



European  
University  
Institute

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**FROM PERILS TO PEARLS?  
PRESIDENTIALISM AS AN ANSWER TO THE  
CHALLENGE TO PARTY GOVERNMENT**

**DENNIS-JONATHAN MANN**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to link recent arguments about a decline of—or, at least, a challenge to—*party government* to another body of literature that distinguishes two systems of government, a *presidential* from a *parliamentary* one. The point of departure is that, especially with regard to presidentialism, the nature of the party system is regarded as crucial factor in explaining the success or failure of presidential democracy.

While the academic debate about the presidential system of government has been shaped by Juan Linz's (1990a) influential essay "The Perils of Presidentialism" and, accordingly, has been focusing on the Spanish and Latin American cases of *developing democracies*, here, I am trying to relate this debate to the literature on political parties in Western Europe. Therefore, some of the specific arguments made in the presidentialism literature—especially how to sustain democracy in a process of transition from an autocracy—will not be applicable. Here, the puzzle is rather how to adapt to a changing role of political parties in *consolidated* democracies.

The paper is divided into three parts; the first part will summarize the main arguments currently advanced in the *party government* literature. The second part of the paper will then revisit the main findings of the *system of government* literature with regard to the role of political parties and/or the party system. Building upon this discussion, the last part of the paper then seeks to establish a *theoretical* relationship between recent changes in party government and the logics of a presidential system of government. All in all, it is hypothesized that a presidential system of government should be more capable of "handling" a decline in party government than a parliamentary one. Finally, the paper asks if there (already) is some empirical evidence for a shift towards presidentialism and, if this is the case, if this change can be attributed to the changing expectations on parties.

## A CHALLENGE TO PARTY GOVERNMENT

Currently, a strong theme in the literature on political parties and party systems is that of a decline of traditional party government in (the Western European) democracies (Katz & Mair 1995; Blyth & Katz 2005; Mair 2005; Mair 2006; Mair 2008). In a nutshell, it is argued that—for a variety of reasons—the character of parties is fundamentally changing, just as is the character of (Western European) democracies. The crucial factors are seen *inter alia* in a

- *convergence of parties*, since the conflicts and cleavages that traditionally divided parties in those democracies are found to have attenuated considerably (Mair 2008: 212f).
- At the same time, there is strong empirical evidence that *electoral cohesion* has been steadily declining—if not eroding—in the last 30 years (Dalton 2004: 32ff; cf. Mair 2008: 218ff).

Both findings can be seen as “two sides of the same coin”, since political parties, it is argued, *respond* to changes in their electoral alignments as much as they *provoke*—or at least reinforce—them at the very same time. Put differently, in trying to accommodate to the changing electoral alignments—or the increasing absence thereof—political parties tend to become more catch-all, leading to the ironic outcome that not only the voters (Franklin *et al.* 1992) become more “free-floating” but so too do the parties (Mair 2008: 219).

This “catch-22” situation parties face may have a multitude of implications for them and their role in democracies, for the purposes of this paper we can, however, focus on one central argument. Political parties in the consolidated Western European democracies, it is argued, have traditionally fulfilled a unique twin function as *representatives* of their constituency while, at the same time, *governing*. In other words, in this “Golde Age” (Mair 2008: 218) of party government, it was possible for political parties to “combine these crucial two roles in to one”, thereby solving the principal-agent problems typically arising in representative government. In Mair’s (2009: 5) words, the very “same organization that governed the citizenry also gave that citizenry voice, and the same organization that channeled representation also managed the institutions of the polity”. In their current environment however, parties find it increasingly difficult to combine both of their traditional functions—representation and governing—and therefore are tempted to (if not forced to) downplay their representative role, (only further) undermining their legitimacy and capacity (Mair 2009).

When thinking out this argument, it becomes clear that political parties in Western Europe apparently are trapped in a vicious cycle, a cycle that—at least if we buy into Schattschneider’s (1942) argument that political parties are a *conditio sine qua non*—ultimately endangers the very foundations of democracy itself (cf. Mair 2005: 6ff). It is this thread to party government this paper seeks to find a systemic response to. The twist to the argument to be developed in the following is the fact that some of the alleged *perils* of a presidential system of government

might ironically turn out to be potential remedies for some of the challenges party government faces in (the Western European) democracies.

