

# Presidential and Parliamentary Systems: A Comparative Analysis

Dr. Nagendrappa K.T.

*Associate Professor, Dept. of Political Science, Y.D.D. Government First Grade College, Belur,  
Karnataka, India*

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**Abstract**—It compares the three systems of government presidential, parliamentary and semi-presidential identifying their fundamental differences (institutional structures), and how these differences structure democratic performance, accountability, and stability. The paper examines what makes parliamentary systems parliamentary, in which executives are elected by legislatures and depend on them for continuous confidence, such as the Westminster-derived model of India or the British system. In comparison, the paper explores presidential systems — latest examples being the USA — that create full separation of powers through directly elected executives with fixed terms. Semi-presidential systems are then studied as mixed forms of both types, again with France being the main example. The paper explains several main strengths of parliamentary systems: coordinated policy-making, collective ministerial responsibility preventing authoritarianism, and institutional flexibility allowing political adaptation by alteration of the office holder without constitutional change. But the paper also spells out parliamentary disadvantages, including susceptibility to government instability whereby coalition governments can be fragile or when no party enjoys clear majorities, as occurred with the United Front coalitions in India in the 1990s or Italy's rolling changes of government. In assessing presidential system benefits, it highlights stable executive leadership via fixed terms, transparency of presidential accountability, and a strong separation of powers with mutually effective checks and balances. On the flip side, the paper points out key disadvantages of the presidential system: the ever-present danger of gridlock when the President and the legislature belong to different political parties, less ability to respond to poor leadership and prospects for diffused accountability during a divided government, plus research that suggests that presidential systems are more corrupt. The paper shows how semi-presidential systems try to balance power between independently elected presidents and legislature-dependent prime ministers, providing clear advantages when the two share different preferences but also a potential ambiguity as

to whom is the final arbiter over different governmental branches. The empirical analysis indicates that variation in system performance is explained not by the superiority of any particular model, but by background conditions like the configuration of the party system, the sophistication of the most recent constitutional design, the extent of post-authoritarian democratic traditions and the depth of civic engagement for the defense of democratic norms. Rather than finding either presidential or parliamentary systems to be an uncontested success by comparison, the paper ends by arguing that successful democracies are not the result of any simple generic solutions but needs creating context-specific institutional arrangements, furnished with the right combination of checks and balances, competitive elections and independent judiciaries, a free press, and civic patterns ensuring that governments are able to be responsive to the popular will.

**Index Terms**—Presidential systems, Parliamentary systems, Semi-presidential systems, Executive- legislative relationships, Separation of powers.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The question of democratic governance is, therefore, selecting institutional arrangements that provide a special balance between concentrated executive power and dispersed legislative authority, between government accountability to the public and the efficient execution of policy. Presidential-styled and parliamentary-styled systems are two baseline types of arrangements based on diverging views about executive-legislative relations, where power is distributed, and how responsive a government should be. In contrast, presidential systems (the United States is the most consequential example) are characterized by a more rigid separation of powers, independent executive and legislative branches that serve fixed terms and possess different mandates. Parliamentary systems — with examples such as the

United Kingdom and India — create fusion of powers with the executive constituted within the legislature and accountable by confidence votes. Other semi-presidential systems, as in France, are hybrid between the two. Exploring the structural workings, constitutional foundations, and practical functioning of these systems in various national settings is therefore required to be able to comprehend them.

## II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

**Aims:** The objective of this research study is to conduct an extensive comparative study on presidential and parliamentary systems of governance with regards to the foundations of democracy, structures of institutional accountability, and political stability.

**Objectives:**

1. To discover and explain the essential constitutional and structural characteristics that set presidentialism apart from parliamentarism.
2. To study the executive-legislative relationships and the power-sharing mechanisms in each of the systems.
3. To assess the pros and cons of each system for democracy and policy.
4. For this, real-world functioning is checked through recent examples from USA, India, France, Brazil and UK.
5. To analyse the role of institutional rigidity instead of flexibility for political stability, crisis management, and democratic resilience.

