task[s],” that causes confusion because in comparative politics the term semi -presidentialism is subjective and depends on the national constitution. The contested nature of semi – presidentialism makes the classification of a semi – presidentialist states more difficult and therefore comparison more complicated. For example Iceland is arguably not a semi – presidential state because the president has more of a ceremonial role. Similarly Russia may also not be classified as a semi – presidential state because the Russian president has too much executive power.

In France however the problem is that the constitutional roles of the president and prime minister are unclear. For example the constitution states that the president is “ given foreign policy responsibility under article 52,” and the prime minister has “ control over defence issues,” which implies that both have constitutional authority when it comes to national defence issues. This ambiguity can cause tension between the president and the prime minister especially considering that often the roles of the prime minister and the president overlap. Despite the potential for there to be confusion, the ambiguity over who has authority in defence issues forces the prime minister and president to work together. The fact that both have a constitutional right to authority in defence means that in order for there to be an effective defence policy and execution compromise is essential. It can

therefore be said that despite the problems of constitutional ambiguity the disadvantages of semi – presidentialism can be minimised.

Semi – presidentialism also poses the problem of the potential for there to be too strong an executive. In France the Fifth republic has relied upon strong leaders who have been able to assert their authority and work with the prime minister and the National Assembly. A strong figure head in the semi – presidentialist system is important because the “ leadership style and personalities affect both the popularity and effectiveness of leaders.”

However there is the potential for the president to become too strong and to some extent authoritarian. For example Russia is seen as a semi – presidential nation that has an executive president that has too much power. The Russian president has the authority to appoint the prime minister and other state ministers, to dissolve the parliament, authority over foreign policy and controls the media. Therefore “ it is very difficult to get rid of the Russian president in contrast with the French presidency.” This makes the Russian semi – presidentialist system somewhat tyrannical. In contrast the French semi – presidential constitution can avoid this problem because the French president does not have as much autonomous power and the presence of a strong party system ensures that the president faces competition and opposition making he or she more accountable.

One of the major concerns of a semi – presidentialist system is that there is the potential for gridlock. In France this gridlock can occur between the prime minister and the president when they are from opposing parties. This as mentioned previously is known as cohabitation and poses the risk of a constitutional crisis and political stability. Gridlock is a result of the “ dual
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leadership,” having dual legitimacy where both the president and prime minister, disagree over state legislation. This form of gridlock is comparable to the American presidential system where the president and the legislature can reach a stalemate. In France and America both the dual executive and the legislature are within their constitutional rights and gridlock is the result. The problem is that “ the prospect of cohabitation always carries with it the potential for instability and governmental ineffectiveness.” It should be noted however that the occurrence of gridlock highlights the democratic nature of both the French semi – presidentialist system as well as the American presidential system by emphasising the equal distribution of power among the dual executive where gridlock can force cooperation and negotiation. Guyomarch, Machin, Hall and Hayward agree and observe that “ cohabitation is generally well-liked by the electorate,” because it forces compromise, and lessens the probability of extremist policies.

In conclusion it can be said that the advantages of the French semi – presidentialist system outweigh the disadvantages. The French semi-presidential system is flexible “ able to accommodate merely two phases, that is parliamentary and presidential phases,” combining the advantages of parliamentary and presidential systems. Furthermore the fact “ France’s distinctive mixed presidential-parliamentary system has become the most influential Western model guiding the crafting of new democracies in Eastern Europe, from Poland to Ukraine.” Sri Lanka, Romania, Finland and Russia also have constitutions based upon the French semi – presidential constitutional framework which supports this argument highlighting its democratic flexibility. However the semi – presidentialist framework has yet to face the

test of time as it was established recently in 1958. Nevertheless when examining semi - presidentialism it becomes apparent that France has aimed to counter the constitutional paradox, where a state tries to maintain the balance of power between the legislature and executive but also tries to prevent gridlock and sustain an efficient government.