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Inclusion and the design of democratic executives in Steffen Ganghof's *Beyond presidentialism and parliamentarism*

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ABSTRACT
Steffen Ganghof's book addresses pressing questions in democratic theory and institutional design regarding how to promote effective political inclusion and avoid personalizing power in democratic executives. His model of semi-parliamentarism manages to transform tradeoffs in these areas that were previously thought inescapable, unlocking novel potential for democratic reform.

KEYWORDS Inclusion; complexity effects; information shortcuts; institutional design; semi-parliamentarism; executive personalism

Steffen Ganghof's *Beyond Presidentialism and Parliamentarism* does the kind of work we need more of: detailed institutional design thoroughly informed by political theory. Though Ganghof is a comparativist by training, this is the sort of work political theorists can and should be doing as well. The gains of this work stem from its interdisciplinarity – or, rather, its *intra*disciplinarity. Its value comes from combining the insights of political theory with the methods of empirical political science. Political theory is too often isolated within the wider discipline of political science, to the impoverishment of all. Ganghof's work joins a growing body of research that transcends this isolation and as a result can tackle big questions with the scope, perspective, and methods equal to the task. In this review, I will first discuss the big question Ganghof concerns himself with – the design of democratic executives – and then concentrate on the implications of his innovative design for the core democratic value of inclusion.

Designing democratic executives in an era of authoritarian ascendance

As democracies come under pressure throughout the world, it is important that we deepen our understanding of how the core institutions of democracy function. This is the task Ganghof sets himself. The question is big and

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fundamental: how can we get the benefits of checks and balances offered by presidential systems of government while avoiding the quasi-monarchical consolidation of power in one person – what he calls 'executive personalism' — that attends such systems? (Ganghof speaks of the 'separation of powers' rather than checks and balances but his concern is not that executives are legislating, etc., but rather that power is not too concentrated in one institution.) Parliamentary governments avoid executive personalism but only by surrendering an important check. Since the legislative majority selects the executive, parliamentarism effectively disposes of the possibility of an adversarial relationship between the legislature and the executive, leading to an intense concentration of power in the fused executive-legislature. Ganghof's solution to this seemingly unavoidable tradeoff is *semi-parliamentarism*, which fills in a logical gap in the tetraptych of presidentialism, parliamentarism, and semi-presidentialism (though the proper analytical picture is more complicated than this; see Weale's Table 1). Where semi-presidentialism splits the executive and makes part of it accountable to the legislature, semi-parliamentarism splits the *legislative* and makes the executive accountable to part of it. This arrangement thereby secures a real mutual check between executive and legislature while also avoiding executive personalism.

The book's main normative preoccupation is thus executive personalism, or the concentration of executive power in a single human being. Ganghof is sagacious in this choice of target since we live in an era of resurgent authoritarianism and democratic erosion. Democratic offices that place enormous power in the hands of a single person provide an opening for ambitious would-be autocrats to weaken or overthrow democracy, as Juan Linz warned of long ago (Linz, 1990). Yet unlike Linz and subsequent scholars who view the choice between presidentialism and parliamentarism as a stark one involving unavoidable tradeoffs between the direct democratic accountability made available through presidentialism – with its attendant risks of authoritarianism – and a more proportional representation of voters in parliamentarism – with its risks of indecisive elections – Ganghof charts a new path. He provides a way to address the structural vulnerability in democratic politics and institutions that executive personalism represents while avoiding many of the tradeoffs conventionally thought inevitable in the choice between presidentialism and parliamentarism. Semi-parliamentarism provides the innovative institutional design making this possible.

Ganghof does democratic theory a great service by identifying some arguments for presidentialism as monarchical. This is helpful because monarchies have been the most common form of government over the long arc of history. It is unlikely that monarchical ways of thinking and organizing politics would vanish after little more than a century of democratic ascendance. Moreover, much like racism and other 'scavenger ideologies' that adapt newly available ideas to justify longstanding hierarchies (Fredrickson, 2015),

monarchism likely changes form to better match the circumstances of a new age. We saw this in the development of absolutism during early modernity as monarchs shook off feudal restraints on their power, as well as in the turn to constitutional monarchy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, executive personalism could be seen to represent the monarchical impulse and its political logic within democratic regimes. The growth of competitive authoritarian regimes, often out of the rotting carapace of former democracies, underscores the importance of understanding ways to institutionally inhibit executive personalism as a potential Trojan horse for neo-monarchical authoritarianism.