## III. SCOPE

This particular paper deals with within the context of democratic regimes, including but not limited to, presidential, parliamentary, and semi-presidential systems among developed and emerging democracies. The review covers constitutional design, presidential accountability, legislative authority and real world democratic efficacy. Though there are many constitutional differences within each group, the focus here is only on major structural differences and not on particulars of process. Findings Semi-presidential systems are hybrid models and the temporal scope covers modern

systems operational during the 21st century, supplemented by historical contrasts.

## IV. DEFINING FEATURES OF PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS

Parliamentary systems are those where executive authority is derived from and accountable to the legislature. Head of government (the Prime Minister) must command majority support in parliament and so typically heads the party or coalition with the largest number of seats. But ministers are typically appointed from parliament — hence institutional overlap and a separation of powers dilemma.

The unique feature preserving parliamentary accountability is the vote of no-confidence, which allows legislators to dismiss the government immediately upon losing their backing. It means that the executive must always respond with action to the opinion of the legislature. A government that is unable to command the confidence of the Parliament must resign or seek dissolution of Parliament to hold fresh elections.

India is a perfect example of parliamentary rule in a diverse, federal democratic system. The President is the nominal head of state and exercises ceremonial powers, while the Prime Minister—head of the Lok Sabha majority—holds actual executive power. Adopted from the Westminster model, the Indian system shows parliamentary adaptability to suit the pluralistic political representation resulting in coalition governments.

## V. PARLIAMENTARY BENEFITS

Compared to the presidential system, more coordinated policy-making can come about in parliamentary systems due to executive-legislative fusion, meaning, when ruling parties have majorities, laws are able to pass more easily. Collective ministerial responsibility and executive reliance on the legislature are safeguards against authoritarianism. Flexibility permits the adaptation to political transformations via the formation or dissolution of government without requiring change to the Constitution.

## VI. PARLIAMENTARY DRAWBACKS

Coalition governments can be unstable or no party wins big enough to govern. Past experiences are relevant — India cautionary due to consistent government collapses in the 1990s United Front period on coalition partner exits, and Italy has seen over 60 governments since 1945. Coalition differences lead to policymaking-stalemate as regional partners are more focused on provincial interests than national ones; this is particularly evident in Indian context, with the much-delayed GST being a good example of key legislation being blocked by coalition partners during UPA-II. Also, in the case of majority governments, power is concentrated like in a presidential system, especially when anti-defection rules do not allow them to vote independently in the legislature.

## VII. DEFINING FEATURES OF PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS

In contrast, presidential systems create strong separation of powers via independently elected executive, legislative and judicial branches. The President is directly elected for a set term, usually four or five years, and functions as both the ceremonial and executive head of state and government. They have been appointed from outside the legislature as members of the Cabinet; they answer only to the President and not to legislators.

Executive tenure can only be removed through impeachment for serious violations of the Constitution, which made it impossible for the Legislature to exercise that power. On a parallel track, there are deadlines for when legislatures cannot be dissolved before constitutionally mandated terms.

Presidentialism has its roots in the United States and comes with intricate checks and balances: Congress confirms presidential appointments and controls funding; the President has the power to veto legislation; Congress can override vetoes, but only with supermajorities. The separation of powers ensures that no one branch checks the power of the others.

## VIII. STRENGTHS OF PRESIDENTIALISM

Presidential systems grant stable executive power through presidential fixed terms, preventing the need to stop policy implementation early due to the threat of removal. When presidential accountability is unambiguous, voters know whom to reward or punish for the state of government. Check and balances Separating authority so that no one branch can have too much power in the other. Stability and reduced uncertainty Especially when we have to act fast during crises, fixed tenure brings political stability and reduces uncertainty.

