Civil–Military Relations: Through a Perilous Lens

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Abstract

Since Huntington's seminal work *The Soldier and the State*, the scholarship on civil–military relations in the American context has often emphasized the need for a professional military to maintain an apolitical stance and let the civilian principals lead. In this article, we ask, what can we learn about civil-military relations by seeking to better understand the relationship between political institutions and the politicization of the military? We argue that this literature insufficiently accounts for the perils that exist within separation of powers (i.e., presidential) systems. Consequently, the existing scholarship cannot distinguish when politicization happens because of or despite civilian principals. We use long-standing arguments from Comparative Politics to explain why problems of separation of powers systems are endemic to these institutions. We then present five questions and two examples to facilitate a theoretical reframing of the subject. Our argument suggests more work is needed to understand how American political institutions shape civil–military relations.

Keywords: civil–military relations, politicization, presidentialism, separation of powers

> ". . . the Constitution, considered only for its affirmative grants of powers capable of affecting the issues, is an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy."
> Corwin, 1984, p. 201

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to advance an argument about the nature of civil–military relations in presidential systems.[1] We believe that the same institutional characteristics that Linz (1990) argues lead to "the perils of presidentialism," and which Corwin (1984) suggests provide "an invitation to struggle," shape American civil–military relations in important and underappreciated ways. Others have noted the challenges the Constitution presents to civil-military relations. Notably, Huntington (1956a) said, "the American Constitution in the twentieth century obstructs the achievement of civilian control" (p. 676). But in framing the central problem of civil–military relations as one of "civilian control" over the military, Huntington (1956a, 1956b, 1957) focuses our attention on and asks us to address symptoms of a problem that others have argued is inherently unresolvable. Recognizing the importance of the relationship between civilians and the military as a broader governance problem (Brooks,

2019), we believe the civil–military relations literature is yet to adequately understand the ur-challenge in American civil–military relations: How the institutional characteristics of presidential systems incentivize elites to politicize the military.

The leading framework for thinking about American civil–military relations today comes from Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* (1957). This "normal theory" of civil-military relations remains monolithic in the field (Cohen, 2002, p. 248; Nielsen & Snider, 2009). The theory is both descriptive and normative. It describes the institutional characteristics of the American political system and its relationship with civil–military relations. It also falls in line with what Burk calls the central problem in civil–military theory—"to explain how civilian control over the military is established and maintained" (2002, p. 7). We might ask, what factors establish and maintain the nature of the relationship between civilians and the military in the American political system? To better understand this question, we turn to work from Comparative Politics.

In "The Perils of Presidentialism," Linz (1990) explains that because both the executive and the members of the legislature use claims of representation to advance their political power, separation of powers systems face problems of dual legitimacy. While Madison (1788) saw the need to institute checks on political power to counteract political ambition, Linz recognized the institutional arrangements of presidential systems sometimes manifest authoritarian reversals through gridlock, overreach, and democratic collapse. At the same time, in Linz's words, as "the only presidential democracy with a long history of constitutional continuity," the United States is an outlier (1990, pp. 51–52). The fact that the United States is an outlier warrants attention. In what ways is it like other presidential systems? On the contrary, what characteristics of the American political system make it different from other separation of power systems?

We find the literature on American civil–military relations to be at odds with Linz's insights. In fact, the genesis of this article was a realization that the commentary on American civil–military relations was bereft of his and similar insights. While remaining apolitical is the *sine qua non* of the American military professional—and therefore essential to the character of civil–military relations in American society—Linz (1990) argued that separation of powers systems create incentives for civilian politicians and administrators to advance their political power by politicizing the military. At a certain point, these ends are unreconcilable. This article explores why American political institutions ultimately limit the military's ability to remain apolitical.

We must acknowledge that Huntington was aware of the same constitutional struggles we discuss here. He understood that American political institutions could influence civil-military relations.[2] He was concerned about the possible consequences for civilian and military actors. But it is on this point that our work differs significantly from Huntington.

One should understand our point of departure as having an interest in understanding how the political institutions of presidential systems influence civil-military relations. Thus, instead of asking "What should we do?," we want to encourage researchers to better understand the conditions relevant to civil–military relations that presidential institutions will manifest. Ultimately, we agree this question is critical for both practitioners and scholars. Yet, as should become clear, the factors of instability in presidential systems are legion. Ergo, we ultimately believe that our responses to the "What should we do?" question plausibly hinge on the circumstances of a given issue or situation. Thus, rather than assuming one course of action for all issues in civil–military relations, we assume an appropriate—not necessarily best—action and implementation come after comprehension of the phenomenon one might wish to address. Understood in this way, we believe scholars can dedicate more attention to the ways in which various institutions (organizational, political, etc.) shape American civil–military relations.

