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Does It Work: An Examination of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Parliamentary Systems

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explain the extent to which the advantages of parliamentary systems outweigh their disadvantages. The primary hypothesis is that the advantages of parliamentary systems outweigh the disadvantages to a moderate extent.

In order to explore the degree to which the advantages of parliamentary systems outweigh the disadvantages, this study will examine the different elements of parliamentary systems and examine the advantages and disadvantages of each component, with references to the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Simply defined, parliamentarianism is a system of government in which the chief executive is selected by and responsible to the legislature (Gering, Thacker, Moreno). According to Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction, parliamentary government has three components. The first characteristic is that the executive is “organically linked” to the legislature rather than put in check by it, as in presidential systems. The second quality of parliamentary government is that the executive branch is composed of a cabinet of ministers headed by the prime minister (first among equals) as opposed to a single executive in presidential systems. Finally, parliamentary systems typically have a separate head of state from the prime minister (Hague and Harrop 336).

There are two major types of parliamentary systems: majority government, in which the ruling party has a secure majority, and minority and coalition government, in which no party has a legislative majority (Hague and Harrop 337). This essay will primarily examine the advantages and disadvantages of the majority parliamentary model used in the United Kingdom and other liberal democracies.

The first section of this essay, United We Stand, will examine the unitary quality of parliamentary systems, highlighting the ways in which the executive and legislative branches of government complement each other and promote centralised government. In particular, this section will explore how the division of power affects the authority held by the prime minister and how the judiciary system operates within the unitary system. Moreover, this section will elaborate on how the executive is chosen
and removed from office. Essentially, *United We Stand* will argue that although unitary government lacks a balance of powers and direct election by the populace, it allows the country to act more efficiently and guarantees that the ruling party remains accountable to the people.

In its second section, *First Among Equals*, this essay will explore how the shared power in the executive branch between the prime minister and other ministers affects the way parliamentary countries are run. Specifically, this section will demonstrate how the prime minister’s power depends on his cabinet’s support and how the ministers remain accountable to the legislature, as well as consider how the division of executive power allows more diversity. *First Among Equals* will assert that while the shared power of the executive branch surely prevents the prime minister from wielding too much authority, it also impedes the decision-making process.

The final section of this essay, *A Second Head*, will analyse the role of the separate head of state and what its purpose is in the parliamentary system. *A Second Head* will concentrate on the ways in which the ceremonial head of state inspires stability, as well as examine how the head of state is chosen and discuss any reserve powers held by the ceremonial head of state. This segment will maintain that although the ceremonial head of state rarely affects the outcome of political decisions, it is still a valuable role that provides regimes with tradition, endurance, and continuity and has, on occasion, played an important role in political outcomes.

The conclusion will argue that although parliamentary systems do have disadvantages, every political system has pros and cons, and that the advantages of parliamentary systems outweigh the disadvantages to a moderate extent, hence allowing governments such as Great Britain’s to thrive over hundreds of years.

*United We Stand*

One of the key features of parliamentary government is being unitary. In his book *The English Constitution*, Walter Bagehot wrote, “The efficient secret of the English Constitution may be described
as the close union, the nearly complete fusion of the executive and legislative powers” (Bagehot 12). Rather than checking and balancing each other, as in presidential systems, the executive and legislative branches in unitary systems support each other (Hague and Harrop 336). For example, in the United Kingdom, the parliamentary majority elects a leader to become the prime minister. The prime minister retains a seat in parliament and only remains the executive as long as his party maintains control of the House of Commons (Elgie 14). On the other hand, in the United States presidential system, the president must forfeit any legislative office, is directly elected by the people, and sometimes is not of the same party as the legislative majority (Hague and Harrop 331).

