PRESIDENTIALISM, MULTIPARTY SYSTEMS, AND DEMOCRACY: THE DIFFICULT EQUATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the combination of a multiparty system and a presidential system is inimical to stable democracy. The paper presents empirical evidence that shows that few (4 of 25) stable democracies have presidential systems. Several features of presidential systems contribute to explaining why so few have become stable democracies; this paper focuses particularly on the possibility that presidential systems are more prone to immobilism, weak executive power, and destabilizing executive/legislative conflict than parliamentary systems. The paper then shows that among all of the cases (past or present) of stable presidential democracy, only one—the Chilean—had a multiparty system. In presidential democracies, two-party systems are more capable of avoiding immobilism and intense legislative/executive conflict because they facilitate the formation of a government with a majority (or close to it) in congress, and also because ideological polarization is less likely with only two parties.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo argumenta que la combinación de un sistema de partidos multipartidario y un sistema presidencialista es adversa a la democracia estable. El trabajo presenta evidencia empírica que muestra que pocas democracias estables (4 de 25) tienen sistemas presidencialistas. Varias características del presidencialismo contribuyen a explicar por qué tales democracias no suelen ser estables; este trabajo se concentra particularmente en la posibilidad de que los sistemas presidencialistas están más propensos al inmovilismo, a un poder ejecutivo débil, y a un conflicto desestabilizador entre los poderes ejecutivo y legislativo que los sistemas parlamentaristas. Entre todos los casos (pasados o presentes) de democracias presidencialistas estables, solamente uno—el de Chile—tuvo un sistema multipartidario. En las democracias presidencialistas, los sistemas de dos partidos tienen más capacidad para evitar el inmovilismo y el intenso conflicto entre los poderes legislativo y ejecutivo porque ellos facilitan la formación de un gobierno con una mayoría (o casi una mayoría) en el congreso, y también porque la polarización ideológica es menos probable con sólo dos partidos.

Over a long period of time, scholars have debated whether the number of parties in a nation affects its prospects for democracy. During and shortly after World War II, impressed with the stability of democracy in Britain and the United States and its breakdown in Germany and Italy, several scholars (e.g., Duverger 1954: 206-280; Hermens 1941) argued that two-party systems were more favorable to democracy, and that multiparty systems tended to be more unstable. These analysts did not pay much attention to the smaller European democracies, where multiparty systems had been compatible with stable democracy for decades.

The tide of this discussion changed in the 1960s and 1970s, with the contributions of Lijphart (1968, 1977) being particularly significant (see also Dodd 1976). Noting that many multiparty democracies had achieved stability for a long period of time, Lijphart argued that in "plural societies," with sharp cultural, ethnic, religious, or linguistic cleavages, multiparty systems could be more propitious in promoting stable democracy. With a two-party system, significant minorities might be permanent "outs," a situation that could reduce their willingness to abide by the rules of the game. A multiparty system could enable these minorities to attain meaningful representation and to participate in governing coalitions.

Although they did not extoll the merits of multiparty systems, Sani and Sartori (1983) argued that the decisive dimension in stable democracy was more the level of ideological polarization than the number of parties. Valenzuela (1985) defended multiparty systems, avering that in ideologically polarized political systems attempting to impose a two-party format would reduce legitimacy and loyalty. A number of studies have continued to demonstrate a statistical correlation between a lower number of parties and a higher degree of democratic stability, but it is not clear whether the number of parties per se is relevant in explaining stability.[1] The consensus has moved toward the opposite side of the debate. This consensus, however, has obscured an important difference between parliamentary and presidential systems.

In this article I argue that in presidential systems, multiparty democracy is more difficult to sustain than two-party democracy. Only one country—Chile—with a multiparty system and a presidential system has achieved stable democracy. I agree with recent contributions that suggest that presidential systems are generally less favorable to stable democracy than

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[1] Sanders and Herman (1977) argued that when four other variables were controlled for, party system fragmentation had only a trivial effect on democratic stability. Lijphart (1968) similarly maintained that there was no empirical relationship between the number of parties and democratic stability. On the other hand, Taylor and Herman (1971) argued that the number of parties was inversely correlated to democratic stability. But they actually measured cabinet stability and made inferences about democratic stability on this basis. As I argue later, this is a dubious inference because in parliamentary systems frequent changes in government are less troublesome for regime stability than in presidential systems. According to Powell (1982: 108), multiparty systems tend to have less stable governments, but it is their association with extremism, not fragmentation as such, that led to instability.

parliamentary systems (especially cabinet governments), but go one step further in arguing that the difficulties of presidential democracy are compounded by multiparty systems.[2]

An examination of the mechanisms of presidential systems suggests some reasons to believe that among presidential systems, the correlation between stable democracy and two-party systems is not spurious. Coalition building tends to be more problematic in presidential systems than in parliamentary systems because of differences in how executive power is formed and maintained. Presidential systems lack mechanisms for assuring that the executive has a majority in the legislature, and there is no way of replacing minority governments until the next pre-scheduled elections. Consequently, presidential systems are simultaneously more prone to minority governments and to immobilism. Immobilism has often led to enervation of executive power, problems of governability, and severe conflict between legislatures and presidents, sometimes contributing decisively to democratic breakdowns. In presidential democracies, two-party systems are more capable of dealing with these problems because they facilitate the formation of a government with a majority (or close to it) in congress, and also because ideological polarization is less likely with only two parties.

Defining Presidential Democracy

Before entering the corpus of the argument, it is important to define how the terms "democracy" and "presidential democracy" are used in this paper. A democracy must meet three criteria. First, democracies must have open, competitive elections that determine who establishes public policy. This means that election results cannot be determined by fraud, coercion, or major proscriptions, and that the elections in question are for important political positions. Elections must in principle afford the opportunity of alternation in power, even if, as in Japan, actual alternation does not occur. Second, in the contemporary period, there must be nearly universal adult suffrage. Until recently, this criterion was debatable because some nations that were usually considered democracies excluded a large part of the adult population (e.g., Switzerland excluded women), but this is no longer the case. Third, there must be guarantees of traditional civil rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of organization, due process of law, etc.[3]

A *presidential* democracy has two distinguishing features.[4] First, the head of government is elected independently of the legislature in the sense that legislative elections and postelection negotiations do not determine executive power. Wherever the chief executive is

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2 For a similar argument, see Arriagada (1984).

3 My definition of democracy essentially follows Dahl's (1971) definition of polyarchy, except with the additional criterion regarding traditional civil liberties.

4 For related discussions of how presidentialism should be defined, see Linz 1984; Lijphart 1984: 68-74; Riggs 1988.

selected by the legislature, not as a second alternative where the popular vote does not produce a clear winner but as the fundamental process, the system is usually parliamentary[5] and never presidential. Postelection negotiations that determine which parties will govern and which will head the government are crucial in many parliamentary regimes, hence indirectly they determine who will be prime minister. In contrast, such postelection negotiations are not part of the selection process of chief executives in presidential systems.

