

# 8

## Executives

### CONTENTS

- Understanding executives
- Presidential executives
- Parliamentary executives
- Semi-presidential executives
- Executives in authoritarian regimes

### PREVIEW

The focus of this chapter is on the top tier of leadership and the most visible office in any system of government. Whether we are talking about presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, dictators or despots, those who sit at the peak of the pyramid of government – the executives – typically attract the most public interest, whether opinions are positive or negative. To be sure, executives – in democracies, at least – consist not just of individual leaders but of large networks of people and institutions, including the ministers and secretaries who form the cabinet or the council of ministers. Even so, a single figure usually becomes the best-known face of government, shaping its agenda, attracting attention for its successes and failures, acting as a focus of popular domestic interest and representing a country in its dealings with other executives.

The chapter begins with a survey of the roles of executives, distinguishing the different tasks of heads of state and heads of government. It then looks in turn at the three major forms of democratic executive: the presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential. It compares and contrasts their roles and powers, focusing in particular on the sub-types of parliamentary executives and the experience they have with legislative coalitions. The chapter then looks at the executives found in authoritarian systems, where leaders may seem to enjoy more power than their democratic peers but where they also enjoy fewer formal protections of their person or their tenure in office. This inevitably affects the way they approach their positions.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- The political executive has multiple roles, including making policy, overseeing its execution, providing leadership and responding to crises.
- Executives carry out the functions of head of state and head of government, jobs that are combined in some political systems and divided in others.
- Although presidential executives come in different forms, the usual arrangement is one in which power is shared between a presidency and other branches of government.
- In parliamentary executives, the government comes out of the legislature, and the power of the executive depends heavily on the balance of party support in the legislature.
- Semi-presidential executives combine elements of the presidential and parliamentary formats. They are less common and less thoroughly studied.
- Executives in authoritarian regimes face fewer constraints than those in democracies, as well as fewer guarantees about how long they will stay in power.

## UNDERSTANDING EXECUTIVES

In September 2021, Canadians took part in a general election to decide who would run the country. Incumbent Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose Liberal party had been governing as a minority government since the 2019 general election, was hoping to gain enough seats to be able to form a majority government. However, he was facing declining popularity, and doubts also hung over the opposition Conservative party under its relatively new leader, Erin O’Toole. In the event, the Liberals placed second in the number of votes won, but – thanks to the arithmetic of the single-member plurality electoral system (see Chapter 14) – won more seats than any other party while falling short of a majority. Undaunted, Trudeau formed a second minority government, his party having won less than one-third of the vote and 47 per cent of the seats in the Canadian House of Commons. A party rejected by more than two-thirds of voters found itself once again controlling government and the executive in one of the world’s pre-eminent democracies.

### Executive

The political institution responsible for overseeing the execution of laws and policies, and most often associated with the idea of national leadership.

The office held by Trudeau is one example of the political **executive** that lies at the heart of government, providing the political leadership that forms the highest level of administration in a country, which at the national level means prime ministers like Trudeau, as well as presidents, cabinets and government ministers. The term *executive* also applies to leaders at lower levels, such as the governors of states or provinces and the mayors of towns and cities. The institutional approach to comparison (see *Using Theory 7*) focuses on the role of the executive as a government’s energizing force, setting priorities, mobilizing support, reacting to problems, resolving crises, making decisions and overseeing their execution. In authoritarian systems, meanwhile, the executive is often the only institution that wields true power, so it has to be understood using a variety of additional theoretical approaches.

It is important to distinguish the temporary political executive (who is elected or appointed to fixed terms in office and makes policy) from the career bureaucrats who put policy into effect. The members of the political executive – in democracies, at least – are chosen by political means, most often by election, can be removed by the same method and are accountable for the activities of government; their desks are where the buck stops. The bureaucracy, meanwhile, consists mainly of public employees without direct public accountability; while secretaries and ministers at the top of the bureaucratic structure are usually political appointees who come and go with changes in the government, the vast majority of bureaucrats are unelected, as we will see in Chapter 10.

