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CIDE

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PRESIDENTIALISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES:
A DEBATE
I. The Debate over Presidentialism

In the last decade there has been a renewed interest on the development of political institutions and their consequences on different political processes. This interest reveals itself in a wide literature that falls into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are the writings of those that drawing from political economy traditions, from rational action theories and from a game theoretic framework set themselves the task of explaining how institutions develop, work and change, and how they affect the choices, behaviour and interactions of political actors. On the other hand, there are the political comparativists that have sought to explain the performance of different countries in relation to the institutional forms that polities adopt.

This renewed interest seems to find its roots in two distinct developments, one theoretical, the other political. Regarding the first, it can be argued that social and economic centered theories which rendered political variables dependent and understandable only through social and economic factors gave way to paradigms in which the autonomy of the political was vindicated or, at least, put on the same foot as socio-economics factors. Consequently, the features and impact of political institutions and the way they shape life became a matter of debate.

Politics also played its part. The eighties witnessed the breakdown of very many authoritarian regimes and a commitment to democracy bringing to the fore the discussion of politico-intitutional design (especially the drafting of new constitutions) and the issue of what kind of institutions seem more conducive to stable democratic rule. However, this kind of political debate has not been exclusive to those countries that experienced breakdown of authoritarian rule. Even in one of the most stable democracies in the world - that of the USA - politicians and intellectuals have been discussing the advantages of reforming the Constitution to obtain better (more workable) institutional arrangements.

Part of this debate has been directed at the different forms of government or regime types (particularly the contrast between parliamentarism and presidentialism)

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3Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol (1985), Krasner (1978).
4The literature on transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule exemplifies some of the above assertions: the treatment of political variables as independent, the importance accorded to political institutions for the prospect of stable rule and the commitment to democracy. See, O'Donnell, G., Schmitter, P. and Whitehead, L. (1986), Diamond, L., Linz, J., and Lipset, S. M. (1989) and Huntington (1997).
and involves central political concepts such as representation, accountability, consensus, legitimacy and conflict regulation.

The common assumption in the debate is that institutional arrangements for representative democracies affect the ways in which the political process operates. They affect political behaviour and, thus, the chances of both confrontation and negotiation; performance and, thus, expectations of stability or, at least, durability; power relations and, thus, dominance.

The debate has focused on the two most widely found regime types and has centered around the following interrelated issues:

- definitional criteria;
- strengths and weaknesses or advantages and disadvantages of each arrangement;
- consequences for a selected number of political processes;
- and, to a lesser extent
- suitability or affinity between one or other regime type according to the type of society.

**Definitional Criteria**

The definitional criteria for the "pure" presidential regime type have not been very troublesome although some authors tend to include more elements than others. In his *The Analysis of Political Systems*, Verney (1959) offers eleven criteria that distinguish presidentialism from parliamentarism. Lijphart, in the introductory essay to his *Parliamentary versus Presidential Government*, points to three essential criteria: the head of government is elected for a fixed constitutionally prescribed term and in normal circumstances he cannot be forced to resign by the legislature; presidential heads of government are popularly elected; the executive is unipersonal and members of presidential cabinets are mere advisers or subordinates of the president (Lijphart 1992:8). He then adds the following subsidiary elements: people cannot serve at the same time in both branches of government, neither branch has the right to dissolve the other, head of state and head of government are the same (Lijphart 1984: 68). Linz (1990 and 1994) and Mainwaring (1990) adopt similar criteria.

In fact, there is no substantial disagreement among authors over the definition of presidentialism and which countries belong to this category. However, Shugart and Carey’s (1992, p. 19) defining characteristics of the pure type of presidentialism seem to best capture the essential elements of this form of government. Presidentialism is a system of government which meets each of the following criteria:

- the chief executive is chosen by popular election
- the terms of the chief executive and assembly are fixed, and are not contingent on mutual confidence
the elected executive names and directs the composition of the government
the president has some constitutionally granted lawmaking authority.

These definitional criteria include the essential attribute of having separate sources of the origin and the survival of the executive and congress while avoiding the misguided idea that presidentialism is characterized by the absolute separation of powers. Thus, by including some provisions pertaining to the actions of the executive power (assignment and direction of the composition of government plus lawmaking authority) it conveys autonomy to the executive as well as allowing for the necessary overlap of power and, consequently, interdependence and possibility of checks and balances.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Political Consequences

Consequences for the political process should follow from each of the constitutive elements of presidentialism. It is precisely these consequences that proponents and critics of presidentialism regard as the strengths and weaknesses or advantages and disadvantages of such institutional arrangements.