The chief executive in most presidential democracies is elected by popular vote, although some countries, most notably the United States, have an electoral college rather than direct popular elections.[6] Even so, in the U.S., the popular vote in each state has a virtually binding effect on the electoral college. In Argentina, if no candidate obtains an absolute majority in the popular vote, an electoral college chooses the president, but tradition has dictated that the electoral college select the candidate with most popular votes. In Chile before 1973, the congress voted for president if there was not an absolute majority in the popular vote. Yet the popular vote was the first criterion, and tradition dictated that congress selected the candidate with most popular votes.

Note that it must be the head of government, not merely the president, who is elected by popular vote or an electoral college. In Austria, Iceland, and Ireland, the president is elected by direct popular vote but has only minor powers and is therefore not the head of government. In all three countries, the system of government is parliamentary notwithstanding the existence of popular elections for president.[7] In most cases, it is clear whether the elected president actually is the head of government, but in a few countries (notably France and Finland), this issue is debatable.

The second distinguishing feature of presidential democracies is that the president is elected for a fixed time period. Most presidential democracies allow for impeachment, but this practice is rare and does not substantially affect our definition because of its extraordinary

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5 Switzerland is the best known exception. In Switzerland, a collegial executive is selected by the legislature, but the system is not parliamentary because the executive has a fixed term of office. Bolivia is also an exception. When no presidential candidate wins an absolute majority of the popular vote, congress elects the president. But the president's term of office is fixed, so the system is not parliamentary.

6 Until 1988, Finland also had an electoral college for presidential elections, but according to most analysts its system of government is semi-presidential or parliamentary. In 1988, Finland instituted a new system for presidential elections. If one candidate wins a majority of personal votes in the presidential election, he/she is directly elected. The electoral college now meets only if there is no majority winner.

7 Duverger (1980) argued that Austria, Iceland, and Ireland have semi-presidential governments, but I am not persuaded by his logic. There is no more reason to call a government semi-presidential just because there is a president than there is to call a government semimonarchical just because there is a hereditary monarch. What matters is whether these offices are almost exclusively symbolic or, conversely, whether the office holders wield considerable power.

character. The president cannot be forced to resign because of a no confidence vote by the legislature. In contrast, in a parliamentary system, the head of government is selected by the legislature and subsequently depends upon the ongoing confidence of the legislature for remaining in office; thus, the time period of the chief executive's mandate is not unalterable.

Some other features are normally associated with presidential rather than parliamentary systems of government or vice versa, but should not be included in a definition of presidentialism. For example, many analysts associate the right of legislatures to interpellate cabinet members with parliamentary government, but this practice is also found in many presidential systems in Latin America. Similarly, in some presidential systems the legislature can call for the dismissal of particular ministers, another provision several analysts associate with parliamentary systems. Many presidential systems allow congressional representatives to become cabinet members; this feature, too, is sometimes considered an element of parliamentary government.

This definition of presidential democracies excludes semi-presidential or alternating systems in which executive power is divided between (or alternates between) a prime minister and a president elected by popular vote. On the other hand, the definition includes most of the Latin American experiments that are sometimes called parliamentary.[8] The assembly government of Chile (1891-1924) and the semi-presidential system of Brazil (1961-1963) are exceptions. Many other Latin American constitutions introduced features commonly found in parliamentary systems, but did not alter the basic distinguishing features of presidentialism.[9]

In contemporary Latin America, the most unusual case is the Bolivian. As in Chile before 1973, the first method for determining the presidential winner is popular vote, and congress elects the president if nobody wins an absolute majority. However, in contrast to Chile, the Bolivian congress gave the presidency to a candidate who did not capture the most votes in 1979, 1985, and 1989. Here, legislative negotiations became the primary mechanism for selecting the president. The popular elections set parameters but negotiations among the parties determine the actual presidential winner, as well as cabinet appointments. Consequently, I would argue that the Bolivian system is not strictly presidential, but rather an alternating system; it is

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[8] Stokes (1947) argues that the Cuban regime of 1940-1947 was parliamentary. Elsewhere (1951) Stokes includes experiences in Bolivia, Uruguay, Peru, Haiti, and Honduras as parliamentary or (although he does not use the term) semiparliamentary.

[9] For a discussion of the various experiments that have modified presidentialism, see Stokes 1947; Stokes 1951; Stokes 1959. In this latter work, Stokes (p. 422) correctly observed that "When Latin Americans use the term 'parliamentary' or 'semiparliamentary' government, they do not mean the classic system of Great Britain or even the French model. No Latin American country has ever had a system in which the chief executive was selected by the legislature and held responsible to the legislature." Since one of the characteristics of a parliamentary system is that the chief executive is selected by and held responsible to the legislature, the implication is that no Latin American country has had parliamentary government. The governments of Chile (1891-1924) and Brazil (1870s to 1889) came closer than most others.

presidential when one candidate obtains an absolute majority in the popular vote, but it is a hybrid when, as has been occurring consistently, this is not the case.

Presidentialism and Democratic Stability

The poor historical record of presidential democracies is clear from Table 1 below, which lists most stable democracies in the world. A stable democracy is defined here strictly on the basis of democratic longevity, more specifically, at least 30 years of uninterrupted democracy. This time frame is neither so loose that fledgling democracies are included, nor so stringent as to reduce drastically the sample. Table 1 excludes nations with a population of under 1,000,000, but inclusion of such micronations would strengthen the strong correlation between stable democracy and parliamentary systems.

Some cases are difficult to classify. I included Colombia, which could be excluded for several reasons including restrictions on competition for executive and legislative power between 1958 and 1974. The two dominant parties agreed in 1958 to rotate the presidential office and to split evenly the number of congressional seats for the following sixteen years. On the other hand, there has been meaningful participation and competition in the political system.[10] India could be excluded because of the imposition of emergency law in 1975, but the Congress Party's defeat in 1977 showed that election results continued to be respected. Scholars debate whether France has a semi-presidential or presidential system of government, and the classification of Finland (parliamentary or semi-presidential) is also controversial.

Presidential systems have not fared well. Although presidential systems outnumber parliamentary systems, out of 25 countries that have had continuous democracy since 1959, only four—Colombia, Costa Rica, the U.S., and Venezuela—have presidential systems, and the Colombian case is debatable. The correlation between stable democracy and parliamentary systems could be spurious, but there are compelling reasons to believe it is not. I generally agree with recent arguments made by Lijphart (1989), Linz (1984), Riggs (1988), Suárez (1982), and Blondel and Suárez (1981) on this subject, and will draw somewhat on their works in the following synthetic discussion.

Perhaps the greatest comparative liability of presidential systems is their difficulty in handling major crises. Although most presidential systems have provisions for impeachment, they offer far less flexibility in crisis situations because attempts to depose the president easily shake the whole system. There are no neat means of replacing a president who is enormously

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10 For a balanced assessment of this case, see Hartlyn (1988).

