

The perils of semi-presidentialism. Are they exaggerated?

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There is a standard academic consensus that semi-presidentialism is perilous for new democracies. In particular, this is because semi-presidential countries run the risk of experiencing difficult periods of 'cohabitation' between a president and a prime minister who are opposed to each other, and because they may also experience periods of divided minority government that encourage the president to rule by decree and subvert the rule of law. This article examines the evidence to support these two arguments. We find very few cases of cohabitation in young democracies and only one case where cohabitation has directly led to democratic collapse. By contrast, we find more cases of divided minority government and more cases where it has been associated with democratic failure. However, we also find that young democracies have survived divided minority government. We conclude that, to date, there is insufficient evidence to support the long-standing and highly intuitive argument that cohabitation is dangerous for new democracies. There is more evidence to support the much newer argument about the dangers of divided minority government. Even so, more work is needed in this area before we can conclude that semi-presidentialism is inherently perilous.

Most academic observers agree that, like presidentialism, semi-presidentialism is a problematic regime type for newly-democratising countries and that parliamentarism should be preferred ahead of it. For example, in the early 1990s

Linz stated that: “In view of some of the experiences with [semi-presidentialism] it seems dubious to argue that in and by itself it can generate democratic stability”.¹ More than a decade later many writers echo Linz’s judgment. For example, Lijphart has recently written that semi-presidential systems “represent only a slight improvement over pure presidentialism”² and states that “parliamentary government should be the general guideline for constitution writers in divided societies”.³ For his part, Valenzuela has argued that semi-presidentialism “may not solve some of the inherent problems of presidentialism, and indeed could make them worse by reifying the conflict between two state powers and personalizing them in the figure of the president and the prime minister”.⁴ If these observers are correct, then democratizing countries would do well to avoid semi-presidentialism. Paradoxically, though, to date there has been no systematic cross-national study of the performance of semi-presidentialism. Instead, studies have tended to focus on semi-presidentialism in particular regions.⁵ This article aims to fill that gap. We do not aim to compare the performance of semi-presidentialism relative to presidentialism and parliamentarism. Instead, we seek to examine whether there is empirical evidence to support the specific arguments that are made against semi-presidentialism. In this sense, we aim to establish whether semi-presidentialism is as perilous as the scholarly consensus would suggest.

We begin with a definition of semi-presidentialism and identify a list of semi-presidential regimes. We then briefly outline the three main objections to semi-presidentialism. They are that, like presidentialism, the direct election of the president encourages populist candidates who, if elected, often consider themselves to be above the law; that semi-presidentialism can lead to

destabilizing periods of 'cohabitation' between the president and the prime minister – this is the most well-known argument against semi-presidentialism; and, finally, that semi-presidentialism is particularly vulnerable to collapse during periods of 'divided minority government' as presidents are encouraged to rule by decree – this is a more recent claim. Given they are specific to semi-presidentialism, we focus on the last two objections. We find that: first, there have been only three examples of cohabitation in partial democracies and only one case where it has directly led to the collapse of the democratization process; second, in full democracies cohabitation has never been associated with breakdown, even in the very early years of such democracies; third, relative to cohabitation, there are more examples of divided minority government and more cases where it has been associated with democratic failure in partial democracies; fourth, while there is an equal number of cases where divided minority government has not led to breakdown of such democracies, these cases have been associated with a dangerous personalization of the political process; fifth, in full democracies divided minority government has never led to democratic breakdown, or even a decline in status from a full democracy to a partial democracy. The article concludes by arguing that the most well established argument against semi-presidentialism remains largely unfounded. Instead, attention should focus on the more recent argument that semi-presidentialism is vulnerable during periods of divided minority government, particularly in systems which the presidency has been a strong political actor from the start.

What is semi-presidentialism and where is it found?

The original definition of semi-presidentialism was provided by Duverger. He stated that:

[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.⁶

The problem with this definition is the issue of what should count as “quite considerable” presidential powers. Different people make different judgment calls. As a result, the list of semi-presidential regimes varies from one person to next. For their part, Stepan and Skach identify two semi-presidential regimes – France and Portugal – in their study of regime-type performance.⁷ By contrast, Shugart recently identified 26 semi-presidential countries and implied that the list was not exhaustive.⁸ To the extent that the list of semi-presidential countries varies from one writer to the next, often like is not being compared with like. For example, if a writer includes only semi-presidential countries where the president and prime minister have equal powers and, hence, the inherent likelihood of intra-executive conflict is high, then we should not be surprised when the conclusion is drawn that semi-presidentialism is associated with intra-executive conflict and should be avoided. By contrast, if a writer includes semi-presidential countries where the president has fewer powers and the prime minister is the dominant actor and, therefore, the likelihood of intra-executive

conflict is much lower, then we would, by definition, expect the association between semi-presidentialism and intra-executive conflict also to be much lower and the judgment about the regime type to be more positive. In other words, the study of semi-presidentialism has often suffered from a problem of selection bias.

In this context, we follow recent scholarship and propose a definition of semi-presidentialism that minimises the opportunity for variation in case selection from one writer to the next.⁹ We propose a definition based on a literal reading of the constitution rather than a subjective judgment about the powers of political actors. We define semi-presidentialism as:

A regime where there is both a popularly-elected fixed-term president and a prime minister and cabinet responsible to the legislature.