In the next section, we review and assess the Normal School of civil–military relations. This includes a discussion of the awareness Huntington had of the constitutional challenge to civil–military relations and the prescriptions he suggested to combat it. We then highlight some assumptions we believe Huntington made that we view as critical to his work, followed by several critiques of the normal theory. We end this section pointing to work in Comparative Politics that we believe provides an important contribution to thinking about civil–military relations in presidential systems. Following that, we review arguments from Comparative Politics that describe the "perils of presidentialism." In doing so, we develop our argument that the structural factors in the separation of power systems are important to civil–military relationships. This is in line with Brooks' call "for promoting integration within the subfield of civil–military relations and connecting with other research areas in the discipline of political science" (2019, p. 390). In the subsequent section, we provide a theoretical reframing for the field based on the following question: What can we learn about civil-military relations by seeking to better understand the relationship between political institutions and the politicization of the military? We then provide four questions scholars can use in their research to, hopefully, engage the problems of civil-military relations in new ways. We then provide two examples that illustrate the politicization of the military across four levels of analysis before concluding the essay.

Huntington and the Normal School

Constitutional Baggage

Samuel Huntington clearly appreciated the force with which political competition influences American political institutions. He grasped the constitutional structure of the United States could ultimately contribute to problems in civil–military relations (Huntington, 1956a, 1957). He articulated an understanding that the competing principal problem arises out of the separation of powers versus the separation of function problem—"The independence of Congress and President from each other and from any other higher institutional authority means that both share in the ultimate power to govern. Inevitably, the result is continuous rivalry and friction" (1957, pp. 401–402). Yet, while Huntington (1957) ultimately saw this rivalry as exemplifying "the basic genius of American government" (p. 403), Linz saw this political competition as the source of institutional friction in presidential systems. Huntington also understood the structural constants of the American political system increased "the likelihood that military leaders will be drawn into" political controversies (1957, p. 179).[3] Yet it is clear from other writing that he intends this to mean the military drawing itself into politics rather than civilians inviting the military into the political arena to increase their own claims of legitimacy:

> Just as the separation of powers is a standing invitation to military leaders to make an end run around the President to Congress, the Commander in Chief clause is a standing invitation to make an end run around the civilian secretary to the President. (Huntington, 1956a, p. 693)

Thus, while he discerns the problem and is aware of its contours, we believe he fell short of appropriately understanding the myriad and nuanced ways in which the institutional structure of a presidential system can influence civil–military relations—more directly, how the institutions of presidential systems incentivize politicians to politicize the military. Furthermore, Huntington understood that aspects of the American political milieu can lead to frictions with the potential to develop into existential crises for the republic. He believed that

the American political system and the prevailing values in the broader society raised important problems for civil–military relations. For example, he believed differences between the military and the civilians on social issues could degrade into civil-military crisis points (Huntington, 1957).

Huntington believed the Constitution may have been adequate for addressing problems of civil–military relations, and more specifically civilian control, in the 18th Century but failed to foresee some of its challenges in the 20th century: "The Framers did not foresee the rise of popular democracy; consequently, they did not provide for political parties. They did not foresee the rise of the military profession; consequently, they did not provide for civilian control" (1957, p. 190).

To address these concerns, he used an institutional perspective to develop two conceptual lenses with which to understand American civil-military relations. First, he argued for the need for separate spheres of (1) civilian control (i.e., for the development of strategic objectives) and (2) military control (i.e., to carry out operations in line with end goals provided by civilian principals). Second, he argued that increasing the professionalization of the military could prevent what he characterized as subjective civilian control, which he defined as "maximizing civilian power" (Huntington, 1957, p. 81).

We find that rather than attempt to better understand the different types of civil–military issues we see in American society or the forces that contribute to manifesting these issues, Huntington was preoccupied with providing a remedy to his concerns. While previous scholarship considers the limitations of Huntington's use of separate spheres and professionalization in managing civil–military relations, less effort has been given to understanding the assumptions Huntington relied upon that led him to focus on separate spheres and professionalization as tools to mitigate civil–military crises. We believe there are two assumptions in Huntington's work that remain critical to the theory and practice of American civil–military relations today. Once one becomes aware of them, it is easy to see these assumptions in much of the scholarship on civil–military relations, even if they are only implicit in an argument.

Critical Assumptions in the Normal School

Huntington believed "the basic problem in defining civilian control is: How can military power be minimized?" (1957, p. 80). He thus defines from the outset what the problem is and the direction in which we should try and "solve" it. However, focusing attention on the problem of civilian control, and more broadly military power versus civilian power, misses a critical aspect of the American civil–military relations story that arises from the struggle for political power (Corwin, 1984; Moe & Wilson, 1994). Nonetheless, we believe this encourages observers of American civil-military relations to look at the military as "the problem." This orientation has the potential to affect the objectivity of observers of civil–military relations in three ways. First, it influences the normative bent one might take in understanding these situations. Consequently, second, it clouds their ability to understand political processes involving civilian and military actors. This leads to a third reason, which is that it affects their ability to describe these processes.

In our view, the problem is not the military, per se. Because of its command structure and the necessity of obedience to superiors, the military is a nondemocratic institution. But it is not inherently antidemocratic. Professionalism and attempting to remain outside of the political fray are normative ideals that support essential virtues of the republic. We are also mindful to note that American military professionals make a commitment to constitutionalism. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said shortly after the 2020 presidential election, the Constitution of the United States receives unrelenting devotion from military

professionals and represents "the moral north star to all of us in uniform. It is that document that gives purpose to our service" (Milley, 2020). But politicization of the bureaucracy is a part of the American political system (Cooper, 2021). Ergo, it is a necessary aspect of civil-military relations at the highest levels of the American government.

