



# What do we know about semi-presidentialism?

**Robert Elgie**  
**Dublin City University**

# What do we know about semi-presidentialism?

The aim of this talk is to review what we know about semi-presidentialism

- We know what semi-presidentialism is
- We know the effect of semi-presidentialism is not unidirectional
- We know the effect of direct presidential elections depends on the interaction of variation in presidential power and party politics

# What is semi-presidentialism?

The adjective 'semi-presidential' has been used since the 1910s

The concept of 'semi-presidentialism' was first coined in 1970 by Maurice Duverger

The term was popularized by Duverger's 1980 article in EJPR

The study of semi-presidentialism began in earnest in the early 1990s

# What is semi-presidentialism?

Duverger's (1980) definition generated a controversy

[a] political regime is considered as semi-presidential if the constitution which established it combines three elements: (1) the president of the republic is elected by universal suffrage; (2) he possesses quite considerable powers; (3) he has opposite him, however, a prime minister and ministers who possess executive and governmental power and can stay in office only if the parliament does not show its opposition to them (p. 166)

# What is semi-presidentialism?

Duverger's (1980) definition includes an ambiguous clause

[a] political regime is considered as semi-presidential if the constitution which established it combines three elements: (1) the president of the republic is elected by universal suffrage; (2) he possesses quite considerable powers; (3) he has opposite him, however, a prime minister and ministers who possess executive and governmental power and can stay in office only if the parliament does not show its opposition to them (p. 166)

This generated different lists of semi-presidential countries and created endogeneity problems in comparative studies

# What is semi-presidentialism?

The solution was to adopt a purely taxonomic classification

A country is semi-presidential when the constitution makes provision for both a directly elected fixed-term president and a prime minister and cabinet who are collectively responsible to the legislature (Elgie 1999: 13)

The advantage is that countries can be classified unambiguously on the basis of clear classification rules and publicly available information

This definition has now been adopted by “the majority” of scholars (Schleiter and Morgan-Jones 2009a: 874)



# What is semi-presidentialism?

The consequence of defining semi-presidentialism in this way is that semi-presidentialism should not be operationalized as a single explanatory variable in empirical studies

The post-Duvergerian definition includes a very varied set of semi-presidential countries, ranging from Slovenia to Russia

So, we should not ask the question 'what is the effect of semi-presidentialism?' because its effect is not unidirectional

We need to identify variation within the set of semi-presidential countries and explore the effects of such variation

# What is semi-presidentialism?

However, this generates a second controversy

How can we best capture the variation within the set of semi-presidential countries?

Typically, scholars wish to distinguish within the set of semi-presidential countries on the basis of the relative power of the president from one country to another

There are two basic options



# What is semi-presidentialism?

However, this generates a second controversy

The first option is to employ another constitutional classification rule that generates a basic strong vs weak president dichotomy

Shugart (2005: 333)

Under premier-presidentialism, the prime minister and cabinet are exclusively accountable to the assembly majority - Romania

Under president-parliamentarism, the prime minister and cabinet are dually accountable to both the president and the assembly majority - Russia

# What is semi-presidentialism?

However, this generates a second controversy

The first option is to employ another constitutional classification rule that generates a basic strong vs weak president dichotomy

Shugart (2005: 333)

The advantage is that we can unambiguously identify presidential, parliamentary, president-parliamentary, and premier-presidential countries

The disadvantage is that there is still variation within both president-parliamentary and premier-presidential countries

# What is semi-presidentialism?

However, this generates a second controversy

The second option is to generate a metric of presidential power  
e.g. Doyle and Elgie (2015)

This leads to a scale of presidential power from 0 (weak) – 1  
(strong)

e.g. Ireland = 0.1, Slovenia = 0.15, Poland = 0.27, Romania 0.28,  
Lithuania = 0.31, Ukraine = 0.46, Russia = 0.58, Belarus = 0.63

## Semi-presidential studies

So, with a post-Duvergerian definition we can identify a set of semi-presidential countries and we have ways of identifying variation in presidential power within that set of countries

The study of semi-presidentialism has been applied both to the study of democratization and to consolidated democracies

# Semi-presidentialism and democratization

In the 1990s there was a long and largely fruitless debate about the effect of semi-presidentialism on democracy

This debate was based either on studies of single countries from which it was difficult to generalize, or on comparative studies that operationalized semi-presidentialism as a discrete explanatory variable, i.e. studies that assumed the effect of semi-presidentialism was unidirectional and that were problematic for that reason

# Semi-presidentialism and democratization

In the 2000s there were more large-n comparative studies comparing the effect of presidentialism, semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism on democracy

Most of these studies still assumed semi-presidentialism was a discrete variable

In addition, the results of these studies are very sensitive to case selection, time periods, control variables, and method of estimation



# Semi-presidentialism and democratization

More recently, the debate has turned to the impact of strong presidents on democratization

These studies compare the impact of president-parliamentary vs. premier-presidential forms of semi-presidentialism

They confirm that president-parliamentarism is a more dangerous form of semi-presidentialism for democracy than premier-presidentialism, but more studies are needed

There are no studies comparing presidentialism, president-parliamentarism, premier-presidentialism and parliamentarism

# Semi-presidentialism and democratization

So, I conclude that we know much less about the effect of semi-presidentialism and democratization than most people claim

We can perhaps say some things about the effect of semi-presidentialism in individual countries

We can say much less about the general effects of semi-presidentialism

We need work that examines the effect of presidential power rather than regime type

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

In addition to work on semi-presidentialism and democratization, there has been work on semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

I am going to look at:

- The effect of direct election
- The effect of variation in presidential power
- The effect of cohabitation and minority government

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?  
i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism?