The advantage of this type of definition is that it includes the countries that are normally included in any study of semi-presidential regimes, such as France and Poland. At the same time, it establishes the the case selection as clearly as possible. In so doing, the potential for selection bias is minimised. Certainly, the nature of constitutional law is such that some judgment calls still have to be made. For example, in Slovakia the president can be removed from office by a plebiscite. As a result, arguably the fixed-term requirement is breached. However, we include Slovakia and countries like it because a super-majority is required in the plebiscite and because we feel there is a big enough difference between removal by plebiscite and removal by the legislature for cases such as Slovakia to be included. Another ambiguous case occurs in Argentina. Here, the

head of the government is responsible to the legislature, but the cabinet is not. In this article, we exclude Argentina from the list of semi-presidential regimes because there is no collective responsibility. That said, Argentina is on the cusp of the definition and other writers may make a different judgment call. Finally, a number of problematic cases involve the situation where there may or may not be collective responsibility to the legislature. For example, in South Korea the prime minister is appointed with the consent of parliament, but parliament may then only recommend the removal of the prime minister and the president may decide to ignore the parliamentary vote. There are equivalent situations in countries like Azerbaijan and Mozambique. Here, we include these as cases of semi-presidentialism. We feel that even though the responsibility measures after the prime minister's appointment are sometimes very weak, they are still different from the situation under a purely presidential system where the executive is never responsible to the legislature. Again, though, other writers may decide otherwise.

Overall, within these parameters, we calculate that there are currently 54 semi-presidential regimes in the world. (See Figure 1). Clearly, some of these countries are unequivocally undemocratic and semi-presidentialism has always been a purely nominal affair. But what about semi-presidentialism in countries that have embarked on a process of democratisation? To what extent has semi-presidentialism affected their progress? As we shall see in the next section, the scholarly consensus is that in these cases semi-presidentialism should have been an impediment to democratisation and for some quite explicit reasons.

The consensus against semi-presidentialism

In comparison with the work on presidentialism and parliamentarism, there is much less scholarship on semi-presidentialism.¹⁰ That said, there is a general consensus within this scholarship that semi-presidentialism is essentially problematic and that young democracies should avoid choosing it.¹¹ The opponents of semi-presidentialism identify three weaknesses with this type of regime.

The first problem with semi-presidentialism is the same as one of the standard criticisms of presidentialism and concerns the impact of directly electing the president.¹² The direct election of the head of state encourages the president to place himself/herself above politics. Presidents claim that they have a mandate from the people – no matter how close their winning margin may have been. This mandate, they believe, gives them the authority to act in the best interests of the country, as they see it. This can lead presidents to ignore the rule of law. In addition, a closely related argument suggests that direct election encourages political outsiders to seek election. If successful, such presidents tend to ignore political parties and personalise the presidential process. The survival of the regime becomes associated with the survival of the president in office. Opposition to the president becomes associated with opposition to the regime itself.

In the work on semi-presidentialism, the perils of the direct election of the president have been noted. For example, when the president is supported by a loyal parliamentary majority Lijphart argues that mixed systems “actually make it possible for the president to be even more powerful than in most pure presidential systems”.¹³ For his part, Linz states that “as much or more than a

pure presidential system, a dual executive system depends on the personality and abilities of the president".¹⁴ Thus, semi-presidential systems may suffer from the same problem of a highly personalised political process as presidential systems. We will return to this issue in the conclusion. For the rest of this article though, we will focus on two other perils of semi-presidentialism because these objections are unique to this regime type.

The second problem with semi-presidentialism is the potential for conflict between the president and prime minister, especially during periods of 'cohabitation', or the situation where the president is from one party or political grouping and the prime minister is from an opposed party or grouping. This is what Pierce identified as the executive "divided against itself".¹⁵

Under cohabitation, both the president and prime minister can legitimately claim that they have the authority to speak on behalf of the people. Therefore, neither actor can trump the authority of the other. In this context, the fact that the prime minister is responsible to the legislature means that the president has either to accept the will of the legislature and coexist with a political opponent or, if the constitution allows, to defy the legislature and dismiss the head of government in the knowledge the legislature may simply appoint as prime minister someone who is equally opposed to the president. The prospect of ongoing intra-executive conflict or a prime ministerial merry-go-round until the next presidential or legislative election, and perhaps beyond, is a scenario that young democracies can well do without. It may lead to a gridlock situation in which neither the president nor the prime minister is willing to compromise and where the military intervenes in order to restore effective leadership authority. Alternatively, it may lead to one or other of the executive

actors, usually the president, seizing power themselves so as to resolve the impasse.

For Linz the result of cohabitation “inevitably is a lot of politicking and intrigues that may delay decision making and lead to contradictory policies due to the struggle between the president and prime minister”.¹⁶ Linz and Stepan are explicit about the dangers of cohabitation for young democracies:

When supporters of one or the other component of semi-presidentialism feel that the country would be better off if one branch of the democratically legitimated structure of rule would disappear or be closed, the democratic system is endangered and suffers an overall loss of legitimacy, since those questioning one or the other will tend to consider the political system undesirable as long as the side they favor does not prevail.¹⁷

For their part, Stepan and Suleiman recommend against countries importing semi-presidentialism. They argue that semi-presidentialism “is a more risk-prone system than the modern parliamentarism that has evolved in Europe other than France after World War II”.¹⁸

