

***The ‘presidentialisation’ thesis revisited:
Lessons from the Swedish case***

Thomas Persson
Department of Government, Uppsala University
Thomas.Persson@statsvet.uu.se

Jörgen Hermansson
Department of Government, Uppsala University
Jorgen.Hermansson@statsvet.uu.se

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Abstract

The ‘presidentialisation’ of politics thesis asserts that executive actors become increasingly empowered at the expense of parliamentary and party actors. Given the strong criticisms levelled against the thesis (see e.g. Karvonen 2010; Dowding 2013; Heffernan 2013), we aim to develop a more precise analytical framework to investigate the level of chief executive dominance in parliamentary democracies. We present a set of indicators to investigate this empirically, which is then applied in a least-likely case: Sweden. Our preliminary results indicate that, even in a country with strong consensual traits and collegial decision-making in cabinets, there are signs of a strengthening of executive power in recent decades. The findings confirm our belief that better indicators of the likely empowerment of executives are well needed, and should be applied in future comparative research.

Introduction

A major trend among parliamentary systems in Europe seems to be changing executive-legislative relations. More powers are concentrated to political executives at the expense of parliamentary and party actors, while at the same time powers inside cabinets are increasingly concentrated in the hands of prime ministers. This development is summarized by the so-called ‘presidentialisation of politics’ thesis (Poguntke & Webb 2005), which entails a strengthened role and autonomy for the prime ministers in relation to other political players although this has (generally) not been accompanied by formal changes of constitutions.

However, the idea of an ongoing strengthening of executive power has not been unchallenged. The presidentialisation thesis has been criticized for being theoretically and conceptually under-specified and the empirical results scant (Karvonen 2010; Dowding 2013; Heffernan 2013). Some scholars have even argued that the term ‘presidentialisation’ should be ‘expunged from political science vocabulary’ (Dowding 2013:617). We acknowledge the conceptual and theoretical problems that exist with the thesis but will avoid proposing new terms for a phenomenon that nonetheless seems to reflect an important development in parliamentary systems. The crucial thing for us is rather how to approach this proposed development analytically. Ultimately, we want to find ways to better investigate the alleged strengthening of executive power, whether it is called ‘prime ministerial predominance’ (Heffernan 2003), ‘chief executive empowerment’ (Johansson & Tallberg 2010), ‘prime ministerialisation’ of prime ministers (Dowding 2013) or ‘presidentialisation of politics’ (Poguntke & Webb 2005; 2013).

The alleged development carries the potential to transform parliamentary systems to resemble separation-of-power systems (Bergman & Strøm 2011), and this development is too important to ignore. Hence, this article aims to provide a more precise analytical framework for investigating the level of chief executive dominance in parliamentary democracies. Moreover, we will present a set of indicators to investigate this in empirical settings, which we will then apply in one single case study. To what extent has there been a general strengthening of the executive branch of government in a parliamentary democracy where we do not expect this development?

In essence, we see the extent of executive dominance as a two-dimensional problem: on the one hand the parliamentary-executive linkage (the relation between parliaments and governments), and on the other the intra-executive dimension (the relation between the prime minister and her cabinet ministers). These two dimensions resemble the ‘party face’ and the ‘executive face’ of presidentialisation (Poguntke & Webb 2005). We will accordingly not cover the ‘electoral face’, which point at a personalization of politics and increasingly leadership centred electoral processes (Mughan 2000; Karvonen 2010; Hermansson 2011).

In our view, Sweden provides a good testing ground for our analytical framework due to its consensual traits and collegial decision-making in the cabinet (Lijphart 1999). It seems to be contrary to the foundations of Sweden’s parliamentary system to put more power in the hands of executives and prime ministers and thereby diminish the role played by consensus decision-making and collegiality (for a similar argument, see

Bergman and Strøm 2004: 91). Notwithstanding this, however, we find that the balance of power has tilted decisively away from parliaments in favour of the executive branch, and the prime minister has received an increasingly dominant position in the government. The findings confirm our belief that better indicators of the likely empowerment of executives are well needed, and should be applied in future comparative research.

The paper is organized as follows. We first outline current academic debates on the strengthening of executive power in parliamentary democracies. We then present how we believe this development should be examined by elaborating a couple of indicators of executive empowerment. In the next section we present the design of our study and the data we use. After this, we will apply this analytical framework on the case of Sweden. We conclude by discussing the general implications of our analysis and end by suggesting some avenues for future research.

