

THE POWERS OF PRESIDENTIALISM¹

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Orthodox interpretations of Mexican politics contrast considerably with the day-to-day perception of the president of the republic. The canonical interpretation holds that the axis of Mexican politics is presidentialism, that is, excessive, uncontrollable power of the executive. However, the surveys talk about a rebuked and beleaguered president,² while debate in the press speculates about the possibility that he be forced to step down and even children tell jokes about his debility. What has happened to turn the criticisms of a couple of years ago about excessive presidentialism into complaints about the weakness of the office?

Naturally, someone is always ready to attribute this change to Ernesto Zedillo's personality, pointing to the marked difference between his character and that of Carlos Salinas, his predecessor. This difference does exist, of course, but personality is not sufficient

Clearly, the vigor of Mexico's presidentialism does not depend on the personality of the occupant of Los Pinos.

to explain so much: there were greater differences of character between Lázaro Cárdenas and Miguel de la Madrid, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and José López Portillo, or Manuel Avila Camacho and Miguel Alemán Valdés,³ and they all enjoyed the splendor of presidentialism. Clearly, the vigor of Mexico's presidentialism does not depend on the personality of the occupant of Los Pinos.⁴

Others have attributed the phenomenon to Mexico's political culture, saying that the root of authoritarianism in the government is the authoritarianism in society. The problem with this interpretation is that to

explain the sudden weakness of presidentialism, we would have to accept that a very brief period has produced profound changes in Mexicans' political culture, the same Mexicans who previously supported presidentialism and now undermine it.

The neo-institutionalist perspective, on the other hand, has sought the basis for presidentialism in the institutions themselves and in political and partisan equilibria. The best analysis to date from this perspective is Jeffrey Weldon's, which will soon come out in a book on presidentialism and democracy in Latin America.⁵ The argument that I will summarize here may be consulted extensively in that work.

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² Surveys carried out mainly between April and July 1996. [Editor's Note.]

³ Lázaro Cárdenas was president from 1934 to 1940; Miguel de la Madrid, from 1982 to 1988; Adolfo Ruiz Cortines from 1952 to 1958; José López Portillo, from 1976 to 1982; Manuel Avila Camacho, from 1940 to 1946; and Miguel Alemán Valdés, from 1946 to 1952. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ Los Pinos is Mexico's executive mansion. [Translator's Note.]

⁵ Jeffrey A. Weldon, "The Logic of *Presidencialismo* in Mexico," in Scott Mainwaring and Matthew Soberg Shugart, *Presidentialism and Democracy in Latin America*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass., currently at the printer's.

THE FORMULA OF PRESIDENTIALISM

From the institutional point of view, presidentialism is the fruit of the convergence of four necessary conditions, all institutional and partisan. The formula of presidentialism is quite simple:

Presidentialism = 1) constitutional prerogatives + 2) a unipartisan government + 3) party discipline + 4) presidential leadership of his own party.

1. Constitutional prerogatives are the basis for presidentialism. Without them, power would only occasionally be concentrated in the president's hands, when, in an exceptional crisis, it can be wielded by an extraordinary, charismatic, overwhelming personality. A strong personality, however, is not even necessary, as the presidentialist term of Miguel de la Madrid shows. The basis, then, is that the Constitution deposits in the office itself a great many executive, legislative and judicial prerogatives.

However, while a necessary condition, this is not sufficient for presidentialism. A comparative study⁶ of formal presidential privileges in several countries has shown that the Mexican Constitution is not the one which bestows the greatest power in its pres-

⁶ See Matthew Soberg Shugart and John Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies. Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 131-147.

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Zedillo with members of his cabinet and state governors.

idency, although no one doubts that Mexican presidentialism is unparalleled in practice. Our history also shows that some presidents have been weak despite having had at their disposal the same prerogatives as the prototypes of presidentialism. That is why other conditions must be fulfilled and examined.

2. The second condition, albeit insufficient in and of itself, for presidentialism to exist, is a uni-partisan government. This means that a single party controls both the presidency and the legislative branch. The case of France, with its semi-presidential system (as Duverger calls it) or its premier-presidential system (as Shugart and Carey call it), is illustrative on this point. The president is all-powerful and makes all executive decisions when his party dominates the Legislative Assembly,

but he loses almost all his strength to the prime minister when the assembly is controlled by the opposition.⁷

The situation of state governors in Mexico also exemplifies this point: in their states, they are what the president is in the country as a whole. And what happens when a governor loses the majority control over his legislature shows that the partisan unity of the executive and the legislative branches is an indispensable component of "governorism."⁸ When the governor's party has the necessary legislative majority,

⁷ Maurice Duverger, "A New Political System Model: Semi-Presidential Government," in *European Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 8, 1980, pp. 165-187.