The third problem with semi-presidentialism is the potential for divided minority government. This is a more recent criticism and is associated with the work of Cindy Skach. She calls this situation “semi-presidentialism’s most conflict-prone subtype”.¹⁹ She defines it as the case where “neither the president nor the prime minister, nor any party or coalition, enjoys a substantive majority in the legislature”.²⁰ This, she says, “can predictably lead to an unstable scenario, characterized by shifting legislative coalitions and government reshuffles, on the

one hand, and continuous presidential intervention and use of reserved powers, on the other".²¹ Furthermore, this scenario can lead to a vicious circle: "The greater the legislative immobilism, governmental instability, and cabinet reshuffling resulting from the minority position of the government, the more justified or pressured the president may feel to use their powers beyond their constitutional limit, for a prolonged period of time".²² For Skach, the prescription is very simple. In countries where party systems are not institutionalised, which would include most nascent democracies, "the argument for borrowing semi-presidentialism has profound problems". Indeed, she goes further and encourages countries that have already adopted semi-presidentialism to consider changing to parliamentarism: "It is time for Russia, along with many other fragile democracies that suffer from the semi-presidential predicament, to rethink its constitutional framework".²³

The literature on semi-presidentialism is unequivocal. This is a regime type that should be avoided. In this article, we focus on the two criticisms of semi-presidentialism that are unique to this regime type. Each criticism provides a very explicit hypothesis. Firstly, in young semi-presidential democracies cohabitation is likely to be associated with the collapse of democracy. Secondly, young semi-presidential democracies that experience divided minority government are likely to be prone to collapse. Somewhat surprisingly, to date, neither of these hypotheses has been systematically tested. There is anecdotal evidence of the perils of cohabitation, but no full-scale study of the impact of cohabitation has been undertaken. As for divided minority government, Skach has investigated the cases of France²⁴ and Weimar Germany in detail and she has also linked the problems of democracy in contemporary Russia with the

experience of divided minority government. Again, though, no systematic comparative study has been undertaken. In the next section, we examine the record of cohabitation and divided minority government under semi-presidentialism.

The impact of cohabitation and divided minority government: the method

To test the impact of cohabitation and divided minority government, we first need to identify the set of countries that have operated under a semi-presidential system during the time when they have been engaged in a process of democratisation. If the existing literature is correct, then we would expect democracy in these countries to collapse if they experienced cohabitation and/or divided minority government. Various measures of democratization have been proposed. In this study, we rely on the classifications in the Polity IV dataset. This dataset provides codings of countries as more or less democratic from the early 19th century up to and including 2004. The Polity scale ranges from -10 (complete autocracy) to +10 (complete democracy). There are various points in the scale over and above which the democratization process might realistically be considered to have begun. In this study, we assume that the process of democratization has begun in the year when a country moves from a score of 0 or below to a score of +1 or more, or when a newly independent country scores +1 or more in the first year of its existence.²⁵ Thus, evidence of democratic failure would be where a country that previously scored +1 or more is then given a score of 0 or lower. In addition, within the range of +1 to +10 we consider countries that score from +1 to +7 inclusive to be partial democracies and

countries that score +8 or above to be full democracies.²⁶ We expect partial democracies to be more susceptible to the problems of cohabitation and divided minority government than full democracies.

In a previous section, we identified 54 countries whose constitutions are currently semi-presidential. Some of these countries have never registered a score of +1 or more in the Polity database. We exclude all such countries, including Cameroon, Chad, Rwanda and Tajikistan among others, from the study. By contrast, we include some countries more than once. For example, Armenia scored +1 or more from 1991-95 inclusive. It then scored below +1 in 1996 and 1997, only to register a score of +1 or more again from 1998-2004. In this case, we include two entries for Armenia, one of which corresponds to a process that failed (1991-95) and a second that did not (1998-2004, the date at which the data set ends). We also include a small number of countries that were semi-presidential for a period, but subsequently abandoned this form of government in favour of another. Thus, we include Moldova, which was semi-presidential from 1991-2000 until a switch to parliamentarism and which scored +1 or more during this period. We also include the Comoros and Congo-Brazzaville, both of which were semi-presidential for much of the 1990s before they switched to a presidential system of government. We also include Cuba, which was semi-presidential and registered a score of +1 or more from the time of the 1940 Constitution until the collapse of democracy in 1951, as well as the more well-known historical cases of Weimar Germany and First Republic Austria. Finally, we exclude four semi-presidential countries where the president is only a figurehead. These are: Austria since 1945, Ireland, Slovakia and Slovenia. We assume that the aforementioned criticisms of semi-presidentialism only apply

when the president has at least some *de facto* executive power. In these four countries, the president has scarcely any powers. In practice, they have consistently operated as parliamentary-like systems. So, the criticisms of semi-presidentialism are inappropriate. In total, we have 42 cases to examine.²⁷ (See Figure 2 for the countries in the dataset).

Next, we identify the periods of cohabitation and divided minority government that have occurred in these cases. We began the process of identifying periods of cohabitation by consulting www.worldstatesmen.org/. This is a very thorough and reliable data source. It provides the names and terms of office of all presidents and prime ministers. It also records their party affiliation. We identified all cases when the party affiliation of the two executive actors was different. We then consulted secondary sources to confirm whether these instances were examples of coalition government, where the president and prime minister were from different parties but the same political alliance, or cohabitation, when they were from opposing parties and/or alliances. We identified periods of divided minority government by consulting the World Bank's Database of Political Institutions (DPI).²⁸ This dataset has an entry called 'Majority'. The DPI codebook states that this entry records "the fraction of seats held by the government". It is calculated by dividing the number of government seats by the total number of seats in the main house of the legislature. When the score for 'Majority' was below 50 per cent in a given year, we coded the case as a period of divided minority government. The DPI database only goes back to 1975. This range covers most of our examples. For pre-1975 cases we use secondary sources to determine whether or not there was divided minority government. (The periods of cohabitation and divided minority government and

the cases of democratic breakdown are recorded in Figure 2). In the next section, we report the findings of the study.