The second assumption provides the basis for his prescriptions for civilian control. More importantly, it is an assumption that facilitates thinking about political control of the military—that is, it makes it easier to think in terms of "control"—but in fact has important consequences for how we think about the relationship between civilian and military actors. Huntington says he derives his view of separate spheres from the work of Carl Friedrich. And "Friedrich's general distinction between objective functional responsibility and subjective political responsibility" provides the basis for his ideas of civilian control (Huntington, 1957, p. 479).[4]

Scholars of public administration will understand the distinction of separate spheres as an idea rooted in the politics-administration dichotomy. Just as Huntington does in *The Soldier and the State*, the dichotomy is a framework that bifurcates politics and administration into separate elements of how to govern a state through a bureaucracy. It has been considered by scholars of public administration, at least as far back as Wilson (1887). As one scholar stated, "the politics-administration dichotomy remains helpful to understand and order governmental reality" (Overeem, 2008, p. 41). At the same time, it has been decried by public administration scholars for its limitations due to its failure to adequately capture some of the realities of managing in the public sector.

Critiques of the Normal Theory

> But both Congress and President are fundamentally concerned with the distribution of power between executive and legislative rather than between civilian and military. (Huntington, 1957, p. 81)

In our view, a core limitation of the normal theory is that the problems its prescriptions attempt to ameliorate simplify complex social phenomena to provide a manageable lens for thinking about these difficult conundrums. But those simplifications remove important information about these subjects. Thus, despite an awareness that led Huntington to provide the epigraphical quote, his focus remained on addressing the balance of power in civil–military interactions rather than the more foundational constitutional struggle.

As one practitioner-scholar argued, Huntington's "objective control was fundamentally flawed from the outset because it presumed that the military and political spheres could be distinguished in a comprehensive and meaningful way" (Gibson, 2009, p. 242). Similarly, a well-known critique of Huntington came from Janowitz (1960) who viewed Huntington's ideal-type characterizations as simplistic and at times not representing the concept he attempted to describe (i.e., the military as a profession). The thrust of these critiques may have been best explained by a contemporaneous review of the book: "pretending that military men holding various amounts and kinds of political power will or can play roles derived solely from their professional status amounts to wishing away the really hard political problems of civil-military relations" (Wahlke, 1958, p. 399, emphasis added).

More recently, several leading civil–military relations scholars have also used an institutional perspective to critique the normal theory—work which comments on both the separate spheres and the professionalization assumptions. Ironically, one theme running through these analyses is that the ideas posited by Huntington can exacerbate the problems he sought to alleviate.

In her critique of Huntingtonian professionalism from a rational, principle-agent perspective, Avant (1994, 1996) explains that the military can leverage its professionalism,

separate spheres of expertise, and control to bargain with politicians. Here, "the military" can increase the probability of achieving its preferred outcome(s) when it plays civilian actors off one another. We will note here that Avant's work assumes competing civilian actors. Feaver (1998, 2009) also uses agency theory to suggest conflicts arise between civilian and military actors when (1) civilian leaders fail to appreciate military expertise and observe a separation of spheres (i.e., intrusively directing or monitoring the military) or (2) the military does not comply with civilian directives. Here, Feaver's work relies upon a "unified" civilian principal.

Davidson (2013, p. 130) uses bureaucratic culture to argue, "the military's doctrine and education reinforce a culture of 'military professionalism' . . . that defines 'best military advice' in very specific ways." Doing so places subjective constraints on the "best military advice" given to civilian leaders. It also incentivizes members of the military to not accept guidance from civilian leaders whose expectations are "formed from another set of cultural and institutional drivers" (p. 131). In addition, Brooks' (2020) assessment of Huntington's views on professionalism shows that professionalization of the military: (1) leads to the military's involvement in partisan politics, (2) lowers civilian understanding of military related matters and thus control over the military, (3) undermines the military's ability to achieve its strategic objectives, and thus (4) undercuts the military's professionalism.

We believe Huntingtonian professionalism is a normative response to problems of civil–military control. Its appeal arises from the fact that it offers two significant benefits to society. First, it provides a normative answer—what an officer "should" do—to how the military can support democratic norms. Second, its foundational logic is simple and easy to understand and provides a consistent touchstone when navigating national security policy regardless of an individual's professional status (i.e., civilian or military) or political stripes (e.g., Democrat or Republican).

Sociologists have provided many critiques of this version of military professionalism (Crosbie & Kleykamp, 2018b). The seminal critique in this line of research comes from Janowitz (1960) who showed that Huntington's perspective is not robust enough to deal with a variety of managerial and technical aspects of the profession and requires some acknowledgment of politics as a central part of war-making. More recently, Crosbie and Kleykamp (2018a) discuss how scholars model the relationship between civil–military relations and military professionalism shapes their research in important ways.

Where We're Going

We previously asked, what factors establish and maintain the nature of the relationship between civilians and the military in the American political system? Huntington (1956a, 1957) recognized the institutionalized division of powers of the U.S. Constitution has the potential to weaken civil-military relations. Ultimately, Huntington saw separate spheres and professionalism as possible antidotes to civil–military frictions resulting from the competition between political elites.