In democracies, understanding the executive begins with an understanding of constitutional constraints. Chief political executives are not only elected but remain subject to rules which limit their power; they must face regular re-election, and their performance is measured in public opinion surveys and media coverage. In authoritarian regimes, by contrast, constitutional and electoral controls are either absent or ineffective. The scope of the authoritarian executive is restricted not so much by the constitution as by political realities, and the office of the executive tends to be more fluid, patterned by informal relationships rather than formal rules.

Executives come in four main types: presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential, and authoritarian. All four types can be understood as contrasting methods for dividing and controlling executive authority. In democratic presidential and semi-presidential regimes, the constitution sets up a system of checks and balances between executive, legislative and judicial institutions. In parliamentary systems, the executive comes out of the legislature and its survival depends on keeping the confidence of the legislature, its freedom of action often limited by the need to sustain a coalition between parties that have agreed to share the task of governing. In authoritarian regimes, meanwhile, executives are subject to fewer constraints.

Having said all this, though, there are no fixed and unchangeable templates for any of these types. They change over time and vary within and between different countries, according to constitutional rules, the **leadership** style of officeholders (see *Using Theory 8*) and the changing balance between the executive and the legislature. Some states fit firmly within one of these types, while others have features that are a blend of types, even slowly moving from one to another as the powers of offices change.

In coming to grips with the different political roles of executives (see Figure 8.1), we first have to appreciate that the executive is more than the individual who leads the government of a country or a province or a city and is actually a collective body consisting of multiple people and offices. Presidents and prime ministers may be the most visible members of an executive but they do not govern alone and instead rely heavily on advisers, ministers, bureaucrats and independent agencies. Executives also go beyond making policy and providing leadership, but also have to work with the other parts of government in order to govern. Executives do not make laws (that is mainly the job of legislatures) and they do not interpret laws (that is the job of the judiciary).

**Leadership**  
The capacity to lead by motivating or inspiring others to achieve common goals, ideally voluntarily and willingly but otherwise by threats and force.

Role	Features
Representation	Representing the interests of voters in government, and of the state in dealings with other governments.
Execution	Overseeing, through the bureaucracy, the execution of laws and policies, and the maintenance of law and order.
Making policy	Defining the policy priorities and interests of government.
Leadership	Providing the overall direction taken by a government and a state.
Appointments	Making appointments to other senior positions in government.
Security	Defending and preserving the unity and integrity of the state, in the face of domestic and external threats.
Crisis response	Leading the response of the government to political, security, public safety and natural crises.

**Figure 8.1** Executives in democratic regimes



## USING THEORY 8

### LEADERSHIP THEORIES

Leadership skills are critical to the performance of executives. A president or a prime minister who struggles to provide direction will struggle to govern, while one who is able to inspire others to follow and to pursue a common set of goals will likely achieve much more. Defining leadership is not easy, though; it is a quality that we tend to know when we see it in action and whose absence is also often clear, but explaining the differences between strong and weak leadership is another matter altogether, particularly as the definition of leadership has changed over time (Northouse, 2022).

In spite of the obviously important role of leadership in understanding government and politics, and the long history of interest in political leadership that dates back at least to Plato, political science has been remarkably lax in developing theories of leadership. They were used in the decades after World War II but then were overtaken by an interest in other theoretical approaches such as structuralism and rational choice and have only seen a revival in recent years. It was not that long ago that Peele (2005) made the case for political scientists and students of leadership to engage with each other more extensively, and it was even more recently that Helms (2011) made the case for studying political leadership comparatively.