## IX. PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM WEAKNESSES

Presidential systems face endemic risks of gridlock when the President and legislative majority come from different parties. Such conflicts place branches in a constitutional standoff against the other, where neither, constitutionally, can override the other. Divided government like this is common, with voters eager for immediate policy outcome and changing parties in the following election, leading to executive-legislative opposition. Such stalemate blocks the passage of legislation and paralyzes governance, as we have witnessed many times in American political history. Moreover, gridlock both dilutes accountability (President and Congress can blame each other for failure) and is as much the result of institutional factors. An immovable presidential term renders nations such as Bolivia prisoners of their own constitution, stuck with a bad leader for a full term as citizens choose between further anxiety and suffering or a plummeting democracy. Given that impeachment is the exceptional remedy for president removal, removal becomes practically impossible absent dire crimes. Presidentialism is also corruption inducing; meta-analytical studies of levels of corruption show that presidential systems have many more times as much corruption as do parliamentary systems.

## X. SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS: A HYBRID APPROACH

Semi-presidential systems mix parliamentary and presidential systems with dual executives. France is an example of this model, with a directly elected

President holding considerable authority over defense and foreign policy, and a Prime Minister answerable to the National Assembly. The President appoints the Prime Minister, who must maintain the confidence of the legislature. The power dynamic changes under "cohabitation" where the President is of a different party than the parliamentary majority, with an emphasis on the domestic voice of the Prime Minister. The semi-presidential system provides unique benefits by distributing power across independently elected President, and a legislature-dependent Prime Minister, limiting concentration of power by either. Meanwhile, the President's fixed term guarantees continuity in the executive branch, while parliamentary accountability of the Prime Minister ensures the government remains responsive to changes in society. It is capable of accommodating various types of political configurations in adaptable cohabitation arrangements without the need or requirement for constitutional change.

However, that separation of powers creates potential ambiguity about who is in charge of what, and semi-presidential conflicts may be mired in confusion over who reigns supreme when the executive is tangled. Indeed, scholarly work has established that so-called semi-presidential systems are generally more at risk of suffering democratic backsliding than pure parliamentary systems because the combination of presidential popular legitimacy and fixed terms enables power aggregation in concentrated and often anti-democratic hands.

#### XI. EMPIRICAL PERFORMANCE AND DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

System performance, depending as it does on party systems, fine details of constitutional design, and political culture, is ultimately both comparative and complex. If functioning well, parliamentary systems are more flexible and less likely to result in authoritarianism, since executives must maintain constant confidence of the legislature. Nevertheless, tight parliamentary majorities can centralize authority as perilously as presidential systems.

Presidential systems bring stability and a clear accountability, yet they can lead to gridlock and less adaptability to changing circumstances if branches clash. Studies find that presidential democracies are

less stable than parliamentary ones, especially in the case of new democracies where structured systems intensify polarization and limit responsiveness to disruption.

And regime type per se is also an inadequate explanatory factor because political stability derives not only from effective institutional boundaries and checks, representativeness of party systems, constitutional rules regulating executive-legislative relations and the quality of civic commitment to democracy. Institutional frameworks and national political cultures need to be in sync in order for democratic consolidation to occur.

#### XII. CONCLUSION

Presidential elections and parliamentary ones are completely different approaches to democracy, reflecting different theories of power and accountability. Main characteristics of parliamentary systems are executive accountability of government, governmental flexibility, and confidence mechanisms which rely on a balance of power to protect against authoritarianism, but can lead to greater instability and concentration of power in parliamentary systems. Presidential systems emphasize stable executive leadership, clear responsibility, and a strict separation of powers that provides checks on each branch, but also the potential for political stalemate and less adaptability if branches come into conflict.

No system emerges as the best; success hinges on multiple contextual factors, such as party system type, constitutional design sophistication, democratic history, and political culture. Despite extreme ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity, India has a parliamentary system that works, while the United States has sustained presidential democracy over centuries. On the other hand, parliamentary systems have failed in some countries and presidential systems have collapsed in others. But cannot have democracy here without building institutionalisms that fit to context, that have certain levels of checks and balances built in; need competitive elections but also need the judiciary, need the press to be free, need citizens to have a network of relationships and associations that will force governments to be accountable to the popular will.

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