Political executives

Andeweg, R.B.; Adrian Vatter, Rachel Freiburghaus

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Rudy B. Andeweg (†)

INTRODUCTION

Few political institutions are more important for life in a particular polity than the political executive, but unfortunately few political institutions are also less clearly defined. Most used terms for this institution imply a definition in terms of a function: executive, government and administration. However, a perfect match between institution and function is rare, and the execution of decisions made by other institutions may not even be the most important function of modern political executives. A definition in terms of its position may come closer to our intuitive understanding of what a political executive is in a representative democracy: it is, in Bagehot's (1963 [1867], p. 68) famous description of the British cabinet, 'a hyphen which joins, a buckle which fastens' the political arena to the administrative apparatus. In the United Kingdom (UK) and elsewhere, it is the most senior constitutional body that gives direction to the bureaucracy and that is legitimized to do so because of a direct or indirect electoral mandate. Some have advocated a broader definition in recognition of those actors who share in the political executive's work without having its legitimacy, such as political advisers and policy consultants (the 'cabinet system' or the 'central executive territory'), while others have sought a narrower focus in recognition of power differences within the political executive (the 'core executive' or the 'Centre of Government'). There is no ready solution to the problem of definition, but what I have suggested may at least serve as a starting point for this chapter's exploration of some of the literature's most prominent typologies and themes regarding the political executive.

In doing so we shall look at the political executive both from within – its internal dynamics – and from without – its external relations. With regard to the external relations, there is a range of institutions and actors with which the executive interacts, from international relations with other states and organizations to intergovernmental relations with subnational levels of government, and from interest groups to bureaucratic agencies. Here, we focus on the relations with parliament or congress, as these 'executive–legislative relations' have given rise to the most influential typology and to the fiercest debate regarding the political executive.

EXECUTIVE–LEGISLATIVE RELATIONS: FADING DISTINCTIONS?

The Great Debate: Presidentialism versus Parliamentarism

The distinction between presidential systems of government and parliamentary systems of government is founded on two aspects of executive–legislative relations: dual versus single legitimacy and fixed versus flexible terms of office. In a presidential system, both the chief executive[1] and the legislature are popularly elected in elections that may be simultaneous,

but that are independent from each other. Hence, both can claim democratic legitimacy, or in the terminology of agency theory, both are agents of the same principal: the people (Strøm, 2000). In a parliamentary system, only the legislature is popularly elected and subsequently (s)elects the executive, or: the principal (the people) delegates to a single agent (the legislature), which in turn delegates to the executive. The second aspect of the distinction follows logically from the first: as in a presidential system both chief executive and legislature have democratic legitimacy, the one is not subordinate to the other, and thus neither can bring down the other. Hence their terms of office are fixed. In a parliamentary system, by contrast, only the legislature is democratically legitimated and hence there is a hierarchy between the legislature and the executive: the executive can exercise its constitutional powers only as long as the majority of the legislature allows it. If the legislature withdraws its confidence in the executive, the executive must either resign or appeal to the legislature's principal, the people, by dissolving the legislature which triggers early elections.

The contrast between the two regime types depicted above may be too stark. In most presidential systems the legislature is not entirely without influence over the composition of the executive (e.g., impeachment and senatorial confirmation), and many parliamentary systems are not without constraints over the legislature's power to censure the government (the constructive vote of no confidence) or the executive's power to dissolve the legislature (fixed-term legislation). But these are the kind of exceptions that prove the rule.

For many authors, dual legitimacy and fixed terms do not suffice to define a system as either presidential or parliamentary. The record is held by Verney (1959), who lists no fewer than 11 distinguishing features, such as parliamentary regimes having a head of state (e.g., constitutional monarch and president) separate from the head of government, while the two roles are fused in presidential systems. However, if a parliamentary system follows the presidential custom of combining the two functions (such as South Africa does), it is not automatically regarded as having transformed into a presidential system. This aspect correlates empirically with the distinction between the two systems, but it is not an essential characteristic. The same can be said of some other characteristics mentioned by Verney (1959), such as whether government ministers must be members of the legislature (parliamentarism) or are not allowed to have a seat in the legislature (presidentialism). Even Verney's long list is not exhaustive. For example, the existence of term limits is also associated with a presidential system by some authors.

An additional definitional element that does feature prominently in the literature is whether the powers of the executive are vested in a single individual (presidentialism) or in a collective (parliamentarism). Theoretically, however, it is feasible to design a political system in which it is not a person but a collective that is popularly elected and that cannot be removed by the legislature. In fact, there have been a few such cases, such as the *colegiado system* that operated in Uruguay from 1919 to 1933, and in a purer version from 1952 to 1967 (see for example Altman, 2008, pp. 488–98). Moreover, it is an aspect of the political executive's internal dynamics rather than an aspect of executive–legislative relations, and I shall also return to it in that section of this chapter.