The presidentialisation thesis recapitulated

According to students of political parties, the role played by chief executives in contemporary parliamentary systems is growing. This trend is commonly referred to as ‘presidentialisation’ (Foley 1993, 2000; Poguntke & Webb 2005), although the term itself has become highly contentious (Dowding 2013). The phenomenon is defined by Poguntke and Webb (2005: 5) as ‘the development of increasing leadership power resources and autonomy within the party and the political executive respectively, and increasingly leadership-centered electoral processes’. Thus, the increase of resources and powers at the disposal of the chief executive is believed to indicate a trend towards ‘presidentialised’ executive politics. Clearly, however, this term should not be taken literally, but understood metaphorically.

The increasing dominance of chief executives can be explained, according to Poguntke and Webb (2005), by the internationalisation of politics, of which European integration is deemed the most significant example (Bäck et al. 2012). Furthermore, macro-societal factors such as the erosion of cleavage politics, the changing structure of mass communications, and the growth of the state, are all contributing factors behind this trend. Thus, while the presidentialisation concept combines several empirical trends into a coherent theoretical understanding of current power shifts within parliamentary democracies, we believe that the thesis suffers from a number of conceptual and empirical deficiencies (Hermansson & Persson 2010; Persson & Wiberg 2011).

First, the thesis suffers from the problem of suggesting far-reaching changes to a system whose definition is subject to considerable debate (see, e.g. Verney 1992/1959; Sartori 1997/1994). Additionally, the term ‘presidentialisation’ is mainly used as a metaphor. It essentially means that parliamentary systems become more ‘like’ presidential regimes without acquiring its constitutional characteristics. Hence, when both the parliamentary system itself and the very meaning of its alleged transformation is unclear, the presidentialisation thesis will lack sufficient precision.

Second, the presidentialisation thesis presupposes that prime ministers become more powerful and acquire ‘presidential’ powers. In fact, however, prime ministers in many parliamentary systems are already more powerful than their presidential counterparts which has been pointed out by critics of the presidentialisation thesis (Heffernan 2005;

2013; Dowding 2013). Therefore, the suggestion that presidentialisation makes parliamentary and presidential systems more similar, has to be taken with caution.

Finally, it is still more a suggestion than a well-documented fact that presidentialisation occurs in parliamentary states (Poguntke & Webb 2005). While the public debate and much research have focused on the electoral dimension (Mughan, 2000), it is not clear whether or how these changes in electoral processes actually translate into increased PM power vis-à-vis parliamentary groups and other cabinet ministers (Hermansson 2011). Hence we are inclined to agree with Karvonen that ‘the general “gut impression” of expert authors seem to be more in favour of the presidentialisation thesis than is warranted from the actual evidence presented in the various country studies’ (Karvonen 2010: 20).¹

In sum, many scholars claim that contemporary parliamentary systems are moving toward the presidential model. However, the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of these claims are weak, and the empirical evidence scarce and ambiguous. Nevertheless, we still believe these claims are too important to ignore. Before subjecting the thesis to empirical scrutiny, however, it is necessary to look more closely at how we intend to examine the validity of these claims. Given the strong criticisms levelled against the hypothesis, we aim to develop a more precise analytical framework to investigate the level of executive dominance in parliamentary democracies.

An analytical framework for examining executive dominance

Defining parliamentary systems of government

One of the most widely cited definitions of parliamentary systems is that of Giovanni Sartori. According to Sartori, the parliament is sovereign and admits no power sharing between parliament and government. All power derives from the parliament. Hence, Sartori claims that parliamentary systems ‘require governments to be appointed, supported and, as the case may be, dismissed, by parliamentary vote’ (Sartori 1997/1994: 101).

¹ Hermansson 2011 provides an analysis of the 2006 election in Sweden based on a survey (Hagevi in Växjö) with a question where the respondent report if he/she voted for a specific party due to its party leader or rather due to the party itself (a scale from 0 to 10). This question suits well as an indicator of presidentialisation, but it collapses several different questions which are used in the polls that have been conducted by scholars in Gothenburg since the mid 1950s.

