

Explaining Democratic Developments in Post-Communist Countries

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LEVAN KAKHISHVILI, APR 8 2013

Is Presidentialism Perilous for Post-Communist Political Systems?

The dissolution of the Soviet Union gave a few scholars a, perhaps, not very well grounded reason to believe in the 'end of history', as Fukuyama (1992) put it. The idea behind this was that the collapse of communist rule was a clear indication of the triumph of western civilisation, and especially of the western style of political governance – liberal democracy. Therefore, many experts expected the eastern bloc countries to gradually transit towards market economy and liberal democracy. However, this expectation, as well as the idea of 'end of history', proved to be largely misleading, and not all of the former communist states were keen on democratisation. The failure to anticipate these developments, in its turn, led to another type of debate. Many scholars tried to explain the causes of the lack of democratisation in these former communist countries by establishing a causal inference between the political system they adopted after gaining independence, on the one hand, and level of democratisation on the other. Consequently, there are two camps of thought: the first argues that presidentialism proves to be perilous for post-communist political systems and these countries should opt for parliamentarism; the second maintains that the perils of presidentialism, as Elgie (2008) puts it, might be exaggerated. This paper argues that the issue is more complex than the theoretical discussion of presidentialism versus parliamentarism: it is not clear that there is definitive causal relationship between institutional arrangements and consolidation of democracy. Therefore, it might be useful to consider alternative explanations such as the reasons for choosing certain constitutions.

Differences in Institutional Arrangements and Theoretical Debates

The difference between presidentialism and parliamentarism, according to Linz (1990 p. 52), is that presidentialism is a system in which "an executive ... is directly elected by the people for a fixed term and is independent of parliamentary votes of confidence." Further, the executive in such systems completely controls composition of government and is the symbolic head of the state. The president's vulnerability to be removed is very low and impeachment is highly difficult. In contrast with presidentialism, parliamentary systems have only one democratically elected legitimate institution – parliament. Therefore, governments are dependent on the parliament's confidence. This difference between the two types of institutional arrangement has sparked theoretical debates with the aim of identifying the best regime type for democratising states.

Linz (1990) in his authoritative article criticises presidentialism and identifies several expected problems, which in theory accompany presidential regimes in democratising countries. These problems include dual legitimacy, rigidity, personalisation of power, and zero-sum elections. Dual legitimacy comes from the fact that presidents are popularly elected and can act as symbolic heads of state and claim to represent the whole population of the country, which, according to Linz (1990), might not always be the case. Therefore, legitimacy of the president and that of parliament in times of crises will come against each other and there will not be any established mechanism which of the two branches of power is more legitimate. Rigidity is a result of fixed terms in presidential systems, which make policies discontinued. Concentration of power in the hands of the president is, perhaps, the biggest problem of presidentialism and is a frequent occurrence in transition countries. Finally, zero-sum or "winner-takes-all" elections make it difficult for the president to claim to be a representative of the whole population of the country.

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Horowitz (1990), on the other hand, criticises Linz on various grounds, including his methodology. Horowitz (1990) claims that Linz only focuses on carefully selected cases from Latin America; that his views of presidentialism are caricaturist; that he assumes that presidents can only be elected in a particular way; and finally that he ignores many of the functions presidents can perform in divided societies. Consequently, Horowitz refutes each of Linz's arguments. Yet, one cannot avoid the fact that there are presidential systems that can hardly be called democracies. Abdukadirov (2009) provides account for such systems in Central Asia and argues that high level of power personalisation leads to instability. However, the author rightly points out that while parliamentarism may have potential to avoid instability as a result of their flexibility, the effectiveness of such systems largely depends on the existence of developed political parties. Likewise, Shugart (1999), while recognising the advantages of parliamentarism, argues that the absence of nationally oriented parties determines the adoption of presidential systems in less-developed countries that have no prior experience of parliamentarism. Additionally, Shugart shows that presidential systems in some societies better ensure the provision of collective goods. Moreover, the societies with a parliamentary form of government normally are very large countries with either great regional disparities in development or great income inequality. They tend to experience highly unstable cabinets or shut out important societal interests. The former would be the result of multiple parties representing different occupational groups or regions, while the latter would be a consequence of the manufacturing of majorities for one (minority) party. Therefore, it is important to consider why certain countries end up with presidentialism and others with parliamentarism.

This debate shows that both parliamentarism as well as presidentialism have their supporters. However, it cannot provide causal inference, which has to be established by empirical studies which could account for the varied success in the democratisation of former communist states.

The Causal Relationship between Regime Types and Democratisation

Although theory can anticipate certain perils of presidentialism and, to a lesser extent, of parliamentarism, the essence of the problem lies in the extent of the ability of an institutional arrangement, as an independent variable, to reasonably explain the process of democratisation. Does parliamentarism cause democratisation or does presidentialism hinder this process? The theoretical answers to this question are clearly debatable. Therefore, it might be useful to turn to empirical studies, which quantitatively examine the link between institutional arrangements and democratic performance.

