Regime Stability and Presidential Government
A Preliminary Analysis

Chris Lawrence
Jennifer Hayes
The University of Mississippi

Please direct all correspondence to:

Chris Lawrence
Department of Political Science
208 Deupree Hall — Post Office Box 1848
The University of Mississippi
University MS 38677-1848
Fax: (662) 915-7808
Email: cnlawren@olemiss.edu

Abstract

Several scholars of comparative politics, including Juan Linz and Arend Lijphart, have argued that presidential democracies are inherently less stable and representative than parliamentary regimes. This viewpoint, which had dominated the discipline, was challenged by Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey in *Presidents and Assemblies*, in which they argued that presidential government *per se* was not problematic; rather, Shugart and Carey demonstrated that particular institutional designs, such as the concentration of legislative powers in the hands of the president and incoherent party systems, tend to lead to regime instability.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to that debate by showing a different approach to the problem. Previous studies have been qualitative in nature and have tended to focus on particular regions of the world; by contrast, we approach the problem using a quantitative approach that looks at democracies across the world since World War II. Despite some serious limitations in the data we were able to analyze (most notably, the limited years of data we have available and a lack of control variables), we believe our preliminary results tend to reinforce Shugart and Carey's argument that presidential government, in and of itself, is not problematic.

One prominent debate in the comparative politics literature has been over the comparative merits of presidential and parliamentary systems of governance in democracies. Until the early 1990s, it was generally believed (see, e.g., Linz 1990) that parliamentary systems were inherently more stable than presidential systems. However, Shugart and Carey (1992) advanced the debate by demonstrating that it was not presidential systems *per se* that were unstable, but that particular configurations of presidential powers—particularly, the concentration of legislative powers in the hands of the executive (against the advice of James Madison in *Federalist* 51)—that was particularly problematic. However, the underlying question remains unsettled in that there has been no comprehensive cross-national comparison of regime stability that takes into account both the existence and powers of a presidency. This paper seeks to redress that balance by including all independent states within the international system in a cross-national, time-series analysis of regime stability.

Theoretical Background. Traditionally, the literature has argued that presidential government is inherently less stable than parliamentary regimes. This argument has its origin in a more general problem that has been identified: the "exportation" of institutions by advanced industrial societies—particularly the United States—to contexts in which they may not be appropriate. For example, in a somewhat broader context, Arend Lijphart argues that Britain's "Westminster" model of majoritarian democracy was inappropriate for Northern Ireland, because of the presence of a relatively large Catholic minority population with very diffrent interests than the majority Protestants (1999: 32–33). Majoritarian structures, such as presidential regimes, are in this view incompatible with plural societies.

Nowhere has this critique been more forcefully argued than by Juan J. Linz in var-

1

ious contexts. In particular, two articles written by Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism" (1990a) and "The Virtues of Parliamentarism," (1990b) generally support the parliamentary form of government over presidential systems. In the first article, Linz argues that presidential systems have two major faults: they are inherently inflexible and rigid, due to the relatively strong constitutional underpinnings required by presidential systems, and presidential elections foster a "winner-takes-all" mentality that can exclude other groups from government. Linz restates his arguments from "Perils" in his second article, there emphasizing that his purpose is not to make blanket statements about existing regimes, but rather to provide prescriptive guidance based on the likelihood of particular outcomes. He also responds to a criticism that his sample was biased towards Latin America by claiming that most of the world's presidential systems are located there and that he "also had in mind" some other cases.

Lijphart produces a more nuanced picture of presidential and parliamentary systems in his chapter on executive-legislative relations (Chapter 7) in *Patterns of Democracy*. He argues that systems in which there is a balance of power between the executive and the legislature are inherently more consensual than executive-dominant systems, which tend to be majoritarian in nature. This appears to be the exact opposite of Linz's argument, which emphasizes the inclusive nature of parliamentary systems against the exclusive nature of presidential systems. To some extent, the two authors are discussing different things: Lijphart emphasizes the separation-of-powers aspects of the system, whereas Linz seems to focus more on the role of elections. Lijphart uses two measures of cabinet stability as the basis for his measure of executive dominance, although he adjusts the measures, mainly to compensate for the effects of presidential systems (which begs the question of why he included presidential systems in the analysis of cabinet dominance). He also establishes a typology of forms of government (1999: 119), although most of the "types" have no examples (and many are nonsensical, as he himself admits). Lijphart appears to weigh in on both sides of the presidential-parliamentary debate; he argues that presidential systems tend to be more consensual, but also argues that a separate presidency can distort parliamentary systems by creating an alternate center of power.

