



# Executive Power

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## INTRODUCTION

Executive power exists in all polities. Although ubiquitous in all countries, the concept of executive power has received remarkably little scholarly attention, if key political science handbooks are taken as the reference point. The subject is not well studied because it is difficult to define and to measure. In most studies, executive power is defined as the power of the political executive to make and influence governmental policy. Empirically, it has often coincided with political power *tout court* (Finer, 1997). In this sense, executive power can be fragmented or centralized, it can variously interact with other forms of social power and it can be channeled through more or less strong institutions (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012).

This chapter attempts to conceptualize executive power in different political regimes.<sup>1</sup> It starts with a historical review of the notion of executive power. The chapter then introduces various definitions of

executive power and advocates that executive power should be studied in context with the functioning of political institutions. The discussion paves the way to an overview of the organization of executives in authoritarian and democratic regimes. In a further step, we examine the internal structure of political executives in democratic regimes particularly in light of their linkage to political parties and legislative support. Moreover, we discuss the issue of gender representation in the context of executive power. Finally, we tackle the pressing debate on how to measure executive power.

## EXECUTIVE POWER IN A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

If one recalls the history of executive power back to Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle have probably been the most influential thinkers. While the former tried to

define the best rulers' profiles, the latter was more concerned with illustrating (normatively) how rulers should use their power. Later Roman writers extended these issues. Cicero, for example, argued that an ideal system should give wise people the chance to choose superior leaders, who govern based on goodwill and are loved by the governed themselves (Keohane, 2014: 26–30). Outside Western society, Confucius (551–479 BC) had already stressed – even before Plato – the need to lead people through specific virtues and moral qualities (Wong, 2011: 771–2). A new perspective was introduced by early Christian thinkers, who were interested in answering the question of what role governing plays in God's creation and how Christian should govern accordingly (Lunn-Rockliffe, 2011: 142). The relationship between religion and politics was also a relevant topic in the Muslim world during the medieval period of Islam (about 850–1200): some philosophers sought to reinterpret Plato and Aristotle against the Islamic law; others provided advice to leaders about ethics and the ideal government. In this regard, the most famous treaty was the *Book of Government*, written by the Persian Nizam al-Mulk in the late 11th century. Later works on executive power simply described the caliphate as the sum of the functions of the caliph. After the abolition of the caliphate in the first half of the 20th century, Islamist theorists mainly focused on Islamic ideals, rather than providing empirical accounts of governing institutions (Akhavi, 2011). The classical Hindu tradition was another example of thought where 'good' government was related to the fulfillment of a sacred law: the individual's spiritual sphere was seen as superior and government was understood as a necessary burden. An exception was Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, a text of political realism from the 4th century before Christ (Dalton, 2011: 811–12).

Because of its focus on government as it is and not government as it ought to be, Weber ([1919] 1992: 75) compared *Arthashastra* to

Machiavelli's later *The Prince*. *The Prince*'s publication (1513) can be considered a watershed for the passage from a normative to a realist study of executive power in the Western thought. 'The theme of the treatise is not guardianship or statesmanship, but the success of the individual prince in obtaining and retaining power.' According to Machiavelli, these activities may well require behaving immorally (Keohane, 2014: 30). Only between the 17th and 18th centuries was executive power explicitly connected to the issue of constitutionalism. Authors such as Locke (1632–1704), Montesquieu (1689–1755) and Rousseau (1712–78) aimed at justifying the executive as a distinct power of the state and defining how it relates with other constitutional powers. Similarly, Hamilton (about 1757–1804) discussed the specific powers of the executive in the well-known *Federalist Papers* (Keohane, 2014). In 1848, Marx and Engels connected the notion of executive power to their materialist theory of history, by asserting that in modern states the executive is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.

## EXECUTIVE POWER AND POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

When political science as an academic discipline came into being at the end of the 19th century, old institutionalism focused on executive power, with a legalistic approach in terms of leaders' formal powers in office (Helms, 2014: 196). Meanwhile, the main representatives of the Italian school of elitism (Pareto and Mosca) argued that politics is invariably about a minority who rules over a majority, irrespective of the political regime. These scholars tried to discover why executive power is always exerted by a relatively small number of individuals, citing factors such as superior personal qualities and oligarchical organizational principles (Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 2007: 820).

These contributions have been prodromal to the establishment of the modern empirical study of executive power in political science.