### **JUAN LINZ AND THE (ALLEGED) “PERILS OF PRESIDENTIALISM”**

The presidentialism *versus* parliamentarism dichotomy is a classic as well as one of the *evergreens* in the field of comparative politics. Yet, though have typologies were proposed as early as in the 1950s (Verney 1959), political scientists eventually lost interest in institutional questions in the course of the so-called “behavioralist revolution”. It wasn’t until the 1980s that the new institutionalisms (Steinmo *et al.* 1992; Schmidt *forthc.* 2010) and a wave of transitions to democracy in the developing countries—*inter alia* in Latin America and Central Europe (Stepan & Skach 1993; Beyme 1994)—sparked a renewed interest of political scientist in institutional and constitutional design or “engineering”.

Juan Linz had already been studying the impact of various institutions on the stability of political systems (Linz & Stepan 1978), yet it wasn’t until later (Linz 1984; Linz 1987) that he shifted the focus of his studies towards the role of presidentialism and parliamentarism on political systems. It then were his two articles “The Perils of Presidentialism” (Linz 1990a) and “The Virtues of Parliamentarism” (Linz 1990b) that gave rise to a vivid debate, producing a multitude of publications.<sup>1</sup>

What—in a nutshell—Linz suggests in these texts is nothing less than to blame the institution of presidentialism for repeated “failures” of democracy in the countries of Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. Linz’ critique of presidentialism focuses on what he (Linz 1990a: 60ff; Linz 1994: 6ff) regards as its two main characteristics:

- The coexistence of a “dual democratic legitimacy” and
- the “time factor” (election for a fixed term).

The issue of, as Linz puts it, *dual legitimacy* automatically arises in presidential systems since—particularly in a state of crisis—both, the president as well as the legislature can claim to speak in the name of the people.<sup>2</sup> *Fixed term* elections mean that in a presidential system, the presi-

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<sup>1</sup> (Shugart & Carey 1992).

<sup>2</sup> As opposed to a parliamentary system, which “in a strict sense is one in which the only democratically legitimate institution is parliament” (Linz 1990a: 52).

dent is usually elected for a period of time that cannot be (easily) modified whereas in a parliamentary system, a new head of government can usually be elected by a majority of parliament at any time throughout the term.

Both characteristics, taken together, lead to what Linz refers to as the “rigidity” (Linz 1994: 8) of the presidential system.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this rigidity of presidentialism, according to Linz, is that rather than providing stability, it creates a “structural problem” which *can* lead to “conflict situations and stalemates” (Linz 1994: 69). While in a parliamentary system it is the parliament that has the legitimacy to remedy the situation by electing a new (head of) government or by calling for new elections, in a presidential system, these situations are likely to be “solved” by populist presidents governing by decree or the army taking over, thereby—Linz argues—potentially endangering democracy itself.

## REACTIONS AND REFINEMENTS TO LINZ’S CRITIQUE

For the purposes of this paper, it is not so much Linz’s above-presented argument but rather the reactions, critique and refinements it sparked that suggest themselves to be related to the current party government literature. While, to be fair, Linz had already hinted at the relationship between the system of government and the party system in some of his later works, he was trying to put into perspective the notion that parliamentary systems require relatively disciplined parties (Linz 1994: 62f) rather than to explicitly focus on the presidentialism-party system dimension.

Linz’ case against presidentialism was attacked on many grounds, including methodological, logical, factual as well as statistical objections.<sup>4</sup> Some authors tried to overcome Linz’s apodic-

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<sup>3</sup> There are even more features of the presidential system which Linz (Linz 1990a; Linz 1994) regards as reaffirming the rigidity and danger of presidentialism. These include a lack of *identifiability and accountability* when compared to a parliamentary system, a *winner takes all* logic of presidential elections (favoring majoritarian-style politics), the implications of *term limits* on the political culture and the *political style* of a country, the *ambiguities of the presidential office* (combining the functions of the head of state and the head of government), the likelihood of an election of an *outsider* and finally the delicate office of the *vice-president*.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Linz’s *methodology* was attacked on the grounds that he was accused of using contra factual thinking solely at the expense of the presidential system. Also, by inductively deriving the features his cases of presidentialism Linz was accused of ascribing certain characteristics to presidentialism (like term limits) are not necessarily tied to this system of government whereas for the parliamentary system he seems to work with an ideal type (assuming, e.g. the existence of a constructive non-confidence vote) rather than real life cases. Linz’s *logical* and *factual* arguments were also criticized, e.g. him relating presidentialism with majoritarian politics whereas it is rather a Westminster style parliamentarism that can be regarded as the archetype of a majoritarian system (Shugart & Carey 1992; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997). Finally, a dispute arose as to the *statistical* dimension of