Table 1
Stable Democracies, 1959-1989

Parliamentary Systems	*Presidential Systems*	*Other Systems*
Australia	Colombia	Finland (semi-presidential)
Austria	Costa Rica	France (semi-presidential or alternating)
Belgium	United States	
Canada	Venezuela	Switzerland (collegial)
Denmark		
West Germany		
India		
Ireland		
Israel		
Italy		
Jamaica		
Japan		
Netherlands		
New Zealand		
Norway		
Sweden		
Trinidad and Tobago		
United Kingdom		

unpopular in the society at large and has lost most of his/her support in the legislature.[11] The president may be incapable of pursuing a coherent course of action because of congressional opposition, but no other actor can resolve the problem playing within democratic rules of the game. In many cases a coup appears to be the only means of getting rid of an incompetent or unpopular president. Thus, the effort to get rid of one incompetent or unpopular person can destroy the regime.

One of the purported advantages of presidential systems is their higher degree of stability. Following the mainstream consensus, Powell (1982: 63) reported that "presidential systems are designed to produce executive stability, and they do so." But Powell's conclusion is spurious because it is based on the few cases of presidential *democracies*, not presidential *systems*. Only exceptionally is an executive displaced from office before the end of his/her term without a regime breakdown in presidential systems, so if we take only the stable democracies, the higher stability of presidents is not surprising. Suárez (1982) showed that presidential

11 Presidents have resigned when they have lost most of their support in the legislature, but resignation depends on a personal act of the president, hence is a noninstitutionalized means of dealing with a crisis. Moreover, when a president resigns, it usually exacerbates rather than opens the way for ameliorating a crisis because the the vice-president generally lacks the legitimacy needed to fill the position without elections. Thus, when Brazilian President Quadros resigned in 1961, it created an intense crisis that ultimately led up to the 1964 coup. President Alfonsín's decision to shorten his mandate in 1989 was an innovative way of dealing with a complete collapse of governability, but it, too, lacked the institutionalized mechanisms that parliamentary systems offer.

systems provide less executive stability when we consider all cases and not only the stable democracies.

As Linz (1984) notes, it is necessary to distinguish between cabinet stability and regime stability. Parliamentary systems have mechanisms that may lead to relatively frequent changes in cabinets and governments, but this flexibility in changing governments may help preserve regime stability. Conversely, the fixed electoral timetable of presidential regimes apparently ensures cabinet and governmental stability, but in practice has introduced a rigidity inimical to regime stability.

Ironically, the fixed timetable of presidential elections also has disadvantages for presidents who do get the job done (Blondel and Suárez 1981). In most Latin American countries, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua being the exceptions, there is no immediate re-election of presidents. Consequently, good presidents are turned out of office even if the general population, political elites and parties, and other major actors continue to support them.

Presidentialism is based on an institutional separation of the legislature and executive, and parliamentary government on a fusion of these two branches. The latter arrangement may be more propitious to democratic stability than the former. Because presidents and legislatures are elected independently, presidential regimes afford two competing claims to legitimacy, one by the president and the other by congress (Linz 1984). The ensuing conflicts between the two branches of government over who should be allowed to do what can lead to escalating hostilities. Parliamentary regimes allow only one such claim to legitimacy because the executive does not have a base independent of the legislature. The competing claims to legitimacy in presidential systems can lead to antagonistic relations between the president and congress rather than the moderation that is conducive to stable democracy.

Presidentialism and Immobilism

Recent analyses have called attention to several problems frequently associated with presidential government, but they have not sufficiently looked at the issue that receives central attention in this article, namely, the possibility that presidential systems are more prone to immobilism, weak executive power, and destabilizing executive/legislative conflict than parliamentary systems. Whether or not political systems engender effective government depends on a wide range of factors of which the institutional arrangement is only one—albeit a very important one. Moreover, there is no absolutely clear correlation between the system of government and policy effectiveness. One presidential democracy (the United States) stands out as reasonably effective by most historical/comparative standards, while most presidential democracies have not fared well. Many parliamentary systems have produced effective

government, but some have not, with the Third and Fourth French Republics being oft cited (though somewhat controversial) examples. Among parliamentary systems, assembly governments have proven particularly poor at creating effective government and have been especially prone to immobilism. The French polity has been considerably more stable with a semi-presidential arrangement than under the assembly governments of the Third and Fourth Republics (Suleiman 1981; Suleiman 1989).

These observations serve as warnings against facile generalizations of the nature, "parliamentary government is always more effective than presidential government." Nevertheless, presidential systems are generally more prone to immobilism than parliamentary systems, especially cabinet (as opposed to assembly) governments. This is true for two primary reasons. First, compared to parliamentary systems, presidential systems are more apt to engender minority governments and weak executive power, which can cause immobilism. Second, presidential systems are less capable than parliamentary systems of dealing with these problems when they arise. I discuss both of these points in some detail in the following pages.

Because of the separation of powers, presidential systems lack means of ensuring that the president will enjoy the support of a majority in congress. Presidents are elected independently of congress,[12] and because personalities are often decisive in presidential campaigns, the winner need not come from a majority party—if one exists. In some presidential systems, candidates from small parties may make successful runs for the presidency, getting elected despite having little support in congress. Presidential campaigns frequently have a supra- and even antiparty tone, and political outsiders with little experience in handling congress can get elected. As a result, in some countries (e.g., Brazil and Ecuador), presidents often do not enjoy secure support in their own party (Mainwaring 1989).

In the U.S., the single member majoritarian congressional districts, reinforced by rules that make it difficult for new parties to appear on the ballot and the electoral college for president, have supported the maintenance of the purest two-party system among the advanced industrial democracies. Presidents have usually enjoyed majorities in congress, although since the 1950s this situation has been the exception rather than the rule (Sundquist 1988-89). Even so, U.S. presidents' parties have usually controlled at least 40% of both houses, and less-than-perfect party discipline has made it possible for Republican presidents to construct occasional majorities by coopting Democrats. In most Latin American countries, neither the electoral college nor single member congressional districts obtain, making it more difficult for presidents to have a majority and

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12 As noted earlier, there have been some minor exceptions to this rule. In Chile before 1973, if the popular vote did not produce an absolute majority for any candidate, congress voted to determine the president. However, congress always elected the candidate with most popular votes. If the congress plays a central role in electing the president, the system is not properly considered presidential.

more likely that the opposition would control a solid majority. In most Latin American countries, legislative elections are based on proportional representation with district magnitudes sufficiently large to facilitate representation of a large number of parties. In some countries, including Colombia and Venezuela, the coincidence of presidential and congressional elections has deterred party system fragmentation.[13] In at least one country—Uruguay—citizens must vote for the same party for legislative and presidential elections, and the decisive importance of the presidency has a detering effect on parties that have no chance of winning this post. Nevertheless, in most countries presidents' parties do not control anywhere close to a majority of the seats in congress. Presidents who enjoy little support in congress sometimes get elected, which can easily lead to bitter struggles between the executive and the legislative.

In most presidential systems in Latin America, the president is largely responsible for policy and legislation, and congress's main policy function is overseeing the executive. This fact has led many observers (Davis 1958; Diniz 1984; Hambloch 1936; Lambert 1969) to conclude that presidents have virtual dictatorial powers. While this perception may be accurate for authoritarian regimes, nothing could be further from the truth under democratic governments (Archer 1989; Mainwaring 1990).

