



Hybrid System of Governance in France: Semi Presidential System

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ABSTRACT

France has a distinctive semi-presidential system whereby the features of presidential and parliamentary systems are incorporated within its framework. Fundamentally, the system revolves around the purpose of maintaining an equilibrium of executive authority between a President who is directly elected and a PM who is answerable to the legislature. Its establishment with the constitution of the Fifth Republic in 1958, under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle, had spanned over six decades. Significant actors have interpreted and operated within the system in a manner that has mirrored the evolution of several constitutional provisions. France's semi-presidential system will be examined in detail in this paper. Commencing with its inception and extending to the present day, the analysis will examine the system's historical development. It will subsequently discuss the practical day-to-day operations of the system and analyse its institutional characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

The semi-presidential system established in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic in 1958 is, a blend of parliamentary and presidential forms of democratic governance.¹ It arose after the political instability of the Fourth Republic, and by then, de Gaulle had come to regard a constitution he would draft as the head

¹ Duverger, M., 1980. A new political system model: Semi-presidential government. European journal of political research, 8(2), pp.165-187.

of a new assembly as the only guarantee of the kind of government he wanted and that he trusted to remain stable.² That vision has proven prescient. The system, as he saw it, had the potential to bring stability to the French régime and allow for the effective governance of the nation. The power of the directly elected President combined with the authority of the Parliament and the Prime Minister (who is responsible to a majority in the National Assembly) makes for just such a stable situation. One of the French semi-presidential system's main features is its dual executive structure. The President, who is elected for a term of five years, has considerable power over foreign policy, defense, and the appointment of the Prime Minister. For the most part, the President's powers work in a way that's similar to those of the Chief Executive (that is, the Governor or Mayor, as opposed to the head of a single city council), but the French President also has significant authority in "soft" foreign policy—areas like cultural, economic, and scientific interaction with other countries.

The purpose of this research paper is to conduct an in-depth exploration of the semi-presidential system of France. The study aims to answer major inquiries about the structure of this political entity and its effectiveness in serving the country's political needs. In so doing, the analysis will consider all essential aspects that have led to the establishment of this political contraption. Then, it will expatiate on the nature and content of its various provisions before pronouncing the kind of change or impact it brings to French politics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the historical origins and motivations behind the establishment of France's semi-presidential system?
2. How does the dual executive structure of the semi-presidential system function in practice?
3. What are the roles and powers of the President and the Prime Minister in France's semi-presidential system?
4. How does political cohabitation affect the functioning of the semi-presidential system?
5. What are the pros and cons of semi-presidential system in contrast to purely presidential or parliamentary systems?
6. How well suited is the system of semi-presidential government to France?

² Ibid.

OBJECTIVES

1. To trace the development of France's semi-presidential system from its inception in to present day.
2. To analyze the institutional framework of semi-presidential system.
3. To evaluate the powers of the President and Prime Minister within the system.
4. To examine the impact of political cohabitation on the balance of power and governance in France.
5. To identify and assess the strengths and weaknesses of the semi-presidential system.

HYPOTHESIS

- The semi-presidential system of France, characterized by a dual executive structure, provides a balance of power that enhances political stability and governance effectiveness.
- Periods of political cohabitation may introduce challenges that affect the system's overall functionality.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Understanding the semi-presidential system of France and how it balances power between the President and the Prime Minister is the main focus of this research. The study tries to explore and explain the system's intricacies and subtleties, especially during the cohabitation periods. The basic idea is to figure out what this system does, how it does it, and why—compared to its alternatives or complements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Elgie, R. (2011). "Semi-Presidentialism: Sub-Types and Democratic Performance." Oxford University Press.

Elgie's innovative research examines semi-presidentialism in great detail. He categorizes various subtypes of this system and assesses their performance in democratic governance. By working with a framework based on democratic theory, Elgie has been able to shed light on the system of government in France and on other political systems that resemble the French model. He not only highlights the structural differences between semi-presidential systems but also takes a look at what those mean for

how well governments of that system perform and how stable they are. Through looking at evidence and the outcomes of several case studies, Elgie pulls back the curtain on the complex interplay between presidents, prime ministers, and parliaments, as well as on the problem-solving and -creating capacities of such a system of governance.