The relative merits of presidentialism and parliamentarism have been fiercely debated. The debate started in the Convention that designed the United States Constitution, but in recent times it was rekindled by Juan Linz's seminal essays *The Perils of Presidentialism* and *The Virtues of Parliamentarism* (Linz, 1990a, 1990b, also see 1994). The core of Linz's argument is that a presidential system provides incentives for conflict – such as the winner-takes-all

nature of presidential elections and the fact that the executive and the legislature can both claim electoral legitimacy – but lacks conflict resolution mechanisms. Any conflict between the political executive and the legislature results in a stalemate at least until the next elections. The only way to break the deadlock is by terminating the presidential system, which usually implies a breakdown of democracy. A parliamentary system, on the other hand, not only contains conflict resolution mechanisms in the form of the motion of no confidence and early elections, but it also provides options to prevent conflict through coalition formation. The conclusion, in Linz's (1990a, p. 52) often cited words, is that:

> A careful comparison of parliamentarism as such with presidentialism as such leads to the conclusion that, on balance, the former is more conducive to stable democracy than the latter. This conclusion applies particularly to nations with deep political cleavages and numerous parties; for such countries, parliamentarism generally offers a better hope of preserving democracy.

Tsebelis (2002, p. 75) sides with Linz, asserting that 'there is one result in the literature that is corroborated in all analyses: democracy survives better under parliamentarism than under presidentialism', but a recent review of 24 studies testing Linz's hypothesis (Hicken et al., 2022) finds unequivocal support in only seven of these studies (e.g., Stepan & Skach, 1993), contingent support in a further eight studies (e.g., Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997) and no relationship between regime type and democratic breakdown in nine studies (see Chapter 24; also see Power & Gasiorowski, 1997). Moreover, some studies that did find a correlation between presidentialism and democratic breakdown argue that it is spurious 'what causes presidential democracies' brittleness is the fact that presidential institutions have been adopted in countries where any form of democracy is likely to perish' (Cheibub, 2007, p. 2).

To some extent, the variety of conclusions reached by different studies may be due to the choice of the historical period or geographical region that was studied. However, a more fundamental problem is that the underlying mechanisms of parliamentarism and presidentialism may not be as distinct as Linz suggested. In a direct reaction to Linz's 1990 articles, Horowitz (1990) pointed out that parliamentary systems of the Westminster variety exhibit the same winner-takes-all characteristics that are regarded as perilous in presidential systems. And the other way around, in many presidential systems no party can win a legislative majority, forcing a president who wants to govern effectively to form and maintain the type of coalition that is regarded as a virtue of parliamentarism (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997, p. 454).

Consequently, the systemic distinction between presidentialism and parliamentarism does not suffice, and we need additional variables such as the party system and the electoral system, to which others have added, for example, the powers of the president (the more problematic; Shugart & Carey, 1992) and the degree of party discipline (Cheibub, 2007; Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997). Currently, the literature seems to converge on the conclusion that:

> While formation and dissolution mechanisms for presidential and parliamentary systems remain distinct, there is now much fruitful work being done in the area of executive–legislative relations where scholars can speak to one another 'across the institutional ocean' and we see even more areas where overlap will be beneficial for theory development and empirical testing. (Escobar-Lemmon & Taylor-Robinson, 2020, p. 548)

Hybrids

The above rendition of the debate contrasts presidentialism and parliamentarism and ignores mixed or hybrid regime types. When Linz initiated the debate in 1990, the executives of most countries could still be classified in this dichotomy. Apart from individual cases with an idiosyncratic type of executive (most notably Switzerland, where a collective executive is selected by the legislature, but cannot be removed by it), a third 'semi-presidential' regime type had already been identified, but the number of countries that could be classified as such was still quite small, with France as the best-known example. However, the number of semi-presidential systems has grown rapidly: Elgie (2011, pp. 24–5) identified no fewer than 52 countries in this category as of December 2010, as well as 19 historic cases.

Theoretically, it is not the only hybrid system possible, and others have been identified, but with only a few empirical manifestations. An example is the system in which the executive remains responsible to parliament as in a parliamentary system, but in which the head of the executive is popularly elected and cannot be removed. This is sometimes known as 'presidential parliamentarism' (Hazan, 1996), but there is no generally agreed label for this system. Allegedly, an elected prime minister would strengthen the executive's democratic legitimacy and strengthen the position of the prime minister. The vulnerability of the system is that there is no guarantee that the elected prime minister is able to form a government that can count on majority support in parliament. In Israel, where this system was introduced in 1996, this vulnerability was exacerbated when many voters split their ticket and parliamentary fragmentation made the formation of a viable coalition more difficult. As Sartori (1994, p. 117) had warned in advance, 'the insertion of a non-removeable, popularly elected premier into a parliamentary system is like entering a stone into an engine'. After only three prime ministerial elections, Israel abandoned the reform and returned to a purely parliamentary system in 2001 (e.g., Ottolenghi, 2004). The failed experiment also dampened enthusiasm for this hybrid in other countries where it has been considered (e.g., Italy, Japan and the Netherlands).

