

Presidential legislative initiatives under semi-presidentialism: What accounts for their success and failure?

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Few presidents in Europe have the power to propose legislation directly to Parliament. Accordingly, presidential legal initiatives in Europe are not very well researched or understood. This paper seeks to address this research gap by providing an analysis of presidential legal initiatives in Lithuania. We have assembled a dataset of all the presidential legal initiatives proposed in Lithuania since 1993. Using this dataset, we find that factors in the political environment significantly affect the success of presidential legislative initiatives. Additionally, we find that the success of these initiatives partly depends on policy content, as initiatives in foreign and defense policy, on average, tend to be more successful. Lastly, non-partisan presidents in Lithuania become more successful over time; our results suggest a consolidation of consultation mechanisms between the presidents and the legislature.

Keywords: semi-presidentialism; Lithuania; legislative initiatives; president.

1. Introduction

Under presidential and some semi-presidential democracies, presidents are granted significant legislative powers. Although reactive powers (foremost, the power to veto legislation) are often researched and sometimes even used as indicators of general presidential activism (Köker, 2017; Moestrup and Sedelius, 2023), some presidents also enjoy proactive legislative powers, such as executive decrees and the power to propose new legislation, which enables them to influence the

Received 1 July 2024; revised 25 October 2024; accepted 8 November 2024

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political agenda (Bulmer, 2017: 3). Directly elected presidents have a strong incentive to use this power, as it empowers them to implement their agenda and demonstrate accountability to voters. Moreover, the amendatory veto in some countries allows presidents not only to block the passage of a law but also to insert their own corrections.

Proactive presidential legislative powers have been studied most extensively under presidential regimes, especially in Latin American countries; the power to propose legislation is quite widespread in this region (Alemán and Calvo, 2010; Feliú Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021; Mimica *et al.*, 2023). The U.S. is also a common subject of research. Although the U.S. president does not have the power of legislative initiative, he is often capable of persuading Congress to support preferred legislation (Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2007). Most of these studies pose the same question: what determines the success of presidential legislative initiatives? Existing literature identifies several groups of factors: the political environment (unified government, composition of Congress), timing (point of tenure, election cycle), president-centered factors (president's popularity, communication with Congress), and the policy area of the initiative (whether it is foreign or domestic policy).

Meanwhile, research on the legislative powers of European presidents focuses more on reactive powers, especially the veto (Chandler, 2001; Köker, 2017). A gap in the research most likely exists due to the rarity of proactive presidential powers in European democracies. Only four out of all European presidents (Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, and Latvia) are vested with the power to propose ordinary legislation (Köker, 2018). Of these four countries, two are parliamentary republics (Latvia and Hungary) with very rare use of this presidential power (Köker, 2015). The mode of presidential election and the consequent degree of a president's dependence on Parliament (directly elected presidents are naturally more independent) affect the mechanics of presidential legislative initiatives: presidents in the other two semi-presidential countries (Poland and Lithuania) use their power to initiate ordinary legislation significantly more often (Köker, 2015). However, none of the studies conducted so far have analyzed what accounts for the success of presidential legislative initiatives in European (semi-presidential) democracies. We lack an understanding of the use and success of presidential legislative initiatives under semi-presidentialism.

At first glance, there is no convincing argument for why presidents should be granted this power in semi-presidential democracies (Köker, 2018). If we presume competition among various branches of government and political parties within the political system, such power could prove ineffective during periods of cohabitation, when the party or parties opposing the president's party control the government. In such a scenario, the oppositional government lacks the incentive to endorse any of the proposed legislation, especially if the proposals

are ideologically at odds with the government's policy. On the other hand, when the president's party holds a parliamentary majority, the president can introduce legislative proposals through party members (as in the case of the U.S.).

Nevertheless, there are also compelling arguments as to why the power to propose legislation under semi-presidential regimes is not void. First, it is plausible for a president to leverage their political authority, informal powers (especially popularity), and negotiation skills to win votes from parliamentary groupings, even during periods of cohabitation (when the president is partisan and their party is not in the government) or when the president is truly non-partisan and lacks any (former) party affiliations. Second, the mere presence of the president's party in the cabinet does not guarantee the effective implementation of the president's political agenda. Achieving success requires additional factors such as party discipline, the president's leadership within the party, and a low level of fragmentation within both the parliament and the government. Third, presidents may also propose technical amendments to close loopholes in the law, rather than fundamentally changing policy: even an opposing majority could welcome these initiatives as they benefit all parties. Moreover, some semi-presidential constitutions stipulate that the president cannot be a member of a political party, in pursuit of the ideal of a neutral president who is above party politics. While even a true non-partisan president (without any party background) may have policy preferences and may conflict with opposing political parties, such neutrality could contribute to the success in building broad, ad hoc parliamentary coalitions for legislative initiatives.

Therefore, the main question related to the power of legislative initiative under semi-presidentialism is not why these presidents should have it, but rather, what determines their success in using this power? Some factors may overlap with the literature on presidentialism: the strength of the government, parliamentary fragmentation, the president's popularity and authority, and the importance of the legislation. However, there are some peculiarities due to the differences between regimes. In presidential democracies, the president is the head of the executive, and thus their accountability for public policy naturally encompasses both domestic and foreign policy. Semi-presidential regimes vary considerably according to the constitutional powers and roles of presidents (Siaroff, 2003; Elgie, 2009). In the president-parliamentary type (Shugart and Carey, 1992), the system favors the president over the prime minister, as the president has the right to dismiss the government. Under the premier-presidential system (common in Europe), the president does not have this power, so these systems usually favor the prime minister over the president (a notable exception is France during periods of unified government: the president there *de facto* dominates the executive when supported by a legislative majority). In this article, we focus on (and our results apply to) premier-presidential systems where the president does not dominate the executive.

