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Comparison between the Parliamentary and the Presidential System

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Abstract

This manuscript aims to present a comparative analysis between parliamentary and presidential systems of government, examining their structural features, functional structure, and impact on political stability, good governance, and democratic accountability. The main goal of the study is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of both systems in terms of executive-legislative relations, leadership stability, inclusiveness, and policy continuity. Methodologically, this research uses a qualitative comparative method, using constitutional provisions, scholarly literature, and secondary data from selected countries that have adopted parliamentary and presidential systems. It concludes that while parliamentary systems promote accountability and inclusiveness through collective executive responsibility, coalition politics can lead to government instability. In contrast, presidential systems provide fixed tenure and policy stability, but they can also lead to problems such as centralization of power and weak oversight by the legislature. The study's findings show that no system is universally superior, but its effectiveness depends on historical background, political culture, judicial system, and institutional maturity. As a consequence, it seems necessary to prioritize contextual suitability, balanced power-sharing, and democratic security in constitution-making and governance reform, especially for multi-party and multicultural societies like Nepal.

Keywords: Governance, parliamentary system, political stability, presidential system

Introduction

So many words in the political vocabulary, the word ‘democracy’ has acquired remarkably strong emotive overtones (Barry, 2000, p. 278). With the development of democratic governance systems, two major models, the parliamentary system and the presidential system, have become fundamental subjects of study in world politics and political science. Although both these systems are based on the principles of constitutionalism, separation of powers, and popular representation, in practice there are major differences in their structures, processes, and functioning. While the parliamentary system relies on a close relationship between the executive and the legislature, the presidential system emphasizes the independence and separate powers of the executive. The question of how these two systems ensure stability, accountability, and representation in governance is a constantly dynamic one in political thought.

In the context of Nepal, the parliamentary system has been practiced for a long time, but political instability, frequent dissolution of the government, and party divisions have raised questions about this system. “The transformation of Nepal from a monarchical system to a democratic system unfolded the absolute power of the king through the separation of power into legislative, executive, and judicial structures in 2047 B.S.”, (Acharya, 2025, p. 32). Meanwhile, some intellectual circles and political forces have been putting forward the presidential system as an alternative. Therefore, a comparative study between the parliamentary and presidential systems is very relevant not only for Nepal, but also for the overall democratic practice. In particular, when analyzing the governance structure adopted by the Constitution of Nepal (2072) and the practical challenges it has brought, a comparison between these two systems can provide policy guidance. Although this system has moved the country forward from a unitary to a federal system, it has also assimilated the Western parliamentary system. “The promulgation of Nepal’s constitution in 2015 initiated a profound transformation in the nation’s governance landscape, transitioning from a deeply entrenched centralized unitary system to a multi-tiered federal structure”, (Gupta, 2025, p. 194).

From an international perspective, the study of these systems is of profound importance. Countries like India and Bangladesh are adopting parliamentary systems, while countries like the US, Brazil, and Argentina have adopted presidential systems. The successes and challenges these countries have achieved provide learning opportunities for Nepal and other countries. Comparative political studies show that no system is completely flawless, but rather the suitability of the system with the historical, social, economic, and cultural structure of

the country determines the success or failure of governance. For this reason, studies should emphasize the deeper historical and social context rather than superficial comparisons. In addition, such studies set long-term strategic foundations for strengthening democracy. “Reflecting on the historical context of Nepal’s unification reveals significant insights into its current state structure and societal composition”, (Guragain, *Challenges in Developing National Unity and Governance in Nepal*, 2025, p. 2).

In political philosophy and comparative politics, the comparison between parliamentary and presidential systems is an old but constantly evolving debate. Scholars have studied the issue from various angles, as the nature of political institutions and the system of government have a profound impact on democratic stability, policy-making, governance, and citizen participation. In the early period, the ideas of John Locke and Montesquieu laid the theoretical foundation for the separation of powers, the relationship between the legislature and the executive, and the nature of accountability. Locke emphasized the supremacy of limited government and the legislature, while Montesquieu argued that a balance between the executive, legislature, and judiciary is a fundamental principle of democracy. “They are of the view that the legislature should only make laws, the executive should implement those laws and run the administration according to those laws, and the judiciary should decide the disputes according to those laws”, (Agarwal, 2004, p. 381). This led to the development of the parliamentary system in Britain, while the presidential system was established in countries such as the United States.

Walter Bezhat’s *The English Constitution* is considered a very important source when analyzing parliamentary systems. For him, the peculiarity of the “fusion of power” of the executive and the legislature in a parliamentary system. “In the British system of government, the Prime Minister is practically the head of the supreme executive”, (Bhandari, 2071, p. 63). In this system, the prime minister is elected by parliament, so the stability of the government depends on the support of the majority. Arend d’ Arend Lijphart (1999) has described the parliamentary system as a system that promotes consensus politics, allows for pluralism, and dialogue between the government and the opposition. Lijphart (1999) believes that this system is particularly effective in multi-party democracies. “The government has to form coalition parties to ensure it has majority support in parliament”, (Simatupang, 2025, p. 100). However, critics say that parliamentary systems can be a source of political instability, especially where the party system is weak or coalition politics prevails.