2. Hayward, J. (2003). "De Gaulle to Mitterrand: Presidential Power in France." Routledge.

The work of Hayward serves as a reliable guide to the development of executive authority in France over the nearly 30 years following Charles de Gaulle's election to the presidency in 1958. Hayward describes the titular authority of the head of state, his most important acts, and the kinds of decisions over which the president exercised the most clear control. In the context of campaign promises, public expectations, and the tugs of political controversy, he examines what the French president was able to accomplish, even with the help of a freshly instituted rulebook that was constitutionally forbearing in some respects and by turns empowering and disempowering in others.

3. Knapp, A., & Wright, V. (2006). "The Government and Politics of France." Routledge.

Knapp and Wright's book is a profound examination of the French political system. They cover its history, the framework of its institutions, and the current circumstances that have given it a certain mo. Even when they don't come out and say it, the authors tell us a lot about the issues associated with (and the pathways for) governing in France. They look at key institutions—the presidency, parliament, and the government—and analyze how the semi-presidential framework works and the roles these institutions play. They also examine the political context in which all these things occur, investigating electoral politics, party competition, and the dynamics of coalition governance.

4. Pasquino, G. (2007). "Semi-Presidentialism: A Political System Model." European Political Science Review.

Pasquino's work is a major advance in the theoretical understanding of semi-presidentialism. It offers the most comprehensive model available, deepening the understanding of its basic structure, the dynamics of its functions, and the normative implications attached to it. Pasquino's achievement is no small thing. Clear, synthesizing, and decidedly analytical, he takes up the previous scholarship and runs it through his own critical thinking, producing something that is better than whatever was there before: his theoretical model for identifying semi-presidentialism in any of its variant forms running almost to 200 pages.

5. Schmidt, V. A. (2003). "The Changing Dynamics of French Politics." *West European Politics*.

The study by Schmidt is about the changes in French politics as a result of socio-economic changes, ideological shifts, and institutional reforms. It examines how political elites and political parties have debated, enacted, and implemented policies and what goals they have pursued. It also looks at what voters and public opinion have said and sought in elections, and at the evolving relationship between interest groups and the state. And it is comparative, insisting that to understand what is happening in France, one must understand what is also happening in Europe and the rest of the world. Schmidt's book, then, is an ambitious work of political science.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

France's semi-presidential system was established during the Fourth Republic (1946-1958), a time of frequent government changes and political instability. This republic had a parliamentary system of government, which meant that the executive power was shared between the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister, with the latter serving as the effective head of government.

The significant military leader and statesman—Charles de Gaulle—took the lead as the advocate for a new constitution that addressed the Fourth Republic's failings. De Gaulle imagined a setup that featured both robust executive leadership and democratic oversight. And this is just what came to pass. The semi-presidential system enabled De Gaulle himself to serve as the first President of the French Fifth Republic (1959–1969).³

The dual executive structure allowed the semi-presidential system to function effectively and provided it with stability in times of crisis and change. The President, who was elected by all the people in the nation and not by any of the representative bodies, had a strong leadership role. Indeed, the powers of the President were such that only a President with stamina, charisma, and skill could wield them effectively. The President of the semi-presidential system had at least three advantages over the parliamentary Prime Minister as a national leader.⁴

Meanwhile, the system preserved elements of parliamentary democracy. It ensured that the President and the government remained responsible to the National Assembly. The President appointed the Prime Minister, who required the Assembly's confidence to rule. The Prime Minister, in turn, was the executor

³ Cole, A., 1993. The presidential party and the fifth republic. *West European Politics*, 16(2), pp.49-66.

⁴ Ibid.

of the domestic policy and administrator of the government. The point of this arrangement was to blend executive authority with democratic oversight so that no single party to the five-party system could concentrate too much power in its hands.