The most well-known response to these arguments is from Shugart and Carey, in *Presidents and Assemblies* (1992), where they weigh in on the presidential side of the debate, arguing that existing studies of presidential systems ignore many important factors, namely institutional design and electoral rules. They classify existing criticisms of presidential systems as falling into three categories: the problems of temporal rigidity (fixed terms), majoritarianism, and dual democratic legitimacy, and acknowledge that those who have identified these problems do have some legitimate arguments, but that they often overstate their case. Shugart and Carey also argue, based on evidence of regime breakdowns separated by prior regime type, that parliamentary systems are not as "safe" as their proponents tend to believe. Furthermore, the authors argue that there are four distinct advantages of presidential systems that are lacking in parliamentary ones: direct accountability of the executive, identifiability of the outcomes of elections, the presence of mutual

checks on power, and the potential role of the president as an arbiter in the system. The authors present the hybrid type of premier-presidentialism as a potential solution to the criticisms of pure presidential systems that still incorporates the advantages of a separate presidency.

Their work also includes a more comprehensive look at the nature and characteristics of presidential systems. Chapters 5 through 7 of *Presidents and Assemblies* include a more thorough examination of these systems, including an overview of the various constitutional designs of presidential systems, a discussion of the relative powers of the executive and legislature to dissolve each other, and an examination of the legislative powers of presidents (such as vetos, budgetary prerogatives, and decree authority). Shugart and Carey combine measures of these powers in chapter 8 to form two indices of the legislative and non-legislative powers of presidents in various regimes, and then examine how well these indices explain regime breakdowns, finding that presidential systems with few legislative powers in the hands of the president tend to be less susceptible to breakdown than those granting wide powers to the presidency.

In chapter 9, Shugart and Carey examine the relationship between efficiency (that is, programmatic parties) and the strength of presidential legislative powers, finding that more authority is delegated to the president (in the form of legislative powers) when the legislature is comprised of parties lacking internal cohesion; Shugart and Carey argue that this is the "inefficient secret": legislators in states with weak parties delegate national issues to the presidency so they can focus on patronage and other localist concerns to retain their positions in the legislature. The authors conclude that chapter with a set of recommendations for "effective presidentialism." These chapters provide a fairly concise outline of the formal institutional powers of presidents. They further expand on their analysis in *Executive Decree Authority* (1998), although there they mainly focus on the legislative powers of presidents.

Scott Mainwaring (1993) also examines the effects of a large number of parties on presidential systems. He argues that Linz's critique of presidentialism must be refined in that it is the combination of multipartism (the presence of more than two major political parties) and presidentialism that presents the most serious challenge to democratic stability. Mainwaring believes that multipartism is problematic because it increases the likelihood of deadlock and ideological polarization and requires the formation of interparty coalitions to pass legislation. He, like Shugart and Carey, emphasizes the importance of institutional arrangements in analyzing the form of presidential systems and their stability.

Data and Methods. The bulk of the data for this analysis comes from the Cross-National Time Series data set collected by Arthur Banks at the State University of New York, Binghamton University. However, the version of the data set available at ICPSR only covers years through 1973; an updated version of the data set is available, but it has not been released free-of-charge for academic use. Therefore, this analysis is limited to the

years 1946–1973[1]; as our preliminary analysis has been fruitful, we plan to collect data for 1974 to the present.

Our unit of analysis is the regime. Regimes are institutional systems that may span multiple governments; for example, one can speak of a continuous American regime since 1789, although that regime has encompassed multiple governments and survived civil war and invasion. A new regime may arise through breakdown, as defined below, or a significant change in the constitutional system of the state, such as the transition from the Fourth Republic to the Fifth Republic in France, or the peaceful replacement of the communist regimes of several Eastern European states with parliamentary and presidential democracies in the early 1990s.

Our dependent variable of interest is regime breakdown. We consider a regime breakdown to have occurred if an extraconstitutional usurpation of power in the national executive has occurred; this concept includes the typical *coup d'état* as well as other situations, such as the "self-coup" by Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Boris Yeltsin's forcible dissolution of the Russian Parliament, which did not lead to a change in the executive but did substantially shift power from one branch of government to another.

