Non-Technical Summary: Government stability in semi-presidential regimes

This was a data-collection project, which was conceived in response to a major change in the constitutional traditions of the European continent. Following the collapse of communism many of the new East-European democracies chose semi-presidential regimes, and by 2000, the continent once dominated by parliamentary governments contained 15 semi-presidential regimes: Austria, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovenia and Ukraine. These regimes combine a popularly elected president who holds some executive powers with a prime minister and government accountable to the assembly. Much of the literature stresses that this regime type, which gives president and assembly some influence on government formation and/or termination, can foster conflict and government breakdown. Examples abound. Prime ministers Petre Roman (Romania), Filip Dimitrov (Bulgaria), and Jan Olszewski (Poland) all lost their positions through conflicts with the president, others, like Sergei Kirienko (Russia), through conflicts with the assembly. The question that motivated this data-collection project was thus under what conditions we can expect the two branches of power to co-operate and support stable governments.

Aims and Objectives

The primary objective of this project was
1. To generate a quantitative data set that would make it possible to study systematically the causes of government stability in Europe’s semi-presidential regimes.

The secondary objective was
2. To fast-track the analysis of EU candidate states in order to make a contribution to the debate about the benefits and drawbacks of Eastern Enlargement by December 2004.

The data analysis-phase proper was to follow completion of the ESRC-funded data-collection project. It was planned to extend for a year, focussing on institutional and non-institutional influences on government stability in semi-presidential regimes.

Main Research Results and Significant Academic Achievements

Meeting its primary objective, the project’s main result is a data set that includes governments in Europe’s 15 semi-presidential regimes from the first post-World War II cabinet, or the first government formation following the adoption of a semi-presidential constitution, to December 31, 2003.

With respect to the secondary objective, the data analysis has progressed ahead of schedule, partly because I was able to continue to work with Edward Morgan-Jones. The results to date can be summarized under three headings:

a. Government Stability and Co-operation between President and Assembly

A central hypothesis in the literature is that semi-presidential regimes with powerful presidents, who can challenge and override the assembly’s wishes, are likely to experience severe conflict and government instability. The project examined this proposition through a study of government change in Russia since 1994 - the semi-presidential regime with Europe’s most powerful presidency. The case does not support the hypothesis well, but suggests that electoral and policy considerations
constrain even Russia’s presidents to co-operate with parliament more frequently than expected.

In a second piece, the project examined co-operation and conflict over governments in EU accession states (Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia). The evidence from these cases too suggests that political context shapes how institutional powers are used. Presidents tend to defer to assemblies that have working majorities, but will often seek to control the government when assemblies are very divided.

b. Government Formation
A distinctive characteristic of semi-presidential regimes is that they can give rise to president- or assembly-led governments. In a third piece, the project examines whether primary control over government formation is decided through tense struggles or in more co-operative ways. Our findings suggest that assembly-led governments are by far the most frequent outcome in semi-presidential regimes. President-led cabinets are rare and tend to be formed under difficult political conditions by powerful presidents. These results suggest that presidential cabinets are not usually formed as a way to marginalize the assembly, but tend to occur as stop-gap measures to ensure effective representation and governance when parliament can or will not govern.

c. Accountability
In a fourth piece, the project examines how voters can hold executive leaders accountable in semi-presidential regimes in the context of a growing trend towards personal, swift responding leadership. In many parliamentary democracies of Western Europe this trend toward a “presidential” leadership style has led to a crisis of legitimacy, which is fuelled by the perception that voters cannot effectively hold their leaders accountable via parties and parliament. The piece argues that direct presidential elections in semi-presidential regimes may offer an accountability mechanism that is better suited to address patterns of executive leadership in the 21st century.

Dissemination Activities

A) To Academic Users

The project has so far resulted in two academic papers, one published in a refereed journal, the other in a working paper series.


In addition I have presented the results of the research at three international conferences (AAASS 2003, MPSA 2004, and APSA 2004), an international symposium, and in two political science seminar series. The project website http://government.politics.ox.ac.uk/Projects/Govt_stability.asp has further enhanced dissemination of the research.

B) To Non-academic Users
The project results will help staff of the OECD’s SIGMA programme to target its advice more effectively to semi-presidential EU accession and candidate countries. Two briefing papers for SIGMA are currently being produced, and I am at present discussing a meeting for these briefings to take place in Paris in spring 2005.

In addition, the public interest in the EU’s Eastern Enlargement led to the decision to communicate the results of the project to a wider non-academic audience including business, the media, schools, journalists, and politicians through two brief articles (one published, the other submitted) for current affairs magazines.


**Potential Impacts on Policy and Practice**

The project work has relevance to OECD SIGMA initiatives in two technical areas: “Public Administration Development Strategies” and “Policy-Making, Co-ordination and Regulation”. In those areas, the project will help SIGMA to target its advice more effectively at the semi-presidential countries, which it serves.