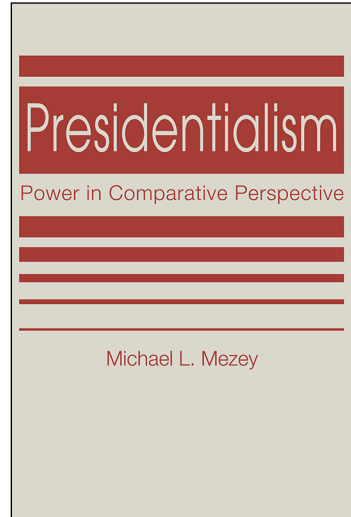


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**Presidentialism:
Power in Comparative Perspective**

Michael L. Mezey



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1800 30th Street, Ste. 314
Boulder, CO 80301
USA
telephone 303.444.6684
fax 303.444.0824

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1

An Introduction to Presidentialism

On January 20, 2009, Barack Obama took the oath of office as the forty-fourth president of the United States. At that moment, the country was in what could only be described as terrible shape. The United States was confronting its worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Unemployment was climbing toward double digits, major financial institutions were requiring huge investments by the government in order to avoid collapse, hundreds of thousands of people were about to lose their homes to foreclosure, and the domestic automobile industry was on the verge of bankruptcy. Internationally, the country's soldiers were fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Middle East was once again in flames as Israelis and Palestinians confronted one another in Gaza, failed states in Africa and South Asia were sliding toward chaos, Iran and North Korea were hard at work on nuclear programs, and a new cold war with Russia seemed to be brewing.

Yet when polled a week before inauguration day, overwhelming majorities said that Obama would be a good president, that he would bring real change to Washington, and that he would make the right decisions on the economy, Iraq, dealing with the war in the Middle East, and protecting the country from terrorist attacks. More than 80 percent of the public believed that their new president would work effectively with Congress and that he would manage the executive branch wisely; 79 percent pronounced themselves optimistic about the next four years, and 78 percent said that they had a favorable opinion of the president-elect. Only 18 percent reported an unfavorable opinion.¹ All of this was particularly remarkable given the fact that he had prevailed in a tough, often bitter election campaign, winning just under 55 percent of the popular

vote. Equally remarkable was that the popular belief in Obama's abilities to deal with all of these challenges seemed to be largely a matter of faith rather than a reasoned assessment based on past performance. After all, Obama had served only four years in the US Senate, two of which had been devoted more to running for president than legislating, and before that his only government experience had been as a rank-and-file member of the Illinois state legislature.

One year after his election, however, things had changed. Although the economic free fall that he had inherited had been stopped—in large measure because of a huge economic stimulus program, government support for the automobile industry, and various initiatives to bolster the housing sector, all of which the president championed—unemployment had soared to 10 percent, home foreclosures were continuing, and, although Obama had begun to wind down the country's military commitment to Iraq, continued violence there and uncertain steps toward democracy called into question his ability to actually withdraw US troops. At the same time, he had escalated the country's commitment of troops to Afghanistan and expanded the air campaign against Taliban and al-Qaeda forces in Pakistan. In Washington, partisanship had intensified, his signature healthcare initiative was bogged down and losing public support, and deficit spending had reached alarming proportions as tax revenues declined and the countercyclical expenditures necessary to stop the recession increased. The public mood began to sour; Democrats lost the off-year gubernatorial elections in New Jersey and Virginia along with several special elections including, shockingly, the election to replace Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts. Anti-Washington sentiment was on the rise, directed for the most part at the Democrats, who were in control of the presidency and both houses of Congress. Obama's job approval rating fell below 50 percent, his support among independent voters, who had provided him with so many votes a year earlier, sharply eroded, and the country's confidence that the president could deliver on his promise of change moved toward the vanishing point. The midterm elections of 2010 saw the Democratic Party lose its majority in the House of Representatives while barely clinging to its majority in the Senate, and according to public opinion polls, more voters disapproved than approved of the president's performance. In the view of many commentators, Obama seemed well on his way to becoming a one-term president. Nonetheless, in November 2012 he was reelected to a second term, although by a narrower margin than in 2008, a victory that may well have had more to do with the weaknesses of his opponent and the Republican Party than with widespread satisfaction with his first-term performance.

Some may attribute Barack Obama's first-term problems to his inexperience, mistakes, and misjudgment; others will cite the intractability of the problems that he confronted, many of which he inherited from his predecessor, as well as the unrelenting hostility of the Republican opposition to his agenda and to him personally. Although there is something to be said for these factors, such an analysis misses the point that Obama's experience tracks to a great extent the experiences of many if not all recent US presidents. Typically, presidents score their highest job approval rating at the moment that they take office and then experience an erosion of public support as their term progresses. There are, to be sure, short-term ups and downs, depending upon the events that dominate the news, but the long-term trend is toward lower levels of public support. In other words, all US presidents begin their terms with the high hopes and good wishes of the American people and end their presidencies seeming to have fallen short of meeting these expectations. More often than not, they leave office frustrated that they have accomplished less than they had hoped, angry about the things that got in their way, and already drafting the inevitable memoir, replete with self-justifications and score-settling.

Interestingly enough, this pattern of very high expectations that go unmet is not an exclusively US phenomenon. This point is typically missed by US voters as well as scholars, who fail to ask to what extent the experiences and practices of their political leaders and institutions compare to those in other countries. Such a comparative perspective can serve to move us away from idiosyncratic explanations for the success or failure of specific presidents and toward the structural and systemic issues that apply to all presidential systems. A brief review of recently elected presidents in France and Bolivia suggests that Barack Obama's experience during his first years in office was in many ways similar to that of other presidents.

In May 2007, a year and a half before the Obama victory, Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president of France, replacing Jacques Chirac, who had served in that office for twelve years and who in the minds of many had come to represent an aging, complacent, elitist, and distant political class (Smith 2007). Sarkozy won with 53 percent of the vote against his opponent, the Socialist candidate Ségolène Royal. It was a hard-fought race, turning in part on explosive issues such as immigration and French identity as well as more traditional concerns about the economy, corruption, and, like the Obama campaign, the need for "change." Sarkozy had made his reputation as a tough-minded minister of interior who took a particularly hard line against immigrants and the urban unrest with which they had been associated. Some three weeks after his election,

Sarkozy had a job approval rating of 65 percent, prompting one journalist to say that “not since de Gaulle returned to office in 1958 had a French leader enjoyed such popularity.” He concluded that “a large number of French people seem to be ready to give M. Sarkozy a chance to push through his promised whirlwind program of fiscal, labor, education and criminal justice reforms” (Lichfield 2007).