The impact of cohabitation and divided minority government: the findings

In countries that have scored +1 or more on the Polity scale while operating under a semi-presidential system, democracy has collapsed in 17 of the 42 cases (or 40 per cent).²⁹ However, this figure may underestimate the perils of semi-presidentialism. In six of the 42 cases a score below 8 on the Polity scale was never registered while they have been semi-presidential.³⁰ Thus, they have always been classed as full democracies when operating under this type of system. If we assume that full democracies are much less likely to collapse and exclude them from the calculations, then we are left with 36 cases where semi-presidentialism has operated in a country when it has been classed as a partial democracy.³¹ Democracy has collapsed in 17 of these 36 cases (or 47 per cent). We are not in a position to know how this figure compares with the equivalent figures for presidential and parliamentary regimes. Our aim is not to determine the relative merits of semi-presidentialism. Instead, here, we are solely interested in whether cohabitation and divided minority government have been associated with these examples of democratic failure.

Cohabitation

As regards cohabitation, the first point to note is that it has occurred in partial democracies only very rarely. Indeed, only three countries have experienced

cohabitation when they have been in the range +1 to +7 inclusive. These are Niger (1995), Weimar Germany (1923-24 and 1927) and Sri Lanka (2002-2003). However, in two of these countries democracy collapsed. Therefore, even though cohabitation is very rare, when it does occur it would seem to be just about as perilous as the literature would suggest. That said, when we look more closely, the situation is not quite so clear-cut.

There is no doubt that in Niger cohabitation was directly responsible for the collapse of democracy. Here, in 1995 the incumbent president, Mahmane Ousmane, dissolved parliament prematurely. However, the subsequent election returned a majority opposed to him. When the new majority rejected the president's choice of prime minister and elected the president's opponent, Hama Amadou, there was an ongoing stand-off between the two parts of the executive. As one analyst put it: "both president and prime minister went 'on strike', refusing to carry out duties prescribed by the constitution for the normal functioning of the government, a near-total breakdown in constitutional procedures resulted".³² For another observer, the "stand off between the president and the prime minister seriously discredited the democratic government and opened an opportunity for an authoritarian reversal".³³ In January 1996, the military stepped in and Niger's first experiment with democracy came to an end. This is a textbook example of the perils of cohabitation under semi-presidentialism. While many other factors are no doubt associated with the collapse of democracy in Niger, including the country's extreme poverty and lack of a democratic tradition, the experience of cohabitation was undeniably destabilising and certainly helped to bring about the military coup in 1996.

At first glance, the situation in Weimar Germany would seem to confirm the Nigerian experience. However, this situation needs more exploration. In Weimar Germany, there were four periods of cohabitation.³⁴ The first was from 21 November 1922 to 5 October 1923. The second was from 3 June 1924 to 14 January 1925. The third was from 20 January to 16 May 1926. The fourth was from 29 January 1927 to 28 June 1928.³⁵ Thus, cohabitation would seem to be associated with democratic failure. However, given that Weimar Germany is classed as a partial democracy by Polity until 1934 and that the last period of cohabitation was in 1928, it is not clear that cohabitation can be directly associated with the breakdown of democracy. Indeed, Skach focuses on the problems of divided minority government as a more important reason for the collapse of Weimar.³⁶

In addition, the recent situation in Sri Lanka would seem to disconfirm the standard wisdom. Here, the country recently experienced a period of cohabitation without democracy collapsing. In December 1999 Chandrika Kumaratunga of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party was re-elected as president. However, in December 2001 parliamentary elections returned a majority for the United National Party (UNP) and President Kumaratunga appointed Ranil Wickremasinghe of the UNP as prime minister. The president and prime minister clashed repeatedly over the handling of a peace agreement with the Tamil Tigers.³⁷ These tensions came to a head when President Kumaratunga dismissed the Wickremasinghe government in February 2004 and early parliamentary elections were held in April. In the elections, the president's coalition was returned as the largest grouping and the period of cohabitation ended. There is no doubt that Sri Lanka's experience of cohabitation was

extremely difficult, but democracy survived. Indeed, in the two years of cohabitation Polity recorded a slightly improved score of 6 from 5 previously.

These examples suggest that cohabitation is perhaps not as problematic as standard the literature would suggest. The predictions of that literature do capture the 1995 events in Niger extremely well. However, they are much less successful at capturing the impact of cohabitation in Weimar Germany and, particularly, Sri Lanka. In the latter case, the predictions of rivalry between the president and prime minister were certainly correct, but democracy survived. In other words, even partial democracies may well be robust enough to cope with intra-executive tensions.

In full democracies (those that score +8 or more on the Polity scale), the situation is very clear. Here, cohabitation has occurred much more frequently and, when it has occurred, it has never been associated even indirectly with the either the collapse of democracy or a decline in the Polity score to below +8 (i.e., a decline from a full democracy to a partial democracy). Indeed, there are a number of key examples showing that even very young full democracies can survive periods of cohabitation. For example, Macedonia, and Mongolia experienced cohabitation just a year after they were first classed as full democracies. Poland and Bulgaria experienced cohabitation three years after they were first classed as full democracies.³⁸ In short, full democracies have always coped perfectly well with cohabitation. Arguably, this is true even when it has occurred at a time when a decline in the status of democracy was entirely possible.

