

To what extent is 'semi-presidentialism' a meaningful category?

In this essay, I will argue that 'semi-presidentialism' is not a meaningful category. That semi-presidential democracies are too different from each other and that grouping them into one category is incorrect. That the semi-presidential category is nothing more than democracies which are either like a parliamentary system or alternate between a purely presidential and parliamentary system. And that 'semi-presidentialism' as a category is only useful insofar as it captures this, a democracy which oscillates between presidentialism and parliamentarism. Firstly, I will argue why semi-presidential democracies fit better into the "pure" categories by looking at the different forms of semi-presidential democracies. Then I will refute a counterargument by Clark et al. which argues that semi-presidential democracies are in between presidential and parliamentary democracies.¹

The main difference between presidential and parliamentary democracies is that governments do not require a legislative majority to exist in presidential regimes but do require an (at least implicit) legislative majority in parliamentary regimes. Semi-presidential democracies are the democracies where the government does need a legislative majority, but which simultaneously have a president. However, this is not enough. As I will later show, it is necessary to also distinguish between different types of semi-presidential democracies. For this I will use the approach taken by Shugart and Carey.² The semi-presidential category is subdivided into a premier-presidential system and a president-parliamentary system. In the premier-presidential system, the government is responsible to the parliament but not to the president. In this system, the president has usually only limited or symbolical power, they cannot dissolve the government. In the president-parliamentary system, the government is also responsible to the president. I will explore both the premier-presidential and president-parliamentary system and explain why they better fit into the pure categories.

In premier-presidential systems, the prime minister usually has much more power than the president. Even though the president is popularly elected. As a result, it is almost exactly the same as a parliamentary system as the president cannot dismiss the government. An example of this is Ireland. Ireland has a popularly elected presidential head of government. However, because the Irish president is very weak, the real head of government is actually the prime minister. As a result, Ireland functions pretty much like a pure parliamentary government.

The president-parliamentary system is a bit more complicated. It alternates between a purely presidential and a more parliamentary system. This is best illustrated with the

Met opmerkingen [MOU1]: Generally: read and reference more widely.
Such as: during the definition of presidentialism, reference Duverger etc.
It is not bad to reference a lot, it is not bad to have the half of the paragraph be citations.

No parentheses around the citations in a footnote.

Met opmerkingen [MOU2]: There is a certain level of circularity, I adopt a definition and then criticise it for not being precise. Could I make it more precise? Why do I then adopt this definition if it is wrong anyway?

Met opmerkingen [MOU3]: Good, answer immediately.

Met opmerkingen [MOU4R3]: Maybe, not going the easy way, arguing what you really believe is more valuable.

Met opmerkingen [MOU5]: Instead of saying that you will, just already summarise what you are going to say.

Met opmerkingen [MOU6]: Idem.

Met opmerkingen [MOU7]: Do this the different way around. First explain why they are necessary and then introduce new vocabulary.

Met opmerkingen [MOU8]: Mention more details, what then is pure parliamentarism

¹ (Clark et al. 2012, 511)

² (Shugart and Carey 1992)

example of France. When the party of the president also has a majority in the national assembly, it is effectively a presidential system. If he can control his own party, the president has the authority. However, because the government also needs the confidence from the legislature, the national assembly, periods of cohabitation can arise. In a presidential system, if the political party of the president has the majority of the seats in the legislature, the president will simply appoint a government consisting of their own party. Similarly, even if the political party of the president does not have enough seats for a majority in the legislature, because the government does not need the confidence of the legislature, the president can appoint a minority government. Consequently, the prime minister will almost always be of the same political party as the president. In the case of France, however, the government needs the support from the legislature and as a result, if the party of the president does not achieve a majority in the national assembly, the president will sometimes have to assign a prime minister from a different political party: cohabitation. During times of cohabitation, as the prime minister usually has authority over domestic policy and the president over foreign policy, the real head of government is the prime minister. Therefore, during times of cohabitation, the de facto power is with the legislature and the prime minister. As a result, they should be classified as parliamentary systems.

As I have shown, the classification of semi-presidential is in premier-presidential systems not at all meaningful, as they should just be classified as parliamentary democracies. And it is only meaningful with president-parliamentary systems because it captures the unique ability of those regimes to alternate between presidentialism and parliamentarism during times of legislative majority for the presidential party and cohabitation respectively. **It should not, however, be seen as a different category of democracy.**

Met opmerkingen [MOU9]: This is a little bit strange, what does it mean to be a category of democracy?