But the Sarkozy honeymoon did not last any longer than Obama’s. By May 2008, the same journalist was reporting job approval ratings for the president “between 28 and 35 percent, the “lowest for any year old presidency since the launch of the 5th Republic” (Lichfield 2008). By early 2009, Sarkozy’s numbers had rebounded somewhat, but his job approval rating was still hovering at around 40 percent. The recession with which President Obama was trying to cope also had hit France and the rest of Europe, resulting in rising unemployment, threats to the stability and even survival of the euro, and severe fiscal challenges for the government as it sought to deal with mounting imbalances between revenues and expenditures. Sarkozy’s efforts to curb budget deficits and to reform the expensive French pension system, together with a series of appointments that to some suggested cronyism and even nepotism, and several scandals involving members of his administration, had created in the minds of many an image of arrogance and detachment from public opinion and a view that the promised change either was not going to happen or was not going to be as popular or as painless as the public had been led to believe.² By the summer of 2011, less than a year before the 2012 presidential election, Sarkozy’s disapproval ratings were approaching 80 percent (Gourevitch 2011), and other polls indicated that he was “deeply disliked” by some 60 percent of French voters.³ Unlike Barack Obama, Sarkozy was narrowly defeated for reelection in May 2012, by Socialist candidate François Hollande.

In December 2005, Bolivia elected as its president Evo Morales, leader of the Movement Toward Socialism party. He was the first presidential candidate in recent Bolivian history to have received a majority of the popular vote (54 percent); as required by the Constitution, his predecessors had been selected by the Bolivian Congress when they failed to attain an electoral majority. Morales also was the first indigenous person to become president of Bolivia, and his election ignited joy among the poor and downtrodden of his country and fear among the landed elite, who were for the most part descended from the European immigrants who had for so long dominated the politics of the nation. His party also gained a majority of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. His avowedly anti-US platform, his open affection for Hugo Chávez and

Fidel Castro, his pledge to nationalize leading industries, and his opposition to US-inspired policies aimed at eradicating cocoa cultivation set off alarms in Washington. However, a public opinion poll conducted shortly after Morales's election found that 65 percent of the population approved of the president-elect, 67 percent believed that his administration would be positive for Bolivians, and 45 percent said that they felt confident about the new president.⁴ One month into his term, his approval rate had risen to nearly 80 percent.

Once in office, however, Morales faced strong opposition from the Senate, where his party lacked a majority, as well as from the wealthier eastern provinces of the country, whose leaders organized a constitutionally questionable referendum endorsing secession. He responded by scheduling a special election that would ask the people to vote on whether or not to recall him, his vice president, and the provincial governors, several of whom were opposition leaders. According to the rules, if he or the other officials were to retain their office, they needed not just a majority of the vote in the recall but a higher percentage of the vote than they had received in their initial election. Although seen by some as taking a risky gamble, Morales won a resounding victory, gaining substantially more support than he had registered in 2005, particularly in the poorer western part of the country, where he polled in excess of 80 percent. One observer suggested that the election results were less an endorsement of Morales and more a commentary on the dependence that Bolivians have on the presidency—"there is no alternative national leader, they only had a choice between Evo or a vacuum of leadership."⁵ After his victory, he developed a new Constitution that would provide the basis for greater representation of indigenous people in the legislature, adopted a more aggressive approach to land reform, and sought a greater role for the government in regard to nationalization. He also proposed that the president be allowed to run perpetually for reelection, but, faced with resistance, backed off that proposal in favor of one allowing him an additional five-year term. Early in 2009, the new Constitution was approved, and at the end of the year Morales was reelected with 62 percent of the vote. The next year, he nationalized energy-generating firms and reformed the pension system, extending its benefits to millions of poor Bolivians. But he also suffered a major setback when he attempted to end government fuel subsidies; the resulting spike in gasoline prices caused violent street demonstrations and Morales was forced to back down.⁶ His job approval ratings dropped to 32 percent at this point, compared with 70 percent at the time of reelection. By the end of 2011, things had not improved, with his job approval rating at 35 percent.⁷

What do these three presidencies, in three quite different countries—separated by language, geography, and culture—have in common? Each president was an atypical candidate in terms of his personal background—Barack Obama as the first African American president in US history, Nicolas Sarkozy as a descendent of Hungarian Jews who was baptized a Catholic, and Evo Morales as the first indigenous president in Bolivia’s nearly 200 years of independence. Also atypical were the political careers of Obama and Morales prior to becoming president; while Sarkozy had more than twenty years of governmental experience at the local and national levels, both Obama and Morales had spent a good deal of time as “community organizers.” Obama had served only four years in the US Senate, and Morales, a union leader and activist, had served only briefly in the Bolivian Chamber of Deputies. All three men were relatively young when elected—Morales forty-six, Obama forty-seven, and Sarkozy fifty-two—and each became somewhat of an instant celebrity. Sarkozy’s marriage to a well-known model became fodder for the tabloids. One lost count of the number of times Obama and his family appeared on the cover of various magazines. And Morales’s international travels were widely reported, while at home his opponents asserted that he, with the support of the country’s media, was creating a cult of personality (Romero and Schipani 2009). All three presidents began their terms with public opinion polls suggesting widespread optimism about their prospects for success, optimism that would dissipate relatively quickly in the cases of Obama and Sarkozy, and a bit later in the case of Morales.