Another possible indicator to be used in Sweden is data from 1998 and onwards about personal votes for the party leaders. Together with the vote for a specific party (selecting a party list) the voter has the possibility to make a cross for at most one candidate. This may change the ranking order of the candidates on the list but in practice it seldom does due to the fact that most crosses goes to candidates at the top of the list, hence to candidates who do not need personal votes in order to get a seat. As an example the party leader of the conservative party got more than 20 percent personal votes in the 2006 election and almost 25 percent in the 2010 election. The candidate with the second most personal votes received slightly more than 1 percent in both elections.

The simplicity of Sartori's minimal definition, however, makes it hard to use for analytical purposes. According to his definition, any system is either parliamentary or presidential, though he recognises that 'the distribution of the real world cases into these two classes reveals impermissible bedfellows' (Sartori 1997/1994: 83). For our analytical purposes it would be more useful to consider parliamentarism as something that can vary on a scale between these two extremes.

The main track in research has been to contrast empirical cases of parliamentary systems (the real kind) with the British Westminster model, which thus serves as an ideal type. The task then is to establish the degree of parliamentary government by fixing the distance to an idealized image of the British parliamentary system. Such an ideal type definition has been provided by Douglas Verney (1992/1959), who was trying to contrast the parliamentary ideal-type model with its equivalent, the presidential system.

Verney identifies eleven contrasting criteria that separate parliamentary from presidential systems of government. The three most important contrasting criteria are:

- In a parliamentary system the government is politically responsible before parliament, while in a presidential system the executive is judicially responsible before the constitution;
- In parliamentary systems, governments are only indirectly responsible to the electorate, while in presidential systems the government is responsible to the people;
- Governments in parliamentary systems are a collective, whereas executives in presidential systems are individual.

Apart from the third point, the definition is similar to Sartori's. Also Lijphart (1999: 117-8) suggests similar criteria to distinguish between parliamentary and presidential systems. As we have already made explicit, however, this article is not about classifying regimes. Rather, we have set out to ask whether existing parliamentary systems are moving toward the presidential ideal-type. To this end, we believe that our attention should be directed primarily to the first and third dimensions of Verney's definitions. An examination of the second dimension, i.e. that prime ministers tend to be increasingly in direct touch with voters and to by-pass political parties, would require a totally different research design (see e.g. Hermansson 2011).

We will therefore examine the extent to which parliamentary systems are changing in two important dimensions. First, we consider executive-legislative relations with regard to the degree of executive domination over legislatures (see Figure 1). Parliamentary systems requires a set of devices available to the parliament for controlling the PM and his or her cabinet ministers. In our view, it is appropriate to speak of presidentialisation whenever the parliament's ability to control the government is diminished.

We will then look at intra-executive relations – between the PM and individual ministers –with respect to the degree of collegiality within the cabinet. Parliamentary cabinets are more collegial and less hierarchical than their presidential counterparts. In our view, it is therefore appropriate to speak of presidentialisation whenever the prime minister gains more influence at the expense of the cabinet as a whole.

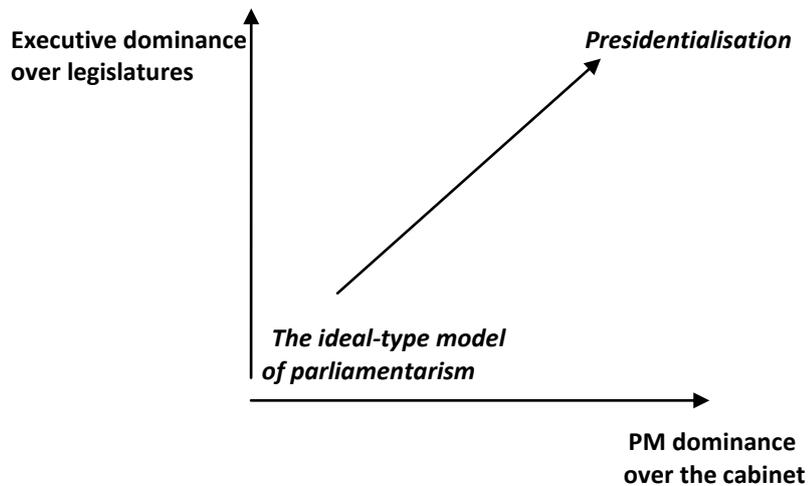


Figure 1. Two dimensions of parliamentary government

Our interpretation of how the parliamentary system ideally should work is indicated by the position in the lower left corner of Figure 1. This is how we interpret Verney (1992/1959) and others who advocate an ideal model of parliamentarism. In line with this, one can also imagine that parliamentarism is eroded to the extent it departs from the ideal model in either of the two dimensions, which is exactly what the presidentialisation thesis asserts. One can therefore conclude that the more the government disconnects from parliament, and collegiality inside the executive diminishes, the more a system approaches a presidential system without necessarily acquiring its constitutional character. Hence, a parliamentary system of government requires that neither PM dominance over the cabinet, nor executive dominance over the legislature be prominent features of said system.