One response could be that, empirically, semi-presidential systems are in between presidential and parliamentary systems. Some of the implications of semi-presidentialism would be that semi-presidential democracies have fewer partisan ministers and a lower proportionality in the allocation of portfolios than in parliamentary democracies but more partisan ministers and a higher proportionality in the allocation of portfolios than in a presidential democracy. **This is also what Amorim Neto and Strøm find.** This would imply that semi-presidentialism is different from presidentialism and parliamentarism. However, as I will argue, if one looks at the data, it seems to substantiate the theory that semi-presidentialism is *not* different from presidentialism and parliamentarism.

Met opmerkingen [MOU10]: Right approach, look at outcomes.

Partisan ministers and proportionality in the allocation of portfolios are good measures for presidentialism and parliamentarism. This is because, as I explained above, presidential democracies will usually have more minority governments and fewer

coalition governments than parliamentary democracies. Because it is less important to build legislative majorities for the president than in a parliamentary democracy, the president can appoint more nonpartisan ministers such as technocrats and experts. Conversely, in a parliamentary system, because ministerial posts are important bargaining chips when deciding which party gets how much power, the prime minister cannot afford to give them away to nonpartisan ministers. For the same reason, proportionality in the allocation of portfolios is also higher in parliamentary regimes. Because the president does not really need the support from other political parties that much in the legislature, she can afford to give fewer ministerial posts to coalition partners and, as a result, the political party of the president will have disproportionately many ministerial posts. In a parliamentary democracy, however, other coalition parties have more leverage over the prime minister and therefore the ministerial posts will be distributed more fairly.

As one would expect, the data confirms this. The average percentage of nonpartisan ministers in parliamentary regimes is 2.12 and in presidential regimes 29.17. The average proportionality of cabinet portfolio allocation is in parliamentary regimes 0.90 and in presidential regimes 0.65 (higher is more proportional).³

So, what happens in semi-presidential regimes? Amorim Neto and Strøm compiled the following table:

Country	Number of cabinets	Mean percentage of nonpartisan ministers	Standard deviation
Austria	5	6	3
Bulgaria	7	51	33
Finland	5	3	3
France	6	6	9
Iceland	4	0	0
Ireland	5	0	0
Lithuania	5	36	22
Macedonia	6	1	2
Poland	7	30	18
Portugal	3	6	0
Romania	7	28	18
Slovenia	4	8	13

Table 1: Semi-presidential democracies, number of cabinets formed in 1990-2000, percentage of nonpartisan cabinet members and standard deviations.⁴

Met opmerkingen [MOU11]: Standard deviation is a very good point.

Met opmerkingen [MOU12]: Next time (though I did not have the time this time), just divide the table into two then.

³ (Clark et al. 2012, 504)

⁴ (Neto and Strøm 2006)

The average percentage of nonpartisan ministers is 14,58. This seems to suggest that semi-presidentialism really is a different form of democracy 'half-way' between presidentialism and parliamentarism. However, as I explained above, grouping all semi-presidential systems together like this is inexpedient. Because some of the semi-presidential regimes are parliamentary-like and some presidential-like (or alternating between the two), it could have been expected that one will end up with an average in between half-way between parliamentarism and presidentialism. The distinction between premier-presidential systems and president-parliamentary systems can actually be observed in the data.

In countries such as Austria, Iceland, Ireland, Finland (at least after 1981 when Urho Kekkonen was no longer president) and Portugal, the president is relatively weak, so they function like a parliamentary regime. And for those countries, one can also observe a relatively low percentage of nonpartisan ministers. France, on the other hand, has a high standard deviation in the percentage of nonpartisan ministers. This is also expected as France alternates between a more presidential and a more parliamentary system.

Met opmerkingen [MOU13]: Only looking at France is not enough!

Met opmerkingen [MOU14]: You should also look then at what happens during the different governments.

In conclusion, semi-presidentialism is not a meaningful category because there are larger differences between semi-presidential regimes than between semi-presidential and presidential/parliamentary regimes. Therefore, semi-presidentialism should be subdivided into premier-presidential and president-parliamentary regimes. However, as premier-presidential systems are so similar to parliamentary systems, semi-presidentialism is only meaningful should be weakened to only those countries which have the ability of oscillate between a parliamentary and presidential system. Although, initially, the empirical data seems to show that semi-presidential regimes are qualitatively different from presidential and parliamentary regimes, once one recognizes that the category semi-presidentialism should be subdivided, the data defends the theory that semi-presidential democracies can be, at any given time, be classified as parliamentary or presidential regimes.

Bibliography

- Clark, William Roberts, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2012. *Principles of Comparative Politics*. 2nd ed. London: CQ Press.
- Neto, Octavio Amorim, and Kaare Strøm. 2006. 'Breaking the Parliamentary Chain of Delegation: Presidents and Non-Partisan Cabinet Members in European Democracies'. *British Journal of Political Science* 36(4): 619–43.
- Shugart, Matthew Soberg, and John M. Carey. 1992. *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139173988.

