

Why Do the Same Political Systems Produce Different Political Outcomes Under Different Social Conditions? —A Comparative analysis Based on Variations in the Operation of France’s Semi–Presidential System

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Abstract: Political institutions are frequently employed in comparative political science research to explain political stability and governance effectiveness. However, in real-world political contexts, identical political institutions may yield outcomes that diverge from their original design intentions when situated within different social environments and contexts. This paper employs a comparative case study approach, drawing upon the frameworks of historical institutionalism and state-society relations theory. It identifies the level of social cohesion, the structure of the party system, and crisis pressure as three key social variables, and ‘left-right coalition governance’ as the key mediating mechanism, to analyse the operational differences of the French semi-presidential system under varying social conditions. In light of the above research, this paper argues that under political conditions characterised by high levels of social cohesion and a relatively concentrated party system, the French semi-presidential system contributes to the concentration of power and political stability; conversely, under conditions of heightened social division and a fragmented party system, it may exacerbate internal conflicts and undermine governance effectiveness. Political institutions do not automatically determine political outcomes; political effectiveness is highly context-dependent, and comparative politics should place greater emphasis on the social embeddedness of institutional operation.

Keywords: Comparative Politics; Semi-Presidential System; Social Conditions; Left-Right Coalition; French Politics

I. Introduction

In comparative political studies, institutional analyses are frequently conducted to explain variations in a nation’s political stability, the quality of its democracy, and the effectiveness of its governance. Some research suggests that a single institutional framework does not, in fact, automatically produce stable or consistent political

outcomes. Institutions serve as intermediaries between ‘thought and action’; whilst they are a necessary condition, they are contingent upon other necessary conditions and vary with changes in those conditions. Therefore, it cannot be simply assumed that institutions determine history.¹ Helmke and Levitsky note that a core challenge in comparative politics lies in the fact that “in most cases, similar political institutional rules produce opposite political outcomes”. If researchers fail to take informal institutions seriously, they may overlook the “most important incentives and constraints” that shape political behaviour² .

This paper analyses the semi-presidential system implemented in France from 1958 to the present day. In light of the chaos and failures of the Third and Fourth French Republics, in September 1958, then-President Charles de Gaulle reintroduced a highly centralised presidential system through a constitutional referendum to balance parliamentary power, thereby establishing France’s unique semi-presidential system. During certain periods, the semi-presidential system has sparked intense controversy and social conflict due to power struggles between the President and the government, a phenomenon that was particularly pronounced during the era of “coexistence between left and right”. Whilst the President retains key constitutional powers and a symbolic status, he must share power with a government dominated by the opposition, thereby relinquishing leadership over policy-making and day-to-day administration. This places executive power in a state of tension characterised by dual centralisation. The academic debates sparked by these contradictions in the practice of the political system have led scholars to re-examine the operational logic of the semi-presidential system under varying socio-political conditions.

This paper seeks to answer the following question through a comparative analysis of variations in the operation of France’s semi-presidential system: why does the French semi-presidential system produce different political outcomes under varying social conditions whilst maintaining a relatively stable institutional framework? It further reflects on the tendency towards ‘institutional determinism’ in institutional studies, arguing that only by examining institutions within their specific social contexts can their political effects be more accurately understood. Unlike existing research on semi-presidential systems, which often focuses on institutional typology or cross-national comparisons, the innovation of this paper lies in its intra-period comparison of political practices within the same country across different eras. This approach, whilst maintaining the constitutional text and institutional structure essentially unchanged, reveals how shifts in social conditions influence political outcomes through specific institutional mechanisms. This paper does not regard ‘left-right co-governance’ merely as an institutional anomaly or a manifestation of institutional defects, but rather analyses it as a crucial mediating mechanism linking social conditions and institutional performance, thereby addressing the shortcoming in

1Lu Peng. Institutions and Historical Determinism [J]. *Dongyue Luncong*, 2020, 41(06): 47 – 53+191. DOI: 10.15981/j.cnki.dongyueluncong.2020.06.006.

2 Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. *Informal Institutions and Comparative Politics: A Research Agenda* [M]. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012.

institutional research that has tended to overemphasise formal rules whilst neglecting the contextual circumstances of institutional operation.

II. Literature Review: Major Explanatory Approaches in Research on Semi-Presidential Systems

Existing research on semi-presidential systems and their political effects has primarily focused on institutional typology, power allocation, and the evaluation of institutional performance.

(1) Research on Semi-Presidential Systems: Institutional Types and Power Allocation

Maurice Duverger was the first to define the French Fifth Republic as a “semi-presidential system”, noting that the system possesses characteristics of both presidential and parliamentary systems: the president derives independent democratic legitimacy through direct election, whilst the government is accountable to parliament³. Subsequent research has further distinguished internal subtypes of the semi-presidential system. Elgie proposed a classification of “president-dominated” and “prime minister-dominated” semi-presidential systems, pointing out that constitutional texts do not fully determine the actual distribution of power, and that significant differences exist in power structures within political practice⁴. Samuels and Shugart’s cross-national research indicates that the relationship between the president and the prime minister is largely influenced by the structure of the party system and election results⁵.

By contrast, research on semi-presidential systems within the domestic academic community began relatively late, with early studies largely focusing on institutional introductions and normative analysis. Yang Yunjin, starting from the background of institutional formation, analysed the historical reasons for the establishment of the semi-presidential system of the Fifth Republic in France, emphasising its institutional response to the shortcomings of the parliamentary system⁶. Li Dan, drawing on the political practices of Gaullism, pointed out that the French semi-presidential system combines centralisation with instability in its institutional design, and that its operational effectiveness is highly dependent on specific political conditions. Overall, domestic research has been relatively thorough in its analysis of institutional types and the distribution of power, but it has largely focused on institutional descriptions of the French case, with comparatively limited comparative analysis of differences in institutional operation.