Over the years, it has become conventional wisdom in the discipline that politics is characterized by the search for and the exercise of power. Since this power is disputed between political actors, we can simply assert that politics essentially refers to a 'struggle for power' (Weber [1919] 1922).

A first systematic–empirical linkage between politics and power was introduced by the Chicago School of political science in the 1920s and 1930s. Its main three representatives (Catlin, Merriam and Lasswell) argued that power should be the key concept to understand politics. In this regard, Lasswell's definition of politics as 'who gets what, when, how' is the most famous expression (Lasswell, 1936). In the early 1950s, Lasswell, together with Kaplan, distinguished between influence (control over valued material or immaterial resources) and power: power, the two argued, is an exercise of influence, which modifies others' behavior through (potential) punishments or rewards. This phenomenon would denote the realm of politics (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950). Similarly, de Jouvenel (1963) depicted the core of the political as a relation between an 'instigation' (to do something) and a corresponding (positive) 'response'. Yet, other scholars have observed that it is not any form of power that denotes politics, but rather a very specific type. In his theory of social systems, Parsons (1969) stressed that only *political* power is crucial to understand politics. Easton (1953) criticized the Chicago School and proposed to connect the notion of political system precisely to the authoritative allocation of values. Finally, Sartori (1975: 132) rephrased Easton and argued that politics is about collectivized decisions, which are '(i) sovereign, (ii) without exit, and (iii) sanctionable'.

The theoretical viability of such definitions ultimately depends on how one defines the community that is affected by these

enforceable decisions. If one argues that this community is political since it is subjected to the political power itself, the conceptualization will appear tautological. If, instead, one does not define the community this way, one will conclude that other powers – for example, religious power – may also present the same characteristics. For these reasons, we assume that a sound definition of political power needs to address the very function of such power. Moreover, we argue that executive power can usually be equated to political power.

Some authors suggested that the function of political power differs from other types of social powers (Stoppino, 2001; Poggi, 2014). Political power is a stable power, which integrates a form of authority and is valid for an entire social field. For those who are part of such field, political power produces stable entitlements, whose enforcement is ultimately guaranteed by political authorities. The function of political power is thus to generate these entitlements through policies. For example, political power can provide public goods such as laws, physical protection, civil liberties and social rights.

These theoretical arguments are particularly useful for understanding executive power across time and space. The function of the political power – or, in other words, the governmental function – relies on specific authority positions, which endow rulers with the right to take binding decisions. In this sense, political executives are the central institutions that fulfill the functions of initiating, coordinating and implementing political decisions (Blondel, 2011: 866). These decisions are the outputs of the political process and are exchanged with political support from society (Easton, 1975). Executive institutions (the structural facet of the executive power) frame how power is produced and how it is exercised by political actors (the agential facet of the executive power). Thus, the way in which executive power is channeled depends on the institutional organization of political executives.

## EXECUTIVE POWER IN AUTHORITARIAN AND DEMOCRATIC REGIMES

Historically, executive power has always been concentrated. Before the birth of contemporary liberal democracies, executive power was wielded either by authoritarian governments or by relatively restricted and closed oligarchies in mutual competition. In particular, the ‘government by one’ was the rule, rather than the exception (Brooker, 2014). In the contemporary world, however, the emergence of new forms of authoritarian rule, hybrid regimes and varieties of democracies have made the picture of the extent of executive power more complex.

The power of political executives differs extensively among the different regime types. In democratic regimes, for instance, the formal institutional setting defines and limits executive actors’ room for maneuver. The exercise of executive power in democracies derives from open competition and is based on stable expectations about the rules of the game (i.e. elections and constitutional provisions). In autocratic regimes, competition is often closed, not very permeable and ultimately based on the approval of the apical actors of the regime, such as the king or the leader to be succeeded. Power dynamics within the executive and between institutions are often uncertain and fickle (Stoppino, 2001: 368–71). These general differences are strictly connected to the very legitimization bases of executives in democracies and autocracies: legal–rational in the former and traditional/charismatic/ideological in the latter (Weber, 1921; Brooker, 2014).

### *Authoritarian Regimes*

In spite of previsions about the ‘victory’ of liberal democracy against alternatives after the end of the Cold War, authoritarian executives have remained numerous. Over the past decades, the third wave of democratization (Huntington, 1991) has been counterbalanced by reverse trends of autocratization (Mechkova

et al., 2017): between 1991 and 2001, the number of countries with an authoritarian government increased from 42 to 48 (Freedom House, 2001). From a more institutional perspective, the Polity IV project (Marshall et al., 2018) has estimated that in 2017 a total of 106 countries out of 165 (64%) were characterized by (more or less full-fledged) democratic systems, whereas 36% were under some sort of autocratic rule.

