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Part III

National political systems and institutions in European politics
Introduction

A variety of models of parliamentary government and semi-presidential government can be found in European political systems. Other than Cyprus, no European government follows the presidential model. In many European parliamentary democracies, the head of state is either a king or a queen. This is not an insignificant detail, as practically all parliamentary monarchies have been ‘uninterrupted’ democracies, with the exception of Spain (where the king played a crucial role during the country’s transition to democracy); that is, after the systems of government were established, they have not experienced any authoritarian interlude. It has been observed, by Seymour M. Lipset among others, that by eliminating the need to elect the head of state a significant opportunity for political conflict is removed, often with positive consequences.

This chapter will first identify the major features of the parliamentary and the semi-presidential models. Emphasis will be placed on the continuing relevance of party government. The chapter will then explore some of the most important national differences for each of the two models. Third, it will address the factors responsible for the functioning of both models in some of the European countries. Finally, the issue of the presidentialization of politics will be briefly examined, offering an overall assessment of the power of the heads of government in the two models.

Parliamentarism

The defining feature of a parliamentary model of government is that the parliament creates the government, which will remain in office as long as there is a relationship of confidence with the parliament, not necessarily expressed through a formal vote. Under certain conditions, the government has the power to dissolve parliament or is able to affect its dissolution. There is no popular direct election of any parliamentary government or its respective heads. There are different ways in which the relationship of confidence between the government and the parliament can be established (for an overview, see Müller and Strom 2000a; Pasquino 2005). The most formal and rigid relationship is when an explicit vote of investiture cast by the absolute majority of parliamentarians is required in order for a government to be formed. This is the case in the
Italian Republic and was the case in the Fourth French Republic (1946–58). In a way, it can be said that the explicit vote of investiture has characterized the traditional models of parliamentary government. Another formal and rigid relationship is found in the German requirement that a vote of investiture by the absolute majority of the *Bundestag* directly approves the chancellor, who then proceeds with the formation of the government. Because of its proven efficacy in contributing to governmental stability, this solution has also been introduced in the post-Franco Spanish democratic constitution. Both in Germany and in Spain, the vote of confidence is accompanied and enriched by an important clause: no chancellor or president of the government can be ousted and replaced unless he or she is censured by the absolute majority of the *Bundestag* or the *Congreso de los Diputados* and a successor is approved within 48 hours by an absolute majority of parliamentarians. Both in Germany and Spain, the vote of confidence is accompanied and enriched by an important clause: no chancellor or president of the government can be ousted and replaced unless he or she is censured by the absolute majority of the *Bundestag* or the *Congreso de los Diputados* and a successor is approved within 48 hours by an absolute majority of parliamentarians. Referred to as the ‘constructive vote of no confidence’, this innovative mechanism was devised to avoid governmental instability (much feared, both in Germany and Spain) and to prevent what the Italians call ‘crises in the dark’ – that is, governmental crises that arise suddenly and unexpectedly without any obvious resolution. Such crises may drag on for many weeks, with costly consequences for both the economy and citizens’ trust in their political leaders, parties and institutions.

In some Scandinavian political systems, namely Norway and Sweden, no explicit vote of investiture (or confidence) is required for a government to come into being. Once a prime minister has been appointed and has formed his or her government, it is sufficient that no absolute majority of parliamentarians decides to introduce and pass a motion of censure against the (newly formed) government. Due to some peculiar political aspects of the structure of the party system in these countries (the existence of a strong Labour/Social-Democratic Party and fragmentation among centre-right parties), this condition has allowed the formation and the stable operation of a variety of minority governments (Strom 1990). Finally, the UK – the first and arguably the most significant example of a parliamentary democracy – does not require any explicit vote of investiture, either for the prime minister or for the cabinet. Once the seats won by the various parties have been counted, the leader of the party that has obtained the absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons automatically and immediately becomes prime minister. In the extremely rare event of a House of Commons in which no party obtains an absolute majority of seats (a situation referred to as a ‘hung Parliament’), as was the case in the May 2010 elections, an agreement between numerically indispensable and politically compatible partners is required. However, there is no question that the leader of the larger party will become and remain the prime minister as long as the government retains the confidence and the support of an absolute majority of the members of the House of Commons.

One element common to all varieties of parliamentary governments is the significance not so much of the parliament itself, but rather of the type of relationships established between the parliament and the government. It must be stressed that all such relationships depend on the structure of the parliament, usually, though differently, asymmetric, on the (generally asymmetric) structure of the parliament, on the nature of the party system and consequently on the composition of the government: one-party governments v. multiparty coalition governments. What Walter Bagehot long ago (1867) called the ‘efficient secret’ of the English constitution – the ‘fusion’ between the government and its parliamentary majority whereby the government, supported by its majority, substantially leads the nation – is a reality in some cases and an aspiration in others.

