

Presidents vs. Parliaments

THE CENTRALITY
OF POLITICAL CULTURE

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Juan Linz and Donald Horowitz are to be commended for reviving the discussion of the relationship between constitutional systems—presidential or parliamentary—and the conditions that make for stable democracy. Linz, basing himself largely on the Latin American experience, notes that most presidential systems have repeatedly broken down. Horowitz, a student of Asia and Africa, emphasizes that most parliamentary systems, particularly those attempted in almost all African countries and some of the new nations of postwar Asia, have also failed. He could also have pointed to the interwar collapse of democratic parliamentarism in Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, Austria, Germany, and most of Eastern Europe. Conversely, in addition to the successful parliamentary regimes of northern Europe and the industrialized parts of the British Commonwealth, countries such as France under the Fifth Republic, pre-Allende Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay (for most of this century) offer examples of stable and democratic presidentialism.

Clearly, it is not obvious that constitutional variations in type of executive are closely linked to democratic or authoritarian outcomes. As Linz emphasizes, parliamentary government (especially where there are several parties but none with a clear majority) gives different constituencies more access to the decision-making process than they would enjoy in presidential systems, and presumably helps bind these constituencies to the polity. Under presidential government, those opposed to the president's party may regard themselves as marginalized, and thus may seek to undermine presidential legitimacy. Because presidential

government entrusts authority and ultimate responsibility to a single person, some scholars regard it as inherently unstable; failures can lead to a rejection of the symbol of authority. Power seems more diversified in parliamentary regimes.

The reality is more complicated. Given the division of authority between presidents and legislatures, prime ministers and their cabinets are more powerful and may pay less attention to the importunings of specific groups. A prime minister with a majority of parliament behind him has much more authority than an American president. Basically, such parliaments vote to support the budgets, bills, and policies that the government presents. Government members must vote this way, or the cabinet falls and an election is called. Unlike members of a legislative branch, opposition parliamentarians, though free to debate, criticize, or vote against the policies set by the executive, rarely can affect them.

The situation is quite different in a presidential system. The terms of the president and cabinet are not affected by votes in the legislature. As a result, party discipline is much weaker in, say, the U.S. Congress than it is in the British Parliament. In the United States and other presidential systems, the representation of diverse interests and value groups in different parties leads to cross-party alliances on various issues. Local interests are better represented in Congress, since a representative will look for constituency support to get reelected and can vote against his president or party. An MP, however, must go with his prime minister and his party, even if doing so means alienating constituency support.

The fact that presidencies make for weak parties and weak executives, while parliaments tend to have the reverse effect, certainly affects the nature of and possibly the conditions for democracy. But much of the literature wrongly assumes the opposite: that a president is inherently stronger than a prime minister, and that power is more concentrated in the former. I should emphasize that a condition for a strong cabinet government is the need to call a new election when a cabinet loses a parliamentary vote. Where parliament continues and a new cabinet is formed from a coalition of parties, no one of which has a majority, parliamentary cabinets may be weak, as in the Weimar Republic, the Third and Fourth French Republics, or contemporary Israel and India.

In my recent book *Continental Divide*, which compares the institutions and values of the United States and Canada, I note that the difference between presidential and parliamentary systems in comparable continent-spanning, federal politics results in two weak parties in the United States and multiple strong ones in Canada. The U.S. system appears to be the more stable of the two; since 1921, Canada has seen the rise and fall of over half a dozen important "third parties." The U.S. system's emphasis on electing one person president or governor forces the "various groups . . . [to] identify with one or another of the two major electoral alliances on whatever basis of division is most salient to them. Each major

alliance or coalition party contains different interest groups which fight it out in primaries."

I conclude with respect to Canada that its "electoral changes have clearly been the result not of great instability or tension," but rather of the political system. In effect, the need for disciplined parliamentary parties "encourages the transformation of political protest, of social movements, of discontent with the dominant party in one's region or other aspects of life, into third, fourth, or fifth parties." The loose parties inherent in the presidential system of the U.S. absorb protest more easily within traditional mechanisms than do the parliamentary parties of Canada.

The Cultural Factor

The question remains, why have most Latin American polities not functioned like the U.S. political system? The answer lies in economic and cultural factors. If we look at the comparative record, it still suggests, as I noted in 1960 in *Political Man*, that long-enduring democracies are disproportionately to be found among the wealthier and more Protestant nations. The "Fourth" or very undeveloped world apart, Catholic and poorer countries have been less stably democratic. The situation has of course changed somewhat in recent times. Non-Protestant southern European countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain have created parliamentary democracies, while most Catholic Latin American countries have competitive electoral systems with presidential regimes.

I will not reiterate my past discussions of the diverse social conditions for democracy, other than to note that the correlations of democracy with Protestantism and a past British connection point up the importance of cultural factors. In this connection, it may be noted that in Canada the "Latin" (French-speaking and Catholic) province of Quebec seemingly lacked the conditions for a pluralistic party system and democratic rights until the 1960s, while the anglophone and Protestant part of the country has had a stable multiparty system with democratic guarantees for close to a century. In seeking to explain in 1958 why "French Canadians have not really believed in democracy for themselves," and did not have a functioning competitive party system, political scientist Pierre Trudeau, who would later serve as prime minister of Canada for 16 years, wrote, "French Canadians are Catholics; and Catholic nations have not always been ardent supporters of democracy. They are authoritarian in spiritual matters; and . . . they are often disinclined to seek solutions in temporal matters through the mere counting of heads."¹

Trudeau mentioned other factors, of course, particularly those inherent in the minority and economically depressed situation of his linguistic compatriots, but basically, as he noted, Canada had two very different cultures and political systems within the same set of governmental and

constitutional arrangements. Quebec, like most of South America, may be described as Latin and American, and its pre-1960 politics resembled that of other Latin societies more than it did any in the anglophone world, whether presidential or parliamentary. Quebec, of course, has changed greatly since the early 1960s, and now has a stable two-party system. But these political developments have occurred in tandem with major adjustments in the orientation and behavior of the Catholic Church, in the content of the educational system, and in economic development and mobility, particularly among the francophones. What has not changed is the formal political system.

Islamic countries may also be considered as a group. Almost all have been authoritarian, with monarchical or presidential systems of government. It would be hard to credit the weakness of democracy among them to their political institutions. Some writers claim that Islamic faith makes political democracy in a Western sense extremely difficult, since it recognizes no separation of the secular and religious realms. Such claims should not be categorical, since, as with Christianity, doctrines and practices can evolve over time.

This emphasis on culture is reinforced by Myron Wiener's observation that almost all of the postwar "new nations" that have become enduring democracies are former British colonies, as are various others, such as Nigeria and Pakistan, which maintained competitive electoral institutions for briefer periods. Almost none of the former Belgian, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish colonies have comparable records. In the comparative statistical analyses that I have been conducting of the factors associated with democracy among the Third World countries, past experience with British rule emerges as one of the most powerful correlates of democracy.

Cultural factors deriving from varying histories are extraordinarily difficult to manipulate. Political institutions—including electoral systems and constitutional arrangements—are more easily changed. Hence, those concerned with enhancing the possibilities for stable democratic government focus on them. Except for the case of the Fifth French Republic, and the barriers placed on small-party representation in West Germany, there is little evidence, however, that such efforts have had much effect, and the latter case is debatable.

NOTES

1. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, *Federalism and the French Canadians* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 108.