

# The choice between presidentialism and parliamentarism politics essay



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As the third wave of democracy identified by Samuel Huntington has been spotted to its highlight after the fall of Berlin wall, now scholars put their concerns towards the consolidation of democracy. There is a revival of studies investigating how the settings of political institutions affect the stability and quality of democracy. One of the hotly-debated issues would be the choice between presidentialism and parliamentarism. These two political systems are the most dominant yet fundamental constitutional frameworks of a democratic regime. In this essay, it will try to look into the issue by the following order. First, it will give a definition of presidential systems and parliamentary systems. Then it will examine the characteristics of a new democracy and analyze the virtues of the two systems. After, it will come to a conclusion that parliamentary systems tend to do better. Finally, it is acknowledged that countries have different historical and culture contexts. It is an over-generalization to say that parliamentary system fits all.

The fundamental difference between a parliamentary system and a presidential system is the relationship between the executive and the legislative. In a parliamentary system, the two branches are mutually dependent. The prime minister is elected by the majority of the parliament and therefore the power of his/her cabinet comes from the support of legislators. In case the cabinet loses this support, it may fall from the vote of no confidence in the parliament. The survival of the prime minister depends on the ongoing confidence of parliament members. Under this circumstance, the executive collaborate closely with the legislature. There is more likely a fusion of powers. In a presidential system, there are two political agents selected each has a fixed electoral mandate, namely the president and the

legislature. Both can claim legitimacy of representing the people without any interdependence. The executive and legislature check and balance the power of each other. There is a distinct separation of power.

In parliamentary systems, presidents are not only the head of government who hold strong executive powers. They are also the head of state who perform ceremonial functions. In contrast, the head of state and the head of government are differentiated in parliamentary systems. For example, in constitutional monarchies such as the U. K. or Japan, the head of state is the Queen or the Emperor whereas in parliamentary republics such as Germany president is elected to be the head of state separately with the chancellor who is the head of government.

There is fixed term of a president in the presidential system. It is difficult to impeach the president during his/her term. In Linz's famous work ' The Perils of Presidentialism', he states that such an arrangement brings stability to the executive's power but at the same time brings great rigidity. In parliamentary systems, when the prime minister loses the support from the parliament. The cabinet may be impeached by a vote of no confidence from the majority. Also the prime minister has the power to dissolve parliament and call for election earlier.

The visibility of the policy making in each system is quite distinct from each other. According to Eaton (2000), such a distinction arises from the different political sites where policy formulating takes place in the two systems. In parliamentary system, policy bargain takes place in private meetings of party leaders, caucuses within a party or informal dealings of parliament

members. Whereas in presidential systems, as Eaton (2000) points out 'Public and often publicized conflict over legislation is more common in presidential systems, where a bill must work its way through the separately elected chambers to a separately elected president.' (p. 363) Indeed the nature of fusion of power in a parliamentary system makes it rather difficult to spot out where the policy is formulated exactly. In contrast, the distinct separation of power in a presidential system makes more rooms and capacities for policy transparency.

Before proceeding to detailed evaluation of which system works better in new democracies, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of a new democracy. Although each country has its own historical, cultural background and demography, similarities can be found out. First of all, the liberal and republican substance is extremely weak. According to Larry Diamond (1999), many new democracies have only elections formalized but without the substantial components of a liberal democracy such as citizens' rights and equal access of public agencies. Secondly, new democracies have often gone through vigorous political transition. There are often deep-rooted conflicts between the governing elites before the transition and the mass population or other conflicts due to historical reasons. During the era of Franco's dictatorship, the liberals in Spain were suppressed by the regime. There are deep cleavages between the two side originated from the Spanish Civil War. After the fall of the authoritarian regime in Spain, the followers of Francisco Franco stills remain influential. There was still a great tension after the democracy regime was set up. Also, there are often deep ethnic cleavages in of democracies in the third wave such as many countries in

Africa. Third, the political cultures of unconsolidated democracies share many similarities. Larry Diamond (1998) identifies that in general, people in new democracies do not get used to embrace democracy as the only legitimate political systems.

With regarding on the question whether which system fits better in new democracies, this essay will try to argue with two dependent variables, consolidation of democracy and effective governance.

There are higher chances of full-blown regime crises which is unfavorable to the consolidation of democracy in presidentialism than in parliamentarism. Linz(1990) argues that ' Presidentialism is ineluctably problematic because it operates according to the rule of " winner-take-all-an arrangement that tends to make democratic politics a zero-sum game.' (p. 36) The zero-sum game nature may deepen the fragmentation and polarization between parties. In presidential systems, if a candidate loses in the election, it means that his part have to wait for several years without any executive powers. The rivalry arises during the election because of that fact that parties treat it as a zero-sum game exacerbates the problem. However in parliamentary systems, coalitions are common, parties who lose the election may still get a slice of power if they have significant clout. Also, coalitions promote and enhance the collaborations and communications between parties. Parties with huge ideological differences may form a cabinet and derive consensus rather than being in rivalry. As new democracies often emerges from a history of conflicts, political turmoil or colonialization, the distrusts and even tensions between different interest or ethnic groups are deep in many occasions. The more the tensions between parties representing different

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groups, the more likely that the distrust among different interest groups deepens. This kind of distrust may eventually evolve into disappointments to the democratic system to represent their voice among the interest groups who lose the election. The rigidity of the term of president in presidential systems makes this problem more complex. It is very difficult to impeach an unpopular president. Such kind of rigidity may eventually cause the frustration of the opposite party or people and they may seek to impeach the president through non-democratic means. An example would be Taiwan. In 2006, as many people are frustrated by the failure to impeach Chen Shui-bian, they turned to the streets to protest. This causes great turmoil to a new democracy like Taiwan and shakes the confidence of people towards democratic regimes. In parliamentary systems, the cabinet has to fall if the majority of the parliament agrees with the vote of no confidence. It may well be argued that by this way the government is weak and instable. However such kind of instability and the ease of dissolve of the government may avoid a greater crisis with higher risks of downfall of democracy.