⁸ Two significant recent cases in Mexico are those of Chihuahua and Guanajuato, where the governors belong to one party and the majority of the local legislature is in the hands of another. In both cases, the governor is a member of the



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Traditionally, all development plans come from the first executive and are never changed by the other branches.

bills presented by the state executive pass without a hitch, whether the governors are members of the PAN or the PRI. But, when their party loses that majority, governors see their bills amended or voted down, or are forced into intense negotiations with the opposition, again, whether they are members of the PAN or the PRI.

3. The convergence of the two factors, the indispensable constitutional prerogatives and a uni-partisan government, are still not enough to produce presidentialism. The United States is the perfect example: since its founding it has had a uni-partisan

National Action Party (PAN) (Francisco Barrio in Chihuahua and Vicente Fox in Guanajuato) and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has the congressional majority in both legislatures. The opposite is the case in Aguascalientes, a state where the opposition as a whole has had a legislative majority since the 1995 elections and Governor Otto Granados Roldán is a member of the PRI. Also, in the northern state of Baja California Sur, PRI Governor Guillermo Romero is faced with a legislative majority of the opposition. [Editor's Note.]

government half the time, but it has almost never had a presidentialist system. The most recent example is clear: President Clinton was not able to obtain passage of one of his most important bills, the health bill, despite the fact that the Democratic Party had the majority in both the House and the Senate. The reason was simple: his party's vote, as almost always, was divided. In the U.S. Congress, all party members voting the same is the exception and not the rule. The logic behind U.S. parties being undisciplined would be a matter for another article, but it is generally accepted to be the case, and this stops a presidential system from becoming presidentialist. This is why, Woodrow Wilson came to the conclusion that the U.S. system was not even presidential, but congressional.

4. Not even the convergence of the first three conditions, however, is enough to transform a presidential system into presidentialism. Also needed is a president who is the leader of the

majority party of congress. Let us look once again at cases in our own history: the three presidents of the Maximato Period⁹ [Emilio Portes Gil, Pascual Ortiz Rubio and Abelardo Rodríguez] often failed when they sent bills to Congress, despite the fact that they belonged to the National Revolutionary Party, which controlled the legislature. In fact, these three presidents are considered examples of weakness in the post-revolutionary period, although they enjoyed basically the same constitutional prerogatives as later presidents, had no important opposition parties in Congress to contend with and belonged to the same political party as their successors. What was missing was the fourth condition: being the leaders of their own party. The leader was someone else, the "boss," the Maximum Commander, Plutarco Elías Calles. To abolish the Maximato—the total negation of presidentialism: "The president lives here, but the man who governs lives across the way"—[President Lázaro] Cárdenas [1934-1940] had to win leadership of his party and—at that time—also of the army, from which the party had emerged.

What does Ernesto Zedillo lack to be able to exercise the presidentialism of the past? Today's president has three of the four necessary con-

⁹ The period immediately after the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928) is called the Maximato, characterized by the weakness of its presidents, who ceded real power to Calles himself, the true leader of the government party. Emilio Portes Gil was president from 1928 to 1930; Pascual Ortiz Rubio, from 1930 to 1932 and Abelardo Rodríguez, from 1932 to 1934. [Editor's Note.]

ditions to turn his presidential office into the presidentialist monster of his predecessors: he has more or less the same constitutional prerogatives; the federal government is uni-partisan, since the PRI controls both houses of Congress and the PRI is inconceivably disciplined. However, President Zedillo is not the effective leader of his party, and he therefore seems weak.

It should not be thought, however, that this question can be solved just by the president and his party drawing closer together. The “healthy distance”¹⁰ that

¹⁰ One of the planks of Zedillo’s platform for the 1994 presidential elections laid great emphasis on what he called a “healthy distance” between

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Zedillo has said he wants to maintain may be the inevitable product of circumstance and not a voluntary decision.

party and government, by which he meant the disengagement of the two on several levels: for the first time, the party would make its decisions autonomously and the government would stop using public funds to support the party and finance its electoral campaigns. [Editor’s Note.]

There are several reasons why he is not the leader of the PRI, and it would be worthwhile examining them in another article. But, the fact that there is a distance between him and his party—be it healthy or unhealthy—is the cause of the apparent weakness of presidentialism and the basis for founding a limited presidential system. ❧