(2) The Contextual Dependence of Institutional Effects: A Historical Institutionalist Perspective

³ Duverger M. A new political system model: Semi-presidential government [J]. *European Journal of Political Research*, 1980, 8(2): 165–187.

⁴ Elgie R. *Semi-presidentialism: Sub-types and democratic performance* [M]. Oxford University Press (UK), 2011.

⁵ Samuels D J. Presidents, parties, and prime ministers: How the separation of powers affects party organisation and behaviour [J]. 2010.

⁶ Yang Yunjin. A Preliminary Exploration of the Reasons for the Establishment of the Semi-Presidential System in France and Its Implications [J]. *Commodities and Quality*, 2010, (SA): 22.

Addressing the limitations of research on institutional types, historical institutionalism emphasises the context-dependence of institutional outcomes. Pierson proposed the theory of path dependence, arguing that whilst early institutional choices may impose long-term constraints, the manner in which institutions operate will still adjust in response to changes in the social environment and political conditions⁷. Thelen further emphasised that institutions are not static rules, but are constantly reinterpreted and reshaped through long-term social interaction. This research approach provides an important theoretical tool for understanding why the same institution exhibits different operational outcomes in different periods⁸.

In recent years, the domestic academic community has gradually adopted a historical institutionalist perspective, engaging in discussions regarding the contextual dependence of institutional outcomes. Lu Peng points out that ‘institutional determinism’, which treats institutions as decisive variables, struggles to explain the complex changes in political practice; institutional outcomes often depend on the historical and social conditions in which they are embedded⁹. Some studies have begun to emphasise that the dynamic evolution of institutional logic should be understood in conjunction with specific historical phases and changes in social structure. However, compared to international research, domestic findings largely remain at the level of theoretical introduction, and there is still room for expansion in empirical analysis of specific institutional operating mechanisms.

(3) State–Society Relations and the Complementary Explanation of Informal Institutions

State–society relationship theory complements institutional analysis at the level of social structure. Migdal points out that state capacity is profoundly constrained by social organisational structures and the capacity for social mobilisation, and that formal institutions often require the involvement of social forces to function effectively¹⁰. Helmke and Levitsky further emphasise that informal institutions play a significant constraining role on political behaviour in many contexts. Relevant research indicates that changes in the degree of social integration and the capacity of political parties influence the actual mode of institutional operation¹¹.

Research in this field within the domestic academic community has primarily focused on issues of state capacity and social integration. Wang Shaoguang, approaching the subject from the perspective of state capacity, points out that the effectiveness of state governance is highly dependent on the mechanisms of integration between the state and society. Some studies have begun to introduce this perspective into the analysis of Western political systems, exploring the impact of social mobilisation and modes of political participation on the functioning of these systems. However, in studies of the French semi-presidential system, domestic research has largely treated

⁷ Pierson P. Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics[J]. *American Political Science Review*, 2000, 94(2): 251-267.

⁸ Thelen K. Historical institutionalism in comparative politics[J]. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2(1): 369-404.

⁹ Lu Peng. Institutions and Historical Determinism [J]. *Dongcong*, 2020, 41(06): 47–53+191. DOI: 10.15981/j.cnki.dongyueluncong.2020.06.006.

¹⁰ Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

¹¹ Helmke G, Levitsky S. Informal institutions and comparative politics: A research agenda [M]. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012.

left-right coalition governance as a special phenomenon within the system's operation, and systematic analysis of it as a mechanism of institutional operation remains relatively limited.

(4) Literature Review and Research Positioning

Existing research has provided a relatively thorough examination of the semi-presidential system from perspectives such as institutional typology, historical trajectories and state-society relations; however, explanations regarding the divergent political outcomes produced by the same system under different social conditions remain inadequate. There is still scope for further analysis of how social conditions influence the practice of the semi-presidential system through specific operational mechanisms.

A synthesis of domestic and international research reveals that, whilst foreign academia has developed a relatively mature analytical framework for the semi-presidential system, significant divergences persist between different research approaches. Institutional research emphasises the importance of constitutional design and the allocation of power, whilst historical institutionalism and the state-society relationship perspective focus more on the context-dependence of institutional operation. However, existing research still falls short in explaining how social conditions influence political outcomes through specific institutional mechanisms, particularly in situations where institutional practices undergo significant changes within the same constitutional framework.

Domestic research has accumulated substantial achievements in institutional description and normative analysis, but there remains scope for further development in providing mechanistic explanations for variations in institutional operation. In particular, within studies of the French semi-presidential system, left-right coalition governance is often viewed as an institutional anomaly or an incidental political phenomenon, rather than being systematically incorporated into the analysis of institutional operating mechanisms.

Although research on the semi-presidential system has developed a relatively systematic theoretical body, significant divergences remain between different research approaches. Scholars representing institutional research tend to explain the operational outcomes of the semi-presidential system from the perspectives of constitutional design, power allocation and institutional typology, arguing that institutional elements such as the strength of presidential power and the power to dissolve parliament are key determinants of political stability. However, such research often struggles to account for the systematic variations in the operation of the same system over extended periods, particularly when the constitutional text remains relatively stable.

By contrast, historical institutionalism and the state-society relationship perspective place greater emphasis on the contextual dependence of institutional operation, pointing out that changes in the level of social integration, the structure of the party system, and modes of social mobilisation continuously reshape institutional practices and influence political outcomes. Nevertheless, existing research largely remains at the macro level, and analysis of how social conditions influence semi-presidential practices through specific institutional mechanisms remains insufficient. In particular, within studies of the French semi-presidential system, ‘left-right co-governance’ is often viewed as an institutional anomaly or an occasional political phenomenon, rather than being systematically incorporated into the institutional mechanism for explanation.

In light of these research gaps, this paper builds upon existing scholarship by introducing social variables such as the level of social integration and the structure of the party system. It treats ‘left-right co-governance’ as a key mediating mechanism linking social conditions to political outcomes, thereby exploring the internal logic by which the French semi-presidential system produces different political consequences under varying social conditions. Compared to explanatory approaches centred on factors such as the personalities of leaders, the details of constitutional provisions, or short-term economic cycles, this paper argues that an analysis grounded in the interaction between social conditions and institutional mechanisms is more conducive to revealing the structural origins of institutional outcomes, thereby addressing the explanatory gaps in existing research.

