With Caesarism and Civilization, the great struggles between political parties are no longer concerned with principles, programs and ideologies, but with men. Marius, Sulla, Cato, Brutus still fought for principles. But now, everything became personalized. Under Augustus, parties still existed, but there were no more Optimates or Populares. No more conservatives or democrats. Men campaigned for or against Tiberius or Drusus or Caius Caesar. No one believed any more in the efficacy of ideas, political panaceas, doctrines, or systems, just as the Greeks had given up building great philosophic systems generations before. Abstractions, ideas, and philosophies were rejected to the periphery of their lives... (de Riencourt 1958).
Introduction

In this paper we argue that the de facto ‘presidentialization’ of democracies represents a growing challenge to the party government model and carries implications for broader democratic theory. Starting with a model of ‘presidentialized’ politics which seems to be largely substantiated by a new survey of empirical evidence across a number of advanced industrial democracies (Poguntke & Webb 2005a), we show how the party government model is undermined as the long-term conditions on which it has been sustained have altered to the benefit of increasingly powerful and autonomous individual leaders. This evidence reveals ways in which candidate-centred electoral processes, changes in intra-party patterns of power, and the growing structural power of leaders within political executives have combined to enhance independence from their parties. These processes, we believe, derive from a number of major developments affecting the environment in which parties and politicians now operate, at the levels of both state and society: these include cleavage decomposition, media change, state restructuring and the internationalization of decision-making.

After discussing the concepts of party government and presidentialization, we review the evidence for the presidentialization phenomenon across a number of Western democracies, and then consider the implications for democratic theory.

The dimensions of party government

Historically, Gioavanni Sartori asserts that party government was preceded by, and grew out of, responsible government in England. The latter emerged during the late 18th century, and consisted of the responsibility of ministers to Parliament. True,
parties began to develop in this era, as ways of solving collective action problems in Parliament: famously, Edmund Burke advocated them as a means of counteracting King George III’s growing control of Parliament through his extensive use of patronage (Burke 1968). Even so, there was little or no sense of parties in government at this time. It was only with the gradual democratisation of politics during the 19th century that parties became central to the work of the executive. As this happened, so they were obliged to extend their operations and presence beyond Westminster in order to become responsive to the demands of voters. ‘Logically, it would appear that it is responsive government that entails party government proper. The party can hardly meet the demands through which it competes for votes unless it can govern: hence party government’ (Sartori 1976: 22). Thus, over a century or more, England experienced a gradual shift from responsible aristocratic government to responsive democratic party government. As a logical concomitant, parliamentary party behaviour became highly cohesive in the wake of the (electoral) Reform Act of 1867 (Cox 1987: ch.3). Furthermore, the autonomy of backbenchers was greatly eroded by the growing domination of the legislature by the executive in this period (Bagehot 1867).

Since this time, it has gradually become orthodox to regard political parties as central to the way in which government operates in most of the world’s established democracies. But is this orthodoxy still justified today? We need a clear definition of party government in order to judge. Taking our cue from Richard Katz (1986: 43), we can regard party government as satisfying three essential criteria: first, all government decisions should be taken by individuals chosen in elections which are conducted along party lines; second, policy must clearly emanate from within parties (or definite
coalitions of parties); and thirdly, ‘positions in government must flow from support within the party rather than party positions flowing from electoral success’. While the first and third criteria prompt us to look at the personnel involved in the governing process, the second criterion points us towards the substance of policy and governmental decision-making. All three propositions imply a significant involvement for actors in one or more of the various party strata - parliamentarians, extra-parliamentary officers or activists (rather than the entirety of dues-paying members).

In a nutshell, party government means - at least in its traditional sense and in a European context - government by the party in this broad collective sense. It is our contention that the growing autonomy and power of individual leaders weakens the appropriateness of the party government model in many democratic countries in each of these respects. In order to appreciate this fully one must turn to the ‘presidentialization’ of politics in these countries.

**The presidentialization phenomenon: Conceptual dimensions**

The theme of the concentration of power around leaders in democratic political systems is by no means new. More than 30 years ago Brian Farrell (1971: x) observed that ‘in almost all political systems, executive dominance and the personification of this domination in a single leader is a central fact of political life’. Yet it is hard to avoid the impression that perceptions of the personalization, and in particular, the ‘presidentialization’ of politics have become more widespread in recent years, regardless of formal constitutional characteristics. Certainly this is true of the UK, for instance, where the impact of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair on politics has frequently inspired observers to draw the presidential analogy. While debates over the extent of prime ministerial power are long-standing (see, for instance, Mackintosh
1962; Crossman 1964; Jones 1965), the most outspoken recent advocate of the presidentialization thesis in the British context has been Michael Foley (1993, 2000, 2004). The concept of presidentialization is a very useful way of grasping the essence of the challenge which individual power poses for party government. What do we mean when we refer to it? In addressing this, we draw on a new comparative study of the presidentialization of politics in advanced industrial democracies, which we have directed (Poguntke and Webb 2005a).

First, it must be emphasized that we are not referring to a shift in the formal-legal context from parliamentarism to presidentialism, but rather to informal changes in the working mode of political systems, whereby they increasingly come to operate according to a logic resembling that of presidentialism. These shifts are sustained by a combination of contingent and structural factors, the latter component implying that those changes attributable to them are likely to be permanent while shifts caused by contingent factors are intrinsically short-term in nature, and therefore reversible if, for example, the incumbent in the chief executive office changes. We may call such changes ‘de facto presidentialization’, as opposed to ‘de jure presidentialism’. To understand what the former consists of, it is essential to recognise that it borrows from the functional logic of presidential regimes the following three effects:

*It provides executive leaders with superior power resources:* Under de jure presidentialism, this emanates directly from the fact that the head of government is not responsible to parliament, is (usually) directly legitimated by popular election, and has the power to organize cabinet without significant interference from other
institutions or actors. In a nutshell, the head of the executive can govern without much outside interference from his or her party.

