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SYMPOSIUM

A Context-sensitive Approach to the Study of Presidentialism and Ethnic Violence

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Introduction

In her essay on ‘Presidentialism and the risk of ethnic violence’, Ulrike Theuerkauf raises the important and hitherto widely neglected issue of whether or not a presidential form of government—especially in comparison with parliamentary systems—increases the risk of ethnic conflict. I strongly subscribe to many of the propositions made in this paper; indeed, the type of government in place has been discussed relatively rarely with regard to the risk it generates of ethnic conflict, as most of the works focus instead on legislative electoral systems and decentralization. If presidentialism is considered, it is mostly democracy that is the explanandum, not ethnic or other types of conflict. I particularly support the idea that future research on the topic is urgently required. Although I subscribe as well to much of the theorizing advocated, I also have a number of suggestions on how to advance empirical research on the subject. In the following sections, I shall first show that recent quantitative work has no definite answer on the conflict-proneness of presidentialism. Second, I shall address general theoretical considerations, arguing in favour of a context-sensitive—or conditional—study of the presidentialism–conflict link. Finally, I shall outline the three main elements of such a context-sensitive approach.

Empirical Findings from Quantitative Studies

Ultimately, the effect of presidentialism on ethnic conflict is an empirical question. In the most recent quantitative findings, no consensus has been reached about whether or not a presidential form of government increases or reduces (ethnic) conflict risks. Brancati’s

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(2006) results suggest that presidentialism reduces the risk of anti-regime conflict but is irrelevant for secessionist and other territorial conflict. Schneider & Wiesehomeier (2008) found that presidentialism, in general, increases the risk of conflict, but becomes insignificant when the interaction with various forms of ethnic diversity (fractionalization, polarization, dominance) is tested. Wimmer's (2012) study yields limited support for the conflict-proneness of presidentialism, but his relationships turn non-significant when the exclusion of ethnic groups is controlled for. All of these studies rely on different data sets, samples and operationalizations of key variables. However, a sensitivity analysis by Binningsbø *et al.* (2012) questions further the impact of institutions, as it did not find any robust relationship between the form of government (as well as other institutions) and conflict risks. In sum, it remains empirically unclear to what extent and under what circumstances—or, indeed, whether or not at all—the form of government matters for (ethnic) violence.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

The first consequence of these findings is the necessity to specify what we expect to be the relative weight of presidentialism. Ulrike Theuerkauf juxtaposes two (rather) implicit hypotheses: presidentialism either increases or decreases (ethnic) conflict risks. Yet, there are at least two more possibilities. Beyond positive and negative effects, it is also possible that presidentialism has a marginal or zero effect among a huge number of potentially more significant factors. The inconclusive results point in this direction, but they may also be due to the fact that recent studies have neglected the fourth possible scenario: the effects of presidentialism are conditional, that is, they depend on context.¹

The second imperative is to specify the causal mechanisms: what are the exact dynamics that interlink a presidential form of government and ethnic violence? Little theorizing has been done thus far on this question. More or less implicitly, the idea circulates that presidentialism increases the risk of ethnic conflict via the winner-takes-all effect, thus marginalizing (ethnic) losers. Marginalization then gives rise to frustration and, in turn, to aggression. But is this mechanism compatible with the deadlock risk between the presidency and parliament? This mechanism relies on contested powers, not marginalization. In fact, both mechanisms are unlikely to materialize at the same point in time. Whether one or the other (or further) mechanism(s) materialize must, then, depend on other contextual conditions.

We also have to consider presidentialism as a dependent variable as well as endogeneity issues: a presidential form of government does not come about by chance. Arguably, a presidential form of government reflects the strong desire that the chief executive should be directly elected—either because of a 'big man' culture or because of past experience with lifelong presidents. It is no accident that presidential systems can be found in Africa and Latin America in particular. This idea implies that it might be difficult to introduce alternatives to presidentialism, but for the effects of presidentialism it is more important that the choice of the form of government is not exogenous to other conflict risks. Contextual risks (such as the 'big man' culture) may foster both presidentialism and ethnic conflict, creating a spurious relationship.