tic rejection of presidentialism *per se* and instead sought to identify specific institutional variations and configurations *within* the presidential type. In a nutshell, these authors (Shugart & Carey 1992; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997) suggested that presidentialism *as such* was far from being a second-best (let alone a dangerous) solution for developing countries but that it were rather some specific combinations of institutional features in the Latin American countries—which, actually, often were deviations rather than characteristics of a presidential system—that made these systems so prone to failure. Thus, it was suggested to shift attention towards certain institutional factors within different cases of presidential systems to test their effect on the stability in a particular case.

Quite a number of institutional as well as cultural—or “para-constitutional” (Riggs 1988)—variables were suggested to have influence on the stability of presidentialism, including the presidential role, powers and election procedure, the role of the executive (council *versus* cabinet), the voting system, the role of congress/parliament as well as the role of a constitutional court (if existent). Still, by far the most studies seem to have been done on the issue that also is the central theme of this paper, the relationship of presidentialism and political parties—this theme includes the *party system* as well as issues of *party polarization* and *party organization* (Cheibub 2007: 68ff).<sup>5</sup> Two dimensions subsequently emerged from this debate:

- The issue of the *fragmentation* of a party system and that of the levels of a
- *radicalization* and *ideologicalization* of a party system under presidentialism.

While there is an ongoing debate as to whether a parliamentary system can actually account for a polarized multiparty system as easily as Linz (1994: 62ff) had suggested,<sup>6</sup> there seems to be at least some agreement in the literature that a presidential system does not go well together with party systems that, according to the so-called Laakso-Taagepera index, have more than two

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Linz’s work. Not only was the representativeness of his case selection questioned by also the classification of some of the countries; many arguments about the latter can be attributed to an (ongoing) controversy about the concept of a distinct “semi-presidential” system of government as popularized by Duverger (1980; cf. Bahro *et al.* 1998).

<sup>5</sup> (cf. Mainwaring & Scully 1995; Mainwaring & Shugart 1997; Mainwaring & Valenzuela 1998; Corrales 2000; Figueiredo & Limongi 2000).

<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, many of the multi-party cases cited by Linz deviate considerably from the ideal type of parliamentarism—because they have, for instance, minority governments—on the basis of which he asserts the “virtues” of the parliamentary system (Linz 1990b).

“effective” parties (Laakso & Taagepera 1979). Especially if in conjunction with highly polarized and ideological parties, a situation of “divided government” is indeed likely to cause stalemate and gridlock—if not to endanger the whole political system (cf. Elgie 2001).

When we turn this argument on its head and ask what then have been the factors for a successful “management” of divided government in the US (Ware 2001: 31ff), we are—expectedly—presented with the mirror-image of the above argument. Resembling notions of an alleged “US exceptionalism”, it is argued that the stability of the US American political system (as opposed to the Latin American cases) can be attributed to its two-party system and,<sup>7</sup> more importantly, to the *exceptional* character of US parties (Riggs 1988: 260ff; Green 2002). What makes US political parties so exceptional is the fact that their degree of organization is very low—as a matter of fact, some authors go as far as to argue that US political parties—at least on the federal level—are simply nonexistent in a strict sense but rather are to be considered “empty vessels” (Katz & Kolodny 1994). Ironically, it is this “weakness” of the US political parties that is argued to enable members of congress to *not* vote along party lines and thus allows the president to govern on the basis on ad-hoc majorities, thereby enabling him to avoid gridlock even in times of divided government.

## PULLING TOGETHER THE ARGUMENT

After having gone to great lengths in order to do justice to both, the *challenge to party government* as well as the *system of government* literature, it is now possible to pull together the argument and to relate the two bodies of literature to each other. To be sure, the parties of the (consolidated Western) European democracies are still more than just a “*wahlverein*” and considerable differences to the US case remain; nevertheless, many of the characterizations found in the literature on the challenge to party government seem to closely resemble the preconditions defined in the presidentialism literature.