_It provides party and executive leadership with autonomy:_ This is also a direct result of the separation of powers found in presidential regimes. While in office, the head of the executive is well protected from pressure from his own party. This works both ways, however. Parties in parliament are not constrained either to support the government or to present themselves as a viable opposition. Crucially, while the head of the executive enjoys considerable autonomy vis-à-vis his own party, his power to lead depends directly on his electoral appeal. In other words, leadership autonomy may make for enhanced power to lead, but it is contingent upon electoral success. It is not based on organizational control of the party. In short, leadership autonomy may find expression in two different zones of action: the party organization itself, and (for governing parties) the political executive of the state.

_It implies personalization of the electoral process:_ This follows directly from the natural focus on the highest elective office in presidential regimes, which requires that all aspects of the electoral process are decisively moulded by the personal qualities of the leading candidates.

While these three features are intrinsic to formally presidential regimes, similar developments can be said to emerge in parliamentary or semi-presidential systems where a de facto ‘presidentialization’ occurs. Indeed, one may even conceive of the process of presidentialization as we conceptualise it here affecting formally presidential regimes: that is, the process by which the power resources and autonomy
of leaders are enhanced, and more candidate-centred elections emerge, could occur even within presidential settings, although we would expect these things to develop from higher base-lines than in parliamentary settings (see Poguntke and Webb 2005b: 5-7).

Whatever the regime context, it should be apparent that de facto presidentialization carries important implications for the party government model. Clearly, an increase in the leader’s personal power resources and autonomy within the party and the political executive respectively, plus increasingly leadership-centred electoral processes, all suggest a movement away from a purely ‘partified’ form of governance of the type outlined by Katz. For one thing, the personalization of elections would seem, strictly speaking, to contradict Katz’s first criterion - that members of the government should be chosen in elections ‘conducted on party lines’. We do not want to overstate the case here: It often remains true in parliamentary systems that a government’s power flows from the fact that its parliamentary supporters have been returned to office by virtue of the party label they display. To this extent, membership might be said to emanate from ‘elections conducted along party lines’. Even so, if it is the case that the ‘party’ campaign is in reality becoming ever more nearly a personal campaign focusing on the qualities of the leader, and if those qualities are becoming increasingly salient in the minds of voters, then it is surely reasonable to question the strict applicability of this tenet of the party government model. In brief, candidate-centred elections undermine the party government thesis.

De facto presidentialization also threatens Katz’s second criterion, that government policy should emanate from within parties (or coalitions of parties). A strict rendering
of such a condition implies that governments should stick firmly to pre-election programmes which have been fully debated and endorsed by the party (or parties). Indeed, (parts of) the governmental programme may even have originated with the sub-leadership strata of the party. In either case, a meaningful system of intra-party democracy must apply for such a model to hold. Yet we have said that the presidentialization of politics involves the growth of leadership autonomy from the party. In this context, such autonomy would imply independence for the leader to establish the programme unconstrained by other party actors, such as parliamentarians or activists. More subtly, it may also be consistent with a plebiscitary model of intra-party democracy, in which the leader enhances his or her independence from the sub-stratum of party activists by getting his or her programme ratified by grass-roots members or supporters.

Finally, Katz informs us that ‘positions in government must flow from support within the party rather than party positions flowing from electoral success’. This seems to imply that executive heads would only have risen to their position by virtue of a long apprenticeship within the party, and thanks to their reliance on clear support bases therein (and to which they will likely be obliged to remain accountable for their actions in government). Yet the presidentialized model of power is inconsistent with this, for we have seen that it makes primacy within the party and executive contingent mainly upon electoral success. Thus, the ‘presidential’ leader may well be able to bypass the long and painstaking process of building a power-base in the party by the sheer force of his electoral appeal: the party may cede powers to such a leader on the basis that it will benefit electorally by hanging on to this individual’s coattails, at least for as long as s/he is an asset rather than a liability in this sense. But if this happens, it
implies that position within the party, and therefore the executive, really flows from
(the prospect of) electoral success, rather than an established support base within the
party.

In short, presidentialized politics of this sort represents a serious challenge to the role
of parties in respect of the governing function. In the next section, we review the
empirical evidence that confirms that the presidentialization process is widespread in
today’s advanced industrial democracies. The factors driving these developments are
beyond the scope of this paper, but may be briefly summarized in the following terms:
we believe that the underlying trends stem from several major developments affecting
the environment in which parties and politicians now operate, at the levels of both
state and society: these include cleavage decomposition, media change, state-
restructuring and the internationalization of decision-making. Some of these factors
work primarily on the electoral and party faces of the presidentialization phenomenon
(cleavage decomposition), some on the executive face (restructuring of the state, the
internationalization of decision-making), and some impact on all three faces
simultaneously (the growth and changing structure of mass communications). These
underlying structural factors are moderated or amplified through short-term
contingent factors such as political contexts and leadership personality. A fuller
account of this can be found in Poguntke and Webb (2005a: 13-17; Webb and

The empirical evidence
The model of de facto presidentialization outlined above encompasses change in three
distinct political arenas or faces: the executive of the state, the party, and the
electorate. In order to describe the changes this challenge represents to party government it is necessary to take our discussion into all three arenas.

*The electoral process: candidate-centred or party-centred?*

With respect to the electoral face of presidentialization, we can consider three distinct but related components. First, we have looked for evidence of a growing emphasis on leadership appeals in election campaigning. This necessitates consideration of research on political marketing and communication to see if parties have become more inclined to emphasize their leaders than hitherto. Although one could easily imagine that such evidence might be strongly contingent on the personalities and leadership styles of particular leaders, it is particularly interesting to see if candidate-centred campaigning has become too widespread and enduring in parliamentary regimes to be explained entirely in these terms. Relatedly, we need evidence that media coverage of politics focuses more on leaders than hitherto. Finally, if party campaigns and media coverage are now more leader-centred, we might reasonably expect such developments to resonate with electors, so we should look for signs that leader effects have become more significant influences on voting behaviour.

