A Rejoinder to Dowding

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I would like to thank Professor Keith Dowding for responding to my article (Kefford 2013) and the AJPS for providing space for this rejoinder. In three recent articles, Dowding (2012, 2013a, 2013b) has attempted to demonstrate, unsuccessfully in my view, the superficiality of debates about presidentialisation, and that this thesis should be ‘expunged from political science vocabulary’ (Dowding 2012, 1). His argument is similar in each of these papers, and as far as I can tell, his view is based on two central claims. First, that prime ministers in Australia and the United Kingdom are becoming less, not more, like the president of the United States (US). Second, that similar forces may be affecting liberal democracies globally, but they have ‘divergent effects’ due to institutional differences (Dowding 2013b, 147).

In Dowding’s opinion, presidentialisation consists of behavioural and institutional aspects. He argues that the behavioural aspect can be seen in terms of personalisation, while the institutional aspect relates to centralisation of prime ministerial resources. In his view, both features make parliamentary systems less, not more, like presidential systems. It is hard to disagree with his overarching observation that presidentialisation has a behavioural and institutional aspect since the thesis does have both a structural and an agency focus. Nonetheless, problems emerge in Dowding’s explanation of why these factors do not equate to presidentialisation, and in his use of the US as his ideal type and primary source for counter-evidence.

In the three articles, Dowding has attempted to demonstrate why Australian and British leaders are not becoming more like the US president, and he has provided evidence from the US to highlight differences. This approach is baffling, considering that Poguntke and Webb (2005; Webb and Poguntke 2012) have clearly stated the basis for their model, which has nothing to do with the US president. Dowding (2012, 2) can disagree with what Poguntke and Webb (2005, 4) view as ‘the inherent functional logic of presidential regimes’. But his insistence on using evidence from the US to make his point muddies a debate that is already riddled with technical jargon and mired in semantics (Dowding 2012, 2013b). In the second article (2013a, 9), Dowding called for an end to ‘The use of the one-hundred-year old technique of ideal types in comparative political science’. He cannot criticise the model for being based on an ‘ideal type’, only then to refer to one of his own.

Dowding’s argument about the importance of institutions in determining the effects of global forces is well made. I highlight the importance of institutions by demonstrating the way presidentialisation unfolds, as conceptualised by Poguntke
and Webb (2005), takes distinct forms in Australia because of Australia’s particular mix of institutions. This institutional architecture combines dominant parties and long-held advantages for the prime minister. Despite Dowding’s claim that I make no comparisons, I argue that: ‘The executive face of presidentialisation in Australia may not reveal as much as in other systems because Australian prime ministers have always enjoyed institutional advantages that British prime ministers, for example, have not’ (Kefford 2013, 143). Throughout the paper, I note how I think it contributes to the international literature that uses Poguntke and Webb’s (2005) model, which by its very nature is comparative.

In my view, Poguntke and Webb’s model provides an effective conceptual framework for comparatively examining the phenomena that are central to this debate. It is not without flaw, and elements could be conceptually clearer, but Dowding’s critique obscures what the thesis is about. The thesis focuses, most notably, on whether leaders have more power resources than previously, and what they can achieve with these resources (see also Karvonen 2010). This is what is contested in the literature on presidentialisation, not whether one ideal type is better than another.

References