Another, very different, hybrid system seeks to combine a putative advantage of parliamentarism – the absence of executive personalism – with a perceived advantage of presidentialism – the separation of powers. In this 'semi-parliamentary system' there is no popular election of the chief executive, and parliament consists of two directly elected chambers, only one of which can censure the government. That chamber and the executive relate to each other as in a parliamentary system, while the other chamber has veto power over legislation, and relates to the executive as in a presidential system (see Chapter 25; see also Ganghof, 2021, pp. 36–9). At the national level, semi-parliamentarism currently exists only in Australia and Japan.

Here we focus on semi-presidentialism as it is the most widely applied hybrid system, and as it became the topic of debate itself. That debate is dominated by two questions: is semi-presidentialism a distinct regime type, and if it is, how does it relate to the debate about the supposed 'perils of presidentialism' and 'virtues of parliamentarism' discussed above?

All definitions of semi-presidentialism contain the constitutional requirements that there is a president who is popularly elected for a fixed term, and that there are also a prime minister and a cabinet who are collectively responsible to the legislature (Duverger, 1980; Elgie, 1999; Sartori, 1994). Some authors add elements to the definition to make clear that in this system the president is not a mere ceremonial head of state: Sartori (1994, p. 121) stipulates that the president is not entitled to govern alone but enters a 'dual authority structure' with the prime minister, allowing for different balances of power within that dual authority structure.

Duverger (1980, p. 166) requires the president to possess 'quite considerable powers', as do Shugart and Carey (1992). Given the ambiguity of 'dual authority' and 'quite considerable powers', Elgie (1999) prefers to confine the definition to the popularly elected fixed-term president and the cabinet's dependence on the support of a majority of the legislature, and this minimal definition has become the standard in the literature. Figure 14.1 illustrates how the semi-presidential system combines elements of parliamentarism and presidentialism. As in a presidential system, the electorate delegates to two agents – the legislature and the president, and the president in turn delegates to the ministers. But while the legislature does not affect the composition and survival of the executive in a presidential system, this aspect of a parliamentary system is incorporated in semi-presidential systems.

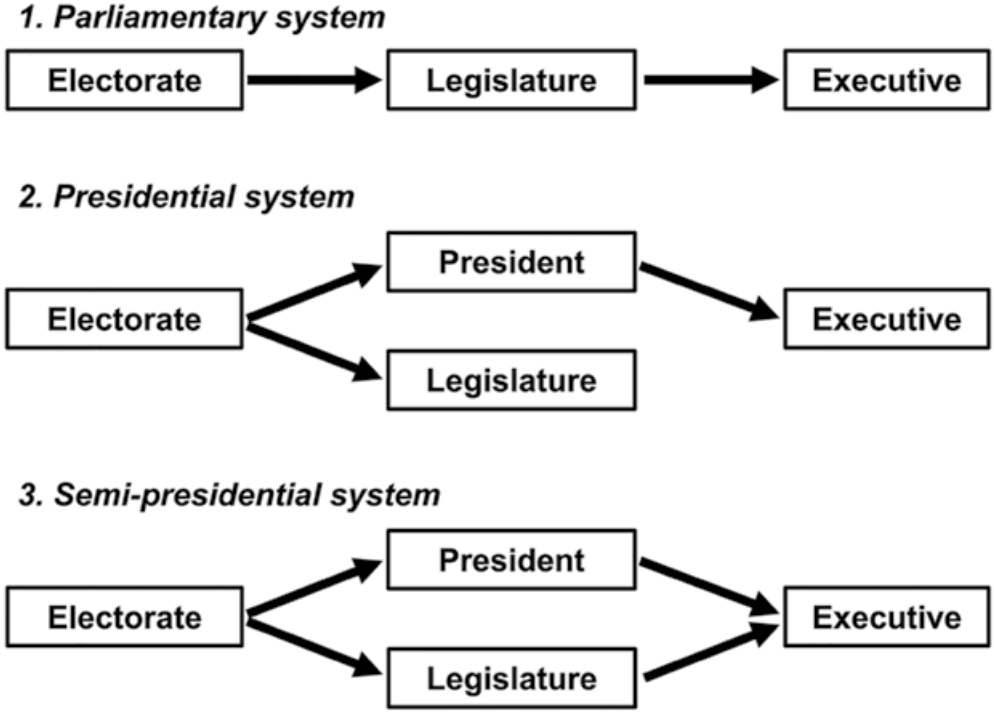

Figure 14.1 Political executives and executive–legislative relations

At first sight this combination seems to exacerbate the problem of 'dual legitimacy' in presidential systems. There, these conflicts are about policy, but in semi-presidentialism they are also about the control over the executive itself. For Linz (1994, pp. 48–60), semi-presidentialism does not offer much improvement over presidentialism in terms of democratic stability, but much depends on the existence, or not, of a mechanism to resolve conflicts between the two powers in semi-presidential systems.