Among non-democratic regimes, one can distinguish between competitive and non-competitive authoritarianisms (see Schlumberger, Chapter 42, this *Handbook*). Hybrid regimes (see Gagné and Mahé, Chapter 47, this *Handbook*) or *competitive authoritarianisms* can tend to either preserve the same institutional settings of democracies (or at least a façade) or reproduce characteristics of the other forms of non-democratic regimes. Executive power in *non-competitive authoritarianism* is basically channeled through two types of institutional settings: *personal* rule and *organizational* rule. The former implies that executive power is concentrated in the hands of ruling monarchs, military leaders or civilian dictators, whose power is hardly affected by institutional forms of checks and balances. Organizational rule refers to those cases where power is exercised by a collective organization such as the military or one ruling party (Brooker, 2014). Several sub-types exist; they differ based on how power is achieved, on the sources of legitimization and on the way of governing (Cheibub et al., 2010; Wahman et al., 2013; Geddes et al., 2014). We also find authoritarian regimes (particularly military dictatorships) in which the executive power is based on a combination of personal and organizational rule (mixed rule). Table 45.1 provides an overview of the different types of executive power in authoritarian regimes worldwide.

According to the data, the most common way to organize executive power in contemporary authoritarian regimes has been civilian personal rule (54%), followed by party-based government (23%). Overall, the figures show

**Table 45.1 Executive power in 55 authoritarian countries, 2010 (percentage of countries)**

<i>Personal rule</i>			<i>Organizational rule</i>		<i>Mixed rule</i>	
<i>Monarchic (13)</i>	<i>Military-personal</i>	<i>Civilian-personal (54)</i>	<i>Military (4)</i>	<i>One-party (23)</i>	<i>Party-military (2)</i>	<i>Party-personal-military (4)</i>
Jordan		Afghanistan	Algeria	Angola	Rwanda	Egypt
Kuwait		Armenia	Myanmar	Cambodia		Syria
Morocco		Azerbaijan		China		
Oman		Belarus		Ethiopia		
Saudi Arabia		Burkina Faso		Laos		
Swaziland		Cameroon		Mozambique		
United Arab Emir.		Central African Rep.		Namibia		
		Chad		Singapore		
		Congo		Tanzania		
		Cuba		Tunisia		
		Eritrea		Vietnam		
		Gabon		Zimbabwe		
		Gambia				
		Ivory Coast				
		Kazakhstan				
		Libya				
		Madagascar				
		Mauritania				
		North Korea				
		Russia				
		Sudan				
		Tajikistan				
		Togo				
		Turkmenistan				
		Uganda				
		Uzbekistan				
		Venezuela				
		Yemen				

Note: Iran is counted as an authoritarian regime *sui generis*.

Source: Geddes et al. (2014); Marshall et al. (2018), own elaboration. The dataset of Geddes et al. on the classification of authoritarian regimes provides information only until 2010. Countries are considered authoritarian if they scored below 6 in the democratic scale of the Polity IV dataset in 2010.

that executive power by the military is the exception: only in five countries (out of 52) was the military involved (10%). This number is even lower than that of countries with monarchic rule (13%). Thus, the data confirm the trend currently observed toward more civilian-oriented autocratic leadership where executive power is basically in the hands of one person.

### **Democratic Regimes**

Contrary to authoritarian regimes, democracies are based on the principle of inclusive political

representation (see Schmitter, Chapter 43, this *Handbook*). In order to transfer individual political demands into collective interest, all democracies have constitutionally introduced free election. By voting for individual politicians or political parties, citizens (principals) delegate executive political leaders (agents). These leaders in turn become accountable to their voters when it comes to implementing governmental policy (Strøm, 2003; Samuels and Shugart, 2010). The ‘chain of democratic delegation and accountability’ exists in all parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential democracies.