Examination of available evidence confirms that leader-centred election campaigning and media coverage are indeed much in evidence across Western democracies. Both generally appear to have been increasing, or to have started from comparatively high levels in most cases. Sweden probably represents one of the most ‘partified’ exceptions to the rule, but even here Nicholas Aylott confirms that the media focus more on party leaders, and that the parties have responded by increasing the leadership emphasis in their campaign strategies (Aylott 2005: 188-9). Very similar
findings are reported across most of the countries surveyed (Webb & Poguntke 2005: Table 15.1, 345). However, it is perhaps less certain that voters are behaving more as if they were in a presidential system, with something approaching a direct accountability relationship with their head of government. Parties still preponderate in voter assessments when it comes to parliamentary elections, though this is clearly not so true of presidential elections or in the case of Israel’s directly elected premiers in the 1990s (Hazan 2005). Indeed, this may be the least convincing aspect of the presidentialization thesis. Even so, leader effects on voters do appear to be significant and/or increasing in 11 of the 14 cases we have examined (Webb & Poguntke 2005: Table 15.1). While none of our cases reveal evidence that direct effects on voters are strong, where change has occurred it has been mainly in the direction of growing leadership effects, and a number of observers have suggested that leaders are sometimes responsible for ‘indirect’ (but probably unmeasurable) effects on party support via their ability to shape overall party images. For instance, while there is little evidence that Tony Blair’s ‘personal vote’ contributed strongly to New Labour’s strong electoral showings in 1997 and 2001, it is to be suspected that the very positive voter evaluations the party received from that time reflected the popularity of Blair at that time. It is certainly hard to imagine that the party would have been so warmly embraced by British voters had Blair not been leader, but it is extremely difficult statistically to untangle the strict causality in the relationship between party images and leadership images (Bartle & Crewe 2002: 81).

Still, it is hard to deny that in an age of increasingly competitive elections, electorally appealing leaders may make all the difference. Undoubtedly, a large (and growing) number of voters in modern societies are less constrained by stable party loyalties,
and are thus likely to be freer to base their voting decisions on the personal and political qualities of the leading candidates; this perception encourages party strategists to respond by focussing their campaigns increasingly on leaders. Indeed, one might say that this perception of the importance of leaders is what really matters: even if leaders actually only have a modest direct effect on voting behaviour, the fact that the strategists tend to be convinced of their importance nevertheless results in campaigns which are increasingly centred on party leaders. This, in turn, furnishes leaders with additional legitimacy (and hence power), as they are increasingly able to claim a personalized mandate to lead their party. Thus, the party leadership rests less on a dominant coalition within the party than it does on the claim that it delivers the votes necessary to govern. Its increased power and autonomy is based on electoral appeal (or the promise of it), and this is a relatively precarious power base: Presidentialized party leaders are less likely to survive electoral defeats than their precursors, who were safely entrenched in their parties. Germany provides a clear example of this: Helmut Kohl was deeply entrenched within his Christian Democratic party and could therefore survive an election defeat (1976) and the loss of the chancellor candidature to his Bavarian rival Franz-Josef Strauß (1980) before he was eventually elected Chancellor in 1982 (and stayed in office for 16 years). Gerhard Schröder, on the other hand, gave up his party chairmanship during a period of intra-party resistance to his neo-liberal reform agenda in 2004 which was accompanied by disastrous poll ratings. In a way, he has taken the presidentialization of party government to its logical conclusion and in fact no longer attempts to lead the party. Rather, he seeks to dominate it through his executive office - and through repeated threats of resignation. The CDU has moved in the same direction in that the question of who is going to be the next Chancellor-candidate is debated with close attention to
the poll ratings of potential candidates. Furthermore, party leader Angela Merkel’s position rests primarily on support of the party’s rank-and-file while she cannot be certain to control a dominant coalition of power-brokers within the party. (Poguntke 2005).

*Government programmes: Party policy or leader’s policy?*

The second criterion of party government is that government policy should emanate from within parties (or coalitions of parties). On the face of it, government policy is party policy under the party government model. Across the democratic world, the election manifestos that outline party proposals for action if they should form a government after an election are usually taken seriously within the parties and by external commentators. It is widely assumed that these manifestos provide an accurate impression of what parties will actually do in office, and research has found ‘a remarkably high congruence between the themes stressed in party election programs and the subsequent policies enacted by parties that get into government (Klingemann et al 1994: 268). But an important question nevertheless arises: to what extent is the manifesto authentically a statement of *party* policy, as opposed to the personal programme of the leader? One might further ask how far the decision-making of the political executive more generally reflects a pattern of leadership-domination, as opposed to one in which the leader is constrained by his or her party colleagues. While the first of these issues requires us to consider the question of intra-party democracy (the party face of the presidentialization phenomenon, as it were), the second necessitates an examination of the government itself (the executive face).
Power within the party might be thought of as the capacity of leaders to get the party to do as they want, while the leader’s autonomy from the party can be thought of as the ability to ignore or bypass the party altogether. With respect to policy-making, these things require us to focus on rule changes which give leaders more formal power, the growth of the leaders’ offices in terms of staff or other resources, and the use of plebiscitary modes of political communication and mobilization vis-à-vis the grassroots, as a means of bypassing party activists. These are all ways in which leaders might enhance their capacity to forge programmes independently of their parties.