The possibilities are reflected in the numerous theories of leadership that have come out of the corporate world, including the following:

- *Behavioural or style theory*: Focuses on how leaders behave and assumes that their traits can be both copied and avoided. The best predictor of leadership success, in this approach, is studying the actions of a leader.
- *Contingency or situational theory*: Studies the context within which leaders function and notes that the best leaders can adjust to changing circumstances.
- *Great Man theory*: Argues that good leaders are born and achieve leadership because of innate skills and traits that cannot be taught or learned.
- *Management or transactional theory*: Focuses on the abilities of leaders to supervise and organize, using rewards and punishments to achieve their goals.
- *Participative theory*: In this view, leaders prefer to have others involved in decision-making and act mainly as facilitators.
- *Power theory*: Looks at ways in which leaders use power and influence to get things done.
- *Relationship theory*: Emphasizes the manner in which leaders focus on their interactions with others.

Understanding the rules of leadership and understanding how leaders come to power, work with other institutions and lose their power are all important parts of the study of political systems. Clearly, though, political science still has much to learn from the corporate world.

We also need to distinguish between two different dimensions of the work of executives:

- The **head of state** is the representative of the state and is expected to rise above politics and work in the general interests of all the citizens of a state. In democratic systems, much of what the head of state does is symbolic: for example, hosting visiting leaders, engaging in foreign state visits and providing leadership in times of war or national crisis. The lines between the figurehead and the politician are sometimes unclear, particularly in presidential systems or absolute monarchies where one person is both head of state and head of government.
- The **head of government** is the political leader of a government. In this capacity, the executive is either elected or is appointed by elected politicians, or – in authoritarian regimes – comes to power through other and sometimes less transparent means. Heads of government usually make little effort to hide their partisan preferences, and they are more interested in keeping the support of their party, voters and supporters than in representing the broader interests of all citizens (whatever they might say about their sympathy for the national interest).

The classic analysis of the differences between the two dimensions was made by the British commentator Walter Bagehot (a one-time editor of *The Economist*). In his book *The English Constitution* (1867), he wrote of the two key elements of constitutions: the dignified parts ('those which excite and preserve the reverence of the population') and the efficient parts ('those by which [the constitution] in fact, works and rules'). In presidential executives such as the United States, Mexico and Nigeria, the two parts are combined in one office, mingling the symbolic and the political. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, the roles of head of state and head of government are carried out by two different people, making it easier to differentiate the symbolic and the political.

While the head of government in parliamentary systems is an elected prime minister or chancellor, heads of state take one of two forms (see Table 8.1):

- In **republics**, non-executive presidents are elected either through a popular vote (as in Ireland), by parliament (as in Israel) or by a special electoral college, the latter often consisting (as in Germany) of the national legislature along with representatives from regional or local government.
- More rarely, heads of state are monarchs who have inherited their positions. Seven European countries – Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom – along with three principalities (Andorra, Monaco and Liechtenstein) and a grand duchy (Luxembourg) have a **constitutional monarchy**. Meanwhile, Malaysia's supreme head of state provides a rare example of an elected monarch. Constitutional monarchs are expected to stay out of politics, but royal influence can sometimes be significant, especially in times of crisis and transition.

#### Head of state

The figurehead or ceremonial leader of a state, who may be elected or appointed, or – in the case of monarchs – may inherit the position.

#### Head of government

The elected leader of a government, who comes to office because of the support of voters who identify with their party and platform.

#### Republic

A political system in which all members of the government are either elected or are appointed by elected officials. In other words, there is no monarch.

#### Constitutional monarchy

A state headed by a monarch, but where the monarch's political powers are severely limited by constitutional rules. Stands in contrast with a ruling or absolute monarch (see Chapter 6).