The second common element of parliamentary governments is the problem of the status of the prime minister vis-à-vis his or her ministers. There are two concrete solutions. When the head of government is the leader of the largest party in the coalition (as, for instance, in Germany and Hungary), he or she commands the ministers: *primus super pares*. Alternatively, the head of
government may be the leader of a coalition of parties of more or less the same size: *primus inter pares*. Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, several Balkan countries and Sweden (when the winning coalition is composed of the bourgeois parties) are all instances of this second situation.

**Semi-presidentialism**

Although its significance is often neglected, the precursor and prototype of the model of semi-presidential government was the Weimar Republic (1919–33) (Skach 2005). However, the tragic experience of the Weimar Republic has rarely been analysed from a constitutional perspective. Hence, it is the Fifth French Republic that, since 1958, has truly served as the model of semi-presidential government (Duverger 1980; Ceccanti *et al.* 1996; Elgie 1999). Due to the system’s perceived success, illustrated also by its introduction in Finland and Portugal, semi-presidentialism has gradually been ‘imported’ by several Eastern European (Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Ukraine and, to some extent, although it’s not entirely democratic, Russia), African and Asian (e.g. Taiwan) countries (for a useful review, see the relevant chapters in Pegoraro and Rinella 1997; Rinella 1997; Elgie 1999; Elgie and Moestrup 2007). Although it combines certain aspects of parliamentarism with features of presidentialism, it should be noted that the semi-presidentialist model represents a category of its own and must be defined and analysed as a governmental model in itself.

There are three defining features of semi-presidentialism (Sartori 1994: 121–40; see also Elgie 2004).

First, the president is directly elected by the people and is endowed with significant executive powers. Second, there is a prime minister who must be backed by the confidence of parliament. Third, under some conditions, the president has the power to dissolve parliament. Although there are some minor differences between them, in Europe the political systems of Portugal, Poland and Romania have the necessary elements to be classified as semi-presidential. Finland has recently abolished some of the features of the country’s semi-presidential system (Nousianen 2000; Paloheimo 2001). Although the Austrian president is indeed popularly elected, the country cannot be categorized as semi-presidential because the president does not wield executive powers. Both Russia and Ukraine certainly represent significant examples of semi-presidentialism; however, the democratic quality (and quantity) in these regimes is highly dubious.

**Parliamentary models at work**

Two factors affect the stability and the efficacy of all models of parliamentary government. One involves the institutional mechanism that ties the government to the parliament; the other concerns the format and the dynamics of the party system (Sartori 1976: 128–9, 315–16). The traditional view has been that, with the exception of the United Kingdom, all parliamentary governments are prone to governmental instability, as indicated by frequent changes in the head of government and turnover in governmental coalitions, internal litigiousness and ministerial reshuffles (Almond 1956). These phenomena are bound to have a negative impact on governmental efficacy. In some cases – Portugal after 1910, Spain after 1931 and Weimar Germany (at the time not identified as an instance of semi-presidentialism) – governmental instability has led to the collapse of the democratic framework. In 1958, the Fourth French Republic came to an end in part because of the institutional weakness and instability of its government. Table 17.1 offers a wealth of information concerning the numbers of governments and heads of government, their duration and alternations in a variety of European political systems. The Fourth French Republic was characterized by the shortest duration of governments. Finland, Belgium
Table 17.1 Number of governments and heads of government in European democracies (1945–2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. of cabinets</th>
<th>No. of cabinet parties (mean)</th>
<th>Duration in days (mean)</th>
<th>No. of PMs</th>
<th>Age of PMs (mean)</th>
<th>Cabinet seat share</th>
<th>No. of alternations</th>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>536</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>51.9</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>468</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>52</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>56</td>
<td>56.6</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
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<td>Italy I</td>
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<td>335</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>52.0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>61</td>
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<td>45</td>
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<td>511</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>54.6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>68.9</td>
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<td>1,266</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52.3</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>360</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49.5</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Romania</td>
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<td>427</td>
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<td>55</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>56</td>
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Source: Updated and calculated from Strøm et al. (2003); ParlGov database (www.parlgov.org); Pasquino and Valbruzzi (2011). Data for Central Eastern European countries, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Spain exist only after their democratization.

and Italy (1946–92) exhibit the highest number of prime ministers. Together with Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the Fourth Republic and Italy (1946–92) experienced no complete alternation in government.