For Barack Obama, the hope was for a quick recovery from economic disaster and in the long term for a new kind of politics that would be more bipartisan and more transparent and put an end to what he called “business as usual.” In the case of Nicolas Sarkozy, it was a return to law and order in the short term and a wide-ranging “modernization” of the French political system as well as the country’s economy and society. For Evo Morales, it was the “overwhelming demand for change” in a political system dominated by traditional political parties and the promise that he “would open the political system to the indigenous masses” so as to achieve a more just distribution of the wealth of their nation (Gamarra 2008:130). In each case, these hopes were more easily articulated than realized. Obama faced opposition from an independent Congress and its obstructionist Republican minority; rather than the bipartisanship he had hoped for, his first term was characterized by an even more polarized and hostile political environment. Sarkozy faced opposition from an entrenched French political and economic establishment, and Morales from that portion of Bolivian society who had long held power and were not prepared to yield it willingly.

Each president had his successes. Obama saw his healthcare initiative enacted into law after a long struggle, Sarkozy played a central role in attempts to stabilize the euro during the Greek financial crisis, and Morales by all accounts strengthened the Bolivian economy while at the same time moving the country toward a more equitable distribution of its wealth. Despite their achievements, however, each failed to fulfill all the promises and to meet all the expectations generated by their election. Each failure was viewed by the media and the public as personal in nature—primarily as a failure of presidential leadership and less as an indication of systemic failures or of the resistance of a policy problem to simple, consensual, or pain-free solutions. The experience of each nation and each president, as different as they are, exhibits an outsized focus on the president—on one person who would bring about change, who would solve all of the country’s problems. This personalization of governance, focusing intensely and almost exclusively on the president, is the heart of *presidentialism*, the central theme of this book.

Presidentialism

In presidential systems, the executive (that is, the president) and the legislature are elected separately and directly by the voters. The legislature has no primary role in the selection of the president; his tenure in office is fixed; and policy failures, popular discontent with his leadership, or adverse votes against his policy preferences in the legislature cannot drive him from office prematurely.⁸ He can be forced to leave office before the end of his term only with extraordinary actions—for example, impeachment in the United States, a combination of impeachment and popular uprisings in Latin America (Pérez-Liñán 2007), or coups in those countries with militaries disposed to take such steps. Legislative terms are similarly fixed; only in a few instances can a president make the unilateral decision to dissolve the legislature and call for new elections (see Linz 1994:6; Lijphart 1994:99–100; Shugart and Mainwaring 1997:14). José Antonio Cheibub (2007:35) summarizes this arrangement succinctly by saying that, in presidential systems, the executive does not require the support of a parliamentary majority to exist and persist in office. David Samuels and Matthew Shugart (2010:4) describe the situation simply as “separate origin and separate survival” for both the legislature and the executive. In presidential systems, the president serves as both head of state and head of government. In the former capacity, he symbolizes the unity of the nation and, along with other national sym-

bols, evokes a sense of patriotism among citizens. As head of government, he is the political leader of the nation, charged with a leading role in the policy decisions that the country takes.

In parliamentary systems, in contrast, the voters, rather than electing the executive, elect legislators who in turn select a cabinet that constitutes the executive. The cabinet—sometimes referred to as “the government”—is composed of legislators from the party or parties that make up the majority in Parliament, and is headed by a prime minister (or a premier) who serves as head of government or chief executive. The prime minister is not the head of state; that position and its symbolic functions belong to either a constitutional monarch, or to a typically nonelected and relatively powerless president in those parliamentary systems that do not have a monarch. The government is accountable to the legislature; this means that the prime minister and cabinet can be removed prior to scheduled elections if they lose the support of their legislative majority. Reciprocally, in many parliamentary systems, the government holds the power to dissolve the legislature and schedule new elections. In other words, in parliamentary systems, the executive is selected by, and serves at the pleasure of, the legislative majority (see Samuels and Shugart 2010:26–27).

A third category of constitutional arrangements combines aspects of parliamentary and presidential systems. In semipresidential (or mixed) systems, executive power is shared between a president who is directly elected by the voters, serves a fixed term in office, and enjoys independent powers, and a prime minister and cabinet who are dependent on a parliamentary majority for their survival in office. The president is the head of state and serves jointly with the prime minister as head of government (see Linz 1994:48ff.; Cheibub 2007). The discussion in this book includes both presidential and semipresidential political systems. As compared with parliamentary systems, presidential and semipresidential systems together constitute a majority of the democratic political systems worldwide, with slightly more semipresidential than purely presidential systems (Samuels and Shugart 2010:6).⁹

These distinctions among parliamentary, presidential, and semipresidential systems rest upon the wording of a nation’s constitution.¹⁰ But the theme of this book is that presidentialism is more than simply a constitutional category; it includes a set of public perceptions, political actions, as well as formal and informal political power arrangements that to a greater or lesser degree characterize all countries that have presidential or semipresidential constitutions.

In the first instance, presidentialism is characterized by a broadly shared public perception that places the president at the center of the

nation's politics and views him (or her) as the person primarily responsible for dealing with the challenges before the country. One leading scholar of Latin American politics summarized this phenomenon in the following terms: "The president is taken to be the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests." The president is thought to be "the individual who is most fit to take responsibility for the destiny of the nation" (O'Donnell 1994:59–60). Popular expectations for the welfare of the nation and for the satisfactory performance of its political system focus on the presidency, often to the exclusion or at least the marginalization of other public officials and political leaders. These lofty expectations mean that policy failures as well as successes, whether or not they are the result of the actions or inactions of the president, are nonetheless attributed almost exclusively to him.

Second, presidentialism is characterized by the efforts that presidents and others make to increase the power and authority of the presidency so that the occupants of the office will have the capacity to meet the expectations that the public holds for them, or simply because it is in the nature of an office holder to seek to aggrandize his power. Presidents use their rhetorical skills to encourage popular support both for their policies and often for enhanced presidential power. They argue implicitly and often explicitly that because they are elected by all of the citizens, their plans and proposals embody the will of the people and therefore that deference to the president and to his agenda is required if his, and by extension the people's policy goals, are to be achieved.

Third, presidentialism refers to the actual movement of power and authority in the direction of the president. Although this process can take place quickly, it more typically occurs over an extended period of time, decades perhaps; in the short term, presidential power can wax or wane in a particular country, but the long-term trend is toward the accumulation of more power in the hands of the president. This takes place either through usurpation of power by the incumbent or the voluntary ceding of power to the president by other political institutions, particularly the legislature, or more typically by a combination of both factors. This is justified either as an appropriate response to the public expectations that focus on the president or as an unavoidable necessity given the realities of leading and governing the modern nation-state.