In this regard, the example of Mongolia is worth exploring a little more fully. The transition to democracy began, naturally enough, in 1989-90. The first

multi-party elections were held in July 1990. The current semi-presidential constitution was ratified by the Mongolian parliament on 13 January 1992. The Polity scores for Mongolia are -7 in 1989, 2 in 1990 and 1991, 9 from 1992-95 and 10 since 1996. Thus, the introduction of semi-presidentialism corresponds to the first year of full democracy. In the June 1992 legislative elections, the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party won 85 per cent of the seats in the Great Hural. In June 1993, Punsalmaagiyn Ochirbat from the Mongolian National Democratic Party (MNDP) was elected as president, so beginning a period of cohabitation that lasted until the victory of the MNDP-led coalition in the June 1996 legislative elections. Arguably, even though Mongolia is classed as a full democracy during the whole of this period, the survival of this status was not necessarily guaranteed. In other words, it is reasonable to suggest that the country may have slipped back to the status of a partial democracy or worse. For example, Mongolia was suffering from a bout of hyperinflation and it is estimated that the collapse of Soviet subsidies meant that in 1991 the country lost around half of its gross national product.³⁹ In addition, Mongolia had no tradition of democracy to rely upon. In all, even though Fish argues that Mongolia did not suffer from some of the problems that beset many equivalent post-Soviet countries,⁴⁰ there seems to be nothing inevitable about the maintenance of full democracy during the early years of the transition. If Mongolia's status as a full democracy was under threat at this time, then the standard literature would suggest that cohabitation would be problematic in this regard. Even so, Mongolia's status as a full democracy survived and was consolidated. We do not necessarily have to agree with Fish that cohabitation actually helped Mongolia, but if the survival of

democracy was not inevitable then we can argue, once again, that the perils of cohabitation are exaggerated.

Overall, partial democracies with a semi-presidential form of government have collapsed 17 times. Only one collapse is directly associated with cohabitation. That said, cohabitation has been an extremely rare phenomenon in partial democracies. Thus, the best we can say in support of the standard wisdom is that there is some evidence to back up the argument about the perils of cohabitation, but the jury is still out until we have the evidence from more cases. By contrast, if we weaken our assumptions somewhat and allow for the possibility that the status of full democracies is not necessarily guaranteed at least in the first few years of their existence, then we can say that cohabitation is scarcely perilous at all. In this case, the evidence suggests that the standard wisdom exaggerates the problems caused by cohabitation under semi-presidentialism.

Divided minority government

In contrast to cohabitation the record of divided minority government is unequivocally worse. We find that divided minority government was clearly associated with the breakdown of democracy in five of the 17 cases in our dataset. They are: Armenia (1991-95), Belarus, Burkina Faso, Cuba and Weimar Germany. These cases confirm the predictions that Skach makes about the perils of divided minority government and most cases neatly parallel the events in Weimar Germany that she studied in depth. For example, in Belarus the first multi-party elections for the Supreme Council of the Belarus Soviet Socialist

Republic were held in March 1990 and the Communist Party of Belarus obtained a large majority. In August 1991 Belarus declared independence. In early 1994 a new semi-presidential constitution was adopted by a referendum. In July 1994 Aleksandr Lukashenko was directly elected as president. By this time, the majority in parliament was fractured, leaving the government without a formal majority. President Lukashenko issued executive decrees to assert his control over the regime. He also used his power to call a referendum to increase his authority over parliament. In May 1995 voters approved the following question: 'Do you agree to the need to amend the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in order to provide for the possibility of an early termination of the Supreme Council by the President of the Republic of Belarus in case of systematic or major violations of the Constitution?'⁴¹ In terms of Polity IV, Belarus scores +7 from 1991-1994, but declines to 0 in 1995 and -7 thereafter. Therefore, the evidence suggests that Skach's conviction about divided minority government being "semi-presidentialism's most conflict-prone subtype" is accurate.

That said, there is evidence that divided minority government is not necessarily fatal to new democracies. In five cases partial democracies have experienced divided minority government and have not collapsed. They are: Finland (1932-36), Madagascar (1998 and 2002), Russia (1994 and 1997-2003),⁴² South Korea (1988-92) and Ukraine (1995-2004).⁴³ All the same, many of these examples support Skach's argument about the problems associated with the dynamics of divided minority government. In Madagascar, Russia and Ukraine, the strength of the president has increased over time. In Madagascar the constitution was amended in 1998 to reinforce the president's power. In Russia and Ukraine, presidents have resorted to rule by decree in a way that neatly

confirms Skach's predictions about the effect of divided minority government. Indeed, in Russia democracy is currently very fragile indeed and in Ukraine democracy was only saved following the 'Orange Revolution' in 2005. Overall, these examples do show that partial democracies can survive divided minority government and suggest that it is not an inherently perilous situation, but they also indicate that the basic intuition about the dangerous personalisation of the political process under divided minority government does seem to hold true.

As with cohabitation, the situation in full democracies is quite different. In these regimes, divided minority government has occurred quite frequently and it has never been associated with a decline in the status of the country from a full to a partial democracy or worse. The closest case that corresponds to this situation is First Republic Austria. Here, the December 1929 constitution introduced a semi-presidential system by creating the direct election of the president. In the period 1930-32, there were two minority governments: Karl Vaugoin from 30 September to 4 December 1930, and Karl Buresch II from 29 January to 20 May 1932. In addition, the government of Engelbert Dolfuß that immediately followed Buresch II began life as a majority government, but was in a minority situation by the time Dolfuß dissolved parliament and began to rule by decree in March 1933. From 1930-32 inclusive Polity IV scores Austria at +8. In 1933 it scores -88, which is how Polity IV score a transition year. In 1934 it scores -9. Thus, the Austrian case would also seem to support Skach's argument about the perils of divided minority government. However, this case is somewhat unusual. In the first place, no presidential election was held before the collapse of democracy in 1933. Moreover, the 1929 constitution gave the president relatively few powers. The responsibility for decision-making lay with the head of government.

