

This article was downloaded by: [Australian National University]

On: 14 March 2013, At: 21:31

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Ethnopolitics: Formerly Global Review of Ethnopolitics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reno20>

### Presidentialism Reconsidered: The Relevance of an Old Debate

Benjamin Reilly <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Australian National University, Australia

Version of record first published: 10 Dec 2012.

To cite this article: Benjamin Reilly (2013): Presidentialism Reconsidered: The Relevance of an Old Debate, *Ethnopolitics: Formerly Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 12:1, 82-85

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2013.746008>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## SYMPOSIUM

# Presidentialism Reconsidered: The Relevance of an Old Debate

BENJAMIN REILLY

Australian National University, Australia

This article takes us back to scholarly debates that raged through the 1990s on the ‘perils of presidentialism’ for new democracies, and the suitability or otherwise of presidential democracy as a political system for ethnically divided societies. It shows convincingly that this debate remains relevant today, with so many ‘Third Wave’ democracies having chosen presidential systems as part of their constitutional arrangements. As the author notes, ‘the number of “basically open” regimes with a presidential form of government has been following a steady upward trend since 1976, and increased significantly from only nine in 1955 to 38 in 2007’. The article also provides a classification of presidential electoral systems over time that is very relevant to the debate on presidentialism and the risk of ethnic violence.

It seems to me, however, that the author misses some of the most important conclusions about the subject presented by her own data. By surveying the debates of previous decades so faithfully she neglects several opportunities to break new ground and overlooks more recent developments, both in terms of actual institutional choices in presidential democracies as well as the findings of other scholarly studies.

There are three areas in particular that I think deserve more attention. First is the basic empirical story: as the author’s Figure 1 shows, most of the world’s democracies are now presidential or semi-presidential systems, and presidentialism has become the modal constitutional choice for emerging democracies in much of East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Many of the presidential democracies in these regions are also ethnically plural societies in some form. The spread of presidentialism across such a diverse array of cases thus itself presents a *prima facie* challenge to the article’s conclusions, which question the suitability of presidential systems for divided societies. A very basic query that these

---

*Correspondence Address:* Benjamin Reilly, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia. Email: [ben.reilly@anu.edu.au](mailto:ben.reilly@anu.edu.au)

data could shed light on would be to examine which of the 38 cases of presidential democracy identified in Figure 1 are also ethnically plural societies. This would highlight the variation between those cases that have and have not experienced ethnopolitical conflict.

The means by which presidents are elected is another element in understanding the relationship between presidentialism and ethnic violence. The author draws our attention to the changing nature of presidential electoral systems over recent decades (in her Figure 2), but then questions whether the way in which a president is elected has any impact on ethnic conflict. Again, this is an empirical question that the author's own data could help to answer. For instance, some argue that the bargaining between candidates inherent in the use of majority run-off systems, or of vote-transfer systems such as the alternative vote, can itself act as a conflict management device and help mitigate ethnic tensions. The author reports the dramatic increase in majority-inducing electoral systems for presidential elections in recent years, but without any discussion of their potential for or against ethnic conflict management.

Yet majority-rule electoral systems have, on the face of it, several potential advantages in ethnically divided societies following the logic of centripetal analysis (Reilly, 2011, 2012): they can encourage candidates to broaden their support base in search of an absolute majority; they limit the impact of vote splitting; and they can help 'manufacture' majority support for candidates who attract more voters than they repel. These attributes can provide a powerful institutional incentive towards centrist politics where no candidate garners a majority in the first round of voting. In such cases, run-off elections encourage the top two candidates from the first round to broaden their appeal on partisan issues for the second-round run-off. When the run-off victor assumes office, this should lead to greater responsiveness and moderation on policy positions than would be the case if the winner had a plurality of votes alone. Giovanni Sartori (1994, p. 63) lavished praise on the conflict management potential of two-round systems for precisely this reason, because a second round of voting almost always encourages bargains and trade-offs between successful and unsuccessful parties and candidates.<sup>1</sup>

By downplaying their importance, the article misses an opportunity to look more closely at the relationship between electoral systems and presidentialism. For instance, while scholars such as Horowitz (1985) and myself (Reilly, 2001) have argued for the benefits of vote-pooling electoral systems such as preferential voting or distribution requirements, in this article such systems are dismissed as being 'very rare indeed'. Although true, the fact that they are rarely used by most presidential democracies tells us nothing about their impact on those at risk of ethnic violence, which is precisely where they have been adopted in practice. For instance, three of the world's most ethnically complex states—Indonesia, Nigeria and Kenya—employ distribution requirements to ensure elected presidents command some degree of cross-regional support. Likewise, preferential voting systems (which enable voters to rank candidates in order and thus have a similar centripetal effect) are a feature of presidential elections in other important test cases of ethnic violence, such as Sri Lanka as well as Papua New Guinea's autonomous Bougainville province.

This is not to argue that such devices will inevitably help to ameliorate ethnic conflict. As the author notes, there have been analyses of particular cases that throw into question the utility of distribution requirements, and considerable disagreement among scholars, with some interpreting them as impotent or even harmful interferences with the democratic process, whereas others see them as important mechanisms for muting ethnic conflict and ensuring the election of broad, pan-ethnic presidents (Sisk, 1996, p. 55). Problems

have also occurred in Nigeria when no candidate has met the required cross-national vote spread in the second round of elections. Despite these problems, such system have not only remained a feature of national electoral politics but also spread to other jurisdictions (e.g. in Nigeria the distribution requirements have been extended to parliamentary elections via reforms that make national party registration dependent on regional vote shares in local elections (Bogaards, 2008, p. 54)).