Painfully aware of the need to avoid any governmental instability after the Second World War, the framers of the German constitution devised a truly brilliant institutional innovation: the constructive vote of no confidence. Later (1977–9), this mechanism was also introduced in the post-Franco Spanish democratic constitution. The constructive vote of no confidence deserves detailed examination. In both Germany and Spain, the head of government (the chancellor and the president of the government, respectively) can assume office only after he or she has obtained
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the absolute majority of the votes in the Bundestag or the Congreso de los Diputados. These leaders can be replaced only if, following an explicit motion of censure (no confidence), their successor wins an explicit vote of confidence from the absolute majority of the deputies. Otherwise, the chancellor or the president of the government can continue in office for some time, or can ask for and obtain the dissolution of the lower house of parliament if it is unable to agree on a new head of government. The constructive vote of no confidence is a very demanding institutional mechanism. In practice, it has been utilized twice in Germany and twice in Spain, but it has only reached a successful conclusion once, in Germany. In 1972, the German Christian Democrats (Christlich Demokratische Partei, CDU) led by Rainer Barzel initiated the procedure of the constructive vote of no confidence against the Social-Democratic chancellor Willy Brandt. They failed to defeat him by two votes. New elections followed, which were won by a coalition between the Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD) and the Liberals (Freiheitliche Demokratische Partei, FDP). In September 1982, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals, who had decided to abandon their coalition with the Social Democrats, first voted against the incumbent Social-Democratic chancellor Helmut Schmidt, then replaced him with the former regional president (Ministerpräsident) of the Rhineland-Palatinate, Helmut Kohl. Even though the entire procedure was carried out in complete accordance with constitutional requirements, in order to acquire full political legitimacy the CDU and the FDP decided to call early elections in March 1983, which they duly won.

In Spain, the constructive vote of no confidence has been attempted twice. The first time it was used was in 1981 by Felipe González. The young leader of the Socialist Party, although he was aware that he could not win, wanted to display his oratorical and political talents by challenging the incumbent president of the composite multiparty governmental coalition, Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo. González’s performance was quite impressive, but he could not muster enough votes to defeat the president. The second time, in 1987, the young, newly elected leader of the Alianza Popular, Antonio Hernández Mancha, tried to obtain a similar result, seeking to enhance his visibility and consolidate his grip over the party. His poor performance against González put an end to Hernández’s political career.

Overall, the mechanism of the constructive vote of no confidence can prove to be incisive and decisive in two ways. First, whether it is used to pursue the goal of replacing an incumbent chancellor or simply as a challenge to the president even when there is no chance of success, it provides an opportunity to evaluate the qualities of the challengers. Second, its technical requirements serve as a deterrent to those who may be capable of provoking a governmental crisis but unable to resolve it. Indeed, the ‘deterrence function’ of the constructive vote of no confidence quite effectively discourages ambitious but outmatched challengers and should not be underestimated. Because they lack sufficient political and parliamentary support, under certain circumstances such challengers might be able to defeat the incumbents but would not have enough votes (the absolute majority of the lower house) to replace them. In Spain, the constructive vote of no confidence can be said to have been responsible for the formation and survival of five minority governments (Tudela Aranda 2012: 209, fn. 14).

In terms of the mechanisms governing the creation and the dynamics of parliamentary governments, the lack of a need for an explicit vote of confidence has facilitated the formation and the permanence in office of many minority governments in the cases of Norway (Narud and Strøm 2000) and Sweden (Bergman 2000). Conversely, the need for an explicit vote of investiture by both houses in a symmetric bicameral parliament has obliged the majority of Italian governmental coalitions to be oversized (Cotta and Verzichelli 2000). Thus far, even non-partisan Italian governments (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012) have only been possible when they were able to ‘float’ above oversized parliamentary support. Because the government is obliged to
resign if defeated in either house, the Italian symmetric bicameral parliament has proven to be an aggravating factor in the extraordinary weakness of a number of Italian governments. For example, Romano Prodi was defeated (and ousted) twice as prime minister: in October 1998, by a vote taken in the House of Deputies, and in January 2008, by a vote taken in the Senate. In both cases, had it been available, the constructive vote of no confidence would have saved Prodi’s governments due to the lack of any alternative majoritarian coalition. Table 17.2 provides an instructive overview of the variety of types of governments and coalitions in European parliamentary democracies. Minimum winning coalitions are the most common; however, although it may be a phenomenon of the past, the ‘difficult’ democracies of Finland, the Fourth French Republic and Italy have all experienced numerous oversized coalitions. Somewhat surprisingly, oversized coalitions have been rather infrequent in Eastern European political systems, as shown in Table 17.2. They are clearly outnumbered by the combined total of minority governments and minimum winning coalitions. It should also be noted that in Eastern European democracies there have been very few technocratic or caretaker governments.

The second factor affecting the functioning of all models of parliamentary government involves the format and the dynamics of the party system. Very few exceptions aside, parliamentary government means party government. According to Richard S. Katz, party government must fulfil three conditions:

Firstly, all major governmental decisions must be taken by people chosen in elections conducted along party lines, or by individuals appointed by and responsible to such people. . . . Secondly, policy must be decided within the governing party, when there is a ‘monocolour’ government, or by negotiation among parties when there is a coalition. Policy . . . must also be made along party lines, so that each party may be held collectively accountable for ‘its’ position. . . . Third, the highest officials (e.g., cabinet ministers and especially the prime minister) must be selected within their parties and be responsible to the people through their parties.