**Table 8.1:** Selecting the head of state in parliamentary systems

Country	Head of state	Method of selection	Tenure
Australia, Canada, Jamaica	British monarch, represented by Governor-General	Governor-General nominated by prime minister or government and confirmed by British monarch.	At monarch's pleasure
Austria*	President	Direct popular election by a two-round system.	6 years
Germany*	President	Election by a joint <i>Bundestag</i> and <i>Land</i> convention.	5 years
India*	President	Election by a college of federal and state assemblies.	5 years
Italy*	President	Election by a joint session of parliament and regional representatives.	7 years
Japan	Emperor	Heredity (eldest male).	Life
Malaysia	Supreme head of state	Elected (by rulers of the nine Malay states).	5 years
Spain	Monarch	Heredity (eldest male).	Life
Sweden	Monarch	Heredity (eldest child).	Life
UK	Monarch	Heredity (eldest child).	Life

\* Republics.

In semi-presidential systems, the division of roles is more complicated. There is both a president and a prime minister, but while the job of the prime minister rarely spills over into the duties of the head of state, the president straddles the two offices. In instances where presidents are popular and have strong support in the legislature, they will be both head of state and of government. Where they are unpopular and are working with legislatures in which their party does not have a clear majority, presidents will find themselves focusing more on the duties of a head of state, while the prime minister is more clearly the head of government.

Although most executives are still men, the number of women being elected to the highest offices has grown, such that when a woman is elected as a president or prime minister it is much less noteworthy than it once was. Since the election in July 1960 of the world's first female head of government of the modern era – Sirimavo Bandaranaike, prime minister of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – more than four dozen countries have had women as national executives; see Table 8.2 for some examples.

Globally, the number of women holding ministerial positions in government has also grown, with several countries – including Finland, France, Iceland, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Sweden and Switzerland – having achieved, or coming close to achieving, an equal number of women as men in senior levels of government. While many women ministers are often still found in the areas of education and social policy traditionally perceived to be associated more with women's interests, they have also moved into more powerful fields such as defence, finance and foreign policy (Paxton et al., 2021). Despite this progress, the glass remains well over half empty: in a large majority of countries, most ministers and legislators – as well as most top business executives – are still men (see Chapter 9).

**Table 8.2: Women executives (selected)**

Country	Name	In office
Sri Lanka	Sirimavo Bandaranaike	1960–65, 1970–77, 1994–2000
India	Indira Gandhi	1966–77, 1980–84
Israel	Golda Meir	1969–74
Britain	Margaret Thatcher Theresa May	1979–90 2016–19
Dominica	Eugenia Charles	1980–95
Norway	Gro Harlem Brundtland	1981, 1986–89, 1990–96
Philippines	Corazon Aquino Gloria Macapagal Arroyo	1986–92 2001–10
Pakistan	Benazir Bhutto	1988–90, 1993–96
Poland	Hanna Suchoka Ewa Kopacz Beata Szydło	1992–93 2014–15 2015–17
Bangladesh	Sheikh Hasina	1996–2001, 2009–
New Zealand	Jenny Clark Jacinda Arden	1999–2008 2017–
Indonesia	Megawati Sukarnoputri	2001–04
Mozambique	Luisa Diogo	2004–10
Germany	Angela Merkel	2005–21
Chile	Michelle Bachelet	2006–10, 2014–18
Liberia	Ellen Johnson Sirleaf	2006–18
Argentina	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner	2007–15
Iceland	Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir*	2009–13
Australia	Julia Gillard	2010–13
Brazil	Dilma Rouseff	2011–16
South Korea	Park Geun-hye	2013–16

\* World's first openly lesbian head of government.

**Presidential executive**

An arrangement in which the executive and the legislature are separately and directly elected and have separate powers and responsibilities.

## PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVES

The world has many presidents, but it is important to appreciate that they are not all equal. At one end of the scale, a president in a parliamentary system is usually a figurehead: someone without executive powers who serves as a ceremonial head of state. Then comes the **presidential executive**, who is elected to the job and fulfils a central political role. At the other end of the scale, many authoritarian regimes have presidents who have managed to accumulate so much power that they have become quasi-monarchical dictators, making the presidency the only political institution that really matters. Even within these three types there are multiple sub-types, so that – as Mezey (2013) argues – ‘presidentialism is more than simply a constitutional category; it includes a set of public perceptions, political actions, as well as formal and informal political power arrangements’.

