Presidents, Assemblies, and Accountability

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Abstract

Much research has explored the relationship between economics and elections, and scholars have begun to explore how institutions mediate that link. However, the relationship between presidential institutions and electoral accountability remains largely unexplored in comparative politics. Because voters in presidential systems can cast votes for executive and legislative elections separately, we have good reasons to suspect that the institutions of presidentialism might generate different forms or degrees of accountability than parliamentarism. Powell and Whitten (1993) suggest that the partisan or institutional "clarity of responsibility" might mediate the relationship between economics and elections: when responsibility for outcomes is clear, the relationship should be strong, and vice-versa. I develop this notion for use in presidential systems, and explore executive and legislative elections in 24 countries. The results indicate that economics always influences the incumbent vote in *executive* elections, regardless of the partisan or institutional clarity of responsibility. Economics also affects vote swings in *legislative* elections, but the institutional clarity of responsibility does mediate this relationship: legislative accountability for national economic outcomes is *lowest* when clarity of responsibility is *highest*, a situation that arises when the president is relatively more powerful and the bases for electing legislators and the president differ. By providing an empirical basis for a discussion of accountability under presidentialism, these findings contribute to important debates in comparative politics.

Introduction

To what extent do the institutions of presidentialism allow voters to hold the government accountable? Do voters reward or punish incumbent presidents *and* legislators for economic outcomes, and to the same degree? Do certain institutional formats of presidentialism dim or enhance the prospects for accountability? These are pertinent questions about the capacity for voters to hold presidents and legislators accountable - and thus about how well presidential democracy can work. Yet although literally hundreds of books and articles have explored the relationship between economics and elections (see Lewis-Beck and Stegmeier 2000), and scholars have begun to explore the ways in which political institutions mediate this connection (e.g. Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 1995; 2000, Lewis-Beck 1997), the relationship between presidential institutions and democratic accountability remains largely unexplored.[1]

Although no system of democratic government can ensure accountability, certain institutional formats might enhance or hinder it (Przeworski, Manin and Stokes 1999). With this in mind, some scholars have criticized presidentialism for allegedly hindering accountability relative to other forms of government, suggesting for example that its "dual democratic legitimacies" can confuse voters or that presidential autonomy inhibits "party government" - type accountability (e.g. Linz 1990, 1994; Lijphart 1992; Mainwaring 1993; O'Donnell 1994; Manin *et al*. 1999; Przeworski and Cheibub 1999). Other scholars question this claim (e.g. Shugart and Carey 1992; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Persson, Roland and Tabellini 1997; Samuels and Shugart 2003) and suggest that presidentialism's alleged drawbacks might actually provide advantages for democratic accountability. In particular, Shugart and Carey (1992) suggest that

[1] This is despite presidentialism's status as the regime of choice for many new democracies, and despite a lively debate that explores the impact of presidentialism on other key dependent variables such as regime performance and survival (e.g. Linz 1990; Shugart and Carey 1992; Stepan and Skach 1993; O'Donnell 1994; Jones 1995; Morgenstern and Nacif 2002; Cheibub and Limongi 2002).

the separation of powers could enhance identifiability and thus improve democratic accountability.

This paper elaborates on Shugart and Carey's suggestion and tests propositions about electoral accountability under presidentialism. To date, no research has empirically explored hypotheses linking economics, presidential institutions, and elections. This remains true despite Powell and Whitten's (1993) claim that institutional "clarity of responsibility" may be critical for accountability as well as recent research that suggests that voters can differentiate between coalition partners in parliamentary or semi-presidential systems in terms of allocating blame and reward (Anderson 1995; 2000; Lewis-Beck, 1997).[2] Presidentialism by its nature imposes a certain degree of separation of responsibility, so a pertinent question is therefore whether and to what extent the relative clarity of responsibility under different presidential institutions affects accountability.

Samuels and Shugart (2003) suggest that clarity of responsibility for both the executive as well as legislative branches in presidential systems is a function of two variables: the balance of institutional power and the separation of purpose between the two branches of government. For example, when one branch (typically the executive) has much higher autonomous power, voters might hold that branch accountable but not the other because one branch more clearly can attempt to shape policy output. Similarly, when separation of purpose is high, for example when the executive and legislative branches are elected at different times, clarity of responsibility is high in the sense that it is less likely that both branches will be held accountable for the same things. This paper represents a first attempt to explore the hypothesis that the extent to which voters hold presidents and legislators who support the president accountable for economic

[2] However, see Royed *et al.* (2000) and Chappell and Veiga (2000).

outcomes depends on the “clarity of responsibility” between branches in presidential systems. I will elaborate on my use of the concept of “clarity of responsibility” below.

The results presented here confirm that “clarity of responsibility” matters in presidential systems, in the following way: first, regardless of the institutional or partisan clarity of responsibility, voters always hold presidents accountable for national economic trends. However, institutional clarity of responsibility does affect the degree to which voters hold legislators in the president’s party accountable. When clarity of responsibility is low (for example, when the two branches of government are in relative balance and are elected on similar bases), voters hold *both* presidents and legislators accountable for the economy, and to a similar degree. Perhaps it is precisely *because* voters cannot distinguish policy responsibility in such systems that they hold the inhabitants of both branches accountable.