Many such systems resolve the conflict by prioritizing the link between the ministers and the legislature over the link between the ministers and the president. Note that none of the definitions of semi-presidentialism mentioned above stipulate that the president appoints the

prime minister or the entire cabinet. This is not because the president does not appoint. If the presidential and legislative majorities are congruent, he or she does indeed determine the composition of the executive, but if the majority in the legislature is opposed to the president, the president is constrained in his choice; the president appoints formally but not substantively. In such cases there will be either a 'divided executive', perhaps better called a coalition government in which parties from both the presidential and legislative majorities cooperate, or even 'cohabitation' in which the president remains head of state but is no longer head of government, and the prime minister becomes head of a government composed of ministers from the parties that oppose the president. This is what Sartori means by the possibility of having different balances of power within the dual executive. However, these differences of power are quite fundamental and some authors, including Duverger (1980), refer to such shifts as different 'phases' of the semi-presidential system: if the presidential and legislative majorities coincide, the president basically finds him or herself in the same position as a prime minister in a parliamentary system, but if the two majorities are opposed, the semi-presidential president is even weaker than a president whose party has lost control over the legislature in a presidential system. From that perspective, a semi-presidential system is only a container for two very different types of executives, and which one is operative depends on whether the presidential and legislative elections have congruent outcomes. As Lijphart (1994, p. 95) argues about the semi-presidential French Fifth Republic: 'instead of semipresidential [it] is usually presidential and only occasionally parliamentary'. But I would go further: from the perspective of executive-legislative relations – and that is the perspective in this section – semi-presidentialism is in essence a parliamentary system because for its survival the executive is always dependent on a majority in the legislature, and on that majority alone. The only difference between the two 'phases' is who is the de facto chief executive (i.e., the president or the prime minister). But that is a difference in the internal dynamics of the executive, not in its external relations with the legislature.

It is true that even such internal dynamics may evolve into highly charged conflicts that could – in theory – destabilize democracy (Shugart & Carey, 1992, pp. 56–8). However, empirically that does not seem to be the case: only in Niger in 1996 did democracy break down during a period of cohabitation.

So far, we have focused on the subset of semi-presidential regimes that prioritizes the legislative majority over the presidential majority. They are generally referred to as 'premier-presidential systems'. Shugart and Carey (1992, pp. 24–5) distinguish them from 'president-parliamentary systems' in which the ministers' survival depends on *both* the president and the majority in the legislature. In such cases there is no mechanism to resolve the conflict of opposing majorities. Coalition and cohabitation are still possible but are used less often than in premier-presidential systems. As Elgie (2011, p. 179) put it:

> The very reason why presidential-parliamentarism is dangerous for democracy, namely the incentive for presidents to try to govern against the legislature, is also the reason why both cohabitation and a divided executive are likely to be much less prevalent in such countries and, therefore, why president-parliamentarism is a much stronger predictor of poor democratic performance.

From a principal-agent perspective, the existence of two institutions that are both agents of the same principal and that both subdelegate to the same agent is indeed distinctive. For some authors this is sufficient, and the differences in functioning merely constitute the variation that is constrained by this regime type (Åberg & Sedelius, 2020, pp. 1126–7;

Schleiter & Morgan-Jones, 2009, p. 877). However, if semi-presidentialism includes such different subtypes with such important consequences for democratic stability, one may also wonder what is gained by treating them as belonging to the same regime type. In addition, semi-presidentialism and its premier-presidential and president-parliamentary subtypes are defined on the basis of formal constitutional rules, which has important advantages. But in this case, the formal rules are misleading in quite a few countries. Formally, for example, contemporary Austria and Iceland belong to the president-parliamentary category, but most scholars would agree that politics in these countries is better understood as a parliamentary or at most a premier-presidential system. Elgie (2016, p. 65) highlights this difference between semi-presidentialism as an ideal-typical model and semi-presidentialism as an independent variable:

> Early work was quick to draw conclusions on the basis of the more or less implicit assumption that semi-presidential countries comprised a discrete category separate from presidentialism and parliamentarism. Yet, institutional variation within semi-presidentialism clearly shows it does not. Therefore, while the concept of semi-presidentialism has considerable taxonomic value, it has little empirical validity if it is operationalized as a discrete variable.