Beliaev (2006) analyses twenty-two post-communist countries and concludes that presidential power is not uni-dimensional. According to Beliaev (2006), presidents have executive power, the influence to serve as an arbiter between the legislative and executive branches, and at the same time can patronise courts. Beliaev concludes that concentration of executive power is inversely related to the democratic performance of the country, while the power to serve as an arbiter positively influences the democratisation process. Consequently, four types of presidential regimes can be identified: super-presidential, presidential or president-parliamentary, semi-presidential, and parliamentary. Although Beliaev establishes correlation, he does not explain the exact mechanism through which this correlation is realised. Further questions also arise from this study: what is the influence of human factor or the type of the leader who serves as an elected executive? With this regard Baylis (1996) shows that even less powerful presidents are able to remove unfavourable prime ministers or *vice versa*. Baylis' analysis raises questions regarding the human factor in politics. Further, does presidential power have more dimensions or is the power to serve as an arbiter the same as the president's ability to form coalitions in parliament, as analysed by Chaisty *et al* (2012)? Based on cross-regional analysis, Chaisty *et al* (2012) demonstrate that presidents have the capacity to act as prime ministers in parliamentary systems, and contribute to forming coalitions in legislatures through a toolbox, which includes factors like agenda power, budgetary authority, cabinet management, partisan powers, and informal institutions. This data might be suggesting that presidential systems can, to certain extent, be as conducive to democracy as parliamentary regimes.

Other studies examine the power of parliaments and their correlation with democratisation. Fish (2006) investigates the relationship between the parliamentary power index (PPI) and Freedom House scores. Having analysed all the post-communist countries except Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, and Turkmenistan, the findings of Fish's research

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show that stronger legislatures are positively correlated with democratic consolidation. However, there are a few problems with the research. First, the correlation is very high while examining 2003-2005 data, but the relationship is not so perfect when the data at the time the constitutions were adopted and the extent of overall change is analysed. In the latter case there are outlier cases, such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Hungary, Albania and Mongolia. Therefore, the predictive power of this relationship decreases. Second, measuring PPI is itself problematic. Although the designers of the study did approach the issue in an innovative way, the data is based on the subjective perceptions and assessments of experts. (Fish admits that, in some cases, the constitutions were ambivalent on certain issues and a second round of consultations was required, indicating potential problems within the study.) Further, all the items in the list of 32 questions are not equally significant. What is more important, however, is that the answers had to be 'yes' or 'no' while sometimes the reality might not be so categorical. It is equally important to know if there is a possibility to avoid parliamentary approval on certain issues. On the other hand, in the cases where presidents enjoy not only official but also informal powers through patronage networks, for instance, executives may delegate certain official powers to legislatures but it might not mean that the stronger parliament will lead to consolidation of democracy.

Clearly, the outcomes of quantitative studies largely depend on the methodology applied. Ishiyama and Velten (1998) analyse the relationship using a multivariate analytical technique. The authors assess varying degrees of presidential power by measuring presidential power index and other independent variables, including the electoral system, and examine them against the index of democratisation. To measure democratisation, Ishiyama and Velten (1998) modify Vanhanen's index of democratisation (citation?) and add Freedom House scores. This way they measure two important dimensions of democracy: participation and competition, along with freedom of the society. The findings of their research demonstrate that democratic consolidation is affected by electoral systems more than the power of the constitutional president or socio-cultural and economic factors. Consequently, it can be argued that different kinds of methodological frameworks might lead to varied results on relations between institutional arrangements and democratisation.

Alternative Explanations

If the relationship between the regime type and democratic performance is not clear, then what accounts for the varied level of democratic consolidation throughout the post-communist region? An alternative explanation might be that this outcome can be the effect of initial conditions in states. Thus, it might be useful to investigate why states choose certain type of constitutions and not others. This is connected to the question Frye (1997) asks in his article: why is it that formal powers of the presidency vary greatly across the region? Assuming that politicians make choices based on concerns for their individual power, and that they operate under varying degree of uncertainty, Frye concludes that the two factors that affect this choice of constitution are: "the bargaining power of the electoral favourite and the degree of uncertainty over the electoral outcome." (1997, p. 524) This is an important conclusion, which may suggest that certain political conditions may be more favourable for democratisation. These conditions might also include weak informal power networks and the existence of political parties that are not solely based on charismatic leaders and show features of programmatic parties. The idea is that under favourable conditions for democratisation, societies do not choose presidentialism in the first place. This might be the primary cause for the lack of democratic consolidation in some countries in their early stage of transition, while the later period can be explained with path-dependency. Therefore, democratisation can be the result of these favourable initial conditions, variance of which also leads to different institutional arrangements. These arrangements are not limited to the dichotomy of presidentialism versus parliamentarism but also include differences of presidential and parliamentary power.

Overall, the institutional dimension of democratisation needs further studies. Theories can predict certain outcomes but since the practice is different more empirical studies need to be carried out. What the existing studies show is that different methodological approaches produce different results, which does not conform to the idea that institutional arrangements can actually determine and predict the process of democratisation. Consequently, at this stage the effects of constitutions should be analysed with reasonable suspicion.

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Date written: February, 2013