In contrast, under high clarity of responsibility (for example, when the legislature is relatively weak and is elected at different times or on a different basis than the president), voters tend to hold legislators much less accountable for the economy. This finding of course leaves open the question of whether voters in such systems hold legislators accountable for other matters, as Shugart and Carey implied.

These findings are important because they reveal that under many common institutional formats, voters hold both branches of presidential governments accountable for what scholars think they should, fluctuations in the national economy. In sections that follow I discuss the nature of accountability generally, how accountability might differ under presidentialism, and then posit and test specific hypotheses regarding accountability for executive and legislative elections. The final section concludes.

Accountability and Clarity of Responsibility

According to the theory of "retrospective voting" (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988), accountability occurs because voters retrospectively judge whether governments have acted in their best interests, and reward or sanction them appropriately. However, several factors might generally hinder voters' ability to hold elected officials to accounts. First, voters might not be able to punish incumbents if no viable alternative exists (Anderson 2000; Przeworski *et al*. 2000). However, this problem is certainly not limited to presidentialism, and in the analysis below I only include competitive elections. Second, governments might conceal information about responsibility for policy. This is also a problem everywhere, and it is reasonable to assume that voters in presidential systems can *potentially* hold governments accountable. It seems unreasonable to assume that democratic governments with competitive elections conceal *all* information; instead, we should test to see whether partisan and/or institutional factors mediate the connection between economics and elections.

Third, citizens will be able to hold governments accountable only if politicians desire (and are eligible for) reelection or care about who succeeds them to office. Manin *et al*. (1999) argue that limits on executive reelection in presidential systems restrict voters' capacity to hold governments accountable. Yet this argument unreasonably assumes that incumbents do not care about their legacy and have no interest in their policies' continuation. Presidents care deeply about their place in history, and thus care about their performance in office. They also care about who succeeds them to office, which means they ought to attempt to convey to voters the notion that they share a personal and political affinity with their successor-candidate. Although candidates know that they must distance themselves from an unpopular incumbent, they also know that they may benefit from associating with a popular one. Voters may either reward a successful president's party by electing his or her hand-picked successor or by punishing the incumbent's party by electing a rival party's candidate. There is therefore no reason why voters could not hold presidents - *even those not running for reelection* - accountable in a retrospective voting fashion, and thus hold presidential governments accountable more generally. In short, although many problems inhere in the relationship of accountability between citizens and governments, these problems are by no means limited to presidential systems, nor should we assume that presidential governments are necessarily worse than any other form of government in terms of accountability.

Economic voting studies typically assume that at least some voters consider national economic conditions before the election as a part of their vote decision. Voters attribute reward or blame to the incumbent government for those conditions, and as a result the vote shifts. In general, scholars believe that electoral accountability declines when voters cannot discern responsibility for government policy. Powell and Whitten (1993) developed this idea and argued that voters are more likely to punish or reward the incumbent government for the state of the economy if "clarity of responsibility" is high, and not if clarity of responsibility is low.

There are two potential reasons for this. The first focuses on the strategic actions of incumbent politicians. All incumbent governments tend to lose votes (Rose and Mackie 1983; Paldam 1986). Powell and Whitten surmised that incumbents know this and therefore prefer to diffuse political responsibility, for example by blaming those with whom they might have shared control of government. The institutional and/or partisan makeup of the country can help politicians diffuse responsibility, or it can make such activity more difficult. The second factor is related, but emphasizes the ability or willingness of voters to gather information: as institutional or partisan complexity increases, voters are less likely to be able to discern actual responsibility for government output, regardless of whether politicians are attempting to diffuse responsibility or not. Regardless of which of these two factors is more important, reduced clarity of responsibility should insulate incumbents from the factors that cause them to lose votes, and the impact of the economy in particular ought to be mediated by the relative clarity of responsibility.[3]

Presidentialism and Clarity of Responsibility

Perhaps clarity of responsibility and thus the degree of accountability in presidential systems depends on factors similar to those Powell and Whitten (1993), Anderson (1995) and others have identified for parliamentary systems. Yet because of the separation of powers, the institutions of presidentialism might affect how voters hold the government accountable in particular ways. For example, Manin *et al.* (1999) suggest that presidential systems in general obscure government responsibility, and that coalition and divided governments are particularly bad for accountability. In contrast, Persson *et al*. (1997) suggest that the separation of powers, by institutionalizing conflicts of interest between branches of government, encourages relatively *greater* information revelation than parliamentary systems, which might aid voters' efforts to discern responsibility for policy.