However, in such regimes, presidents often play a central role in foreign policy. Moreover, some of these presidents are allowed to propose legislation across various domains, regardless of their constitutional prerogatives. Hence, an additional question arises: how do legislators respond when semi-presidential heads of state propose laws that exceed their designated areas of responsibility, particularly in economic and social policy?

Accordingly, the aim of our paper is to study the determinants of success in presidential legislative initiatives under semi-presidentialism in European premier-presidential systems, with a special focus on the policy content and scope of the proposed amendments. Although our focus is on this particular subset of semi-presidential countries, we also delineate, where relevant, the theoretical differences from the president-parliamentary system. In particular, cohabitation could lead to different dynamics, as presidents under president-parliamentary regimes have increased leverage over the government, whether during cohabitation or not.

We must also note that the relationship between presidents and political parties varies across semi-presidential systems. In some semi-presidential countries, the presidential post is *de facto* the most important electoral prize, and parties are organized around presidential candidates (as in France). In another group of semi-presidential regimes common in Europe (and the ones we are focused on), parties are typically organized around candidates for the prime ministerial position (for example, in Portugal). In presidential elections, parties often nominate (if they choose to do so) “elderly statesmen” types or even support some non-partisan figures. Consequently, even presidents with some party background cultivate an “above politics” stance (Jalali, 2011). However, although in such countries the president is not the dominant executive, the neutral authority that comes from being distanced from the party system can be beneficial in convincing parliamentary majorities to adopt certain laws.

We employ the case of Lithuania for several reasons. First, the Lithuanian president is one of the few European presidents constitutionally granted the power to propose new ordinary legislation. Additionally, the president has the power of amendatory veto, which can be used to influence the content of legislation. These powers, combined with the direct election of the president, create a degree of presidential independence that allows for the study of a variety of presidential legislative initiatives. This is in contrast to parliamentary republics such as Latvia and Hungary, where presidents possess similar powers but use them infrequently (Köker, 2015). Second, Lithuania is a convenient case due to its stable democratic record. Unlike Poland (another European semi-presidential regime where the president has the right to initiate legislation), where liberal democracy has experienced a significant decline in the past decade (the Liberal Democracy Index by V-Dem was 0.44 in 2023), Lithuania’s democracy has remained stable (its

index has never fallen below 0.73 since 1992). Third, under Lithuania's semi-presidential system, the government bears primary responsibility for social and economic policy, while the directly elected president plays a central role in foreign policy, which is conducted in cooperation with the government. This allows us to examine whether the success of presidential legislative initiatives is related to the alignment with presidential policy areas (and vice versa). Fourth, Lithuanian presidents tend to be non-partisan both *de jure* (the Constitution requires elected presidents to suspend their activities in political parties) and *de facto* (voters usually elect presidents without party affiliations). These non-partisan presidents are generally more popular than the government, and thus, in pursuing their agendas and reelection, they remain relatively independent and may be incentivized to propose legislation across various policy areas. This non-partisanship presents an advantage over the Polish case, where presidents often have strong party affiliations. Finally, the overall powers of the Lithuanian presidency are relatively moderate: various indexes that measure presidential power place it in the average category for both Central and Eastern Europe (Sedelius, 2006; Elgie et al., 2014; Raunio and Sedelius, 2019) and European (Siaroff, 2003; Elgie, 2009) semi-presidential republics. For this reason, Lithuania has been used in several recent studies on semi-presidential regimes (Janeliūnas, 2019; Raunio and Sedelius, 2019, 2020; Pukelis and Jastramskis, 2021; Jastramskis and Pukelis, 2023a, 2023b).

This paper proceeds as follows: First, we present theoretical arguments regarding the motivation of presidents to propose legislation. Second, we discuss the factors that may influence the success rate of presidential legislative initiatives. Third, we present our data and conduct an empirical analysis. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the successes and failures of presidential legislative initiatives under semi-presidentialism.

2. Why do presidents use legislative initiative power under semi-presidentialism?

A review of the academic literature on both presidentialism and semi-presidentialism suggests several factors that may motivate presidents to use the power of legislative initiative. The most important of these factors are direct elections, vote-seeking behavior, and policy-seeking motives.

First, direct elections encourage presidents to be proactive political actors (Duverger, 1978, 1980; Metcalf, 2002; Tavits, 2008). Köker (2017: 213) argues that popular presidential elections are a key factor influencing presidential activism. Direct elections provide the president with a mandate from the electorate and greater legitimacy, which, in turn, allows presidents to be more independent from parliament and proactive. Furthermore, under semi-presidentialism, the electorates of the president and parliament come from different

elections, and this separation creates conditions for intra-executive competition and increased presidential activism (Samuels and Shugart, 2010; Elgie *et al.*, 2014).

Empirical evidence regarding these arguments is somewhat mixed. In her comparative analysis of directly and indirectly elected European presidents, Tavits (2008) argues that the mode of election does not significantly affect presidential activism. She contends that presidential activism depends on other factors, such as the strength of the government and the timing within the presidential tenure (whether it is the first year in office or later). In contrast, Köker (2015, 2017) found that directly elected presidents veto more bills and initiate laws more often compared to indirectly elected presidents.

Second, direct elections create vote-seeking incentives for presidents. The reelection of an indirectly elected president depends on the parliament and government, whereas the primary principal of a directly elected president is the voters. In the former case, it is counterproductive for the president to compete with parliament in seeking reelection (Köker, 2017: 26). In contrast, a president seeking reelection in the latter case should demonstrate activism and the ability to use their powers to be accountable to the electorate. From a normative perspective, principal-agent theory suggests that in a representative democracy, directly elected agents will behave rationally and make efforts to implement their political agenda. In turn, the rational principal will “reward” them with reelection (Lane, 2009). Following this line of reasoning, the power to propose legislation creates more opportunities for the president to be accountable to the electorate and fulfill their commitments.

