

PRESIDENTIALISM IN LATIN AMERICA *

Scott Mainwaring
University of Notre Dame

The intransigent clinging to the presidential system does not grow out of lofty considerations; it is not the case that our politicians long for true republican practice. On the contrary, they are after irresponsibility in politics and in administration. . . . If not in theory, at least in practice, presidentialism is usually an irresponsible system of government.

Ruy Barbosa,
Brazilian statesman

One of the striking lacunae in the study of Latin American politics is the paucity of social science and historical analyses of presidentialism. Whether a regime is parliamentary or presidential has a major impact on significant aspects of political life: how executive power is formed, relationships between the legislative and the executive branches, relationships between the executive and the political parties, the nature of the political parties, what happens when the executive loses support, and arguably even prospects for stable democracy and patterns of domination. Presidents have received considerable attention in journalistic writings on Latin America, and presidentialism has been studied by jurists, but the subject has received scant attention from social scientists and historians.

This neglect is somewhat surprising in view of commonplace observations on the importance of executive power in Latin America. It is partly explained, however, by the predominant trends in the field: from the early 1960s until the early 1980s, Latin American political institutions were not well studied. Renewed interest in political institutions has surfaced in this decade but has focused more on political parties than on

*I would like to thank Maxwell Cameron, Michael Coppedge, Caroline Domingo, Leon Epstein, Juan Linz, Matthew Shugart, and J. Samuel Valenzuela for their helpful comments and suggestions.

presidentialism. A review essay on Latin American presidentialism, therefore, finds few stellar works to discuss.

This essay will address three main subjects. I will first argue that the neglect of presidentialism as a subject of inquiry is a phenomenon of recent decades and that until the 1950s, it was somewhat more debated and analyzed. Many of these earlier contributions lack enduring value, but they are important for understanding how the field has changed. Second, I will look at some recent arguments regarding the relationship between presidentialism and stable democracy. A number of recent studies have argued that presidentialism may be inimical to democratic consolidation. I agree with this assessment and will argue that it is particularly true of multiparty systems. Finally, I will suggest a few areas in which research on presidentialism would enhance general understanding of Latin American politics.

Before turning to these points, however, it is important to clarify the meaning of *presidentialism*, a term whose usage is less obvious than it appears because some political systems have titular presidents but still are not presidential systems. A presidential democracy has two distinguishing features.¹ First, the head of government is elected independently of the legislature in the sense that legislative elections and postelection negotiations do not determine executive power. In countries where the chief executive is selected by the legislature, not as a second alternative when the popular vote does not produce a clear winner but as the fundamental process, the system is either parliamentary (the vast majority of cases) or a hybrid (as in Switzerland).² Postelection negotiations that determine which parties will govern and which will head the government are crucial in many parliamentary regimes (Luebbert 1986), but they are not part of the selection process of chief executives in presidential systems.

The chief executive in a presidential democracy is usually elected by popular vote, although some countries, notably the United States, have an electoral college rather than direct popular elections.³ Even so, in the United States, the popular vote has a virtually binding effect on electoral college votes. In other presidential systems, including those in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile (before 1973), the congress votes for a president if there is no absolute majority in the popular vote. Yet the popular vote is the first criterion, and in Argentina and Chile, tradition has dictated that congress will select the candidate with the most popular votes. Note that it must be the head of government—not simply the president—who is elected by popular vote or an electoral college. In Austria, Iceland, and Ireland, the president is elected by direct popular vote but has only minor powers and is therefore not the head of government.

The second distinguishing feature of presidential democracies is that the president is elected for a fixed period of time. Most presidential democracies allow for impeachment, but this practice is rare and does not

substantially affect the definition because of its extraordinary character. The president cannot be forced to resign because of a no-confidence vote by the legislature, and consequently, the president is not formally accountable to congress. In a parliamentary system, in contrast, the head of government is elected by the legislature and subsequently depends on the ongoing confidence of the legislature to remain in office; thus the time period is not fixed.

This definition distinguishes presidential from semipresidential systems like the French regime, in which executive power is actually divided between a prime minister and a president elected by popular vote.⁴ Conversely, I consider almost all of the Latin American experiments that are sometimes called parliamentary to be presidential systems. The major exceptions have been the semipresidential regimes in Chile (1891–1924) and Brazil (1961–1963), both of which substantially modified presidential authority.⁵ Many other experiments have introduced secondary features of parliamentary systems, such as the right of congress to interpellate ministers, but none have altered the basic distinguishing features of presidentialism.⁶

PRESIDENTIALISM AND THE OLD INSTITUTIONALISM IN LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

Although presidentialism has received insufficient attention in the past few decades, this was not always the case. In several Latin American countries, the desirability of presidentialism was the subject of intense political debate for some decades. In the 1940s and 1950s, many U.S. textbooks on Latin American politics included a chapter on the subject. A range of institutional issues that were later neglected were prominent on the agenda in the 1950s: federalism, the role of legislatures, and political parties. Latin American scholars, too, were more concerned with political institutions in the 1940s and 1950s than in subsequent decades until the 1980s. Given the salience of institutional issues during this period, it seems appropriate to speak of an “old institutionalism” in the study of Latin American politics.