These contradictory hypotheses suggest the need for additional theoretical and empirical work. Although a few single-country studies support the notion that differences exist in terms of voters' ability and/or willingness to punish members of the same party who occupy different branches of government (e.g. Lewis-Beck (1997) on France; Erickson (1989; 1990) on the US),

[3] Powell and Whitten argued that incumbent party or coalition cohesion and the type of committee system are important aspects of clarity of responsibility. Information on those variables is currently unavailable for the sample of countries included in this study. I am presently agnostic as to these factors' general impact, but this is only to affirm the cliché that "more research is necessary."

this paper is the first to attempt a general approach.[4] How do voters in presidential systems think about blame and reward for the economy? Do they focus exclusively on the president, regardless of who controls the legislature? Are presidents in some institutional environments more or less likely to feel the brunt of the voters' wrath, regardless of the partisan composition of the legislature? These are important questions.

Several factors might affect clarity of responsibility and thus voters' propensity to reward or punish incumbents in presidential systems. The first is the separation of powers itself. All else equal, do voters reward or punish incumbent executives and legislators to the same degree? In the US, research suggests that economics matters more in presidential elections (Erickson 1990). Perhaps this is because although no president can govern alone, voters typically identify him or her as uniquely and individually responsible for national policy. In contrast, legislatures in presidential systems, even those tightly controlled by a single party, typically do not take the initiative in macroeconomic policy. Statistically, this suggests that the coefficient on "economic conditions" should be *lower* in tests on the incumbent legislative party or coalition compared to the president, all else equal. Comparing the vote swings in executive versus legislative elections lends initial support to the notion that voters attribute blame differently: all else equal, in the 75 executive elections in the sample the average vote swing was -5.41%, while the average vote swing in the 98 legislative elections was -2.95%.

[4] To my knowledge, Remmer (1991; 2001) is the only scholar who has published research on the links between economics and elections in presidential systems. However, Remmer did not seek to explore the impact of presidentialism *per se*, but rather the relationship between economics and elections in Latin America, where all systems happen to be presidential. Thus Remmer's results do not speak to the question of whether presidential institutions mediate economic voting effects. Remmer also did not explore the impact of economics on legislative elections. In addition, Remmer's analysis faces the possibility of serial autocorrelation, the presence of which could invalidate the conclusions: although she tested for both "incumbent vote share" as well as "incumbent vote loss" as dependent variables, Remmer did not control for the incumbent party's performance in the previous election. Instead, the "vote share of two largest parties" was used as a control. There is no clear theoretical reason why one should control for the performance of the two largest parties rather than the incumbent's vote alone. In the analysis below I follow the standard practice and include the incumbent's vote in the previous election as a control.

As in parliamentary systems, a second factor that might affect clarity of responsibility is coalition government (Lewis-Beck 1988; Powell and Whitten 1993; Anderson 1995; 2000). Coalition governments tend to obscure any one party's responsibility for government output. Coalition governments in presidential systems typically involve power-sharing in the cabinet. Perhaps governing in coalition insulates incumbent presidents from the factors that might otherwise affect vote swings for or against them or their chosen candidates. A coalition in the legislature might insulate the president's party similarly. At the aggregate level, the presence of a coalition might therefore be sufficient to diffuse clarity of responsibility, regardless of the number of parties in the coalition. Thus I will employ a dummy for this variable for both executive and legislative elections. As with the difference between executive and legislative elections, a simple comparison of vote swings lends initial credence to this notion: executive elections for presidents who governed in coalition were relatively more insulated from losses, losing on average -4.67% (N=24) compared to average losses of -6.27% (N=51) for presidents who did not govern in coalition with other parties. A similar result obtains for the legislative elections: incumbent presidents' parties in coalition lost an average of -1.15% (N=29), while parties that governed alone lost an average of -3.70% (N=69).

A third factor that might insulate presidents and incumbent legislative parties from vote swings is the presence of minority or "divided" government. When control over all branches of government is divided, the incumbent president can claim that the opposition impeded his efforts to govern and thus that all parties must share responsibility for poor performance, for example. Several studies have confirmed that minority governments tend to suffer smaller losses than majority governments (e.g. Strom 1990; Powell and Whitten 1993). In unicameral presidential systems, divided government occurs when the president's party or coalition does not control more than 50% of the seats in the single legislative chamber. In bicameral systems, divided government occurs when the president's party or coalition does not control more than 50% of the seats in both chambers. As with earlier comparisons, minority government appears to insulate incumbents from losses. Minority presidents were relatively more insulated, losing on average -3.28% (N=41) compared to average losses of -7.97% (N=34) for majority presidents. Likewise, in legislative elections, incumbent presidents' parties in a minority government lost an average of -1.21% (N=57), while parties in a majority government lost an average of -5.27% (N=41). It remains to be seen whether in multivariate statistical tests these differences will hold up.