Whatever the process or its justification might be, presidentialism reflects the fact that presidents around the world have, over the years, come to enjoy an increased capacity to determine public policy. At first glance, this assertion seems to fly in the face of the policy failures and disappointments that so many presidents experience in their time in

office. In the United States, President Obama and all of his recent predecessors have been unable to gain approval for some of their highest-priority policy initiatives. But such failures indicate that while the power of the US president has increased, the expectations that people have of him have increased at a faster rate, so that despite the increased power of the office, the gap between what is expected of him and what he can deliver has grown. On the other hand, in some countries, presidential power has increased at a rate comparable to the increase in public expectations, so that the gap, if it exists, is substantially smaller. Arguably, this has been the case with Bolivia's President Morales.

Presidentialism thus incorporates a state of mind of a public disposed toward connecting themselves and their political fate to the personality and policies of a single leader, to the efforts of presidents to exploit that state of mind in order to generate popular support both for their policies and for their own more central role in determining public policy, and to a tendency, more fully realized in some nations than in others, to allocate state power in a way that conforms to this state of mind.

Personal vs. Collective Leadership

Presidentialism emphasizes the personal leadership of a singular leader, while parliamentary systems are characterized by collective leadership. In presidential systems, the president alone is responsible for administering the nation's executive power. He may choose to consult with others as he exercises his power, or delegate responsibilities to others who report to him, but he sits atop the executive hierarchy and has the final say on all executive decisions. He need not conduct a vote among his advisers or cabinet members prior to taking action; he can simply act.

In parliamentary systems, policymaking power lies in the hands of the leaders of the majority party or coalition. The prime minister, functioning as head of government, works in close consultation with individual legislators, particularly members of the governing party or the parties that compose the governing coalition, as well as with a cabinet that reflects the majority in the legislature. The prime minister typically does not have the unilateral power to act; cabinet votes or at least discussions authorizing such actions take place prior to major executive decisions, especially in those cases when the government is composed of a coalition of political parties. Thus, in parliamentary systems, major political actions and public policy decisions or initiatives are more likely to be attributed to political

institutions (as in “the government proposed the policy”) than to an individual (as in “the prime minister proposed the policy”). In presidential systems, executive actions are attributed to the president, usually by name (as in “Sarkozy proposed the policy”).

Parliamentary systems tend to be characterized by strong political parties that play a significant role in providing policy cues to voters, identifying who will hold political power, and determining the content of public policy. In contrast, presidential systems tend to emphasize the personality and policy priorities of the president and de-emphasize political parties as well as other political institutions. While executive leaders in parliamentary systems are members of, and therefore inextricably bound to their legislative bodies, presidents can distance themselves from their legislatures, or even attack the legislature as an institution. For example, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil frequently indicated that he held members of Parliament in relatively low esteem and, toward the end of his first term in office, according to one analyst, “increasingly sought to rely on his personal charisma rather than on the party organization for support” (Samuels 2008:174). US presidents have regularly sought to depict themselves as standing above the partisan conflict that characterizes Congress. President Bill Clinton, after his party lost control of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections, practiced a policy of “triangulation”—depicting himself as the moderate and sober leader standing apart from the Republican conservatives who controlled the House and the Senate as well as from his own ostensible allies in the Democratic Party. President Obama, during his reelection campaign, frequently criticized Congress for blocking his initiatives, usually failing to distinguish between its Democratic and Republican members. President Rafael Correa of Ecuador characterized his Congress as a “sewer” of corruption, and his party, to demonstrate its disdain for that institution, ran no candidates for legislative seats during Correa’s election campaign (Hayes 2006).

Writing about Latin American presidencies, but in terms that are more generally applicable, Guillermo O’Donnell remarks that presidents tend to “view themselves as above both political parties and organized interests,” that they seem to view other institutions such as legislatures and courts as “nuisances,” and that they depict themselves as standing alone as the sole representatives of the people as a whole. “Since this paternal figure is supposed to take care of the whole nation, his political base must be a movement, the supposedly vibrant overcoming of the factionalism and conflict associated with parties” (1994:60).

Presidential Visibility

To the citizens of presidential nations, the president is by far the most visible domestic political actor. Today, the president of the United States is the dominant figure in the political consciousness of the American public. Nearly every person in the country older than the age of six knows the president's name, and no other political leader is as widely known. US history is recounted in terms of presidential administrations—the Age of Jackson, Lincoln and the Civil War, Roosevelt and the New Deal, the Reagan years. Highways and airports are named after past presidents, the faces of the greatest adorn the nation's currency, and monuments are built to commemorate them. The quadrennial presidential elections attract more media attention and more voters than any other election, and many citizens vote only in presidential elections. Once he is in office, the nation's politics tend to revolve around the president. His words and actions dominate the news, and citizens as well as Congress look to him for leadership and policy initiatives on major issues.

Similarly, virtually every French citizen knows that their president's name is François Hollande; fewer, I suspect, know that the prime minister is named Jean-Marc Ayrault, and even fewer could name key members of the National Assembly. The name of Charles de Gaulle, four decades after his death, still resonates with the French people. The country's main airport is named after him and a magnificent Parisian museum bears the name of his successor, Georges Pompidou. Before the death of Hugo Chávez, one could not speak of Venezuela without focusing on its colorful and controversial president. Few people outside Venezuela and only a few more inside the country would have been able to name another major government leader. Indeed, presidential dominance is a common theme throughout Latin America. President Evo Morales's preeminent role in Bolivian politics is comparable to the roles that Presidents Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador play in the political lives of their nations. In Africa, President Robert Mugabe has controlled Zimbabwe since its independence, often with an iron fist, and in the more democratic South Africa, presidents such as Nelson Mandela and his successors, Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, have been at the center of public attention and the policymaking process. The founding presidents of postcolonial Africa—Banda, Nkrumah, Senghor, Nyerere, Kenyatta—have the same meaning to the people of their countries that George Washington has to Americans. These leaders constantly blurred the distinction between themselves and the state as each moved to expand his power and control his country, and each remains a major historical fig-

ure nationally and on the continent as a whole. And just as Americans tend to recount their history in terms of presidential administrations, one student of francophone Africa says that it is “hardly accidental that regimes in Africa and elsewhere tend to be denominated by the names of their leaders—the Wade regime [in Senegal], the Biya regime [in Cameroon], the Bongo regime [Gabon], and so on” (Le Vine 2004:292). Similarly, as Russia moved in recent years from authoritarianism to an ostensibly more democratic system, the presidency, first with Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin and then with Vladimir Putin, became the primary focus of public attention and virtually synonymous with governmental power.¹¹

The President and the People

Presidents have a unique relationship with the citizens of their countries, a relationship derived in part from the fact that presidents are the only political leaders elected by the population as a whole and in part from their role as head of state. It is a relationship that presidents are inclined to cite when their policies are questioned or when they are perceived as having overstepped the constitutional limits of their power.