Strictly speaking, however, the thesis also holds that executive power rests on a personal mandate from the people. A president-like prime minister need not consult his ministers when he or she gets his/her support directly by the people. However, we will limit this study to examine whether there is a strong shift upward and to the right of the figure, as illustrated by the arrow in the figure.

This analytical understanding of relations between parliaments and executives, and between PMs and cabinet ministers, resembles a Principal-Agent understanding of parliamentary government (Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2003). According to the P-A approach, parliamentary government can be understood as a system whereby the electorate delegates authority to the parliament, which in turn delegates authority to the government. At the final stage, the PM then delegates authority to the ministers. Principal-agent theory has proven to be a powerful tool for several research problems concerning the delegation of power and the difficulties that may arise from this. It is, for example, difficult and costly for the principal to ensure that the right agents are selected for different tasks (adverse selection), and then verify that they behave as expected (moral hazard).

Indicators of presidentialisation

Conceptualization and theory, however, is not sufficient to empirically investigate the phenomenon we are interested in. We also need to introduce appropriate indicators for the two dimensions of parliamentarism. Here we rest largely on a variety of factors that have been suggested in the literature, particularly with respect to the balance of power between the government and the parliament. Several of these indicators are well established, others are more rudimentary (see e.g. Poguntke & Webb 2005; Dowding & Dumont 2008; Bäck et al. 2009, 2012; Kolltveit 2013).

Regarding the balance between the government and the parliament, we rely primarily on a number of factors that are often deemed important in this regard (Strøm, Müller and Bergman 2003). For example, parliaments are strengthened by positive investiture votes (requires the cabinet/PM to win a majority vote), by requirements of membership in parliament for cabinet positions, by a two-chamber legislature, by strong parliamentary control instruments, and by minority governments (instead of majority governments). To the contrary, requirements of constructive votes of no-confidence, a right for the cabinet to dissolve the parliament, package voting, and single-party governments (instead of coalition governments) strengthens the cabinet (see Table 1).

Table 1. Factors affecting the power balance between parliaments and governments

Positive parliamentarism		Strengthens parliament
Constructive vote of confidence	Strengthens government	
Ministers with parliamentary background		Strengthens parliament
Parliamentary dissolution by cabinet	Strengthens government	
Two-chamber system		Strengthens parliament
Package voting (<i>vote bloquée</i>)	Strengthens government	
Parliamentary control instruments		Strengthens parliament
Single-party government	Strengthens government	
Minority government		Strengthens parliament
Government's administrative resources	Strengthens government	

Also when it comes to the internal balance of power, between the Prime Minister and individual ministers, we are inspired by the various indicators proposed in the literature on presidentialisation (see e.g. Poguntke & Webb 2005; Dowding & Dumont 2008). It is, for instance, argued that single-party governments, many instead of few ministers with thin portfolios, more resources to the Prime Minister's Office, PM's with prior experience of the job, and frequent cabinet reshuffles are all signs of strong prime ministers. To the contrary, ministers with parliamentary background, extensive political experience, and leading positions in their parties as well as limits to the PM's power to appoint or dismiss ministers are factors weakening the PM (see Table 2).

Table 2. Factors affecting the power balance inside governments

Single-party government		Strengthens PM
Ministers with parliamentary background	Strengthens ministers	
Increasing number of ministers		Strengthens PM
Ministers with extensive political experience	Strengthens ministers	
Resources to Prime Minister's office		Strengthens PM
Ministers with leading position in party	Strengthens ministers	
Prime minister's experience as PM		Strengthens PM
Limits to PM's appointment powers	Strengthens ministers	
Frequent reshuffles		Strengthens PM

A problem common to both lists of indicators, however, is that they include elements of very different character. Some of them point to constitutional characteristics, others are effects of voter behaviour, and some are ultimately determined by the Prime Minister's way to appoint and dismiss ministers. Therefore, we will in the analysis construct an index on presidentialisation consisting of three components: constitutional rules, voter behaviour and recruitment of ministers decided by the PM, i.e.

$$\text{Index on PM dominance: } X = (X_k + X_v + X_{pm}) / 3$$

$$\text{Index on executive dominance: } Y = (Y_k + Y_v + Y_{pm}) / 3$$

where all included components are normalised (0 to 1).