(Katz 1986: 43)

Generally speaking, these features of party government are found in all types of parliamentary democracies and affect competition and coalitions among the parties. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that party government is also favourable for alternation in office (Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2011) and can positively influence electoral competition.

Between the 1920s and 2010, the United Kingdom had a two-party system characterized by a fair amount of alternation in office. However, it must be noted that the protracted tenure of Conservative governments – 18 consecutive years, from 1979 to 1997 (Margaret Thatcher 1979–90, John Major 1990–7) – has led some scholars to question the relevance of full and frequent governmental turnovers as a positive feature of democratic regimes, while others have worried about the consequences of their protracted absence. Perhaps what should be stressed is that British elections have always remained quite competitive, and that the most important actors (party leaders, activists, the mass media, public opinion and, above all, the voters) have behaved as though alternation continues to be a likely outcome. When it finally occurred in the 1990s, it was followed by the 13-year tenure of New Labour in office through three consecutive electoral victories: 1997, 2001 and 2005. The lack of a majority in the May 2010 elections led to the novel formation of a coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Since 1982, only the leaders of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) and of the People’s Party (Partido Popular, PP) have had access to the Palace of
Table 17.2 Types of governments and coalitions in Western Europe (1945–2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single-party majority</th>
<th>Single-party minority</th>
<th>Minority coalition</th>
<th>Minimum winning coalition</th>
<th>Oversized coalition</th>
<th>Technocrat, caretaker and interim</th>
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<td>Austria</td>
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<td>18</td>
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Source: Updated and calculated from Strøm et al. (2003); ParlGov database (www.parlgov.org). Data for Central Eastern European countries, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Spain exist only after their democratization.

Moncloa, the residence of the Spanish prime minister (Presidente del Gobierno). Although other parties have won seats in the lower house, the electoral and political competition in Spain has fundamentally remained ‘bipartisan’ and has been characterized by governmental turnover. The PSOE led the government from 1982 to 1996, winning four consecutive elections. Subsequently, the PP won two elections, followed by two victories for the PSOE. In November 2012, the PP returned to office. On the whole, in Spain there have been four single-party majority governments (two led by the Socialists and two by the PP) and eight single-party minority governments supported by regional parties. Without exception, all these governments have been strictly party governments. The much-feared governmental instability has not emerged in Spain.

Nor has instability been experienced in Germany, where there have been four coalitional patterns: CDU/CSU+FDP (1949–66; 1982–98; 2009–13), CDU/CSU+SPD (1966–9; 2005–9;

The Italian experience is located at the opposite end of the spectrum. At the last count, there were 63 governments from 1946 up until 2014 (for a comparison with all other European parliamentary democracies until 2000, see Müller and Strøm 2000b: 585). Not even during the second phase of the Italian Republic (that is, beginning in 1994) has the situation improved: there have been 11 governments with an average tenure of about 11 months. Thanks to his sizeable electoral victories, Berlusconi has led the two longest-lasting Italian governments, but in neither case did he succeed in completing the entire parliamentary term. There was no alternation in office from 1946 to 1992, although there was alternation in every election from 1994 to 2008. Until 1992, all governments were party governments; in contrast, between 1992 and 2011 there were two non-partisan governments. All prime ministers until 1992 were professional politicians, but starting in 1993 five of the ten prime ministers have had no previous political experience. Indeed, only one of them (the former Communist Massimo D’Alema) could be considered a professional politician. In summary, the Italian model of parliamentary government has not yet found adequate mechanisms for the stabilization of the executive. The fragmentation of the party system continues to be a major obstacle to the formation of stable and effective governments.

There is no doubt that governmental stability is the most important precondition for decision-making efficacy. If we were to construct a continuum from governmental stability to governmental instability, one pole would feature Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom as the most stable of the parliamentary models. At the other pole, one would find the Fourth French Republic, Italy, the Netherlands and Belgium. Scandinavian countries would occupy the intermediate positions. In addition to the role of parties and the party system, the stability of governments can be evaluated with reference to two important elements. One concerns the tenure of the individual heads of government; the other is based on the cohesion of the governmental coalitions. From 1949 to 2014, Germany has had only eight chancellors: Konrad Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard, Kurt Kiesinger, Willy Brandt, Helmut Schmidt, Helmut Kohl, Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel. It is no wonder that this remarkable governmental stability has created the necessary conditions for a significant level of decision-making efficacy. From 1982 to 2013, Spain had only four presidents of the government (González, Aznar, Zapatero and Rajoy), and only two parties occupied governmental offices. The British case is slightly different. From 1945 to 2010, either the Labour Party or the Conservatives were able to form governments. The 2010 governmental coalition between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats represents an important exception (excellently described in Hazell and Yong 2012).