Consequences as well as strengths and weaknesses are mainly discussed in terms of the prospects of maintaining stable (maybe we should say durable) democratic rule. However, there is an underlying worry about the efficiency and expediency which each institutional arrangement seems to lend to the business of governing. (In discussing what the different authors have to say about the advantages and disadvantages of presidentialism we will necessarily be referring, at the same time, to the political consequences it appears to yield).

Again, the debate is framed in comparative terms between the regime types of presidentialism and parliamentary and there seems to be a consensus which favours the latter. In fact even those characteristics that were initially proposed as advantages of presidentialism are qualified so as to turn them into disadvantages.

Both the general advantages and disadvantages of presidentialism are said to derive from its constitutive elements or definitional criteria, namely, fixed term, popular election and separation of powers. Resulting from the same sources, critics of presidentialism view as disadvantages what proponents of presidentialism regard as advantages.

On the side of advantages, executive stability, greater democracy and more limited government are the most widely discussed. Regarding disadvantages, temporal rigidity, majoritarian tendencies (lesser inclusiveness), and dual democratic legitimacy leading to deadlock are the rule. As is obvious, what critics and proponents of presidentialism do is to emphasize a different consequence of each constitutive element.
Executive stability is said to follow from the fact that presidents are elected for a fixed period of time during which political actors agree to being legitimately ruled or governed by the incumbent. In fact, Powell’s (1982) multivariate analysis shows that no variable is more powerful than a presidential executive in predicting stability. Critics of presidentialism argue that stability should be regarded not -or not only- at the government or cabinet level but -also- at the system’s level. If this approach is adopted, then what appeared as an advantage may turn into a disadvantage for in the case a president becomes unpopular or loses legislative support there are no obvious and institutionalized mechanisms to replace the executive. The argument is then that stability turns into rigidity and, possibly, crisis, breakdown and dictatorship (Blondel and Suárez, 1981; Lijphart, 1992, p. 11-12, Linz, 1990, p. 55; Mainwaring, 1993, pp. 207-208).

Further negative consequences of the “fixed term” characteristic are the following. First, the same rigidity operates regarding what could be termed an “intransigent congress”, that is, there are no means whereby a president which has strong popular support can dissolve congress (Shugart and Carey, 1992, pp. 29). Second, the opposite manifestation of the problem of not being able to remove presidents is that when they come to the end of their period they must step down regardless of the desire of the voters (Shugart and Carey, 1992, pp. 29). Third, a fixed period coupled with the non-reelection provision have the effect of: a) turning the president into a lame duck (Mainwaring, 1993, p. 217), b) constraining the government’s ability to make good the promised electoral programme, c) provoking an exaggerated sense of urgency that can lead to ill-conceived and hasty policies, d) having to produce a capable and popular leader every four or five years (Linz, 1990, pp. 66-67).

Greater democracy is the second most cited advantage of presidentialism and it is supposed to follow from popular election. Direct elections (or through an electoral college) are said to offer a choice that is clear, unmistakable and not subject to either postelectoral negotiation or leaving the decision to the backstage maneuvering of politicians. Apart from arguing that parliamentarism “offers the functional equivalent of popular election of the prime minister” (especially in two party systems), critics of presidentialism put forward other consequences of the president being popularly elected that do not seem to enhance democracy. One is that more often than not presidents get elected not by a majority but by a plurality of votes. Another is that even with slim majorities a winner takes-all phenomenon takes place generating majoritarian tendencies that cannot be regarded as very democratic due to their exclusive and zero-sum character (Lijphart, 1992, pp. 19, Linz, 1990, p. 56). A third consequence is that “popular mandate is likely to imbue a president with a sense of power and mission, even if the plurality that elected him is a slender one” (Linz, 1990, p. 56). This, in turn, may lead the president not to seek alliances and compromises with the “losers” and to deny them access to influential positions during
the whole period thereby polarizing politics. Finally, it is argued that the zero-sum game present in presidential regimes raises the stakes of presidential elections and inevitably exacerbates their attendant tension and polarization (Linz, 1990, pp. 55-56).

From another perspective, two further drawbacks are said to derive from direct popular election of the chief executive. Linz (1990, pp. 60-61) claims that the office of the president is, by nature, two dimensional and, in a sense, ambiguous. On the one hand the president is the head of state and the representative of the whole nation; on the other, he stands for a clearly partisan political option. Finally, Blondel and Suárez (1981) argue that presidentialism gives greater possibilities to individuals with no ministerial or, indeed political experience and reinforces personalism. After all, “direct election of the executive dictates that candidates have widespread popular appeal, even at the expense of political experience” (Shugart and Carey, 1992, p. 33).