III. Conceptual Framework

(1) Semi-Presidential System

The concept of ‘semi-presidentialism’ employed in this paper adopts the definition commonly used in comparative politics, namely that the president is elected directly by the people and possesses independent democratic legitimacy, whilst the government is accountable to parliament and executive power is shared between the president and the prime minister¹². This institutional form combines elements of both the presidential and parliamentary systems, but is not a simple compromise between the two; rather, it constitutes a dual executive power structure characterised by inherent tension. The Fifth Republic of France, analysed in this paper, is a classic example of a semi-presidential system. The concept of the semi-presidential system was first proposed by the French political scientist Duvaige in 1978. Douaillat argued that the semi-presidential system is characterised by the fact that “the head of state is elected by direct universal suffrage and possesses certain powers exceeding those of the president in a typical parliamentary cabinet system. However, the government is still constituted by a cabinet comprising the Prime Minister and ministers, and the National Assembly may bring down the government through a vote of no confidence”. Dujardin further summarised the principles of the semi-presidential system into three

¹² Li Dan. Gaullism and the Fifth Republic – The ‘Unbearable Lightness and Weight’ of French Politics? [J]. *European Studies*, 2017, 35(04): 99–114+7.

points: the President of the Republic is elected by universal suffrage; the President possesses considerable powers; and there exists a Prime Minister and ministers who are independent of the President and hold executive authority, and who may remain in power as long as the National Assembly does not express opposition¹³. The Fifth Republic of France, established in 1958, was the first widely recognised semi-presidential, semi-parliamentary system. Under the Fifth Republic, the President is no longer a ‘ceremonial head of state’ but a true leader wielding substantial power, with greatly enhanced status and prestige. Article 5 of Chapter 2 of the 1958 Constitution stipulates that the President of France ‘guarantees, through his arbitration, the normal exercise of public authority and the continuity of the State’, and is responsible for ensuring ‘the independence of the State, the integrity of its territory and the fulfilment of treaties’¹⁴.

(2) Co-governance by Left and Right

‘Co-governance’ does not refer generally to power struggles amongst political elites, but rather to a specific mode of institutional operation within the context of France’s semi-presidential system. It denotes a situation where the President’s political camp and the majority in the National Assembly belong to different political camps, thereby creating a state of coexistence between the separation and sharing of powers between the President and the Government within the constitutional framework. Under a left-right coalition, the President’s dominant position in domestic policy is constrained, whilst the government and the parliamentary majority it represents gain greater autonomy in policy-making. This paper regards the left-right coalition as a crucial intermediary mechanism linking social conditions and institutional performance, rather than a mere manifestation of institutional failure¹⁵.

(3) Social Integration

The concept of ‘social integration’ used in this paper primarily refers to the capacity for internal social conflicts to be institutionalised, absorbed and regulated, as well as the effectiveness of integration mechanisms between the state and society. In societies with a high degree of social integration, social conflicts are more readily channelled into the political process through formal channels such as political parties, trade unions and interest groups; conversely, in societies with a low degree of social integration, social mobilisation is more likely to manifest as frequent street protests and non-institutionalised conflict. This paper does not equate social integration

¹³ Maurice Duverger, ‘A New Political System Model: Semi-Presidential Government’, *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 8, Issue 2, 1980, p. 166.

¹⁴ Jean Masso, ‘What Role Does the 1958 Constitution Assign to the President of the Republic?’, *La Constitution en 20 questions*

¹⁵ Chen Juan. A New Exploration of the Relationship between the President and the Prime Minister under the “Semi-Presidential System” of the Fifth French Republic [J]. *Europe*, 1999, (02): 62–67.

with social consensus or cultural homogeneity, but rather emphasises its capacity for institutional absorption at the political level.

(4) Structure of the Party System

In this paper, ‘party system structure’ primarily refers to the number of political parties, the degree of concentration of parliamentary power, and the parties’ capacity to organise and represent voters. In a stable and concentrated party system, election results are more likely to yield a clear political mandate; conversely, in a fragmented party system, political representation tends to be loose, and it becomes more difficult to form a parliamentary majority. This paper assesses changes in the structure of France’s party system across different periods by examining the structure of party alliances, the distribution of parliamentary seats, and the rise of emerging political forces.

(5) Institutional Operation

The term ‘institutional operation’ as used in this paper does not refer solely to the formal rules laid down in constitutional texts, but rather emphasises the actual functioning of institutions in concrete political practice, including political conventions, informal rules, and stable patterns of interaction formed between political actors. Institutional operation may adapt in response to changes in social conditions and the political environment, and may even produce markedly different political outcomes without altering formal institutional arrangements. It is precisely on the basis of this understanding that this paper analyses the operational differences of France’s semi-presidential system under varying social conditions¹⁶ .

Regarding the aforementioned concept, there is no universally agreed-upon definition within the academic community. Different research approaches place varying emphasis on its connotations, reflecting the interpretative flexibility of the concept itself. This paper does not seek to adjudicate the merits of different definitions at a normative level, but rather, based on its research objectives, adopts an operational understanding that is more conducive to explaining differences in institutional operation.