Regime breakdown is inherently a dichotomous measure: a regime either fails or it does not. The most common approach to estimating equations with dichotomous dependent variables is to use either logit or probit procedures; in this case, with corrections for the use of a cross-sectional time series data set. However, regime failure is a relatively rare event; predicting rare events with logit or probit models is inherently problematic, as independent variables will rarely explain much additional variance. Thus, a probit or logit model would be inappropriate in this case.

An alternative approach that is more fruitful is to use a survival or duration model (Cox and Oakes 1984). These regression models were designed by biostatisticians to estimate the effects of particular treatments on the morbidity of certain diseases. These models have been applied by economists and political scientists to problems similar to ours: the effects of independent variables on the duration of a particular phenomenon (Bennett 1999; Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 1997). A duration model is well-suited to the problem at hand: predicting the duration of regimes based on societal and institutional factors. Several duration models are often used in the literature, the most common of which is the Cox proportional-hazards model; we employ a Weibull regression model in our analysis, as has become increasingly common in the social sciences[2]. These estimators also account for censored data, such as regimes that did not break down during their existence, such as France's Fourth Republic, or which have not failed yet, including many of

_____

[1]The variables of interest are available for some years prior to World War II; however, there is a gap in the data from 1939 to 1945, so it seems most appropriate to start after 1946.

[2]Similar results to those presented here were obtained with a Cox model; Collett (1994) argues that the Weibull model is often a more efficient estimator.

the industrialized democracies.

Our independent variables are fairly straightforward. We include per-capita gross domestic product, to indicate the level of development of the regime; the effective number of legislative parties, using Laakso and Taagepera's (1979) measure thereof[3]; a dummy variable indicating whether or not the executive had changed in the past year; and a dummy variable indicating whether the regime was parliamentary or presidential in nature. A regime was classified as "presidential" if the president was the effective executive of the state during the period of time in question[4].

Findings. The model is estimated three times: once including both presidential and parliamentary regimes, and then separately with each type of regime. The estimates are presented in Tables 1–3.[5]

The overall model performs quite well. As might be expected, less economically-advanced countries are significantly more prone to regime failure, as are countries with a large number of parties in the legislature. The "change in executive" variable does not have any significant effect, although it does increase the likelihood of regime failure, as expected. The variable of substantive interest, that indicating presidential regimes, is marginally significant ($p = 0.052$), at least affording preliminary support to Linz's argument that presidential regimes are more prone to failure.[6]

To investigate the hypothesis that extreme multipartism leads to presidential breakdown, as advanced independently by both Mainwaring and Shugart and Carey, we examine presidential regimes separately in Table 2. As expected, a large number of legislative parties does significantly contribute to regime breakdown; however, the overall fit of the model is rather unsatisfactory (the chi-square test is only marginally significant). Notably, the per capita GDP variable is not significant (though its directionality is as expected); we hypothesize that this is due to there being little variance in this independent vari-

---

[3]The Banks data set includes the Rae (1968) index of fractionalization; we converted this index to the Laakso and Taagepera effective number of parties measure, using the formula $P = 1/(1 - F)$. The transformation makes the operationalization more "natural," although it has little substantive impact.

[4]Lijphart (1999: 121–24) identifies a few unusual cases that must be accounted for in later periods. Most notably, the "premier-presidential" system used in France exhibits both "parliamentary" and "presidential" phases based on whether or not the president has a majority coalition in the legislature. Throughout the period of the Fifth Republic examined here, France is purely presidential in nature so this classification issue does not arise.

[5]The hazard ratios in survival models are interpreted as follows: a hazard ratio greater than 1.0 indicates that an increase in the value of the independent variable increases the risk of failure (in our case, regime breakdown), while ratios less than 1.0 indicate that an increase in the independent variable decreases the risk of failure. The significance of these effects is determined using the z test statistic, as for ordinary least squares regression models.

[6]However, this result is not unexpected: as Shugart and Carey argue, an analysis that focuses on the years 1946–73 will pick up an relatively large number of regime failures in South America. We would expect this result to disappear if we were to include 1918–45 in the analysis.

able among presidential democracies, as they are mainly concentrated in the relatively homogenous region of Latin America.