It is noteworthy that securing reelection may be achieved not solely through the fulfillment of promises, but also through competition with the government (parliamentary majority). Several possible scenarios exist. If cohabitation prevails (when the president’s party is not in the government) or if the president is a true non-partisan (running in elections as an independent without any party affiliation), presidential activism through legislative initiatives may signal the president’s willingness to challenge and oppose governmental policies. Such confrontation can mobilize existing voters and attract undecided votes. The lower level of trust in parliament and government compared to the president (Raunio and Sedelius, 2020) creates favorable conditions for the president to compete with the government in pursuit of reelection.

We should note that, in a subset of semi-presidential systems, presidents are formally required to become non-partisan. In some regimes, such as in Portugal, they are required to relinquish party leadership and suspend their party membership. It is important to note that the formal non-partisan status of a president does not necessarily create incentives for competition with the government (as in cases of cohabitation or with a true non-partisan president). For example, if the

president previously belonged to the party currently in government, it is likely that the president will not seek to compete with their parliamentary majority. However, this only negates the competition motive for the president to propose a law. A president who has been nominated by a party and suspended their membership may seek to initiate legislation, assuming that the former party in power will be more favorable to their initiatives and will support them. On the other hand, if the president was previously a member of a party that is in opposition during their term, a cohabitation regime is likely due to the competition reasons discussed above, and the process of initiating successful legislation becomes more complicated.

Third, presidents may initiate laws due to policy-seeking motives. Behavioral theory suggests that policy-seeking political actors aim to maximize their impact on public policy (Strom, 1990). Presidents typically have manifestos outlining their political vision and objectives. While they often employ other tools, such as vetoes or going public tactics, to influence public policy, these tools have limitations. Even an amendatory veto is fundamentally reactive, as it is applied only to laws that have already been passed by parliament. Going public and related negotiating tactics are indirect methods for intervening in the law-making process. In contrast, the power to initiate legislation allows the president to propose amendments to previously adopted laws and to intervene directly in public policy with new legislation.

These theoretical and practical arguments justify why presidents can have and exercise the power of legislative initiative under semi-presidential regimes. However, proposing new legislation is only the first part of the process; parliament ultimately decides on legislation. What factors determine whether Parliament will adopt a presidential proposal? The next section discusses theoretical explanations related to the success of presidential legislative proposals.

3. What determines the success of presidential legislative initiatives?

The literature on presidential activism, particularly the success of presidential vetoes, distinguishes several groups of factors that may influence the success of presidential legislative initiatives: the political environment, president-centered factors, and the type (policy content) of legislation. The political environment encompasses determinants such as the strength of government, cohabitation (or unified government), parliamentary fragmentation, the point of presidential tenure (whether it is the first year of the term or later), and the election cycle. President-centered factors include the president's popularity and personal characteristics. Finally, the type of legislation considers the policy area of the initiative and its scope.

3.1 Political environment

If a proposal for legislation by the president requires a vote in parliament, then a unified government (or cohabitation regime) is a significant factor that explains the successful use of proactive legislative powers. In countries where presidents are affiliated with political parties, it is critically important for the president's party to control the majority in parliament and for the government to be unified to effectively shape the political agenda and initiate legislation (Edwards, 1989; Bond and Fleisher, 1990; Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2007). Under a unified government, the ideological beliefs of the president and her party typically align, making it easier to agree on policies and laws. Furthermore, if the president assumes leadership within her party, her authority can enhance support for initiatives in parliament; party members may be motivated to ask the president to formally propose legislation. However, this requires party discipline and coherence (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Croissant, 2003; Remington, 2006). Moreover, research on non-U.S. presidential democracies finds that a unified government is not always advantageous (Alemán and Calvo, 2010). Acknowledging these caveats, overall theory suggests that a unified government should increase both the use and success of presidential legislative initiatives under presidentialism and semi-presidentialism.

In addition, cohabitation—when the president and the parliamentary majority (as well as the government under semi-presidentialism) come from different ideological camps—should decrease the theoretical chances of success for presidential legislative initiatives. On one hand, literature on European presidential activism finds that presidents have more incentives to be active during periods of cohabitation. Differences in political agendas and ideologies between the president and the government may prompt the president to behave reactively, primarily by vetoing laws passed by parliament (Tavits, 2008; Köker, 2017). On the other hand, proactive legislative powers may be ineffective under such circumstances, as an opposing majority will effectively block the president's initiatives. Securing support from an ideologically opposing majority is challenging. Thus, it is likely that the president will propose fewer pieces of legislation during periods of cohabitation and will be less successful.

Under the European semi-presidential republics (with a notable exception of France), presidents are often non-partisans and/or distance themselves from party politics. It is important to note that this does not apply to other regions; for example, in Africa, the president typically dominates the executive. The classifications of cohabitation and unified governments are not directly applicable to such situations: in the case of Lithuania, all full-term presidents, except one (who had to relinquish party membership constitutionally but had previously been a party leader), were true non-partisans (without prior party affiliation). In this context, the strength of the government (the size of the parliamentary majority)

could be an important factor. Studies on presidential activism in Europe (Köker, 2017; Pukelis and Jastramskis, 2021) find that these presidents are more active and more successful in attaining their political goals when they face a weaker government (parliamentary majority). Extending this theoretical argument to proactive legislative power, the smaller the parliamentary majority (the weaker the government), the weaker the chances of consolidated opposition to presidential initiatives. In addition, under weaker (minority) governments, presidential efforts to pursue cooperation with opposition parties could be more effective. Research on presidential regimes (Alemán and Calvo, 2010) finds that sometimes presidents are able to gain support from opposition parties. This logic may also pertain to non-partisan presidents under semi-presidential regimes.