Interestingly, between 1949 and 2013 there were more prime ministers in the United Kingdom, 13, than chancellors in Germany, 8. One additional element must be stressed. All three of these stable countries have had key instances of long tenures by the same head of government. Certainly, the lengthy terms in office of Konrad Adenauer (1949–63) and Felipe González (1982–96) made a major contribution to the consolidation of their respective democratic regimes. The same can probably be said of Alcide De Gasperi’s tenure (1946–53) in Italy. Helmut Kohl’s longest-lasting tenure (1982–98), in addition to strengthening Germany’s role in the European Union, allowed the quick, perhaps hasty and costly, but politically successful reunification of Germany. In the United Kingdom, the two longest-lasting prime ministers, the Conservative Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) and Labour’s Tony Blair (1997–2007), both drastically reshaped the boundaries between the state and society, redefining the policies of the
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country. Interestingly, both Conservative and Labour members of government and parliamentarians retained enough strength to oblige both of these leaders to resign. The length of time that the Conservative Party and New Labour have controlled governmental office has also raised certain questions concerning potentially negative consequences (in terms of the exercise of political power and the formulation of public policies) stemming from the lack of alternation (see the relevant chapters in Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2011).

At the opposite end of the continuum indicating the stability/instability of governments and coalitions, one finds the two most traditional parliamentary democracies of the Fourth French Republic (1946–58) and Italy (1948–present). Indeed, in the 12-year period of its duration, the Fourth Republic saw more governments come and go than Italy did. This fact goes some way towards explaining the collapse of the Fourth Republic and perhaps also the relatively longue durée of the Italian Republic. While it is very true that Italian governments have rarely been stable, the governmental coalitions have each lasted for more than a decade: centrism (1948–60), centre-left (1962–75) and pentapartito (1980–92). Between 1976 and 1979, there was a Christian-Democratic monocolour government supported by a large parliamentary majority. The post-1994 phase has been characterized by a bipolar competition in which both coalitions have been subject to variations in their composition, although less so for the centre-right dominated by Silvio Berlusconi’s leadership and party. Interestingly, Berlusconi has led both the shortest government of this period (seven and a half months) and the longest government ever (1,410 days between 2001 and 2005). Over his long political career, he has been opposed by no fewer than five centre-left leaders – Achille Occhetto, Romano Prodi, Francesco Rutelli, Walter Veltroni and Pier Luigi Bersani – politically outlasting them all.

Generally speaking, two factors are responsible for the longevity (or brevity) of parliamentary governments. The first factor is institutional, featuring two components: electoral and constitutional. The British plurality system, unique in Europe, has a powerful impact on the country’s party system, essentially resulting in one-party governments eager to retain office and capable of doing so. Even the Spanish proportional electoral system applied in small constituencies has strongly influenced the possibility that a party will be able to obtain an absolute majority of seats and form a single-party government. By enabling (or even encouraging) party fragmentation and thus multiparty governmental coalitions, Italian electoral systems have been more than partially responsible for the short tenure of almost all of the country’s governments. In any case, unless mitigated by specific clauses (as in Germany and Spain), proportional representation (PR) is generally conducive to the creation of multiparty coalition governments that are prone to instability (for an early but still useful exploration of the formation and functioning of such governments, see Laver and Schofield 1991). There is no doubt that PR is also responsible for the short tenures of the governments in the Benelux countries and of their prime ministers. Moreover, the fragmentation of the party system often necessitates an extremely lengthy process of consultation and bargaining, often through so-called formateurs, before the formation of a government (in which the political power of the prime minister is limited). The constitutional factor affecting the duration of a government involves the rules connecting the government and parliament in a relationship of confidence. The need for the government to obtain an explicit vote of investiture and the possibility of being defeated even by a random parliamentary vote considerably weaken governmental coalitions, especially multiparty coalitions.

The second, perhaps more important, factor influencing parliamentary governments involves the format of the party system. Not surprisingly, the number of parties and the type of competition both have a significant impact on the functioning and the duration of parliamentary governments. Limited and moderate multiparty systems, in Sartori’s terminology (1976: 126–7, 173–4, 178–85) – that is, those that include no more than five parties, contain no anti-system
parties and are based on bipolar competition – offer the best conditions for a parliamentary government. Germany fits perfectly into this mould, as do Austria and Sweden. In contrast, extreme and polarized party systems composed of six or more parties, including an anti-system party, that are based on multipolar competition are bound to encounter many operational problems. For example, a polarized party system cannot offer voters a reasonable promise of alternation. Both the Fourth French Republic and Italy until 1992 represented cases of polarized pluralism. The Fourth Republic eventually collapsed, and its party system was completely restructured by the electoral and institutional constraints of the Fifth Republic (Reif 1987). In Italy, polarized pluralism faded away, but it has not been replaced by a newly restructured and consolidated party system. Since 1994, the dominant feature of the Italian party system has been the process of deconstruction, consisting of frequent, volatile and indecisive mergers and splits among weak and internally divided parties.

