

5 **Presidential and parliamentary government**

The first task of this chapter is to map out the three systems and the main differences between them. Since each has its own strengths and weaknesses, the second task is to consider their respective merits and deficiencies. Third, since constitutions do not exist in a societal vacuum, the next job is to try to sort out the form of government best suited to each kind of social and historical circumstances. Some forms of government are more likely to work better in certain conditions than others, and it is also possible that countries might do well to shift from one form to another as they develop over time.

The five major topics in this chapter are:

- Presidential systems
- Parliamentary systems
- Semi-presidential systems
- Presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential systems compared
- Theories of parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential government.

■ Presidential systems

Presidential systems A directly elected executive, with a limited term of office and a general responsibility for the affairs of state.

Directly elected Election by the electorate at large (popular election) rather than an electoral college, the legislature, or another body.

A great many **presidential systems** are modelled on the USA, and they reproduce many features of the American system, though not in every detail (see [fact file 5.1](#)). The main point about a presidential system is that its president is **directly elected** and his or her executive power is balanced by a legislature that is independent of the president because it, too, is popularly

elected. The president, alone among all the officials of state, has general responsibility for public affairs. He or she may appoint ministers or cabinet members, but they are responsible only for their own department business, and they are accountable to the president, not the legislature. To ensure a real separation of powers (see [chapter 4](#)) neither the president nor members of the cabinet can be members of the legislature.

Presidential government is marked by four main features:

1. *Head of state and government* Presidents perform the ceremonial duties of head of state and are also in charge of the executive branch of government: they are usually chief of the armed forces and head of the national civil service, and responsible for both foreign policy and for initiating domestic legislation.
2. *The execution of policy* Presidents appoint cabinets to advise them and run the main state bureaucracies.
3. *Dependence on the legislative branch* Presidents initiate legislation but depend on the legislature to pass it into law.
4. *Fixed tenure* Presidents are directly elected for a fixed term and are normally secure in office unless, in exceptional circumstances, they are removed from it by the legislature.

The separation of executive and legislative, each with its independent authority derived from popular election, is a deliberate part of the system of checks and balances (see [chapter 4](#)). In theory both have powers and are independent of each other, but in practice presidents and assemblies usually have to share power. They must cooperate to get things done, and the result is not so much

a separation of powers as a complex mix of them, consisting of a separation of institutions but a mix of powers in the daily give-and-take of their political relations.

This division of powers has an important effect on the way that presidents work, because ultimately they are dependent on their legislatures. It is said, for example, that the American president has little power over Congress other than the power of persuasion. Some in the White House have found this inadequate, for the purposes of government. If Congress and the president are of a different political mind they may fight each other and get little done. One image likens the president, the House and the Senate to participants in a three-legged race – difficult to move along unless they move together, and easy to fall over if they pull in different directions. The problem is heightened if the presidency is controlled by one political party, and one or both houses of parliament by another. If, on top of this, the president is weak and the parties poorly co-ordinated or split, the majority party may be unable to pass its legislation. The result is that apparently powerful presidents are sometimes immobilised by elected assemblies.

For this reason, many presidential systems have failed the test of democratic stability and some experts believe that they do not make for effective government. The USA may be the only successful example, although Costa Rica has successfully maintained its presidential system since 1949.

■ Parliamentary systems

In **parliamentary systems** the executive is not directly elected but usually emerges or is drawn from the elected legislature (the parliament or assembly) and, unlike a directly elected president, is often an integral part of it (see fact

file 5.1). This form of parliamentary executive usually consists of a prime minister (sometimes called chancellor or premier) and a cabinet or a council of ministers. The cabinet or council is the collective executive body. Usually the leaders of the largest party in the assembly, or the governing coalition within it, take the executive offices. Unlike presidents, who are the only officials with general responsibilities for government affairs, parliamentary executives are supposed to share responsibilities among their members. This means that the cabinet, including the prime minister, is jointly responsible for all the actions of government, and the prime minister, therefore, is only *primus inter pares* (first among equals). In fact, prime ministers in many countries have acquired more power than this, as we shall see.

Whereas the executive and legislative branches in presidential systems are separated, this is not so clearly the case in parliamentary systems where:

1. The leader of the party or coalition of parties with most support in parliament becomes the prime minister or chancellor.
2. The prime minister or chancellor forms a cabinet usually chosen from members of parliament, and the cabinet then forms the core of government.
3. The government is dependent upon the support of parliament, which may remove the executive from power with a vote of no confidence. The executive (government) is also dependent upon the legislature (parliament), because the latter can reject, accept, or amend legislation initiated by the government. Equally, the executive can dissolve the legislature and call an election.

This means that the executive in a parliamentary system is directly dependent on, and accountable to, the legislature (i.e. the parliament), which can veto legislation with a majority vote, and bring down the executive with a vote of no confidence. Since the executive has **collective responsibility** for government (unlike a president), it must stick together because public disagreement within the cabinet or council on a major political matter will almost certainly result in its being seriously weakened. The prime minister and the cabinet must be closely bound together by mutual dependence and ‘collegiality’ if they are to have a chance of remaining in office. The prime minister appoints cabinet members and can sack them, but to remain in power the prime minister must also retain the confidence of the cabinet.