This separation of the two indices into three different components will have no effect on how we consider the presidentialisation thesis if we limit our view to only describe what happened. But it is a first step to further understand the driving forces behind the development patterns we find. Our guess is that the underlying explanation may accommodate different kinds of factors.

Research design and method

Rationale for case selection

Sweden, together with other Nordic countries, are often considered to be a consensus democracy (Arter 2006). This characterisation was perhaps most fully developed by Arndt Lijphart in his seminal work on Patterns of Democracy, where he recognises the Nordic countries as consensus model democracies, in sharp contrast with the Westminster style model of majoritarian democracy (Lijphart 1999, 250). We believe that Lijphart's dichotomy is too rough; Sweden should rather be seen as a mix of the consensus and majoritarian model with its blend of broad power-sharing between government and opposition, and of concentrating power in the hands of the majority. Hence, in our view, Sweden provides a good testing ground for our analytical

framework due to its consensual traits and collegial decision-making in the cabinet. It seems to be contrary to the foundations of Sweden's parliamentary system to put more power in the hands of executives and prime ministers and thereby diminish the role played by consensus decision-making and collegiality (for similar arguments, see Bergman and Strøm 2004: 91; Persson & Wiberg 2011; and Kolltveit 2013 regarding Norway).

Data and variables

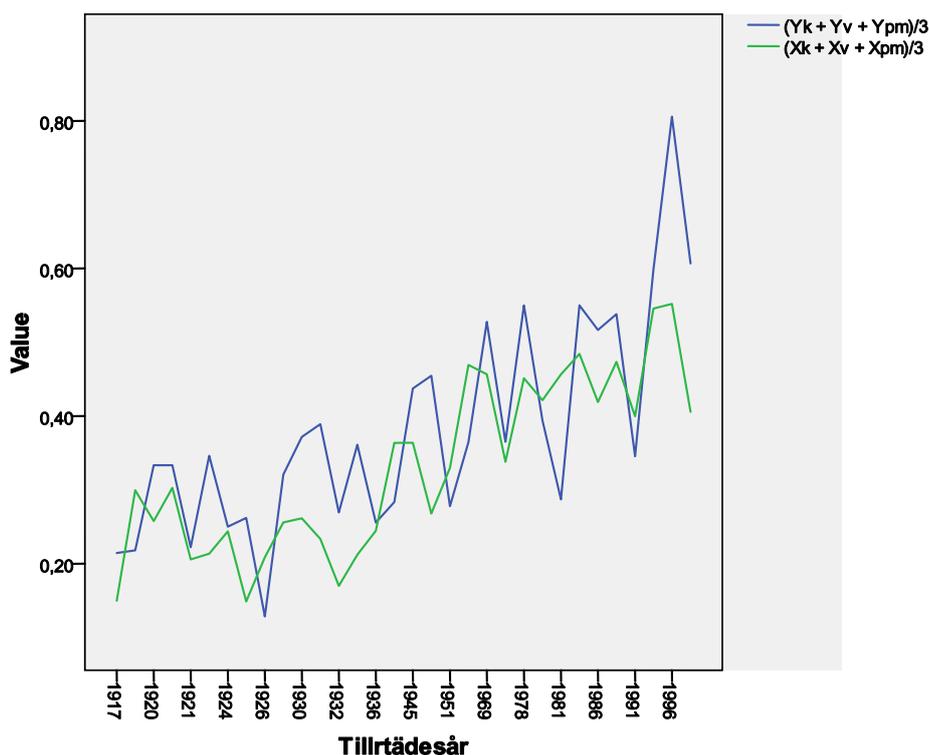
In order to test the level of PM and executive dominance set out above, we will use a dataset of complete Swedish ministerial careers for the period 1917–2008. The data set consists of 336 individuals who were appointed to, in total, 709 ministerial posts in any of the 32 cabinets during the parliamentary era in Sweden.