Paradoxically, from time to time in parliamentary governments, the risk of governmental instability is counteracted by governing coalitions that are held together by the fear of defeat in the next elections. What follows may be even worse: prolonged phases of immobility and stagnation in which no decisions are taken, no problems are tackled, no solutions are found and the overall situation degenerates. The political class protects itself; it becomes older, self-referential and even less capable of understanding the changes in progress. The five-party Italian coalition of 1980–92 (pentapartito) ended in disgrace precisely because it had exhausted all its potentialities and was unable to promote the circulation of new personnel and ideas. Its stagnation opened the door to the collapse of the party system. The dynamics of Belgium and the Netherlands are not too different from the Italian case. Both countries feature a fragmented party system, and both encounter difficulties in the formation of stable governments. Neither system is capable of providing and maintaining a significant amount of political and institutional support for its oft-changing prime ministers (Keman 2008).

Although an in-depth comparison would have to focus on institutional components as well, it appears that several Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) have manifested similar problems of governmental instability stemming from weak parties and unconsolidated party systems (Kitschelt et al. 1999). However, Table 17.1 does not show as clear a connection between the number of parties in the governmental coalition and the duration of the respective government. In fact, there are certain minor differences among these Eastern countries in this regard. The governments of Latvia, Lithuania and Romania have been the most short lived, whereas Bulgaria and Hungary have had relatively long-lasting governments, a fact that appears to be related to or dependent on the number of parties. In many ways – number of prime ministers and alternation in office, for example – the new, often ‘difficult’ democracies of Eastern Europe seem to have adopted Western European political systems, joining the mainstream with their parliamentary and semi-presidential models of government.

Semi-presidential models at work

Two major factors must be seriously taken into account when analysing the workings of the semi-presidential model of government. The first is whether the presidential and parliamentary elections are simultaneous. The second concerns the type of electoral system used for the election of parliament. Acting on his desire to create a more important role for the president of France that would enable the officeholder to transcend partisan conflicts and bickering, de Gaulle established a seven-year term for the French presidency in 1958. This would prevent any electoral overlapping with parliamentary elections, which were to be held every five years. This is not
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the case in the other significant examples of semi-presidentialism (Portugal, Poland, Romania and Ukraine); in all of these countries, the terms of the president and of parliament are five and four years, respectively. However, because the president has the constitutional power to dissolve the parliament under more or less precisely defined conditions, the temporal overlapping of parliamentary and presidential elections is always a distinct possibility. Moreover, in the wake of the longest French cohabitation (1997–2002), the Gaullist president Jacques Chirac and the Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin reached a somewhat controversial agreement to reduce the presidential term to five years. All semi-presidential presidents are popularly elected through a double-ballot system. In France, parliamentary elections are held by means of a run-off majority system, whereas Portugal, Poland, Romania and Ukraine use different varieties of proportional electoral systems. The double-ballot presidential election is likely to create and encourage the bipolarization of the electorate. In France, this bipolarization is further supported and sustained by the majority system utilized for parliamentary elections, but it can be somewhat weakened by parliamentary elections conducted according to a proportional system. This has especially been the case in Poland.

In the Fifth Republic, the political coincidence of the presidential and parliamentary majorities prevailed from 1958 to 1974. President de Gaulle chose and replaced three prime ministers. In his shorter term (1969–74), President Pompidou appointed two prime ministers. Because he was the leader of the minor party in the coalition with the Gaullists, President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was politically obliged to appoint two Gaullist prime ministers. The Socialist president François Mitterrand enjoyed a correspondence between the political majority that had elected him and the parliamentary majority of his coalition between 1981 and 1986 and again between 1988 and 1993. As a result, he was able to freely appoint two and three prime ministers in these respective periods. Cohabitation made its first (1986–8) and its second (1993–5) appearance under President Mitterrand. In the first case, the president was obliged to appoint the Gaullist Jacques Chirac as prime minister (whom he subsequently defeated in the 1988 presidential election). In the second case, he appointed another Gaullist, Edouard Balladur. The longest cohabitation, between the Gaullist president Jacques Chirac and the Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin, was the consequence of an unnecessary and hazardous dissolution of the National Assembly by President Chirac. It took place from 1997 to 2002, lasting the entire parliamentary term. Although French cohabitations had not been tempestuous, the two leaders decided to reform the constitution along the lines described above in order to make cohabitation, if not impossible, at least highly unlikely. It was agreed that the presidential election would precede the parliamentary election so that the voters would be encouraged to offer the victorious president a parliamentary majority he or she could work with. In the three elections following the constitutional reform (2002, 2007 and 2012), all the presidents, the Gaullists Chirac and Sarkozy and the Socialist Hollande, have succeeded in winning a solid parliamentary majority that has created the necessary conditions for them to govern to the best of their personal and political capabilities.