Combining this conclusion with that of Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson (2020) quoted earlier, it would seem that the differences between the regime types as such are fading, and that the empirical study of political executives is moving to a lower level of abstraction. Earlier, but in a similar vein, King (1976) warned that the study of executive–legislative relations needs to recognize that the executive and the legislature are not only two institutions that interact with each other, but also two arenas within which political parties and societal interests interact in two-level games; in modes rather than models of executive–legislative relations (see Andeweg & Nijzink, 1995). This brings us to our second exploration of political executives: their internal dynamics.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS

There has been more attention on the internal dynamics of political executives in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems, probably because it is assumed that in presidential systems the functioning of the executive is simple and not very interesting. It is just the president deciding, and the ministers carrying out these decisions. As we shall see, this is an oversimplification, and it is not too difficult to include presidential executives in typologies that have been designed for parliamentary executives.

The Degree of Hierarchy in Political Executives

The most common dimension on which political executives are classified is their internal hierarchy, in particular the extent to which the cabinet is dominated by the head of government. In parliamentary executives the prime minister is rarely the 'first among equals' that his title suggests. For a truly 'first among equals', one has to move outside the category of parliamentary executives to Switzerland, where the legislature annually elects one of seven ministers to preside over the cabinet's meetings for one year. The fact that in most parliamentary systems the prime minister's vote in cabinet formally carries no extra weight except in case of a tie

should not be interpreted as a sign that the prime minister has no constitutional powers over the other cabinet ministers, including the hiring, firing and reshuffling of ministers, the delineation of ministerial portfolios, agenda-setting, instructions to ministers or the chairing of cabinet committees. All these powers vary considerably across parliamentary heads of government, as does the size of the staff that helps them to monitor their cabinet colleagues and departments (e.g., Dowding, 2013; Weller, 2014). Comparing the prime ministers of 17 Western European countries, Bergman et al. (2003, pp. 183–90) list the heads of government in Spain, Germany and the UK as possessing most institutional powers, and their colleagues in Austria, Italy and the Netherlands as having the least institutional powers.

However, the institutional provisions tell us only part of the story, as they interact with the political context. The crucial variable here is the party composition of the government: single party or coalition. For example, a prime minister who is also the leader of a unified political party that governs alone on the basis of a parliamentary majority can make full use of all powers assigned by the constitution, which are reinforced by any powers he or she has as party leader. A prime minister who heads a coalition government and may not even be the leader of his own party, by contrast, is unlikely to be able to use whatever constitutional powers are available unilaterally. In some coalition governments the actual leadership even shifts from the prime minister alone to an inner cabinet or coalition committee which brings the leaders of the governing parties together, as in many Dutch and Belgian governments (e.g., Andeweg & Timmermans, 2008). Combining institutional and political factors into a single measure of prime ministerial power is not straightforward, also because the political context in particular is likely to change over time. Bergman et al. (2003, pp. 190–4) combine scales of institutional powers and the party system to arrive at an overall assessment of the position of the prime minister within the executive. Other scholars have relied either on their own subjective judgement (e.g., King, 1994) or on that of country experts (e.g., O'Malley, 2007). Helms (2005, p. 11) warns that such assessments should not confuse the prime minister's power *within* the executive with the overall power of the executive in a particular system. It is possible to have a strong prime minister in a weak government and vice versa.

It is not difficult to extend this discussion of hierarchy within executives to presidential executives, as the debate on the relative merits of presidential and parliamentary systems included scholars who argued that presidentialism as such need not be problematic, but presidentialism systems with a powerful president are (e.g., Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997). However, studies that sought to gauge the power of presidents differ in two respects from studies analysing the power of prime ministers. First, as they originated in the debate about the 'perils of presidentialism', the focus is often on the president's powers vis-à-vis the legislature (e.g., veto power and the power to initiate legislation), not on the president's power over the cabinet ministers.[2] Second, the degree of presidential power is usually assessed on the basis of constitutional provisions alone (Doyle, 2020, p. 387). Although constitutions in presidential systems do not embed the president within a cabinet, the very essence of presidentialism – the separation of powers – has mitigated the otherwise dominant position of the president: ministers are appointed and dismissed by the president, but in general they must also look to the legislature for budgetary and legislative support. Depending on the exact powers of the legislature, ministers in presidential systems may be the agents of two principals. In the United States (US) this has occasionally frustrated presidents to such an extent that they have dismissed ministers, or even the entire cabinet (e.g., Nixon and Carter), in the hope that new appointees would orient themselves more towards the president.

Increasingly, it is realized that the single-party/coalition distinction also interacts with the formal institutional powers of presidential executives. Chaisty et al. (2018) have shown that the effect of increased ideological fragmentation of legislatures is that today most directly elected presidents lack a majority in the legislature. To get elected, many of these presidents already had to enter a coalition with other parties, and even if they did not rely on an electoral coalition, they often formed a legislative coalition afterwards. Obviously, this has an effect on the internal hierarchy of the executive. In coalitions, presidents are no longer omnipotent, but that does not mean that they are powerless. In studies of coalitional multi-party presidentialism, the concept of a presidential or executive 'toolbox' is used to describe the mix of formal powers and political strategies that presidents can employ in the formation and management of such coalitions (Raile et al., 2011). As Chaisty et al. (2020, p. 424) conclude, in such situations it is simply a mistake to see presidential executives as 'unipersonal' without internal dynamics, and 'the respective roles of presidents and prime ministers may be more similar than previously believed'.