Presidentialism is said to have the advantage of being a more limited form of government (the federalists) as well as of allowing assemblies to perform the function for which they were democratically elected, to legislate (Schlesinger, 1985). It has been charged, however, with the disadvantage of creating dual democratic legitimacy. These and other consequences discussed below, follow from the separation of powers principle or, to put it in another way, from the separate bases of origin and survival of the executive and the legislative and the necessary overlap or sharing of power needed for the checks and balances to work.

Proponents of presidentialist arrangements hold that limiting the government is necessary for enhancing democratic practices as well as for better protecting the rights and liberties of individuals. But even more important, it is argued that presidentialism endows the legislature with enough legitimacy and power to carry on its job. In parliamentarism, a member of parliament can ill afford to challenge, criticize or publicly differ with the prime minister and his party. Since such behaviour may bring the government down, the majority of legislators are expected to show obedience and thus provide “solid masses of steady votes” (Bagehot, 1867).

Although some authors consider this as a clear advantage for it gives strength to the executive and allows it to follow a clear and consistent policy, for many others it is a disadvantage since the assembly is reduced to passivity, rendering it incapable of taking an independent line or exercise any meaningful control (Koenig, 1981, p. 411, but also Schlessinger, 1985).

In contrast, critics of presidentialism hold that many more disadvantages follow from the often praised separation of powers. First and foremost it is argued that the inevitable result of the coexistence of two independent and legitimate organs is deadlock and paralysis due to the absence of institutionalized means to keep the legislature and the executive in tune or to resolve conflict through the dissolution of
The most obvious means to keep the executive and the legislative “in tune” would be for the president and majority of congress to be from the same party. Two problems seem however to preclude this. First, there are no mechanisms for securing a majority in the legislature. Second, even when president and majority of congress are from the same party, the national versus local outlook and interests of the president and the representatives may still render conflict inevitable (Koenig, 1981, p. 126). The result is that heads of government find sometimes insurmountable obstacles to push through policy measures. In contrast, the leading attraction of a parliamentary system, especially of a majoritarian kind, is the unity and cohesion of policy. That is, the head of the executive is likely to see “not the 40 or 50% of the important measures that the American President is likely to secure but 100%” (Koenig, 1981, p. 405).

This situation is aggravated by the kind of behaviour that dual legitimacy and independence of tenure of members of each branch seems to foster. On the side of the executive, the national and popular origin of its mandate, its plebiscitarian character, “is likely to make the obstacles and opposition he encounters seem particularly annoying ... it may also ... bring on a refusal to acknowledge the limits of the mandate that even a majority -to say nothing of a mere plurality- can claim as democratic justification for the enactment of its agenda” (Linz, 1990, p. 61). The separateness of survival may translate into lack of interest at seeking to maintain lasting coalitions. Since coalitions may be needed to pass initiatives and legislation, alliances will be sought but they will be of a piecemeal character and will rely on discrete and particularistic incentives (Shugart and Carey, 1992, p. 33, Mainwaring, 1993). Finally, one of the often mentioned drawbacks of presidentialism is said to be that presidents, being elected by popular votes, enjoy independence from political parties and that this further reinforces the likelihood of antagonistic relations between the head of the executive and congress (Blondel and Suárez, 1981, p. 60, Linz, 1990, p. 56).

On the side of the legislative, the argument is that neither representatives from the opposition nor those of the same party as the president, have enough incentives to coalition building. In the first case because there is not much to gain from supporting the executive’s agenda. In the second, because their fate is not tied to that of the president and may even suffer from being associated with an unpopular (in case of legislative elections pending) or outgoing executive.

In the end, critics of presidentialism end up recognizing that the executive is not as strong as is often assumed and that the great responsibilities accorded to the head of the executive are impaired by the limits of power imposed on it (Blondel and Suárez, 1982, pp. 64-70, Koenig, 1981, pp. 406-408, Mainwaring, 1990, pp. 162 and 167).
A more extreme conclusion that is supposed could follow from the fixed term and the absence of institutionalized means to remove presidents as well as from executive-legislative deadlocks is that of creating incentives to turn to authoritarian solutions as the only alternative (Davies, 1958, Linz, 1990). The line of reasoning in this respect is given in Mainwaring (1990, pp. 168-169) who argues that effective executive power is indispensable if democracy is to thrive, that presidentialism is prone to immobilism due to balance and separation of powers, and that immobilism contributes to rule by decree and even to the total breakdown of democratic regimes (see also Shugart and Carey, 1992, pp. 36-38).