Several common themes run throughout most of the old institutionalism in general and in its analysis of presidentialism. In contrast to the modernization theory that emerged in the late 1950s and dominated U.S. political science in the 1960s, the institutionalists of the 1940s and 1950s focused a great deal on political institutions as shapers of the political system. Modernization theory eschewed this approach as formalism, arguing that it was more important to focus on functions. Although the early institutionalists took political institutions as their primary object of study, they were divided in the ways they analyzed the relationship between political institutions and culture or social structure.

Some gave more weight than others to culture or social structure in explaining differences in political institutions. Yet the old institutionalists consistently, if implicitly, rejected the later view of politics and political institutions as dependent variables and of social or cultural phenomena as the independent variables that explained political outcomes. These broad conceptions about institutions explain the old institutionalists' concern with presidentialism.

Many analysts devoted considerable attention to characterizing presidentialism in Latin America and to explaining the differences between presidentialism in the United States and in Latin America (see Lambert 1969, 257–363; Pierson and Gil 1957, 208–41; Davis 1958; Fitzgibbon 1951; Christensen 1951, 446–53; Stokes 1959, 385–436; Hambloch 1936; Edelmann 1969a, 406–42). Scholars called attention to the dominance of presidents in the political systems of most Latin American countries and contrasted this tendency with a balance of powers in the United States. Analysts observed that a balance of powers existed in most Latin American constitutions, but that in practice, a system of checks and balances was lacking. Also in contrast with the United States, the legislatures throughout Latin America were generally subservient, although Chile, Costa Rica, and particularly Uruguay were often cited as exceptions to the general pattern.

Out of this focus on differences between presidentialism in Latin America and the United States emerged a concern with explaining why these differences existed. A broad consensus held that constitutional factors helped explain differences in how presidentialism worked but that culture, history, and social structure also mattered. On the constitutional issues, many analyses of the 1940s and 1950s are better than those available today. For example, it was noted that many constitutions permitted the executive branch to introduce bills into congress, and in some countries, only the president could initiate legislation on matters such as the military, civil service, and the budget. In several nations, promulgation of executive-initiated laws was automatic if congress did not reject the measures. Many constitutions enabled presidents to veto specified items of proposed legislation, in contrast with the U.S. Constitution, which allowed presidents to veto only entire bills. Decree-laws enabled Latin American presidents to legislate, a power not held by U.S. presidents. Latin American presidents generally had greater control over the budget than U.S. presidents. They also often had broader powers than U.S. presidents in making appointments. For example, in many countries (the Central American nations, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela), presidents appointed governors, and in several systems, they also appointed supreme court justices. Presidential recourse to declaring a state of siege also gave Latin American presidents an important power that U.S. presidents lack.

The institutionalists of this period have been neglected in recent decades and are sometimes dismissed as stodgy formalists, but it would be unfair to suggest that they looked only at formal institutions. Generally, they argued that the main differences between presidentialism in the United States and in Latin America involved extraconstitutional matters. In one of the most extensive analyses of Latin American presidentialism, Jacques Lambert (1969) argued that underdeveloped countries need rapid, effective processing of decisions and that this approach was possible only with a dominant executive (1969, 257–365). He stated, “In view of the social conditions that prevailed in Latin America in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, an increase in presidential power was certainly needed, and on the whole this regime of presidential dominance seems to have given the best results that could have been expected under difficult circumstances” (Lambert 1969, 271). Lambert also argued that presidentialism serves as a more effective symbol of national unity than parliamentary government: “Since the presidential regime can satisfy the need [for personalization of power], it is preferable to the parliamentary regime. . . . Since the presidential regime embodies national power in one person it may be more effective in transforming scattered allegiances to the nation” (Lambert 1969, 361–62).

A number of U.S. scholars who wrote on presidentialism agreed with Lambert that differences in social structure or culture or both were the main causes of differences between presidentialism in Latin America and in the United States. Some, however, were less sanguine than Lambert about the effects of presidentialism. Harold Davis wrote, “The presidency, more than some other forms of organization of the executive power, may well carry within it the possibility of dictatorship unless limited by a successful division of powers” (Davis 1958, 253). In a comprehensive synthesis of presidential systems outside the United States, Karl Loewenstein argued, “When transplanted to a physical and moral environment less privileged by Providence, the American system of presidential leadership has failed to give what man expects of his state, namely, good government and personal security” (1949, 452). Emile Giraud (1938) believed that American presidentialism was a *sui generis* product unlikely to be reproduced successfully elsewhere, an argument seconded by Carl Friedrich (1967, 15–40).

In retrospect, one of the flaws in most of these earlier analyses of presidentialism was a failure to differentiate sharply between presidentialism in authoritarian polities from those in democracies. Many analyses excluded Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay from their generalizations about weak congresses and dominating presidents (for example, Davis 1962). This exclusion is telling because these three countries had the most democratic traditions in Latin America. Thus the sharpest distinction probably lies between presidentialism in democratic systems and in authoritarian

regimes, rather than between U.S. presidentialism and Latin American presidentialism. Presidents in democracies face a number of similar constraints and opportunities, while presidents in authoritarian regimes function in completely different circumstances. For analysts of presidentialism, it would have been more revealing to compare Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay with the United States rather than comparing them with Latin American countries under authoritarian rule, or even with new democracies whose procedures were not yet institutionalized.

