

Ron Fleming

PSC 7000: Research Concepts and Approaches

Dr. Matthew Kerbel

Democratization, Institutions and Elite Legacies: Understanding the Limits of Institutional Analysis

8 December 1997

Ron Fleming

Dr. Matthew Kerbel

PSC 7000: Research Concepts and Approaches

8 December 1997

Democratization, Institutions and Elite Legacies: Understanding the Limits of Institutional Analysis

Introduction

The democratization efforts that began in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s have stirred many scholars to consider which factors may contribute to the success or failure of democratization. The most widely discussed factors can be placed into three broad categories: institutional, cultural, and economic. Of particular interest to some scholars is the institutional debate concerning whether presidential or parliamentary systems lead to better probable outcomes of democratization. This institutional debate became especially pertinent to Russia's democratic experiment when Boris Yeltsin abolished the country's legislative bodies by military force in September 1993 and established a new constitution that strongly favored presidential power. Gennadii Zyuganov and the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) have since strongly opposed presidential rule and call in their platform for a reduction of presidential authority and restoration of the Soviets (the legislative bodies Yeltsin abolished along with the Congress of People's Deputies). When the CPRF gained a controlling bloc of the Russian State Duma in December 1995, the institutional debate between presidentialism and parliamentarianism became quintessentially delineated in Russian politics.

Democratization is often considered through analyses that utilize only one of the factors mentioned above. Proponents of economic determinants of democratization, for example, tend to leave out considerations of political culture. A careful look at the literature regarding the presidential/parliamentarian debate, however, reveals that institutional factors alone do not account well for variation in democratization outcomes. This project seeks first to argue that the institutional concern of presidentialism versus parliamentarianism is secondary to that of political culture, especially as political culture is manifested in the elites of a given polity;¹

¹Political culture and elite behavior, like other factors of democratization outcomes, are often viewed as mutually exclusive. For the purposes of this study, elite behavior is considered to embody a country's political culture, especially in the

we will then attempt to identify the specific characteristics of elites that contribute to the negation of institutional strength (at least as it is manifested in presidential and parliamentary systems) in determining democratization outcomes. Before we do this, however, it is important to consider the rationale behind the institutional debate, and how it leads to the proposal made here.

Presidentialism versus Parliamentarianism

The underlying assumption in much of the literature addressing the issue of presidentialism versus parliamentarianism is that emerging democracies demand flexible political climates in order to survive. One of the earliest writers on this topic is Juan Linz, who concludes that the latter is more favorable to stable democracy than the former, stating that “the only presidential democracy with a long history of constitutional continuity is the United States” (Linz 51-2). Linz’s terms, inasmuch as they are unchallenged in the literature, are appropriate for use in this discussion:

A parliamentary regime in the strict sense is one in which the only democratically legitimate institution is parliament; in such a regime, the government’s authority is completely dependent upon parliamentary confidence . . . In presidential systems an executive with considerable constitutional powers—generally including full control of the composition of the cabinet and administration—is directly elected by the people for a fixed term and is independent of parliamentary votes of confidence. He is not only the holder of executive power but also the symbolic head of state and can be removed between elections only by the drastic step of impeachment (52).

Linz identifies two characteristics of presidential government that stand out as problematic: “The first is the president’s strong claim to democratic, even plebiscitarian, legitimacy; the second is his fixed term in office” (53). The former presents two possible stumbling points vis-à-vis establishing a stable democracy, according to Linz. The first is that presidents can make their claims to legitimacy (i.e., by winning elections)

context of regimes that have democratized to the point of allowing free elections, for two outstanding reasons: 1) elites are democratically legitimized and 2) elites tend to share national, sometimes ethnic, and certainly cultural identities with their respective constituencies. Elite behavior is therefore considered to reflect constituent political culture.

with only a plurality of popular support. Once in office, presidents have the prerogative of acting on a “popular mandate,” even if their electoral support had been minimal. The second point is that legislatures can make the same claims to legitimacy as their presidential counterparts, even if constitutionally ordained power structures favor the president in each case. This type of “dual legitimacy” becomes problematic when legislative and presidential agendas conflict.

