

# Checking presidential powers is key to successful democratic performance in new semi-presidential countries

By Democratic Audit UK

*Numerous new democracies have adopted a semi-Presidential model which typically sees executive powers split between a President and a Prime Ministers. Presenting new research on the subject, **Young Hun Kim** argues that divided minority government is associated with higher levels of democracy, even though it can make political instability more likely.*



Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has recently been elected as President Credit: [Prime Minister's Office from Greece via Wikimedia Commons CC BY SA 2.0](#) –

Systems in which a popularly elected president shares executive power with a prime minister (what we call by semi-presidentialism) have been enjoying a growing acceptance among countries that were democratized since 1974. Based on my own calculations, about 60% of democracies (18 of 30) in the former communist region have adopted semi-presidential systems after the fall of communism. But only 30% chose a parliamentary system, and 10% presidential systems in Eastern Europe. Semi-presidential systems are not limited to the post-communist countries. Several democracies in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and southern Europe have also embraced semi-presidentialism.

More interestingly, some presidential or parliamentary democracies have transformed to semi-presidential governance or are considering doing so. Armenia and Georgia, for instance, abandoned their presidential constitutions in favour of semi-presidentialism in 1994 and 2004, respectively. More recently, the parliamentary Czech Republic elected its president by popular vote for the first time in February 2013, and Turkey in August 2014. In addition, South Korea has long been debating the possibility of amending their presidential constitution, although the final outcome is yet to be seen. All told, about 40% of new democracies (40 of 103) formed between 1974 and 2009 are classified as semi-presidential systems.

Reflecting on the high popularity of semi-presidentialism, an increasing amount of comparative research has recently examined the democratic performance of semi-presidential systems with a particular emphasis on the

effects of divided minority governments (where no party or coalition controls a majority), cohabitation (where the two executives come from different parties/coalitions and the president's party/coalition is not represented in the executive), an imbalance of presidential powers, and a president-parliamentary configuration (where the prime minister and cabinet are responsible to both the president and the legislature, and the president has power to dismiss the legislature) in executive–legislative relations.

But the results thus far appear to be replete with pessimistic conclusions. It has been found that semi-presidential systems facing these conditions are more likely to experience intra-governmental conflicts, government instability, lower levels of democracy, and even democratic failure, since these conditions are thought to generate partisan infighting in the executive branch and to foster political fragmentation in the legislature. These pessimistic verdicts clearly cast doubt on their democratic future.

In a [recently published article](#) “A Troubled Marriage: Divided Minority Government, Cohabitation, Presidential Powers, President-Parliamentarism and Semi-Presidentialism”, I reassess democratic performance in the areas of leadership stability, quality of democracy and democratic breakdown in all new semi-presidential systems across Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America from 1974 to 2009. My results from a broader set of new democracies are more encouraging than the pessimistic conclusions most previous studies have reached. Most importantly, a divided minority government contributes to higher levels of democracy. It appears that its positive effects such as enhanced inclusiveness and checks and balances in the executive body trump most of its potentially negative effects.

Given that divided minority government occurs quite often in dual-executive systems (it occurred in about 53% of years in my sample), this finding seems particularly encouraging for countries that contemplate a switch to semi-presidentialism. And cohabitation (less frequent than divided minority government occurring in only about 13% of years in the sample) poses less risk than previously thought. It has little effect on either executive stability or the level of democracy. Also found is that none of these caveats against semi-presidentialism (divided minority government, cohabitation, strong presidential powers, and president-parliamentarism) makes democratic breakdown more likely.

At the same time, some pessimistic assessments of semi-presidential systems receive empirical support. For example, divided minority government and president-parliamentarism are more likely to generate executive instability in the form of presidential impeachment attempts or changes of a prime minister. But executive instability may not necessarily be an alarming sign for good democratic performance, because impeachment attempts are often employed as a means of resolving inter-branch conflicts.

What does appear to be a great risk for semi-presidentialism is a failure to check presidential powers: as presidents enjoy more powers, the level of democracy not only tends to decrease, but also is executive instability more likely. This finding has a significant implication for countries that already practice semi-presidential governance or are contemplating a move in that direction: checking presidential powers is one of the key factors that will facilitate democratic consolidation in semi-presidentialism. If countries can successfully check presidential powers, then a semi-presidential system may appear to be a more appealing option than it does now for many young democracies.

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*This is a shortened version of the article [“A Troubled Marriage? Divided Minority Government, Cohabitation, Presidential Powers, President-Parliamentarism and Semi-Presidentialism”](#) from the *Government and Opposition Journal*.*

*Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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