We should note that cohabitation in president-parliamentary systems may function somewhat differently. Under these regimes, both the parliament and the president have the authority to dismiss the prime minister. Hence, the prime minister is accountable to two principals: the parliament and the president (Protsyk, 2006). In theory, the president could use this arrangement to seek the prime minister's support for legislative initiatives, either in parliament or within the prime minister's own party; the president enjoys a significant advantage even under cohabitation. However, since our focus is on premier-presidential systems, we do not test these arguments.

Theoretical arguments related to cohabitation, unified government, and the strength of government lead to the formulation of hypotheses H1a and H1b. Although Lithuanian presidents tend to be non-partisan—not just formally, as voters usually elect presidents without party affiliations—the term of the first democratically elected Lithuanian president, Algirdas M. Brazauskas, enables us to test the first hypothesis. Brazauskas was the de facto leader of the ex-communist left, which held the parliamentary majority from 1993 to 1996. Although he formally quit the party when elected, his ties to the organization remained very close, and he even handpicked prime ministers (Raunio and Sedelius, 2019).

H1a: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when a unified government (president and prime minister from the same party) is in place.

H1b: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when the strength of the government decreases.

In multi-party systems, the composition of parliament tends to vary. The greater the fragmentation of parliament, the more difficult it becomes to reach compromises and make decisions, such as forming coalitions or implementing important legislative reforms. These factors could also complicate the effectiveness of presidential legislative proposals, even if the president enjoys strong authority

and a working relationship with the parliamentary majority. For the president to gain support for a legislative initiative in parliament, the president or her team should formally or informally engage in communication with legislators and parliamentary groupings (Neustadt, 1955). In the case of a highly fragmented parliament, such communication becomes particularly challenging due to the necessity of reaching a consensus among a larger number of parties with various ideologies and interests. These obstacles may reduce the president's motivation to propose legislation and also hinder success, as there is less certainty regarding the approval of her proposal by the fragmented parliament (Mainwaring and Shugart, 1997; Croissant, 2003).

On the other hand, some non-partisan presidents may actually benefit from greater fragmentation, as the lack of party affiliation allows them to reach agreements with a larger number of political groups. Therefore, in the case of a conflict between the president and one or more parliamentary groups, possibilities remain for the president to attract votes from other factions. While acknowledging these theoretical caveats, we still hypothesize that high fragmentation (on average) should reduce the likelihood of a successful presidential legislative initiative because of the considerable effort required to convince a large number of different political groupings. In addition, a larger number of factions in parliament increases the risk that some parliamentary groups might break the agreement and change their position on the presidential initiative.

H2: Likelihood of successful legislative initiative decreases when the fragmentation of parliament increases.

Literature also suggests that the success of presidential legislative initiatives depends on the election cycle and the point of the president's tenure (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2005; Alcántara Sáez and Moreno, 2008; Mimica et al., 2023). Under presidential and semi-presidential regimes, voters give a direct mandate to both the parliament and the president. This creates incentives for presidential activism: Köker (2015, 2017) finds that directly elected presidents in semi-presidential regimes more frequently initiate legislation and exercise veto power compared to their counterparts in parliamentary systems. Moreover, this activism could be related to the point of tenure and the election cycle. The beginning of a president's tenure is characterized by a honeymoon phase, during which the president enjoys greater popularity. Light (1999) argues that the first year of a president's tenure should open up the most opportunities for presidential activism and efficiency, regardless of whether it is the first or final term. A newly elected president possesses a fresh mandate from the electorate and is consequently more favored by both the public and the media (Dominguez and Knudsen, 2002). This fresh legitimacy is useful when pursuing the president's agenda, as it demonstrates to

political opponents her authority and the support of the electorate. Bearing this in mind, it can be expected that the president will propose more legislation and will have more success during the first year of her term.

Meanwhile, at the end of the second presidential term, it is not expected for the president to be active and successful. First, since presidents usually cannot seek reelection in their second term, there is less need to maintain high public approval ratings. As Köker (2017) argues, presidents in their second term typically focus on policies that are personally important to them, resulting in weaker incentives to use their activism for representing voters. Moreover, it has been observed that lame-duck presidents gradually lose informal power over the course of their term, particularly in comparison to their first term or the first year of their second term. They are generally less motivated to maintain a prominent role in the political system (Grossman et al., 1998; Eshbaugh-Soha, 2005; Köker, 2017). Therefore, we expect that the success rate of presidential initiatives will be higher in the first year of office (H3a) and lower in the later years of the second term (H3b).

H3a: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases during the first year of the term.

H3b: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative decreases during the last years of the second term.

3.2 President-centered explanations

Presidential success in legislative initiatives can also be explained by president-centered factors. First, the president's popularity can significantly influence the incentives for utilizing proactive legislative power and its success. Literature indicates that parliament is more likely to respect the opinion of a popular president. This suggests that a particular president enjoys approval from a substantial portion of the public, which can stem from her personality, policies, or the institution itself (Canes-Wrone and De Marchi, 2002; Barrett and Eshbaugh-Soha, 2007). Furthermore, under semi-presidentialism, presidents are typically more popular than the other branches of government (Raunio and Sedelius, 2020).