Note that a new cabinet is formed every time there is a change of prime minister or when there is a change of parties in government. However, an election does not necessarily imply that a new cabinet is formed according to the Swedish constitution.²

Empirical analyses

The main result is presented in Figure 2 below. At the bottom left, Sweden's first parliamentary government is illustrated (headed by Prime Minister Nils Edén), and at the top right is one of the very last (led by Prime Minister Göran Persson). Despite large fluctuations between different governments, a long-term trend can be discerned in both dimensions. The government has significantly strengthened its position in relation to the parliament (the blue/dark grey Y-line) and the prime minister has received an increasingly dominant position in the government (the green/light grey X-line). There has been a clear shift in the context of the parliamentary form of government.

² It will be change in this regard. When parliament is gathered after the 2014 elections, the Instrument of Government now statutes that it has to be a decision on who should be appointed as Prime Minister (still negative parliamentarism)



Figur 2. Index on PM and executive dominance in Sweden 1917-2009

We initially identified a number of factors that can affect executive power in both dimensions. Some of these factors were constitutional or structural in nature, meaning that they are primarily suited for comparative studies between countries. In our study, which is limited to Sweden, there are no major changes in terms of the constitutional framework. The present constitution as of 1974 was mainly a codification of the parliamentary praxis established 1917. However, the Swedish constitution has not been unchanged since 1917. There have in fact been some changes that are relevant in this context.

As for the relationship between the executive and the parliament three different phases in the Swedish parliamentary system is distinguishable. Until 1970, the Swedish parliament was divided into two chambers. Since 1971, however, Sweden has a unicameral system. This change should be interpreted as a slight strengthening of the government's position in relation to the parliament. In the 1990s, there were three other changes that involved shifts in the same direction: the extension of the parliamentary term from three to four years, the EU accession, and the new budget law. From a strictly constitutional point of view, therefore, the government has gradually strengthened its position in relation to the parliament.

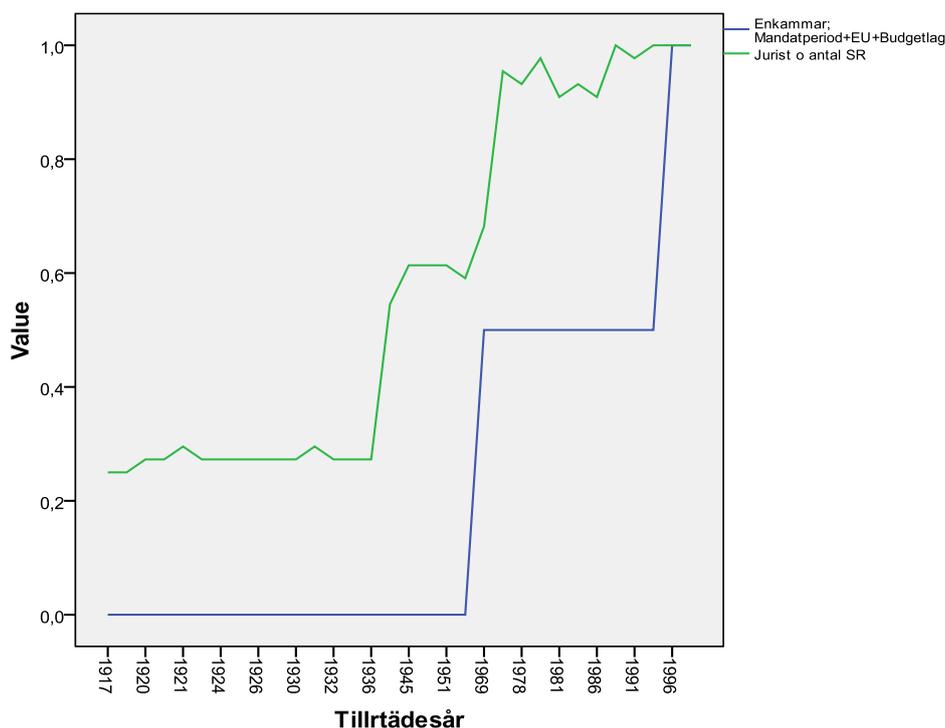
The same shift can be observed if we instead look at administrative resources. This trend is more gradual, but the tendency is the same: the government has gradually strengthened its position in relation to the parliament. The gap in resources has become particularly pronounced after the unicameral reform which gave the government and ministries an advantage relative to the parliament.