As to the second problem with presidentialism Linz identifies—fixed terms of office—Linz points to the need for flexibility in emerging democracies: “[Fixed terms break] the political process into discontinuous, rigidly demarcated periods, leaving no room for the continuous readjustments that events may demand. The duration of the president’s mandate becomes a crucial factor in the calculations of all political actors, a fact which . . . is fraught with important consequences” (54). The problem of presidents’ fixed terms becomes even more difficult when it is compounded with another inherent shortcoming of presidential government—the “zero-sum game” of presidential politics—that is, a one-person, “winner-take-all” situation “with all the potential for conflict such games portend” (56). These two features of presidential rule exacerbate the problems of legitimacy and flexibility because, as Linz notes, “[w]inners and losers are sharply defined for the entire period of the presidential mandate. There is no hope for shifts in alliances . . . Instead, the losers must wait at least four or five years without any access to executive power and patronage” (56).

In short, Linz reduces the debate to one of flexibility versus rigidity, with overtones of concern that suggest presidential systems lack sufficient legitimacy for democratic consolidation. The problems of dual legitimacy, zero-sum politics and fixed terms of office combine to create a potential situation in which public interests are not only poorly articulated in government, but may even become usurped entirely by a scarcely-legitimated president acting in overbearing conflict with a more representative and flexible legislature.

Linz is not alone in his analysis. His analysis, mainly confined to Latin America,² is joined by other scholars who study this area, although on somewhat differing grounds (Mainwaring; Nino; O’Donnell). Arend

² Linz’s arguments, while justified by an analysis that heavily favors Latin American countries, are presented as objectively applicable to most countries of the world. As we will see, however, his claims are both upheld and criticized in the literature.

Lijphart, while he agrees with Linz's proposition that presidentialism leads to rigidity and stagnation in the political process, argues that presidential governments encourage "majoritarian democracy," especially in countries with "deep ethnic, racial, and religious cleavages but also those with intense *political* differences stemming from a recent history of civil war or military dictatorship, huge socioeconomic inequalities, and so on" (91-92). This argument draws on Linz's criticism of presidential governance as a practice of low-legitimacy, winner-take-all "mandates," while adding that such an arrangement is counterproductive "especially in the many countries where, because a natural consensus is lacking, a consensual instead of a majoritarian form of democracy is needed" (91). Stepan and Skach, in an empirical study analyzing democratic outcomes of the 93 countries that became independent between 1945 and 1979 and those from the same set that remained democracies from 1980-1989, found that of the 93 countries, only 15 remained democracies in the latter period—all of which were parliamentary regimes. The problem with presidentialism, these scholars noted, is that it is an arrangement of "mutual independence," whereas parliamentary government is one of "mutual dependence" (17-18); that is, presidentialism is an arrangement of "discouraging the formation of durable coalitions, maximizing legislative impasses, motivating executives to flout the constitution, and stimulating political society to call periodically for military coups . . ." (17). Parliamentary government, on the other hand, involves a "mutual dependency relationship—the executive's right to dissolve parliament and the legislature's right to pass a vote of no confidence"—what Stepan and Skach call "deadlock-breaking devices" (18). In short, because of the "separate and fixed mandates" presidents and legislatures have in presidential governments, and the likelihood that presidents in such arrangements will often not have a legislative majority of support (a problem presumably engendered by the marginally legitimate mandates presidents share according to Linz), presidents may often be drawn to rule by decree—at the "edge of the constitution" (19; 22).

Using the specific case of Russia, Lilia Shevtsova says that "presidentialism is incompatible with the flexible federal model and would be difficult to implement in a society with numerous conflicts; it would inhibit the development of mechanisms for power sharing . . . In fact, there are few reasons to believe that strong presidentialism is a good choice for Russia" (46). Sakwa applies Linz's arguments to the particular case of Russia as well, using the indictment of presidential rigidity to claim that "[p]residential government in

post-communist Russia is based on the notion of *choicelessness* in the so-called transition. The Bolshevik formula had been ‘one class, one party, one ideology’ and in early post-communist Russia this appeared to become ‘one policy, one leader’” (147-8).