In the next section, we highlight work from Comparative Politics which suggests a different approach may be necessary for thinking about civil–military relations. This work argues that presidential systems of government exhibit instability in predictable ways. In addition, this body of literature suggests presidential systems create incentives for politicians to politicize the military.

Ultimately, we will argue that the causal pathways of instability arising from divided powers systems mean that the Huntingtonian solutions cannot address the spectrum of potential civil–military issues—let alone "crises"—a society with presidential institutions might face. As a result, we believe that democratic breakdown and crises in civil–military relations centered on political polarization, electoral competition, and the role of the presidency cannot

be resolved by the military remaining apolitical and civilians practicing restraint. We feel our view highlights several questions for the Huntingtonian framework. However, we would like to highlight two: First, why do civilian leaders involve the military in partisan struggles over policies and power? Second, what incentives exist for the military to become involved in these processes?

Answering these questions requires a different explanation of the nature of the relationship between civilians and the military. As we will discuss, we feel Linz and others made better inroads into understanding the institutional effects of presidential systems, but this work generally exhibits little discussion of civil–military relations. Although the first edition of *The Soldier and the State* predated the work of Linz and others by more than 30 years, Huntington did not update subsequent editions with relevant materials about the challenges of separation of powers systems. As a result, the ideas of Linz and others were not incorporated into the normal theory of civil–military relations in the American context.

Presidentialism: A Perilous Institutional Arrangement

Linz (1990) first articulated the reasons why separation of powers systems experience regime instability. He argued the political instability in these systems centers on four factors: (1) dual legitimacy of the presidency and the legislature; (2) fixed terms for the presidency and the legislature; (3) zero-sum electoral competitions for the presidency; and (4) the president's dual role as both the head of government and the head of state. Linz's insights were refined by Mainwaring and Shugart (1997), vis-à-vis the specific powers of the presidency and the nature of the party system. Riggs (1997) referenced these tensions in his explanation of how practices and institutions in the United States, which limit popular participation and provide alternative institutions that are venerated, help avoid democratic breakdown.

Regarding dual legitimacy, Linz explained that because their elections are separate—that is, legislators and presidents directly represent voters within distinct but overlapping constituencies—both can claim to be the authentic representatives of the people (1990, pp. 63–64). Overlapping responsibilities, especially over the budget, leads to political standoffs between politicians. Separation of powers systems, wherein the presidency and legislature are controlled by different parties worsen confrontations because neither have non-institutional means, like party loyalty, to informally resolve the crisis. This situation is aggravated if presidents conflate their partisan mandate, which could be from a minority of voters, with the national interest.

The problem of fixed terms is twofold: (1) removal during a term-in-office and (2) continuation after a term ends. Linz explains, because their power stems from being directly elected representatives of the people, the president cannot be easily removed by the legislature and vice-versa. Presidents enjoy—that is, benefit from—distinct tenures. Linz (1990) also mentions the process of removing the president by legislative action takes a long time, thus, prolonging any constitutional crisis (pp. 64–65). Furthermore, presidential succession becomes problematic if the president is incapacitated, removed, or dies in office. Succession is not automatic and may go to vice presidents unprepared for the responsibilities or members of the legislative branch who were not elected to the position (Linz, 1990, pp. 65–66).

Third, regarding the effects of zero-sum electoral competitions, two problems are inherent within the presidency. First, whether due to political system functions or by accretion over time, presidents accumulate significant power and resources. This contributes to a second potential problem arising from zero-sum electoral competitions. Specifically, control over the presidency leads to heightened political competition (Juan J. Linz, 1990, pp. 55–58). Given the winner-take-all character and the fact that there is only one such position, societies divided on ethnic or economic lines are prone to violence because of such competition (Ibid.).

Finally, the president's combined role creates many problems. They are both the head of government elected by partisan supporters and the head of state representing the entire nation's administration. When shaping policies and laws, presidents can claim they represent the national interest as whole even when governance decisions align with partisan issue frames. While legislators frame issues along partisan lines, they neither enjoy the benefits nor suffer the consequences that come with being singularly responsible as head of state. Huntington (1957, pp. 400–403) himself recognizes this problem in his discussions about the "Separation of Power" and "Separation of Function."

Mainwaring and Shugart (1997) refine Linz's (1990) arguments by positing how three factors within the presidency and legislature can ameliorate or exacerbate the problems of presidentialism. These are (1) the strength of presidential powers, (2) political parties' discipline, and (3) the number of parties, as well as whether there exist irreconcilable differences between them.

Regarding strong and weak presidential powers, they consider powers pertaining to lawmaking and the legislative process. In terms of lawmaking, they review the passive power of vetoes to block bills arising from the legislature and the active power of decrees to make laws. They argue that presidents become extremely powerful if they have veto powers, especially partial vetoes that cannot be overridden by the legislature or done so with difficulties like the necessity for super majorities. In the United States, these are known as line-item vetoes. Similarly, decree powers, known in the United States as Executive Orders, enhance presidential power with regard to lawmaking. Usually, up for question though is (1) whether presidential decrees have the same standing as laws made by the legislature or whether they need ratification by the legislature and (2) the duration of time a decree can stand sans ratification (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997). In terms of the legislative process, presidential powers to set the legislative agenda in key policy areas and primacy in the budgetary process, either via preparing the budget or having the right to amend it, creates powerful presidencies (Ibid.).