By definition, semi-presidential regimes have both an elected president and a prime minister. It is Blondel's (1984) primary example of an executive with 'dual leadership', to which he attributed important advantages in terms of catering to two different constituencies, more effective coordination and even a smoother succession process. However, this assumes that president and prime minister work together, as a functional equivalent of an inner cabinet or coalition committee. This may be the case when the presidential and legislative majorities coincide and the prime minister acts as second in command to the president. In the premier-presidential variety of semi-presidentialism the president and the prime minister may truly share power if the government is a coalition of parties from the presidential majority and the non-presidential legislative majority. But in cases of cohabitation, dual leadership is unlikely. There is only one head of government: the prime minister. Interestingly, several multi-party presidents in Latin American presidential systems appear to have opted for a form of dual leadership: Valadés (2005) points out that several presidents have appointed coordinators to manage the cabinet, and that in some countries this position has even been constitutionalized (discussed in Elgie, 2020, p. 408).

In addition to this cross-sectional overview of variation in the internal hierarchy of political executives, there is also a longitudinal approach, almost without exception arguing that heads of government are growing stronger over time. In the UK it has been suggested since the 1960s that 'cabinet government' had given way to prime ministerial or even presidential government (e.g., Crossman, 1963; Foley, 1993). In recent decades, that argument has been extended to other modern democracies. Poguntke and Webb (2005) argue that whatever their regime type, democracies are 'presidentializing' in the sense that the heads of government are becoming more autonomous in three aspects: the executive face, the party face and the electoral face. Surprisingly, the legislature is not included as a separate 'face'. As the prime causes of this 'presidentialization', they list the internationalization of politics, the growth and growing complexity of the state, the mediatization of politics and the erosion of traditional political cleavages. Their thesis initiated a debate that is still not settled. The concept 'presidentialization' has been criticized as being operationalized in very different ways (e.g., personalization and separation of powers; see Elgie & Passarelli, 2019), but also because it seems to imply that prime ministers used to be, or still are, weaker than presidents. Although some scholars are not convinced that 'presidentialization' actually occurs (e.g., Helms, 2005, pp. 252–9; Vatter, 2020, pp. 188–9), on balance the literature is supportive of the 'presidentialization'

thesis (Elgie & Passarelli, 2020, pp. 372–4). However, that support rests on the impressions of country experts more than on actual empirical, let alone longitudinal, research.

The Degree of Collectiveness of Political Executives

Cabinet government, whether as an ideal or as a practice, refers to collective decision-making and, within that collectivity, the head of government can be more or less dominant. That dimension is also present in the literature on political executives, albeit less prominent than the degree of hierarchy. In their portfolio approach to coalition government, Laver and Shepsle (1990, 1994) argue that the formation of a new government boils down to negotiations about the distribution of the ministerial portfolios to the coalition parties, and each of these parties then determines policy in the portfolios assigned to them by appointing party representatives to these portfolios. The underlying assumption is that ministers are 'policy dictators' in their own portfolio and need not submit their proposals to collective decision-making. In later, more sophisticated, versions of the theory, some of the assumptions are relaxed, and some collective decision-making is acknowledged, but in its crudest form the portfolio allocation approach depicts an extreme degree of fragmentation of the political executive. In reality, neither such fragmentation nor pure collective decision-making exist, but political executives can be located somewhere between these poles, depending on a variety of institutional features.

Cabinet size and its impact on decision-making is largely ignored in the literature on political executives (Freiburghaus et al., 2023, pp. 1112–13; Indridason & Bowler, 2014). Small groups are assumed to be more conducive to face-to-face decision-making than large ones and political executives come in different sizes (from just seven in Switzerland to about 24 in the UK). Whatever their size, most cabinets meet as such on a regular basis, but the frequency and duration of these meetings vary, from several informal meetings per week to prepare a single formal meeting in which decisions are finalized (Sweden and Norway) to brief weekly meetings in France and the UK (Thiébault, 1993). However, even frequent cabinet meetings are not sufficient for truly collective decision-making. Often, there is a tacit rule of mutual noninterference: ministers are reluctant to intervene on agenda items in which their own department is not involved; they often lack the time and the staff to study proposals that do not touch upon their own portfolio, and they fear retaliation from ministerial colleagues if they do (Andeweg, 2000). Nevertheless, in coalition governments in particular, there is an incentive to monitor and, if necessary, intervene in the portfolios of other parties' ministers, to prevent those ministers from ignoring the coalition agreement and following their own, or their own party's, policy preferences (see Klüver et al., 2023). Some of these mechanisms are located outside the cabinet, in forms of legislative scrutiny (Martin & Vanberg, 2011), but for our purpose the mechanisms within the cabinet are more relevant, such as a monitoring role for deputy prime ministers from the coalition parties, overlapping portfolios for ministers from different parties (e.g., Shpaizman & Cavari, 2023) or assigning junior ministers from one party to act as 'watchdogs' in the departments of cabinet ministers from other parties (e.g., Lipsmeyer & Pierce, 2011). To the extent that such mechanisms exist, decision-making will be more collective.

