

# Comparative advantages of presidential and parliamentary systems politics essay



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At the birth of every nation is the key structural question, how best to govern ones people and state. This has predominantly been met with two, very differing and opposing answers that of presidentialism and parliamentarism. The variables that determine this choice are inherently entrenched in the political, social and economic history of the state in question. As such one cannot dismiss one particular system on a political or ethnocentric basis, but evaluate it on its applicability and suitability to the state that it presides in, and the impact the innate strengths and flaws of both systems.

However given the huge number of political systems to study and the national variations that occur within each state it would be impossible to present a comprehensive comparison of the systems, as such I will focus on two systems in particular, the United Kingdom and the Unites States of America. These can be regarded as the figureheads of their respective systems and the models upon which most other systems are based.

The American constitution was created in 1787 with the radical idea that no single branch of the political structure should have precedence over another. As such the concept of separated power was introduced. This involved a significant departure from the traditional forms of government of the colonial states that had controlled and exploited the New World states such as the US itself. The governments of the industrialised imperialists tended to be dominated by the executive. This is another significant factor which encouraged these ex-colonial states to reject the democratically imperfect parliaments of the European imperialists in search of a fairer, more representative system inspired by the ideas of Aristotle[1].

Therefore both the executive and legislative is elected separately and therefore have dual democratic legitimacy. Therefore neither body is accountable to the other such as in the British parliament, so there is no danger of one branch holding more power and dominating the other. This ensures a more balanced government and one that more correctly expounds the political will of the public. The fact that there are bicameral and presidential elections makes the system much more representative and democratic than in the UK where only the legislature is elected. It also makes the political institution more flexible to the changing tide of public opinion. For instance if the British public becomes dissatisfied with its Labour government after its election it may have to wait five years before they can vote against them, whereas in the US elections for at least one aspect of government occur every two years, enabling government to better represent the contemporary political desires of its citizens.

This arouses another key component of the presidential model; it has set term times for its officials. For instance the President is in office for four years and can only be removed by being impeached by the congress, a very rare move. This gives the system a stability and removes the uncertainties of the parliamentary system where the threat of both the vote of confidence and anticipated elections always hang over the government. Anticipated elections though inducing a certain amount of uncertainty into the parliament, they also give the government a much greater flexibility than that of its American counterpart, enabling them to alter the political landscape of the parliament to react to the changing moods and reality of the domestic and international environment. New elections may be called

before the obligatory five years for a number of reasons, for instance to strengthen a parties ruling majority, to introduce a new government if one cannot be created or becomes unworkable or to respond to crises such as a huge scandal in government.[2]

In terms of elections in the Congress the framers ensured that both houses of the bicameral legislative should be elected, in keeping with the founding democratic principles of the American constitution. This leads to a much fairer and representative governing of the people as all aspects of the legislative and presidency are elected by the people. However the relatively high number of elections may go some way to explaining the extremely low voting turn out of the American people, perhaps somewhat apathetic to elections they dismiss as commonplace and thus irrelevant.

These dual Presidential and Congressional elections allow the opportunity for both a legislative and government division. If different parties occupy each house or the congress is united against the opposing administration there can be a divided government. This can lead to a deep division within the presidential system if the 'two sides disagree, it can be very difficult to enact legislation or concur on appointments to the Supreme Court'[3], famously described by Rauch under the term of 'demosclerosis'. However, 'few examples of a unified government since WWII demonstrate that unification does not guarantee efficient, informed, timely and effective public policy'[4], as seen under Jimmy Carter's administration and due to the individualist based nature of US politics rather than party orientated. In fact the potential delays associated with dual democratic legitimacy ensures that

policies are not rushed and are mutual accepted by both the executive and legislature.

The third branch of the presidential system is the Supreme Court, yet Schubert has shown that it is only since 1957 has the supreme court began to exert its power over the congress and president by asserting its constitutional right to veto laws it deems unconstitutional. Previously to this the Supreme Court had only struck down President's actions fourteen times, failing to maintain an effective separation of power by undermining the system of balance and checks that the US model is based on.[5]A more independent and aggressive judiciary helps to ensure that the constitutional rights of the public are preserved and to limit the powers of the executive and legislative. However there still remains the capacity for a combined, presidential, congressional and federal over turning of the Supreme Court ruling so as to ensure the balance of power remains.

Though the British parliament encompasses a number of similarities with the US' model such as a bicameral legislative and three branched system, it still remains profoundly different in how these institutions are created and distributed. Most importantly only the legislative is democratically legitimate. This means that the executive originates from and is appointed by the legislative. This has a number of critical implications. Without the potential legitimacy conflicts that may occur in America the government can rule much more efficiently and quickly then the grid locked Presidential model. However the executive is prevented from abusing this power by the fact they have no democratic power base and as such, are accountable to the legislative by a vote of confidence. This allows a flexibility in the

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parliamentary system that America lacks. If the government suffers from ineptitude, an unworkable hung government or national crisis the government can be expelled and new elections called. This has only occurred once in Britain in 1979 when the minority government of Labour's Callaghan was removed with a vote of no confidence when the government had become hung and ineffective[6].

The UK also has an unelected head of state, albeit a de jure power role. Though this is extremely undemocratic when compared to the US system, monarchists argue that the royal family acts as a symbolic vessel for all the heritage and wisdom of the previous generations and is a fundamental institution of the British consciousness. The same can also be said for the lower house of the UK's bicameral legislative. The house of Lords is another unelected part of the parliament, albeit much less influential than the house of commons. This gives the parliament a stability, in its continuity that the permanently changing congress lacks, even if this is at the expense of democratic inclusiveness.

The house of Lords also acts as the highest judiciary court of the parliamentary system. They can repeal government decisions only by legal precedents as the UK has no constitution. This streamlines the political structure and thus reduces the opportunity for inter-branch conflict which would slow down and inhibit the mechanism of governing as demonstrated by the demoscclerosis that occurs in the US. However this is an obvious merging of powers and allows room for the abuse of power and conflict of interests, and as such is a serious flaw in the UK system.

The traditional form that parliament or legislature takes is that of a majoritarian, where there is one dominant party with a majority of seats (51% plus). With Britain's tradition of a minister's loyalty to their party and the whip system, they have very disciplined parties compared to America. This allows the party with an absolute majority to pass their legislative quickly and efficiently. Whereas in the US, 'despite the importance of party labels, members of Congress are independent players who vote not primarily out of party loyalty but to advance their constituency and career interests'[7]. This means that the fluidic environment of Congress relies on undisciplined parties in order for it to function in a divided government, the existence of a whip system in such a divided government would produce comprehensive grid lock.

This is a final example of the inherent indigenous nature of politics, what works in one state may not work in another. This is evident in the wide spread failure of president democracies such as in South Vietnam. America's attempts during the Cold War to remake the third world in its image have obviously been an over-riding disaster. Both these systems require a number of prerequisites in the nation they are being implemented in. America requires a lack of ideological rigidity, undisciplined parties and locally-orientated politics[8], whereas Britain needs public deference to its political rulers and an allegiance to authority. So despite each system's blatant imperfections they are ideally suited to the two entirely different nations they exist in.