



**Title:** Presidentialism, Parliamentarism, and Democracy

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**T**his book considers a question which has been at the heart of many political debates: which type of governmental system to adopt, presidential or parliamentary? In short, the book is about the impact of parliamentary or presidential institutions on the survival of democracy. The author argues that the intrinsic features of presidentialism are not the reason why presidential democracies are more prone to break down. What causes their fragility is the fact that presidential institutions have been adopted in countries – as in Latin America – where any form of democracy is likely to perish.

José Antonio Cheibub opines that the instability of presidential democracies lies in the fact that presidential institutions tend to exist in countries that are also more likely to suffer from military dictatorships. A nexus exists between military dictatorships and presidentialism that fully accounts for the differences in democratic survival. The author observes that democracies which are preceded by military dictatorships are more unstable than those preceded by civilian dictatorships; whereas presidential democracies are more likely to follow military dictatorships. It is the nexus between militarism and presidentialism that – in his view – explains the higher level of instability of presidential democracies.

Presidentialism has been criticized on various accounts: presidential democracies have a shorter life span than parliamentary ones; the presidential systems are inherently ungovernable, structurally problematic, likely to generate crisis; and presidential regimes with their separation of executive and legislative powers undermine democracy.

Notwithstanding these criticisms levelled against presidentialism, Cheibub argues otherwise. According to him, there is nothing wrong with presidential institutions per se and that such institutions do not cause the instability of presidential democracies.

Juan Linz has claimed that there exists a causal relationship between presidentialism and the instability of democracy. In Linz's opinion, the separation of powers that defines presidentialism implies a relationship of "mutual independence" between the executive and the legislature which leads to the breakdown of democratic

regimes. The Linzian view criticises presidential systems on the following grounds – few or no incentives for coalition formation, undisciplined parties, minority governments, deadlocks and legislative ineffectiveness and a breakdown of democracy.

According to this latter view, there are three reasons why presidentialism lacks incentives for coalition formation: (1) the president's survival in office does not depend on any kind of legislative support; (2) the nature of presidential elections also gives presidents incentives to avoid seeking cooperation. Presidents tend to claim that they are the rightful interpreters of the national interest whose independent authority and popular mandate provide incentives to govern alone; (3) presidential politics is a zero-sum, as the winning candidate acquires all of the executive power concentrated in the presidency.

Opponents of presidentialism are also concerned about party discipline. Even if coalitions were able to form under presidentialism, they would be fragile and composed of undisciplined parties incapable of offering reliable legislative support to the government. Critics charge that presidentialism is characterized by the absence of incentives to form majority government and hence presidentialism is likely to generate either minority governments or governments that are only nominally majority governments. Moreover, in the views of the critics, presidentialism brings about conflict between the executive and the legislature as well as governments that are legislatively ineffective. Finally, because there are no incentives for cooperation, presidentialism is characterized by frequent minority governments and conflict as well as deadlocks between the government and legislature, the end result being a breakdown of democracy.

In order to counteract these arguments, Cheibub first identifies the set of democracies that are at risk of breakdown and their distinction from dictatorships. Systems in which governments cannot be removed by the assembly are presidential, while the obverse are parliamentary or mixed. Answers to the following questions identify each form of democratic government: (1) is there an independently elected president? (2) is the government responsible to the assembly? (3) is the government responsible to the president? On the basis of these questions, the author classifies the constitutional framework of all democratic systems that have existed between 1946 to 2002 – 135 countries in all.

Cheibub states that presidential and parliamentary institutions prescribe different relations between the executive and the legislature, but the question is whether this difference is sufficient to generate opposite incentives for coalition formation. He observes that in presidential democracies, the president is always the government *formateur* and hence the number of possible government coalitions is smaller than in parliamentary democracies where any party is a potential *formateur*. In presidential systems, failure to form a coalition implies that the party of the president is the only one to hold government portfolios. Moreover, the legislative powers of the president, and hence the extent to which the president controls the legislative process, vary in a way that the powers of the government in a parliamentary system do not. If presidents do not dominate the legislative process, then they will offer non-presidential parties portfolios in government in exchange for policy cooperation; if parties have policy positions close to each other, then presidents will keep all portfolios for their party allowing policy to be set by a non-presidential party – a minority single-party government will thereby emerge.

The structure of presidentialism is not sufficient to make coalition governments atypical. Cheibub holds that these governments may be more frequent under parliamentarism than under presidentialism, but they form in the latter in response to the same incentives that lead parties to coalesce in the former. By seeing politicians as actors who care about both office and policies the reader can understand why presidents, in spite of the fact that they need not share office in order to survive, may want to do so in order to govern.

On the basis of his empirical studies, the author suggests that coalition governments are more frequent in parliamentary democracies but are also common in presidential ones. The notion that coalitions are rare events

in presidential democracies finds no support in a data set consisting of all democracies that have existed in the past 60 years.

As to legislative effectiveness, minority governments in presidential systems are not any less effective – according to the data surveyed in this book – than majority coalition governments. Indeed, Cheibub asserts that the status of the government has no effect on the proportion of bills introduced by the executive that are approved in a year. Moreover, the status of the government has no effect on the probability that a democracy will survive. The chain of events to be set in motion by the separation of powers that defines presidentialism – minority governments with no legislative support, deadlock, and democratic breakdown – does not materialise in the presidential systems that have actually existed since 1946.

The analyzed data indicates also that democratic survival is not threatened by legislative fragmentation. Cheibub argues that it is not that presidential institutions are unable to handle situations in which there are many parties in the legislature; on the contrary, it is precisely in these cases that the incentive for coalition formation will be the strongest and that governments will eventually work out a way to find support for their program.

For Cheibub presidential systems in which the president dominates the legislative process are neither legislatively ineffective nor any more prone to die than those in which the president does not dominate the legislative process. But the overall outcome, according to him, in so far as capacity to govern and maintenance of democracy are concerned, is not affected by these institutional traits of presidential systems.

As to party discipline, no mechanism exists in presidential systems whereby the vote of no confidence is crucial for inducing such discipline. However, that parties in presidential democracies cannot be disciplined via the confidence mechanism, and hence may have lower overall levels of party discipline, does not mean that presidential governments will necessarily have a hard time obtaining legislative support. Indeed, the steady legislative support party discipline affords the government is not endogenous to the form of government. Although formal models of party discipline demonstrate that parliamentary systems will have higher levels of discipline than presidential ones, this does not rule out the possibility that the latter can achieve sufficient levels of discipline by other means. Indeed, sufficient levels of party discipline may be obtained through mechanisms that are available to presidential governments such as the president's legislative power and the organization of the legislative body.

One disadvantage of presidentialism, however, is that it is more prone to transform itself into a dictatorship. Democracies that follow military dictatorships are more likely to become dictatorships and presidential democracies are more likely to follow military dictatorships. Cheibub maintains that the military-presidential nexus is the product of a historical accident: it exists because the countries where militarism remained strong at the middle of the twentieth century were also countries that adopted presidential institutions. The instability of presidential democracies is due to their existence in countries where the military has endured. Hence, the intrinsic features of presidentialism do not explain why such democracies break down.