The design and evaluation of democratic executives have been an area where political theorists have lagged behind other subfields. Books like Howell and Moe's (2016), which is mostly a work of American politics, and Ganghof's own contribution from the quarter of comparative politics find few corresponding works in political theory. The most innovative institutional design work in democratic theory in recent years has concerned legislative and quasi-legislative institutions, above all those of deliberative mini-publics and citizen assemblies that use stratified random selection or sortition (Blum & Isabel Zuber, 2016; Landemore, 2020). Even advocates of using sortition to staff traditional legislative chambers have not taken the step of extending such design features to the executive (Gastil & Olin Wright, 2019). This should strike us as at least somewhat odd given that the main historical provenance of sortition is democratic Athens, where it was used most frequently to staff quasi-executive offices. Work on leadership and representation which might focus on executives has mostly occurred at such a high level of abstraction that it applies equally to legislative and executive offices (Beerbohm, 2015; Disch, 2021). When political theorists have discussed executives in the institutional design mode, it has often been through the lens of the separation of powers (e.g. Waldron, 2016, 68–69) rather than through imaginative rethinking of executives' core design features. Theoretical and normative work on emergency powers – which are usually vested in or exercised by executives – have generally not included detailed consideration of the design of executives (Lazar, 2009; Schupmann, 2017). Ganghof's engagement with political theory therefore makes his contribution an important addition to all this innovative work on institutional design. It focuses on a branch of government vitally implicated in the most important challenges facing democracies today and yet that has largely eluded the attention of theorists.

The inclusionary potential of semi-parliamentarism

I have argued that effective political inclusion should be the first aim of the design of democratic institutions (Elliott, 2023), and it is to this I now turn. I take this principle to mean, among other things, that institutions should not

just grant formal participation rights and expect citizens to make use of them, but they should also actively reach people where they are and ensure politics is accessible to all, particularly those who are too busy with the demands of quotidian life to devote much time to politics. Semi-parliamentarism suggests two powerful tools for addressing this challenge.

The first is identifiability, which refers to the ability of voters to identify the competing alternatives for executive office before the election. Presidentialism is said to be good for identifiability while most forms of parliamentarism are not because of the need for post-election coalition formation processes that can generate unexpected executive cabinets. Ganghof's favored design for semi-parliamentarism generates identifiability by having the confidence chamber elected according to majoritarian electoral rules, reducing the number of parties represented there to those with a realistic shot at winning power and encouraging the formation of single-party majority cabinets by the largest party. This generates identifiability while avoiding presidentialism and maintaining executive responsibility to parliament.

Semi-parliamentarism's identifiability advantage boosts its power to include all citizens in its electoral processes. Many citizens do not have the time or inclination to devote much attention to politics. Inclusion therefore requires that it be easy not just for citizens to participate in politics but also that politics be easy for them to understand. Party labels are often conceptualized as information shortcuts helping citizens to make more informed choices without learning much policy detail (Lupia, 1994). Parties are thus important in part because they are an institutional means to scaffold the political understanding of ordinary citizens. Complexity in political processes is the bane of understandability because it makes it difficult for busy citizens with little time for politics to grasp who is responsible for particular outcomes.

Identifiability is one way to make politics understandable for citizens by decomplexifying the process of forming governments. By clarifying the linkage between votes and electoral outcome, it makes both prospective selection and accountability easier for voters. Identifiability also helps illuminate an election's stakes for voters, imbuing their votes with meaning linked to the parties' competing stances. This, in turn, makes party labels more valuable as voter cues because identifiability makes control of executive office more closely reflect the outcome of electoral competition. This promotes inclusion by mobilizing voters who now better understand what is at stake and by offering information that requires less processing and contextualization, reducing information search costs. Understandability mechanisms thus promote inclusion by making available and *salient* easily understood information about what citizens' votes could mean. I emphasize 'salient' here because uptake is key: what makes party labels so useful for voters is that they aid the practical task of making electoral choices.

Another powerful tool for promoting inclusion is proportionality. Although there is much disagreement about the mechanisms involved, it is widely agreed that more proportional electoral institutions are associated with higher turnout. From the perspective of an individual citizen, proportionality means there is more likely to be a choice on the ballot that aligns with their views, interests, or identity, providing higher quality options for voters and so stimulating their participation. There is usually said to be a stark tradeoff between identifiability and proportionality in institutional design because institutions that promote identifiability, such as presidentialism, do so by manufacturing artificially clear majorities while those that promote proportionality tend to generate fragmented election results that make it difficult to predict who will enter government.

One of the most striking features of semi-parliamentarism is that it manages to achieve both these goals at once. The key reason is its effective bicameralism. One chamber is highly proportional but does not have confidence authority over the executive, while the other does have confidence authority but is selected to promote identifiability. This arrangement allows us to have proportionality – promoting inclusion by giving people real choices – as well as identifiability – promoting inclusion by clarifying the stakes and choices in elections. If we put inclusion first in the design of democratic institutions, as I argue we should, semi-parliamentarism is, then, powerfully attractive.

Two reasonable concerns about inclusion follow from what I have said. One is about multipartyism. A (proportional) multiparty electoral environment seems to be more complex than a two-party context, and this might be thought to harm inclusion rather than promote it by making the electoral context harder to comprehend. Moreover, semi-parliamentarism might be thought to be an opaquely complex regime because of the complexity of a bicameral legislature with two different representational bases – a majoritarian one for the confidence chamber and a proportional one for the chamber of legislation.