The system of semi-presidentialism has seen constitutional amendments and a number of political developments. When the presidential term was extended to five years in 2000, the presidential and parliamentary electoral periods became aligned, with both being five years long. That has enhanced the likelihood of periods of cohabitation being short and less awkward. Fundamentally, however, the core principles — dual legitimacy, a powerful president, a prime minister who is the president's delegate, and a parliament that holds the legitimacy of both — have remained unchanged.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

The President

The President elected by way of direct universal suffrage holds significant executive powers in France. The President's primary responsibilities include:⁵

1. **Foreign Policy and Defense:** The French President is the boss of the country's military and also has a role in leading the nation's foreign policy. The French President is the head of state, so they represent the nation in international affairs and work with other countries' leaders. The President gets to make the calls on most treaties that the nation enters into with other states.
2. **Appointment Powers:** The head of state, the President, selects the head of government, the Prime Minister. Next, the Prime Minister suggests to the President the other members of the government who they believe are qualified to lead. The President can say no, but this almost never happens in Serbia. The President also appoints other key officials, like the leaders of state-owned companies, with the advice and consent of the Prime Minister.
3. **Dissolution of the National Assembly:** The National Assembly can be dissolved by the President. The parliamentary authority can be checked in this way. Political deadlocks can then also be resolved. When the National Assembly is dissolved, the President has the power to call for new legislative elections. This is a power that creates a direct means to solve political problems and has the same effect as when a horse knocks down a king in a game of chess.

⁵ Åberg, J. and Sedelius, T., 2020. A structured review of semi-presidential studies: Debates, results and missing pieces. *British Journal of Political Science*, 50(3), pp.1111-1136.

4. **Council of Ministers:** Major policy decisions are made in the Council of Ministers, which the President presides over. Even though the Prime Minister is chiefly in charge of carrying out these decisions and the rest of the nation's administration, the President still holds a good amount of sway over the decision-making process, precisely because it's such an eminent body. And sometimes, to get something done, you have to be in the right place at the right time with the right bunch of people.

The Prime Minister

The PM in France is appointed by the President but requires the confidence of the National Assembly. He or she heads the government and oversees all its works. The PM's major responsibilities include:⁶

1. **Domestic Policy:** The Prime Minister has the authority of leading government policy in all sorts of realms but especially in domestic affairs. That means the Prime Minister is in the best position in all sorts of ways to come up with the best policies and to make sure those policies work well when put into action.
2. **Legislative Process:** The legislative process centers around the Prime Minister. This official is the one who proposes bills to the National Assembly, making sure that they are successfully passed. It is the Prime Minister who is in charge of issuing not only decrees but also regulations.
3. **Government Administration:** The general management of the government and public services is the responsibility of the Prime Minister. This means the Prime Minister takes care of things like the smooth operation of public services. And it is the Prime Minister who has to coordinate the work of the ministers and check that their government policies are being followed through.
4. **Parliamentary Accountability:** The National Assembly holds the Prime Minister and the government answerable. For the Prime Minister to rest easy in office, they must earn the faith, trust, and support of the parliamentary majority. If perchance, this support were to waver, and if worse came to worst -- if the government were to lose a vote of confidence -- the Prime Minister would have no choice but to step down, and then, per the French Constitution, the President would appoint a new Prime Minister.

⁶ Raunio, T. and Sedelius, T., 2020. Semi-Presidential Policy Making in Europe. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

THE DYNAMICS OF COHABITATION

Cohabitation takes place when the President and the parliamentary majority represent different political parties. This situation forces power-sharing between the president and the prime minister and can impede the smooth functioning of the semi-presidential system. In cohabitation periods, the president usually concentrates on foreign policy and security matters, whereas the prime minister takes hold of internal policymaking and the day-to-day administration of the government.⁷

Conflicts and tensions can arise between the two personalities, considering that they often pursue different political agendas. Yet, as the Russian political scientist Georgi Satarov has pointed out, cohabitation also demonstrates the system's flexibility and ability to accommodate different political groups.