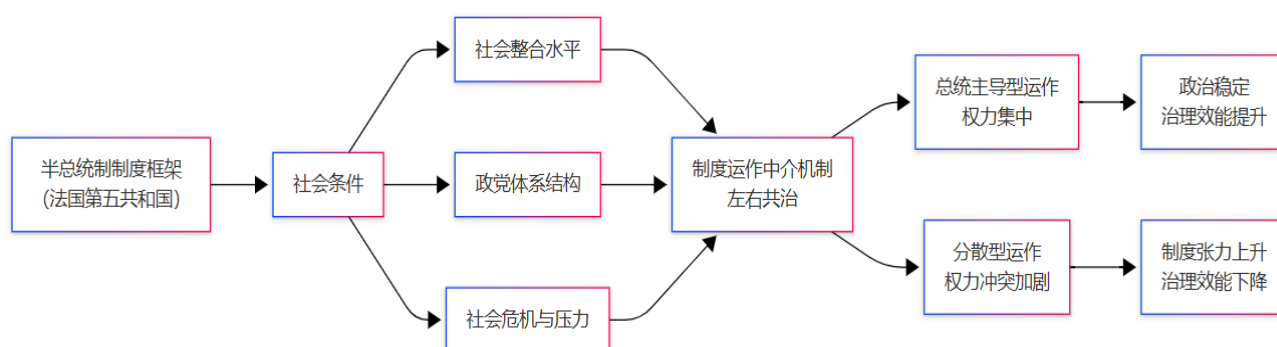
IV. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

This paper aims to address a core question in comparative politics: why does the same institutional framework produce markedly different political outcomes under varying social conditions? Consequently, the institution is not treated as a single determinant; instead, the focus is on the interaction between the institution and social conditions. Building upon historical institutionalism and state-society relationship theory, this study conducts a comparative analysis of the operational differences of the French semi-presidential system across

¹⁶ Lu Peng. Institutional and Historical Determinism [J]. *Dongcong*, 2020, 41(06): 47–53+191. DOI: 10.15981/j.cnki.dongyueluncong.2020.06.006.

diverse social contexts. To enhance the structural rigour of the analysis, this paper further clarifies the relationships between variables within the existing theoretical framework. This paper treats the level of social integration and the structure of the party system as the main independent variables, regards left-right coalition governance as the mediating variable linking social conditions and political outcomes, and takes the degree of power concentration and governance stability under the semi-presidential system as the dependent variables. Within this framework, the constitutional text and state capacity are regarded as relatively stable background conditions. By distinguishing between different levels of variables, this paper reveals that differences in institutional operation are not the direct result of institutional design itself, but rather the cumulative effect of social conditions generated through institutional operational mechanisms.

To present the analytical logic of this paper more clearly, the mechanism underlying the operational differences in France's semi-presidential system is summarised as follows: the level of social integration and changes in social structure influence the degree of concentration within the party system and the structure of electoral outcomes, thereby shaping the political relationship between the President and the parliamentary majority; when the President and the parliamentary majority belong to different political camps, 'left-right co-governance' emerges and is reinforced as a specific operational form of the semi-presidential system; co-governance by the left and right, by reshaping the distribution of power between the President and the government, alters the processes of policy formulation and implementation, ultimately influencing political stability and governance effectiveness. Thus, institutions are not independent variables, but rather exert their influence on political outcomes through specific operational mechanisms, subject to the constraints of social conditions.



Historical institutionalism emphasises that institutions are constantly shaped and reinterpreted within different historical contexts and social structures. Political institutions often exhibit path dependence; early institutional choices can create long-term constraints and exert a sustained, self-reinforcing influence on subsequent political developments. Through the intergenerational transmission of power structures and the allocation of resources, these institutions become increasingly entrenched; even when superior institutional alternatives emerge, it is difficult to break away from established paths. The actual functioning of institutions is

profoundly influenced by factors such as the degree of social integration, the structure of the party system, and crisis situations, particularly during critical periods such as economic crises and regime transitions¹⁷. Institutions serve as both constraint mechanisms and instruments of distribution; their effects evolve over time and frequently deviate from the original intentions of their designers.¹⁸ Theories of state-society relations suggest that the exercise of state power is deeply embedded within the social structure and is subject to continuous constraints from forms of social organisation, identity conflicts, and patterns of political mobilisation¹⁹. In social contexts characterised by low levels of social integration and strong capacity for social mobilisation, informal institutional rules and social forces often exert a countervailing influence on formal institutional arrangements and the actual logic of institutional operation. This provides an important analytical framework for understanding the specific practices of the semi-presidential system in different historical periods and the real-world outcomes that deviate from constitutional design. It explains why the same institutional model can exhibit markedly different operational outcomes in the same country across different periods, and reveals how formal institutional arrangements are reshaped by informal rules and social forces through the interaction of historical trajectories, social structures and key events, thereby deviating from the initial provisions of the constitutional text²⁰.

This study employs a comparative case study approach, selecting France as a single case with a relatively stable institutional framework to examine the actual functioning of the French semi-presidential system under varying social conditions. Through a comparative analysis of different historical periods characterised by consistent constitutional texts, political system types and basic state institutions, this study explores how changes in social conditions influence the practical operation of the semi-presidential system. It focuses on analysing how social factors—such as the level of social cohesion, the structure of the party system and the capacity for social mobilisation—shape political outcomes through mechanisms such as the relationship between the President and the Cabinet, interactions between the government and parliament, and informal political practices. The aim is to reveal the pathways through which changes in social conditions influence the political consequences of the semi-presidential system, whilst controlling for institutional variables.

At the empirical level, the “level of social integration” referred to in this paper is not an abstract concept of social consensus, but is primarily manifested in the controllability of social conflict, the degree of institutionalisation of social mobilisation, and the effectiveness of integration mechanisms between the state and society—such as the frequency of nationwide strikes and street protests, and whether social issues enter the institutionalised political process through political parties and interest groups. The “structure of the party system” primarily refers to the number of political parties, the degree of concentration of parliamentary power, and the parties’ capacity to organise and represent voters; changes in these aspects can be observed through the