Previous research has tended to conclude that policy is largely the preserve of the leadership, even when matters of candidate-selection reside with sub-strata within parties (Scarrow et al 2000). Dean Jaensch explains this succinctly in regard to the example of the Australian Liberal Party: ‘The organisation’s role is to raise funds, pre-select candidates, campaign, constantly monitor the platform of the party, and to provide every possible support for the party in parliament. Its role is not to make policy, nor to direct members of parliament’ (Jaensch 1994: 128). Overall, the literature (e.g. Blondel and Cotta 1996; Budge et al. 1987) and feedback from academic specialists confirm the leadership’s domination of policy-making. Generally, the final determination of manifesto content is down the leadership and a small group coterie surrounding it. The leadership draws up the programme, based in part on underlying party ideology, but also on its own interpretation of what should sell well to voters. Often the party’s pollsters and marketing consultants provide input into this process, but often are answerable to the leadership, and are therefore a resource of it.
This does not mean that the leadership enjoys carte blanche in drawing up the election programme. But party leaders will often be able to use the opportunity provided by an election to emphasize certain policies which they believe will fare well with the voters, and to de-emphasize those policies which might prove electorally damaging or embarrassing (Budge and Farlie 1983). Where democratization of the policy-making process does seem apparent, this usually relates only to the development of broad policy principles which the leadership may either overlook, or at least do the detailed policy work on. For instance, in Norway the practice is that the parties take a year to deliberate on the election program. The grassroots members are consulted and the draft is debated by party conference, but for the most part the leadership tends to get its way on the main specific policies (Svåsand et al. 1997: 106). Moreover, one should not lose sight of Peter Mair’s well known paradox that empowering the grass-roots in matters of candidate-selection can be an effective way of by-passing the activist office-holders in parties. As he says:

[I]t is not the party congress or the middle-level elite, or the activists, who are being empowered, but rather the ‘ordinary’ members, who are at once more docile and more likely to endorse the policies (and candidates) proposed by the party leadership. . .the activist layer inside the party, the traditionally more troublesome layer, becomes marginalized. . . in contrast to the activists, these ordinary and often disaggregated members are not very likely to mount a serious challenge against the positions adopted by the leadership (Mair 1994: 16).
Contributors to Poguntke and Webb (2005a) have recently reasserted the general argument about the control leaders have over policy: none of the country-experts doubts that the leaders of (potentially) governing parties have enjoyed a growth in intra-party power and/or autonomy, or that these were already well-developed features of party life at the start of the period analysed and have remained so. Even in a heavily partified polity like Sweden, Aylott concedes that ‘as elsewhere in Europe, party elites have grown increasingly dominant’ (Aylott 2005: 184). This reflects the erosion of the traditional link between the dominant Social Democrats and the trade unions. This organic link lay at the heart of party power in Sweden throughout much of the twentieth century, but its weakening has created greater scope for the autonomy of the individual leader. Of course, the Swedish Social Democrats are not unique in loosening their ties to external collateral organizations in order to expand their leaders’ room for manoeuvre (Poguntke 2000: 51). Apart from such (relatively rare) cases where changes are formally enshrined, the social anchorage of political parties has been eroded across the board because collateral organizations have tended to become internally more pluralistic (Poguntke 2002: 59). As a result, party leaders are less constrained when (re)positioning their parties in order to establish electoral advantage.

Arguably, an equally strong push towards more power and autonomy for party leaders is often associated with parties entering national governments. The example of the German Greens is instructive here: As they moved into national government organizational reforms were implemented which were aimed at improving the steering capacity of the party leadership (Poguntke 2001, Rüdig 2002). Yet, the most
significant development was quite unrelated to party rules and regulations. The ‘unofficial’ party leader and Foreign Secretary Joschka Fischer gained paramount influence over the party and could almost single-handedly push through major policy changes, most notably the decision to approve of German military involvement in Kosovo.

The relevance of governing potential and incumbency warns us, however, against assuming a uniform trend. In countries with highly fragmented party systems (like Denmark), large parties will experience stronger presidentializing tendencies than smaller parties, and our country experts have alluded to these differences. Of course, the presidentialization of party politics is a competitive phenomenon and the success of highly presidentialized parties such as Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia puts all major competitors under pressure to adapt (Calise 2005).

*The executive face*

What evidence is there of a shift in intra-executive power to the benefit of the head of government, accompanied by signs of growing executive autonomy from his or her party? Note that the latter development does not refer to the leader’s growing autonomy from intra-party power-holders in respect of issues of party management and policy-making: the latter should properly be considered an aspect of the party face, which we have already discussed. Here, we are concerned with the leader’s autonomy from party in respect of the business of the executive of the state (for instance, over government formation and portfolio allocation); thus, it only refers to the leaders of governing parties. This is one of the most common ways in which the adjective ‘presidential’ is used as a loose analogy in the context of parliamentary
regimes, and is well illustrated by references to the ‘presidential leadership styles’ of premiers such as Thatcher, Blair or Berlusconi.

Of course, the ‘presidential-style’ domination of the political executive by leaders such as these is often explained by short-term contingent factors, such as the size and cohesion of the parliamentary support on which they can draw, their current standing with the electorate, their personalities, and the sheer and inevitably unpredictable impact of ‘events’. Indeed, no observer of British politics since 1979 could reasonably deny that each of these contingent factors hugely conditioned the nature of prime ministerial leadership offered by Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair, respectively. Contingent factors of this nature constrain and shape executive leadership in all types of democratic regime, even presidential and semi-presidential ones. True, the US President cannot be fatally weakened by rebellious members of the Cabinet, and neither can he be deprived of his office through losing a majority in Congress, but the power to realize his legislative programme can be seriously undermined. Sergio Fabbrini (2005: 330) reports that ‘the enormous personal power of the President does not necessarily enable him to achieve his desired policy outcomes, unless external factors, like a national or international crisis, furnish an opportunity to impose his own agenda and leadership on the other domestic institutions (and Congress in particular). Thus, Presidents can be forced by circumstance to govern through ad hoc coalitions in Congress or by using their public appeal to ‘force their will’ upon the legislature, the latter being a favoured tactic of ‘the Great Communicator’, Ronald Reagan.
This reminds us that the presidentialization of the executive face does not always coincide with increased legislative power. First and foremost, it implies a reduction of party political influence on executive leadership. Presidentialized chief executives, whether presidents or prime ministers, tend to govern past their parties rather than through them - even if this undermines their chances of realizing their original legislative agenda.