Parliamentary systems These have
 (1) a directly elected legislative body,
 (2) fused executive and legislative institutions,
 (3) a collective executive that emerges from the legislature and is responsible to it and
 (4) a separation of head of state and head of government.

Collective responsibility The principle that decisions and policies of the cabinet or council are binding on all members who must support them in public.

■ Semi-presidential systems

Semi-presidential Government consists of a directly elected president, who is accountable to the electorate, and a prime minister, who is appointed by the president from the elected legislature and accountable to it. The president and prime minister share executive power.

The French Fourth Republic suffered from chronic instability caused by party fragmentation and deadlock in the assembly, running through twenty-seven governments in thirteen years. To overcome this problem the French Fifth Republic (1958–) created a **semi-presidential** system with a strong, directly elected president

with substantial powers to act as a stable centre for government. The president was given powers to:

- appoint the prime minister from the elected assembly, and to dismiss him.
- dissolve parliament and call a referendum.
- call an emergency and substantial powers to deal with it.

The prime minister, in turn, appoints a cabinet from the assembly (the president may do this if he is from the same party as the prime minister) which is then accountable to the assembly. In this way, the French system of semi-presidential government combines the strong president of a presidential system with a prime minister and the fused executive and legislative of parliamentary systems .

Fact file 5.2

This system worked smoothly in the early years of the Fifth Republic when the president (de Gaulle) and the prime minister (Debré) were from the same political party. During this time the president was the dominant force. To the surprise of many, the system continued to work well later when the president (Mitterrand) and the prime minister (Chirac) came from different parties – what the French call ‘cohabitation’. In this period, the balance of power tended to swing in favour of the prime minister.

Semi-presidentialism is found in relatively few democracies (Finland, France and Portugal) but it has been adopted by some of the new democracies of central Europe (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia), which have tried to blend parliamentary systems with a comparatively strong, directly elected president. The attraction of an elected president in the ex-communist democracies is to have a single strong public figure who can act as (1) a focus of national feeling, important in a newly independent state that needs a strong central figure and (2) as the centre of executive power to help overcome extreme party fragmentation in the new legislatures.

There are indications of a tendency to move away from semi-presidentialism in some countries as political conditions change. In Finland, there have been attempts to reduce the power of the president. The central European states are still feeling their way, and if they develop strong party systems and consolidate their national identity, they may well move from a semi-presidential to more purely parliamentary forms of government.

■ Presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential systems compared

We are now in a position to compare all three types of government. The main points of comparison are laid out in briefing 5.1. It is clear that there are things to be said both for and against all three as forms of democratic

Briefing 5.1

The three major forms of democratic government: main features

Presidential	Parliamentary	Semi-presidential
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Citizens directly elect the executive for a fixed term 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The executive emerges from a directly elected legislature and is an integral part of it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive power is shared between a president (directly elected) and a prime minister who is appointed or directly elected
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Except for a few joint presidencies, the president alone has executive power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The cabinet shares executive power and must reach compromises to maintain unity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prime minister appoints a cabinet, usually from the ruling party or coalition in the assembly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The presidency is the only office of state with a general responsibility for the affairs of state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The executive is a collegial body (cabinet or council of ministers) that shares responsibility, though the prime minister, premier or chancellor may be much more than <i>primus inter pares</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president often appoints the prime minister and has general responsibility for state affairs, especially foreign affairs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president shares power with a separate and independently elected legislature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The office of the prime minister/premier/chancellor is usually separate from the head of state (whether monarch or president) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president often has emergency powers, including the dissolution of parliament
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neither can remove the other (except in special circumstances such as impeachment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prime minister and cabinet can dissolve parliament and call an election, but the prime minister and cabinet can be removed from office by a parliamentary vote of 'no confidence' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prime minister and cabinet often have special responsibility for domestic and day-to-day affairs of state
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president is directly elected and therefore directly accountable to the people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The prime minister and cabinet are responsible to parliament 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The president is directly elected and directly accountable to the people; the prime minister is responsible either to the president or to parliament
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples: USA, many states in Central and South America 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most stable democracies are parliamentary systems – Australia, Austria, Belgium, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples: Finland (until 1991), France and many post-communist states,

(Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Venezuela), Cyprus, the Philippines, and South Korea	Canada, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Iceland, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, UK	including Belarus, Poland, Russia and Ukraine
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government, but it is also clear that all three can work as effective democratic structures. Whether all three work equally well in countries with different social conditions and political histories is a different matter. One view is that presidential systems can be weak and ineffective, and run into problems of executive–legislative deadlock, leading to attempts to break through the problem by a ‘strong man’ who promises decisive and effective government. Not many countries have managed the presidential system as well as the USA.

At the same time, semi-presidential systems also have their problems. They can produce deadlock between presidents and prime ministers, leading to weak and ineffective government. Not many countries seem to be able to handle the problems of ‘cohabitation’ as well as France. Some parliamentary systems have also produced weak, divided and unstable government, while others have tended towards an over-concentration of power (see [controversy 5.1](#)). It is clear that we should look more closely at the arguments about parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential government.