As said, most political executives can be positioned somewhere between extreme fragmentation and collectiveness, but one such intermediate position merits special attention: most executives have a system of cabinet committees which provides venues of collective deliberation for ministers with overlapping or adjacent portfolios, even where collective

decision-making in the full cabinet is rare (see Ie, 2022, who studies both the collectivity and collegiality of cabinet committee systems, but with different labels). The importance of cabinet committees varies (Mackie & Hogwood, 1985). In most executives, the committees primarily prepare matters to be decided in a formal meeting of the full cabinet, but where committees may take decisions in lieu of the full cabinet, they become autonomous 'partial cabinets' (Walker, 1970, p. 88) and decision-making is neither collective nor fragmented but segmented. In Canada, the Treasury Board is an example of such a partial cabinet, set up by law. It acts as employer for the public service and many of its decisions have the force of law. In the UK, cabinet committees are groups of ministers 'that can take *collective decisions that are binding* across government' (emphasis added).[3]

Most of the literature on the degree of collectiveness in political executives ignores presidential executives. As discussed above, some authors in the debate about the 'perils of presidentialism' explicitly mentioned that not having a collective executive is a defining characteristic of presidentialism. Indeed, other than in semi-presidential systems, the cabinet as a collectivity is rarely mentioned in the constitution. Yet, in the US, the very first president, George Washington, immediately set up a cabinet and appointed political heavyweights as its members (Chervinsky, 2020). The practice of having a cabinet quickly institutionalized, and since 1934 there has been a Cabinet Room in the White House, adjacent to the Oval Office. When they take office, most presidents intend to have collective meetings of their cabinet, but during their term of office this seems to happen less and less (Bennett, 1996, p. 223). Some presidents have attached more importance to the cabinet as a collectivity (for example, Eisenhower) than others (for example, Kennedy), and even the creation of cabinet councils (committees) under Reagan and Bush has not changed the practice that most decisions emerge in bilateral meetings between the president and individual cabinet members or other advisors. As Hess (1976, p. 206) concludes: 'There is little in American history to create a sense of optimism about the Cabinet becoming a viable collective body that Presidents can rely on as the prime supplier of advice'. Since Hess made this comment, the role of the cabinet has been further weakened by the rapid growth of the president's White House Office, and all that the US cabinet can hope for now is some form of 'power-sharing' between cabinet and the White House (Warsaw, 1996).

But in the growing number of multi-party presidential executives, the same incentives and mechanisms for some form of collective decision-making that can be observed in parliamentary coalition governments may be at work: 'Latin American neopresidentialism rests to an ever-increasing extent on cabinet government, more than on a personal exercise of power' (Valadés, 2005, p. 13). Unfortunately, we still lack even basic descriptive information from these countries: 'How often does the cabinet meet? What are its decision-making rules? Are any votes taken? What are the informal decision-making arenas outside the cabinet? Are there cabinet committees? If so, who chairs them and how do they report to the president and the full cabinet? And so on' (Elgie, 2020, p. 415).

Towards a New Typology

The two dimensions are often confused. Baylis (1989, p. 7), for example, forcefully argues in favour of what he calls 'collegial leadership', which he defines as 'structures and practices through which significant decisions are taken in common by a small face-to-face body with no single member dominating their initiation or determination'. But common decision-making is

a sign of collectivity and 'with no single member dominating' is a sign of a lack of hierarchy. We see the same confusion in the debate about prime ministerial and cabinet government. As Weller (2014, p. 491) has underlined, 'the problem with the debate was that it often seemed to contrast prime-ministerial government with cabinet government, as though the two were polar opposites'. They never were because they belong to different dimensions: the polar opposite of hierarchy is collegiality (all ministers being equal, as colleagues), and the polar opposite of collectiveness is fragmentation.

This is not to say that the distribution of power and the arena of decision-making are completely independent from each other, but they are conceptually different. Vercesi (2020, pp. 444–5) mentions several attempts to construct a typology of political executives in which the two dimensions are not confused but combined. For presentation purposes, Andeweg (1997 and 2003, respectively) has turned each dimension into a dichotomy or trichotomy, resulting in either four or six types of political executive.