The existence of moderately disciplined parties—where legislators are not drawn to extreme positions with fears of being primaried and are unafraid of party elites—reduces the number of actors in negotiations with the president and increases expectations that party leaders can deliver votes, thus enhancing the legislature's clout and encouraging executive-legislative cooperation (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997). With regard to party systems, they posit that the presence of many parties and deep ideological cleavages between them enhance presidential power by increasing gridlock and incentivizing presidents to bypass the legislature (Ibid., pp. 465–467).

Finally, they explain that electoral rules encourage the dysfunctions of presidentialism. Legislative electoral rules that encourage the presence of small parties cause party fragmentation and extreme multipartyism. In some countries, presidential run-off elections, which are held if no candidate acquires more than 50% of the votes or if the gap between candidates' vote percentages is below a certain level, encourage the participation of candidates from multiple parties who expect to acquire enough votes to trigger a run-off. This subsequently creates coalitions to defeat the more popular candidate in the first round (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997, pp. 466–467). While the United States does not have a process for presidential run-off elections, the inclusion of third-party candidates in national elections is argued to have a similar effect of pulling-off votes from one candidate or another (Abramson et al., 1995; Lacy & Burden, 1999; Shugart, 2004).

Comparing international cases of democratic backsliding with American politics, Barbara Walter (2022, p. 139) notes that during 2016–2022 the U.S. military continued to adhere to its constitutionally set role and took measures to secure democracy without becoming involved in partisan politics. Walter (2022) shows that intense political competition centered on controlling the presidency, combined with racial and class cleavages, led to the undermining

of American democracy during this period. However, she ignores how the division of powers system contributes to it and focuses on social factors like political leaders, religious and racial cleavages, and the overlapping of party identity with these cleavages (Walter, 2022, pp. 129–160).

Riggs (1997) addresses these institutional warnings about separation of powers systems, to explain how the United States has avoided institutional breakdown since the Civil War. A subject that receives only cursory treatment from Linz (1994, p. 53). Riggs (1997, p. 259) primarily focuses on the vertical conception of accountability between voters and the legislature and the presidency. Riggs argues presidential institutions lower both representativeness and legitimacy.

Riggs (1997, pp. 259–264) assumes that presidential systems face a problem of attenuated representativeness: Many voters have divided loyalties between a president they did not vote for and legislators for whom they did, a problem worsened by the presence of numerous parties in the legislature with high levels of voter turnout that can create gridlock. Like the argument made by Linz (1990, 1994), these systems face lower legitimacy. The singular position of the president conflates partisan purpose as head of government (who needs to push legislation to govern) with their national purpose as head of state (who at times must stand above the political fray; Riggs, 1997, p. 267). Moreover, Riggs (1997, pp. 272–273) assumes that the bureaucracy is staffed with political loyalists and unable to deliver goods and services in a timely and cost-effective fashion. In highly politicized bureaucracies (e.g., the United States), this creates several legitimacy problems (Dekker & Hansén, 2004; Lewis, 2008; Moynihan & Roberts, 2010; Peters, 2004; Peters & Pierre, 2004).

Based on the abovementioned assumptions, Riggs (1997, pp. 260–262) posits that the United States avoids democratic collapse by creating an oligocracy (his term) that limits the participation of some of its citizens and the *duo-poly* (his term) of the Democratic and Republican parties. Popular legitimacy is buttressed by moving the loci of veneration from the state's traditional governing institutions to other institutions that symbolize national ideals. Examples of this include adulation to the Constitution and the American flag as well as making the unelected Supreme Court the final arbiter of constitutional matters (Riggs, 1997, pp. 271–272). We believe attempts to move the focus of attention from more traditionally construed governing institutions to the military is another artifact of this process.

A Theoretical Reframing

The Problem

To set policy, political officials—especially presidents—must hold office because "public authority does not belong to anyone but is simply available to those players that wield enough power under the democratic rules of the game to gain control over it" (Moe & Wilson, 1994, pp. 4–5). Since gaining and holding onto political power is paramount in advancing policy interests, the norm that grew out of *The Soldier and the State* that military officers should not engage in politics does not apply to politicians. Rather, politicians face incentives to politicize the military or otherwise draw the military into public debates and may do so if they feel it will increase their political ends. In such cases, it is possible for politicians and their appointees to place military officials in situations that are necessarily political to further their own political advantage. In addition, while the political intervention of the military may be viewed as antidemocratic, Moe and Wilson's insights help us understand that the use of the military by politicians is not necessarily antithetical to democratic values. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to grapple with this, we believe it is nonetheless problematic for normative work on civil–military relations.