Throughout Latin America, the presidential role is marked by deep ambivalence and ambiguity (Blondel and Suárez 1981; Suárez 1982); presidents have sweeping powers in some areas, but are notably weak in others. Even in the age of massive, bureaucratized executive branches, presidential power is individualistic; the predilections and proclivities, and even the personality of the president, are significant political factors. Most Latin American constitutions grant presidents greater legislative authority than the U.S. president has. For example, the vast majority of legislation in Latin American countries is initiated by presidents, and presidents have most of the capacity to implement policy. They can often veto specific parts of bills, while the U.S. president must veto or accept an entire bill.[14] Presidents can push through many bills as "executive decree-laws," which are automatically approved unless congress specifically vetoes them. Most Latin American presidents have extensive emergency powers. For example, Article 121 of the Colombian constitution gives the presidents the right to declare all or part of the country under a state of siege, thereby enabling them to govern by decree. Since the return to civilian rule in 1958, Colombia has been under a state of siege 75% of the time (Archer 1989).

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[13] Shugart (1988) showed that where presidential elections coincide with congressional elections, even with proportional representation there is some impulse towards a two-party system. Conversely, if these elections do not coincide, with proportional representation a multiparty system tends to emerge. The most likely explanation for this phenomenon is that the presidency is so important that it polarizes voters into camps of serious contenders, with a spillover effect on legislative elections.

[14] President Reagan sought a line-item veto, but was unable to obtain it.

Latin American presidents also generally have broader nominating powers and more extensive patronage resources than presidents in the U.S.

But because presidents are such powerful individuals, constitutions attempt to circumscribe presidential authority in a variety of ways. Presidents are held responsible for a wide range of activities, but their powers are strictly limited; as a result, they often have trouble accomplishing a minimal policy agenda. Most significant, perhaps, are the common stipulations barring the immediate re-election of the president. Constitution makers feared that longer presidential tenures would lead to greater abuse of power. Most constitutions established bicameral legislatures as a means of creating checks on presidential power, and a few established federal systems. In many countries, the legislature has the right to interpellate and dismiss ministers, thereby circumscribing presidents' authority to choose their own ministers.

Congressional powers in policy areas are limited in virtually all of Latin America, a fact that has led many commentators to consider congresses weak. However, while most legislatures lack the power to initiate policy, they have the power to block the presidential agenda (Archer and Chernick 1989; Santos 1986). When congress exercises that power on a consistent basis, an impasse easily results. Although Latin American legislatures are generally weaker than the U.S. congress, under democratic governments a system of checks and balances does operate. The problem is that this set of checks and balances can paralyze executive power. Since policy making capability is concentrated in executive hands, executive paralysis makes effective policy making extremely difficult.

As a result, even though presidents in most Latin American countries are powerful relative to the legislature, they often have enormous difficulties in implementing their agendas because of a variety of checks and balances, above all congressional opposition. The difficulty of policy implementation stems partially from a crowded agenda of pressing problems in a context of limited resources. In addition, however, most presidential systems have endemic weaknesses that tend to hinder effective policy making.

This argument about presidential powers and limits suggests the need to rethink conventional wisdom. Presidential systems are predicated more upon creating checks and balances than upon encouraging agile decision making. Contrary to common belief, presidents in democracies are generally weaker executives than prime ministers, though the French president has at times been an exception to this rule. Yet the French president has been exceptionally powerful only when and because the prime minister is a member of the same bloc—which means that the president has a majority base in congress. The weakness of presidents is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the American presidency was intended to provide weak executive authority. Hostile to royal absolutism, early U.S. leaders designed an intricate set of checks and balances intended to disperse rather than concentrate power in the political system

(Dahl 1956; Huntington 1968). Yet the myriad conundrums that beset most poor nations require an effective, agile executive.

Not only are presidential systems more apt to produce minority governments, generate deadlocks, and engender weak executive power, with the fixed electoral timetable and the separation of powers, they have no institutionalized means of resolving such deadlocks. Because of the fixed electoral timetable, even if congress becomes massively opposed to a president's programs, it has no way of dismissing the president, except for impeachment. Impeachment, however, is reserved for criminal proceedings, and legislators may be reluctant about or may have no grounds for criminally trying a president whom they oppose. Consequently, the opposition may believe that the only means of deposing an ineffective president is supporting a coup. The parliamentary mechanism of a no confidence vote is not available.

Conversely, presidents lack tools for pushing through policy during periods of executive/legislative deadlock. Because Latin American constitutions bar immediate reelection, presidents are lame ducks the day they take office. Many presidents begin their terms in strong control of their own parties, but lose this control as their situation as lame ducks becomes more apparent (Coppedge 1988). They cannot dissolve the legislature and call new elections, as most prime ministers can. In conjunction with the lack of a vote of confidence, the absence of this threat serves as an incentive to party indiscipline in many presidential systems (Epstein 1964; Epstein 1967). As a result, presidents may painfully await the end of their terms, incapable of implementing a cohesive policy package because of their lack of support. The recent (1985-90) Sarney government in Brazil provided an acute example; one of its ardent congressional supporters admitted in mid-1989 that the government could only rely on 31 of 570 votes in the legislature.[15]

Under these difficult circumstances of presidential/executive impasse and a fixed timetable, presidents and the opposition alike are often tempted to revert to extraconstitutional mechanisms to accomplish their ends. Disgruntled by their inability to effect reform within the limits of the system, presidents often seek to reform the constitution or go beyond it. Presidential authority can erode, and along with it the possibility of coherent policy making. Presidents often subordinate policy coherence to attempts to win support for their programs since such support is far from automatic, given the necessity of constantly creating new majorities in congress. In countries where parties are undisciplined, presidents often need to build a new coalition with every piece of controversial legislation. All of this suggests that democratic presidents, far from being omnipotent, usually have limited ability to implement their programs. Yet where executive authority is weak, political stability often suffers.

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15 *Istoé Senhor* No. 1033 (July 5, 1989), p. 25.

Because the set of checks and balances so frequently leads to serious impasses in the political system, the constitutional prerogatives of presidents and congresses has been an ongoing battle in many Latin American countries. Frustrated by their difficulties in implementing policy, presidents often try to pass constitutional amendments that expand their powers. For their part, legislators are generally already in a marginal position in terms of policy making, and they consequently often resist presidential encroachments upon their turf.[16]

To cope with their minority situation, presidents often try to circumvent congress so that they don't need the support of the parties. In most Latin American countries, presidents can initiate legislation through "decree-laws"—executive bills that legislatures can block only with difficulties. Frequently presidents attempt to accomplish major parts of their agendas through executive agencies that bypass congress. Many presidents have relied on the military to help intimidate legislatures into supporting their actions; in this sense, the military displaces parties as pillars of support. Presidents may also attempt to mobilize the masses to offset a lack of congressional support, hoping that mass pressure will push congress into compliance. Common among populist presidents, such a pattern easily leads to escalating mutual suspicions and hostilities between the president and the opposition.