Consequently, the collapse of democracy is associated with the actions of Dolfuß as Chancellor, rather than Wilhelm Miklas as president. Also, there was no substantial period of divided minority government before the collapse of democracy. So, the Austrian example provides some support for Skach's thesis, but not unequivocal support.

Finally, while we would expect long-standing full democracies, like France from 1988-92, to survive periods of divided minority government perfectly well, we might expect countries that have only just achieved the status of full democracy to decline if the perils of divided minority government are so great. However, this has not been the case. For example, Peru experienced a period of divided minority government immediately after the resumption of full democracy in 2001. Poland experienced divided minority government from 1991-92 at the start of the transition process and when the party system was very fragmented, even though the country was classed as a full democracy at the time. Romania experienced divided minority government after just one year of being classed as a full democracy. Equally, Senegal also experienced a period of divided minority government just a year after being classed as a full democracy. Thus, even if divided minority government is semi-presidentialism's most conflict-prone sub-type, it has had little impact on full democracies even in cases where party systems are still fragmented in new democracies.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to establish whether the main arguments made against semi-presidentialism stand up to empirical scrutiny. There is one very

clear finding in this regard: there is insufficient evidence to make the claim that cohabitation is perilous under semi-presidentialism. Perhaps the most striking result from the empirics is that Niger is the only country where cohabitation has ever been directly responsible for the collapse of democracy. It is plausible to argue that cohabitation contributed to the collapse of democracy in Weimar Germany, but other factors, including divided minority government, were much more influential. So, Niger is the only example that can yet be cited by the opponents of semi-presidentialism in support of their claims about the perils of cohabitation. In a sense, we should not be surprised about this finding. In the literature on democratization from the early 1990s when the standard argument was made, the perils of cohabitation were discussed almost exclusively in the context of the then still recent French experience from 1986-88 and the Polish experience in the early 1990s. Writers such as Linz and Stepan found, quite rightly, that the experience of cohabitation in these countries was politically controversial and traumatic. From these examples, they inferred that if cohabitation were to occur in a nascent democracy, then it would be dangerous for the process of democratization. In short, the standard wisdom about the negative effects of cohabitation was never based on empirical observation. We have shown that the standard wisdom has yet to be proven empirically. The Niger example proves that the predictions of writers such as Linz and Stepan were right. However, the Sri Lanka case and, arguably, the Weimar case also prove that they were not always right. Moreover, we have shown that full democracies have managed to survive cohabitation without any change in their status, even if it has occurred in the very early years of the democratisation process. Overall, while it may be true to say that cohabitation is inefficient and

undesirable, we cannot say that it is dangerous for democracy just yet. We need more examples before we can draw any such conclusion.

The situation with regard to the perils of divided minority government is slightly different. There are more cases of divided minority government than cohabitation and more cases where divided minority government has been associated more or less directly with the breakdown of democracy. Thus, Skach is right to have drawn our attention to divided minority government as the most conflict-prone sub-type of semi-presidentialism. All the same, we have also shown that divided minority government is not necessarily fatal for partial democracies and that full democracies, with the possible exception of the Austrian First Republic, have always managed to survive divided minority government even if it has occurred in the earliest years of the transition process.

In her work, Skach has argued that the perils of divided minority government are associated with the fragmentation of nascent party systems. The lack of cohesive majorities is said to encourage presidents to rule by decree, thus endangering the prospects of democratic survival. We have shown that partial democracies and fledgling full democracies have survived divided minority government even when the party system has been fragmented. So, by itself, variations in party politics do not seem to explain why divided minority government causes some democracies to collapse but not others. As a way forward, we suggest that it might be useful to explore the interaction of semi-presidential regimes in which the president is a strong political actor and divided minority government. It may be the case that divided minority government does not cause presidents to become more powerful so threatening democracy. It may be that divided minority government is dangerous in cases where presidents are

already powerful. This hypothesis is one that might usefully be tested in future work on the topic.

Notes

¹ Juan J. Linz, 'Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does it Make a Difference?', in Juan J. Linz and Arturo Valenzuela eds., *The Failure of Presidential Democracy* (Baltimore NJ: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 55.

² Arend Lijphart, 'Constitutional design for divided societies', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2004), p. 102.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Arturo Valenzuela, 'Latin American presidencies interrupted', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2004), p. 17.

⁵ See, for example, François Frison-Roche, *Le 'modèle semi-présidentiel' comme instrument de la transition en Europe post-communiste. Bulgarie, Lituanie, Macédoine, Pologne, Roumanie et Slovénie* (Brussels: Bruylant, 2005).

⁶ Maurice Duverger, 'A new political system model: semi-presidential government', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 8 (1980), p. 166.

⁷ Alfred Stepan and Cindy Skach, 'Constitutional frameworks and democratic consolidation. Parliamentarism versus presidentialism', *World Politics*, Vol. 46 (1993), p. 9.

⁸ Matthew Søberg Shugart, 'Semi-presidential systems: Dual executive and mixed authority patterns', *French Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2005), pp. 323-351.