From this perspective it can be argued that the decline of party government—convergence of parties and cohesion of the electorate (s. above)—brings European parties much closer to the alleged US exceptionalism than before since they

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<sup>7</sup> In this context, the Chilean case is an exciting one. Literally putting “Duverger’s Law” (c. Riker 1982) into practice, Chile’s unique *binomial electoral system* seems to have transformed a highly fragmented party system into a *de facto* two-party system (Jones 1995; Barret 2000).

- are no longer focusing on representing a distinct, constituency with a strong ideology.
- Instead, they (have to) accommodate to the changing electoral alignments and, thus, have to become more catch-all, more “responsive” to popular demands rather than being “responsible” to their traditional, collective constituency (s. above; cf. Mair 2009).

The first part of my argument is that the *challenge* to traditional party government in (Western) Europe can also be seen as a *transition* to a new type of political party that resembles a lot of the qualities that were hitherto attributed exclusively to US ones. Yet, while maybe a nice scholarly exercise, the fact that political parties in (Western) Europe are changing their character towards a role on the basis of which a presidential system *could* most likely be perpetuated does not automatically mean that such a profound of the political system should be attempted—after all, such a path jump is far from trivial as will be elaborated on below. However, there is a second dimension to my argument suggesting that there is indeed an added value to a presidential system in that it manages to (at least) reduce some of the problems caused by the “waning party government” (Mair 2008: 226; s. above).

It is the “punch line” of my argument that the *dual legitimacy* and Montesquieuan *separation of powers* character of presidentialism—the separate, direct election of the legislative and the (head of the) executive—should make it a substantial alternative to parliamentarism. As aforementioned, it is the political parties growing inability to manage the institutions of a political system and at the same time to channel representation within that same polity that is seen as a challenge to democracy (s. above). What I argue is that a presidential system—through its dual legitimacy design—is more capable to check this thread than a parliamentary system.

While in a presidential system the head of government’s (or: the president’s) campaign and actions can focus on his capabilities manage and govern the polity rather than to represent a certain fraction of the electorate, the separation of powers character of presidentialism in turn frees the members of the (majority party) of the legislature of having to maintain the government (c. Sartori 1997). Based on what we know about the expletory power of presidentialism-parliamentarism dichotomy with regard to role and behavior of the members of parliament (Kailitz 2008) we can expect them to be more independent and, thus, more able to focus on their representative function in a presidential system.



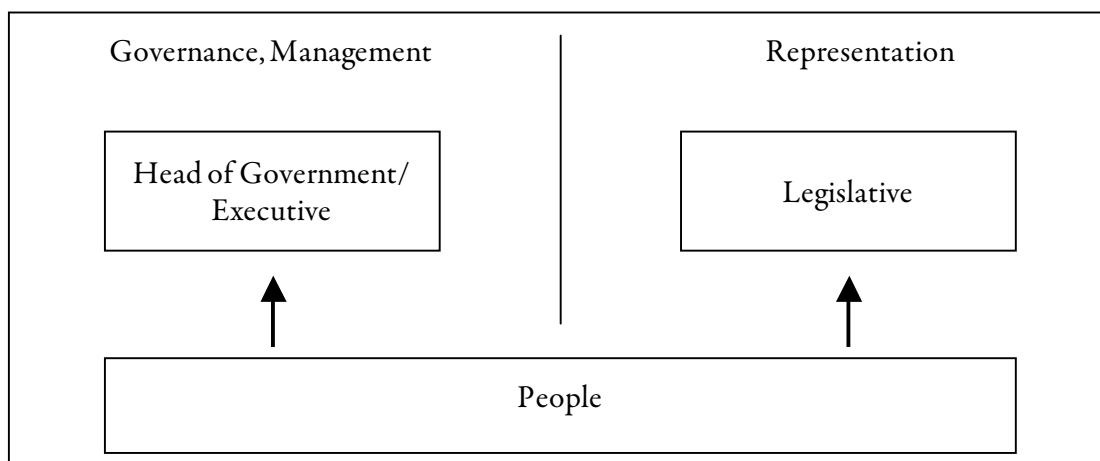


Figure 1: The dual legitimacy character of presidentialism

To be sure, the representation we are talking about will differ considerably from the traditional “one size fits all” representation of large, stable and well-defined constituencies associated with the “Golden Age” (Mair 2008: 218) of party government in Western Europe (s. above)—rather, each single member of parliament would primary represent the volatile opinions and sentiments of his own electoral district in this new equilibrium. On the other hand, it would be unreasonable to suggest that in a transition to a presidential system the strong European parties would transform to US-style “empty vessels” over night.