Thus, we may usefully speak of ‘contingent presidentialization’ of the executive – the leader’s domination of the political executive through the impact of short-term factors. This phenomenon should certainly not be underestimated, but of greater interest are the underlying long-term developments which enhance the potential of the chief executive office of the state for strong leadership, even if contingent influences do not necessarily enable an incumbent to fully realize it in the short-term. Such enduring developments might be referred to as ‘structural presidentialization’, and these are indicated in a variety of ways, including: attempts to reorganize government so as to enhance the resources or strategic coordinating capacity available to the leader; signs of reduced opportunities for collective decision-making within the executive (for instance, reduced frequency or length of Cabinet meetings); the growth of bilateral decision-making processes involving the chief executive and individual ministers to the exclusion of the Cabinet collectively; and a tendency to promote non-party technocrats or politicians lacking distinctive party power bases. To be sure, some of the these phenomena may also contain an element of contingency. The frequency of cabinet meetings or the growth of bilateral decision-making, for example, can be influenced by a specific leadership style. However, if we can show...
that we see sustained and consistent trends it is safe to assume a substantial structural element in such developments.

In almost every case we have reviewed, leaders’ power resources and autonomy within national political executives appear to have increased and/or were already at a high level (compared to other countries with party government) at the outset of the period analysed (Webb & Poguntke 2005: Table 15.1). This is not to deny that parties and parliaments remain important actors, especially in parliamentary systems with strong traditions of party government, such as Sweden. But even in multi-party systems where coalitional and consensus models of politics are the norm, it is fascinating to observe that premiers have apparently often become more ‘presidential’. In the Low Countries, for example, Stefaan Fiers and André Krouwel (2005: 128) tell us that ‘within the last two decades, party leaders and Prime Ministers alike, both in Belgium and the Netherlands, acquired more prominent and powerful positions, transforming these consensus democracies into a kind of ‘presidentialized’ parliamentary systems’. Moreover, comparable developments are also apparent in the case of presidential or semi-presidential regimes (Webb and Poguntke 2005: 341-3). In majoritarian systems, such as the UK, the growth of the Prime Minister’s underlying structural power within the executive has been even more notable. Indeed, this trend has been steadily growing over several decades, if not longer, but has been particularly associated with the premierships of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair (Foley 2000; Heffernan and Webb 2005).

It should be said that none of the foregoing analysis is meant to suggest that the party colleagues of a political leader lack means by which to constrain him or her.
Individual ministers inevitably retain a degree of individual departmental power, especially within parliamentary systems, and particularly perhaps within consensus democracies. Cabinet colleagues and backbench parliamentarians can resist prime ministerial domination when the contingent fortunes of political life – such as party or prime ministerial popularity in the opinion polls – run against the premier. In rather different ways, Tony Blair’s immediate predecessors as British prime minister (Thatcher and Major) discovered this, and at the time of writing there are signs that Blair himself faces greater intra-party resistance than previously in his premiership.

The formal rules and conventions of the regime do impact significantly on leaders. However, our point is that the underlying capacity for personal domination of the executive and party has been structurally enhanced in most of Western democracies. In short, while parties remain significant constraints in most countries, personal authority over the executive by premiers and presidents has become more prevalent. In conjunction with the evidence of growing power over or autonomy from party which we have reviewed, this suggest that leaders now often have considerable scope for governing past their own party.

**The route to the top: Candidate-centred or party-defined?**

Katz’s final criterion of party government is that positions in government should flow from support within the party rather than party positions flowing from electoral success. In other words, the leader should be truly a creature of the party – someone who has served a lengthy apprenticeship in the party and risen to prominence on the back of significant bases of political support which they have managed to cultivate within it. The ‘presidential’ alternative to this would be the individual of either relatively limited party experience or peripheral intra-party standing, who has
bypassed the usual party processes to some extent, rising to the top by virtue of his
direct personal appeal to the electorate. Such an individual is therefore not so
dependent for his position on party support bases, and we may assume that this
enables him to act in a way that is relatively autonomous of the party when he
becomes leader. Equally, however, he may find that he lacks a solid support within
the party when his political – especially electoral – fortunes begin to wane.

It is not easy to get directly at telling evidence concerning the way in which de facto
presidentialization bears on this criterion of party government, but essentially we are
looking for one or both of two things: first, the use of direct voter primaries to select
their leaders, or failing that, mass membership ballots to decide the leader, since the
latter method bypasses parliamentary elites, party officials and activists, and
establishes something often closely akin to a direct relationship with the electorate at
large. And second, evidence that even where voter primaries or membership ballots
do not come into the reckoning, the leader’s rise to prominence has nevertheless been
determined primarily by his or her (supposed) electoral appeal.

In order to gauge the first of these types of evidence, we are obliged to turn to the
major parties’ leadership-selection procedures. In parliamentary systems, the selection
of leaders has generally been the preserve either of parliamentarians or of party
congresses. Either way, leaders who emerge from such procedures are essentially
party creatures, for they are obliged to forge coalitions of support either among
parliamentarians or sub-strata of party officials and activists. However, it is
interesting to note that even in parliamentary systems, parties are starting to give
significant roles in the leadership-election procedure to grass-roots members. From
the perspective of the leadership, there are two possible motives for this. One essentially follows the logic of Mair’s paradox, to which we have already alluded: a leadership which bypasses the activists, officials and parliamentarians in order to obtain its mandate is not thereafter accountable to these party strata; nominally, it is responsible to the grass-roost members or ordinary voters that elected it, but since we know that most of these individuals are inactive, this effectively hands the new leader considerable freedom of manoeuvre within the party (and perhaps executive). The second reason for handing the choice to the mass membership or voters is to find a leader who, by definition, has some kind of mass appeal; thus, the electoral imperative is placed front and centre of the criteria by which the leadership is selected. The implicit consideration at play here is that ‘ordinary’ members and voters have different ideological perspectives and motivations to the activist stratum of a party, and that it is therefore vital for vote-seeking parties not to be driven by this layer of the organization (May 1973).