Before turning to the discussion of the limits and shortcomings of the debate let us first put forward some of the important traits of presidentialism that have either not been addressed by its critics or, at least, not been discussed at length.

Shugart and Carey (1992) two of the very few authors who set themselves the task of reappraising presidentialism offer three major advantages that this regime type provides to a degree that parliamentarism does not: accountability, identifiability and mutual checks.6

Regarding the first of these, the authors claim that “the more straightforward the connection between the choices made by the electorate at the ballot box and the expectations to which policy makers are held, the greater accountability” (p. 44).7

Presidentialism fares better in accountability since voters vote directly for an executive that cannot be removed by shifting coalitions in the assembly. In parliamentarism this form of accountability is weakened since governments can change between elections and the responsibility for policy in the interelection period is less clear, making it difficult for voters to know whom to hold accountable on election day (Powell, 1989).

Other authors (Bagehot, 1867, Wilson, 1992, and more recently Lijphart, 1992) have argued that accountability is lost because separation of powers also means division of responsibilities and thus, also diffused and unclear responsibilities. However, Shugart and Carey (1992, p. 45) have insisted that in presidentialism, where legislative voting does not have implications for government survival, a legislator or a party leadership can be held directly accountable for votes on legislation.

Complementing accountability, presidentialism also provides a degree of identifiability not found in parliamentarism, that is, it allows voters to identify before the election (prospective choice) the likely alternative governments that may emerge after the election (p. 45).8

6In fact, they mention a fourth advantage -that of becoming an arbiter- but the case is not argued forcefully and it is said to function only under rather restrictive conditions (pp. 48-49).

7In their view, accountability is the degree and means by which elected policymakers are made responsible to citizens.

8Shugart and Carey recognize that this outcome can be provided by parliamentarism when they work with a two-bloc format but, in multiparty systems identifiability ranks very low. For such an argument see Strom (1990) where he develops an index of identifiability.
The third advantage is that of providing mutual checks. Although this question has certainly been addressed by critics of presidentialism for it derives from the separation of powers, the chosen perspective has been that of the effects of immobilism. What Shugart and Carey suggest is that the advantage lies, on the one hand, in clarifying “the stakes between legislator and the executive on any given issue” and, on the other, that due to the fact that members of the assembly are freed from the threat of a vote of confidence, they “can ratify or check executive initiatives based on the merit of the legislation itself rather than on the survival of the government” (p. 46). This situation may in fact lead to immobilism and the question becomes whether it is possible to preserve the congressional check under majority conditions, while providing for the resolution of deadlock in the absence of a majority. However, it can still be claimed that by reducing the coercive capacity of the executive over the members of the assembly majority, presidentialism preserves the viability of the opposition, without necessarily endangering stability. In sum, “under conditions in which mutual checks do not threaten presidentialism with immobilism, they act to prevent majoritarianism, and should be regarded as advantages of the system” (p. 48).

Affinity between Type of Regime and Society

The debate on the advantages and disadvantages of different regime types includes some considerations regarding the nature of societies in which each institutional arrangement is put to work. The inclusion of these variables has been marginal and the discussion of their implications poor. It has long been recognized that differences between and among types of regime involve extraconstitutional matters (Lambert, 1969) and that, due to their social characteristics, some countries are more prone to approach the consensus rather than the majoritarian model of parliamentarism (Lijphart, 1984). However, the analysis of social cleavages, cultural traits and traditions has not been central in the discussion of the appropriateness or chances of success of one regime type or another.

At most, the debate considers two related questions. On the one hand, how far voting patterns deriving from the social configuration of a system may ameliorate the disadvantageous consequences of a regime type (Lijphart, 1984, pp. 21-23 and Linz, 1990, p. 57); on the other, the role played by ideological polarization in the workings of presidentialism and parliamentarism (Mainwaring, 1993, pp. 219-220).

Other authors have addressed the question that the existence of pressure groups in national life and vast regional differences have a divisive influence and prevent tight integration of opinion and leadership in the major parties with a consequent impact on both stability and efficiency (Koenig, 1981, p. 406).
II. A Tentative Critique of the Debate

In what follows I will first touch upon what I regard as the rights and wrongs of the debate in its own terms (intrasystematic critique). Then, I will try to spell out the shortcomings of the dominant approach, an approach that seeks to analyse the political consequences alleged to follow from the institutional choice of a form of government.