Linz and his adherents are not without their critics, however. Shugart and Carey find, for example, that democracy is as likely to fail under parliamentary as under presidential regimes.³ Donald Horowitz contends that Linz’s findings are “based on a regionally skewed and highly selective sample of comparative experience, principally from Latin America”; that they “rest on a mechanistic, even caricatured, view of the presidency”; and that “they assume a particular system of electing the president, which is not necessarily the best system” (74). He claims that if Linz had chosen to focus on postcolonial Asia and Africa, “the institutional villain would surely have been parliamentary systems” (74). Horowitz further criticizes Linz’s claim that presidentialism necessarily carries with it a rigid, zero-sum political climate, by pointing out that presidential systems no more dichotomize winners and losers than do parliamentary systems; that is, that “government and opposition frequently cooperate in the legislative process” (75). Finally, Horowitz notes that Linz’s claim that presidentialism results in winner-take-all politics assumes the presence of electoral processes encouraging such outcomes (i.e. first-past-the-post pluralities accompanied by runoff elections). Inasmuch as a broader distribution of support can be found for a president, he says, winner-take-all is not an inherent outcome of presidentialism but of particular electoral practices. Because a wide variation in methods exists to operate under different institutional arrangements, Horowitz is led to conclude that “Linz’s thesis boils down to an argument not against the presidency but against plurality election, not in favor of parliamentary *systems* but in favor of parliamentary *coalitions*” (79). Michael Mezey makes a similar argument, claiming that “the effectiveness of government may have more to do with the presence of a majority party than with a particular constitutional form. In parliamentary systems with no majority party and a fragile governing coalition, policy making may be as slow and inefficient as in a presidential system” (234). He notes further that “in a deeply divided nation, an elected presidency may actually enhance stability, especially if the electoral system is designed to encourage the selection of a centrist” (235).

³ See Easter 186.

Finally, some scholars criticize Linz from standpoints outside of the institutional context. Seymour Martin Lipset, for example, while first noting that many writers ignore the fact that prime ministers tend to be more powerful than presidents⁴ (and hence more dangerous to democracy when the coalition in power has undemocratic tendencies), emphasizes cultural and economic factors as greater determinants of democratization outcomes than the bare institutional question of presidentialism versus parliamentarianism. According to Lipset, “the correlations of democracy with Protestantism and a past British connection point up the importance of cultural factors”—a claim supported by Stepan and Skach, who noted in their study that “all but two” of the “democratic survivors” mentioned earlier are former British colonies (Lipset 82; Stepan and Skach 12). Lipset also points to the fact that “long-enduring democracies are disproportionately to be found among the wealthier and more Protestant nations” (Lipset 82). While economic factors are sure to skew any predictions of democratization outcomes based solely on institutional concerns, we do not address them here. Political culture is, however, of particular interest to this discussion, including considerations of culture-in-elites, for reasons already mentioned.

Gerald Easter delivers a convincing argument that the success of democracy depends less on institutional arrangements per se than on the behavior of elites operating within given arrangements. He acknowledges that on the surface the data seem to support Linz’s argument. He claims, however, that important factors specific to elites precede the choice of institutional arrangement any given government makes. Specifically, he found the following in his study:

In postcommunist transitions, presidentialism was preferred by those old regime elites who in the process of regime breakdown maintained their access, completely or partially, to the state’s power resources. Their goal during the transition phase was not only to keep what they already had but also to deny it to others. Presidentialism offered an institutional form that served this goal better than parliamentarism. The particular institutional features of presidentialism—powers of decree, separation of executive and legislature, and fixed terms in office—were used

⁴ That is, owing to the fact that in parliamentary systems, parties tend to have more discipline as they wish to maintain their power in the executive, whereas a president’s position is unaffected by politics in the legislature—a fact that implies weaker party discipline and hence less legislative influence for the president.

by old regime elites to establish a proprietary claim on the state's power resources. For these old regime elites, presidentialism provided a buffer against the encroachments of democracy, liberalization, and the market . . . By contrast, parliamentarism was preferred in cases in which old regime elites had been dispersed. [The primary concern of new political actors] was to establish access to the power resources of the state. Parliamentarism served this goal better than presidentialism (189).

Until this point, we have discussed scholarly arguments that treat institutional arrangements as causal factors of democratization outcomes. Easter, by contrast, brings attention to the “dynamics of the choice” elites make (210). “Presidentialism,” he concludes, “is the preferred strategy of those actors who calculate that they have the most to gain by limiting the access of others to the state's power resources. If this observation is correct, then the prospects for democratic consolidation in such cases would appear to be bleak from the outset” (211).