The *Federalist Papers* (written by Madison and Hamilton) are considered fundamental in the academic debate on the presidential system. The presidential system under the US

Constitution from the perspective of separation of powers. “The presidential system is based on the theory of separation of powers, although it is difficult to achieve complete separation in actual practice”, (Mahajan, 2016, p. 434). Since the president is directly elected by popular vote, it is believed that his political legitimacy is equal to that of the legislature. “Presidential system are not members of the legislature and they do not belong to the legislative majority party”, (Kapur, 2016, p. 422). This gives stability to the government and facilitates policy continuity. However, Juan Linz has been a harsh critic of the presidential system. Writing in the title *The Perils of Presidentialism*, the presidential system unnecessarily complicates the separation of powers, which increases the conflict between the executive and the legislature and causes political crises. Linz concludes that this system is more likely to fail, especially in developing countries.

In comparative studies, scholars have weighed both systems on the basis of stability and accountability. “Lijphart finds that there are two distinct patterns among his ten indicators that differentiate the two kinds of democratic systems”, (Bormann, 2010, p. 2). In his *Patterns of Democracy*, has shown that parliamentary systems are more suitable for democratic stability. For him, comparative examples of different countries around the world and argues that parliamentary systems balance political consensus, minority participation, and party competition better than presidential systems. On the other hand, Scott Mainwaring has argued that presidential systems are more likely to lead to democratic instability, authoritarianism, and policy failure in countries such as Latin America. However, supporters say that presidential systems strengthen the legitimacy of leaders because they allow them to receive direct mandates, show firmness in policy-making, and are likely to lead to long-term stability.

Looking at the practice of developed countries, the parliamentary system seems to be particularly effective in European countries. The parliamentary system has been in operation stably for more than two hundred years in the United Kingdom. India has also adopted the same system, where both multi-party competition and a federal structure are harmonized. However, in India, instability is sometimes seen when coalition governments and party positions are weak. “A coalition government always remains in pulls and pressures particularly in a multinational country like India”, (Malik, 2014, p. 1). The presidential system seems to have been widely used in the United States and Latin American countries. “The President is hence not the whole gubernative”, (Dann, 2006, p. 2). The United States has operated a presidential system stably for more than two hundred years, which has strengthened democratic institutional development. However, in Latin America, presidential systems have repeatedly failed, which has given rise to

the rebirth of authoritarian rule. “It is also a change of government without a change of regime, and thus carries less of the inherently undemocratic implications of democratic breakdown”, (Hochstetler, 2009, p. 36). Contemporary debate has also brought forward the concept of a semi-presidential system or hybrid system. France uses a mixture of both a presidential and a parliamentary system. “A semi-presidential system offers an intermediate path in policy terms. It retains a significant presidential figure who can set broad priorities, but entrusts day-to-day administration to a prime minister responsible to parliament”, (Magar, 2025, p. 153). This creates two power centers within the executive, a president and a prime minister, but in practice requires balance and cooperation. Some scholars have presented this as a suitable option for developing countries. However, critics say that a mixed system is likely to lead to more conflict and instability.

This issue has been debated in the context of South Asian countries, including Nepal. Although the parliamentary system was re-established in Nepal after 1990, problems have been seen due to political instability, short-lived governments, and party interests. “The constitution of Nepal 2015 incorporates certain outstanding features including dynamism and flexibility”, (Gautam, 2020, p. 51). It has adopted a parliamentary system, but sometimes the argument is raised that a presidential system is more appropriate in Nepal. Some scholars have argued that a presidential system can provide stability in a country with diversity and instability like Nepal, while others have said that only a parliamentary system makes consensus politics possible. “Strong and inclusive political parties provide concrete foundations for establishing a democratic political culture in a developing state like Pakistan, India or Bangladesh”, (Mian et al., 2019, p. 362). The experience of countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh has also shown that party competition is high in parliamentary systems but stability is weak, while presidential systems have stability but political cooperation is weak.

Contemporary scholars have acknowledged both the limitations and potential of both systems when thinking about the future of democracy. Some studies have shown that parliamentary systems can make democratic practice successful in the long run, especially in developing countries. On the other hand, some have argued that presidential systems are strengthened by direct popular support and decision-making power. In the new debate, perspectives such as governance theory, institutionalism, and democratic consolidation are reevaluating both systems. This shows that in today’s global era, governance systems depend not only on constitutional structures but also on political culture, civic consciousness, and party systems. “An executive with considerable powers in the constitution, generally in full

control of the composition of his cabinet and the administration, is directly elected by the people for a fixed period of time and is not dependent on the formal vote of confidence by the democratically elected representatives in parliament”, (Linz, 1985, p. 3).