In the UK, for instance, each of the major nationwide party political organizations has relaxed its longstanding tradition of leadership selection by parliamentary elites to find some kind of role for grass-roots dues-paying members. The first significant British party to do so was the old Social Democratic Party in the early 1980s; its successor, the Liberal Democrats, adopted the same practice of leadership election by the mass membership in 1988. In the 1990s, the Labour Party gave a direct vote to its individual members (though these votes only count as one-third of all those cast in the party’s ‘electoral college’). After its electoral cataclysm of May 1997, the Conservative Party decided to introduce a direct membership ballot as the second and decisive stage of leadership contests (Conservative Party 1998). Moreover, there are
several other party systems which have demonstrated clear trends towards membership-selection of leaders in the 1990s, including those of Belgium, Canada and France. In the USA, of course, popular participation in leadership selection might be said to go even further, at least, in the context of the ‘presidential parties’, since changes in party rules and state election laws generated a major increase in the role of primary election voters in deciding the major parties’ presidential nominees after 1968 (Katz and Kolodny 1994: 36). Overall, Scarrow et al (2000: 143) report that some 19 out of 84 parties (23 per cent) they surveyed in 16 democracies gave ordinary party members or voters the role of choosing their leaders.

This is an interesting development, but it only appears to account for a minority of parties. Does this mean that the route to the top is still primarily ‘party-defined’ rather than ‘candidate-centred’? Not necessarily. Even in parliamentary systems where leaders are chosen by party conferences or parliamentarians, the principal criterion by which the prospective candidates are judged may prove to be electoral. Do those charged with the responsibility of selecting the leader make their decision largely on the basis of the question: ‘what are the likely electoral benefits the various candidates can bring to our party?’ To the extent that they appear to do so, the implication is that the leader thus chosen should be given considerable latitude to establish the electoral strategy he or she judges to be most fitting; if and when this leader appears to fail, however, it follows that they may be dispensed with by the party, and replaced by an alternative with a better electoral prospects.

What evidence is there to suggest that leaders are primarily chosen for electoral motives? It is hard to uncover direct evidence of this kind, although there are certainly
examples of parties which appear to have held thoughts electoral advantage uppermost in their thoughts when choosing a new leader. The British Labour Party could well be said to constitute an obvious example when, in 1994, the more youthful but more marketable Tony Blair was raised to the leadership ahead of more senior colleagues such as Gordon Brown. That he prevailed over his rivals was almost entirely down to the perception of many commentators (and voters in the party’s electoral college) that Blair was the candidate most likely to appeal to broad sections of the electorate. To date, this judgement appears to have been borne out by Blair’s electoral record. The key point from our perspective, however, is that Blair owed his meteoric rise to the leadership to the feeling of many that he could bring the party what it so desperately craved after nearly two decades in opposition – electoral success. When he did indeed fulfil these expectations in 1997, and again in 2001, he was able to assert an unprecedented degree of personal power within government autonomy from his party, largely because of the sense that he had a personal mandate from the electorate.

Italy, too, presents an interesting example – not only in the very clear-cut case of Forza Italia, a ‘personal party’ forged to sustain the late-flowering political career of Silvio Berlusconi, but also in the instance when the centre-left Ulivo alliance chose Francesco Rutelli as its prime ministerial candidate for the 2001 general election ahead of the incumbent prime minister, Giuliano Amato (Calise 2005: 101). Overall, the significance of electoral appeal can be directly identified or inferred in 10 of the cases covered in the Poguntke and Webb volume: UK, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Portugal, Israel and USA. Note that we are not suggesting that this was the primary consideration for all parties in each of these countries, but
that it seems to have been a factor in some cases, occasionally an important one, and sometimes one which has grown in importance over time.

**Presidentialization and the theory of party government**

The party leadership is increasingly at the heart of everything the modern electoral-professional party does (Panebianco 1982), and this has become a key feature of contemporary party politics. Such predominance inevitably grants the leadership power, but only provided it is able to deliver what the party wants, principally electoral popularity and policy success. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that party leaders play an ever more prominent role in governing and electioneering.

Specifically, we have observed three interrelated developments. First, election campaigns across advanced industrial democracies have tended to become more candidate-centred, with parties offering leaders greater prominence in election campaigns, and the media devoting them greater attention. Second, there is widespread evidence that major party leaders are well-placed to act autonomously of their parties in developing party policy, and this independence has very likely grown over the past decade or two, overall. While leaders’ power can fluctuate according to a variety of short-term contingencies, the general trend has been towards more personalized power and responsibility. Third, we have seen that, while executive leadership contenders in parliamentary systems still require some kind of initial support bases within their respective parties, their broader electoral appeal is a significant factor in determining their chances of gaining – and retaining – the leadership. Within presidential and semi-presidential systems, this factor is yet more
prominent, of course. In addition, there has clearly been a trend towards the selection of leaders either by direct voter primaries or grass-roots membership elections. Both of these developments help bestow leaders with a personal mandate, thereby enhancing their autonomy from party and within the executive.

We must not, of course, ever lose sight of the fact that de facto presidentialization has, in most cases, occurred without major formal-constitutional changes that might have altered the institutional design of parliamentary systems. The impact of such institutional and historical structures inevitably continue to be felt. In particular, parliamentary parties and cabinets can, under certain circumstances, strike back at individual leaders, and occasionally knock them off their elevated political perches. Even so, the changes identified in this paper are in a sense mutually consistent and reinforcing. These changes endow leaders with enhanced intra-party power resources and autonomy, provide them with greater structural resources within the political executive, and facilitate a more pronounced personalization of governmental and electoral processes. Taken together they imply that politics in democratic societies have come to operate according to a logic which more closely echoes the inherent logic of presidential systems than was hitherto the case, thereby presenting a clear challenge to established traditions of party government.

**Implications for democratic theory**

What does the challenge to party government theory posed by the presidentialization phenomenon imply for democratic theory? The answer, of course, rather depends on exactly what one means by ‘democracy’. For instance, if we approach it from the perspective of ‘communitarian’, ‘participatory’ or ‘deliberative’ models of
democracy, it appears clearly pathological. But then again, so does party government itself, or any kind of elitist representative democracy.¹ In a sense, therefore, the issue of the demise of party government is likely to be one that leaves advocates of these fundamentalist visions of engagement democracy somewhat indifferent.