17 Pierson P. Increasing returns, path dependence and the study of politics [J]. 1997.

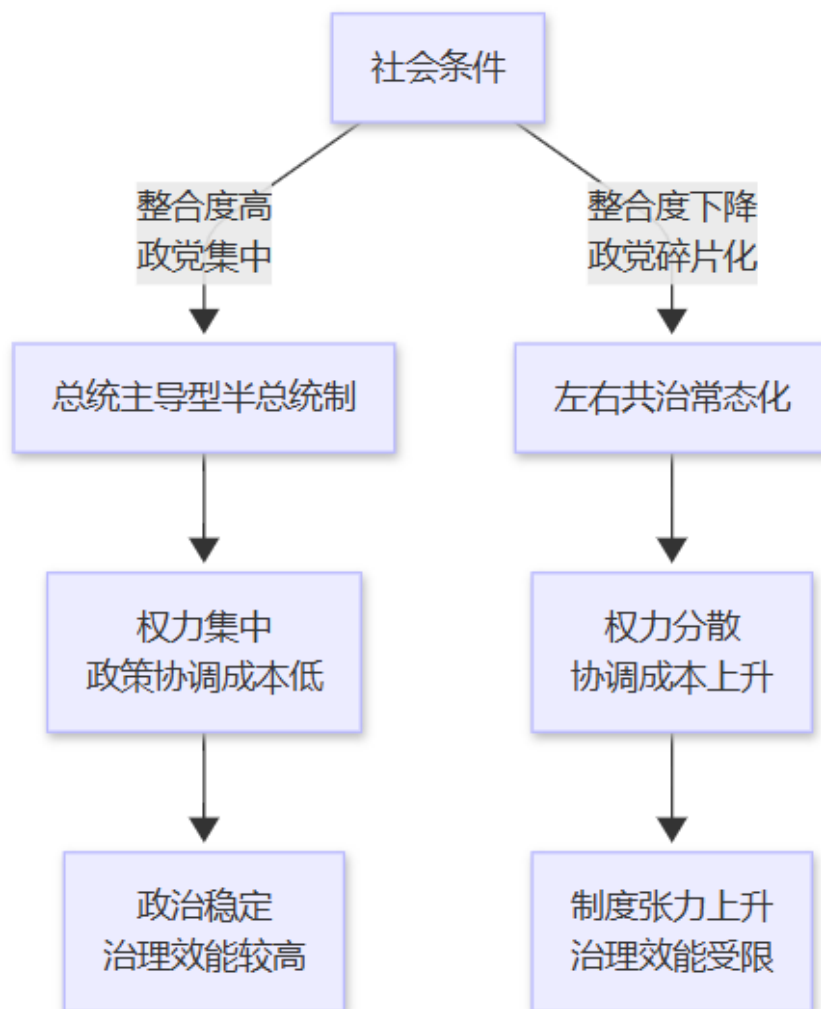
18 Thelen K. Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics [J]. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 1999, 2(1): 369–404.

19 Migdal J S. *Strong societies and weak states: state-society relations and state capabilities in the Third World* [M]. Princeton University Press, 1988.

20 *Bringing the State Back In* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 1985.

distribution of parliamentary seats, the rise of new parties, and fluctuations in voters' political loyalty. It is precisely through these empirical indicators that this paper assesses the differences in French social conditions across different periods.

V. Operational Differences in France's Semi-Presidential System Under Different Social Conditions



France's semi-presidential system exhibits markedly different modes of operation under varying social conditions, the effects of which are the result of the interaction between institutional arrangements and the social

environment²¹ . During periods of strong social cohesion and a relatively stable party system, the political environment under the semi-presidential system often manifests as a centralised presidential model. However, when faced with declining social cohesion and a fragmented party system, the same institutional structure may evolve into a decentralised power structure characterised by heightened conflict²² . Three cases of ‘left-right coalition governance’ during the Fifth Republic can help us gain a concrete understanding.

(1) Institutional functioning in a context of high social integration: the social foundations of the presidential-led model

In the early years of the Fifth Republic, French society faced the challenges of post-war reconstruction and the reshaping of national identity. Collective memories of the Fourth Republic’s frequent changes of government, colonial crises and the failure of the parliamentary system led to a widespread desire within French society for the establishment of a stable and powerful executive authority²³ . Gaullism, which emphasised national unity, executive authority and political stability, gained broad social support. Whilst the Gaullists competed with traditional political parties, social mobilisation and political conflict remained generally within manageable limits.

The system of direct universal suffrage granted the President democratic legitimacy independent of Parliament, as well as key constitutional powers such as the appointment of the Prime Minister and the dissolution of the National Assembly²⁴ . Within a context of high social cohesion, this institutional framework gave rise to a centralised mode of operation centred on the President. The semi-presidential system created favourable