While a president typically enjoys peak popularity ratings during the honeymoon period (supporting our hypothesis H3a), public approval can also fluctuate throughout a president's tenure (Kujanen, 2023: 236). Consequently, a president's behavior may depend on these fluctuations: during periods of waning popularity, the president may strategically choose to refrain from proposing new laws to parliament. Conversely, during times of increased popularity, a window of opportunity emerges to leverage this power, with the hope of gaining parliamentary approval for initiatives.

To enhance the likelihood of a successful initiative, presidents often employ a “going public” strategy, exerting public pressure on legislators to pass specific laws (Barrett, 2004). This approach can be effective, as legislators must consider the potential consequences for their own popularity when opposing popular presidents (Kernell, 1997). Furthermore, when a popular president publicly identifies her policy priorities, it increases the likelihood that legislators will adopt a more favorable stance toward those priorities (Peterson, 1990; Fett, 1994). These arguments lead us to expect that the success rate of a presidential legislative initiative will be higher when the president’s public approval (popularity) is greater.

H4: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when the president enjoys greater popularity.

Existing literature on presidential activism has shown that presidents’ actions are significantly influenced by their personal attributes, particularly political experience and professional background (Lee, 1975; Hager and Sullivan, 1994). The approval of a legislative initiative necessitates both formal and informal communication with various parliamentary groups. A president with political experience is typically better equipped to navigate these negotiations, discerning which political factions are more amenable to persuasion and understanding prior decisions made by legislators on similar topics. Research on the U.S. context reveals that the relevance of political experience extends beyond mere presence; it also encompasses the type of experience acquired, whether through legislative or executive roles (Lee, 1975). For instance, if a president has previously served as a member of Congress, it is likely that current members will view such a president more favorably. Consequently, the likelihood of success for legislative initiatives should correspondingly increase.

Furthermore, as the presidency is a single-person institution, certain decisions and actions—and their consequences—may naturally be influenced by the personal traits of the president (Hager and Sullivan, 1994; Gilmour, 2002; Barber, 2009). For instance, if a president is ambitious or proactive, it is likely that a greater number of legislative initiatives will be proposed. Conversely, traits such as stubbornness, reluctance to compromise, or ineffective communication may negatively impact the success of these initiatives. In the U.S. context, scholars identify several essential characteristics for presidents: the ability to communicate, organizational capacity, emotional intelligence, power motivation, and achievement motivation (Cohen, 1980; Greenstein, 2005). Given the challenges in measuring personal or character traits—and in raising hypotheses related to them—some studies (e.g. Köker, 2017) opt to use dummy variables for specific presidents. In this paper, we follow this methodological approach.

3.3 Legislation content

Legislation varies in terms of importance, scope, and policy areas. Furthermore, both the public and parliament may support not only the president as an individual or institution but also specific proposals. Therefore, the content of legislation can significantly impact the success of presidential legislative initiatives.

First, the success of a presidential legislative initiative may depend on the subject matter of the proposed law. In presidential regimes, presidents are accountable for both socio-economic and foreign policies. However, existing literature suggests that policy bills related to foreign policy are more likely to succeed than those focused on domestic issues (Milner and Tingley, 2015; Feliú Ribeiro et al., 2021). Wildavsky (1966) refers to the differing levels of congressional support for domestic and foreign policy initiatives as the “two presidencies thesis.”

The higher success rate for foreign policy initiatives can be attributed to several factors: presidents have privileged access to information regarding foreign affairs, there are lower electoral incentives related to these issues, and there is a greater demand for state secrecy (Feliú Ribeiro et al., 2021). Additionally, in Latin American presidential systems—where the president serves as a central state agent in the international arena—rejection of foreign policy bills can negatively affect the president’s credibility and public image (Ripley and Lindsay, 1993; Malamud, 2014; Burges and Chagas, 2017).

Under semi-presidential regimes, presidents share executive power with the prime minister. However, in most European semi-presidential democracies (with the notable exception of France), presidents generally have limited influence over government affairs and are not accountable for social and economic policies, which fall under the government’s purview. Nonetheless, presidents in these regimes typically play some role in foreign and defense policy; in many cases, a directly elected president serves as the commander-in-chief. Given this constitutional role, it is likely that parliament will respect presidential initiatives in the areas of foreign and defense policy. In contrast, parliament may be more skeptical of presidential initiatives related to economic and social policies, perceiving them as attempts to encroach on the government’s sphere of competence.

Regarding the constitutional role of presidents, it is noteworthy that some presidents of European semi-presidential countries, such as Lithuania and Portugal, have the authority to nominate key state and judicial officials, including the general prosecutor, head of state security, and judges of the Supreme Court. Furthermore, the presidents of Portugal and Ireland can refer legislation to the Supreme and Constitutional Courts. These powers confer upon the president the responsibility of safeguarding constitutional order and acting as a moderator in conflicts between institutions. If the president assumes the role of a moderating power within the political system (Feijó, 2020), she should be impartial and strive to benefit the

political system as a whole rather than favoring a specific group. Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate that the president's legislative initiatives concerning the organization of government and institutions will be more successful. Based on these arguments regarding the president's role in a semi-presidential regime, we propose several hypotheses that predict varying rates of success for presidential legislative initiatives across different policy areas.

H5a: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when proposal is in foreign and/or defense policy domain.

H5b: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative decreases when the president proposes a bill related to social and economic policy.

H5c: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when proposal is related to government organization.

Finally, the scope and importance of the legislation can greatly determine its passage through parliament. Laws of greater significance (such as budgetary legislation and socio-economic reforms) tend to be ideologically charged, often aiming for substantial changes to existing policies. This line of reasoning partly overlaps with the earlier argument regarding the diminished likelihood of success when the parliament and the president originate from opposing ideological factions. In instances of conflict between the government and the president, rejection of landmark legislation may be motivated by an effort to demonstrate that the president lacks sufficient political authority to exert a significant influence over the political agenda.