In parliamentary and presidential systems, the executive power derives from the relation between voters and the executive branch. Yet, the origin of executive authority differs in the two types of liberal democracies. In *parliamentary democracies* we find a ‘fused power system’ where voters elect a legislature, which in turn chooses (directly or indirectly) the cabinet, which consists of a prime minister and her ministers. The cabinet is (collectively) accountable to the (majority of the) legislature, which can withdraw its confidence toward the executive power. The head of state has a merely ceremonial role and can be either a monarch or a president. Clear-cut examples are Germany, Japan and the UK. On the other hand, *presidential democracies* are defined by a ‘separated power system’ where the executive cannot dissolve and is not accountable to the legislature (Samuels and Shugart, 2010: 27). The presidential system is more likely to be conducive to gridlocks between the president and the legislature, thus undermining presidential freedom of action in certain situations (Blondel, 2011: 867). Furthermore, in presidential regimes, the political executive is monocratic, represented by a president who selects her cabinet members. Both the president and the legislature are directly elected by voters for fixed terms and the legislature can remove the president only in exceptional cases. Thus, the president is not an agent of the legislative majority but of her voters. Presidential democracies exist primarily in the United States of America and in Latin America (Blondel, 2015).

The executive power in *semi-presidential systems* differs from the one in parliamentary and presidential democracies. In semi-presidential systems, a popularly elected president coexists with a prime minister who is selected by the parliament and accountable to its majority. Since a clear-cut definition of the separation of power within this dual executive remains vague, Shugart and Carey (1992) introduced the notion of premier–presidential and presidential–parliamentary subtypes of semi-presidential systems. In premier–presidential systems, the prime minister and

her cabinet are exclusively accountable to the parliamentary majority and not to the president, while in presidential–parliamentary systems the prime minister and her cabinet are accountable to the parliamentary majority and to the president. Table 45.2 provides an overview of the executive power structure in 103 democratic countries.

The data show that parliamentary and presidential democracies exist in 60% of all countries under observation while semi-presidential systems are only present in 34% of all countries, with a clear majority of cases falling in the premier–presidential category (74%). Furthermore, the monarchical form of parliamentary systems is still in existence: 17 out of 30 parliamentary countries still have a monarch as (ceremonial) head of state. Finally, mixed executive power is only presented in a few countries.

How executive power is distributed and organized in both regime types has important implications for how executive institutions are internally structured. In this regard, democracies display more complexity than authoritarian regimes. In the following sections, we therefore focus only on the power dynamics of political executives in democratic countries. Moreover, we only discuss executive power in the two most straightforward examples of separation of powers (i.e. presidential) and fused power (i.e. parliamentary) systems. Semi-presidentialism is considered as a mixture of both types.

## POLITICAL EXECUTIVES IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENTS

Democratic political executives are complex institutions. Several institutional bodies, offices and individuals work together and relate to one another within the executives to make the whole machine work (King, 1975). Sometimes the relationship between the various individual and collective political actors is cooperative; sometimes it is conflictual.



**Table 45.2 Executive power in 103 democratic countries, 2017 (percentage of countries)**

<i>Presidential (30)</i>	<i>Semi-presidential (34)</i>		<i>Parliamentary (30)</i>	<i>Mixed rule (6)</i>	
	<i>Premier-presidential (25)</i>	<i>President-parliamentary (9)</i>		<i>Directorial (2)</i>	<i>Others (4)</i>
Argentina	Bulgaria	Austria	Albania (R)	Suriname	Botswana
Benin	Cape Verde	[Burkina Faso]	Australia (M)	Switzerland	[Myanmar]
Bolivia	Central African Rep.	[Madagascar]	Belgium (M)		South Africa
Brazil	Croatia	[Mozambique]	Bhutan (M)		Zambia
Chile	Czech Republic	[Namibia]	Canada (M)		
Colombia	Finland	Peru	Denmark (M)		
Comoros	France	Senegal	Estonia (R)		
Costa Rica	Georgia	Sri Lanka	Germany (R)		
Cyprus	Haiti	Taiwan	Greece (R)		
Dominica Republic	Ireland		Hungary (R)		
Ecuador	Kyrgyzstan		India (R)		
El Salvador	Lithuania		Israel (R)		
Ghana	Macedonia		Italy (R)		
Guatemala	Mali		Jamaica (M)		
Guinea-Bissau	Moldova		Japan (M)		
Guyana	Mongolia		Latvia (R)		
Honduras	Montenegro		Lebanon (R)		
Indonesia	Niger		Lesotho (M)		
Kenya	Poland		Luxembourg (M)		
Liberia	Portugal		Malaysia (M)		
Malawi	Romania		Mauritius (R)		
Mexico	Serbia		Nepal (R)		
Nicaragua	Slovakia		Netherlands (M)		
Nigeria	Slovenia		New Zealand (M)		
Panama	Timor-Leste		Norway (M)		
Paraguay	[Tunisia]		Pakistan (R)		
Philippines			Solomon Islands (M)		
Sierra Leona			Spain (M)		
South Korea			Sweden (M)		
United States			Trinidad & Tobago (R)		
Uruguay			United Kingdom (M)		

*Note:* (M) means monarchy; (R) means republic.