This observation is not meant to suggest that presidentialism in Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay⁷ was the same as in the United States but rather to argue that the more meaningful difference (authoritarian versus democratic context) may have been misperceived as a result of attempts to write about Latin America as a whole. This point is important because it can suggest conclusions that differ markedly from those drawn by most analysts. Focusing on the subset of Latin American democracies might have led observers to question how strong their presidents really were. My own view is that under democratic conditions, most Latin American presidents have had trouble accomplishing their agendas. They have held most of the power for initiating policy but have found it hard to get support for implementing policy. If my analysis is correct, it points to a significant weakness in democratic presidencies. Robert Dix has made a similar point, characterizing the Colombian presidency as “dominant in comparison to other institutions of government, yet traditionally weak in its ability to effect policy and carry out its decisions” (Dix 1977, 72). This weakness of presidential democracies explains in part the ubiquitous arguments regarding the supposed efficacy of authoritarian regimes. The combination of limited powers, personalized authority, and plebiscitarian rule is often inimical to democratic stability (see Linz n.d.).

Within Latin America, the earlier debate about presidentialism involved three kinds of analyses: social science or history approaches, juridical studies, and polemical criticisms or defenses. Social science and historical analyses were the least salient among them. Generally speaking, social scientists and historians focused more on the actions and accomplishments of individual presidents than on presidentialism as an institution. Among the best works in this category was that of João Camilo de Oliveira Torres (1962), which provided a detailed analysis of changes within Brazilian presidentialism during the Old Republic (1889–1930).

Jurists were more active than social scientists in studying presidentialism largely because legal studies were more prevalent than advanced work in the social sciences. Many Latin American jurists of this time had received broad educations, and the best of them illuminated interesting issues. Reale (1959), Trigueiro (1953), and Trigueiro (1959) are still among the best studies of the Brazilian presidency. Miguel Reale argued that the combination of proportional representation and presidentialism created

impasses in the political system. Osvaldo Trigueiro (1953, 1959) countered the conventional wisdom of his time by arguing against the notion of an omnipotent executive, comparing the role of presidents in Brazil and the United States and observing that presidents frequently had difficulty in realizing their agendas. Many other juridical studies of this earlier period, however, are merely descriptive and less interesting to contemporary social scientists.

Much Latin American writing on presidentialism was polemical, largely in response to debates about political reforms. This period witnessed some innovations in Latin American constitution making. Several countries modified their presidential systems by introducing secondary features of parliamentary regimes. After Chile's semiparliamentary system ended in 1925, Uruguay's collegial executive was the most extensive departure from classical presidentialism until Brazil's semipresidential experience of 1961–1963, but new constitutions in Cuba (1940), Guatemala (1945), and Venezuela (1947) also modified presidential rule (Stokes 1949, 1951).

These experiments gave rise to many works that strongly advocated or trenchantly criticized presidentialism as a form of government. In Chile Arturo Alessandri (1930) led the criticisms of parliamentary government in the aftermath of the demise of the semipresidential experience of 1891–1924. In Brazil the leading critics of parliamentary government in the Old Republic (1889–1930) included Joaquim Francisco de Assis Brasil (1934), Aurelino Leal (n.d.), Manuel Ferraz de Campos Sales (1983), and Torres (1933); Levi Carneiro (1965) criticized it after the semipresidential experience of 1961–1963. Typifying the vitriolic critics of parliamentary government, Torres wrote, "The parliamentary regime is a permanent system of rivalries and antagonisms. . . . It is the antithesis of organization and of strong, conscientious government. . . . It is the regime of dispersion, vacillation, and permanent crisis" (Torres 1933, 378–79). Moitinho Doria (1934) made no effort to hide the fact that his predilection for presidentialism was linked to authoritarian proclivities.

Others excoriated presidentialism and called for parliamentary government. In Cuba José Manuel Cortina (1931) was the most prominent voice, and in Venezuela, Laureano Vallenilla Lanz (1961) coined the felicitous phrase "democratic Caesarism." During the Old Republic in Brazil, several known political figures ardently defended parliamentary government and attacked the presidential system (Jacques 1982; Albuquerque 1914; Medeiros 1933; Medeiros 1987; and Romero 1979). Sylvio Romero's letters to Ruy Barbosa (originally written in 1893 and republished in 1979) argued that presidentialism encouraged militarism, represented a form of dictatorship, lacked the flexibility needed for modern democracy, encouraged irresponsibility, weakened the legislature, made it easy for mediocre individuals to come to power, and encouraged corruption and despotism.

José Augusto Bezerra de Medeiros affirmed that "Our presidentialism has degenerated into a personal government of the president, a dictatorship of the head of state" (1987, 37).

In Brazil more than in any other Latin American country, debates about the virtues and defects of presidentialism and parliamentarism have recurred throughout the last century. Analysts still debate about whether the last decades of the Empire (1822 to 1889) should be considered a parliamentary regime. During the democratic interregnum of 1946–1964, several attempts were made to introduce parliamentary government in Brazil. They have been analyzed by Vamireh Chacon (1981) and Hindemburgo Pereira Diniz (1984), who argued in favor of the superiority of parliamentary government. Well-known Brazilian politicians argued that presidentialism contributed to democratic instability (see Lima 1954, 53–72; and Pilla 1946). Even recently, heated debates in the 1987–88 constitutional congress revived discussion about the comparative merits of the two systems of government.