CASE STUDIES OF COHABITATION

France has experienced several periods of cohabitation. Three notable instances include:

1986-1988: Mitterrand-Chirac Cohabitation

During this time, France was led by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac, who was a part of the right-wing majority, and President François Mitterrand, a Socialist. These two politicians had very different worldviews and signed up for completely different policy courses. It was almost as if the president and prime minister were working against each other. The system still somehow made it work. That was the first experience of cohabitation, and it has functioned effectively in France in spite of the conflicts between the president and the prime minister.⁸

1993-1995: Mitterrand-Balladur Cohabitation

From 1993 to 1995, the French cohabitation saw a more harmonious relationship between Mitterrand and Prime Minister Édouard Balladur. It was not a rivalry like that with Chirac. Balladur may have been a different kind of conservative, but the right was still represented and had its policies implemented.⁹

⁷ Yan, H.T., 2021. Prime ministerial autonomy and intra-executive conflict under semi-presidentialism. *European Political Science Review*, 13(3), pp.285-306.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Yan (n 7).

1997-2002: Chirac-Jospin Cohabitation

From 1997 to 2002, there was a third and the longest cohabitation to date. Occurring under President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, this period had significant policy differences, especially in the economic and social spheres. Yet both ultimately managed to respect the constitutional prerogatives of the other and passed through this period with few clamorous public disputes.¹⁰

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS

Portugal

The 1976 Constitution of Portugal established a semi-presidential system in which the President holds considerable power, mostly relating to foreign policy and defense. The President's power is slightly curtailed with regards to domestic affairs, as the Prime Minister and the government are primarily responsible for them. Unlike in France, Portugal has seen less cohabitation and more overall stability, with the semi-presidential system functioning fairly well and fewer conflicts arising from it.¹¹

Poland

After the communism was defeated in 1989, Poland initially set up a semi-presidential system that vested significant power in the hands of the president. But during the 1990s, several constitutional amendments made the president's role much weaker, thereby beefing up the authority of the prime minister and the parliament. Yet unlike some European cohabitations, which involve leaders of opposing political parties, the Polish version has usually been a squabble between the head of state and the head of government from the same ruling coalition.¹²

Russia

The established semi-presidential system of Russia—under the 1993 Constitution—gives the President sweeping authority that clearly sets him up as more of a super-president. What this means is that the President has power over the executive branch (as is already firmly established in any system with a strong presidency), but he also directly and indirectly controls the legislative and judicial branches, as

¹⁰ Yan (n 7).

¹¹ Neto, O.A., 2022. Semi-presidentialism in Portugal: Academic quarrels amidst institutional stability. *The Oxford handbook of Portuguese politics*, p.121.

¹² Lytvyn, V., 2021. Institutional and procedural determination of premier-presidentialism as a type of semi-presidential system of government and its manifestations and operationalisations in European countries. *Studium Europy Srodkowej i Wschodniej*, 16, pp.69-91.

well as the armed forces and the security services (the "power ministries" or the "federal security sector").¹³

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM

Like all governance system, semi presidential system also has its own set of pros and cons.¹⁴

Advantages

1. **Balance of Power:** The semi-presidential system prevents the neighboring President and Prime Minister offices from accumulating too much power. This is a good thing—it's good to have them both accountable to the people. And when the people in charge—especially when they are presidents and prime ministers—are accountable, the system they govern looks more like a democracy than an authoritative regime.
2. **Stable Executive Leadership:** The executive branch has continuity and stability because of the President's fixed term. The Prime Minister's post has parliamentary accountability, which means they are open to democratic oversight and have an immediate response to public opinion.
3. **Flexibility:** The semi-presidential system can house various political constellations, including times of cohabitation, without necessitating significant constitutional alterations. This adaptability permits the system to weather political changes.
4. **Effective Governance:** The dual executive system might be quite exceptional. It allows both the President and the Prime Minister to give all of their attention to major tasks they each specialize in. Where the President is concerned mainly with working on foreign and defense policy and leading in executive fashion, the Prime Minister fills the void by being the "go-to" person in charge of everything that relates to the everyday nature and business of the government, domestically speaking.