1. Since the whole debate is framed in terms of the political consequences of a regime type, the first question which it is necessary to raise is how far the identified political consequences (advantages and disadvantages) in fact follow from the constitutive elements (definitional criteria) of each ideal regime type.

Many of the consequences attributed to the ideal type of presidential rule result more from a combination of the institutional arrangement with other political institutions such as the party system or the electoral rules, or else, from characteristics normally associated with presidentialism (e.g. non-reelection, decree powers, recourse to declaring a state of siege) but not intrinsic to its definition.

Thus far we have ignored the empirical examples which its critics use to indict presidentialism; to show that presidentialism leads to conflict, noncooperativeness, majoritarianism, instability etc. Yet alleged disadvantages of presidentialism are drawn more from particular cases than from the initial characterization of the regime type itself.

Generalizing particular cases may have at least two serious drawbacks. First, the choice of a biased sample will reinforce precisely what you intend to show. Second, taking a particular outcome as the direct consequence of a regime type without examining other intervening variables and institutional choices.

Let us first look at the countries from which the authors draw their evidence. The privileged cluster for parliamentarism is that of Western Europe while that for presidentialism is Latin America. It is self evident that these two clusters of countries can hardly be compared in terms of almost any variable one could think of: gross national product, per capita income, income distribution, civic culture, political traditions. However, one wonders what would happen if instead of those in Latin America, the authors had chosen another set of countries. Horowitz (1990, p. 74) rightly points out that if detractors of presidentialism had chosen their sample from postcolonial Asia and Africa "the institutional villain would surely have been parliamentary systems" which, following their approach, could easily be held responsible for instability and the consequent emergence of authoritarian rule. In a similar

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9Horowitz quotes Sir Arthur Lewis’s lectures on Politics in West Africa where he holds that the winner-takes-all features of the Westminster model had the effect of allowing anyone with a parliamentary majority to seize the state thereby excluding other groups from power and leading to conflict and instability.
fashion, Lipset (1990, p. 80) points out that many recent advocates of parliamentarism tend to forget the interwar collapse of it in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, Austria, Germany and most Eastern Europe.

Most analyses of comparative politics dealing with the proneness of regime breakdown point to the inherent instability of presidentialism as compared to parliamentarism. However, it has recently been noted that if instead of taking a snapshot of democracies as of a specific date and look at democratic failure throughout the twentieth century a different picture would emerge. In so doing Shugart and Carey (1992) identified twelve presidential regimes that broke down against twenty one parliamentary systems that suffered the same fate.

In yet another attempt at showing how results depend on chosen samples and time spans, the same authors point out that if only third world countries are considered just over half (52.2%) of the presidential regimes have broken down while the figure for parliamentary regimes is slightly higher (59.1%) (Shugart and Carey, 1992, pp. 38-42).

Now, let us stick to the countries chosen by critics of presidentialism. On the one hand, the United States appears as the clearest example of a stable and democratic (the two values in terms of which the advantages and disadvantages are judged) presidential rule. But the USA is explained away as an exception (Linz, 1990, pp. 53-53, Riggs (1988). On the other, Latin American countries are picked up selectively. Some presidential systems are excluded for their undemocratic character (notably México and Paraguay), others because they have fairly recent democratic regimes. In the end there remains two kinds of countries. Those that have had a more or less stable rule (Chile and Uruguay until 1973, Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica) and those in which democratic rule has been unstable and followed by regime breakdown.

Why, we may ask, is the USA explained away as an exception saying that a number of extraconstitutional factors account for it as a sui generis phenomenon difficult to reproduce elsewhere and Latin American countries taken as the ideal types from which the negative consequences of presidentialism follow? Undoubtedly there are very good reasons for taking the USA as an exception but one wonders whether the analysis of other countries is not also in need of turning to “a number of extra-constitutional factors”.

As we stated in the previous section, the three most important drawbacks of presidentialism are said to be temporal rigidity (resulting from fixed term), majoritarian tendencies (resulting from popular election) and dual democratic legitimacy (resulting from the separation of powers). The remaining drawbacks develop from the sometimes extraordinary legislative powers of some executives.

In the first case the main consequence is that there are no inbuilt mechanisms to get rid of an unpopular or unsupported government before its time elapses. This is certainly so. But that the absence of such a mechanism should lead to regime crisis
and breakdown is another matter. With the exception of Allende's Chile there has been no systematic examination of how often the need to replace fixed time executives arises, how “unpopularity” is to be judged and why it arises.