PRESIDENTIALISM AND STABLE DEMOCRACY: RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS

The social sciences expanded in the 1960s in Latin America, but the new generation of social scientists did not focus much on institutional problems. From the second half of the 1960s until the end of the 1970s, paradigms viewing politics more as a dependent than as an independent variable reigned supreme. Social scientists focused mostly on how political life was shaped by social and economic factors. Prospects for development and democracy were perceived as fundamentally determined by macro-structural questions rather than by the nature of political institutions. In the United States, the ascendancy of modernization analysis and later of dependency analysis among Latin Americanists led to similar results. The balance sheet for this period is mixed. Latin Americans and Latin Americanists innovated in many areas and contributed to a general understanding of important problems; on the negative side, there was a common tendency to neglect institutions and the way they shape political and economic life.⁸ This situation began to change in the late 1970s, when processes of political liberalization and democratization, plus a renewed commitment to democracy among intellectuals, revived interest in political institutions. In this context of renewed concern with political institutions combined with old frustration with the problems of such institutions in Latin America, a new debate about presidentialism has begun to emerge. The central question in this debate is how well presidentialism serves democratic stability.

Juan Linz (n.d.) addresses this question at length and argues that parliamentary systems are more conducive to stable democracy than presidential systems. He begins by insisting that he is employing ideal

types of parliamentary and presidential systems. This point is important not only because of the wide variety of the two systems of government but also because some countries have hybrid forms (Duverger 1980). Also, many countries incorporate some but not all of the features usually associated with presidentialism or parliamentarism.

Because presidents and legislatures are elected independently, presidential systems afford two competing claims to legitimacy, one by the president and the other by congress. Conflict between the two branches of government over who should be allowed to do what can lead to escalating hostilities. Parliamentary regimes allow only one such claim because prime ministers have no electoral base independent of the legislature.

Unlike parliamentary regimes, presidential regimes have fixed timetables; presidents are elected for a specific amount of time. This arrangement has disadvantages for both presidents who do accomplish their agendas and those who do not. Most Latin American constitutions prohibit immediate reelection of incumbent presidents. Consequently, good presidents are turned out of office even if the general population, political elites and parties, and other major actors continue to support them. Presidential systems almost always have constitutional provisions for impeachment, but they are less flexible in crisis situations because any attempt to depose the president easily shakes the regime. When a president is enormously unpopular in the society at large and has lost most support in the legislature, no neat mechanisms exist for replacing the chief executive. The president may be incapable of pursuing a coherent course of action because of congressional opposition, but no other actor can resolve the problem within the democratic rules of the game. Consequently, in many cases, a coup appears to be the only means of getting rid of an incompetent or unpopular president.

Linz argues that presidentialism induces a winner-takes-all approach to politics because electoral victory confers absolute control of executive power for a set period of time. With some exceptions like Colombia from 1958 to 1974 (see Hartlyn 1988), presidential systems do not institutionalize alliances, pacts, and consociational arrangements to the same extent as parliamentary systems. Executive power is not formed through postelection agreements among the parties and is not divided among several parties, as occurs in many parliamentary systems. Although members of several parties often participate in cabinets, the parties are not responsible for the government. Presidents who are elected by popular vote thus enjoy an independence from political parties that is unknown in parliamentary regimes. This situation, however, can encourage antagonistic relations between the president and congress rather than the moderation that is conducive to stable democracy.

One advantage claimed for presidential systems is their higher degree of stability. Linz notes, however, that this issue is not as clear as

many authors have suggested. It is necessary to distinguish between cabinet stability and regime stability.⁹ Parliamentary systems have mechanisms that may lead to relatively frequent changes in cabinets and governments, but this flexibility in changing governments may help preserve the overall stability of the regime. Conversely, the fixed timetable of presidential regimes apparently ensures cabinet and governmental stability but in practice has introduced a rigidity that is inimical to regime stability. Although Linz's paper has not been published in English, it has circulated widely and has had considerable impact (for example, see Smulovitz 1988).

Blondel and Suárez (1981) and Suárez (1982) came to roughly similar conclusions. These authors discuss five major institutional limitations of presidentialism. First, the rigid time schedule imposed by the presidential regime leads to difficulties in removing an unpopular president, and the common clauses prohibiting reelection make it impossible for good leaders to remain in office. Second, presidentialism gives greater possibilities to individuals with no ministerial experience and reinforces personalism at the expense of institution building. Third, presidents are more autonomous than prime ministers with respect to political parties. Fourth, in contrast with parliamentary systems, presidential systems lack institutionalized mechanisms for securing a majority in the legislature. Finally, while presidents are held responsible for a wide range of functions, their powers are strictly limited, and as a result, they may not be able to achieve what they set out to do.

Fred Riggs (1988) has also argued that presidentialism tends to hinder the emergence of stable democracy. The corpus of his article examines why democracy has nevertheless thrived in the United States. Taking the well-known theme of American exceptionalism in a new direction, Riggs argues that a number of "para-constitutional" factors make American democracy and presidentialism a *sui generis* phenomenon that is difficult to reproduce elsewhere. He finds several such factors to be necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the stability of presidential democracies. For example, the two-party system has helped encourage moderation, which is essential in a presidential system. Party indiscipline has facilitated agreements between congress and the president. Also, the system has exhibited low responsiveness to popular demands. Riggs argues that "one price for the survival of a presidential system may be the barriers it puts in the way of popular participation in elections" (1988, 267).