In the process of consolidating democracy, one of the crucial elements will be the legitimacy of the democratic regime. There is a problem of dual legitimacy as Linz verifies in presidential systems. Both the assembly and the president can claim themselves representing the whole people. This is particular obvious when the opposition holds the majority of the assembly. This dual legitimacy often causes gridlocks between the executive and the legislative branch. In case there is a conflict between the two and both claim to be representing the people, new democracies often lack a neutral moderator to resolve the dispute. In U. S., the Supreme Court play such a

role. However this is not common in emerging democracies. In some cases, such as Argentina or other Latin American countries, military intervention may be used to solve the deadlock which often overrules the democratic regimes or cause great harm to it. In parliamentary systems, the role of moderator can be acted by the head of state which is differentiated from the head of government. Often such a dispute can be resolved without bringing damages to the political institution.

In the architecture of presidential systems, the president enjoys a strong executive power. Also, he/she has a fixed term which gives him/her a great amount of time to carry out reforms he/she desires. Theoretically, all these give him great capacity to make a detailed and comprehensive set of policies to bring about substantial to a country. He/she can carry out unfavorable but necessary reforms and need not to be afraid that he will be impeached by this. As a result, political and economic reforms are easier to be carried out in presidential systems which often a new democracy urgently needs. Nevertheless, the above mechanism works on a presumption that the president holds the majority of the assembly. By principles of separation of power, although the president processes strong executive power, he/she is at the same time under the scrutiny of the assembly. When the opposition holds a majority in the assembly, there is a deadlock between the two branches. In this situation, it is very hard to get any legislation passed by the president, whereas the oppositions have limited agenda-setting powers to propose bills. In practical, few candidates in new democracies can win by winning over 50% of popular vote. Their parties are often unable to win the majority of the assembly. While in parliamentary systems coalition

governments are often unstable. The cabinet is vulnerable as once the parliament has lost confidence to it, it may have to be dissolved. In Italy, after 1945, there are altogether 40 cabinets. Many of the cabinets only last for less than one year. Such short and unstable period of term causes the cabinet very difficult to make detailed plans of public administration. The frequent change of the cabinet may also cause vigorous shifts in policies. On another dimension, coalitions between parties are common in parliamentary systems. Sometimes it involves a grand coalition of parties from the left to the right. In a practical sense, it is very difficult for parties with huge ideological differences to formulate a coherent set of policies. However, coalitions usually include small parties which represent minority groups. Hence the voice of minority groups can be represented and taken into account of policy formulation. This is particular important with reference to the divergent background of new democracies.

A higher visibility of policy formulating is generally considered as desirable since it can enhance public's scrutiny and therefore the accountability of the government. In presidential systems, it is argued that it has a higher transparency in policy formulating. Cowhey argues in his book *Structure and Policy* that the struggle between the legislative and the president causes "more systematic disclosure of information about policymaking." This is desirable for the consolidation of democracy as transparency is coherent with the values of democracy. Hence the promotion of transparency through debates between the legislative and executive help shapes political culture more adherent to democratic values. Also, the public can gain more confidence of democracy if they are informed with the decision-making



process and know their representatives are voicing their interests. However such a transparency may be not a positive factor in some circumstances. Disputes and dissents are often more explicit when the debate and political bargains take place mainly in public meetings. Since these kind of public meetings are highly publicized, president or legislators are reluctant to make compromise which may be regarded as a breach of their promises or political standpoint by their electorate. Therefore, disputes in policy issues which originally can be resolved with collaboration and compromises may eventually evolve into bigger crises and deadlocks. This may bring turmoil to the democratic regime and exacerbate cleavages between different interest groups. This is particularly dangerous in new democracies as parties are less disciplined and the lack of moderator in resolving disputes. In parliamentary systems, dissents can be resolved in sub-cabinet meetings between party leaders without exposure to the public. Through lobbying in a somewhat private manner, consensus is more easily reached out before the bills are passed to the parliament and hence reduce tensions arise from the vigorous debates often observed in a presidential system. The effective governance can also be enhanced by avoiding partisan politics which may hinder the efficiency of legislations.

It is impossible to say that a particular form of system fits all. Each country has its own distinct historical or socio-economical background. There are different political consequences aroused from the characteristics of the two systems. For example, Horowitz(1990) points out that in Nigeria and Sri Lanka's presidential systems was observed to have a certain degree of success. Also there should be different weightings to dependent variables. In

some countries in Latin America such as Chile, there is a swing between democracy and autocracy. Therefore priorities should be given to sustain the legitimacy of democratic regime. In countries like Uganda which have just recovered from severe ethnic conflicts, priorities should be given to reduce tensions between different ethnics. It should be noted that there are great variances even within presidential systems or parliament systems. As Shugart and Carey (1992) points out ' There are myriad ways to design constitutions that vary the relationship of the voters' two agents as well as the electorate.' (p. 1) In some countries a hybrid of a presidential system and a parliamentary system is adopted. For example the fifth French republic and Finland adopt a semi-presidential system. Since it is impossible to deal with all the variances, it is this essay's limit to focus on the ideal types of the two systems with more frequent tendencies. However when we carry out a detail case analysis on a country, we need to examine the impact of variances closely. Also, we need to consider other institutional factors that matter. For example, the variance of electorate system combining with presidential or parliamentary systems brings different consequences.

In general, parliamentary systems