Whether a function of institutional defects, political culture, economics or elite choices, presidential regime systems seem to carry a higher risk of democratic failure than parliamentary regimes. This fact is little comfort to those who wish to isolate *which* factor or factors is/are most relevant. The literature seems to suggest that while presidentialism certainly carries with it inherent risks, there is no conclusive evidence to show that it necessarily results in failure. Moreover, when it succeeds and when it fails, we do not know why. It is fair to conclude that the institutional perspective alone does not accurately predict democratization outcomes. The criticisms of Linz's arguments mentioned above at once stand up to empirical tests and fail to negate the contentions of Linz and others in his school, namely, that presidentialism on the whole seems not to encourage democratic consolidation. The findings of all of the scholars in the debate, then, are reconcilable, even if individual authors might contend otherwise. This fact seems to point to the conclusion that proper variables of democratization outcomes have not been completely and accurately identified.

Variables of Institutional Weakness

From the point at which we conclude that presidentialism and parliamentarianism alone do not bear concretely on democratic success, we are led to ask which variables do in fact better predict probable democratization outcomes. This paper does not argue that institutional factors do not matter. They do matter—but, as is argued here, only in a cultural context. Furthermore, building on Easter's conclusion, we can see that

political culture is articulated through elites in a power struggle. Identified below are variables that can be found among elites in any given political arrangement. The argument made here is that these variables bear on the effectiveness of institutional arrangements on democratic consolidation. That is, to the extent that these variables are present, institutional factors matter less toward stabilizing democracy. The converse is also true: When the variables identified here have a weak showing, institutional factors are more significant. The results of this study should offer a new way of viewing institutional factors of democratization (i.e., through a cultural lens).

Before we turn to the variables, however, some possible shortfalls of this analysis should be identified. What is argued here is that institutional arrangements are beholden to democratizing regimes' political cultures as manifested by elites acting out power struggles. The latter is certainly not the only extra-institutional factor to bear on institutional arrangements. Economic factors, for example, can have a particularly strong effect on democratization efforts. The goal here is not to exclude economic concerns for their lack of significance, but to isolate the role of political culture as it relates to institutional arrangements. Perhaps a future study can examine the economic factor. Another potential problem with this analysis is that it examines only successful democracies. Examining failed democracies introduces a degree of complexity not appropriate to our discussion. The hypothesis to be tested is whether elite variables account for variation, among successful democracies, in the success of presidential versus parliamentary systems. While an examination of unsuccessful democracies would lend more to our understanding of elite influence on institutional arrangements generally, such a study goes beyond the scope of the goal presented here. We may now turn to the specific characteristics of elites⁵ proposed to bear on the significance of the presidential or parliamentary choice.

⁵Elites are defined here as individuals who in the current regime hold office either as president or as ranking members of parliament, such as ministers. Also included in this definition is the losing presidential candidate in the last two-person election.

In order to ensure that the results of this study reflect cross-cultural samples, we will examine elite profiles in four countries each of Latin America, Africa, and Europe. We will gather data on elites in each of these countries that correspond to the following criteria.

1. *Position of power in the fallen regime*⁶. Elites who enjoyed power in the governing apparatus of a fallen regime may be thought of, in accordance with Easter's view, as interested in maintaining access to the state's power resources—perhaps more so than in the consolidation of democracy. If Easter's view is correct, we would expect to find a direct correlation between this variable and the choice of presidentialism. This part of the study may be considered a test of Easter's findings.

2. *Frequency of extra-constitutional behavior*. This variable will be assigned a high, low, or null value, depending on the behavior of the elite in question. The portion of history examined to arrive at a value will include the time period that the elite in question held a position or positions of power. The purpose of this criterion is to demonstrate that institutional arrangements are only effective to the degree that the players within them have respect for the rules of the game.