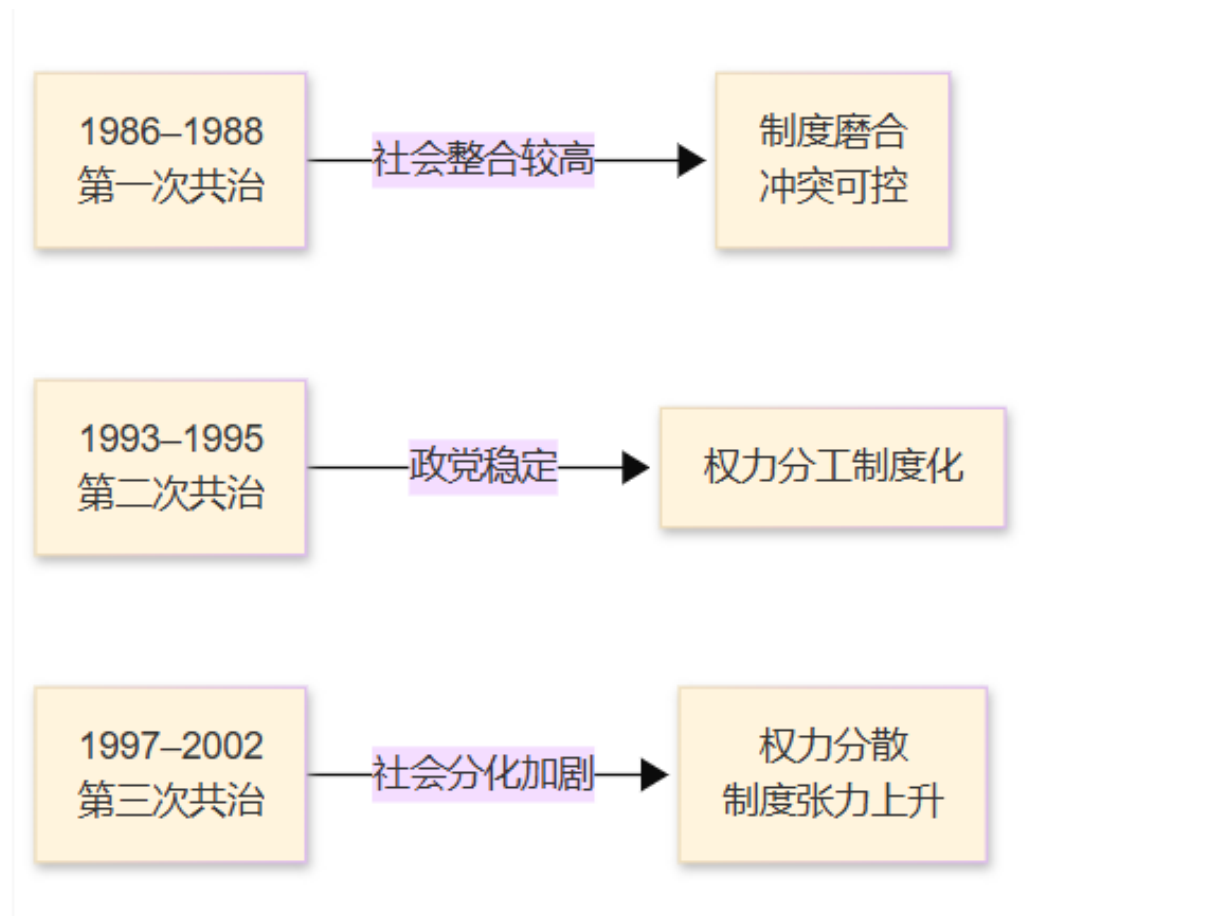
21 Elgie R. *Semi-presidentialism: Sub-types and democratic performance* [M]. Oxford University Press (UK), 2011.

22 Knapp A, Wright V. *The Government and Politics of France* [M]. Routledge, 2006.

23 Cole A. *French Politics and Society* [M]. Routledge, 2017.

24 *Constitution of the Fifth Republic (1958)*

conditions for the President to play a leading role in the exercise of political power.



(2) The First Period of Left-Right Coalition Government (1986–1988): Power Struggles During the Institutional Adjustment Phase

Following the 1986 parliamentary elections, a coalition of right-wing parties secured a majority in the National Assembly, forcing the left-wing President Mitterrand to appoint the right-wing leader Chirac as Prime Minister, marking the first instance of a left-right coalition government in the Fifth Republic²⁵. French society faced economic pressures such as accelerating deindustrialisation, rising unemployment and a growing burden on public finances. Social controversies surrounding welfare state reforms, privatisation and labour market policies intensified. However, traditional political parties maintained strong organisational capabilities and a solid voter base through trade unions, local organisations and electoral mobilisation, and social cohesion did not undergo a fundamental breakdown.

No stable practical consensus has emerged regarding the division of powers between the President and the Government, with both the President and the Prime Minister seeking to expand their respective spheres of influence. The President retains significant influence over foreign and defence affairs, whilst the Government

25 Elgie R. The Politics of Semi-Presidentialism [J]. 1999.

seeks to expand its autonomy in economic restructuring, privatisation and social policy reforms. The two sides frequently engage in political manoeuvring over issues such as the setting of the Cabinet agenda, the signing of decrees, public policy statements and the initiative in policy-making; however, these interactions generally remain within the bounds of the constitutional text and established political conventions.

This phase of left-right co-governance demonstrated the adaptation and coordination of the semi-presidential system under new social conditions, without triggering uncontrollable chaos.

(3) The Second Period of Left-Right Co-governance (1993–1995): The Relative Institutionalisation of the Co-governance Mechanism

In the 1993 parliamentary elections, the right-wing bloc, centred on the Gaullists and the centre-right alliance, secured a majority in the National Assembly, leading Mitterrand to enter a second phase of left-right co-governance, with Balladur appointed as Prime Minister. Compared with the first period of coalition government from 1986 to 1988, French society at this time faced a European economic slowdown, rising unemployment and a widening public deficit, with overall economic and fiscal pressures intensifying further; the Maastricht Treaty also imposed new constraints on domestic policy autonomy. However, the overall level of social cohesion in France remained high; there was no systemic breakdown in the representative relationships between trade unions, employers' organisations and political parties. The organisational structures and political representation of both left-wing and right-wing parties remained relatively stable, and the party system did not show any significant fragmentation.

The division of labour between the President and the government tended towards stability and institutionalisation. The President's direct intervention in domestic policy matters was markedly reduced; during his second cohabitation, Mitterrand ceded the lead on economic reform, fiscal consolidation and social policy adjustments to the government, whilst the government exercised clearer leadership in economic reform and fiscal policy, with the Balladur cabinet pursuing austerity measures and structural reforms. The co-governance arrangement has evolved from a highly personalised power struggle into a predictable model of power division. Under conditions of high social cohesion and a stable party system, the semi-presidential system can, through the intermediary mechanism of left-right co-governance, facilitate institutional adjustments to the exercise of power and alleviate the inherent power tensions within the system. From the perspective of institutional mechanisms, this period of left-right co-governance did not alter the constitutional power structure itself; however, by redistributing the actual authority between the President and the government in the policy sphere, it enabled the semi-presidential system to exhibit operational characteristics distinct from the presidential-dominated model. Compared to the previous phase, the impact of changing social conditions on institutional operations was more pronounced during this period of co-governance, with left-right co-governance gradually transforming from a power struggle into an institutionalised mechanism for power coordination.