On the other hand, minor laws, such as technical amendments, may have a higher likelihood of success as they typically entail minimal alteration to the existing regulations (even during a period of cohabitation). A proposal is considered technical if it intends to correct certain technical shortcomings, such as factual details or internal inconsistencies in an existing bill. Despite the state of the president's (ideological) relationship with the parliamentary majority (government), the adoption of such bills could be useful for both the parliament (assuming that the parliament is interested in the quality of legislation) and the president. Moreover, they obviously do not provoke a sharp policy debate or ideological conflicts between legislators (and the president). Accordingly, we expect that such initiatives will be more successful than substantial ones (legislative initiatives by the president that substantially change the content of public policy).

H6: Likelihood of success of legislative initiative increases when the proposal is technical in nature.

4. Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we assembled an original dataset of 499 presidential legislative initiatives in Lithuania, spanning the period from March 1993 (when the first president after the restoration of independence assumed office) to December 2023. The bulk of the data was collected from the Seimas (Lithuanian parliament) website. However, as data from some periods was not complete, missing bills were additionally provided by the Chancellery of the Seimas. We observe that over time, presidents have increasingly exercised their right to initiate legislation (see Fig. 1) and have become more successful at it. The only notable exceptions to this general trend were Rolandas Paksas (impeached after spending just around a year in office) and the second term of Valdas Adamkus (2004-09). Presidents tend to be quite successful in their presidential legislative initiatives: the Lithuanian parliament approved them in 80% of the cases.

We have identified several types of presidential legislative initiatives based on their content. The first are initiatives that are purely technical in nature and address small issues in existing legislation. One example is an amendment to the law on supervision of financial institutions, allowing regulators to ask courts to freeze a financial institution’s assets upon finding evidence of fraud. Another example is a

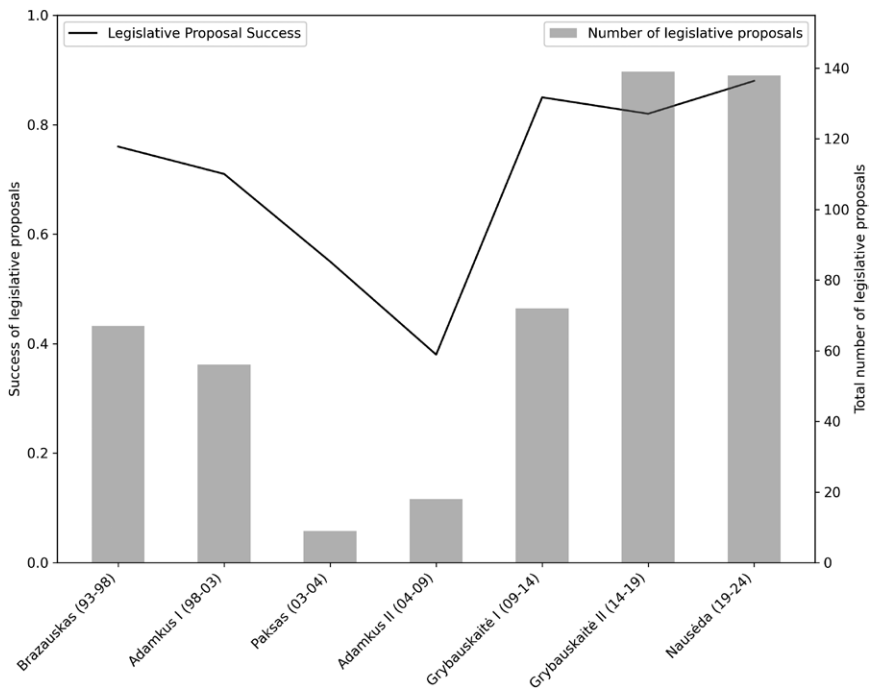


Figure 1. The number and success rate of presidential legislative initiatives by presidential terms

legislative initiative allowing unsuccessful applicants to appeal the decision of the attestation board for notary public officials. We identified these initiatives based on their length in words and considered any initiative under 150 words (the 1st quartile) to be technical.

The other categories we identified are legislative initiatives related to: 1 foreign and defense policy; 2 socio-economic policies; and 3 government organization, including key political institutions like courts, the organization of elections, election campaign financing rules, etc. We identified these categories using a dictionary-classification approach. For each category, we developed a specialized dictionary (see [Appendix](#)) and assigned a legislative initiative to a specific type if it contained at least two terms from that category. The number and success rate of the presidential legislative initiatives by type are presented in [Table 1](#). We can observe that initiatives in foreign and defense policy tend to be more successful (90%) than the other categories.

In our regression models that aim to explain the success of initiatives, we use the following variables (which correspond to the factors covered in the literature review). First, to account for the effects of the election cycle, we added dummies for the first year of the presidential term and the last two years of the second presidential term. Second, to account for the strength of government and parliamentary majority, we included a dummy variable for minority cabinets obtained from the ParlGov dataset ([Döring et al., 2023](#)). We also added a dummy variable for unified government, indicating instances when the president was (originated) from the same party as the prime minister. We measured the degree of fragmentation in parliament using the effective number of parliamentary parties (Laakso-Taagepera index). To account for presidential popularity, we included a measure of popular support for the president based on public opinion polls ([Vilmorus, 2024](#)). Lastly, we added two control variables: years since the restoration of independence (to account for the time and learning effects) and a dummy variable for President Dalia Grybauskaitė, who is known for her exceptional political experience (prior to her presidential post, she served as finance minister and European Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budgets).