Thus, the available literature has shown that the debate between parliamentary and presidential systems is not just about structural differences, but also about deeper questions related to the implementation and sustainability of democracy. Looking at the conclusions of scholars, some similarities are evident, such as the question of institutional stability, balance of power and democratic accountability, which lie at the heart of both systems. But the difference is that the parliamentary system emphasizes cooperation, dialogue and pluralism, while the presidential system emphasizes firmness, stability and direct mandate. For a country like Nepal, a comparative study between the two is even more important and meaningful because Nepal’s democratic practice has repeatedly faced instability, partisan interests and leadership crises.

Therefore, discussion of this research aims to clarify what are the different effects of comparing parliamentary and presidential systems, what are the practical characteristics of these systems, and which system seems more practical in the context of Nepal. Thus, by covering both the theoretical basis and practical significance of the subject, this study aims to deeply understand the democratic practice of Nepal, find solutions to existing challenges, and enrich the academic debate on possible governance models in the future. In addition, this study also provides an opportunity to compare democratic institutional practice in Nepal with other practices around the world. It is expected to provide policy-makers with an intellectual basis for making realistic decisions.

Methods of data collection and analysis

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research framework to analyze parliamentary and presidential systems of government. It is based entirely on secondary data. The sources used include peer-reviewed academic journal articles, scholarly books, constitutional documents, government reports, and other reliable published materials related to governance systems and political structures. Such sources provide the necessary theoretical basis and empirical perspectives for comparative political analysis. The data collection process has been carried out through a systematic review of literature focusing on topics such as executive-legislative relations, political accountability, policy continuity, leadership stability, and citizen participation. Thematic analysis and thematic classification methods have been used

to organize and analyze the collected materials. In this process, major analytical dimensions such as separation of powers, executive accountability, governance effectiveness, and political stability have been identified and classified.

Then, comparative analysis methods have been used to identify similarities and differences between parliamentary and presidential systems in various political contexts. This method provides a deeper understanding of the effects of institutional structures on governance outcomes. To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, various scholarly sources are compared and established theoretical perspectives from political science are used as the analytical basis. Although the study is based on secondary data, it systematically presents a relevant and in-depth analysis of the broader comparative governance debate, including the political system of Nepal.

Results and Discussion

The initial result that presents both parliamentary and presidential systems of government have their own inherent strengths and weaknesses, but no system is universally suitable for all countries. The country's history, political culture, party functioning, social diversity, geographical conditions, and international context determine how effective a system is. For example, parliamentary systems have been found to be durable in European countries due to long-standing traditions, stable party structures, and high-level political culture, while the same system has been found to be weak in countries like Nepal or Bangladesh due to frequent government changes, party factionalism, and policy instability. On the other hand, presidential systems have been stable in the United States for centuries, but have become problematic in Latin American countries due to power centralization, authoritarianism, and political conflict.

Table 1

Comparative Features of Parliamentary and Presidential System

Dimension	Parliamentary	Presidential
Executive Selection	Elected the Prime Minister by Parliament	Elected the President by people directly
Tenure of Executive	Dependent on majority of parliament	Fixed term (4-5 years)
Accountability	Directly accountable to the parliament	Accountable through the separation of powers
Policy Continuity	Less stable, vulnerable to the coalition shift	Stable more, fixed-term ensures continuity

Decision-making processes	Collectively, cabinet-based	Executive-dominant, individual
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Source: Author's development.

Power distribution and stability

The second consequence is related to executive stability and the distribution of power. In a parliamentary system, the executive, i.e. the prime minister, is dependent on a majority in parliament, making the government more likely to be unstable. Nepal has experienced several changes of government in a short period of time since 1990, which has had an adverse impact on policy continuity and development planning. However, this system places the government under direct control of parliament, which increases accountability. In a presidential system, the executive is directly elected and remains stable for a fixed term. This brings executive stability and ensures continuity in decision-making. However, in such a system, power is likely to shift too much towards the executive, which can weaken checks and balances.

Table 2

Advantages and Disadvantages of Parliamentary and Presidential System

System	Advantages	Disadvantages
Parliamentary	Executive accountable to legislature, ensure democratic control, flexible, leadership change without the political deadlock- promotes coalition and the power-sharing-strong party discipline, maintains political coherences	Frequent government changes may cause instability-coalition politics can lead to compromise, can risk of the legislative dominance over executive, weaker separation of powers, inefficiency
Presidential	Strong and stable executive leadership and fixed tenure, clear separation of powers, ensures deadlock possible between the check and balances, direct election of president, enhances legitimacy, stable government, unaffected by legislative crises	Risk of authoritarianism due to concentration of power, policy removal of executive and legislature, removal of president by impeachment, overemphasis on individual leadership rather than the collective responsibility

Source: Author's development.