A few of Riggs's provocative arguments are inconclusive. For example, he argues that stable presidential democracies require malleable parties, but Venezuela offers a counterexample of a consolidated presidential democracy with highly disciplined and cohesive parties. Although this qualification has limited impact on Riggs's argument, many features that

he indicates as having helped American presidential democracy to survive have also existed in Latin American countries where presidential democracy has faltered. For instance, Brazilian catch-all parties make U.S. political parties appear to be paragons of well-disciplined, cohesive parties, but this malleability has not helped foster stable democracy in Brazil. Presidentialism in much of Latin America has coexisted with polities generally unresponsive to popular demands, but this unresponsiveness has not encouraged democratic stability. I concur with Riggs's observation that a two-party system increases the likelihood that a presidential democracy will survive, a point that will be discussed further.

In a paper with insights that go beyond the Chilean case, Arturo Valenzuela has argued that a parliamentary system would enhance prospects for democracy in Chile (1985, 29–34). Valenzuela notes how difficult it was for democratically elected presidents in Chile to govern effectively in the context of a fractionalized party system.¹⁰ Chilean Presidents consistently faced a majority opposition in both houses of congress, which made it difficult for them to accomplish their agendas.

Notwithstanding these valuable recent contributions, the literature on the ways in which presidentialism affects prospects for democracy remains anemic. Several subthemes are important in this regard.

The general belief that presidentialism affords stronger executive power than parliamentary systems is questionable. Presidentialism rests on a balance and separation of powers, but this balance often gives rise to immobilism. Samuel Huntington pointed out that most Americans prefer dispersion of power to concentration of power, but that in underdeveloped countries, some concentration is necessary for effective policy coordination and implementation (Huntington 1968, 1–32, 93–139). In presidential systems, it is difficult to attain concentration of powers while preserving democracy. Richard Rose (1981) argues that even in the more auspicious U.S. context, presidentialism has not fostered effective policy implementation in recent decades, in part because the balance of powers has led to immobilism. This outcome has been a recurring problem in Latin America. Michael Coppedge (1988) has argued that even Venezuela, which politically and economically has fared better than most of Latin America, has experienced frequent periods of immobilism.

Effective executive power is almost indispensable if democracy is to thrive, yet the history of presidential democracies in Latin America has often been one of immobilized executives. Immobilism in turn has often contributed to democratic breakdown. Many scholars have insisted on the importance of strengthening congresses in order to bolster democracy in Latin America, but it may be even more important to create effective executives—a point that has received little attention. Unfortunately, in presidential systems, especially those with fragmented party systems, strengthening congress can exacerbate executive immobilism.

But the combination of presidentialism and a fractionalized multi-party system seems especially inimical to stable democracy. Considerable empirical evidence supports this argument. The world has had relatively few presidential democracies that have endured for twenty-five years or more consecutively: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the United States, Uruguay, and Venezuela.¹¹ Two of these six countries (Colombia and the United States) have consistently had two-party systems. Costa Rica has generally had a dominant-party system or a two-party system but on occasion has had three relevant parties. In Venezuela the two major parties have dominated electoral competition since 1973, and the system has worked essentially along two-party lines. Uruguay had a dominant-party system or a two-party system for most of its democratic history, although it has moved to a three-party (or two-and-one half party) format since the early 1970s. Chile is the only case in the world of a multiparty presidential democracy that endured for twenty-five years or more. The rarity of stable presidential multiparty democracy has generally gone unobserved.

The combination of a fractionalized party system and presidentialism is inconducive to democratic stability because it easily creates difficulties in the relationship between the president and the congress. To be effective, governments must be able to push through policy measures, which is difficult to do when the executive faces a sizable majority opposition in the legislature. Parliamentary systems have institutionalized means of resolving this problem: in most cases, the prime minister can call parliamentary elections, and in all cases, the parliament can topple the government. Minority governments do exist in parliamentary systems, but in most countries, they are the exception and are generally not intended to last for a long time (Herman and Pope 1973; Lijphart 1984, 60–66). Presidential systems contain no institutionalized mechanisms for dealing with this situation, and conflict between the executive and the legislature is frequent when different parties control the two branches. A prolonged impasse can result that can have potentially damaging consequences for democratic stability. Kenneth Mijeski (1977) noted the bitter fighting that has characterized disputes between Costa Rican presidents who face an opposition majority and the congress there (1977, 64); Jorge Núñez (1985) and Humberto Nogueira Alcalá (1985) have made similar arguments. The likelihood of such a situation developing is especially high in a multiparty polity.

To avoid this kind of impasse, a president can pursue one of several options, none of which augur particularly well for democratic stability. First, the president can attempt to bypass congress, but this course of action can undermine democracy. Opposition parties may claim that the president is violating the constitution and invite military intervention. In Colombia presidents have frequently declared a state of siege as a means

of governing without checks and balances. Second, the president can seek constitutional reforms in order to obtain broader powers. Frustrated by the difficulties of getting measures through congress, every Chilean president from Jorge Alessandri to Salvador Allende attempted either to bypass congress or to reform the constitution in order to broaden executive power. President Eduardo Frei (1964–1970) ultimately succeeded in the latter course, but as Arturo Valenzuela and Alexander Wilde (1979) have noted, the cost was very high: the erosion of spaces of negotiation and compromise. Similar problems of immobilism led to constitutional reforms broadening presidential powers in Colombia in 1968 and in Uruguay in 1967. Third, the president can attempt to form a coalition government. Coalition or consociational government is possible in presidential regimes, as the Colombian experience indicates (Hartlyn 1988), but it is considerably more difficult than in parliamentary regimes. Parliamentary regimes require party coalitions for creating governments when no single party obtains a majority, which means most of the time in most parliamentary systems. Presidential systems rarely include such institutionalized mechanisms for establishing coalition rule.