These observations are far from being exhaustive, yet nevertheless strongly suggest the importance of taking into account context. As context is only a vague term, I shall outline three clusters of relevant contextual conditions in the following section.

Three Contextual Clusters

Presidentialism does not equal presidentialism: presidential systems differ in many respects (Nohlen, 1991). Some of the provisions matter in theory for ethnic conflict. Ulrike Theuerkauf's paper in fact does a great job in listing some of the key ones, such as territorial requirements. However, there are more: the post of vice-president offers some element of 'power-sharing'—there can be either formal or informal alternation. Both options have been tried in Nigeria (Bogaards, 2010). Decree powers differ as well, and have an influence on risks of marginalization (probably increased) and deadlock (probably decreased)—there has been an extensive debate about such 'decretismo' in Latin America. Beyond presidentialism, the specific properties of semi-presidential and parliamentary forms of government also have to be considered.

Presidentialism within the 'concert of institutions': institutions are frequently analysed independently of each other, but it should be clear right from the outset that institutions work in concert and it is the net effect of inclusion that counts. The form of government is just one out of a number of further formal state institutions, with others being: the legislative electoral system; the party system (or more precisely its regulation); the territorial state structure; and—less often studied—the judicial system and the state security sector. Some of their features strongly affect ethnic conflict, independent of or in conjunction with presidentialism. Minority rights can be enshrined in the constitution via special provisions and effectively prevent marginalization. Marginalization also depends on how the party system is structured. If the presidential camp also dominates the legislature, one can expect that feelings of marginalization will increase. However, if the opposition holds a parliamentary majority such feelings may not emerge. Rather, the risk of deadlock increases. The judiciary may effectively protect minority rights or resolve any institutional crises that arise between the presidency and the parliament (usually over the budget, as, for instance, in Benin in the 1990s). The distribution of power within the security sector matters as well. After the newly elected Hutu president of Burundi announced that there would be a reform of the security forces the Tutsi-dominated military staged a *coup d'état*—killing him and triggering a bloody civil (ethnic) war.

Non-institutional surrounding conditions: as argued above, many variables affect ethnic conflict. Independent from or in conjunction with the form of government and other institutions, they can lead to ethnic conflict. First, we have to consider the 'ethnic landscape'. For instance, the relative size and number of politically relevant ethnic groups might matter. Many scholars argue that a highly fractionalized society is less prone to conflict, as collective action problems are more difficult to overcome. By contrast, if one ethnic group numerically dominates or two ethnic camps are opposed the winner-takes-all effect of presidentialism is much more likely to materialize (as, for instance, happened in Burundi and Nigeria). In fact, the study by Schneider & Wiesehomeier (2008) mentioned above found that the effects of institutions depend greatly on the demographic constellation of ethnicity.² Another important aspect is the relationship between ethnic and other differences. Do they run parallel to other cleavages, or do other cleavages cut across ethnic differences? Political exclusion, relative deprivation and horizontal inequalities also matter. Wimmer (2012) found that presidentialism became non-significant when the percentage of excluded or included ethnic groups was entered into models. Economy variables may count beyond inequalities as well. In high-income countries, even presidential elections will lose their zero-sum nature when the losers have access to alternative

sources of income. There are many further possible determinants (e.g. the availability of arms, rough terrain, natural resources, international factors), and we should also allow ourselves to think about the characteristics of leaders themselves—even given how unsatisfactory this may be theoretically.

In sum, we should not engage in an academic dispute over whether presidentialism is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather in a context-sensitive analysis that identifies under what circumstances—and how—various different forms of government work in the best interests of real people.

Notes

1. In fact, the Theuerkauf paper dismisses Horowitz’s pro-presidentialism arguments, because they depend on context.
2. Disappointingly, it is the electoral system and federalism that matter, not presidentialism.
3. This reference list includes only works that are not cited in the paper commented upon.

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