Furthermore, the capacity of parliamentary systems to depose unpopular governments is not as simple and neat as its proponents suggest. It is not neat because very often the formation of a new cabinet paralyses all governmental and parliamentary work for some time and because it is inevitable that complicated and lengthy negotiations have to be conducted to put together a new cabinet coalition (Gruijters, 1992, p. 191). On the other hand it has the drawback of making the assembly a passive body (remaining as a supportive majority for fear that government may be defeated) and even subject to cabinet “blackmail” (Koenig, 1982, p. 411 and Gruijters, 1992, p. 192).

The absence of a replacement mechanism is usually compounded by the inclusion of the non-reelection provision that prevents popular presidents from staying in office. This has some force, however, non-reelection is not a defining characteristic of presidentialism but merely a supplementary device to limit the executive's power.

Winner takes-all and majoritarian tendencies do not follow from the mere fact of having a popularly and directly elected president. Rather they are a function of plurality or majority systems with single district and no proportional representation. Many parliamentary systems, that have adopted such systems, show the same majoritarian characteristics with supposedly no adverse effects. In consequence, winner takes-all features are a function of electoral systems not of regime types. Furthermore, and beyond electoral systems, there are other institutional arrangements that diminish greatly the majoritarian tendencies. Federalism is a case in point.

The same principle of a popularly elected president is said to encourage the chief executive to perceive himself as having more power than elections justified. This is so because very often presidents are elected by a slim majority or even a small plurality. Again, that the president be elected under a plurality or majority system is not a requirement of presidentialist regimes but merely an institutional-electoral choice. As Horowitz (1990, p. 76) argues, presidents could and should be elected by a system that ensures them broadly distributed support.  

Although it must be granted that the separation (and sharing) of powers has mixed implications, some of the consequences alleged to follow from it are difficult to sustain. As stated before, the main argument starts from a case in which a presi-

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10Horowitz refers here to the Nigerian Second Republic (1979) example where to be elected a president needed a plurality plus distribution. The successful candidate was required to have at least 25% of the vote in no fewer than two thirds of the then 19 states.
dent faces the opposition of congress controlled by a different party. This, in turn, leads to deadlock, immobilism and eventually crisis and breakdown. Finally, the whole situation is seen to be aggravated by the fact, given dual legitimacy and the president's independence from parties, that there is no incentive for any of the participants -legislators and chief executive- to seek conciliation, collaboration and ultimately coalition building.

Why should the situation of a president facing a permanent and entrenched opposition in congress be the prevalent one is not explained. In fact, the case of the same party controlling the executive and the assembly is as frequent as that of both branches being controlled by different parties. Again, there is no explanation as to why a president should be unpopular and not willing to negotiate. Opponents of presidentialism seem to ground their arguments in crisis situations that need not be the rule.

The USA system gives testimony to a workable -albeit often difficult- relation between executive and legislature where even in face of congress majority and president belonging to opposing parties and a history of initial deadlocks, cooperation and coalitions have successfully been built and antagonistic relations avoided. It must also be noted that the executive loose links to the party that supports him may not only have adverse consequences. Executive autonomy and a lesser degree of party discipline makes easier to work out a modus vivendi with an opposing congress (Powell, 1992, p. 219).

But even if we move away from what the authors in the debate call the number one exception, and take some other examples in their Latin American countries sample, we will find cases in which conflict leads neither to unwillingness to cooperate nor to regime crisis.

Costa Rica, Venezuela and Colombia are three cases in point. The former has had bitter fights within congress and between it and the executive and a regime breakdown has yet to arise. Venezuela has had a presidential regime in which congress and executive have learnt to govern together. Colombia is still a better case for showing that presidentialism in itself need not have the adverse political consequences ascribed to it. This country created a mechanism to avoid majoritarian tendencies and was successful in its attempt at building lasting coalitions and a consociational type of democracy (Hartlyn, 1988). Colombia's National Front was in fact a method of creating a permanent coalition government in which the presidency alternates between the country's largest parties, and all other positions -legislative, cabinet, bureaucratic and judicial- are divided equally between the two parties (Kantor, 1977, p. 29).

Again these cases are either viewed as exceptional or explained away by means of their party systems. But then, the adverse or positive consequences should

\[\text{It is difficult to speak about majoritarian consequences at the same time as maintaining that congress and the executive are controlled by different parties (Horowitz, 1990, p. 75).}\]
not be imputed to a presidential form of government but to party systems or, at least, to the combination of presidential rule and fractionalized party systems.\textsuperscript{12}

The argument that Latin American presidents have had enormous trouble accomplishing their agendas and that they have the initiating power but then no support for implementing policy is a fairly common one. This is true not only of Latin American presidentialism but of the USA and many more parliamentary countries which follow the so called consensus model with its multiparty system and proportional representation electoral formulas. Again, this situation cannot easily be explained solely in terms of forms of government nor can it said to be responsible of breakdown of regimes and authoritarian adventures.