The final factor, and the one that is most particular to presidentialism, is the institutional clarity of responsibility between branches of government. This notion attempts to capture the intuition that although voters might identify the president as mostly responsible for national policy, under certain conditions they may also believe that legislators in the president's party or coalition hold a fair degree of responsibility for the economy and might cast their votes based on that belief. Samuels and Shugart (2003) suggested that institutional clarity of responsibility in presidential systems is a function of two inter-related factors: the relative balance of powers between branches and the relative separation of purpose between branches. The former is the executive branch's power to influence policy through a combination of constitutionally-granted tools such as veto, decree, and agenda powers, à la Shugart and Carey (1992). The latter is the degree to which the executive and legislative branches of government are elected on different bases (see also Cox and McCubbins, 2001; Shugart and Haggard, 2001). When both branches are elected on precisely the same bases there is *unity of purpose*, but several institutional factors tend to separate the bases of executive and legislative elections, including the electoral cycle, the degree of personalization of congressional electoral incentives (a function of the electoral formula and district magnitude) (Carey and Shugart, 1995), and the degree of legislative malapportionment, which tends to separate the bases of the presidents' electoral coalition from the majority coalition in the legislature (Samuels and Snyder, 2001).

The underlying assumption here is that the more autonomously powerful a president is relative to the legislature and the greater the separation of purpose, the higher the clarity of responsibility *for each branch of government*. That is, we expect voters to recognize autonomous and powerful presidents as such, but also to recognize that presidents and legislators in systems that link both branches more tightly can be relatively more co-responsible for outcomes. To operationalize clarity of responsibility, I took Samuels and Shugart's (2003) rankings for balance of power and separation of purpose, which vary on a scale from zero to nine (see Appendix 1), and multiplied them together to give an aggregate index of institutional clarity of responsibility.[5]

The index thus creates a continuum that runs from systems like Costa Rica, where presidents have little autonomous power, elections are party-centric and always concurrent, and where there is little malapportionment, to systems like Chile, where the president has substantial individual powers, executive and legislative elections are rarely concurrent, and the bicameral system is highly malapportioned. In the first type of system, "clarity" is low, but the president is relatively more tightly linked to his or her supporters in the assembly. In contrast, in the latter type of system, "clarity" is high in the sense that the institutions tend to encourage voters to perceive legislators and the president in different lights, and thus perhaps hold them accountable for different things.

[5] The logic here is that the effect of these institutions should be multiplicative and not simply additive, because as an increasing number of them are employed, their effects should interact.

The logic of clarity of responsibility suggests that the effect of economics on elections is interactive with institutions. That is, I have little reason to expect a *direct* relationship between institutional clarity of responsibility and the dependent variable, the change in the vote for the incumbent. Instead, I hypothesize that the relationship is indirect and that the *interactive* effect of the balance of power and the separation of purpose is associated with clarity of responsibility.

Tests of the Hypotheses

This study explores the impact of economic conditions on elections in 24 presidential democracies and includes 75 executive elections and 98 lower-house legislative elections. I included a country if it is currently a democracy and had had at least two consecutive democratic elections (and if political and economic data were available).[6]

Scholars of economic voting typically employ one or more of the following three economic variables: GDP growth, inflation, and/or unemployment. In the models that follow, I use change in real per capita GDP growth (IMF, International Financial Statistics) as the indicator of the performance of the economy.[7] Following Pacek and Radcliffe (1995), I use the change in GDP growth in year t-1 if the election was held in the first six months of the year, and the change in GDP growth in year t if the election was held in the last six months of the year (quarterly figures are unfortunately unavailable for most the countries in the sample).

[6] For information on the countries and elections included, consult Appendix 1. My choice to include the vote total in the previous election as a control variable reduces the number of cases considerably: for executive elections, there are actually 95 election-years included in Appendix One, but this results in only 75 data points in the models. As for upper-chamber elections, I will explore them elsewhere.

[7] Unemployment information is unavailable for most of the countries in the sample, so I could not use it even if I wanted to. As for inflation, I tested the models using different operationalizations, and the results were usually but not always supportive. In any case, GDP growth is theoretically a better variable, because the expectations about the impact of inflation are unclear. Do voters respond to the *level* of inflation or its *direction*? This is not merely speculation: for example, in Argentina in 1989, inflation increased 564.5% in the quarter prior to the election, and perhaps not surprisingly the incumbent party suffered at the polls, with its vote total declining by 15.3%. Yet in Peru in 1990, inflation declined by 112.5% in the quarter prior to the election, but the incumbent party also saw its vote total decline by 28.1%. In both cases, GDP was declining.

I test the following specific hypotheses for both presidential and legislative elections:

- H1: The performance of the incumbent party is positively correlated with the performance of the economy in presidential systems, in both executive and legislative elections. I expect the values on "GDP" to be greater for presidential than for legislative elections. That is, all else equal, voters will reward or punish the executive to a greater degree for the performance of the economy.
- H2: The performance of the incumbent party is a function of whether there is a government coalition or not, defined as above. If Coalitions diffuse accountability, the coefficient ought to be positive for both presidential and legislative elections – that is, coalitions ought to insulate incumbents from losses that they otherwise tend to receive.
- H3: The performance of the incumbent party is a function of whether there is a minority government or not, defined as above. As with "Coalition," if "Minority Government" affect accountability, the coefficient ought to be positive for presidential and legislative elections.
- H4: The performance of the incumbent party is also a function of the interaction of clarity of responsibility and the economy, operationalized as per above. In executive elections, I expect the coefficient on the interaction of clarity of responsibility and the economy to be *positive* – as presidents become more clearly independent of the legislature, voters will tend to reward or punish them more. In legislative elections, we expect the coefficient on the interaction of clarity of responsibility and the economy to be *negative* – as legislators become more institutionally separate from the president, voters will tend to hold them relatively less responsible for national policy outcomes, and thus will reward or punish them less for the economy. In such systems, where legislators are elected either at different times or in different ways from the president, we might instead expect that "all politics is local,"

and thus that voters will reward or punish incumbent legislators on different grounds than the performance of the national economy.