When presidents are incapable of pushing critical legislation through congress, they often create new state agencies as a means of enhancing their power and accomplishing their agendas. This approach explains part of the endemic expansion of the state apparatus and the tendency to pursue policy through state bureaucracies rather than through congress. Circumventing congress can lead to a vicious cycle: expansion of the state apparatus, even if it means duplication of tasks; congressional resentment at being bypassed, leading to further congressional tendency to impose vetoes; and the encouragement of irresponsible behavior and clientelism on the part of politicians who have no opportunity to play a major role in the polity. Finally, the president can attempt to buy the support of individual politicians from opposition parties, but this option exists only if the parties are malleable. In this case, even if the president manages to obtain a temporary majority, the effects on institution building, public morality, and legitimacy can be pernicious. This approach to working out presidential-congressional relations has prevailed in Brazil since 1985, but the egregious corruption and plundering of the state apparatus associated with this practice have taken a high toll.

Scholars have debated whether the number of parties in the party system affects democratic stability (Sartori 1976; Taylor and Herman 1971; Lijphart 1984, 106–26; Mayer 1980; Laakso and Taagepera 1979). One reason for the inconclusive results has been that it matters whether analysts are talking about a multiparty presidential system or a multiparty parliamentary system, a distinction that has been consistently overlooked. The fact that parties must agree to form a government gives

parliamentary systems an institutionalized mechanism for dealing with a large number of parties, a mechanism lacking in presidential systems. This observation does not imply that a stable multiparty presidential democracy is impossible, but it certainly is more difficult than a two-party presidential democracy or a multiparty parliamentary system.

If this argument is correct, presidential systems face a serious (and once again, unstudied) dilemma: whether presidential elections should involve a simple or an absolute majority. Current wisdom in some Latin American countries favors the latter. The argument is that where presidents are narrowly elected with a simple majority, their claim to representing the nation may be tenuous, a situation that can undermine legitimacy. Nevertheless, the costs of having a second round of elections to establish an absolute majority may outweigh the benefits because it might encourage fragmentation of the party system. Stephen Wright and William Riker (1988) have shown that in U.S. primaries, absolute majority systems with a second round encourage an increase in the number of candidates, and Maurice Duverger argued earlier that systems with a second round generally favor multipartism (1954, 239–45). In many Latin American countries, then, a second round is likely to encourage more candidates to run for president and consequently may foster fractionalization of the party system, with the deleterious implications noted above.

Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos has sided with those who maintain that the number of parties is irrelevant in determining prospects for democracy (1987, 62–77), but like most scholars, he failed to distinguish between presidential and parliamentary systems. In another recent work, Santos (1986) provides insights into how difficult the combination of a presidential system and a highly fractionalized party system actually is. He explains the 1964 democratic breakdown in Brazil as resulting primarily from a decision-making paralysis. Neither the congress nor the president could accomplish their agenda, but both could—and did—block the other from acting. Santos attempts to explain the decision-making paralysis in terms similar to Giovanni Sartori's (1976) notion of a polarized pluralistic party system. I have doubts about this explanation in the Brazilian case because a major antisystem party is a central feature of polarized pluralism. While Santos classifies the populist Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro as a leftist party, in my view, it was a center-left party and certainly not antisystem. His rich data support an alternative argument, however: in the context of a presidential regime, a fractionalized party system made it very difficult to process decisions, ultimately resulting in the decision paralysis that led to regime breakdown.

In the past, the debate about the desideratum of presidentialism and parliamentarism was relatively evenly divided between advocates and critics of both systems of government. In the recent academic debate,

few intellectuals have argued for the superiority of presidentialism (an exception is Abranches n.d.). Nevertheless, presidentialism has not been seriously debated in political circles, except in Brazil, where a semiparliamentary proposal was considered during the 1987–88 constitutional congress. In most recent transitions to democracy, little institutional innovation has occurred, perhaps in part reflecting the poverty of thinking about political institutions in the past few decades.

A RESEARCH AGENDA ON PRESIDENTIALISM

Beyond several rather obvious and sometimes misleading generalizations, we know surprisingly little about the nature of the presidency in Latin America. What are the reaches and limits of presidential power in the democratic systems? As noted above, the common tendency to characterize Latin American presidents as all-powerful is misleading. Other actors in the system may lack the power to accomplish their agendas and may be overshadowed by presidents, but this situation does not mean that presidents are omnipotent. Hambloch's title, *His Majesty, The President of Brazil* (1936) amuses, captures common perceptions, and accurately characterizes the presidency in many authoritarian situations, but it does not apply to Latin American democracies.

Particularly in regard to policy implementation, the weaknesses of Latin America's democratic presidents eclipse their strengths, but in some ways, executives have broad powers. Latin American presidents have devised countless means of partially circumventing legislative vetoes and counteracting immobilism. Their constitutional authority in legislating, appointing officials, and enacting emergency measures generally exceeds that of U.S. presidents. Immobilism may not have caused concentration of power in the executive, but it has encouraged presidents to attempt to expand their powers and weaken the legislative and judicial branches.