As for the second dimension, the prime minister's position in government, constitutional changes are more marginal but the trend is similar. Prior to 1974 there

were certain restrictions on the prime minister's ability to compose his or her government. Already in 1941 the constitutional fixation of the number of ministries were abolished. With the constitutional reform of 1974, the requirement that two of the ministers had to be lawyers was finally removed. The removal of previous restrictions on the number of government ministries, and requirements of lawyers in the cabinet should therefore be perceived as a slight strengthening of the prime ministers position.

There are also a couple of other long-term structural changes that should be considered. One is the growth of prime minister's office. Beginning with Tage Erlander's long period as Sweden's prime minister, the PM's own office has been added resources that now enable it to serve as a small ministry. In addition, the reform in 1997 transforming the Government Offices into to a single authority under the leadership of the PM helped to strengthen the prime minister's position (Sundström 2009). **The second factor is the numerical increase in the number of ministers. The more ministers, the more distinct the prime minister is.**

These constitutional and structural factors have affected both aspects of executive dominance. The government have systematically been strengthened in relation to the parliament, and the prime minister has gradually gained a greater position. This is illustrated in the figure 3 below.



Figur 3. Index on PM and executive dominance in Sweden due to constitutional and structural factors

With regard to other types of factors that affect PM and executive dominance – election results and prime minister's own actions – there is no clear trend. In general

elections it is decided by voters whether it is possible to form a one-party government or a coalition government, and if the government gets a majority in parliament. Elections also affect the position of the Prime Minister. An incumbent PM has probably a stronger position than beginners.

(Perhaps another figure with information about X_v and Y_v .)

In addition to the above factors also the Prime Minister may influence his/her own position. In the literature on presidentialisation two different measures are often used. A high proportion of parliamentarians in the cabinet are usually perceived as an indicator in favor of the parliament. A high turnover of ministers is also interpreted as signs of a strong PM. Additionally, we include the proportion of strong politicians (insiders) in a government as an indicator of the prime minister's position in the government. A low proportion of insiders imply that the Prime Minister will have a strong position and vice versa. Another factor that should be considered is that two of our prime ministers also have been heads of ministries. Hjalmar Branting, in his second government, was both PM and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Similarly, Felix Hamrin was both PM and Minister of Finance. In both cases, we should consider the fact that this strengthened the prime minister's position in these governments.

(Again information about these components: X_{PM} and Y_{PM} . The first index will give us some evidence for the presidentialisation thesis.)

The picture is not at all as clean as in figure 2, but it is obvious that PM dominance to some extent has been created by the PM:s themselves. The result is somewhat blurred by the exceptional amount of reshuffling during Hjalmar Branting's first cabinet in 1920, but this may be considered as an outlier.

We are now ready for a conclusion about our empirical case. The Swedish parliamentary system has been moving towards the presidential model of government. It can also be said that it is mainly the constitutional and structural factors that create such a development in the direction the presidentialisation thesis alleges. No matter how we balance these factors, they give rise to the same kind of trend: government power has been strengthened in relation to the parliament, and the prime minister has gradually strengthened his/her position in the government.

Concluding remarks

The 'presidentialisation' of politics thesis asserts that executive actors become increasingly empowered at the expense of parliamentary and party actors. Given the strong criticisms levelled against the thesis lately, we set out to develop a more precise analytical framework to investigate the level of chief executive dominance in parliamentary democracies. We acknowledge the conceptual and theoretical problems that exist with the thesis but the crucial thing for us is rather how to approach this proposed development analytically.

For this purpose, we have presented here an analytical framework where executive dominance is considered as a two-dimensional problem: on the one hand the

parliamentary-executive linkage (the relation between parliaments and governments), and on the other the intra-executive dimension (the relation between the prime minister and her cabinet ministers). Moreover, we presented a set of indicators to investigate this empirically, which was then applied in a least-likely case: Sweden. In our view, Sweden provides a good testing ground for our analytical framework due to its consensual traits and collegial decision-making in the cabinet.

Notwithstanding this, however, we find that the balance of power has tilted decisively away from the parliament in favour of the executive branch, and the prime minister has received an increasingly dominant position in the Swedish government. The findings confirm our belief that better indicators of the likely empowerment of executives are well needed, and should be applied in future comparative research.

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