Yet, most of the writing on the "status" or "state" of civil–military relations relies on the assumption—one similarly held by Huntington—of the civil–military problematique: "The very institution created to protect the polity is given sufficient power to become a threat to the polity" (Feaver, 1999, p. 214). In this view, the military is often the focus of civil-military relations and is "the problem" around which institutions are designed to safeguard the state. From this perspective, it is easy to understand the value of Huntington's emphasis on professionalism as a bulwark against politicization and, ultimately, authoritarian reversal. But as we consider the insights from Comparative Politics we become increasingly concerned about the limitations of professionalization as a normative tool to ensure democracy. Rather, we believe the structural factors of the American political system which create incentives for politicians to politicize the military are underexplored and therefore undertheorized in the literature on civil–military relations. This leads us to ask, what can we learn about civil-military relations by seeking to better understand the relationship between political institutions and the politicization of the military?

The Empirical Domain

We believe that to answer the preceding question, we must seek to understand its corresponding empirical domain. In this section, we provide five research questions we believe scholars of civil-military relations can ask to better understand military politicization.

First, how do the assumptions we make about institutions—specifically, institutional forms—influence our research? We hope the reader agrees at this point that the field of civil-military relations can benefit from a better understanding of the implications of different institutional arrangements—especially presidential systems. To make progress in that direction, a point we think merits further attention in the field pertains to the assumptions one makes about the nature of "principals" and "agents." Since institutional form and actor behavior are endogenous, the insights from Linz and others might lead us to reconsider how actors (1) respond to institutions and (2) seek to use institutions to their (organizational or political) advantage.

Future research should seek to understand the implications of the military being an agent of competing civilian principals. While it is beyond the scope of this article to address these in depth, it is possible to think about the American military as both a part of the president's bureaucracy and an agent of competing principals; the military is also an agent of the legislature. What similarities or differences exist in how we are able to theorize about these relationships compared with a unitary principal? In addition, these principals are different in several important ways. Thus, we should also be careful not to assume that the principal–agent relationship between the President and the military is necessarily the same as that which exists between the legislature and the military or even Members of Congress and the military. We believe this has implications for both descriptive and normative theorizing. And it may be that this problem contributes to what is limiting about the separate spheres argument.

Second, what is politicization? We find one of the challenges with this area of research is that it is difficult to understand what "politicization" of the military means.[5] Or, even if one is clear about what they mean about politicization, are others operationalizing the concept in the same way? Politicization can mean many things. By politicization of the military, do we mean when the members of the military or veteran community engage in political behavior? Does this include certain behavior and not others? In other words, where do we draw the line on what is or is not politicization? Others have pointed to this problem—"In terms of military influence on domestic politics, the behavior spectrum can, in theory, vary quite widely along a dimension from "perfect subordination" to "de facto military rule" (Feaver & Coletta, 2020). Although the more extreme concern surrounding military politicization regards a potential

military *coup d' état* (Dunlap, 1992), the military as an organized group may seek to increase its own influence and thereby create tensions and this might manifest in myriad ways.

In addition, more work can be done to understand the connection between the way we conceptualize the accountability relationships between civilian principals and military agents and how this affects civil–military relations. That is, how might conceptualizations of accountability other than Friedrich's influence how we think about politicization and civil–military relations more broadly? Work on this topic might also help us gain a better understanding of when political principals politicize the military versus when political elites might simply be going about the regular business of running the government. One challenge for scholars of civil–military relations might be that in some cases this might appear to be clear, but many situations are not black-and-white. Finally, does politicization manifest differently whether it occurs from civilian elites or when the military self-politicizes?

Third, how is the military politicized? At times, we can even think of this as "Who politicizes the military?" In Huntington's view, military politicization occurs due to (1) the military violating their normative role as guardians of the state, or (2) subjective control. Examples of the former are the result of the military (1) being seen as operating within the "civilian sphere" or (2) stepping outside of norms of professionalism (Avant, 1998). Regarding the latter, Desch (1999, pp. 14–15) argues weak civilian institutions lead civilians to undertake subjective control mechanisms to use the military to gain support for domestic political gain.

Fourth, what is the relationship between polarization and politicization? We think that polarization might be a special or unique factor in politicization processes. As polarization arises endogenously from and within the separation of powers system, future scholarship could consider two questions. (1) How does polarization moderate or otherwise influence military politicization? (2) What factors shape polarization that are underexplored in terms of their role in military politicization processes?

Ultimately, fifth, what types of explanations best describe politicization processes and activities? We can think of at least four different "lenses" or "levels of analysis" from which to think about military politicization that relate to our argument: environmental, structural, organizational, and individual. While our argument emphasizes a structural explanation, we recognize that politicization is ultimately likely to occur because of concurrent processes operating across multiples "lenses" or "levels" of analysis. Next, we provide two examples for thinking about politicization across these multiple levels.

Example 1: Separation of Powers and Political Polarization

In Presidential Power, Neustadt (1960, p. 30) notes that a president's power is based on their capacity to persuade and bargain with Members of Congress and senior officials of their own administration. The president's capacity to do so depends on (1) the resources the position can deploy, (2) expectations of Members of Congress and senior administrators that such resources are available and will be used, (3) their perception that the President is popular, and (4) whether their own constituents will accept what they do at the President's behest (Neustadt, 1960, p. 150).