Any attempt to specify the reaches and limits of presidential powers necessarily involves relational analyses, for power is relational. Most important is analysis of the relationships among the presidency, the bureaucracy, and congress. Who is responsible for most of the important legislation? How easy or difficult is it for the president to accomplish his or her agenda? Where are the major decisions in the political system made?

Another fertile area for research is comparative presidentialism, especially among Latin American democracies. In recent years, studies of parties and party systems have insisted on the need for more careful distinctions among the Latin American countries (De Riz 1986; Mainwaring 1988). Comparative studies of presidentialism would almost certainly yield similar results, but so far, analyses have been mostly limited to broad generalizations about the nature of presidentialism throughout the

region. Dix (1977) offers some preliminary indications, arguing that the Colombian presidency has been more limited and has faced more constraints than the presidency in any other country in Latin America. Hughes and Mijeski (1973) compared legislative-executive relations in Chile and Costa Rica.

Diachronic analysis of changes would also enrich general understanding of the presidency. It is most meaningful to focus on changes within the context of democratic governments because it is rather obvious that the nature of the presidency changes considerably when a democratic government is replaced by an authoritarian one, or vice versa. One intriguing question is whether executives have become more powerful over time. Rose (1981) argued that presidential responsibilities have grown dramatically in the United States but that presidential capabilities have not. In the 1980s, this argument applies even more to Latin America than to the United States. Catherine Conaghan (1988) argues that the horrendous economic crises of the 1980s have favored technocratic decision making in the executive branch and have been unpropitious for strengthening legislatures as arenas of decision making. It is nevertheless possible that executives may be weaker than ever in implementing policy and undertaking major reforms.

We also need studies on how presidentialism has affected parties and party systems in Latin America. Presidentialism has a strong impact on party development for several reasons. Generally speaking, parliamentary systems offer stronger incentives for party cohesion. In a parliamentary system, members of parliament have a strong disincentive to vote against the party line because doing so can bring down their own government. Presidential systems offer no such incentives for party cohesion, even though electoral or party legislation may compensate with other mechanisms (such as absolute party control over candidate selection and the order of the ticket).¹² This view of the relationship between presidentialism and party cohesion is supported by comparative studies of the United States versus Canada and some European countries (Epstein 1964; Epstein 1986, 79–122). Yet this important theme has been neglected in studies of parties and of presidentialism.

Presidentialism also affects party building because it encourages greater personalism in politics than a parliamentary system. Prime ministers are directly tied to their parties; not being elected by popular vote, they necessarily have had lengthy party careers that have culminated in their selection as party leaders. Thus prime ministers have a strong stake in party building. Because presidents are elected by direct popular vote, they are not always deeply concerned about party building; they frequently have had limited experience as congressional representatives and as party leaders (Rose 1981). Depending on the candidate selection process,¹³ presidents can even be elected despite the opposition of most

party professionals. In extreme cases, which have been all too common in Latin America, elected presidents may even work actively at undermining parties, as did Juan Perón. The fact that the president is elected by popular vote may increase the likelihood of demagoguery and pure politicking in campaigns. And because presidents have a direct popular mandate, they can appeal over congress to the electorate to pressure congress into compliance. Such an approach, however, easily leads to politics of outbidding and immoderation that do not favor democratic stability. Consequently, this kind of personalism in politics is inimical not only to institution building but also to democracy.

Focusing on Venezuela, Coppedge (1988) has examined in detail the impacts of the combination of presidentialism and what he calls "partyarchy," that is, extreme domination by parties of the political system. He underscores the tendency toward immobilism and ongoing stalemates that result from this combination. The clause prohibiting immediate reelection of presidents creates divisive power struggles in a governing party, isolating and enervating the executive and thereby further exacerbating the tendency toward immobilism.

Not everyone agrees that presidentialism is less conducive to party building than parliamentary systems. Duverger (1984) argued that the introduction of a presidential election in France in 1962 helped foster party development. But he did not generalize beyond the French case, which has limited relevance for Latin America because of the hybrid French executive and because the early years of party development took place under a parliamentary system.

Until recently, most presidential systems were notably more personalistic than parliamentary systems in that the personality of the candidates for the chief executive was generally more important. Personalism in presidential and parliamentary systems alike has grown in recent years because of the rapid expansion of the electronic media. Television has made it possible for candidates to appeal directly to voters and has thus displaced one important function of political parties in the early twentieth century, when parties served as the means of introducing candidates and forwarding issues and images to the electorate. The issue of how television has transformed the presidency and parties is a fascinating but underexplored subject in the Latin American context.

The winner-takes-all nature of most presidential systems offers some incentive for the emergence of two major party coalitions in the political system. Many scholars have argued that proportional representation is conducive to the formation of multiparty systems (Duverger 1954; Lijphart 1988; Rae 1967; Riker 1986; Sartori 1986), and in Europe, only Austria has been an exception to this rule.¹⁴ The Latin American experience, however, suggests the need to qualify this argument. Four of the five countries that have enjoyed stable democracy (Colombia, Costa

Rica, Uruguay, and Venezuela) have had either two-party systems or formats approaching a two-party system, despite having proportional representation. Presidentialism is at least partially responsible for this combination of proportional representation and two-party systems.¹⁵ Shugart (1988) has demonstrated that in this regard, the timing of congressional and presidential elections is decisive. Where presidential and congressional elections are concurrent, a party system with two major parties usually emerges, even with proportional representation. Where these elections do not coincide, proportional representation generally encourages the formation of a multiparty system.