Most presidents bargain extensively with congressional representatives to win support for their programs. They can generally offer valuable patronage resources to senators and deputies who support them. Thus, presidents are not entirely defenseless when they face a majority opposition bloc, particularly if party discipline is weak enough that they can win support from members of other parties. Nevertheless, securing a stable base of congressional support is often difficult under the best of circumstances and nearly impossible in times of economic austerity. Moreover, extensive reliance on patronage as a means of building support for policies can lead to charges of corruption and nepotism, while populist demagoguery can exacerbate fears of entrenched elites. Although the point cannot be developed here, it is likely that presidentialism encourages populism and clientelism as a way of coping with the difficulties created by the separation of powers.

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[16] Frustrated by the difficulties of getting measures through congress, every Chilean president from Alessandri to Allende either attempted to bypass congress or to reform the constitution to broaden executive power. President Frei (1964-70) ultimately succeeded at the latter, but as Valenzuela and Wilde (1979) note, the cost was high: the erosion of spaces of negotiation and compromise. Similar problems of immobilism led to constitutional reforms that enhanced presidential powers in Colombia in 1968 (Hartlyn 1988; Hartlyn 1989) and Uruguay in 1967. The Uruguayan constitution was changed five times between 1918 and 1967, and the fundamental controversy involved the nature of executive power (Edelmann 1969; Gillespie 1989: 3-17). In the same vein, President Goulart of Brazil became frustrated with the limits of working with congress and demanded in March 1964 (two weeks before he was overthrown) a constitutional reform that would expand his powers.

Immobilism in presidential democracies has often been a major ingredient in coups. In the context of ineffective government, pressing social and economic problems, and political mobilization encouraged by elite actors as a means of winning leverage in a stalemate situation, authoritarian leaders can easily justify and win support for coups. Moreover, immobilism can encourage radicalism, seen as a way of overcoming the inefficacy or inadequacy of feckless liberal democracies. Thus it is not surprising that several analysts (Santos 1986; Gillespie 1989) have attributed coups partly to paralysis stemming largely from executive/legislative conflict.

While presidents typically have considerable difficulty implementing their programs, they have enormous—and ever growing—responsibilities. Latin American presidents must administer huge, complex state bureaucracies. Yet most democratic presidents are constantly engaged in cultivating public support, hence have less actual time to oversee administrative activities than do prime ministers (Rose 1981). Moreover, they generally have less administrative experience than prime ministers (Suárez 1982). The gap between demands on and capabilities of the presidency has grown enormously in recent years as a result of the severe economic crises of the 1980s. The economic crises have led to closed, technocratic decision making within the executive branch, and congresses have been excluded from economic policy making (Conaghan forthcoming). But presidential capacity to handle these huge crises has eroded. In the past, the weaknesses of democratically elected presidents helped justify coups that led to the extreme hypertrophy of the executive and the emasculation—if not the abolition—of congress.

It is in part because of their difficulties in getting congressional support that presidents circumvent legislatures, create new executive agencies, distribute patronage to win the favor of some politicians, attempt to enact constitutional reforms to expand their powers, and try to undermine congress and parties so that they can get their way. Most often, these proclivities of Latin American presidents have been treated as expressions of an Iberic political culture. The Iberic political culture may have contributed to presidential quests for power, but it is equally important to look at the dilemmas that shape presidential behavior. Unlike most prime ministers, they cannot dissolve congress and call new elections. Unlike all prime ministers, they are sitting ducks—more than lame ducks—if their congressional support dissipates. In some countries, in contrast to prime ministers, they cannot even count on the support of their own parties.

The panoply of problems driving many presidential systems toward immobilism suggests that only under special conditions is democratic presidential government likely to be effective. The two-party system, loose parties, and exceptionally limited ideological polarization have contributed to making the U.S. a viable presidential democracy (Riggs 1988). But these conditions have been difficult to reproduce outside the United States. In Latin America, only Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela since 1973 have consistently approximated two-party

systems.[17] Ideological polarization within the party system is limited in all three countries, especially Colombia and Costa Rica. Not coincidentally, these three countries have the oldest democracies in the region.

I began this section by arguing that presidential systems may be more prone to immobilism than cabinet governments because the latter are better at avoiding minority government and at dealing with it when the situation arises. Most parliamentary democracies have majority governments most of the time, although Norway, Sweden, and especially Denmark have had more minority than majority governments (Herman and Pope 1973; Lijphart 1984; Strom 1984). Some parliamentary systems, especially those in the British Commonwealth, have majoritarian electoral systems that help manufacture majorities for the party in government. In most other parliamentary systems, a coalition of parties usually governs. Even in the Scandinavian cases where minority governments are common, governments usually have reliable majority support in the legislature. One or more parties not in the government will offer a dependable (although not unlimited) base of support. Because most contemporary European parliamentary governments usually enjoy reliable parliamentary support, the danger of immobilism is diminished.

Moreover, in contrast to presidential systems, parliamentary systems have an institutionalized mechanism for overcoming deadlocks when they arise. A vote of no confidence can topple the government, leading to new elections that may change the balance of power and help resolve the crisis. This provision allows for replacing unpopular or inept executives with less institutional strain. Excessive recourse to dismissing governments can breed instability and may lead to a different kind of immobilism, but this problem can be mitigated by measures such as the West German or Spanish constructive vote of no confidence. Conversely, if a prime minister is frustrated because of the difficulty of effecting policy in the face of opposition control of the legislature, in most parliamentary systems he/she can call new elections in an effort to achieve a majority. In either case, there are means of changing the government without threatening the regime.

Advantages of Two-Party Systems Under Presidential Governments

If presidential systems generally are unconducive to democratic stability, this is especially true of multiparty presidential systems. Table 2 lists all presidential systems that enjoyed at least 30 years of uninterrupted democracy, including two countries (Chile and Uruguay) that are not currently stable democracies as defined above. The inclusion of Uruguay for the 1951-67 period

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[17] Uruguay had a two-party system during most of its democratic history, but moved to a two-and-one-half or three party format in the late 1960s. In the 1980s, the Argentine party system has approximated a two-party format, but this was not the case in the 1960s and 1970s.

is debatable because of its collegial executive,[18] but Uruguay had unequivocally presidential governments for the 1942-51 and 1967-73 periods. Whether or not it is included does not affect the overall arguments here. Indeed, excluding Uruguay would further underscore the difficulty of establishing stable presidential democracy.