### IN SEARCH OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Even if my argument for presidentialism as a possible solution to the challenge to party government is a reasonable one in theory, there is still an objection to be raised. Systems of government are, it can be argued, strongly path-dependent and therefore almost impossible to change. While Brazil is widely cited (Lamounier 1994; Jones 1995) as a case of a nearly successful transformation from a presidential to a parliamentary system, any empirical evidence for the opposite process *prima facie* seems to be absent.

Against this it can be argued that there are two dimensions of empirical evidence that suggest that presidentialism is not just a hypothetical answer to the challenge to party government but that we might already have empirical evidence for its efficacy in practice. A first, weaker argument can be made by pointing to the fact that—while *de jure* changes to a presidential system of government might indeed be non-existent on national level—it can be argued, that an (in-

formal) “presidentialization of politics” is already happening in parliamentary systems nevertheless (Poguntke & Webb 2005).

A second, more convincing argument would be that we *do* indeed find empirical evidence of “path jumps” to presidentialism—not at the national level but rather at the sub-state level. In Germany, for instance, direct elections of mayors have been established in one of the German *Länder* after the other at the community level, effectively replacing parliamentary systems with a presidential logic.<sup>8</sup> Relatedly, it has been repeatedly proposed to directly elect the prime ministers (*Ministerpräsidenten*) of the German *Länder* in order to remedy some of the (democratic) deficits of German federalism (Decker 2004; Backmann 2006).

Still, it might be on the supranational level where the virtues of a presidential system might be most evident. Today, a majority of political scientists still seems to favor a parliamentary path to democratization for the European Union—by making the European Commission dependent on a majority of the European Parliament (Schmitter 2000). In this context, it is often suggested that confusion would arise among the voters in a presidential Europe given the fact that all of the EU member states—apart from Cyprus—follow a parliamentary logic (Holzinger & Knill 2001).<sup>9</sup> If this path-dependency logic was true, however, presidential systems at the local level should confuse the people even more—not to mention empirical findings for Germany that suggest that the “new dualism” and the parliamentary system’s guiding principles and functional logic still appear strange to voters (Decker 2002b).

What a minority of scholars—and politicians (Fischer 2000)—who are proponents of a presidential European Union therefore usually stress is the fact that the current institutional setup of the EU already resembles a presidential system so that only gradual changes would be needed to transform it to a fully-fledged presidential system (Decker 2002a). Again, the most fruitful aspect of this discussion for the argument put forward in this paper can be found in the debate about the role of political parties at the European level. In light of an absence of (strong) political parties at the EU level, advocates of a parliamentary path to democratization have to go to great lengths to develop sophisticated measures intended to “create” a European

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<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the party “Politieke Partij Democraten 66” has been pushing for a direct election of Dutch mayors for a long time.

<sup>9</sup> At least if one follows Steffani’s (1995) typology which treats semi-presidentialism as a sub-group of parliamentarism.

party system, which is seen as a *precondition* for a democratic system (Schmitter 2000). Yet, in light of the above-discussed waning of party government at the national level it seems rather difficult—if not beside the point—to try to emulate something at the supranational level that is no longer working domestically (Mair & Thomassen 2010: 27). Consequently, proponents of a presidential system at the EU level explicitly point to the fact that such a system of government goes together well with weak political parties and ad-hoc majorities (Decker & Sonnicksen 2009).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has linked recent arguments about a waning of party government to the presidentialism-parliamentarism dichotomy. It was argued that a presidential system of government—due to its *separation of powers* logic—should be capable of allowing (Western European) parties to manage *and* represent even after the end of the “Golden Age” of party government. While transformations to a presidential system have not (yet) taken place at the national level, some empirical evidence that could support this argument could be found on the (German) sub-state level as well as on the European level.

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