Inclusion and representation

The third outcome is related to social inclusion and political representation. Since coalition governments are often formed in parliamentary systems, there is a greater possibility of including different classes, castes, communities and parties. The issue of inclusion has historically been sensitive in Nepal, especially in terms of ensuring representation of Dalits, indigenous peoples, women and Madhesi communities. In a parliamentary system, their voices can be easily conveyed to the parliament and government through coalitions. However, this has the potential to complicate and slow down the decision-making process. In a presidential system, the representation of minorities may also be weak as the winning candidate or party takes power in a “winner takes all” style. In a multicultural society like Nepal, such a system can further complicate the issue of inclusion. Therefore, in the context of Nepal, the parliamentary system seems to be relatively more suitable in terms of representation and inclusion, although reform is essential.

International experience and its relevance

The fourth conclusion is drawn from a comparison of international experience. The United Kingdom is an excellent example of the successful practice of the parliamentary system, where a permanent party structure, good political culture and constitutional traditions have made the system stable. In India, the parliamentary system has also been accepted as a constitutional system, which has been protecting Indian democracy, but this system has faced many challenges due to coalitions, instability, factional politics and corruption. In the United States, the presidential system has provided stability and clear executive leadership, but conflicts between the legislature and the executive are also common. In Latin American countries, the presidential system seems to have increased authoritarianism, military intervention and centralization of power. These experiences have taught Nepal that rather than blindly copying any system, it is necessary to choose a model that suits Nepal’s social, political and historical conditions.

In terms of presidential systems, the United States is considered the most successful example, where a strong mechanism of checks and balances clearly implements the separation of powers between the president and parliament. However, in Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Ecuador or Brazil, presidential systems have increased authoritarianism, policy deadlock and power struggles. This international experience makes it clear that for a presidential system to be successful, it is necessary for the judiciary to be independent, political parties to be accountable and citizens to be aware. The importance of these practices for Nepal lies in the

fact that Nepal needs to take a long-term view in choosing a system, strengthening federalism, multi-party practice and democratic values. Only by studying international successful and unsuccessful practices in a comparative manner can Nepal move its political structure towards stability, which can provide stability based on policy clarity, institutional strength and public trust in democratic practices.

Practical message for Nepal

Based on the study, the conclusion for Nepal is that no system is automatically successful because Nepal's political culture is party-centric, leader-oriented, and profit-oriented. Unless the parliamentary system is reformed, the problem of stability will persist, while moving to a presidential system will increase the risk of power centralization and authoritarianism. Therefore, the long-term solution for Nepal is to reform and strengthen the parliamentary system. This requires steps to simplify the process of government formation, make it difficult to destabilize the prime minister before a certain term, reduce factionalism within the party, ensure policy continuity, and increase accountability. Some scholars have argued that a semi-presidential system could be adopted for Nepal, in which the balance of executive power can be established by giving the president a limited role and making the prime minister accountable through parliament.

Table 3

Implication for Nepal's Political Context

Dimension	Parliamentary Practice	Presidential Possibility
Political stability	Frequent government changes	Potential stability with fixed executive term
Inclusivity	Coalition governments allow minority participation	Risk of marginalizing smaller parties, minorities
Governance quality	Weak policy continuity due to instability	Stable policies but prone to power centralization
Risk factors	Coalition fragmentation, weak institutions	Democratic backsliding, authoritarian tendencies

Source: Author's development.

Conclusion

This manuscript clarifies the structural and functional characteristics of both systems through a comparative analysis of parliamentary and presidential systems. Based on the analysis,

it is seen that the parliamentary system improves collective responsibility and democratic accountability by making the executive accountable to the legislature. However, coalition politics and party divisions may pose additional challenges to the stability of the government. In contrast, the presidential system has the potential to strengthen policy continuity and executive stability by providing fixed tenure and clarity of executive leadership. However, it also entails the risks of power concentration, executive-legislative conflict, and weakening of democratic oversight. Therefore, the strengths and weaknesses of both systems are deeply intertwined with institutional design and political behavior.

This study has reaffirmed the fact that no system of governance is universally superior. The effectiveness of a system of governance depends on historical background, political culture, maturity of the party system, constitutional balance, and institutional practice. Especially in a multi-party, diverse social structure, and transitional democratic context like Nepal, it seems more relevant to focus on appropriate reforms in its implementation, institutional strengthening, and accountability promotion rather than abandoning the parliamentary system. This study is expected to provide further guidance for adopting a context-appropriate, balanced, and democratic values-based approach in future constitutional debates and governance reform process.

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