Table 2 shows the Rae Index of Party Fragmentation and the Laakso/Taagepera number of effective parties for the number of seats in the lower house. The Rae index is derived by squaring each party's share of seats and subtracting the sum of all these squares from 1.00. The formula can be expressed as follows:

$$Fs = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{N} pi^2$$

where *Fs* is the index of fragmentation expressed in seats, *N* is the number of parties, and p_i is the proportion of seats held by the i^{th} party. A low number means that a few parties (probably one or two) control a large majority of seats, while a high number indicates the opposite (Rae 1967). The Laakso/Taagepera number of effective parties, which can be calculated from the Rae Index through a simple algebraic transformation, is derived by squaring each party's share of seats, adding all of these squares, and dividing 1.00 by this number. The formula can be expressed as:

$$N_S = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i^2}$$

where N_S is the number of effective parties expressed in seats and p_i is the fractional share of seats of the *i*-th party. If every party has an equal number of seats, the number of effective parties is equal to the number of parties that have seats. If two equal parties control a large majority and a third has fewer seats, N_2 is equal to some number between 2.0 and 3.0, reflecting the domination of the two largest parties but the presence of a third but smaller competitor (Laakso and Taagepera 1979).

Five of the six cases of stable presidential democracy have comparatively low indices of party fragmentation and have under three "effective parties." Of 23 other democracies for which Sartori (1976: 313) calculated the Rae index for 1945-1973, only three scored below .500, and only three more between .500 and .599. Venezuela, which has the second most fragmented party system among the stable presidential democracies, nevertheless has a less fragmented

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[18] González (forthcoming) argues that even during the period of collegial executives, the system was quasi-presidential.

Table 2

Party System Fragmentation and Number of Effective Parties in Presidential Democracies

	Mean Party System Fragmentation (Rae Index)	Mean Number of Effective Parties (Laakso/Taagepera Index)
United States	.475	1.90
Costa Rica	.592	2.45
Venezuela	.620	2.63
Colombia	.521	2.09
Chile (1933-73)	.796	4.90
Uruguay (1942-73)	.595	2.47

Elections on which calculations are based: United States: 1968-1986. Costa Rica: 1974-1986. Venezuela: 1973-1988. Colombia: 1974-1986. Chile: 1946-1973. Uruguay: 1950-1971.

Sources. United States: Harold W. Stanley and Richard G. Niemi, *Vital Statistics on American Politics* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1988), p. 90. Costa Rica: *Keesing's Contemporary Archives* Vol. 20 (May 27-June 2, 1974), p. 26535; Vol. 28 (May 21, 1982), p. 31499; Vol. 32 No. 5 (May 1986), p. 34350. Colombia: Colombia, Registraduría Nacional del Estado Civil, *Estadísticas Electorales* (various years) (Bogotá). Chile: Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 313. Uruguay: Julio Fabregat, *Elecciones uruguayas* (Montevideo: Senado, 1972), p. 50; CLAEH, *Uruguay: Indicadores básicos* (Montevideo: ARCA, 1983), p. 84; "Uruguay: le retour au régime présidentiel," *Problèmes d'Amérique Latine* No. 5, *Notes et Etudes Documentaires* No. 3383 (19 April 1967), pp. 27-28; Philip B. Taylor, *Government and Politics of Uruguay* (New Orleans: Tulane University Press, 1960), Appendix B; Julio Fabregat, *Elecciones uruguayas* (Montevideo: Cámara de Diputados, 1957), pp. 22, 114.

system than 16 of Sartori's 23 other cases.[19] A particularly poignant way of underscoring the point is that the world's longest standing multiparty presidential democracy is Ecuador, which has been a democracy only since 1978.

This correlation between two-party systems and stable presidential democracy would be irrelevant if two-party systems were the norm in presidential democracies, but this is not the case. Most presidential democracies have more than two parties.[20] Among presidential systems, the

[19] For comparative data on the number of effective parties, see Taagepera and Shugart (1989: 82-83). Their calculations are based on the most recent legislative elections rather than on a time-series.

[20] McDonald and Ruhl (1989) listed six two-party systems in contemporary Latin America, compared to nine multiparty systems. Although their list is incomplete and is misleading in some

correlation between number of parties and democratic stability is striking. This correlation, however, does not explain why two-party systems are more propitious to stable presidential democracy than multiparty systems. Without some logical explanation, it remains possible that the correlation is spurious. But there are reasons to believe that this correlation is not accidental, that the combination of presidentialism and multiparty systems makes it more difficult to achieve stable democracy.

Two-party systems in and of themselves are not necessarily a desideratum. They tend to constrict the breadth of opinion represented, and they also hinder the building of coalition governments, thus making it difficult to establish consociational forms of democracy (Lijphart 1989). As Sartori (1976: 191-192) has observed, two-party systems become less functional and less viable as the spread of opinion becomes greater. Nevertheless, in presidential systems a two-party format seems more favorable to stable democracy. Having a two-party system does not entirely resolve the problems of immobilism, executive/legislative paralysis, and weak executive power, but it increases the likelihood that the president will enjoy majority backing in congress, and hence decreases the likelihood of presidential/legislative impasse. Two-party systems are not necessarily better equipped to handle the problems created by minority government, but they are better at avoiding minority government. This fact is indicated in Table 3, which shows that in five of the six stable presidential democracies, presidents' parties controlled nearly half of the seats in the lower chamber.

The tendency toward minority governments and immobilism is particularly acute in multiparty presidential democracies, especially with highly fragmented party systems. Under these circumstances, the president is likely to face a decisive majority in both (if there are two) chambers of the legislature, so pushing through policy measures is apt to be difficult. Immobilism and sharp conflict between the executive and the legislature, with potentially deleterious consequences for democratic stability, often result. Protracted conflicts between the legislature and congress can lead to a decision making paralysis. In well established democracies, such a paralysis may not have catastrophic results, but in fledgling democracies it often does. If in addition to being highly fragmented the party system is also highly polarized, the difficulties of governing will be compounded.

There is a paradox here. Presidential systems hinge on the division of powers, but Latin American experience suggests that such a division often leads to immobilism. If the president's party is in a minority situation, it is often difficult to govern. Conversely, however, if the president's party has a majority in congress, the division of powers often has no significance because executive initiatives are rubber stamped.

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cases, it is still revealing that five of their six two-party systems have been stable democracies, compared to only one of the nine multiparty systems.

Table 3

Mean Share of Seats in Lower Chamber Controlled by President's Party

United States	45.8%
Costa Rica	50.9%
Venezuela	49.9%
Colombia	52.2%
Chile*	30.1%
Uruguay	49.3%**

* In contrast to the other countries shown on this table, Chile did not have concurrent presidential and legislative elections. Consequently, the share of seats in the lower chamber controlled by the president's party changed within a presidential term. In calculating the data for Chile, I simply used the legislative elections closest in time to the presidential elections. Thus, for the 1942-46 presidential period I used data from the 1941 congressional elections. For the 1946-52, 1952-58, 1958-64, 1964-70, and 1970-73 presidential terms, I used data from the 1945, 1953, 1957, 1965, and 1969 legislative elections, respectively. General Carlos Ibañez, president from 1952 to 1958, was known for his antipartisan style, and he did not have a party, but rather ran with the support of a coalition of parties including the Agrarian Labor Party, the Democratic Party of Chile, the People's Democratic Party, and the Doctrinaire Party. I used data for all of these parties in calculating the percentage of seats controlled by the president's party. Arturo Alessandri, president from 1958 to 1964, similarly did not run as the candidate of a party, nor was he clearly identified with one of the parties, but rather had the support of the Conservative and Liberal parties. Consequently, I used the share of seats of both parties combined.