In the United States, almost from the beginning of its constitutional history, its presidents have justified the expansion of their powers in democratic terms—in terms of their connection with the people. Thomas Jefferson argued that when as president he needed to use discretionary power beyond the explicit terms of the Constitution, he would appeal to the people to judge whether he had acted appropriately or not. In his view, “governments are republics only in proportion as they embody the will of the people and execute it” (Bailey 2007:14). By the time that Andrew Jackson became president, the electorate had expanded significantly, and Jackson, who had arrived at the presidency over the opposition of the Washington elites, styled himself as “the people’s” president. For him, the first principle of the United States was that “the majority should govern” (Meacham 2008:120). One student of his presidency suggests that Jackson wanted the power to act as freely as he could because he believed his judgment would serve the country well, for he made no distinction between himself and the broad idea of “the people” (Meacham 2008:250). Three decades later, Abraham Lincoln justified his expansion of presidential powers beyond its clear constitutional limits as being in response to the wishes and needs of “his rightful masters, the American people.” Similarly, Theodore Roosevelt argued that the president’s power could be restricted only by the specific words of the

Constitution, and that where the document was silent, he had discretion to act. When he acted, he did so as the “steward of the people, bound actively and affirmatively to do all he could for the people” (Pfiffner and Davidson 2009:44–45). And in the mid–twentieth century, as the nation moved toward universal suffrage and as modern methods of mass communication developed, the connection between presidential power and popular, democratic government became even stronger.

Presidents outside the United States have justified their actions in similar democratic terms. Like their US counterparts, they too are the sole leaders in their countries who are in office by virtue of the votes of a national electorate. Hugo Chávez, during his 2000 campaign for the Venezuelan presidency, adopted the slogan “with Chávez, the people rule” (Hawkins 2010:15). Evo Morales, on the eve of his election to the Bolivian presidency, declared in an interview with a Brazilian newspaper that “when elected, I intend to be the people’s president.”¹² When the new Constitution that Morales designed and championed—and that significantly expanded presidential power—was approved, he said that the vote to approve the document was “not a vote for the government; it is for the Bolivian people” (Partlow 2009). Chávez and Morales are often viewed as part of a new generation of Latin American presidents who have come to office as populist outsiders who present themselves, their policies, and their actions—and especially those actions that stretch the ostensible constitutional limits of their power—as a manifestation of the will of the people (Mainwaring 2006; Barr 2009; Hawkins 2010).

The president’s ability to gain popular support for the expansion of his powers is abetted by the popular disposition to personalize politics—for individual citizens to attach themselves and their political priorities and aspirations to a singular leader rather than to a larger, more collective organization such as a political party or a legislative body, or to a particular set of ideological beliefs that transcends individual leaders. Such a disposition is encouraged by the fact that the president occupies a dual role; he is not only head of his government but also head of state. The role of head of state, although largely ceremonial, is intimately connected with the history and symbols of the nation. Presidential appearances are typically accompanied by the flags, the music, and the backdrops that arouse a sense of nationalism among a population. This allows presidents, if they wish, to blur the distinctions between support for them and their policies, and patriotic support for the nation, as they seek to justify their actions or expand their power.

The president of the United States may, in his role as head of state, lay a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the morning, and then in

the afternoon, in his role as head of government, may hold a press conference to announce a new economic initiative and denounce his opponents in Congress or in the opposition party. Although political scientists and other informed observers can distinguish these two roles, it is not clear that the American people always make this distinction. Presidents regularly use the trappings associated with their role as head of state to generate popular support for the policy initiatives that they undertake in their role as head of government. Presidential addresses to the nation are televised from the Oval Office of the White House, the very symbol of the US presidency, and the president's State of the Union address to Congress is accompanied by great fanfare and ceremony as both political supporters and political opponents greet him with handshakes and cheers, representing their support for the office of the presidency and his role as head of state, rather than their support for the political positions that the president is about to announce in his speech in his role as head of government.

In parliamentary systems such as the United Kingdom's, the positions of head of state and head of government are separate, so it is more difficult for the prime minister as head of government to marshal the nation's symbols in support of his political program. In England, the head of state is the queen. She is the one who evokes patriotic emotions among the citizens of England, and it is her appearances that are accompanied by the Union Jack and "Rule Britannia." Like the president of the United States, she appears on state occasions amid great pomp and ceremony, but unlike the US president she is the object of widespread public affection, and studiously avoids overt involvement in the political conflicts and contests of the day. Political attacks on the queen, although not unheard of, are generally considered a breach of proper behavior. The queen has few significant governmental functions. She receives the credentials of foreign ambassadors, officially asks the leader of the majority party in Parliament to form the government, offers advice to the prime minister, which of course he is free to accept or ignore, and at the opening of Parliament gives the speech from the throne, written for her by the government and outlining the policy positions and priorities of "her majesty's" government. The head of the queen's government is the prime minister, and he and his co-partisans in the parliamentary majority make the political and policy decisions for the nation. Little in the way of ceremony characterizes his public appearances, and support for him is based entirely on political and personal considerations rather than on any sense of patriotism. Unlike for the queen, attacks and criticisms directed at the prime minister are a staple of everyday political discourse in Great Britain.