⁹ See the definitions in Oleh Protsyk, 'Politics of Intraexecutive Conflict in Semipresidential Regimes in Eastern Europe', *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 1-20; Alan Siaroff, 'Comparative presidencies: The inadequacy of the presidential, semi-presidential and parliamentary distinction', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 42 (2003), pp. 287-312; Cindy Skach, *Borrowing*

Constitutional Designs: Constitutional Law in Weimar Germany and the French Fifth Republic (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 13.

¹⁰ Robert Elgie, 'Semi-presidentialism: concepts, consequences and contesting explanations', *Political Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2004), pp. 314-330.

¹¹ The most consistent proponent of semi-presidentialism is Gianfranco Pasquino, for example, 'Semi-presidentialism: A political model at work', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 31 (1997), pp. 128-137. The other person who is usually quoted as a supporter of semi-presidentialism is Giovanni Sartori, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering. An Inquiry into Structures, Incentives and Outcomes*, 2nd ed., (London: Macmillan, 1997), but his support is lukewarm at best, see p. 135.

¹² See the summary of the standard arguments against presidentialism by Scott Mainwaring and Matthew S. Shugart, 'Juan Linz, Presidentialism, and Democracy: A Critical Appraisal', *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (1997), pp. 449-471.

¹³ Lijphart, 'Constitutional design for divided societies', p. 102.

¹⁴ Linz, 'Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does it Make a Difference?', p. 52.

¹⁵ Roy Pierce, 'The Executive Divided Against Itself: Cohabitation in France, 1986–1988', *Governance*, Vol. 4 (1991), pp. 270–294.

¹⁶ Linz, 'Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy: Does it Make a Difference?', p. 55.

¹⁷ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore NJ: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 286.

¹⁸ Alfred Stepan and Ezra N. Suleiman, 'The French Fifth Republic: A model for import? Reflections on Poland and Brazil', in H. E. Cheibub and Alfred Stepan eds., *Politics, Society, and Democracies. A Comparative Study*, (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 412.

¹⁹ Cindy Skach, *Borrowing Constitutional Designs*, p. 17.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

²² Ibid., p. 18.

²³ Timothy J. Colton and Cindy Skach, 'The Russian Predicament', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2005), pp. 124-125.

²⁴ Strangely, Skach classes the 1958-62 period in France as an example of divided minority government. Yet, France was not semi-presidential, according to her definition, until the constitutional amendment of 1962 and the first presidential election was not until 1965.

²⁵ This assumption is consistent with other studies that have used Polity scores as indicators of democracy and was suggested as an option by Monty G. Marshall, the Polity IV and Armed Conflict and Intervention Projects Research Director, School of Public Policy, George Mason University.

²⁶ This assumption is also consistent with existing studies that have used Polity.

²⁷ We also exclude Iceland and, unfortunately, Sao Tome e Principe, neither of which is included in the Polity IV dataset, although as a parliamentary-like system Iceland would also have been excluded on those grounds as well.

²⁸ Available at:

<http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/0,,contentMDK:20699744~pagePK:64214825~piPK:64214943~theSitePK:469382,00.html>

²⁹ In 2000, Peru was given a coding of -88, corresponding to a period of transition. We include this as an example of breakdown. It corresponds to the end of the controversial Fujimori presidency.

³⁰ Bulgaria, Lithuania, Mongolia, Peru (2001-), Portugal, and Senegal.

³¹ Note that two countries with scores of 8 did collapse: Austria in 1933 and Peru in 1992.

³² Leonardo A. Villalón and Abdourahmane Idrissa, 'Repetitive breakdowns and a decade of experimentation. Institutional choices and unstable democracy in Niger', in Leonardo A. Villalón and Peter VonDoepp eds., *The Fate of Africa's Democratic Experiments. Elites and Institutions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 38.

³³ Sophia Moestrup, 'Semi-presidentialism in Niger: Gridlock and Democratic breakdown – Learning From Past mistakes', in Robert Elgie and Sophia Moestrup eds., *Semi-presidentialism Outside Europe* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007).

³⁴ See Skach, *Borrowing Constitutional Designs*, p. 51.

³⁵ In the dataset here, our unit is the full year. So, we classify countries on the basis of the type of government that existed for the majority of the year.

³⁶ Weimar is also one of a number of cases where a judgment call has to be made as to when a semi-presidential system was actually installed. The first president, Friedrich Ebert, was elected by the Reichstag on 11 February 1919. This is

consistent with a parliamentary system of government. The Weimar Constitution came into force on 11 August 1919. Article 41 of the Weimar constitution stated that “The Reich President is elected by the entire German nation”. This is consistent with a semi-presidential form of government. The constitution was then amended in 1922 to state that the first president would remain in office until 1925 and the first direct election was held in that year. See http://www.zum.de/psm/weimar/weimar_vve.php. Thus, was Weimar semi-presidential from 1919, even though the incumbent president was indirectly elected, or 1925, when the first direct election was held? We assume the former because we define semi-presidentialism on the basis of the constitution, However, if we assume that the perils of semi-presidentialism only kick in when the president is directly elected as the standard literature assumes, then this would exclude the first two periods of cohabitation cited above and weaken further the association between cohabitation and the collapse of democracy.

³⁷ See Neil DeVotta, ‘Sri Lanka in 2003. Seeking to Consolidate Peace’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2004), p. 53.