Table 1. Legislative initiative count and success rate by type

Legislative initiative type	Count	Success rate
All	499	80%
Technical	146	77%
Foreign/Defense policy	41	90%
Social/Economic policy	65	74%
Government organization	149	83%

For our main analysis, we ran logistic regression models using a dummy measure for the success of a presidential legislative initiative as the dependent variable. We ran a total of seven regression models: factors of political environment (M1) and factors of political environment with controls (M2); president-centered factors (M3) and president-centered factors with controls (M4); factors of policy content (M5) and factors of policy content with controls (M6). Finally, in the last general model (M7), we included all the above variables. The results of the regression models are presented in [Table 2](#).

In our first model (factors of the political environment), the coefficient of the minority cabinet is statistically significant; however, it runs against the expected direction and decreases the chances of success (H1b rejected). This could occur because under minority cabinets it is much more difficult for the parliament to mobilize a sufficient number of votes to pass any legislation; quite interestingly, this may also apply to presidential initiatives. In the second model (with control variables), the coefficients of the unified government variable and the last two years of the presidential term were significant and ran in the expected direction: the former increases (H1a supported) and the latter decreases (H3b supported) the probability of success in legislative initiatives by presidents. We did not find any support for H2 and H3a, as neither the degree of parliamentary fragmentation nor the first year of the presidential term had any significant effect in any model.

Somewhat surprisingly, in the third model, we find that presidential popularity has a significant effect running in the opposite direction than expected: the more popular the president is, the lesser the chances of success in law-making (H4 rejected). When presidents are more popular, they possibly resort more often to public tactics and engage less in informal coordination with members of parliament; this may result in a counter-effect. On the other hand, this variable loses statistical significance in the model with controls and in the general model (M7), so we should not overstate this relationship.

In our fifth model, we find that the coefficient of initiatives in foreign and defense policy is significant and runs in the expected direction: as observed from the descriptive statistics ([Table 1](#)), legislative initiatives in these areas increase the chances of presidential success (H5a supported). However, other types of policy content (including the technical scope) do not have significant effects (all related hypotheses are rejected). Moreover, the coefficient of initiatives in foreign and defense policy loses significance in the model with controls (M6), although it retains the direction formulated in H5a. In summary, support for the hypotheses that theorize the influence of the policy content of initiatives is rather weak.

Finally, we find that in all the models where it was included (M2, M4, M6, and M7), the variable for time and learning effects (years since independence) has a positive and significant effect. This clearly suggests that over time, Lithuanian presidents learn how to initiate legislation more successfully. Arguably, this is a

Table 2. Regression results

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Unified gov.	0.35 (0.57)	1.08^b (0.58)					0.81 (0.55)
Minority gov.	-1.2^b (0.47)	-0.57 (0.49)					-0.77 (0.52)
Parl. fragmentation	0.14 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.15)					0.1 (0.15)
First year	-0.16 (0.29)	-0.31 (0.3)					-0.31 (0.32)
Last years	-0.59 (0.73)	-1.2^b (0.5)					-1.06^b (0.53)
Presidential popularity			-0.04^b (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)			-0.01 (0.02)
Foreign/Defense policy					0.92^a (0.55)	0.79 (0.56)	0.36 (0.54)
Social/economic policy					-0.27 (0.32)	-0.29 (0.33)	-0.36 (0.35)
Gov. organization					0.28 (0.27)	0.25 (0.28)	0.33 (0.29)
Technical					-0.21 (0.25)	-0.08 (0.25)	-0.22 (0.27)
Dalia Grybauskaitė		0.11 (0.27)		0.4 (0.3)		0.1 (0.26)	0.22 (0.34)
Years since independence		0.06^c (0.02)		0.04^a (0.02)		0.03^b (0.01)	0.06^b (0.01)
Constant	1.01 (0.73)	0.48 (0.69)	3.35^c (0.77)	1.9 (1.3)	1.36^c (0.18)	0.65^b (0.32)	0.36 (1.44)
(pseudo) R2	0.05	0.08	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.09
N	499	499	433	433	499	499	433

^a $p < .1$,

^b $p < .05$,

^c $p < .0001$.

process of institutional learning (which is not much related to the learning of individual presidents) that is linked to the consolidation of consultation mechanisms between the parliament and the president. Some of the expert and high-profile interviews we conducted for our research on the Lithuanian presidency suggest that extensive consultation and coordination with major parliamentary party groups usually occur prior to submitting of presidential legislative initiatives to parliament. This process helps facilitate their success.

We have to admit that in the final model (M7) only two of the coefficients are statistically significant: the last two years of the second presidential term and the years since independence. This could occur because, overall, presidential legislative initiatives tend to be quite successful (with a success rate of 80%). When we add a number of explanatory variables to the model, there simply is not enough variation in the dependent variable (once we account for learning effects and those of the last years of the second presidential term) for the weaker effects to remain statistically significant.

5. Discussion

How do the results of our quantitative analysis compare to the related research and data? First, the interpretation of our major finding—that the increasing success of presidential legislative initiatives over time in Lithuania indicates the consolidation of consultation mechanisms between the parliament and the president—is well corroborated by qualitative data. In our research on the Lithuanian presidency, we conducted several high-profile interviews with prime ministers, presidents, and their advisers. Some of the questions in these interviews were related to the presidential role in the legislative process. It appears that, in recent terms, presidents often introduce their legislation after informal consultations with the government and parliament, sometimes including the opposition. This practice of informal consultations explains the general rate of legislative success that we find in our models and corroborates the interpretation of consolidating coordination mechanisms.