The president's role as head of state in a presidential system should not be confused with the role of presidents who are heads of state in parliamentary systems that are not constitutional monarchies. In countries such as Israel, Italy, and Germany, the head of government is the prime minister, but each of these countries has a president who serves as head of state. Typically, the president is an elder statesman or stateswoman, and is usually selected by the legislature rather than by popular election. As head of state, he receives ambassadors from foreign nations and, like the queen of England, makes appearances on state occasions, standing above the political fray as a unifying and nonpartisan figure. Constitutionally, the president may be named as head of the armed forces, but the decisions about the governance and disposition of those forces are not made by the president. Just as British military decisions are made by "her majesty's" government and not by the queen herself, so too are Italian military decisions made by the Italian cabinet rather than the president. Presidents in these contexts may have the same formal responsibility as does the queen, of asking the majority-party leader to form a government, and these presidents may be able to exercise some informal influence on that process and on the resulting government itself, but no one would think of these presidents as heads of government.

In semipresidential systems, the president is popularly elected, has significant powers under the Constitution, and is recognized as the head of the state. However, he shares the role of head of government with a prime minister who, like his counterparts in purely parliamentary systems, is accountable to a parliament. In France, the president is an authority figure "who is abstract, impersonal, and removed from the people, yet at the same time embodies personal charisma." Charles de Gaulle personified such a leader, "because of his towering personality, his martial figure and background, his Resistance leadership, and his image as a prophet of legitimacy" (Safran 2009:235–236). So it is the president in France, as well as in other semipresidential systems, rather than the prime minister, who is best able to deploy the symbols of the nation in the service of his political and policy agenda.

Presidential Power: A Continuum

All presidential systems are characterized by an intense popular focus on the president, who tends to portray himself as a person above partisan and legislative conflicts, as the sole and true representative of his people, and as the embodiment and custodian of the nation's history and

symbols. But when it comes to actual presidential power, there is much greater variation. In theory, as well as constitutionally, presidential systems require the president to act cooperatively with other autonomous decisionmakers such as independent legislators, professional bureaucrats, and members of the judiciary, all of whom can constrain or reject his initiatives. Although most presidential systems have such independent institutions with constitutionally designated powers of their own, the power and prerogatives of these institutions tend to decline as nations move in the direction of presidentialism, and those who hold positions in these institutions tend to defer to the president. In either event, the prerogatives of the president increase to the point where the checks on presidential power may become more apparent than real.

This last point suggests that presidentialism, to the extent that it refers to presidential power as it is practiced, is not an either/or phenomenon, but rather a continuum. Political systems may be presidential in the constitutional sense, but may be characterized by varying degrees of presidentialism when it comes to the ability of the president to actually control public policy. In some countries, the degree and pace of the movement of power toward the president have been uncertain and uneven, with episodes of presidential aggrandizement followed by reassertions of power by other political institutions, especially national legislative bodies. Periods of presidential dominance may be followed by periods in which the president is unable to achieve his major objectives and finds himself to a significant degree hemmed in by other political actors. Such has been the case in the United States, where presidents often find that their agendas are frustrated by congressional opposition, where the Supreme Court has, on occasion, invalidated presidential actions, and where bureaucrats can resist presidential efforts to control their actions. In such an environment of “constrained presidentialism,” highly elevated public expectations are still directed at the president, he still dominates the political consciousness of the nation, and he still claims to speak for the people as a whole; however, he finds it difficult to meet the expectations that are focused on him because of the resistance that he faces from other political institutions and actors.

Although these systems of constrained presidentialism constitute a formidable guard against the danger of executive authoritarianism, other problems can arise from a mismatch between popular expectations and the president’s ability to meet those expectations. In the short term, there is likely to be a decline in political support for the incumbent president, as Obama, Morales, and Sarkozy experienced. In the long term, there may be a decline in support for a political regime when its leaders con-

sistently fail to deliver on the promises, implicit and explicit, that they make to their citizens, or fail to deal effectively with the challenges confronting their nation. When people believe that a new president will change their world, and then discover after the president has been in office for a while that their world remains essentially unchanged or even seems to have deteriorated, popular discontent, cynicism, and perhaps political instability can result. In systems where separate institutions really do share power, many political leaders have the ability to stop government action by saying no. Although such systems will minimize the likelihood of authoritarianism, an inability to act on pressing economic or social issues can contribute to instability either because unsolved problems can deteriorate into crises, or simply because citizens come to doubt the legitimacy and efficacy of a political system that cannot respond to their concerns (see Linz 1990, 1994; Haggard, McCubbins, and Shugart 2001). Ironically, such overly constrained presidencies can create conditions that are ripe for an authoritarian leader who promises to break the deadlock and address the problems of the nation in a forceful manner.

At the opposite end of the continuum from constrained presidentialism, one finds “hyperpresidentialism”—presidential systems in which there are very limited or no constraints on the president. Hyperpresidentialism implies “the systematic concentration of political power in the hands of one individual who resists delegating all but the most trivial decision-making tasks” (Bratton and van de Walle 1997:63; see also Rose-Ackerman, Desierto, and Volosin 2011). These extreme cases of presidentialism occur when presidents completely dominate their political systems through some combination of constitutional powers, a rigid and hegemonic governing party, and the extraconstitutional intimidation of opponents. The early presidents of postcolonial African states held office under constitutions that were “personally tailored to the needs of the ruler” in order to establish an “exalted and legally unencumbered presidential office” (Jackson and Rosberg 1982:269), and several countries currently have constitutions that allow for such presidential dominance.

These political systems, as well as similar ones outside of Africa, are of a different order than those constrained presidential systems that we are accustomed to thinking of as democratic, and some might argue that they should be considered part of a discussion of authoritarianism rather than presidentialism. On the other hand, authoritarianism may well be the logical outcome of the movement in the direction of hyperpresidentialism that one sees in ostensibly democratic nations, and suggests some of the worst aspects and greatest dangers of presidentialism—that is, as

democratic presidencies acquire the powers associated with presidentialism, they may begin to take on some of the characteristics of more authoritarian systems. Hugo Chávez began his tenure in Venezuela as a more constrained president, but over the years he moved in the direction of greater presidential power to the point where some observers view his regime as more authoritarian than democratic (Human Rights Watch 2008).¹³ On the other hand, although there are obvious dangers at this end of the presidentialism continuum, the examples of Evo Morales in Bolivia and Lula da Silva in Brazil suggest that strong presidents may be in a better position to achieve significant societal changes than their more constrained presidential counterparts.