(4) The Third Period of Left-Right Co-governance (1997–2002): Rising Institutional Tensions Against a Background of Social Polarisation

In 1997, President Jacques Chirac dissolved the National Assembly early in an attempt to consolidate his position in office; however, his political manoeuvre failed to yield the desired results. The left-wing coalition secured a parliamentary majority, and Jean-Pierre Ponsot was appointed Prime Minister, thereby establishing the third period of left-right co-governance. Compared to the previous two periods of co-governance, the structural changes within French society were more pronounced during this phase: The problem of long-term unemployment continued to worsen, issues of immigration and social integration became increasingly politicised, and nationwide strikes and street protests occurred frequently. This reflected significant strain on the mechanisms of integration between the state and society. The ability of the Socialist Party and traditional right-wing parties to organise and mobilise voters continued to decline, whilst emerging political forces and issue-based mobilisation began to challenge the existing two-party system, leading to a marked weakening of the centralisation of the party system²⁶.

Institutional contradictions within the left-right coalition government have intensified significantly. The President's powers in the realm of domestic policy have been further eroded, with presidential authority now concentrated primarily on foreign affairs and symbolic issues. The relative power of the government and parliament has risen in matters of economic policy, employment policy and social reform, whilst the policy-making process has become more oriented towards cross-party consultation and political compromise. The coalition government has thus become an institutional platform for coordinating the diverse interests of society and the forces within parliament. In practice, the semi-presidential system has clearly deviated from its previous centralised mode of operation, shifting towards a state of greater power decentralisation and more fragile institutional stability; its political consequences reflect the cumulative effects of socio-political conditions generated through the mechanism of left-right co-governance. During this period, left-right co-governance has not only altered the distribution of power between the President and the government but has also significantly increased the costs of policy coordination. The policy-making process became more reliant on cross-party consultation and compromise, administrative efficiency declined relatively, and the government faced greater political resistance when advancing structural reforms. At this stage, the semi-presidential system exhibited highly decentralised operational characteristics; its institutional tensions were no longer merely manifested as power struggles at the elite level, but gradually became intertwined with social conflicts, policy disputes and political discontent. This experience also prompted France's political elite to reassess the costs of institutional coordination, providing the practical context for subsequent institutional reforms aimed at reducing the likelihood of left-right co-governance by shortening the presidential term. The fact that France's semi-presidential system was able to maintain basic institutional functioning against a backdrop of intensifying social polarisation is also closely linked to its relatively strong state capacity. A mature administrative system, a professionalised bureaucratic structure, and a relatively stable constitutional consensus provided institutional buffers for policy implementation under

²⁶ Kriesi H. *Political Conflict in Western Europe* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

conditions of left-right co-governance. This suggests that even within the same social conditions and institutional frameworks, differences in state capacity across nations may further amplify or mitigate the inherent tensions within the semi-presidential system.

(5) Why Differences in Institutional Operation Do Not Stem from Failed Constitutional Design

The governance tensions that have emerged in the French semi-presidential system at different stages cannot be attributed to defects in the constitutional design itself. All three instances of left-right co-governance occurred under the same constitutional text and institutional structure, yet their institutional outcomes exhibited marked differences. This indicates that the constitutional design itself is not a decisive variable, and that left-right co-governance has not led to the collapse of the constitutional order. The normal formation of governments, the continued functioning of legislative procedures, and the transfer of power in accordance with established rules demonstrate that the French semi-presidential system possesses considerable institutional resilience; its operational difficulties are more likely to stem from changes in the social environment in which the system operates, rather than from the system itself.

(6) The relationship between changing social conditions and the political consequences of the semi-presidential system

A comparative analysis of approximately three cases of co-governance reveals that the political outcomes of France's semi-presidential system at different historical stages are not the inevitable result of the logic of institutional design, but rather the product of changing social conditions shaped through the mechanisms of institutional operation. During periods of high social cohesion and a stable party system, the semi-presidential system tends to operate in a centralised manner; conversely, against a backdrop of heightened social fragmentation and a fragmented party system, the same institutional framework is more likely to give rise to the decentralisation of power and institutional tensions.

The semi-presidential system does not possess a 'fixed institutional effect' that operates independently of social conditions. To understand variations in institutional performance, one must examine the functioning of the system within the context of specific social structures and political environments.

VI. 'Co-governance by Left and Right' as an Intermediary Mechanism in Institutional Operation

In the operation of the French semi-presidential system, “co-governance between left and right” serves as a key mediating mechanism linking social conditions and political outcomes²⁷. While the institutional design of the semi-presidential system grants the President and the government shared executive power, it does not specify the precise mode of operation; the actual situation depends heavily on the political relationship between the President and the parliamentary majority²⁸. When social cohesion is high and the party system is relatively concentrated, elections are more likely to produce a political landscape in which the President and Parliament are aligned. Conversely, against a backdrop of heightened social polarisation and a fragmented party system, election results are more likely to result in the President and the parliamentary majority belonging to different political camps. This makes “co-governance between left and right” a distinctive institutional feature of semi-presidential systems. Under left-right co-governance, the President’s dominant position in domestic policy is constrained, whilst the Prime Minister and the parliamentary majority they represent gain greater autonomy in policy-making. This realignment of power reflects how social conditions influence institutional functioning through party structures²⁹.

As an intermediary mechanism, ‘left-right co-governance’ does not directly determine political outcomes; rather, by altering the internal distribution of power and decision-making processes within the system, it renders internal conflicts more visible and increases the costs of policy coordination, thereby influencing governance performance³⁰.

VII. The French Semi-Presidential System from a Comparative Perspective: Generalities and Specificities

From a comparative political science perspective, the experience of the French semi-presidential system is not universally applicable to all semi-presidential states. Compared with some Eastern European semi-presidential states, France has managed to maintain basic institutional stability under conditions of left-right co-governance, without experiencing frequent constitutional crises or institutional collapse. This difference stems not only from the institutional design itself, but is also closely linked to France’s high level of state capacity, its relatively mature party system, and its long-established administrative traditions.