The recent electoral experience of distribution requirements in both Nigeria and Indonesia is one example of how presidential election systems can help surmount problems of ethnopolitical instability. In 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian southerner, was re-elected (in what was hailed as the cleanest presidential vote in Nigeria's history) with more than a quarter of the vote in 31 states and an impressive showing in the predominantly Muslim north. In so doing, he easily surmounted the requirement that a candidate needs at least a quarter of the vote in two-thirds of all states, as well as a majority of the total vote, to avoid a second round of voting. Similarly, after a run-off election victory in 2004, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono easily won the 2009 election in one round of voting by surpassing the cross-archipelago support floor of at least 20% of the vote in half of all provinces. Both Goodluck and Yudhoyono also offer examples of the kind of president distribution laws are supposed to encourage: centrist, moderate, with broad-based support from a range of different regions and groups.

There is not yet much empirical research on these and other experiments, but the little that exists suggests a more positive relationship between presidentialism and ethnic divisions. Basedau (2012), for instance, concludes from his study of ethnic conflict and institutional choice in Africa that there is 'no evidence that presidentialism is harmful in divided societies', and suggests that this may be due to the presence of 'divisions-alleviating institutions such as integrative measures of presidential electoral systems': distribution laws, term limits, regionally balanced tickets, and so on (Basedau, 2012, pp. 7, 30). This is a promising area for future research, and illuminates the reality that presidentialism as a form of government is becoming increasingly diverse as political engineers experiment with new formats and arrangements. These also challenge the blanket contention that presidentialism is always a 'winner-takes-all' institution. Switzerland's collective presidency, which balances ideological, cantonal, religious and ethnolinguistic divisions, is one counter-example of long-standing; Bosnia's tripartite executive divided between Serb, Croat and Bosniak representatives is a more recent case, although it has been plagued by problems (Belloni, 2007). Semi-presidentialism, in all its variants, has become an increasingly popular constitutional choice and provides a range of other possibilities (Elgie, 2011). All offer clear alternatives to the idea of presidentialism as a winner-takes-all model.

Finally, the author 'invites other academics who investigate institutional incentives for ethnic violence to test the proposed relationship between presidentialism and violent ethnic conflict empirically, and to pay closer attention to the relevance of forms of government for the prospects of ethnopolitical (in)stability more generally'. But several such tests have been published already. One was provided by Saideman *et al.* (2002), in an article cited by the author in relation to arguments about the benefits of power dividing but not in relation to its core focus on empirically testing the relationship between political institutions and ethnic conflict over time. This is surprising, as the Saideman piece found no significant relationship between presidentialism and ethnic conflict, concluding that 'parliamentary systems are not clearly superior to presidential ones for managing ethnic strife. More work, theoretical and empirical, is needed to determine whether scholars should

recommend to policy makers presidentialism, parliamentarism, or a combination (or whether it matters at all)' (Saideman *et al.*, 2002, p. 124). Ten years on, it seems the same conclusion applies, as more recent studies by Roeder (2005) and Brancati (2006) also found no significant relationship between presidentialism and ethnic conflict.

To the extent that they investigate the blanket category of 'presidentialism' rather than the many variants of it, such tests themselves need to be taken with a grain of salt as well. Roeder's test of the claims for a 'power dividing' model of ethnic conflict management, for instance, aggregates presidential and semi-presidential forms of government, two very different constitutional models whose differences probably outweigh their similarities. There is also a world of difference within and between hybrid forms such as 'premier-presidentialism' and 'president-parliamentarism', both in theory and in practice (Shugart & Carey, 1992). Whereas some formats may increase ethnic tensions, others may ameliorate them. All of this underscores the reality that presidentialism is not, and never was, a monolithic constitutional model, and that we need an understanding of these very different forms of presidentialism when attempting to analyse their impact on the risk of ethnic violence.

## Note

1. In one of the great pieces of scholarly hyperbole, Sartori also states that comparing the effects of two-round systems to those of the alternative vote is like comparing an eagle to a fly!

## References

- Basedau, Matthias M. (2012) Does the success of institutional conflict management depend on the character of divisions? A pilot study on inclusive institutions and ethnic conflict in 34 African countries. Paper prepared for presentation at the *ISA International Conference*, San Diego, CA, USA, 31 March–4 April.
- Belloni, R. (2007) *State Building and International Intervention in Bosnia* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Bogaards, M. (2008) Comparative strategies of political party regulation, in: B. Reilly & P. Nordlund (Eds), *Political Parties in Conflict-prone Societies: Regulation, Engineering and Democratic Development* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press).
- Brancati, D. (2006) Decentralization: fueling the fire or dampening the flames of ethnic conflict and secessionism?, *International Organization*, 60, pp. 651–685.
- Elgie, R. (2011) *Semi-presidentialism: Sub-types and Democratic Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Horowitz, D. (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).
- Reilly, B. (2001) *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Reilly, B. (2011) Centripetalism, in: K. Cordell & S. Wolff (Eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Reilly, B. (2012) Centripetalism: cooperation, accommodation and integration, in: S. Wolff & C. Yakinthou (Eds), *Conflict Management in Divided Societies: Theories and Practice* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Roeder, P. (2005) Power dividing as an alternative to ethnic power sharing, in: P.G. Roeder & D.S. Rothchild (Eds), *Sustainable Peace: Power and Democracy after Civil Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Saideman, S., Lanoue, D., Campenni, M. & Stanton, S. (2002) Democratization, political institutions, and ethnic conflict: a pooled, cross-sectional time series analysis from 1985–1998, *Comparative Political Studies*, 35, pp. 103–129.
- Sartori, G. (1994) *Comparative Constitutional Engineering: An Inquiry into Structures, Incentives and Outcomes* (London: Macmillan).
- Shugart, M.S. & Carey, J. (1992) *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Sisk, T.D. (1996) *Power Sharing and International Mediation in Ethnic Conflicts* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press).