*Source:* Elgie (2018); Marshall et al. (2018), own elaboration. Countries are considered democratic if they score from 6 to 10 in the democratic scale of the Polity IV dataset in 2017. Some countries were authoritarian in 2010 (see Table 45.1). These countries are in squared brackets.

A *presidential government* provides only a small amount of variation in terms of how the executive power is wielded (Müller, 2017). Presidential governments are openly hierarchical. The president, who is directly elected by the voters, is the most powerful figure of the executive. She selects the members of the executive based on her will and ministers are subordinated and responsible to her (Blondel, 2004: 285). A key characteristic of many presidential systems is that executive members are loosely connected to

one another: ‘the president may not have ... a close relationship with at least a number of them, although some of the positions [... are] filled by the president with those ... who are rewarded for their help, in particular during electoral campaign’ (Blondel, 2011: 864). Thus, presidential executives invariably function according to a model of government in which ‘the president is sovereign’ within the executive. Presidential political power is predominantly based on a list of formal constitutional prerogatives. Since the formal

constitutional power of presidents varies across countries, the executive power of presidents differs between countries (see below). Latin American presidents are, for example, constitutionally stronger and therefore more powerful than the president of the United States (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997).

The formal and informal organization of executives in the *parliamentary government* is fundamentally different to that in presidential systems. As stressed by Blondel (2004: 285), in parliamentary – or cabinet – systems, the chief executive (i.e. the prime minister) is formally embedded in a collegial context, meaning that she is nothing more than a *primus inter pares*. Ministers are also supposed to participate together in the decision-making process. From a principal–agent perspective, they are both agents of the cabinet and principals of their own ministry (Andeweg, 2000). Irrespective of countries' idiosyncrasies, the highest echelon of the executive always comprises the prime minister and a number of heads of department, who form the cabinet. Junior ministers too are usually appointed, but they are hierarchically below the minister of their sector of competence (Barbieri and Vercesi, 2013). The principle of 'collective responsibility' binds cabinet members, by stating that all of them have to adapt to cabinet decisions. If these egalitarian principles are valid on paper, this does not normally apply in reality: they 'are markedly eroded ... in nearly all the countries [... and often] the cabinet ratifies decisions ... *de facto* delegated to individual ministers ... groups of ministers sitting in committee ... or to the prime minister and some of the ministers' (Blondel, 2004: 286).

The comparative literature on cabinet decision-making in parliamentary systems has introduced a few types of government, which account for these variations (Vercesi, 2020). *Cabinet government* illustrates, for instance, the ideal-type of egalitarian and collective executive power as described above. In *ministerial government*, on the other hand, ministers have the power to decide over

policies within their own jurisdiction, without colleagues' interference. Other types of government highlight issues such as the fragmentation of the decision-making process, the hierarchical nature of intra-cabinet dynamics or the impact of bureaucracy over the cabinet (Elgie, 1997). Perhaps the most controversially discussed model is the *prime ministerial government*, where the prime minister exercises a sort of monocratic power within cabinet by setting the agenda and controlling ministers' actions (Rhodes, 1995; Strangio et al., 2013).

The idea of an increasing executive power of prime ministers is also included in the concept of the 'presidentialization of politics' set out by Poguntke and Webb (2005). According to them, the power of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies has increased in three political arenas: in the prime ministerial office (executive face); in relation to their own party (party face); and in the direct impact of prime ministers on electoral campaigns (electoral face). In addition, Rhodes (2008: 328) claims that the central role of prime ministers in cabinet varies and depends on circumstances and policy areas. Prime ministers can be even stronger than presidents, if they are able to control their own party and a parliamentary majority.

## EXECUTIVE POWER, POLITICAL PARTIES AND LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT

In modern democracies parties play a crucial role in the recruitment, support and management of executives. In this context, Müller (2017) suggested that the political capacity of democratic executives and their way of functioning are deeply affected by their autonomy vis-à-vis parties as well as the partisan support they enjoy in the legislature.