In its democratic form, a presidential executive is a form of rule in which a single person governs using the authority derived from popular election, alongside an independent legislature; see Table 8.3. The election normally takes the form of a direct vote of the people, with a limit on the number of terms a president can serve. The president directs the government and also serves as head of state. The president makes appointments to other key government institutions, such as the courts and the heads of government departments, although some may be subject to confirmation by the legislature. Both president and legislature are elected for fixed terms, the president cannot dissolve the legislature, and the legislature can only remove the president through mechanisms such as impeachment (see Chapter 9). Since neither body can normally bring down the other, and there is a separation of powers, each institution has some autonomy.

Presidential executives have strengths and weaknesses. Among the strengths:

- The president’s fixed term provides continuity in the executive, avoiding the potential instability of coalitions found in many parliamentary governments.
- Winning a presidential election requires candidates to develop widespread support across a country.
- Elected by the country at large, the president can rise above the squabbles between local interests represented in the legislature.
- A president provides a natural symbol of national unity, offering a familiar face for domestic and international audiences alike.
- Since a presidential system necessarily involves a separation of powers, it encourages limited government.

**Table 8.3:** The presidential executive

■ Elected president steers the government and makes senior appointments.
■ Fixed terms of offices for the president and the legislature, neither of which can normally bring down the other.
■ Presidents are restricted to a specified number of terms in office; usually two.
■ Little overlap in membership between the executive and the legislature.
■ President serves as head of government as well as head of state.
■ Examples: Afghanistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Philippines, United States and most of Latin America.





Two of the increasing numbers of women who have broken through to the highest levels of executive power: Angela Merkel, Chancellor of Germany from 2005 to 2021, and Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh from 1996 to 2001 and again since 2009.

The key weakness of presidential government is that only one party can win the presidency; everyone else loses. Unless the president is able to reach across party lines, or is limited by opposition parties in the legislature, it is a winner-take-all arrangement. Even more problematic, deadlock can arise when executives and legislatures disagree, leaving government sometimes unable to address pressing problems. Presidential systems also lack the natural rallying point for opposition provided by the leaders of non-ruling parties in some parliamentary systems. In particular, there is no natural equivalent to the parliamentary idea of the Leader of the Opposition – see next section of this chapter. Also, presidents often find themselves in a political minority, having to work with fragmented legislatures in which their party only holds a minority of the seats, and – in effect – having to govern in a coalition (see Chaisty et al., 2018).

Presidential executives are found most often in the Americas, where the United States is a representative case (see Han, 2017, and Edwards et al., 2018). In addition to a general obligation to oversee the execution of laws, the US president is given explicit duties (such as commander-in-chief) that have been interpreted over time as giving presidents additional implied powers, such as the power to issue executive orders, statements and proclamations. At the same time, US presidents often find their hands tied, because they share important powers with Congress:

- The president may be commander-in-chief, but only Congress can declare war.
- The president can make government appointments and sign treaties, but only with the consent of the Senate (the upper chamber of Congress).
- The president can veto legislation, but Congress can override the veto.
- Congress, not the president, controls the purse strings.



# SPOTLIGHT 8 BRAZIL



## BRIEF PROFILE:

As the world's fifth biggest country by land and population, Brazil is also one of the world's largest democracies. It is the most important state in South America and has expanded its influence to the developing world more broadly, taking its place among the BRICs with Russia, India and China. However, Brazil still faces many domestic problems. There is a wide gap between rich and poor, much of the arable land in Brazil is owned by a few wealthy families, social conditions in its major cities are poor, the deforestation of the Amazon basin has global ecological implications, corruption is rife at all levels of government, and Brazil's response to the Covid-19 pandemic was weak. Recent economic developments have sent mixed signals, with oil discoveries pointing to energy self-sufficiency, but an economic downturn and a return to politics as usual casts clouds over Brazil's continued progress.