¹³ Raunio, T. and Sedelius, T., 2020. Semi-Presidential Policy Making in Europe. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁴ Kujanen, M., 2024. Popularity and powers: comparing public opinion on presidents in semi-presidential and presidential regimes. European Political Science Review, 16(2), pp.225-241.

Disadvantages

Potential for Conflict: Tensions and conflicts can arise between a President and a Prime Minister, especially when they rule together, or "cohabit." Such cohabitation can lead to ineffective government and even political unrest.

1. **Complexity:** It is a very difficult thing for the public to understand the semi-presidential system and to hold the leaders accountable because the division of responsibility between the president and the prime minister is not easy to see. The coordination between the two is also thus naturally difficult.
2. **Inefficiencies:** During cohabitation, when power has to be shared and decisions have to be made through compromise, processes can slow down and become inefficient. When the president does not have a promised legislative majority, legislation can be passed and then have to be implemented. The slow and sometimes contentious decision-making of cohabitation has led some scholars to question whether it is even a viable form of democratic government.
3. **Risk of Dual Legitimacy:** When the President is directly elected and the Prime Minister is elected by parliament, we could have a problem of dual legitimacy. This is when both the President and the Prime Minister claim to have a mandate from the voters. And this dual legitimacy could really shake up the politics of a country and make governance much more difficult.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

One direct and significant impact of this governance system in France has been the balance of power it affords, which has in turn provided much-needed political stability and allowed for the sort of governance that can respond quickly to crises and that can make and follow up on coherent policies aimed at serving the needs of society. It's a system that has seemingly found a good balance between these and other factors, enabling it to reap these domestic and international impacts in a sort of "two for one" fashion. Domestically, there is the clear benefit of having both a "president" and a "prime minister" to serve as national political figures; together, they form a dual executive that can act in each of their ways to serve the nation and make and follow up on policy decisions.¹⁵

¹⁵ Jones, B., 2021. The policy-making process. In Politics UK (pp. 590-616). Routledge.

Throughout France's history, the French system of governance has followed consistent principles that have allowed the nation to maintain a strong and smooth presence on the global stage. At the core of this system has been the largely unchecked authority of the French president in the realms of foreign policy and defense. Whether operating alone or in concert with the French prime minister and/or other ministers, the president has been able to act as a reliable and efficient decision-maker. One key period of presidential decision-making that has exemplified this core principle was the time during which President Nicolas Sarkozy advanced the French national interest by managing the complex and dangerous events that led to the 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

The system of government in France is the semi-presidential system, which was established when the constitution of the Fifth Republic came about in 1958. What makes this system unique is that it's a sort of hybrid of the parliamentary and presidential systems. It's a way, on paper at least, to have the best of both worlds, with a single individual in charge (the president) and a body of people (the parliament) who have the power to influence what that person gets to do. But that's very theoretical, and the application of the semi-presidential system comes with its own set of challenges and strengths. A highlight of the semi-presidential system is its flexibility. The system is able to adapt to different political configurations and to periods of cohabitation. This is far from a trivial matter. It is, in fact, a rich, dynamic interaction that exposes the system's "hidden wiring." Because the semi-presidential system uses "two tops"—the president and the prime minister—cohabitation can be difficult and potentially conflictual. Students of this topic have much to offer in the way of intricate analyses and, often, strongly worded opinions. Comparing France's semi-presidential system with those of other nations informs us about what sets it apart and what it means for France itself. Indeed, the semi-presidential system has a number of pluses that come with it, like balanced power among branches, a generally stable leadership, and fairly effective government. And yet, it's not the only system of this kind; it has to be compared to others to see what qualities or potential conflicts it might have. And compared it should be—for many see it as largely unique to France.

Looking at the historical development, institutional structure, and practical results, this research offers a thorough analysis of France's semi-presidential political system. It explores how it works in a

¹⁶ Morgan, P.W., 2020. The Coalition Government and Liberal Intervention: Britain's Response to the Crises in Libya and Syria (Doctoral dissertation, Keele University).

governance framework and how it affects political stability. This work also puts it in a broader context, clarifying its relationship with other forms of government.

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