A first party-related aspect which has an enormous impact on executive power is the division between unified and divided government. This distinction typically applies to



presidential (and semi-presidential) systems, although Elgie (2001) has argued that this can be applied also to parliamentary systems with two parliamentary chambers. A divided government occurs when, in one (or both) of the two legislatures' branches, the partisan majority differs from the partisan orientation of the elected president. Especially when the chief executive does not hold strong constitutional powers to force members of parliament to pass legislation (or to block it), a president's chances of getting her policy decisions into force decrease substantially. To overcome this problem, presidents can employ a range of strategies (from consensual to more conflictual) to cope with legislatures (Cox and Morgenstern, 2002).

A second party-related impact on executive power is linked to the form of party government in parliamentary democracies. In the literature, we broadly differentiate between majority and minority governments. In all democratic polities, political executives need the support of a majority in parliament in order to successfully implement their policy proposals. This is particularly true for parliamentary and semi-presidential systems, but enjoying a parliamentary party majority is also relevant for presidents who want the legislature to translate their will into laws. Müller (2017: 145–6) argued that a party's majority status in parliament increases the political power of chief executives tremendously. However, he also stated that minority governments do not necessarily have a negative effect on the power of the executives. Although majority governments tend to last longer and thereby might have long-term political power over policy decisions, minority governments are the 'policy viable' outcome in those situations where a 'core' party is important enough – either in terms of parliamentary seats or ideological position – to be included in all possible coalition alternatives (Laver and Schofield, 1990; Laver and Shepsle, 1996). Moreover, in some countries, particularly in Scandinavia, the political executive does not need a positive vote of

investiture to enter office. Rather, it survives as long as a majority does not vote against. This rule favors minority governments when parties in opposition do not reach a common agreement to find an alternative government (Bergman, 1993). Finally, minority cabinets are more likely when parties can obtain policy concessions from outside the government and when elections are decisive in determining the winner, especially when cabinet participation produces a loss of votes in the following elections (Strøm, 1990).

A further (albeit intertwined) party-related impact on executive power is based on the distinction between single-party and coalition governments in parliamentary systems. Party coalitions substantially circumscribe the freedom of political activities among members of the political executive (Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 1993). For example, a coalition government limits the power of the prime minister to control the ministers and may thereby lead to oligarchical arrangements. In single-party majority cabinets, it is easier to achieve the goals of the political executive, because the only party in government controls the majority in the parliament.<sup>2</sup> This scenario is well known in the UK, where the prime minister is the chief of the executive and at the same time the party leader. In coalition governments, however, policy decisions are the result of compromises about different policy views and goals between political parties on the one hand, and chief executives on the other. In this situation, executives face severe challenges even to their stability, in particular when the coalition parties are programmatically heterogeneous. In order to avoid governmental destabilization, coalition parties mostly employ a set of mechanisms to control one another and to make the decision-making smoother (Bergman et al., 2013). Within the political executive, coalition parties can for instance agree on appointing junior ministers who come from a different party than the minister's. These junior ministers serve as 'watch-dogs' for senior ministers, because they are

screening the policy decision-making process in single ministries (Verzichelli, 2008). Potential conflicts between coalition parties can also be reduced by proving jointly formulated coalition agreements, which ‘guide’ policy decision over the whole legislation (Andeweg and Timmermans, 2008).

### EXECUTIVE POWER AND THE ISSUE OF GENDER REPRESENTATION

In a study on female government leaders around the world, Jalalzai (2013) found a general underrepresentation of women among executive rulers. Although in some countries women seem to have (nearly) broken the glass ceiling of representation in

national ministerial posts (Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson, 2009; Annesley, 2015), the number of female presidents and prime ministers around the world has increased at a much slower pace. In late 2017, only 21 women were top leaders of the political executives. This corresponds to 11% of the available chief executive posts in the 194 national states around the world (see Table 45.3).