<b>Form of government</b>	Federal presidential republic consisting of 26 states and a federal capital district. State formed 1822, and most recent constitution adopted 1988.
<b>Executive</b>	Presidential. A president directly elected for no more than two consecutive four-year terms.
<b>Legislature</b>	Bicameral National Congress: lower Chamber of Deputies (513 members) elected for renewable four-year terms, and upper Senate (81 members) elected from the states (three members each) for renewable eight-year terms.
<b>Judiciary</b>	A dual system of state and federal courts, with justices of superior courts nominated for life by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Supreme Federal Court serves as constitutional court: 11 members, nominated by president and confirmed by Senate for life, but must retire at 70.
<b>Electoral system</b>	A two-round majority system is used for elections to the presidency and the Senate, while elections to the Chamber of Deputies use proportional representation.
<b>Parties</b>	Multi-party, with more than a dozen parties organized within Congress into four main coalitions and a cluster of non-attached parties.

	<b>211m</b> Population	<b>Democracy Index rating</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Full Democracy</li> <li>✓ <b>Flawed Democracy</b></li> <li>✗ Hybrid Regime</li> <li>✗ Authoritarian</li> <li>✗ Not Rated</li> </ul>	<b>Freedom House rating</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <b>Free</b></li> <li>✗ Partly Free</li> <li>✗ Not Free</li> <li>✗ Not Rated</li> </ul>	<b>Human Development Index rating</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Very High</li> <li>✓ <b>High</b></li> <li>✗ Medium</li> <li>✗ Low</li> <li>✗ Not Rated</li> </ul>	
					<b>\$1.84tn</b> Gross Domestic Product
					<b>\$8,717</b> Per capita GDP

## THE POLITICAL EXECUTIVE IN BRAZIL

Brazil has a presidential executive but gives its leader more constitutional powers than its American equivalent; the president of Brazil can issue decrees in specified areas, declare bills to be urgent (forcing Congress to make a prompt decision), initiate bills in the National Congress and propose a budget which goes into effect, month by month, if Congress does not itself pass a budget. At the same time, Brazilian presidents must work with two features of government that are absent in the United States, and that make it more difficult to bend Congress to their will.

First, thanks to the use of proportional representation, they are faced by a much more complex party landscape. The October 2018 legislative elections resulted in 30 parties winning seats in the Chamber of Deputies, with none winning more than 52 (out of the total of 513), 17 each winning ten seats or less, and the parties forming themselves into four groupings, with the pro-government coalition holding 71 per cent of the seats.

Second, party discipline is exceptionally weak. Deputies often switch party in mid-term and are more concerned with winning resources for their districts than with showing loyalty to their party. In response, Brazil's presidents are



EVARISTO SA/AFIP via Getty Images

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro delivers a speech from his official residence at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia.

obliged to build informal coalitions by appointing ministers from a range of parties in an attempt to encourage their loyalty. The result, argue Melo and Pereira (2013), has been a form of multi-party presidentialism combining a constitutionally strong president and a robust system of checks and balances emerging from healthy political competition.

The coalitions formed in Brazilian politics are more informal, pragmatic and unstable than the carefully crafted inter-party coalitions that are found in parliamentary governments in Europe. In presidential systems, after all, the collapse of a coalition does not mean the fall of a government, reducing the incentive to sustain a coalition. So, although Latin American constitutions appear to give the chief executive a more important political role, appearances are deceptive. The Latin American experience confirms that presidents operating in a democratic setting confront inherent difficulties in securing their programme.



### Further reading

Bianchi, Bernardo, Jorge Chaloub, Patricia Rangel, and Frieder Otto Wolf (eds) (2021) *Democracy and Brazil: Collapse and Regression* (Routledge).

Lapper, Richard (2021) *Beef, Bible and Bullets. Brazil in the Age of Bolsonaro* (Manchester University Press).

Roett, Riordan (2016) *Brazil: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press).