Among the other examples of semi-presidential models, two are especially interesting: Portugal and Poland. In both countries, semi-presidentialism can be considered to have positively contributed to the establishment and consolidation of the new democratic regimes after a long authoritarian regime and lengthy Communist rule, respectively. It is true that some of the functional problems identified in the case of France have emerged in Portugal and Poland as well. However, it is also true that the semi-presidential model has allowed a fair degree of institutional flexibility. It has responded to political challenges and has accommodated political changes (for Portugal, see Magone 2000). Both countries have experienced periods of coincidence between the popular majority that elected the president and the parliamentary majority.
Both countries have also had to deal with periods of cohabitation in which the popularly elected president has been obliged to negotiate with a parliamentary majority of a different colour. In Portugal, the Socialist president Mario Soares (1985–91) found himself in an uninterrupted situation of cohabitation with the Social-Democratic prime minister Aníbal Cavaco Silva throughout both of his presidential terms. Soares’ successor, the Socialist Jorge Sampaio (1995–2005), was blessed with a Socialist parliamentary majority led by Antonio Guterres during his first term, but his second term was almost entirely passed in cohabitation with two centre-right prime ministers. Ironically, in 2005 the former Social-Democratic prime minister Cavaco Silva won the presidential election, only to find himself in cohabitation with the Socialist prime minister José Socrates. This cohabitation came to an end when Cavaco Silva’s re-election to the presidency in 2011 was followed by a Social-Democratic victory in the parliamentary elections (data and interpretations can be found in Costa Lobo 2012).

The Polish institutional circumstances, evolution and trajectory have been much more troubled and significantly more complicated: ‘Some form of divided government has been the rule rather than the exception’ (Krok-Paszkowska 2001: 128). The difficult implementation of the semi-presidential model in Poland has been the consequence of the combination of certain political factors with specific institutional rules. One of the two most important political factors was the personality of the first president of the Polish Republic, the founder and leader of the Solidarity Movement, Lech Walesa. The second political factor concerned the rapid dissolution of the Solidarity Movement, which was therefore unable to provide the indispensable parliamentary power base for the president. There were also two institutional rules that contributed considerably to the difficult implementation of the Polish semi-presidential model. First, there is the fact that ‘presidential and parliamentary elections have never been held concurrently’ (Krok-Paszkowska 2001: 132). Second, part of the blame must be assigned to the exaggeratedly proportional electoral system. The fragmentation of the Polish party system has inevitably made the formation of homogeneous, cohesive and stable parliamentary coalitions practically impossible. Consequently, even after minor modifications of the electoral law, only rarely have the presidents of the Polish Republic enjoyed the support of a parliament majority from their party or coalition. This was briefly (January 1996–September 1997) the case for the former Communist Alexander Kwasnieski in his first presidential term, and then for a longer period between 2001 and 2005, spanning almost his entire second term. All subsequent developments have been characterized by somewhat confused instances of cohabitation in which it is extremely difficult to identify precise and regular patterns.

For Romania and Ukraine as well, one can legitimately conclude that there will always be the likelihood of a tug of war between presidents and their prime ministers. The respective power of these leaders depends, as would be expected, on their ability to control a parliamentary majority and on whether they are the recognized leader of a large and stable party. As in Poland, this has rarely been the case.

Only the French example has facilitated the concentration of political and institutional power. However, for a variety of reasons, including the need to create electoral and governing coalitions and the nature of French parties, there have not been dangerous consequences. In the case of Portugal, especially after 1985, there have been several instances of presidents enjoying a cohesive parliamentary majority. None of these instances has led to attempts to impose controversial decisions and policies or to make the opposition’s lives especially difficult. If anything, the Polish system has experienced the opposite problem: insufficient concentration of power, which resulted in attempts by the nervous President Walesa to overstep the limits of his authority.
Those who would prefer to interpret the semi-presidential model as the institutional framework in which strong government should be the rule and, if possible, cohabitation should be a rare event, can also find justification in the data. Unlike Poland, both France and Portugal have had long phases of ‘unified’ government. Indeed, in the 55-year period since its inauguration, the Fifth Republic has experienced only nine years of cohabitation – less than one year in five. In Portugal, cohabitation has been quite frequent since 1985: 13 years out of 28; this explains why Marina Costa Lobo (2012) has emphasized the ‘protagonism of the prime minister’. Leaving aside a few inevitable tensions of a political nature, the Portuguese cohabitations have not resulted in any significant damage to the political framework, any obstacles to alternation in office or any infringement on the quality or quantity of democracy. In fact, there are several positive aspects of semi-presidentialism. First, both when the president enjoys a parliamentary majority in the lower house and when there is cohabitation, it is always possible for the voters to hold their rulers accountable, as they can easily ascertain who has produced (or not) each decision, policy or action. Second, even when there is cohabitation, the semi-presidential model provides for effective government and clear accountability. The prime minister and his or her majority can still govern without constraints, and the voters can ascertain who should be held accountable for what is done, not done or badly done.