³⁸ It might also be noted that Sao Tome and Principe experienced cohabitation five years after democratization, using Freedom House’s measure of Free as a proxy equivalent to Polity’s measure of a full democracy. By contrast, Polity classes France as having been a full democracy for 17 years when it experienced its first much-talked-about period of cohabitation in 1986.

³⁹ Richard Pomfret, ‘Transition and Democracy in Mongolia’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (2000), p. 150.

⁴⁰ M. Steven Fish, 'The Inner Asian Anomaly: Mongolia's democratization in comparative perspective', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 34 (2001), pp. 323-338.

⁴¹ See Andrei Arkadyev, 'Belarus', in Robert Elgie and Sophia Moestrup eds., *Semi-Presidentialism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁴² Polity IV's classification of Russia as a partial democracy in 2003 is contentious. For example, Freedom House classifies Russia as moving from Partly Free in 2003 to Not Free in 2004. However, given Polity IV is used as the basis of the study here and given we only have scores up to 2003, then we have to go by the Polity IV scores as they stand. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we classify Russia as a country that by 2003 had not collapsed. A similar point can be made about Ukraine where, arguably, democracy broke down in 1999. That said, again Polity IV continue to classify Ukraine as a partial democracy after that time and we have to take their classification.

⁴³ DPI records Sri Lanka as having a minority government from 2002-2004. I have classed this period as a period of cohabitation on the basis of secondary sources.

Figure 1 List of semi-presidential countries and their democratic status in 2003

Algeria (autocracy)	Iceland (democracy)	Rwanda (autocracy)
Angola (autocracy)	Ireland (democracy)	Sao Tome e Principe
Armenia (partial democracy)	Kazakhstan (autocracy)	(democracy) ¹
Austria (democracy)	Kyrgyzstan (autocracy)	Senegal (democracy)
Azerbaijan (autocracy)	Lithuania (democracy)	Singapore (autocracy)
Belarus (autocracy)	Macedonia (democracy)	Slovakia (democracy)
Bulgaria (democracy)	Madagascar (partial democracy)	Slovenia (democracy)
Burkina Faso (autocracy)	Mali (partial democracy)	South Korea (democracy)
Cameroon (autocracy)	Mauritania (autocracy)	Sri Lanka (partial democracy)
Cape Verde (democracy) ¹	Mongolia (democracy)	Taiwan (democracy)
Central African Republic (autocracy)	Mozambique (partial democracy)	Tajikistan (autocracy)
Chad (autocracy)	Namibia (partial democracy)	Tanzania (partial democracy)
Croatia (partial democracy)	Niger (partial democracy)	Timor-Leste (partial democracy)
Egypt (autocracy)	Peru (democracy)	Togo (autocracy)
Finland (democracy)	Poland (democracy)	Tunisia (autocracy)
France (democracy)	Portugal (democracy)	Ukraine (partial democracy)
Gabon (autocracy)	Romania (democracy)	Uzbekistan (autocracy)
Guinea-Bissau		

(autocracy) Haiti (autocracy)	Russia (partial democracy)	Yemen (autocracy)
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Source Polity IV (<http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity/>): Democratic status as of 2003: -10 to 0 (autocracy); +1 to +7 (partial democracy); +8 to 10 (full democracy)

¹ Not scored by Polity IV

Figure 2 Cases of cohabitation and divided minority government under partial and full semi-presidential democracies to 2004

Country (Polity IV score of +1 or more when semi-presidential)	Cohabitation	DMG	Collapse of democracy? (move from a Polity IV score of +1 or more to 0 or less)
Armenia (1991-95)		1992-95	Yes
Armenia (1998-)			
Austria (1929-32)			Yes
Azerbaijan (1992)			Yes
Belarus (1994)		1994	Yes
Bulgaria (1992-)	1995-96, 2001-2005		
Burkina Faso (1978-79)		1979	Yes
Central African Republic (1993-2002)			Yes
Comoros (1992-94)			Yes
Comoros (1996-98)			Yes
Congo Brazzaville (1992-96)			Yes

Croatia (1999-)		2004	
Cuba (1940-51)		1944-45	Yes
East Timor (2002-)			
Finland (1919-)	1946-55, 1991-94	1919, 1921- 29, 1932-36, 1949-50, 1957, 1959- 61, 1972, 1977	
France (1962-)	1986-87. 1993-94, 1997-2001	1988-92	
Germany (1919-33)	1923-24, 1927	1920-22, 1925-26, 1928-29	Yes
Guinea-Bissau (1994-97)			Yes
Guinea-Bissau (2001-02)			Yes
Haiti (1994-99)			Yes
Lithuania (1992-)	1997, 2003	1997, 2001- 2003	
Macedonia (1992-)	2003		
Madagascar (1991-)		1997-98, 2002	

Mali (1992-)			
Moldova (1991-2000)			
Mongolia (1992-)	1993-95, 1997-2000	1997-2000	
Mozambique (1994-)			
Namibia (1990-)			
Niger (1992-95)	1995		Yes
Niger (1999-)			
Peru (1979-91)			Yes
Peru (1993-99)			Yes
Peru (2001-)		2001-04	
Poland (1990-)	1992-95, 1997-2000	1992, 1998- 2001	
Portugal (1976-)	1988-95, 2002-2006	1986-87, 1996-99	
Romania (1990-)		1997-2004	
Russia (1992-)		1994, 1997- 2003	
Senegal (2000-)		2001	
South Korea (1988-)		1988-92,	

		1997-2004	
Sri Lanka (1978-)	2002-2003	2002-2004	
Tanzania (2000-)			
Ukraine (1991-)		1995-2004	