Table 45.3 shows a striking variation of female representation in chief executive positions across regime types, party system types and geographical areas. Among the 21 female heads of government, only one person holds a prime ministerial post in a non-democratic state. All others are chiefs of democratic governments. The majority of them are elected in parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes where political parties are important actors in

**Table 45.3 Women executives in office on December 31, 2017 by country, office, and regime**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Leader</i>	<i>Office</i>	<i>Regime (sub-)type</i>
Bangladesh	Hasina Wazed	Prime minister	Non-democracy
Chile	Bachelet	President	Presidential
Croatia	Grabar-Kitarović	President	Semi-presidential
Estonia	Kaljulaid	President	Parliamentary
Germany	Merkel	Prime minister	Parliamentary
Iceland	Jakobsdóttir	Prime minister	Semi-presidential
Liberia	Johnson Sirleaf	President	Presidential
Lithuania	Grybauskaitė	President	Semi-presidential
Malta	Coleiro Preca	President	Parliamentary
Marshall Islands	Heine	President	Democratic-other
Mauritius	Gurib	President	Parliamentary
Myanmar	San Suu Kyi	Prime minister	Democratic-other
Namibia	Kuugongelwa	Prime minister	Semi-presidential
Nepal	Bhandari	President	Parliamentary
New Zealand	Ardern	Prime minister	Parliamentary
Norway	Solberg	Prime minister	Parliamentary
Peru	Aráoz	Prime minister	Semi-presidential
Serbia	Brnabić	Prime minister	Semi-presidential
Singapore	Yacob	President	Non-democracy
Switzerland	Leuthard	President	Directorial
United Kingdom	May	Prime minister	Parliamentary

*Note:* territories under the formal rule of a third country or part of the Commonwealth are excluded. The same applies to royal heads of state.

*Sources:* See Table 45.2; Jalalzai (2018: 263), own update based on *Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership*, <https://guide2womenleaders.com/> (accessed on November 29, 2018).

daily politics. Only two women were chief executives in democratic presidential systems. Furthermore, we find ten female heads of government in European countries, four in Asia, three in Africa, two in Latin America and two in the Pacific. Finally, most women are chief executives in small states where the selection and recruitment processes to top political offices are less complex.

In a nutshell, these empirical findings indicate, first, that women have to struggle more to reach chief executive positions. Second, democratic regimes foster the selection of women into chief executive offices. Third, parliamentary and semi-presidential regimes with strong multi-party systems help women to reach chief executive positions. Fourth, women have higher chances of entering into executive office in countries run through a democratic transition. Fifth, small countries provide greater access to chief executive positions for women than do large states. Sixth, the majority of the female chief executives are located in Europe, which indicates that the level of political empowerment of women is higher in this region of the world.

## MEASURING (CHIEF) EXECUTIVE POWER

The measurement of executive power is difficult to tackle. If we define executive power as policy-making power, then the political power in democratic countries lies in the hands of the government. It is certainly true that members of parliament in presidential and parliamentary systems may exercise some influence on the policy-making. However, in reality, central political decisions are taken primarily by the chief executives rather than by the legislative chambers. This holds certainly true for the presidential systems but gradually even more so for parliamentary systems (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). Consequently, one – most prominent – way to examine executive power is to measure the

political strength of chief executives in liberal democratic systems. In this context, several diverse indexes on the political power of presidents and prime ministers have been proposed (Doyle, 2020).

The power of chief executives is usually measured by considering the formal constitutional prerogatives for presidents and prime ministers. Informal aspects of executive power have not been studied systematically because of formidable problems in their conceptualization and operationalization. First, it seems unclear what the focus of analysis should be. Are we looking for informal executive power in the definition of policy areas, in the decision-making process or in the interaction among political actors? Second, even if one of these research subjects is specified, there are still serious problems in getting reliable information about informal decision-making processes among political executives, since most decisions are taken behind closed doors. Third, the few sources of information that are available on informal executive power structures are usually eclectic and difficult to quantify, particularly under a cross-national perspective. In the following, we therefore only introduce the existing measures for the formal political power of chief executives (i.e. presidents and prime ministers).

Studies on presidentialism agree that the variety and degree of presidential power is defined differently in each country constitution. Shugart and Carey (1992) were the first to measure presidential power based on a cross-national examination of these written documents. They identified two dimensions of presidential power: legislative and non-legislative. Legislative power is conceptualized as the president's power to veto legislation, to make new laws and suspend old ones, to exclusively introduce bills, to initiate the annual budget bill and to propose referenda. Non-legislative power is defined as the president's power over cabinet formation, cabinet dismissal, the selection and de-selection of single ministers and the dissolution of

the assembly. The authors placed each item on a scale and added them together to a measure of presidential power on both dimensions in 35 countries. As a result, the authors identified world regions with strong presidential power, regions where presidents comprise great legislative power and regions with low presidential power (Shugart and Carey, 1992: 156). A few years later, Frye (1997) extended the checklist of power items to 27. One major disadvantage of this measurement is, however, that 'it does not capture the dual authority structure of semi presidentialism' (Metcalf, 2000: 667). Therefore, Metcalf suggested minor revisions of the existing checklists in order to apply the method to semi-presidential systems. Over the past two decades, major comparative studies have applied the 'constitutional approach' to operationalize the executive power of presidents.

