Chapter Seven Short Answer (Answers Below)

1. Compare and contrast the premier-presidential and president-parliamentary systems.
2. Explain the distinguishing features of coalitional presidentialism.
3. Explain how presidential powers of appointment are part of the checks-and-balances system.
4. Explain how the US Constitution can be both strong and weak.
5. Explain the dynamics of cohabitation.

Answers

1. Both systems are hybrids, in that they incorporate elements of both the presidential and parliamentary systems. In addition, both systems involve a division within the political executive. Where they differ is the relative degree of power of each component of the executive, and the relationship between them. Premier-presidential systems grant the president the ability to name the prime minister, but not to dismiss her (i.e., they have discretion over who has the opportunity to form the government, but cannot create the conditions in which it is possible to exercise them). In the presidential-parliamentary system, the president also has the ability to dismiss the prime minister (as does parliament). In both cases, the confidence of parliament remains a relevant factor, so both systems have been defined as “transactional,” in that although presidents have enhanced powers, they cannot act without regard for the realities of support in the parliament, or the preferences of legislators.
2. Unlike the classic (i.e., US) Madisonian model, coalitional presidentialism is distinguished by a greater degree of executive influence, along with a greater degree of co-operation between parties and government branches. Because the barriers between branches of government are more permeable, and because electoral systems tend to be proportional, presidents are less likely to be able to rely on effective single-party support (or, alternatively, are faced with a hostile and effective legislature). Instead, there exist considerable incentives for them to form alliances with a number of smaller parties, to the extent of bringing leaders of other parties into cabinet in a facsimile of coalition government. The relatively greater internal division of the legislature, along with an enhanced capacity for patronage, puts presidents in a relatively stronger position. In coalitional presidentialism, there is a tendency for executive dominance.
3. While presidents do not have direct access to the process of generating law, they do have considerable ability to shape how it is implemented, both during their time in office and afterward. A president’s ability to appoint cabinet (and the fact that senior members of the executive owe their position to the president) means that presidents are in a position to influence the implementation of laws designed by the legislature. In addition, because of their powers of judicial appointment, presidents have the ability to shape how laws will be interpreted if subject to judicial review or constitutional challenge. While it is possible for a legislature to “shut out” a president from the formation of law, the legislature itself cannot influence the law’s implementation, insofar as that is the prerogative of the executive, the most influential member of which is the president.
4. The US Constitution is commonly held up as an example of a strong constitution, that is, one with effective checks on government authority built in to it (via checks and balances, among other factors), and which is difficult to change. The rigidity that gives this constitution its strength, however, can also be viewed as a weakness, in that it makes it relatively difficult for the US government to change and adapt in response to new demands and circumstances. The United States is a radically different country than it was when the constitution was drafted: it occupies a different place on the world stage, and it faces a different set of challenges. Despite this, its fundamental rules of government remain rooted in a tradition of thought specific to the eighteenth century.
5. Cohabitation is the term applied to the situation in a semi-presidential system where the president and prime minister come from different parties or factions. Under such circumstances, there is a contradictory mutual tendency. On the one hand, the government tends to function more like a parliamentary system, in that the prime minister and government are effectively accountable to the legislature and are held accountable by the public for policy, especially economic policy. On the other hand, the potential for factional confrontation between the president and prime minister can lead to a degree of deadlock in government, something not typically associated with the parliamentary system.