2. That political institutions matter for they create incentives and disincentives for political actors, shape actor's identities, establish the context in which policy-making occurs and can help or hinder in the construction of democratic regimes (Mainwaring, 1993, p. 198) is, I believe, beyond doubt. But, to claim that institutional arrangements regarding the type of regime are, among the whole array of political institutions, the sole or main responsible for whatever consequences we may find in issues such as representativeness, coalition building or conflict regulation is quite another thing. In other words, it is quite another matter to argue that norms regulating the constitution and maintenance of formal political power together with rules regarding the rights and duties of each branch of government are the only or most important institutional choices.

Without denying the importance of the above mentioned constitutional principles, I want to claim that such approach leaves too many unanswered questions and unaddressed issues to be usefully adopted in the analysis of the workings of a particular presidential institution.

It is true that it has long been recognised that there are important variations among regime types (Lijphart, 1984 in relation to majoritarian and consensus models of parliamentarism) and that there are many institutional choices that matter beside the choice of what means to employ for the constitution of executive power (Shugart and Carey, 1992, p. 43, Mainwaring, 1993, pp. 198-199). Thus, Linz (1990, p. 55) has stated that in addition to constitutional provisions "one must attend to the way in which political competition is structured in systems of direct presidential elections; the styles of leadership in such systems; the relations between the president, the political elites and society at large; and the ways in which power is exercised and conflicts are resolved". In a similar fashion, Lijphart (1991 and 1992, p. 21) speaks about the necessity of taking into account the impact of additional causal variables.

\textsuperscript{12}In fact this is the conclusion drawn in Mainwaring (1993).
However, this recognition has seldom been brought into the debate and no attempt has been made to weigh the relevance of different variables.

3. When we state that a regime type approach, understood as the means whereby governmental powers are constituted and maintained, proves to be rather restrictive and insufficient we mean not only that consequences on the political process can hardly be explained in isolation from other political institutions but also that it leaves no room to other set of quite important intervening variables.

a) The constitutional approach accords low importance to political factors other than those of entrenched powers. These go from other institutions and political actors, to political practices, skills, situation, personality, values, bargaining abilities etc.

Among these, two seem particularly important. The first is that of other political actors. The chief executive must constantly relate to constituencies of different nature and power: political (electorate, parties, public officials, foreign leaders); administrative (department and agency heads, civil and military bureaucracies); economic (business and labour); social (racial, ethnic, gender, age); critic (press, clergy, intellectuals, political opponents) (Koenig, 1981, pp. 104-105). These constituencies constrain and/or enable presidents in setting and pushing through their goals and policies and yet they are seldom, if ever, included in constitutions (written or not).

The other is that of leadership. Surprisingly as it may seem the recent debate has disregarded Weber's discussion of plebiscitary democracy and failed to introduce into the analysis the role of leadership, of independent personalities capable of establishing goals for the bureaucratic apparatus of administration. Thus the voluntaristic vein of politics is ruled out from a perspective which focuses on constitutionally established norms of behaviour (Mommsen, 1984, pp. 398-399). In this respect, it must be remembered that creative political leadership can help to mitigate the undesirable qualities or undermine the benefits of any type of regime (Powell, 1982, p. 226).

b) The almost exclusive focus on entrenched powers deriving from the constitution has also the consequence of precluding an inquiry into the phenomenon of presidential power. In other words, a constitutional approach does not take into account that claim to power is not the same as actual power and that despite presidential powers a president "does not obtain results by giving orders or not, at any rate, merely by giving orders" (Neustadt, 1962, pp. 10-18). Consequently it leaves no room for inquiring into the processes whereby powers are transformed into power.

One of such exceptions is Mainwaring's (1993) recent article on multiparty presidential democracies where he evaluates the performance of presidential regimes that have multiparty systems.
c) It also seems worth asking what would happen if regime types were not to be judged according to the criterion of sustaining democracy but by other political values such as efficiency, maximization of power, leadership or, simply, stable rule.

d) Another important question that has been left unattended is that of how far regime types and, within them, particular institutional arrangements, are a matter of choice and, in that case, whose choice. This issue would lead us to one of the principal topics of institutional theories, from which most of the authors borrow their framework: that of actors “knowingly” or consciously reproducing an “inherited” choice and that of their differential ability to impose their preferred course of action.

f) Finally, there are two related and particularly important questions which are absent from the debate. On the one hand we find no analysis of the possibility of breaching, circumventing or flawing the political consequences that are supposed to follow from the adoption of one or other regime type. On the other, that of “deviant” cases, that is, of regimes not “fully” democratic but that nonetheless have presidential forms of government.