Neustadt's explanation of presidential politics elides problems arising from presidentialism by interpreting separation of power as sharing of powers in which the president is one among other entities to which bureaucracies are responsible to (Neustadt, 1960, pp. 34–36). This notion of shared power, however, functions when there are potential mutually acceptable outcomes or win sets between civilian leaders like the President and Members of Congress, bureaucrats from the various executive departments, and the broader public (Tsebelis, 2002). With increasing partisan polarization based on ideological and demographic identities (Finkel et al., 2020), which is moreover asymmetric because the parties have not

moved equally away from the center (Pierson & Schickler, 2020), the number of mutually acceptable outcomes become difficult to achieve through persuasion and bargaining.

Kernell (1997) noted that in the post-Cold War period, Presidents were increasingly addressing the public directly to persuade them, rather than negotiating with Members of Congress. He also showed that divided government—when the executive and the legislature are controlled by different political parties—made this an attractive strategy, although drawing in the public increased hurdles to reach compromise solutions (Kernell, 1997, pp. 3–4). Recent research suggests a decline in the number of compromise options available to political elites has important implications for civil–military relations. In a survey with questions about deference to the military and presidential response to proposals from the military, citizen responses fell along partisan lines (Krebs et al., 2021). This suggests Americans understand civil–military relations through a partisan lens.

Recent research about communication via Twitter also shows the importance of partisanship. President Trump used tweets to bypass traditional media to connect with citizens. While these tweets were not persuasive across the general population, they did increase support among co-partisans (Christenson et al., 2021). The use of social media as a "more democratic" form of political communication—that is, it facilitates direct communication between citizens and elected representatives—may increase the pressures of politicization on the military and give more members of the military outlets to undertake their own political commentary.

The polarization of recent years seems to have raised the bargaining stakes among the American political elite. This is at odds with Neustadt's sense of shared power. Consequently, we believe the way we conceptualize the military within the political environment—as an organization within the presidential bureaucracy and one responsible to both the President and the Congress; that is, an agent with competing principals—has implications for civil–military relations in theory and more importantly in practice.

Example 2: Separation of Powers and the Concentration of Power

Galvin and Shogan (2004) argue the "presidential quest for autonomy and institutional authority is a perennial struggle that crosses the boundaries of the temporal modern-traditional divide" (p. 479). Citing Mansfield (1993), they suggest the desire for increased power is "an enduring part of the president's institutional incentive structure . . . found in the ambivalence of executive power in the Constitution" (Galvin & Shogan, 2004, p. 478). Research from public administration shows politicization is an essential component of the American political system (Cooper, 2021; Lewis, 2008; Moynihan & Roberts, 2010). From this perspective, the normal theory is limited because it inadequately captures an integral aspect of the U.S. policymaking process.

Skowronek (1997) argues that cycles of "presidential time" begin as some presidents (e.g., FDR and Reagan) build philosophically based political coalitions. Their immediate successors (e.g., Truman and George H. W. Bush) use policy to further articulate these philosophies. To achieve and then solidify power, opposition presidents (e.g., Eisenhower and Clinton) accept these policies. They are eventually followed by another articulator (e.g., LBJ, Nixon, and George W. Bush), until the electoral coalition's economic and social bases are exhausted. The cycle concludes with a president (e.g., Carter) presiding over the collapse of the old coalition, accompanied by social mobilization and turmoil. Unable to offer new solutions, these presidents lose power to someone who begins the cycle anew.

The implications for presidential institutions in the United States under the cycle begun by Reagan are enormous. Reaganism's dominant ideology included the "unitary executive." Based on Article II of the Constitution, it seeks a formal separation of powers and sees the president as the sole head of the executive branch (Skowronek et al., 2021). The unitary

executive is cited as an important part of the administrative presidency (Rudalevige, 2009; Waterman, 2009), the latter being an attempt to accomplish administratively what became more difficult through legislative policymaking processes (Nathan, 1983; Roberts, 2021). A leading scholar of presidential policymaking through the bureaucracy says, "While the idea of the administrative presidency remains politically controversial, it is mostly based on solid constitutional principles. The strongest constitutional foundation is the president's ability to appoint loyalists to positions throughout the bureaucracy" (Waterman, 2009, p. 5). In terms of civil–military relations, this should be understood in relation to Mainwaring and Shugart's (1997) discussion of strong political power in lawmaking. Specifically, as other avenues of policymaking become more costly, presidents are incentivized to use the administrative tools of the presidency to achieve their political objectives.

Discussion

We want to be crystal clear that this is not a partisan story—in recent years, we've seen both of the leading parties in the United States take actions to politicize the military. For example, the Clinton Administration's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue" formal policy regarding the sexual orientation of service applicants and members arose out of the 1992 presidential campaign when the subject of homosexuals serving in the U.S. military became an issue for both political parties (Schmalz, 1992). And, although there was little substantive difference between previous policies and the new policy, scholars viewed the policy as a political compromise between competing elites (Fielding, 1996). Nonetheless, the policy was still discussed as a potential indicator of civil–military "crisis" (Avant, 1998). Similarly, there was increasing pressure during the Trump Administration on civil–military relations due to the Black Lives Matter protests and presidential involvement in appointments and promotions in the Department of Defense (Schake, 2021).