I also include the following variables as controls:

- The incumbent party's proportion of the vote in the previous election. This variable should have a negative impact because parties tend to lose votes after being in office and because it is easier to lose votes from a high point than to gain votes from the same high point.
- A dummy variable indicating whether the incumbent president is running for reelection or not. I expect this variable to return a positive coefficient.

In all the models that follow, the dependent variable is the change in vote for the incumbent president's party from the previous election. In the models for executive elections, the dependent variable is the change in the executive election, and in the models for legislative elections, the dependent variable is the change in the legislative election. I employ OLS regression with robust standard errors.[8] Table One displays results for executive elections.

Table One Here

I run several models, to demonstrate that the results are robust. Model One is the baseline model, including only the "Previous Vote" and "Economy" variables, both of which are highly significant. The coefficient on "Economy" indicates that for every percentage-point increase in per capita GDP, the incumbent president's party's vote increases by approximately 1.3%. In Model Two I add in the "President Running for Reelection" variable. The addition of this variable reduces the coefficient on "Economy" by about 10%, but the key to note here is that

[8] Some might advise employing a model including panel-corrected standard errors here. Since the elections are held at various times, depending on the country, I cannot simply include a dummy for each election. Moreover, no country-dummy variables are included in these models because of the numerous cross-sections relative to the overall sample size in the data set (with 24 cross sections I have an average of 3 executive elections and 4 legislative elections per country). I ran a series of separate regressions with a dummy for each country, and although some of the dummies were significant, their inclusion does not substantially alter the results.

voters' goodwill or ire about the president's handling of the economy transfers to that president's party's candidate regardless of whether the president is running for reelection or not. In Model Two, the coefficient on "Economy" indicates that for every percentage-point increase in per capita GDP, the incumbent president's party's vote increases by approximately 1.2%.

Model 3 adds in the variable for "Coalition," and Model 4 adds in the variable for "Minority Government." These two variables are not highly correlated (-.29). Neither variable is significant, nor does their addition change the coefficient on "Economy". These results indicate the following: *the nature of "partisan" clarity of responsibility in the legislature does not insulate a president from voters' reward or punishment*. Model 5 adds in the final variable, the interaction of institutional clarity of responsibility with the economy, but the variable is not close to being significant. This indicates that as with partisan clarity of responsibility, *the institutional clarity of responsibility between branches appears to have no effect on voters' propensity to reward or punish incumbent presidents for the performance of the economy*. In sum, in contrast to Powell and Whitten's (1993) findings for parliamentary governments, voters in presidential systems reward or punish presidents without regard to clarity of responsibility. That is, all presidents are accountable; institutions do not mediate the impact of the economy on the vote in presidential elections.

Let us now explore legislative elections. Recall that we hypothesized that although the performance of the incumbent party should be positively correlated with the performance of the economy, H1 suggested that the values on the economic variable ought to be smaller for legislative elections. Voters ought to hold the incumbent party accountable, but because the president is relatively more clearly responsible for national policy outcomes than a legislator or even a partisan team of legislators regardless of other factors in the system, voters should reward or punish the president relatively more than the incumbent president's legislative supporters.

H4 also suggested that the performance of the incumbent party should be a function of the interaction of clarity of responsibility and the economy, and that for the legislative elections we expected the coefficient on the interaction of clarity of responsibility and the economy to be *negative*: as legislators become more clearly independent of the president, voters should tend to reward or punish them relatively *less* for the economy, and to hold them accountable for performance in other areas. Table Two displays the results for all the legislative elections in the sample. The variables in the models are the same as for the presidential results.

Table Two Here

The results confirm the key hypotheses. Model One again tests the simplest relationship, including only the "Previous Vote" and "Economy" variables, both of which are highly significant. As hypothesized, in this "unmediated" model the impact of "Economy" is indeed smaller in legislative elections (compare with Model 1 in the executive elections): the results here indicate that for every percentage-point increase in per capita GDP, the incumbent party's vote increases by approximately .83%. Model Two adds in the "President Running for Reelection" variable, which indicates that having an incumbent running for reelection helps out the incumbent's legislative party. As with the executive elections, the addition of this variable reduces the coefficient on "Economy" by about 10%.