III. Mexico in Relation to the Debate

In spite of the importance of the executive power in most Latinamerican countries it was not until very recently that presidentialism as a form of government returned to the debate among both intellectuals and politicians.¹⁴

If the neglect of presidentialism is surprising in the context of Latin American politics it is more so in the case of México. A review of the literature on regime types, be it comparative, single case studies or theoretical, seldom includes México. Although the most recent debate on the political consequences and advantages and disadvantages of regime types has been framed from the perspective of comparative politics, México, one of the most stable presidential regimes in this century is simply disregarded. The reason for this absence most surely follows from the fact that the whole debate has the open or underlying assumption that regime types should be evaluated in terms of their political consequences for the maintenance and enhancing of democracy, and from the fact that México is not considered to qualify as democratic.¹⁵ Nonetheless it is still puzzling that México is not included. Many of the

¹⁴We speak of a return for, as Mainwaring (1990) shows in his review, the 40's witnessed a lively debate on the advantages and disadvantages that presidentialist forms of government posed to effective and stable rule.

¹⁵México has generally been considered a non-democratic polity and one having directed elections. As far as we could inquire, no political analyst has ever included México when studying performance of different democracies. Mainwaring (1993) cites the following sources but many more could be quoted: The Freedom House annual publication Freedom Around the World, The Political Handbook of the World, The Statesman's Year-Book, Powell (1982), Rustow (1967) and Stephens (1989). Not even Pempel's "uncommon democracies" where cases of non-alternation of power like that of Japan are analysed allows México to qualify.
Latin American and other third world countries have not had democratic governments most of the time and when they have had them, they have been fraught with instability.

The whole debate is then limited to such countries that can be labelled democratic and, most of the time, those that can be said to have had stable democratic rule.

It is understandable that only democratic regimes should be part of the discussion. It seems awkward to speak of presidentialism - which implies the popular election of the head of government and the existence of two agents of the electorate which are supposed to check one another - and at the same time of non-democratic rule. However, this poses a problem with some countries that have presidential democratic constitutions but in which, at the same time, some of the conditions that are widely accepted as defining democracy in either one of its many definitions do not hold.

The problems are greater when we find countries that while not outright democratic, cannot be either easily classified as authoritarian and that have had a history of stable rule not only in terms of durability but also, and maybe more important, of low level of conflict and contained within institutional bounds. Here we find ourselves dealing with a case in which the dichotomous classification of democratic versus nondemocratic systems would seem inadequate and where continuous categories would be preferable (Mainwaring, 1993, p. 202).

The debate assumes democratic rule and respect for the rule of law but, can there be no presidentialism in polities where regular elections are held, where the executive attains power through a majority of votes and yet many or some of the most often cited institutional guarantees of democracy are absent? After all, among the central definitional criteria of presidentialism it is the way in which the executive attains office and the separate origin and survival of the two branches of government that count, not their democratic character. We would have to prove that neither one of these conditions hold in order to ban the label of presidentialist to México's form of government.

In any case México, which is neither outright authoritarian nor outright democratic, has had a very stable and durable rule within a highly institutionalized polity. Consequently, for all the powers accorded to the president, he is expected to

16Dahl (1971) refers to the following: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, the right to vote, eligibility for public office, the right of political leaders to compete for support and votes, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.

17An institutionalized polity is here taken to be one in which the system of governance - as an ensemble of patterns that determines the methods of access to the principal public offices, the characteristics of the actors admitted to or excluded from such access, the strategies that actors may use to gain access and the rules that are followed in the making of publicly binding decisions - is habitually known, practiced and accepted by most, if not all, actors. See Schmitter and Karl (1991).
play within certain well recognized rules of the game. These rules may be elastic and subject to varying interpretation, but undoubtedly a president who would operate clearly outside of them would provoke a major constitutional crisis (Alexander, 1977, p. 16).

The political process in México worked quite well for decades in spite of the fact that the country does not fit either the model in which citizens participate actively in free and democratic elections through which governments are formed, nor that in which citizens political involvement is characterized by turmoil rather than by electoral participation, governments are unstable and unresponsive and violence is widespread (Powell, 1982, p. 1). Thus, the mexican political system is in need of being explained as a deviant form of presidentialism or, maybe, as a particular case of a, thus far, relatively successful presidential rule.
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