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Comparing democratic performance of semi-presidential regimes in the post-communist region: Omnipotent presidents and media control

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to identify common explanatory factors and internal causal mechanisms behind the poor democratic performance of post-communist semi-presidential regimes. It attributes poor democratic performance to constitutionally powerful presidents supported by single-party-majority cabinets. Under this situation, omnipotent presidents enact media-related law unhindered, tightly regulate the media, prevent the opposition from disseminating election information, and thus increase the ruling party's probability of winning elections. Through quantitative analysis and comparative case studies of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, this paper verifies the convergent pathway from powerful presidents' media control to poor democratic performance. In conclusion, powerful post-communist presidents endanger democracy via media control.

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1. Introduction

Since the third wave of democratization, semi-presidentialism has been widely adopted as constitutional design in many nascent democratic countries, including Central and Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and Francophone and Lusophone countries in sub-Saharan Africa. After twenty-five years, some semi-presidential democracies survive despite confronting regime crisis, while others have experienced authoritarian reversal. Still others maintain authoritarian rule and poor democratic performance. In the post-communist region, the variation in democratic performance of semi-presidential regimes is noticeable. Stable democracies have persisted in Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia since these countries have entered the semi-presidential family. Croatia has become a democracy since undergoing constitutional change in 2000. The Rose Revolution in Georgia brought about a halted democratic development. Ukraine has swung back and forth between democracy and autocracy. The presidents impose their almighty rule in some semi-presidential regimes, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. Why does democratic performance vary across semi-presidential regimes in the post-communist region?

Scholars have identified constitutional design or political circumstances that affect the triangular relationship between the president, the parliament, and the government, and thus democratic performance and even survival of semi-presidential regimes (Shugart and Carey, 1992; Kirschke, 2007; Moestrup, 2007; Elgie, 2008, 2010, 2011; Elgie and Mcmenamin, 2008; Kim, 2014). Existing research, however, has ignored how the combination of those factors has an effect on democratic

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performance. For example, the power arrangement of a constitution benefiting the executive may cause a failure to check presidential power, which appears to have a negative effect on democratic performance. A constitutionally powerful president without support of parties in the parliament, however, is certainly less likely to personalize the political process. Further, although some cases provide evidence on why a powerful president poses a threat to democratic performance (Arkadyev, 2008; Schleiter and Morgan-Jones, 2008; Shen, 2011), this mechanism has not yet been confirmed by the empirical findings from large-N comparative studies. Therefore, this paper attempts to identify common explanatory factors and internal causal mechanisms behind the poor democratic performance of semi-presidential regimes in the post-communist region.

In this research, a constitutionally powerful president supported by a single-party-majority cabinet is proposed as a common factor accounting for poor democratic performance. A president's party, if enjoying a substantial majority in the parliament, helps the president directly control all political output, for example, an establishment of a repressive state apparatus, which is used as a counterweight to the power of parliamentary opposition. By contrast, it is relatively easy for parliamentary opposition to check presidential power when a president faces an opposition coalition holding a majority of seats in the parliament. In terms of internal causal mechanisms, due to overconcentration of power in the executive, a constitutionally powerful dictator-president supported by a single-party-majority cabinet may enact media-related law unhindered, tightly regulate the media, prevent the opposition from disseminating information in elections, and thus increase the ruling party's probability of winning elections.

After reviewing the literature on how constitutional heterogeneity and political circumstances influence democratic performance of a semi-presidential regime, the article proposes theories and hypotheses. Using data covering all semi-presidential regimes of the post-communist region between 1990 and 2012, and employing mediation analysis with panel data and comparative case studies, this study verifies this argument – a constitutionally powerful president supported by a single-party-majority cabinet endangers democracy through media control in the post-communist region.

2. Powerful president and democratic performance of semi-presidential regimes

Constitutional heterogeneity and political circumstances influence whether a semi-presidential regime maintains better democratic performance and thus survives longer. As for constitutional heterogeneity, premier-presidentialism functions better than presidential-parliamentarism because control over the government is clearly assigned to the parliament (Shugart and Carey, 1992). Based on the analysis of 83 young semi-presidential democracies, premier-presidential regimes have better democratic performance and higher chances of survival (Moestrup, 2007: 41). In addition, using survival analysis, Elgie (2011) verified that a regime with a presidential-parliamentary system raises the risk of collapse, compared to premier-presidential regimes.

One reason why presidential-parliamentarism is prone to democratic collapse is dual accountability. Presidential-parliamentarism is defined as a popularly elected president with the power to appoint and dismiss cabinet ministers who are also subject to parliamentary confidence. Further, the president has the power to dissolve parliament or legislative powers, or both (Shugart and Carey, 1992: 24). Under this system, a prime minister and cabinets are accountable to both parliament and president. Chances are that dual control of the government generates political stalemate and cabinet instability, which triggers a crisis of governance, and eventually endangers democracy. For example, compared with other countries of the post-communist region, a higher rate of cabinet turnover in Ukraine results from a more symmetrical distribution of cabinet dismissal powers between the president and the parliament (Protsyk, 2003: 1084).

The other reason is that a president is likely to marginalize the prime minister and the parliament by enforcing power to dismiss the government and dissolve the parliament, thus overshadowing “checks and balances.” It is likely that the prime minister initiates the conflict with the president in premier-presidential regimes (Protsyk, 2006). A president under a presidential-parliamentary regime, however, using the power of cabinet dismissal, puts the prime minister under his or her control, and hence mitigates intra-executive conflicts (Sedelius and Ekman, 2010; Sedelius and Mashtaler, 2013). A strong president also diminishes horizontal accountability. For example, because of his intention to rein in the government without the parliament, Weimar German President Paul Hindenburg used constitutional power to dissolve the parliament (Shen, 2011: 242). Based on some empirical studies, the negative relationship between the institutional basis of presidential power and democratic performance is identified in countries of the post-communist region (Ishiyama and Velten, 1998) or sub-Saharan Africa (Van Cranenburgh, 2008).

If we turn to political circumstances, cohabitation and divided minority government contribute to the poor democratic performance of semi-presidential regimes. Kirschke (2007) posited that executive power-sharing leads to a high risk of authoritarian reversal in neo-patrimonial states in sub-Saharan Africa. By contrast, in the analysis of 54 countries, Elgie (2008) found that relative to cohabitation, divided minority government is more susceptible to democratic failure. That is, among all nascent semi-presidential democracies since 1990, except for Niger in 1995, cohabitation has not been vulnerable to democratic collapse, and the threat of cohabitation has only given rise to military intervention in Guinea-Bissau in 2003 (Elgie, 2010). Other scholars, however, verified that a constitutionally powerful president exacerbates the peril of semi-presidential democracies, but neither cohabitation nor divided minority government brings a negative impact on democratic performance (Elgie and Mcmenamin, 2008; Elgie, 2011; Kim, 2014).

Although the effect of cohabitation and divided minority governments on democratic performance is subject to debate, there is agreement in the literature on semi-presidentialism that granting a president more constitutional power impedes democratic performance. This research, however, ignores the probability that a constitutionally powerful president under

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