In addition, prime ministers usually acknowledge the presidential right to initiate legislation that relates to other constitutional roles of the president: first, foreign and national security policies, and second, matters related to transparency, the judicial system, and administrative codes (the president enjoys substantial powers in nominating judges). Their general stance towards the legislative initiatives of non-partisan presidents is neutral or even positive, except in those instances when the presidential legislative initiatives “fall from the clear sky” without prior consultations and relate to significant changes in public policy. According to informants, such initiatives have lower chances of success. This partly explains why the success rate is rather high but not ideal (hovering around 80 percent).

When we compare our results with those from other countries, some of our findings are quite similar to the research on presidential activism and legislative initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe. Köker (2015) finds that directly elected presidents (in Lithuania and Poland) submit significantly more legislative initiatives than indirectly elected presidents (in Hungary and Latvia). Our analysis corroborates this finding: it appears that directly elected presidents in Lithuania actively use their power and even become more active over time. Moreover, they are quite successful, and one of the apparent conditions for this success is their independence from the parliament (due to direct election). There are also some similarities that relate to the electoral cycle. Although we do not specifically find that presidents tend to submit more (successful) proposals during their first term (Köker, 2015), we found a statistically significant drop in the success of initiatives during the last years of the presidency.

Regarding our main finding—increasing success of presidential legislative initiatives over time—its applicability is restricted due to the lack of data in similar countries and regimes. We attempt to present some tenuous generalizations, but they should be treated with caution and serve rather as hypotheses for further research. Although presidents in Latvia are dependent on parliament for reelection and are not very active in law-making, their status as respected figures could possibly result in similarly high rates of success and coordination mechanisms. As in the Lithuanian case, the tradition of compromise presidents, who are usually not affiliated with any parties and are relatively popular (Auers, 2015), creates favorable conditions for informal political consultations between legislature and the president. Regarding Hungary, regression to electoral autocracy (where all branches of government are controlled by the same party) probably negates most of the democratic processes discussed in our article.

The closest comparison is to semi-presidential Poland; however, data on the success of presidential legislative initiatives is scarce. In their analysis of law-making in Poland, Goetz and Zubek (2007) briefly note that the success rate of bills proposed by the government is higher than that of other actors (including the president). Köker (forthcoming) in his analysis of Polish presidency notes a relatively high number of successful legislative initiatives by recent presidents Bronisław Komorowski and Andrzej Duda. This success is likely explained by the fact that their terms in office mostly coincided with periods of unified government. Even though the parties in Poland are not organized around presidential candidates (i.e. presidential candidates are typically not party leaders), presidents there tend to be partisan (in contrast to Lithuania) and align with the parties. Therefore, factors of cohabitation and unified government in the Polish case could be more important than the informal mechanisms that appear to consolidate between Lithuanian non-partisan presidents and parliament. Although the comparison between the two countries is probably rather complicated due to the recently diverged trends

in democracy, further research could explore the possibility of applying our framework for the Polish case.

6. Conclusion

In this article, we analyzed the factors that may explain the success of presidential legislative initiatives in semi-presidential regimes. This is a somewhat neglected topic, as there are relatively few studies focusing on the legislative powers of presidents in Europe. We have identified three major sets of explanations. First, the political environment links the success of presidential legislative initiatives with the political context of the presidency. The second set of explanations is related to the personality of the president herself and her general popularity. Finally, the third set of explanations relates to the policy content of legislation and its technical (substantial) scope. Our analysis focused on Lithuania, one of the few political systems in Europe where presidents have the power to initiate legislation. For this analysis, we assembled an original dataset of 499 legislative initiatives. Our analysis lead to the following conclusions.

First, factors of the political environment play a relatively important role in determining the success of presidential legislative initiatives. As expected, we found that a unified government (when both the president and the prime minister are from the same party) positively affects the success of presidential bills. However, contrary to our theoretical expectations, we found that under a minority cabinet, presidential legislative initiatives tend to be less successful. This could occur because, in these situations, it is much harder to mobilize parliament to adopt any proposed bill; quite interestingly, it also affects the efforts of non-partisan presidents. We also found that presidential legislative initiatives tend to be less successful during the last two years of the president's final term: it is more difficult for a lame-duck president to be successful in law-making. This is one of the most robust findings of the study.

Second, although we did not find any empirical support for the president-centered theory, the policy content of legislative initiatives matters somewhat: presidential legislative initiatives falling under the foreign and defense policy domains tend to be more successful. This possibly occurs because, in Lithuania, these policy spheres are more in line with the constitutional role of the president, and the president is expected to play a more prominent role in them (Pukelis and Jastramskis, 2021). We must add a reservation that the effect of foreign and defense policy was not consistently significant across all the models. We did not find a significant influence from other types of policy content; however, we must emphasize that Lithuanian presidents in general are successful when initiating amendments to the laws.

Third and most importantly, our control variable for time and learning effects (years after the restoration of independence) was significant in all models where

it was included: time increases the chances of presidential success. This seems to suggest that, over time, non-partisan presidents in Lithuania learned how to initiate legislation more successfully; however, this is most likely not due to individual presidents' learning, but rather indicates a learning of the presidential institution (notwithstanding the person) and also the consolidation of mechanisms for consultations between the president and legislature. This could be both a sign and an outcome of democratic consolidation, as Lithuania is one of the few post-Soviet regimes that has retained liberal democracy for three decades since the initial democratization. These findings are important for the general research on semi-presidentialism: they demonstrate that under a premier-presidential system, a directly elected and non-partisan president who enjoys substantial powers and also has legislative powers (but is not the dominant executive) could play a rather positive and constructive role in law-making.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

Funding

Authors are grateful for the support of the Lithuanian Research Council (Grant no. S-MIP-22-21).

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