In sum, systemic dangers as well as benefits can be found at each end of the presidentialism continuum. In terms of the former, at the hyperpresidential end lies the danger of authoritarianism; at the constrained end is the debilitating gap between public expectations and the president's capacity to deliver on these expectations, a gap that can lead to political alienation and instability. In terms of benefits, hyperpresidentialism can provide the opportunity to break the policy deadlocks that can characterize constrained presidential systems, but these constrained presidencies also provide a greater assurance that democratic institutions and civil liberties will be preserved.¹⁴

Although the actual ability of a president to control public policy may vary, during the twentieth century all presidential systems have been characterized by a steady enhancement of presidential power, an exponentially greater focusing of popular expectations on presidents, and a much stronger public disposition to hold presidents primarily or even solely responsible for public policy successes and failures. There are political, cultural, and technological forces that are global in nature that are driving political systems toward this increasing degree of presidentialism. These factors, to be explored in detail in the ensuing chapters, include the expanding role of governments in the lives of their citizens, the globalized nature of an increasing number of the public policy questions that these governments face, and the increasingly intimate relationship between the presidency and the people facilitated by the electronic mass media.¹⁵

Plan of the Book

As we will see in Chapter 2, one of the major goals of the Enlightenment period was to identify arguments and eventually mechanisms for constraining those holding executive power, in almost all cases kings,

either benevolent or malevolent. This enterprise proceeded from the realization that while an executive function was an indispensable component of every political system of the world, it was also an office that throughout history had proven to be a source of tyranny. Machiavelli's Prince epitomized the executive in its most malevolent form. Written constitutions were developed as a means to formalize restraints on the executive; as political theorist Harvey Mansfield Jr. (1993) has suggested, the task was to "tame the prince." The US Constitution, based upon the teaching of Enlightenment philosophers such as Montesquieu and Locke and drawing upon the US Founders' understanding of Greece and Rome, provided a model of how that might be accomplished in the context of republican (as opposed to monarchical) government by creating the US presidency. Other nations that developed presidential systems were guided by some of the same theories that appealed to the US Founders; in addition, a presidential model proved to be congruent with the history and culture of a number of nations in Latin America and Africa where presidential systems came to be the dominant form of government.

As will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3, the US formula was not the only way to define and confine the constitutional power of presidents. Among the more democratic presidential systems, there are systems where the president dominates because he has the solid support of a highly disciplined legislative majority along with the veto power, the ability to issue decrees, and budgetary control. In Mexico during the period when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was the dominant party in the country, presidents controlled the policymaking process by virtue of their role as the leader of the party (see Saiegh 2010:59). In other Latin American countries where presidents have not been able to count on support from the legislature or where presidents have confronted a highly fractionalized party system, they have relied on a range of formal and informal powers that have either allowed them to act unilaterally, or have been sufficient to allow them to cobble together temporary legislative majorities. This was the situation in both Chile and Brazil beginning in the last decade of the twentieth century and continuing into the first decade of the twenty-first after military governments ceded power to civilians. Earlier in the twentieth century, formal presidential powers as they were written down in constitutions often were supplemented by implicit support from the military establishment that enabled presidents to maintain and extend their power. Such systems were examples of hyperpresidentialism.

In the United States, even when the president's party has held majorities in both chambers of Congress, he has not always been able to

count on the support of his co-partisans for his policy initiatives; but unlike some of his counterparts in the Southern Hemisphere, he has not relied upon the military to force his will upon the nation. US presidents also have a limited though significant arsenal of unilateral powers, and so their success has depended heavily on their ability to persuade others to support their policy initiatives. The US system as well as the hybrid semipresidential system that exists in France are characterized by a more balanced arrangement between the president and other political institutions, exemplifying the notion of constrained presidentialism. Despite these distinctions, all of these systems exhibit the constitutional, political, and psychological characteristics of presidentialism, although to a greater degree in some nations than in others.

One of the forces driving presidentialism is the increasing role that national governments have come to play in the lives of their citizens. As the permissible and expected scope of government actions has expanded, the expectations that citizens have for what the government—and therefore the president—could and should do for them have also expanded. And as government has done more, the result has been that the size of government, calculated in terms of the number of people in its civilian and military bureaucracy, the number of agencies that these people staff, and the cost of all the work that government does, has grown exponentially. More important than the growth of the bureaucracy in terms of size and cost, the jurisdiction and the discretionary power of these bureaucracies have also increased. Because national bureaucracies are part of the executive branch and because every president has the title of chief executive, an expanded bureaucracy has meant expanded presidential power. The role of the growth of government in the movement toward presidentialism will be explored in Chapter 4.

A second factor driving presidentialism is the inexorable movement toward the globalization of every nation's politics, whether one is talking about considerations of war and peace, or the interconnected financial and trade regimes that have such a huge effect on the economies of every nation in the world. Standing and often expansive military establishments exist in virtually every country, and expenditures on military equipment and personnel have become a major part, and in some countries even the largest single part, of the government's budget. Because the president is typically commander in chief of the nation's armed forces, and because the arguments for executive domination of policy-making have always been most persuasive in regard to military and diplomatic issues, large military establishments add significantly to the power of the president. But beyond questions of war, there is an inter-

national dimension to an increasing range of public policy issues. Trade, monetary policy, access to scarce natural resources, environmental questions, and agriculture policy are just a sampling of the issues that have both domestic and international dimensions. Because most political systems, either implicitly or explicitly, concede to their presidents broader prerogatives in regard to the nation's intercourse with foreign governments and institutions, the globalization of public policy issues has further enhanced the role of presidents. This will be the subject of Chapter 5.