The first concern about the number of parties is discussed by Ganghof when he introduces the distinction between simple and complex majoritarianism. Ganghof (2021, p. 67) makes the important point that to contrast rival ideals of democracy in terms of being proportional or majoritarian is misleading because all such ideals should be considered '*different visions of majority rule*' (original emphasis). What differentiates them is how and where in the democratic process majorities are constructed, not whether they embrace majority rule. This is where the distinction between simple and complex majoritarianism comes in. Noting that he uses the latter term differently than Melissa Schwartzberg – for whom it refers to an alternative to supermajority rule that emphases time delays and deliberation (Schwartzberg, 2014) — Ganghof explains that the distinction turns on who the relevant

median voter is. In simple majoritarianism, the idea is that there is a single global median voter who determines control of a basically supreme legislature in a single election. Complex majoritarianism posits that different issues should be allowed to have their own median voters which will be distinct from issue to issue.

Ganghof highlights how simple majoritarianism has close affinities with two-party systems competing along a single political divide while complex majoritarianism is linked to multiple parties competing in a multidimensional issue space, and discusses how the political environments created by these models differ in their complexity (Ganghof, 2021, 69–70). Complex majoritarianism creates a more convoluted politics that is harder for voters to navigate, Ganghof says, while simple majoritarianism is more cognitively tractable. Per my discussion above, cognitive tractability is extremely important for inclusion because many citizens do not have the time to successfully navigate an overly complicated politics. Yet I also argued above that proportionality can bolster inclusion by creating a more interesting politics in which voters can find electoral choices that more closely mirror their own interests and concerns. How can one square these considerations? The answer is empirically, by looking at relative turnout effects. What we want to know then is which is likely to predominate, the demobilizing complexity effect or the inclusionary choice effect, in order to assess whether semi-parliamentary multipartyism is likely to be more exclusionary than a two-party alternative.

Comparativists disagree about whether multiparty systems cause higher turnout. Empirically, it appears to be clear that turnout generally increases with the number of parties, yet there are clear cases where very high numbers of parties reduce electoral participation. The best explanation for this, as I discuss elsewhere (Elliott, 2023, pp. 175–7), is that there is a *curvilinear* rather than linear relationship between turnout and the number of parties (Taagepera et al., 2014). As the number of parties increases past two, turnout rises due to the expanded choice effect, continuing to rise until the number of parties reaches five to seven and then decreases as the number of parties increases further because the complexity effect kicks in and comes to predominate. If this is right, the lesson is that multipartyism is indeed good for inclusion – if used in moderation. Extensive party fragmentation is likely to be demobilizing due to the complexity it adds to political competition. Yet modest multipartyism is more inclusionary than a two-party environment.

What does this suggest about semi-parliamentarism? I would speculate that the more majoritarian electoral rules for the confidence chamber would introduce a centripetal force on the party system that the more proportional rules in the legislative chamber would not entirely counteract. This should generate a moderately multiparty environment with two or three core parties of government plus a smattering of smaller parties. This is indeed the situation we find in all the real-world models of semi-parliamentarism in the Australian and Japanese

contexts. The upshot is, then, that semi-parliamentarism seems well positioned to reap the gains to inclusion accruing to multiparty competition without the risk of overly complexifying the political environment.

I turn now to the concern about the complexity of the semi-parliamentary regime stemming from its two different sets of electoral rules in a bicameral structure. This arrangement could make for a complicated political system where responsibility is difficult for voters to assess, harming understandability and, ultimately, inclusion. Symmetric bicameralism, wherein legislative chambers have the same powers vis-à-vis legislation, is especially prone to this kind of complexity since the dynamics of both chambers are essential for understanding outcomes. When those chambers are elected on different bases, as in semi-parliamentary regimes, this could make for a cognitively daunting situation for citizens.

A straightforward solution to this problem is single-chamber semi-parliamentarism. Instead of having two distinct legislative chambers, only one of which has confidence authority over the government, a *subset* of a unicameral legislature would have the confidence authority (Ganghof, 2021, pp. 49–50). This 'confidence committee' would be populated only by parties who reached some fairly high vote threshold in the most recent election. This threshold should be sufficiently high to reduce the number of parties to just two or three, generating a clear majority for the largest party's government in the confidence committee. That committee would then vote on ordinary legislation along with the rest of the legislature, whose composition is determined proportionally.

This arrangement simplifies the situation for citizens by eliminating the complexities of formal bicameralism while also retaining the advantages of semi-parliamentarism. Since several ballot designs could be used with this system – from single vote to mixed member proportional systems – the cognitive savings of complexity would accrue not in ballot simplicity, then, but in the understandability of the functioning of parliament and government, since difficult-to-parse standoffs between chambers would be eliminated. In all these ways, then, semi-parliamentarism presents a promising design for democratic executives when we put inclusion first.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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