From a representative democrat’s point of view, however, the erosion of party government sounds like bad news for democracy, since it is orthodox to regard parties as a crucial mechanism of democratic linkage and functioning. The litany of functions imputed to parties is very well known, as is the notion that parties are under pressure in respect of some of these roles. In brief, party links with society have been weakened and the consequently they have faced pronounced challenges in respect of their representative and communication functions. But parties remain particularly important to processes of aggregation (Lawson and Poguntke 2004), political recruitment and governance, and have adapted organizationally to the needs of modern communication, often sustaining themselves on the back of their continued centrality to the governing process (Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Webb et al 2002; Gunther et al 2002; Webb Forthcoming). However, if such crucial mechanisms of democratic governance are weakened by the presidentialization phenomenon, is this not profoundly damaging for representative democracy itself?

Not necessarily, for two reasons. One is because, clearly, even a purely presidentialized model of politics is theoretically compatible with the tenets of representative democracy; and the other is because we are not in any case claiming that the de facto presidentialization we have observed across the democratic world

¹ Excluding, perhaps, Ian Budge’s novel proposals for a marriage of party government and referendum democracy (Budge 1996).
amounts to a purely individual-centred form of politics; rather, the empirical reality is a hybrid between partified and presidentialized modes of governance. If one imagines a continuum between partified and presidentialized forms of politics, then our view is that many of the world’s democracies have travelled along this continuum in the direction of presidentialization, without necessarily reaching the polar extreme. Again, we would regard such a system as compatible with representative democracy, although it might throw up issues concerning chains of accountability. Let us look at these arguments more closely.

If we consider representative democracy, parties play a vital role in ensuring a degree of popular control and accountability over the state (Ware 1987: 11-12). The elitist variant of this argument (Schumpeter 1942) demands little more of democracy than the periodic capacity of the electorate to remove leaders in the context of a choice between rival (teams of) governors. This seems perfectly compatible with presidentialized forms of leadership. Indeed, parties are not even strictly necessary to this model, though neither are they incompatible with it.

Other variants of ‘popular control’ democracy may also be compatible with presidentialization, though less straightforwardly. Schattschneider (1942) argues that parties can operate as mechanisms of popular choice, while emphasizing the need for three particular conditions to be met. First, there must be a connection between the competing programmes put before the electorate and the policies a government implements. There is no obvious reason why presidentialized governments should be less capable of fulfilling this requirement than partified governments. Second, if parties are to be mechanisms of popular control, then Schattschneider suggests that
they themselves should be internally democratic. This is interesting, for the presidentialization phenomenon clearly suggests that parties have become more top-down over time. This does not mean that the leader is rendered unaccountable. Instead, as we have observed, the leader becomes directly accountable to the party grassroots, rather than to parliamentarians or other party strata. To labour the point, a ‘presidentialized’ leader who disappoints his or her followers may actually be more vulnerable to removal than in the past. Thus, despite the latitude that might be granted to modern leaders in office, they may be less able to rely upon the loyalties of a party support base. In this way, presidentialization might actually be regarded as enhancing the accountability of leaders.

On the other hand, the emergence of new lines of accountability directly from leaders to extra-parliamentary party grassroots (or even to non-members in a primary system) does generate a problem for parliamentary systems. If we think in terms of principals and agents (Strøm 2000: 266-70), then in parliamentary systems the basic principals, the electors, delegate certain powers to their parliamentary representatives, who delegate in turn to a prime minister and government. The members of the executive are then formally accountable to the legislature. Political parties are extremely useful in facilitating this chain of delegation and accountability in parliamentary systems, for of course the executive must always retain the confidence of the legislature – that is, of its party supporters in parliament. As Aylott (2005: 178) points out, parties may be thought of as helping ‘principals at each stage of the chain of delegation to overcome agency problems – in other words, they reduce the agent’s scope for pursuing its own interests above those of the principal’. While we agree that this requires a prime minister to be more accountable to his party than a presidential candidate is to his
party in a presidential system, we would not necessarily agree with Wolfgang Müller’s view that (2000: 317-19), a prime minister is required to be accountable to the extra-parliamentary organization. Rather, as RT McKenzie (1982) has forcefully argued, the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty dictates that heads of political executives have a primary duty of accountability to legislatures – but not to extra-parliamentary parties. The problem in this is that de facto presidentialization implies that, while a prime minister remains formally accountable to the legislature, the personal mandate which he or she has gained from the electorate makes it politically (if not formally) harder for parliamentary parties to rein-in the head of the executive. This is precisely why the leader enjoys enhanced autonomy from party. But it does seem to imply that parliament becomes less effective in holding the (presidentialized) executive to account.

To return to Schattschneider, he also argues that parties help to ensure popular control by enjoying sufficient control of the state in order to implement their policies once in power. Again, the presidentialization phenomenon is pertinent, in as much as it is, we would contend, partly driven by the attempt of political leaders to generate greater ‘steering capacity’ over the state. The long-term growth of the state has undoubtedly led to greater bureaucratic complexity and organizational specialization. Peters et al (2000: 8) describe this in terms of the twin processes of institutional differentiation (‘increasing the organizational types through which government works’) and institutional pluralization (‘increasing numbers of the same type of organization’). The growing complexity and competence of the state has generated a variety of responses by leaders seeking to enhance their control of increasingly fragmented
organizational networks, some of which would seem to be relevant to the phenomenon of presidentialization, including:

- The centralization of power as the core executive seeks to coordinate the ‘institutional fragments’ of the state.
- The undermining of collective cabinet responsibility, as the trend towards ‘sectorized’ policy-making brings more bilateral contacts between relevant ministers and the head of the core executive.