Finally, and perhaps most important, democratization, with its imperative that political leaders must cultivate and depend upon popular support if they are to wield legitimate power, has driven political systems in the direction of presidentialism. The idea of popular support has developed a wider meaning in the modern age than it had when presidential systems were originally created. During the twentieth century, restrictions on the franchise that were in place during the nineteenth century and earlier began to wither away to the point that today, in almost every nation in the world where elections take place, all adults, with only a very few restrictions, are eligible to participate. This has encouraged and in some ways required presidents and presidential candidates to appeal to a broad and extensive mass public with variable interest in and information about politics and public policy. In addition, the transformative role of the electronic media has provided sitting and aspiring presidents with direct and continuous access to that public. This has had a significant impact not only on the way in which presidents are selected but also on the way in which they seek support for their policies and on the manner in which they choose to govern. A combination of democratization, the electronic mass media, the psychological need of voters to commit themselves to a singular leader, and the weakening of both party structures and overarching ideological commitments has moved politics in the direction of personalism, with its emphasis on the individual leader, and away from political institutions, with its emphasis on collective decisionmaking processes involving multiple political actors. This will be the subject of Chapter 6.

The argument of this book is that the movement toward presidentialism, driven by these three forces—the expanding role of the state, the globalization of multiple policy areas, and what some might call hyperdemocracy—is to a great extent inexorable. In fact, some of the same forces driving countries with presidential offices in the direction of presidentialism have been seen by some as contributing to the “presidential-

ization” of political systems with parliamentary structures. Thomas Poguntke and Paul Webb (2005:13–17), for example, cite the internationalization of politics, the growing role of the state, the changing structure of mass communication, particularly in regard to the role of television, and the weakening of political parties due to the erosion of a politics based on traditional social cleavages as forces leading to the increased personalization of parliamentary systems. Although still committed to collective decisionmaking, many of these systems are experiencing an increased focus on the singular head of government. We will not be concerned with this evolution of parliamentary systems in this book, but the appearance of aspects of this phenomenon in nonpresidential systems strengthens our confidence that we have correctly identified the universal driving forces of presidentialism.

The seeming inevitability of presidentialism carries both risks and rewards for political systems. Although it is clear that dominant presidents can and often have done good and even essential things for their countries—things that collective institutions such as legislatures have not been able to achieve—there are several critiques of presidentialism: the danger that hyperpresidentialism will lead to authoritarianism; in situations of constrained presidentialism, the perils of a widening gap between what is expected of presidents and what they can deliver; the implications of presidentialism for democracy and political stability; the effect of presidentialism on the quality of governance as well as the quality of presidents; and the specific implications of presidentialism for issues of war and peace. These critiques will be assessed in Chapter 7.

Some of these critiques will bring us back nearly full circle to the issues discussed in Chapter 2, which identifies the restriction of executive power as one of the primary goals of constitutionalism. The strength of the forces driving presidentialism is such that they raise serious questions about the extent to which political systems can succeed in constraining the power of the president. It may be that Machiavelli’s Prince cannot be tamed, or at least that the realities of the modern nation-state mean that the older mechanisms for constraining executives are no longer up to the task. Alternatively, if the powers of the president can be constrained, but the expectations of the mass public continue to focus disproportionately on the president, a president’s inability to meet popular expectations can jeopardize popular support for the regime and perhaps invite instability. In other words, an overriding commitment to guard against the danger of authoritarianism may come at the expense of effective government that meets the needs and expectations of its citizens.

Notes

1. Gallup Poll, January 16, 2009, www.gallup.com/poll/113824/Obama-Wins-83-Approval-Rating-Transition.aspx; Nagourney and Connelly 2009.

2. “Le roi s’amuse,” *The Economist*, January 28, 2010.

3. “François Hollande, Challenging Sarkozy, Calls for Change,” *New York Times*, January 22, 2012.

4. “Bolivian Survey Shows Morales with 65 Percent Approval Rating,” *La Razon, La Paz* (in Spanish), January 16, 2006, BBC Worldwide Monitor.

5. “Evo’s Big Win,” *The Economist*, August 16, 2008.

6. “Profile: Bolivia’s President Evo Morales,” January 12, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-12166905.

7. IPSOS/Apoyo polls reported at <http://incakolanews.blogspot.com/2011/12/bolivia-evo-morales-ends-year-with-35.html>.

8. In some systems, the legislature becomes involved in presidential selection in extraordinary circumstances. In the United States, the House of Representatives selects the president if no candidate receives a majority of the electoral votes, and in Bolivia, Congress selects the president if no candidate receives a majority of the popular vote.

9. In practice, these distinctions among parliamentary, presidential, and semipresidential systems are not always easy to make. For example, in Botswana the president is selected by the legislature and is accountable to that body as well, so the system operates in a parliamentary manner. In contrast, in South Africa the president is selected by the legislature, but once he is designated, he is not accountable to that body, and so, despite the manner in which the executive is selected, the country operates presidentially. In terms of semipresidential systems, there are instances where a popularly elected president serves with a prime minister, but the prime minister is not accountable to the legislature (Guyana, South Korea, Sri Lanka), as well as the more common arrangement of a popularly elected president and a prime minister who is accountable to the legislature (see Siaroff 2003).

10. Alan Siaroff (2003) rejects the semipresidential classification in favor of what he believes to be the more precise “parliamentary systems with a presidential dominance” and “parliamentary systems with a presidential corrective.” Matthew Shugart and John Carey (1992) divide semipresidential systems into “premier presidential” and “president-parliamentary,” with the latter implying greater presidential power than the former.

11. In parliamentary systems, the prime minister also may be the most visible political actor in the nation, and British prime ministers such as Margaret Thatcher and German chancellors such as Angela Merkel have dominated the political systems and political cultures of their nations in a manner not dissimilar to that of presidents. Nonetheless, these leaders remain part of a collective government, accountable to their co-partisans, and it is therefore less likely that citizens of these countries will view such leaders as indistinguishable from the state.

12. *Correio Braziliense* (in Portuguese), August 1, 2005, BBC Monitoring Latin America–Political.

13. Freedom House classified Venezuela as only “partly free” in its 2010 report; www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=505.

14. On the other hand, Sebastian Saiegh (2011:89) finds that presidents whose parties do not have majority support in the legislature—the equivalent of constrained presidencies—have only slightly lower success rates for their legislative initiatives than those presidents whose parties command a legislative majority.

15. The first two factors—the expanded role of government and the increasing prominence of international issues—no doubt have contributed to an enhanced focus on executives in all political systems, both presidential and parliamentary. But our concern here is only with their impact on presidential and semipresidential systems.