Model 3 adds in the variable for "Coalition" and Model 4 adds in the variable for "Minority Government." These two variables are again not highly correlated (-.11). Neither is significant, and again their addition does not change the coefficient on "Economy". Similarly to the results for executive elections, these results again indicate that the partisan clarity of responsibility does not insulate a president's legislative contingent from voters' reward or punishment.

Model 5 adds in the final variable, the interaction of institutional clarity of responsibility with the economy.[9] In contrast to the results for executive elections, the coefficient is in the expected direction and is significant, indicating that institutional clarity of responsibility mediates the impact of the economy in legislative elections. As clarity of responsibility increases for the legislature, the incumbent party is punished relatively less for the performance of the economy. (Perhaps voters hold the incumbents to accounts for other reasons.)

Note that in contrast to the inclusion of the "Coalition" and "Minority Government" variables, when "Clarity of Responsibility" is added in, the coefficient on "Economy" changes substantially (and the r-squared goes up): the baseline impact of GDP change actually *increases*. What does this result mean in real terms? Let us contrast Costa Rica and Argentina. Costa Rica takes values of "0" for both the Balance of Power and the Separation of Purpose, meaning it takes the lowest possible value (0) of Clarity of Responsibility. In contrast, Argentina takes on the highest possible values (9) of Balance of Power and Separation of Purpose, meaning it takes the highest possible value (81) of Clarity of Responsibility. Thus in Costa Rica, all else equal, if the economy declines by 1%, then we expect the vote of the president's legislative party to decline by 1.17%, which is actually a bit more than the 1.04% indicated in the full model for executive elections (see Table One). (A model that combined the results for presidential and legislative elections actually found no difference between the two in terms of the impact of the economy). In short, where Clarity of Responsibility is lowest, voters hold both branches of government co-responsible, and to a largely equal degree, for the performance of the economy.

[9] There are three fewer cases in this model because of lack of information on "separation of purpose" for those cases.

In contrast, in Argentina, if the economy declines by 1%, then we expect the vote of the president's party to decline by (-1.17) - (-.01*81) = (-1.17) - (-.81) = -.36%, or about 30% of the effect in a country like Costa Rica. This result follows the expectations of the literature on presidentialism: perhaps not surprisingly in the systems with the strongest linkages between executive and legislative elections like Costa Rica, we expect the impact of the economy on the presidential and legislative races to be tightly correlated. In contrast, in systems where there is substantial institutional separation between branches of government, we expect those same institutions to encourage voters to hold members of different branches of government responsible for different things. Institutions thus mediate the impact of the economy on the vote and lower the correlation between the way in which the economy impacts the vote in executive and legislative races.

That is, in H1 above I not only expected the economy to matter in both executive and legislative elections, I expected it to matter *more* in executive elections. I confirmed the first part of the hypothesis, but found that the institutional clarity of responsibility is the primary variable that influences the degree to which the economy affects legislative elections. When Clarity of Responsibility is Low, the economy has the *same* impact in executive and legislative elections. But as Clarity increases, the impact of the economy diminishes. This finding fits well with existing research on the US that finds that the economy matters about twice as much for presidential elections as for House elections (e.g. Erickson 1989, 1990), perhaps because the US has a medium-level value on "clarity of responsibility".

The operationalization of "Clarity of Responsibility" used here is admittedly rough, but provides a useful first cut at the issue. A way to unpack this variable and further illustrate how political institutions affect accountability for national economic outcomes is explore differences between concurrent and non-concurrent legislative elections (one of the elements of Separation of Purpose, and thus one of the elements of Clarity of Responsibility). When elections are held at the same time, the legislative elections are necessarily tied to the executive election. All else equal, in such elections we expect the “Economy” to be significant and also expect the “Economy*Clarity” variable to be significant. In contrast, when legislative elections are not held at the same time as executive elections, elections are relatively less likely to be “nationalized” and voters are thus more likely to dissociate the incumbent legislative party from the performance of the president and/or the national economy. This suggests that in nonconcurrent elections, the economy is likely to matter less (if at all) than in concurrent elections, all else equal. Table Three displays the results for both concurrent and nonconcurrent elections. Because concurrence is an element of Clarity of Responsibility, I exclude the “Clarity of Responsibility” variable as well as the variable that interacts “Clarity” with the “Economy.”[10]

Table Three Here

The results confirm the expectations: the economy matters almost twice as much in concurrent elections as in non-concurrent elections. This is similar to what Erickson (1990) found for US elections. Note also that the model for non-concurrent elections is generally a poor fit - even the party’s vote in the last election, which would have been a concurrent election - is not significant. The result demonstrates how one particular institutional aspect of the “clarity of responsibility” impacts the degree to which voters hold a president’s legislative party accountable for national economic trends. Additional research could attempt to quantify the degree to which other aspects of clarity of responsibility in presidential systems affect accountability.

[10] These two variables are somewhat collinear (-.42).