3. *Political affiliation*. The political affiliation of elites is likely to have a strong effect on institutional arrangements where the affiliations are strongly democratic or strongly undemocratic, in the context of democratization. Some elites may have had strongly undemocratic affiliations (i.e., by party or faction membership) prior to a regime's fall and strongly democratic affiliations upon taking on the task of democratization. For example, Boris Yeltsin, prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, was a member of the Communist Party apparatus. Today, he has no party affiliation per se, although he stands almost alone as a bulwark against authoritarian pressures in the parliament. Such cases should receive a middle value. The rationale here is that the degree to which presidentialism or parliamentarianism is inherently expected (by some of the authors who contribute to the literature on the subject) to aid or undermine democratization efforts, is negated by the potential authoritarian or undemocratic leanings of the elites within the given institutional arrangements.

⁶In the actual study, a numerical value would be assigned to an elite's previous power position, as not all such positions are likely to have the same degree of bearing on future institutional arrangements. Numerical values would also be assigned to other variables in the study.

4. *Stake in choice of institutional arrangement.* This variable is included as a supplement to the Easter-based variable of power position in the fallen regime. According to Easter, elites choose presidential systems in order to maintain access to the state's power resources. Easter's argument is accommodated well by the literature that—if on discordant premises—suggests that presidentialism is unfriendly to democracy. Here we take the analysis a step further by contending that elites who have a stake in parliamentary power are likely to prefer such power, perhaps on grounds other than the successful perpetration of democratic consolidation. The result of choosing parliamentary government on such grounds, this study contends, is the partial negation of benefits the parliamentary institutional choice is purported to carry, the literature lauding such a choice notwithstanding.

If the premise of this study is valid, we would expect to find that among the democracies studied, the institutional choice of presidentialism or parliamentarianism will have had negligible influence on the democracies' success. Specifically, we should find successful parliamentary systems to have been managed by elites with low values in each of the variables identified, overall. The same should be found for successful presidential regimes. Finally, the factor that underlies high or low values in each of these variables, we contend, is political culture as manifested in elite behavior.

Conclusion

That presidentialism carries with it inherent risks is not disputed here. Presidential rigidity, potential low-legitimacy, and concentrated authority constitute a precarious combination for fragile emerging democracies. It is not a foregone conclusion, however, that presidential regimes are doomed to failure. Moreover, parliamentary regimes, their advantages of flexibility and representativeness notwithstanding, carry with them no guarantees of successful democracy. The behavior of elites within institutional arrangements has more bearing in the equation than the arrangements themselves. Elites are likely to behave in ways that reflect the political culture of the people who legitimized them—the constituents—and their own subjective cultural influences. From this point we can begin to understand the true role of presidentialism versus parliamentarianism in outcomes of democratization.

Bibliography

- Easter, Gerald M. "Preference for Presidentialism: Postcommunist Regime Change in Russia and the NIS." World Politics 49 (1997): 184-211.
- Horowitz, Donald L. "Comparing Democratic Systems." Journal of Democracy 1.4 (1990): 73-79.28-42.
- Lijphart, Arend. "Presidentialism and Majoritarian Democracy: Theoretical Observations." The Failure of Presidential Democracy. Eds. Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
- Linz, Juan J. "The Perils of Presidentialism." Journal of Democracy 1.1 (1990): 51-69.
- Lipset, Seymour M. "The Centrality of Political Culture." Journal of Democracy 1.4 (1990): 80-83.
- Mainwaring, Scott. "Presidentialism in Latin America." Parliamentary versus Presidential Government. Ed. Arend Lijphart. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 111-117.
- Mezey, Michael L. "Studying Legislatures: Lessons for Comparing the Russian Experience." Democratization in Russia: The Development of Legislative Institutions. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hahn. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 221-240.
- Nino, Carlos S. "Presidentialism and Parliamentarism in Brazil." Parliamentary versus Presidential Government. Ed. Arend Lijphart. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 133-138.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. "On the State, Democratization and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Glances at Some Postcommunist Countries." World Development 21.8 (1993): 1355-69.
- Sakwa, Richard. Russian Politics and Society. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Shevtsova, Lilia. "Parliament and the Political Crisis in Russia, 1991-1993." Democratization in Russia: The Development of Legislative Institutions. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hahn. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 29-48.
- Shugart, M. and J. Carey. Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Stepan, Alfred, and Cindy Skach. "Constitutional Frameworks and Democratic Consolidation: Parliamentarianism versus Presidentialism." World Politics 46 (1993): 1-22.