Parliamentary regimes seem to be less threatened by extreme multipartism than presidential regimes, as indicated in Table 3. Per capita GDP has a marginally significant effect in the expected direction ($p = 0.078$) on the stability of parliamentary regimes, while multipartism has no significant effect on their stability. We suspect that this result comes about because many parliamentary regimes include mechanisms to ameliorate multipartism that are not present in presidential regimes (see, for example, Lijphart 1999).

Comment and Conclusions. We first must again stress that these findings are preliminary. They are necessarily time-bound; further, we do not believe that the independent variables chosen for this analysis give the "whole story." In particular, we expect that including indicators of religious and ethnic fractionalization will further attenuate the relationship between regime type and stability, and hope to include those in a future analysis. We also believe that the centralization of the state may have an effect on regime stability, and thus it would be helpful to have a variable to control for that effect.

We also wish to include Shugart and Carey's indicators of presidential powers in our analysis. We have so few presidential regimes in our data that the indicators are unlikely to perform as expected; with more regimes, we believe we can provide some evidence about how well those indicators perform relative to others.

Nevertheless, the data supports both sides of the presidential-parliamentary debate, at least to some extent. As argued by Linz and Lijphart, presidential regimes (at least in this period) do seem to be more stable. However, from the presidentialist perspective, there is also evidence supporting Shugart and Carey's view that presidential regimes break down when they fail to manage the problem of extreme multipartism in the legislature. We expect that additional data will reinforce Shugart and Carey's contention that a variety of institutional choices, not just the choice of presidential or parliamentary government, make a difference in democratic regime stability.

Independent Variable	Hazard Ratio	Standard Error
GDP per capita	0.997	0.001*
Effective number of legislative parties	1.522	0.265*
Change in executive	1.744	1.020
Presidential regime	3.044	1.745†
Log likelihood	−12.745	
Number of observations	825	
Number of regimes	89 (14 failures)	
$\chi^2(4)$	22.45***	

Table 1: Regime duration (presidential and parliamentary regimes)

Independent Variable	Hazard Ratio	Standard Error
GDP per capita	0.998	0.002
Effective number of legislative parties	1.498	0.307*
Change in executive	2.095	1.514
Log likelihood	−5.930	
Number of observations	201	
Number of regimes	37 (9 failures)	
$\chi^2(3)$	6.69†	

Table 2: Regime duration (presidential regimes only)

Independent Variable	Hazard Ratio	Standard Error
GDP per capita	0.996	0.002†
Effective number of legislative parties	1.612	0.607
Change in executive	1.238	1.171
Log likelihood	−6.252	
Number of observations	624	
Number of regimes	58 (5 failures)	
$\chi^2(3)$	9.29*	

- Hazard ratios are Weibull regression estimates.

- *** indicates $p(z) < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; † $p < .10$

Table 3: Regime duration (parliamentary regimes only)

Works Cited

Banks, Arthur S. 1976. *Cross-National Time Series, 1815-1973* [Computer file]. ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor].

Bennett, D. Scott. 1999. "Parametric Models, Duration Dependence, and Time-Varying Data Revisited." *American Journal of Political Science* 43(1): 256–70.

Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M., and Bradford S. Jones. 1997. "Time is of the Essence: Event History Models in Political Science." *American Journal of Political Science* 41(4): 1414–61.

Carey, John M., and Matthew Soberg Shugart. 1998. *Executive Decree Authority*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Collett, D. 1994. *Modelling Survival Data in Medical Research*. London: Chapman and Hall.

Cox, D. R. and D. Oakes. 1984. *Analysis of Survival Data*. London: Chapman and Hall.

Laakso, Murkuu and Taagepera, Rein. 1979. "Effective Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to Western Europe." *Comparative Political Studies* 12: 3–27.

Lijphart, Arend. 1999. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Linz, Juan J. 1990a. "The Perils of Presidentialism." *Journal of Democracy* 1(1): 51–69.

——. 1990b. "The Virtues of Parliamentarism," *Journal of Democracy* 1(4): 84–91.

Madison, James. 1787. *Federalist #51*. Reprinted in James McGregor Burns, et al. 2000. *Government by the People*, 18th Ed. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Mainwaring, Scott. 1993. "Presidentialism, Multipartism, and Democracy: The Difficult Combination." *Comparative Political Studies* 26(2): 198-228.

Rae, Douglas. 1968. "A Note on the Fractionalization of Some European Party Systems," *Comparative Political Studies* 1: 413–18.

Shugart, Matthew Soberg, and John M. Carey. 1992. *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.