Conclusion

In this paper I aimed to contribute to the understanding of accountability in contemporary presidential democracies. The results reveal that most presidential democracies compare favorably to the findings of the aggregate economic voting literature for European parliamentary systems or for the US in terms of the "amount" of accountability one can attribute to retrospective economic voting. I demonstrated that economics always influences the incumbent vote in presidential elections, regardless of the partisan or institutional clarity of responsibility. Economics also affects legislative elections, but the institutional clarity of responsibility mediates this relationship: when the power of the executive and legislative branches are balanced and separation of purpose is minimal, we have the institutional configuration that most resembles parliamentary government. In such presidential systems, voters tend to reward and punish presidents and their legislative contingent similarly. In contrast, in presidential systems that provide for greater executive power and substantial separation of purpose, voters reward or punish legislators far less for economic performance than they do the president.

One might respond to this finding that "clarity of responsibility" is therefore an oxymoron, but that would be mistaken. Low clarity of responsibility in presidential systems appears to be a good thing for accountability, as other scholars have suggested it is a good thing for other "outputs" (e.g. Shugart and Carey 1992), if you believe that both the executive and the legislature ought to be held accountable for similar things, including the performance of the national economy. Under high clarity of responsibility, voters also hold the president accountable, and while they are not *unable* to hold the legislature accountable, they just do not *believe* the legislature is as responsible for the economy. We require additional research to understand what voters *do* believe legislators are responsible for in such systems.

The findings in this paper qualify Linz's critique of presidentialism based on his notion of "dual democratic legitimacies". The findings here reveal that although the executive and legislative branches may indeed derive separate democratic legitimacy based on voters' ability to cast two votes, when the executive and legislative branches are closely linked in both partisan and institutional terms, we are more likely to see "unified democratic legitimacy." In these systems, voters are relatively more likely to treat the incumbent executive and his or her legislative supporters as a team and judge them as such. In contrast, under certain configurations that do not appear in parliamentary systems (a substantial degree of imbalance of power and/or of separation of purpose between branches), the institutions of presidentialism can substantially separate the basis upon which each branch of government derives its democratic legitimacy.

This suggests that Linz's critique holds most clearly, and perhaps paradoxically, when the institutions of presidentialism generate the most "clarity of responsibility". At this point it is critical to restate that the notion of "clarity of responsibility" does not suggest anything particular about the content of voters' decisions. The results here only indicate that under certain institutional configurations the basis for accountability will differ across branches of government. Shugart and Carey (1992) correctly affirm, in my view, that this can be a normatively good thing. In contrast, Linz's "dual legitimacies" critique is rooted in a theory of democracy that lauds "party government" and critiques individualism in both the executive and legislative branches.

Clearly, there is an unstated tension between this theory and the actual ways in which voters relate to elected officials in presidential systems. This study has revealed that accountability can mean different things under presidentialism and parliamentarism, depending on presidentialism's particular institutional structure. The collective, "responsible parties," policy-oriented sense of accountability that is rooted in the European experience or in normative political theory and that has dominated the theoretical literature as well as guided empirical research is likely to occur under presidentialism only under a very limited set of conditions.

The findings in this paper also imply that scholarly concern about how presidential autonomy might hamper accountability is only partly correct (e.g. Cheibub and Przeworski 1999). Presidents should neither reap all the rewards for good performance nor take all of the blame for bad. As others have suggested when exploring regime survivability and/or governability (e.g. Shugart 1995), I argue that the core problem of for overall government accountability under presidentialism is the potential lack of linkage between the president and his or her legislative contingent. I have noted that in terms of accountability, *partisan* distance (in terms of coalitions and/or minority governments) appears to matter less than *institutional* distance, at least for legislative elections, and that neither partisan nor institutional distance appears to affect accountability in executive elections. Future research ought to explore the hypothesized differences in more detail.

The findings in this paper raise the interesting question of whether voters in presidential systems hold presidents “too accountable” while at the same time not holding legislators “accountable enough” for the same economic outcomes. In one respect this question awaits empirical testing that directly compares presidential and parliamentary systems, and in another respect all we can say at present is that “it depends” on one’s view of whether an autonomously powerful president and legislators elected mainly on local as opposed to national bases is or is not a good thing for democracy.

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Table One: Executive Elections

	Mode1 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Independent Variable	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)
Previous Incumbent Vote	-.452 (.161)**	-.465 (.159)**	-.477 (.163)**	-.489 (.161)**	-.489 (.169)**
Economy	1.323 (.340)***	1.175 (.302)***	1.169 (.307)***	1.167 (.308)***	1.041 (.410)**
President Run Reelection	--	10.112 (2.839)**	9.982 (2.854)***	10.089 (2.974)***	9.998 (3.086)***
Coalition	--	--	-.832 (2.923)	-1.099 (3.359)	-.499 (2.744)
Minority Government	--	--	--	-.595 (2.623)	-1.119 (3.568)
Clarity of Responsibility	--	--	--	--	-.004 (.046)
Economy*Clarity	--	--	--	--	.006 (.011)
Constant	12.932 (7.815)	12.144 (7.811)	12.974 (8.148)	13.917 (8.213)*	14.021 (8.465)
R^2	.295	.371	.372	.372	.374
N	75	75	75	75	75
Prob > F	.0002	.0000	.0000	.0000	.0000