Samuels and Shugart (2010) – Yes

“to the extent that the constitutional structure separates executive and legislative origin and/or survival, parties will tend to be presidentialized” (p. 37)

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?  
i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism?

Samuels and Shugart (2010) – Yes

**Political outsiders**

**Political outsiders are less likely to hold office under parliamentarism than under semi-presidentialism**

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?  
i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism?

Samuels and Shugart (2010) – Yes

## Changes in PMs

In pure parliamentary systems “about three in ten changes in prime minister result from purely *intraparty* politics”

A similar finding occurs under semi-presidentialism, but here presidents also have influence over prime ministerial appointments and dismissals, again indicating the presidential ‘contamination’ of intra-party relations under this system



# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?  
i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism?

Samuels and Shugart (2010) – Yes

## Policy switching

There is greater switching, or more violations of mandate representation, “as we move away from the ideal-typical parliamentary chain of delegation” (p. 221)

# **Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies**

**1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?  
i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and  
parliamentarism?**

**Tavits (2009) – No**

**She takes a sample of European parliamentary democracies  
and semi-presidential democracies with weak presidents**

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) Do direct presidential elections make a difference?

i.e. is there a difference between semi-presidentialism and parliamentarism?

Tavits (2009) – No

- Quantitatively, she shows that direct elections make no difference to the level of presidential activism
- Qualitatively, she shows that presidents in some parliamentary systems, e.g. Hungary, have more power than presidents in some semi-presidential systems, e.g. Ireland
- Qualitatively, she shows that presidential activism varies over time within countries, even though the method of election stays the same

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) So, do direct presidential elections make a difference?

- Direct elections make a taxonomic difference but not necessarily an empirical difference

Post-Duvergerian scholars make no assumption that direct election necessarily makes an empirical difference

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) So, do direct presidential elections make a difference?

- Direct elections make a taxonomic difference but not necessarily an empirical difference
- Tavits' work is skewed by her case selection

If she had considered the full set of premier-presidential countries, i.e. if she had included countries with stronger presidents, such as France and Romania, then she may have found that direct election was a significant predictor of presidential activism

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

1.) So, do direct presidential elections make a difference?

- Direct elections make a taxonomic difference but not necessarily an empirical difference
- Tavits' work is skewed by her case selection
- What matters is the interaction of direct election and presidential power

“to the extent that capture of a separately elected presidency is important for control over the distribution of the spoils of office and/or the policy process, party behavior and organization will tend to mimic constitutional structure, giving rise to ‘presidentialized’ parties” (Samuels & Shugart pp. 15-16)



# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

## 2.) The interaction of direct presidential elections and presidential power on party systems

Hicken and Stoll (2013)

Direct presidential elections can affect the party system at legislative elections e.g. concurrent and honeymoon elections vs. mid-term elections

However, the size of the presidential prize varies from one country to another

So, there is no necessary reason to believe that presidential elections will have the same impact on legislative party systems everywhere

# **Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies**

**2.) The interaction of direct presidential elections and presidential power on party systems**

**Elgie et al (2014)**

**All else equal, direct elections will have a reductive effect on the effective number of parties at legislative elections in countries with relatively strong presidents, e.g. in France and Romania, but not necessarily in countries with very weak or very strong presidents**

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

## 2.) The interaction of direct presidential elections and presidential power on government formation

Schleiter and Morgan-Jones (2010)

- The greater the president's power, the more control the president has over cabinet composition
- The greater the fragmentation of party groups in parliament, the greater the president's control over formation outcomes

This suggests that both presidential power and party politics shape outcomes in semi-presidential countries

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

## 3.) Work on cohabitation and minority government

### Cohabitation

We know that cohabitation increases conflict within the executive e.g. France, Romania, CEE, Timor-Leste

However, this point only applies in SP countries where the power of the president is above a certain threshold

So, in SP countries with weak presidents cohabitation makes no difference, e.g. Ireland, while in SP countries with very strong presidents cohabitation does not occur, e.g. Russia

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

## 3.) Work on cohabitation and minority government

### Cohabitation

We know that cohabitation increases conflict within the executive

Moreover, in some SP countries cohabitation reduces the power of the president, e.g. France, whereas in others it increases the power of the president, e.g. Portugal

Here, what matters is the relationship between the president and the president's own party

# Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies

## 3.) Work on cohabitation and minority government

### Minority government

We know that presidential activity increases during minority governments

This point does not apply to SP countries with weak presidents, but it does apply to all other SP countries, e.g. Russia in the 1990s

However, there is some evidence that it does not occur if there is a technocratic government



# **Semi-presidentialism in consolidated democracies**

## **3.) Work on cohabitation and minority government**

**This work suggests that cohabitation and minority government can have important effects, but that the effect is not unidirectional**

**The effect depends on the power of the president and party politics**

## To sum up

**There is now a two-step process to semi-presidential studies**

**The first step is the taxonomic classification of semi-presidential countries on the basis of a post-Duvergerian definition of the term**

**The second step is the identification of variation within this set of semi-presidential countries and the empirical investigation of the effects of such variation**

**The effects of the direct election of the president are conditioned by variation in presidential power and party politics**

## For more information

A written version of this talk will appear in Democratization and is currently available under 'latest articles'

You might be interested in the following blog:

<http://www.presidential-power.com>

Please feel free to like our Facebook Page

<https://www.facebook.com/prespow>