Theoretically, the typology starts from the ideal type of cabinet government (the lower right-hand cell in Table 14.1), with its doctrine of collective ministerial responsibility (suggesting collective decision-making) and its rule of one minister/one vote (suggesting ministerial equality). All other cells are deviations from this ideal type, with the upper left-hand cell being furthest removed from cabinet government on both dimensions. In general, the US presidency comes closest to that cell. That collegiality and collectivity should not be confused is illustrated best by the Swiss and Swedish executives: the Swiss Federal Council with its rotating 'president' and strong emphasis on the role of ministers as heads of departments occupies the lower left-hand corner of a collegial and fragmented executive (Baylis, 1989, pp. 21–44). Swedish cabinets with their tradition of tasking decisions in collective informal meetings and with the prime ministers dominating these meetings (at least in single-party governments) fit the upper right-hand corner of a monocratic and collective executive (Larsson, 1997). In British single-party governments, the prime minister also dominates, but primarily by managing the elaborate system of cabinet committees, which locates them in the upper-central cell. A special case was Churchill's 1951 experiment with 'Overlords': a small number of ministers each overseeing the work of departmental ministers in a particular policy sector. This combination of oligarchical and segmental government has also been considered in other countries, but it does not characterize decision-making in any country. The same is true for the combination of collegial and segmented government.

Table 14.1 A typology of political executives based on their internal dynamics

Distribution of power	**Arena of decision-making**		
	Fragmented (individual ministers)	*Segmented* (cabinet committees)	*Collective* (cabinet)
Monocratic (presidential/prime ministerial)	e.g., US	e.g., UK	e.g., Sweden (single-party government)
Oligarchical (inner cabinet/coalition committee/ bicephalous leadership)	e.g., France	e.g., Churchill's Overlords experiment	e.g., the Netherlands
Collegial (ministerial equality)	e.g., Switzerland		Ideal type of cabinet government

These are examples of global classifications, but changes in the political context and the leadership style of the president or prime minister may affect an individual government's exact position. In the UK, Tony Blair is reported to have run a 'sofa government', preferring bilateral meetings to cabinet committees, let alone the full cabinet. Burch and Holliday (1996, pp. 142–6, 264–6) used the two-dimensional typology to chart variation across individual governments in the UK and even across individual cases of decision-making within these governments. Helms (2005, p. 233) uses the typology to discuss variation between governments in three countries (US, UK and Germany), also showing that the typology based on executives' internal dynamics can be applied to different regimes based on executive–legislative relations.

CONCLUSION

The study of political executives has matured in recent decades, with fewer atheoretical descriptions of the executive in a particular country and more comparative analyses that are inspired by theory. This chapter gives an incomplete overview of this literature, as there are nowadays many studies focusing on the different causes or consequences of a particular aspect of the executive (e.g., its formation and termination, the allocation of portfolios, the role of political advisers, the relations with the bureaucracy, the impact of the media and the sociodemographic composition), but here we have focused on the political executive as such, exploring its relations with the legislature and its internal dynamics.

Scholarly progress does not always mean expansion: the typology of executives based on executive–legislative relations seems to be fading as a foundation for new research. Obviously, the distinctions between presidential, parliamentary and semi-parliamentary systems still tell us about different configurations for the link between citizens and public policymaking, and the terms themselves will remain part of the discipline's vocabulary, but the significance of these regime types as independent variables seems to have eroded. Their impact appears to rely on the interaction with other variables, or on these additional variables without their traditional association with regime types.

There is now more attention for the internal dynamics of political executives. Where that attention used to be confined to the formation and termination (or duration) of governments – the period in between being ignored as an uninteresting equilibrium – the period between the birth and death of executives is now put centre stage. Tentatively, dimensions of the executive's life, such as the internal distribution of power and the internal arenas of decision-making, are being developed, alone or in combination. The position of executives on these dimensions depends on the constitutional framework and on the political context; in particular, on the difference between single-party and coalition government. Coalition government has long been a staple of research into parliamentary executives, but it is now a rapidly growing phenomenon in Latin American presidential executives.

There is still much to be desired. The debate about presidentialism and parliamentarism had its origins in concern over democratic stability and other dependent variables, and then, perhaps belatedly, found its way into discussions of what the defining differences or associated differences between these regime types really are. But the literature on the internal dynamics of executives still seems to focus on the dimensions and typologies themselves, a bit on the causes of variation of executives, but only occasionally on their consequences. That will form an important part of the agenda for future research in this field.

NOTES

1. As the term 'chief executive' implies the existence of a broader executive that is led by the chief executive, I see no need to add to the definition of presidentialism that the elected chief executive appoints and directs the executive (but see Shugart & Carey, 1992, p. 19).
2. Note that there are exceptions that include the presidents' non-legislative powers, including government formation and dismissal (e.g., Shugart & Carey, 1992, pp. 148–66) and even occasional studies devoted to the president's power over the cabinet (Araújo et al., 2016).
3. See www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees (last accessed 25 April 2023).

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