Measuring the power of prime ministers in parliamentary systems is more difficult because constitutions of parliamentary systems vary substantially in their definition of prime ministers' powers. Furthermore, the power of prime ministers is not only dependent on constitutional prerogatives but also (and more) on their interaction with cabinet members and political parties. In a first systematic comparative assessment, Bergman et al. (2003) classified the power of prime ministers in a two-dimensional space that consists of institutional powers and power that derives from party system characteristics. The institutional power dimension is defined by nine items, most of them are related to the formal and informal behavior of prime ministers in cabinet. The party system dimension reflects the type of cabinet that exists in a given country (single-party cabinet; 'bloc' coalition cabinets; coalition cabinets in pivotal party systems). The authors applied the items of both dimensions to 17 countries and found that British and Spanish prime ministers are comparatively powerful, while prime ministers in Iceland, the Netherlands and Norway are the weakest chief executives in Europe.

A second quantitative study on prime ministerial power focuses on survey data rather than on 'objective' hard evidence. O'Malley (2007) asked 249 experts in 20 democracies to rate each prime minister on a nine-point scale about their influence over the policy outputs of the government. The findings confirm that prime ministerial power tends to be higher in countries with single-member plurality electoral systems. Furthermore, in countries with fragmented party systems and proportional electoral laws, prime ministers are less powerful.

## CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH OUTLOOKS

Executive power has been and will continue to be a prominent and widely used concept in political science. In most studies, executive power has been equated with political power, which – by its very nature – can be associated to the functioning of executive institutions in political regimes. The concept of executive power was easily applicable to countries under authoritarian rule, where political power is usually in the hands of one person. Its validity became markedly more complex in democratic societies, where political power is dispersed among many political actors. This is probably why studies on executive power in democratic regimes have been more numerous than in authoritarian regimes.

The main challenges for future research in this field consist first in examining the effect of different forms of executive powers on government performance, and second in the collection of more systematic empirical data on the different forms of executive power. The effect of executive power on governance varies, for instance, not only by the formal power of presidents and prime ministers (as described above), but also by their (rational) behavior within institutions. Future research therefore needs to examine in greater detail the individual behavior of chief executives

in decision-making processes. A behavioral measurement of executive power is surely not as objective as a formal analysis of constitutional rules, but it certainly reflects more accurately what Siaroff (2003: 303) has called the 'actual political practice'.

Furthermore, the impact of executive power on government performance depends strongly on the personality traits and the leadership styles of single presidents and prime ministers. Thus, future research on executive power has to compose more sophisticated theoretical assumptions and empirical measurements that investigate the effect of personality traits and leadership styles on the quality of governance. Future studies could, for instance, follow up the classical works on presidential personalities in the US (Barber, 2009) or on prime ministers in Europe (King, 1994) and examine under which conditions different personality and leadership styles lead to different governmental performance.

Finally, the discipline needs more comprehensive comparative data on various forms of executive power in different political regimes. So far, the literature on executive power has been characterized by a paucity of data outside Western democratic countries and Latin America. The collection of more information and data on other parts of the world, such as Asia and Africa, is a necessary condition for more global-oriented comparisons of the modes of wielding executive power and the consequences that they have on political outputs. It would be particularly useful to identify measures that can bridge the concept of executive power in parliamentary and presidential systems. The more scholars agree on a universal concept and on the measurement of executive politics, the greater will be our ability to compare and assess the practices of power in politics.

In sum, use of the concept of executive power can help to understand the functioning of political life worldwide. However, one should note that, at present, the concept of executive power remains very vague in terms of definition, empirical measurement and

impact on governmental policy. Therefore, executive power should be treated as a flexible tool, taking into account the immense complexities of the political power relationships between political actors in different political regimes.

## Notes

- 1 We exclude from our analysis both sub-national governments and supranational political organizations, such as the European Union.
- 2 This argument assumes that the party is united and not weakened by endemic factional internal conflict.

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