Finally, one of the great challenges in studies of Latin American politics is likely to be combining institutional issues and patterns of domination. All too frequently, analysts of institutions forget that politics always implies patterns of domination. Institutional arrangements and formal rules have major consequences in determining who wins what. For this reason, rules and formal arrangements often become a battleground on which various actors attempt to further their own interests.¹⁶

In the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists studied patterns of domination in a multiplicity of ways but generally failed to analyze the role of institutions in expressing patterns of domination. Today, we may run the opposite risk of accepting an institutionalism that overlooks domination.¹⁷ This point is relevant to the subject at hand because presidentialism may be more prone to sustaining highly inegalitarian patterns of development than parliamentary systems are. Riggs (1988) has argued that to attain stability, presidential democracies probably require more exclusionary politics than parliamentary democracies. His argument is by no means conclusive, but it does suggest an intriguing area for further research.

NOTES

1. For similar definitions, see Linz (n.d.); Lijphart (1984, 68–74); and Riggs (1988). Presidential systems are characterized in less parsimonious ways by Duchacek (1973, 186–91) and Verney (1959, 39–56).
2. Lijphart argues that in a pure parliamentary system, the executive is both selected by the legislature and dependent on its confidence (1984, 68–74). The Swiss system meets the first criterion but not the second.
3. Finland also has an electoral college for presidential elections, but its system of government is not presidential.
4. Suleiman (1981) considers the French system presidential, but other scholars view it as a hybrid or alternating system of government.
5. Many scholars consider these two exceptions as parliamentary systems, but I think they are more properly regarded as semipresidential. In both cases, presidents retained broad powers, and there was no constitutional provision allowing the chief executive to dissolve the legislature, as is found in most parliamentary systems.
6. Stokes correctly observed a distinction that his earlier works (1949, 1951) had neglected: “When Latin Americans use the term ‘parliamentary’ or ‘semi-parliamentary’ government, they do not mean the classic system of Great Britain or even the French

- model. No Latin American country has ever had a system in which the chief executive was selected by the legislature and held responsible to the legislature" (Stokes 1959, 422). Because one of the necessary characteristics of a parliamentary system is that the chief executive be selected by and held responsible to the legislature, the implication is that no Latin American country has ever had parliamentary government.
7. Uruguay was a special case because of the deviations from classical presidentialism. Some scholars have argued that Uruguay did not have a presidential system between 1919 and 1933 and from 1951 to 1966 because there was a plural executive. On the latter period, see Edelman (1969b). González (1988) disagrees, maintaining that it was a modified presidential system, an argument I find persuasive.
 8. There were exceptions to this generalization. Analyses of Venezuelan politics have generally been more attuned to institutional issues than those of other countries.
 9. Powell fails to make this distinction and concludes that "presidential systems are designed to produce executive stability, and they do so" (1982, 63). His book indicates nonetheless that only three presidential democracies (Costa Rica, the United States, and Venezuela) did not experience a breakdown between 1958 and 1976. His spurious conclusion is based on the few cases of presidential democracies, not on presidential systems. Only in exceptional cases have presidents been displaced from office before the end of their terms without a regime breakdown. Thus if we consider only the stable democracies, the higher stability of presidents is not surprising. Elsewhere, Powell suggestively notes that even among the democracies, presidential systems encourage weak parties, are more prone than parliamentary systems to minority governments, and have more difficulties getting executive programs passed in the legislature (Powell 1982, 151–53).
 10. Rae (1967) developed this notion of a fractionalized party system. A high index of fractionalization means that congressional seats or popular votes or both are widely dispersed among several parties.
 11. Colombia might be excluded from the group of long-standing democracies on the grounds that no real competition for executive power took place between 1958 and 1974. Whether Colombia is included or excluded has no bearing on my main argument here. Similarly, Uruguay might be excluded from the set of established presidential democracies because of its collegial executive. The exclusion of Uruguay likewise does not affect my argument, except to reinforce the point about the difficulty of establishing stable presidential democracy.
 12. Where parties have absolute control over which candidates fill a given allotment of seats, congressional representatives have compelling reasons for obeying party mandates: keeping their jobs and winning access to further ascension. See Coppedge (1988, chap. 2).
 13. Ceaser (1979) demonstrated how significant the process of presidential candidate selection is for political parties. He argued that opening the selection process to the broad public has undermined the strength of U.S. parties, with pernicious consequences for system responsibility. His book is essential reading for those who prescribe primaries as a solution to the oligarchical tendencies of political parties.
 14. A low district magnitude and restrictions on minor party participation contributed to Austrian exceptionalism.
 15. In Colombia consociational arrangements that parceled out congressional seats to the two dominant parties have also contributed to limiting the number of relevant parties.
 16. This theme has been developed by a number of analysts working on U.S. politics. Among many examples, see Shefter (1978).
 17. Conservatives have often shown awareness of the importance of institutions in creating patterns of domination. As Ruy Barbosa's comment at the beginning of this essay suggests, it is no accident that Latin American conservatives have generally preferred presidential systems. Barbosa had previously been an influential proponent of presidentialism but became disillusioned with its consequences.

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