The French case demonstrates that the political consequences of a semi-presidential system do not follow a fixed pattern divorced from social conditions. In contexts characterised by a high degree of social cohesion and a concentrated party system, a coalition government involving both left-wing and right-wing parties may evolve into an internal mechanism for power coordination; conversely, in contexts of severe social polarisation and a fragmented party system, the same institutional arrangement may exacerbate political conflict. This finding offers

27 Elgie R. *Semi-presidentialism: Sub-types and democratic performance* [M]. Oxford University Press (UK), 2011.

28 Samuels D J, Shugart M S. *Presidents, parties, and prime ministers: How the separation of powers affects party organisation and behaviour* [M]. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

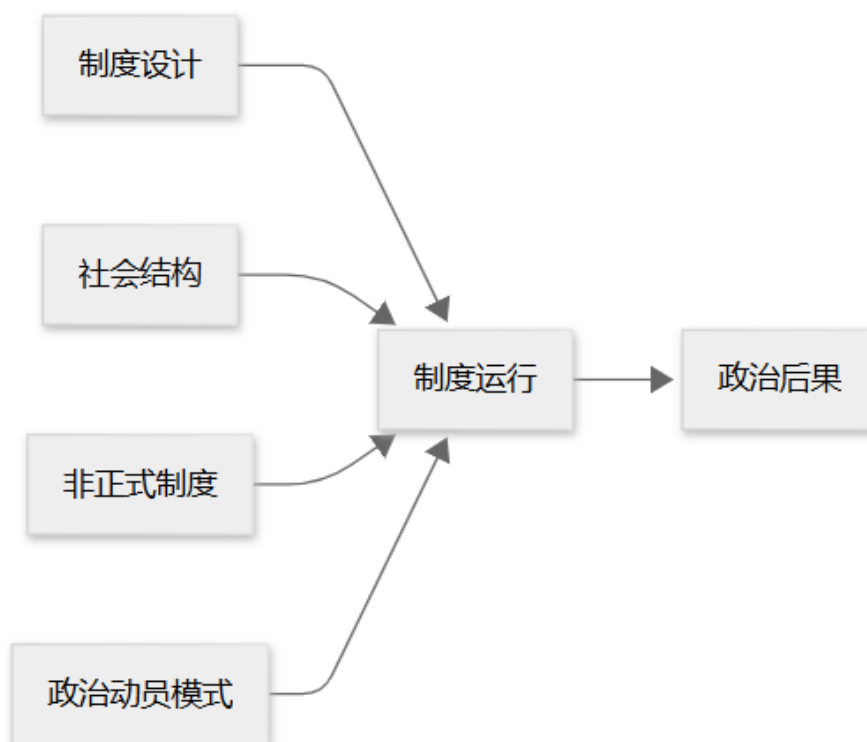
29 France’s Political Institutions at 50 [M]. Routledge, 2009.

30 Lipset S M. *Party systems and voter alignments revisited* [M]. London: Routledge, 2001.

significant insights for understanding other semi-presidential countries and suggests that comparative political science research should avoid a tendency towards institutional formalism.

VIII. Conclusion: The Social Embeddedness of Institutional Effects and Its Implications for Comparative Politics

The French semi-presidential system yields different political outcomes under varying social conditions; the actual effects of political institutions are highly dependent on the social environment in which they are embedded. In contexts characterised by high levels of social cohesion and a relatively concentrated party system, the semi-presidential system is more likely to operate in a manner that centralises power, thereby maintaining political stability. Conversely, under conditions of heightened social fragmentation and a fragmented party system, the same institutional framework may amplify internal conflicts through mechanisms such as left-right co-governance, thereby constraining governance performance. The French case highlights the limitations of analytical assumptions that treat institutions as ‘neutral variables’. Without considering the social context in which institutions operate, it is difficult to explain the variations observed in actual political practice.



Institutions are not a set of entirely fixed rules that automatically produce predetermined outcomes once established; rather, they are processual products that are continually utilised, adjusted, and even reinterpreted by

different political actors within specific social contexts. Emphasising the social embeddedness of institutional effects helps us enhance our ability to explain differences in institutional performance within comparative political studies. It also enables us to redefine 'how we understand institutions themselves', thereby understanding why formally similar institutions exhibit radically different operational logics and practical outcomes across different countries and regions.

From an academic perspective, this paper encourages comparative politics to pay greater attention to informal factors and practical differences in institutional operation. It shifts the research focus from static textual analysis to practical processes and social interaction, linking macro-level institutional analysis with micro-level political practice, and provides an explanatory theoretical model for understanding phenomena related to the French semi-presidential system. The perspective of social embeddedness adopted in this paper enables comparative politics to better align with real-world political processes, allowing it to expand its inclusivity within the context of diverse political experiences and deepen the interpretation of policies.

While this study draws on existing literature and historical sources for its analysis, there remains scope for further expansion in terms of data sources and methodological application. In terms of methodology, this study adopts a single-country, intra-period comparative research design, the advantage of which lies in its ability to reveal the impact of changing social conditions on institutional functioning whilst controlling for institutional variables. Taking France as a single case study, the study uses intra-period comparison to reveal the situational dependence of operational differences within the semi-presidential system; however, due to the limitations of a single case, it is difficult to draw universal causal conclusions. This constitutes a limitation of the study, which will be addressed in subsequent research.

From the perspective of comparative politics, the significance of the French case lies not in providing an 'optimal model' for the semi-presidential system, but in revealing the high degree of situational dependence of institutional outcomes. France's ability to maintain basic institutional stability under a coalition government involving both left-wing and right-wing parties is closely linked to its strong state capacity, mature party system, and long-established administrative and political traditions. This experience suggests that when analysing other semi-presidential systems—particularly those with low levels of social cohesion and highly fragmented party systems—one cannot simply predict political outcomes based on institutional form, but must instead focus on the specific social conditions in which the institutions are embedded. This also offers an important cautionary note for research on institutional transplantation and design.

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