**Uruguay had a collegial executive from 1951 until 1967. For these years, data refer to the share of seats in the Chamber of Deputies occupied by the party that had a majority of the collegial executive.

Elections on which figures are compiled: Except for Chile, same as Table 2. For Chile, 1941-1970.

Sources: Except for Chile, same as Table 2. For Chile, Ricardo Cruz-Coke, *Historia electoral de Chile 1925-1973* (Santiago: Ed. Jurídica, 1984).

Two-party systems are also more likely to be compatible with presidential democracy because ideological polarization is unlikely with only two parties (Downs 1957). Competition tends to be centripetal because to win a majority, the parties must win votes from the center of the political spectrum. Catch-all parties, usually having a centrist, moderate orientation, tend to dominate the electoral market. Such characteristics in the party system generally favor moderation and compromise, characteristics that in turn enhance the likelihood of stable democracy (Levine 1973; Reis 1988; Rustow 1955; Sani and Sartori 1983; Sartori 1976; Scully 1989).

Latin American history affords many examples—including recent ones—of bitter political fighting despite the absence of strong ideological divisions.[21] Nevertheless, intense ideological divisions increase the stakes of the political game, serve as an incentive to polarization, and consequently are less favorable to stable democracy. Such ideological divisions are unlikely in the context of a two-party system. This is one of the reasons why two-party democracies have rarely broken down. One of the few exceptions occurred in Colombia in 1949, where an old oligarchical democracy disintegrated in the fact of bitter rivalries between the two parties. Uruguay had a two-party system during most of its democracy (1904-1933, 1942-1973), but during the late 1960s, with the formation of the leftist Frente Amplio, moved to a three party format. Gillespie (1989) and González (forthcoming) have convincingly argued that this change away from the traditional two-party centrist format was a significant factor in the breakdown of democracy in 1973.

Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Party Coalitions

The difficulties of the combination of presidentialism and multiparty systems are compounded by the problems of coalition building in presidential systems. In multiparty systems, the chief executive's party rarely if ever enjoys a majority in the legislature. Consequently, to attain a majority, interparty coalition building is essential. In multiparty parliamentary systems, coalition building often creates the basis for a stable government. Building stable coalitions is considerably more difficult in multiparty presidential democracies.

At first blush the differences between presidents whose parties control a minority of seats in congress and prime ministers in a similar situation may appear rather minor, but in fact they are quite substantial. This is true above all because the primary prize in presidential systems—the presidency—is nondivisible and is established for a fixed time period. As a result, as Linz (1984) has argued, presidentialism tends to induce a winner-take-all approach to politics. This is also true in some two-to-three party parliamentary systems renowned for their effectiveness, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, but in these cases, the time period is not fixed. In many presidential democracies, a simple plurality confers absolute control of executive power for a set period of time. Both aspects of this situation—the complete control of executive

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[21] Colombia in the period before 1958 is a clear case. Cavarozzi (1983) noted the existence of rancorous divisions in Argentine politics notwithstanding the fact that there was not a great ideological distance between the two main parties (Peronists and Radicals). Between 1945 and 1974, the ideological distance between Peronists and Radicals may have been greater than Cavarozzi suggests, but it cannot completely account for the bad blood between the two parties. Taking a more distant historical example, Lewin (1987) gives a careful account of the bitter rivalries among different political clans in Northeastern Brazil in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such rivalries had limited if any ideological dimension.

power and the fixed time period—contribute to the winner-takes-all nature of presidential systems and pose problems for long term democratic stability.

Mechanisms for sharing executive power are generally less developed in presidential systems.[22] With the exceptions of Colombia and of Venezuela for the 1958-63 period, and the possible exception of Uruguay (if its collegial executive is counted as a presidential system), presidential systems have not institutionalized consociational arrangements to the same extent as many parliamentary systems. Executive power is not formed through postelection agreements among the parties and is not divided among several parties in the same way as in many parliamentary systems. Even though members of several parties often participate in cabinets, the parties are not responsible for the government. The president can usually dismiss those cabinet members at will. Thus, a simply plurality can confer virtually absolute control of executive power.

In most presidential democracies, losers are outsiders for a protracted period of time, with almost no recourse except coups to reconquer power. Whoever wins executive power will virtually monopolize for a significant time the ability to implement policies and effect major reforms. (As noted earlier, most congresses in presidential systems have significant powers to limit presidential action, but not to formulate policies.) Consequently, the stakes of winning or losing are higher and more intractable in most presidential systems. This structural characteristic of presidential majoritarian systems helps shape a *golpista* political culture, in which a coup is the main perceived way of defending interests when a hostile or incompetent president is in office.

In presidential systems, coalitions to support a candidate in a presidential election usually do not imply as stable a base of legislative support as coalitions to form a government in a parliamentary system. Governing coalitions often bear little resemblance to electoral coalitions (Mainwaring 1989). Nor does the inclusion of a party in the cabinet have the same significance in a presidential system—especially one with extremely malleable parties—as it does in a parliamentary system.

A multiparty agreement to form a government in a parliamentary system differs in three significant ways from an agreement among several parties to support a presidential candidate during the campaign and from a president's decision to include leaders of several parties in the cabinet. First, in a parliamentary system, the parties forming the government choose the cabinet and the prime minister. In presidential systems the responsibility of putting together a cabinet rests primarily with the president rather than the parties. The president may have made prior deals with the parties that support him/her, but these deals are not as binding as they would be in a

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[22] The crucial difference is between majoritarian and consociational democracies. See Lijphart (1968, 1977, 1984) for discussions of this distinction. However, as Lijphart (1989, 1990) has argued, parliamentary systems generally afford more opportunities for consociational forms of democracy than presidential systems.

parliamentary system. Presidents are generally freer to dismiss ministers and to rearrange the cabinet than prime ministers in a coalition government are. This presidential autonomy is part of a generally looser institutional arrangement that can easily lead to a lack of stable congressional support, for just as presidents are less bound to the parties, so are the parties less bound to the presidents. Changes in cabinets usually are the president's decision and are not brought about by party decisions.

The second major difference between party coalitions in presidential and parliamentary systems is that in the latter individual legislators are more or less bound to support the government unless their party decides to drop out of the governmental alliance. MPs risk bringing down a government and losing their seats in new elections if they fail to support the government (Epstein 1964; Epstein 1967). In presidential systems, the commitment of individual legislators to vote the party line varies a great deal, ranging from the extremely cohesive congressional parties in Venezuela to the extremely incohesive catch all parties in Brazil and Ecuador. Consequently, it is impossible to generalize about what party support for a government implies in terms of individual congressional representatives' positions. In Venezuela, when a party supports the government, its representatives in congress consistently vote with the government. In Brazil, however, the catch-all parties rarely have party positions, but instead let individual legislators vote as they choose. It is not uncommon for a government to have a cabinet member from a particular party, only to face the opposition of most members of that party in congress. Cabinet representation implies nothing about whether the congressional representatives of that party will support the government.[23]

The third major difference between party coalitions in presidential and parliamentary systems is that in the latter, the parties themselves are coresponsible for governing and are committed to supporting government policy. When they cease supporting the government, there is a good chance that new elections will be called. The coalition that brings the parties together is binding for the postelection period. Along with the two previously mentioned factors, this measure helps ensure that there will either be stable parliamentary support for the executive or a means of toppling the government.