* *p* >.05 (one-tailed test)
** *p* >.01 (one-tailed test)
*** *p* >.001 (one-tailed test)

Table Two: Legislative Elections

	Mode1 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Independent Variable	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)
Incumbent Vote	-.235 (.065)***	-.225 (.058)***	-.230 (.067)***	-.201 (.079)**	-.167 (.080)*
Economy	.832 (.234)***	.771 (.207)***	.770 (.207)***	.780 (.213)***	1.169 (.298)***
President Run Reelection	--	6.459 (3.632)*	6.404 (3.633)*	6.286 (3.656)*	6.771 (3.683)*
Coalition	--	--	-.291 (2.157)	.361 (2.487)	.218 (2.680)
Minority Government	--	--	--	1.395 (1.985)	2.485 (1.966)
Clarity of Responsibility	--	--	--	--	.026 (.037)
Economy*Clarity	--	--	--	--	-.010 (.006)*
Constant	4.742 (2.725)*	3.674 (2.377)	3.947 (2.984)	1.833 (4.169)	-.580 (4.284)
R^2	.244	.293	.294	.297	.369
N	98	98	98	98	95
Prob > F	.0002	.0001	.0004	.001	.0005

* *p* >.05 (one-tailed test)
** *p* >.01 (one-tailed test)
*** *p* >.001 (one-tailed test)

Table Three: Legislative Elections (Concurrent vs. Non-Concurrent)

	Concurrent Elections	Non-Concurrent Elections
Independent Variable	Coefficient (s.e.)	Coefficient (s.e.)
Incumbent Vote	-.346 (.124)**	-.035 (.087)
Economy	1.029 (.221)***	.584 (.259)*
President Run Reelection	6.801 (3.570)*	--
Coalition	-3.169 (4.312)	.895 (2.303)
Minority Government	2.693 (3.137)	.778 (2.518)
Constant	6.834 (6.938)	-2.982 (5.202)
R^2	.463	.1948
N	58	37
Prob > F	.0000	.1678

* *p* >.05 (one-tailed test)
** *p* >.01 (one-tailed test)
*** *p* >.001 (one-tailed test)

Appendix One			
Country	**Balance**	**Separation**	**Election Years (P=presidential, L= Legislative)**
Argentina	9	9	1983PL, 1985L, 1987L, 1989PL, 1991L, 1993L, 1995PL, 1997L, 1999PL
Benin	9	9	1995L, 1999L
Bolivia	2	1 (-1994), 2 (1995-)	1985P, 1989P, 1993P, 1997P
Brazil	5	8	1989P, 1990L, 1994PL, 1998PL
Chile	6	9	1989PL, 1993PL, 1997L, 1999P
Colombia	9 (-1990), 5 (1994-)	9 (-1990), 7 (1991-)	1974PL, 1978PL, 1982PL, 1986PL, 1990PL, 1991L 1994PL, 1998PL
Costa Rica	0	0	1962PL, 1966PL, 1970PL, 1974PL, 1978PL, 1982PL, 1986PL, 1990PL, 1994PL, 1998PL
Dominican Republic	2	2 (-1990), 9 (1994-)	1986PL, 1990PL, 1994PL, 1996P, 1998L
Ecuador	7	9	1979L, 1984PL, 1986L, 1988PL, 1990L, 1992PL, 1994L, 1996PL, 1998L, 2000P
El Salvador	2	3	1989PL, 1991L, 1994PL, 1997L, 1999P, 2000L
Guatemala	2	0	1991PL, 1995PL, 1999PL
Honduras	1	0	1981PL, 1985PL, 1989PL, 1993PL, 1997PL
Korea	6	9	1987P, 1988L, 1992PL, 1996L, 1997P, 2000L
Malawi	0	2	1994PL, 1999PL
Mexico	1	5	1994PL, 1997L, 2000PL
Nicaragua	0	0	1991PL, 1996PL
Panama	2	1	1994PL, 1999PL
Paraguay	2	0	1989PL, 1993PL, 1998PL
Peru	3 (-1990), 7 (1995-)	5 (-1992), 4 (1993-)	1985PL, 1990PL, 1995PL
Russia	9	6	1996P, 2000P
Taiwan	6	4	1996P, 2000P
United States	2	5	1962L, 1964PL, 1966L, 1968PL, 1970L, 1972PL, 1974L, 1976PL, 1978L, 1980PL, 1982L, 1984PL, 1986L, 1988PL, 1990L, 1992PL, 1994L, 1996PL, 1998L, 2000PL
Uruguay	4	4	1984PL, 1989PL, 1994PL, 1999PL
Venezuela	0	1 (-1998), 6 (2000-)	1963PL, 1968PL, 1973PL, 1978PL, 1983PL, 1988PL, 1993PL, 1998PL, 2000PL

Note: for the particulars of operationalizating Balance of Power and Separation of Purpose, see Samuels and Shugart (2003). Changes to values are provided, with the year of the change in parenthesis.