While our story is not partisan, it is political. And we note that some recent assessments of military politicization appear similar to the observations Riggs (1997) made about how the United States has responded to the challenges inherent in its political structure. These recent evaluations of deteriorating civil–military relations in the United States recognize the role of divisions between civilians—namely, the president, congress, and bureaucracy—in encouraging military involvement in partisan politics (Robinson et al., 2020). For example, Golby (2021) argues politicization in the broader political environment contributes to presidents incorporating the military into partisan politics. Furthermore, Beliakova (2021) shows that presidents use deference to the military to (1) increase their own popularity, (2) avoid blame, and (3) persuade the military to carry out the president's decisions. Thus, although the politicization of the American military has drawn attention in recent years, missing from these assessments is an explanation driven by the constitutional structure of the American political system.

Ultimately, we believe, the prescriptions of the normal theory of civil-military relations encumber. They are insufficient in their ability to speak to how military personnel might respond when politicians politicize the military. We hold that civil–military relations scholarship must do more to recognize and grapple with this systemic issue.

Conclusion

Welch began his *Civilian Control of the Military* with the following quote: "Scholars of civil-military relations appear far more effective in listing causes of military coups d'etat than in prescribing steps for civilian control. Far easier, it seems, to examine why civilian governments fall than how they are maintained" (1976, p. 1). Following this argument, it seems it has been

easier to raise awareness of civil-military problems than to describe the institutions that drive these governance challenges.

The U.S. military has long accepted civilian supremacy and adhered to Huntington's (1957) objective civilian control model that views the civilian and military spheres of activity as distinct, with the civilians providing clear goals or "end states" and the military providing achievable "options" based on their professional knowledge (Davidson, 2013). With regard to political ideologies, the military is "sterile and neutral," thus, neither taking public positions on issues and policies that affect the military as an organization nor how "political factors will affect strategy or conduct of war" (Brooks, 2020, p. 10).

The problem with such a model of civil–military relations, however, is that by emphasizing normative theory (Burk, 2002), it fails to adequately consider the institutional environment and the types of problems to which people raise normative tools as the stopgap to civil–military crises. Kohn (2009, p. 265) suggests that the frictions arising from the institutional incentives for politicians to involve the military in partisan politics can be resolved by informal interactions—termed "mundane and situational personal relations"—and adherence to norms about the proper roles of civilian and military leaders. Yet, such prescriptions elide the core conundrum: whereas much of the existing research focuses on governance tools that operate in the spirit of democratic norms in a free and open society, it ignores how the institutions of presidentialism shape such norms.

More than two decades ago, Feaver said, "the political scientists interested in civil-military problems have been uninterested in American politics and those interested in American politics have been uninterested in civil-military relations" (1996, p. 157). We believe it is difficult to understand the mechanisms driving civil-military relations without a holistic picture of the institutional landscape. Thus, one takeaway from this study is that to further civil–military relations scholarship—especially regarding American civil-military relations—we need better descriptions of institutions and processes which exist "underneath" the behavior which draws our interest and holds our attention.

Introducing Linz's insights into the literature on American civil-military relations reveals that civil–military relations in the United States face a fundamental problem of presidentialism's separation of powers system. Specifically, the multiple loci of civilian authority incentivize civilian leaders to encourage military intervention in politics and incentivizes military leaders to use their cohesion and public legitimacy to supplant civilian political competition. By doing so, we provide an explanation that answers Feaver's (1996, p. 168) call for a theory "about civilian control," which explains the institutional "factors that shape how civilians exercise control over the military."

Future research should draw attention to the ways in which political institutions undermine conceptualizations of professionalism and the ability of the military to remain "apolitical." Attempting to incorporate insights from the field of public administration could mark an important step in this effort. Although in many nations the military is the most important public organization in the entire country, the level of cross-pollination between civil–military relations and public administration scholarship is trivial. Additional lines of enquiry could follow existing research on American institutions and the political behavior of the presidency, with a focus on the relationship between the President, the Congress, bureaucracy, and the American public.

Finally, there is room for a contribution either from or to political theory. While Feaver (1996) highlighted the civil–military problematique as the central problem of the field—possibly the central question for any society to address—the Madisonian model of the separation of powers places the "invitation to struggle" as the central societal question. Philosophically then, this paper raises the query: what tools are available to us when these problems might be at odds?

In conclusion, we believe guidance to military officers—as well as a belief among civilians—that the military can and should remain apolitical is disingenuous to the realities of the struggle for power at the apex of the American political system. Rather, we, like Huntington, consider that the separation of powers system of the U.S. federal government makes it "impossible for American officers ever to be at ease in their professionalism" (1957, p. 184).

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Footnotes

1. We use the terms "presidential system" and "separation of power system" interchangeably throughout this paper.
2. Specifically, see chapters 4, 7, and 12 (especially pages 400–403) in *The Soldier and the State* (1957) as well as an article (1956a) and chapter in an edited book (1956b) published in the preceding year.
3. Similar language can be found in his (1956a) article in the American Political Science Review (p. 689) but in that piece he says, "The separation of powers is a perpetual invitation, if not an irresistible force, drawing military leaders into political conflicts."
4. See also page 380 and footnote 2 (p. 385) in Huntington (1956b) for evidence of Friedrich's influence on his work.
5. One could raise a similar concern about the meaning of the term "civilian control."

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