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[23] This dissociation between party affiliations of cabinet members and party coalitions poses troublesome issues about how to define minority governments in presidential systems. In parliamentary systems, minority governments are those in which the party or parties that support the government have a minority in parliament. In multiparty presidential systems with malleable parties, there is no obvious criterion for determining whether a party supports the government. Whether or not a party is allocated a cabinet position is not always relevant, for it may be an individual rather than the party that has the position, and the majority of the party may oppose the government. This situation underscores the unstable basis of congressional support for government policy.

Whereas in parliamentary systems, party coalitions generally take place after the election and are binding, in presidential systems, they often take place before the election and are not binding past election day. Given the separation of powers, an agreement among parties may pertain only to congressional matters, with no binding implication for relations between the parties and the president. Several parties may support the president during the electoral campaign, but this does not ensure their support once he/she assumes office. Even though members of several parties often participate in cabinets, the parties are not responsible for the government. Parties or the majority of party representatives can join the opposition without bringing down the government. Since the only means of replacing the executive is impeachment, it is theoretically possible for an executive to end his/her term with no support in congress.

Moreover, incentives for parties to break coalitions are stronger in presidential systems than in many parliamentary systems. In multiparty presidential systems, as new presidential elections appear on the horizon, party leaders generally feel a need to distance themselves from the president in office. By remaining a silent partner in a governing coalition, party leaders fear they will lose their own identity, share the blame for government mistakes, and not reap the benefits of its accomplishments (Coppedge 1988). Because the government composition is determined by the parties in multiparty parliamentary systems, they are less prone to follow this logic.

Conclusions

In the last few years, several important works have argued that presidential systems of government are generally less conducive to stable democracy than parliamentary systems. This paper has argued that the combination of presidential government and a multiparty system is particularly problematic. It presented empirical evidence to support this claim, and then argued that the correlation between two-partism and stable presidential democracy is probably not spurious. In this sense, it challenges the currently accepted wisdom that the number of parties does not matter much in determining prospects for stable democracy. Except for extreme cases, a large number of parties may not adversely affect prospects for democracy in parliamentary systems, but it appears to with presidentialism.

These observations suggest that institutional combinations make a difference. Presidential systems are generally less favorable to democracy than parliamentary systems, and their disadvantages are multiplied with a multiparty system. Some problems typical of presidential systems—conflict between the executive and legislature resulting in immobilism, presidential efforts to bypass congress, congressional efforts to limit presidential action—are often exacerbated by multiparty systems. Conversely, with parliamentary governments but not with

presidential governments, multiparty systems are seemingly as capable of sustaining democratic regimes as two-party systems. Parliamentary regimes have more coalition building mechanisms that facilitate multiparty democracy than presidential regimes.

This is not to say that the combination of presidentialism and multipartism makes it impossible for a democracy to function well. The Chilean case from the 1930s until the late 1960s shows that presidentialism, multipartism, and stable democracy can go together, even in an ideologically polarized system.[24] However, Chile is the only counterexample of a stable multiparty presidential democracy. With this institutional combination, democratic stability hinges largely on the desire of elites and citizens to compromise and create enduring democratic institutions. Optimally, political systems should have institutional mechanisms that reinforce such elite dispositions.

Nor do I intend to suggest that institutional issues are always the main factor in determining whether democracy succeeds or fails. Some societies face conflicts that are irresolvable in the short run, regardless of institutional structures. Social, cultural, and economic conditions also affect prospects for democracy. However, some institutional combinations facilitate, while others obstruct, the resolution of social, economic, and political problems. The combination of presidentialism and multipartism is especially unpropitious to effective government and stable democracy.

What can be done in terms of constitutional/institutional reform in multiparty presidential democracies? In the abstract, there are two possibilities: switching from a presidential system to a semi-presidential or a parliamentary system, or taking measures to reduce party system fractionalization. Unfortunately, it is not easy to design alternatives that would work even if they had political support, which is most often difficult to muster.

A change to parliamentary government would be more feasible in some countries than others. Effective cabinet government depends on disciplined parties, a requisite reasonably met in several Latin American countries (Chile, Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Venezuela) but sorely lacking in several others (most notably Brazil and Ecuador). In the latter countries, a catch-22 exists: the presidential system (in conjunction with other factors) has weakened parties, but given this weakness, parliamentary government would have its own risks. Any change to parliamentary government would need to simultaneously establish mechanisms to enhance party discipline and cohesion. Because France is the only clear example of a semi-presidential system it is difficult to

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[24] Valenzuela (1977, 1978, 1985) and Scully (1989) have shown that alongside the strong elements of polarization in the Chilean polity were equally strong components of moderation, compromise, and conciliation. These latter components helped make possible the existence of a multiparty presidential democracy. However, the crucial test of institutional arrangements comes in periods of crisis, and the inflexibility of presidential systems coupled with the greater party fragmentation of multiparty systems makes it more difficult for chief executives to maneuver in periods of crisis.

evaluate their comparative performance, but in countries with very undisciplined parties this possibility might avoid some of the problems of parliamentary systems.[25]

In many countries, reducing the number of parties that attain legislative seats by introducing a higher threshold or reducing district magnitude in proportional systems, or by having concurrent congressional and presidential elections, would be feasible and desirable. Such measures could easily reduce the number of parties with congressional seats from over a dozen in some cases to four or five agglomerations. However, efforts to reshape multiparty systems into two-party systems so as to enhance the governability of presidential democracies would be ill advised. The fact that two-party systems are more propitious to stable presidential systems than multiparty systems does not mean that efforts to reduce the number of parties in multiparty systems would succeed in structuring more viable democracies. Cleavages in political systems become institutionalized once party systems have been in place for a considerable time, and elites and followers alike would resist drastic restrictions on representation. Especially in party systems with a) significant ethnic, regional, or religious parties that would disappear under different electoral rules or b) a wide ideological distance, efforts to restructure a multiparty system into two-partism would almost surely be doomed to failure (Valenzuela 1985).

Institutional/constitutional reform is neither easy to accomplish politically nor a panacea. This recognition, however, should not lead to immobilizing pessimism regarding all attempts to achieve reform. The staggering incapacity of the Latin American political systems to address the urgent problems of the past decade may serve as an inducement to exploring such possibilities.

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[25] I cannot delve into this complex question in detail here. See the interesting debate between Linz (1984), who is highly skeptical of the hybrid formulas, and Sartori (forthcoming), who advocates them on the grounds that parliamentary government would not work in most of Latin America. See also Carey (1990) and Duverger (1980) on semi-presidential systems.

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