The practical functioning of the semi-presidential model is significantly affected by the party system. The relative advantage of the French variant is that the electoral run–off majority system strongly encourages the formation of parliamentary coalitions. In contrast, the proportional electoral system utilized in Poland produces a fragmented multiparty system that is rarely capable of providing a strong parliamentary majority for (or against) the president. The political and constitutional evolution of Romania and Ukraine has not produced a precise pattern. Both of these regimes are still in flux; their presidents and prime ministers continually challenge each other to the verge of undemocratic outcomes. The struggle between Yanukovich and Tymoshenko has provided clear evidence of the unsettled rules of the game in Ukraine. On this continuum, Portugal is located in the middle, between France and Poland: its party system is not fragmented, and the two major parties are strong enough to be coalition-makers. Often, the Portuguese Social–Democratic Party has not even needed a coalition partner. Not surprisingly, the functioning of the model of semi-presidential government is significantly affected by the format and the dynamics of the party system. Nevertheless, we have seen that there are fundamental institutional differences between parliamentary models and semi-presidential systems. These differences are not cancelled out by the impact of the party systems, and they deserve detailed investigation.

The personalization/presidentialization of politics

No presentation and discussion of European (parliamentary and semi-presidential) governments can avoid the emerging issue of the presidentialization of politics (Rose and Suleiman 1980; Jones 1991; King 2002; Poguntke and Webb 2005). In principle, parliamentary governments do not seek to encourage either the personalization or the presidentialization of politics. Nor should they attribute an exaggeratedly important role to the head of government. On the other hand, the direct popular election of the semi-presidential president was designed precisely to provide the president with a stronger popular legitimation that would enable him or her to exercise greater political and institutional power. The core of parliamentary democracies is the robustness of the relationship between the parliament and the government. Even in the United Kingdom, the birthplace of parliamentary government and arguably still its most revered
example, the emphasis has classically not been placed on the prime minister, but rather on the
cabinet. Indeed, there is a question of whether recent trends have produced a deviation from
the unwritten traditional expectations of cabinet government. All this said, however, for a variety
of reasons a significant number of studies have discussed both the personalization and the
presidentialization of politics over the past decade. On the whole, the results are inconclusive
(for the most accurate of these studies, see Karvonen 2010).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that several significant developments and transformations of
the political sphere have taken place in contemporary democracies that seem to point towards
greater importance for the head of government. Two quite different but important changes
have been the decline of political parties and the development of the many forms of technological
communication synthesized as ‘Politics 2.0’. In all likelihood, both of these changes have been
exaggerated. It is true that they may have contributed to enhanced political visibility for heads
of government, especially during electoral campaigns (King 2002, compared with Jones 1991).
On the whole, however, the seemingly unstoppable tendency to sensationalize politics through
television and social networks has not thus far inevitably and irreversibly led to the
presidentialization of politics. The power of heads of government continues to be the product
and consequence of the combination of three major factors: (1) the amount of control exerted
by leaders over their parties; (2) their personal and political capabilities; and (3) their ability to
win consecutive elections and to remain in office.

The exploration of European governments that has been presented in this chapter can be
synthesized in three robust generalizations. First, ‘parliamentary politics is still much more about
parties than it is about individual politicians’ (Karvonen 2010: 106). Second, parliamentary models
of governments (because of their flexibility) and semi-presidential models (because of their
adaptability) have both proven to be capable of accommodating and absorbing old and new
challenges and transformations. Third, although political culture is always variable, many of the
European political systems do not provide settings in which political leaders can stress the
importance of their personalities and promote them above their parties’ interests. In any case,
the evidence is inconclusive, and the development of other forms of political participation may
actually counteract the emphasis on the personal qualities of political leaders.

Conclusions

European political systems, old and new, are and will continue to be (notwithstanding negligible
exceptions) party democracies. Hence, their governments will be party governments. Indeed,
only party leaders, usually those with lengthy careers within their organizations (the glaring
exception being Italy after 1994), have been in the position to acquire, maintain and exercise
governmental power. In Europe – West and East, North and South – the most effective path
to the office of the head of government goes through the political parties. The consequence is
that heads of government who can rely on the support of a strong party will be more capable
of governing and more successful than political leaders turned heads of government whose parties
are small and who are obliged to enter into a composite coalition. When heads of government
perceive that the weaknesses of their party will make governing quite difficult, they may attempt
to enhance the authority of their office, generally to no avail. They also attempt, although less
often than expected, to emphasize their personal qualities. However, the presidentialization of
politics does not seem to have become a widespread phenomenon; certainly, it has not helped
those heads of government whose parties remain weak and whose heterogeneous coalitions are
conflict-ridden. The flexibility and adaptability of parliamentary and semi-presidential models
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of government have in almost all cases provided sufficient time to implement the necessary remedies for the functional problems encountered by the heads of government. Alternation in office has fulfilled the demands of democratic rule.

Bibliography

Gianfranco Pasquino