Paradoxically, these processes may well go hand in hand with other initiatives designed to restructure the state by divesting the executive of power, for instance, through privatizing or hiving-off responsibilities to agencies. Thus, strategies conducive to the presidentialization of politics may be compatible with the sort of ‘hollowing-out’ strategies which governments have sometimes pursued in order to overcome problems of ‘ungovernability’. Where this happens, the core executive attempts to reduce the scope of its direct responsibility for government, while enhancing its coordinating power in the domain which it continues to regard as strategically critical. Whatever the precise approach:

There is general agreement that over the last thirty to forty years there has been a steady movement towards the reinforcement of the political core executive in most advanced industrial countries and, that within the core executive, there has been an increasing centralization of authority around the person of the chief executive - president, prime minister, or both (Peters et al 2000: 7).
In short, presidentialization may actually enhance the capacity of elected leaders to fulfil Schattschneider’s final criterion of democratic popular control – control of the state. Ironically, he regards this as part and parcel of the model of party government, though on reflection this, and indeed his first criterion (that there should be a connection between electoral programmes and government action) are perhaps better understood as elements of representative democracy in general, rather than of party government per se.

Overall, we might conclude that while the growth of leadership power and autonomy probably undermine party government, it is not so sure that they are incompatible with representative democracy per se. Presidentialized democracy can still be said to offer choice and accountability, albeit it on the basis of a relationship between electorate and political leaders which is less mediated by party than under the party government model. There is nothing about this model which necessarily runs counter to the popular choice model of representative democracy. It maintains a relationship between voters and those elected to control the state, in such a way as to render the latter accountable for their policy decisions in government. That said, the legislature may become even more inhibited in holding the presidentialized executive to account than it already is in the fused parliamentary model. Furthermore, while there may still be choice, the quality of choice may have deteriorated. The weakening of parties, which is an important concomitant of presidentialization, means a weakening of interest aggregation. Deprived of their formerly stable anchorage in society, parties increasingly collect rather than aggregate interests (Poguntke 2004: 4-5). At the same time, their leaders need to pay less attention to political programmes that are less
coherent than in the past; they are sufficiently autonomous to be able to control 
programme formulation which is then driven by electoral - or, to use a more critical 
phrase, populist – considerations, instead of flowing from a process of interest 
aggregation that could connect the actions of rulers to the preferences of the ruled in a 
systematic and coherent way. In a nutshell, the process of presidentialization is likely 
to contribute to (or even accelerate) the development of contradictory policy 
packages, and may exacerbate the danger of drifting towards populism.

This leads us to a related issue that needs to be considered. What we are talking of is 
essentially the development a (quasi-)plebiscitary model of democracy, and of course 
such models have long had their critics. Earlier, we noted that the empirical 
developments we have observed in today’s democratic polities amount to a shift 
which leaves them somewhere along the continuum between presidentialization and 
partification. However, the polar extreme of presidentialization could be susceptible 
to the claim that it carries with it the dangers which the critics of plebiscitariance have often articulated. Kornhauser’s ‘mass society’ thesis might be read as an 
illustration of such criticism, for instance. For him, ‘a mass society is a social system 
in which elites are readily accessible to influence by non-elites and non-elites are 
readily available for mobilization by elites’ (1959: 39). In other words, a mass society 
is one in which the elites are not sufficiently insulated from the influence of the 
masses and the masses, in turn, are not sufficiently insulated from elite domination. 
The plebiscitariance form of rule which emerges brings political leaders and individual 
citizens into a direct, unmediated relationship with one another, a circumstance made 
for demagogy and ultimately even the rise of dictatorship (Kornhauser 1959: 133).
It is not hard to find more recent critiques of the dangers of plebiscitary democracy, from both left- and right-wing perspectives. For an example of the former, Arthur Lipow and Patrick Seyd’s defence of party politics against plebiscitarianism is instructive (1996). For an instance of the latter, the conservative commentator and journalist Russell Kirk (1992) provided a fascinating view of the development of American democracy before his death in the mid-1990s. He was scathing about the prospects of direct democracy on a national scale, once proposed in populist vein by Ross Perot – the ‘politics of the absurd’, as he calls this ‘democratic madness’. He warned that:

…direct democracy did not function well in ancient Athens, when the whole electorate - a few thousand men - could assemble in the agora; it would function disastrously, if at all, in the United States of the 20th century, with a population of some two hundred and fifty million people. In any event, the People possessing no unanimous collective will on any question, this virtual abolition of representative government would come down to skilful manipulation of the moment's public opinion by a circle of electronic-media specialists in the service of the President: an extreme form of plebiscitary democracy. In effect, the Presidency would become a dictatorship achieved without violence and checked only by the necessity of an election every four years. How very democratic!

Conclusions

In this paper, we have outlined a model of the de facto 'presidentialization' of politics which we believe to be affecting, to some degree or other, many of the world’s most
well-established democracies, including those with parliamentary regimes. The development of more candidate-centred electoral processes tends to afford political leaders with a sense that they have earned personal mandates from voters, and this in turn helps afford them greater autonomy from their parties and greater authority within executives. Although this does not mean that parliamentary regimes have now become virtually indistinguishable from presidential systems, it does tend to undermine the party government model in a number of ways: government decisions are more clearly tied to leadership decisions rather than party policies; party still matters in electoral processes, but elections are increasingly about individual leaders in some countries; and the route to the leadership seems increasingly likely to be defined by the (perceived) electoral appeal of certain personalities.

In one sense, these developments should not matter much for the theory of representative democracy, for this is broadly compatible with either presidential or party government. However, there are two concerns; the more dramatic, but perhaps less tangible, one in the real world is that some of today’s systems will morph into such extreme versions of unmediated plebiscitary democracy that they will bring with them the attendant dangers of demagoguery and political manipulation which democratic critics have often expressed. The more subtle but realistic issue for contemporary democracy is that creeping de facto presidentialization of the sort we have identified muddies the chains of accountability associated with partified forms of parliamentarism, thereby threatening to diminish the capacity of legislatures to hold executive leaders to account.
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