The unitary quality of parliamentary systems holds both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of is that the vote of no confidence keeps the prime minister accountable (Huber). A member of parliament simply introduces a motion of no confidence and, if the motion is successful, the prime minister is removed from office and replaced by another member of the dominant party, as chosen by parliament (Curtis 236). In presidential systems, on the other hand, the president must go through a complex impeachment process to be removed. Even if a president loses the support of most of the nation, as George W. Bush did, he will rarely be impeached (Elgie 108). However, since the prime minister’s authority lies within the legislature, it is his obligation to step down if he loses the support of the majority (Helms 161). For example, Margaret Thatcher held a strong position with the Conservative party and had a huge influence in Cabinet and Parliament until 1990. However, when the economy took a downturn and the poll tax was implemented, her relationship with the party became damaged so she resigned (Elgie 44). Another factor that adds to the prime minister’s accountability is his weekly questioning time in the House of Commons. This weekly event gives parliament a chance to question him on policies, decisions, and legislation, thus keeping him accountable to the legislature, and is the most prominent method of scrutinising the government in parliament (Helms 163).

A second advantage of unitary systems is that parties tend to be stable, efficient, and decisive because of intra-party unity (Hague and Harrop 336). While in the United States the president, Senate,
and House of Representatives are not always dominated by the same party, in the United Kingdom, the same party always controls both the executive and the legislature. In order to facilitate unity within the party, UK governments use the whipping system, led by the chief whip, to encourage party discipline in voting by serving as a liaison between the executive and parliament (Helms 162). Since MPs typically vote along their party line, the dominant party can pass legislation quickly and efficiently. According to Patrick Dunleavy, dominant parties rarely see their measures defeated—or even amended—in parliament (Dunleavy et al. 37). Conversely, in the United States, some Congress members do not vote with their party, which can lead to legislative stalemates. Intra-party unity in parliament also promotes governmental stability because, once parliament makes a decision, it is fairly locked in until a change in parliamentary dominance.

Centralisation also acts as a key benefit of unitary systems. The federal government has much more control than local governments, allowing it to act efficiently (Helms 177). For example, when Prime Minister Gordon Brown wanted to alleviate the credit crunch by providing a bank bailout, he was able to do so overnight. However, when U.S. President George W. Bush attempted to do the same, he met a myriad of roadblocks. In the British unitary system, the central government is responsible for “high politics” like foreign affairs, taxation, welfare structure, and defence, whereas the sub-central government controls “low politics” such as the delivery of local welfare. Recently, the distinction between “high politics” and “low politics” has become blurred, increasing the centralisation of leadership responsibilities even more (Elgie 27).

A final benefit of unitary systems is parliamentary sovereignty. Essentially, parliamentary sovereignty means that no person or institution can overturn the decisions of the parliament (Helms 175). Parliamentary sovereignty allows for a stable system since decisions made by parliament cannot be overruled. When decisions are continually being changed or overruled, it creates confusion and instability. The sovereignty of the parliament also prevents the prime minister or other governmental authorities from exercising too much authority and becoming “above the law.” In addition,
parliamentary sovereignty ensures that no parliament is subject to the restrictions made by past parliaments (Helms 175).

However, the unitary quality of parliamentary government also bears some disadvantages. One of the biggest disadvantages is, in fact, the flip side of one of the benefits: parliamentary sovereignty. Because the decisions of the parliament are final, there are few balances. For example, parliamentary sovereignty does not allow for judicial review, reviewing the validity of a legislative act (Elgie 28). If parliament makes a decision, no person or institution can question its constitutionality. This can lead to excessive power and, as U.S. Chief Justice John Marshall argued, “a legislative intrusion into a judicial monopoly” (Curtis 106). British judiciary authority actually lies within the legislature—the House of Lords. The lack of provision for judicial review in the British system gives parliament authority that could turn authoritarian.

Another disadvantage of unitary government in parliamentary systems is the intra-party unity. Although intra-party unity allows the government to function efficiently and decisively, it also means the dominant party can wield too much power. According to Patrick Dunleavy, “It is (and long has been) extremely rare for governments to see their measures defeated within Parliament; even minor amendments are very unlikely to be passed unless supported by the government” (Dunleavy et al. 37). Because of the elaborate whipping system, most MPs vote with their party; hence, the dominant party can pass almost anything and the opposition can do nearly nothing to stop it (Elgie 3). Prime ministers have a certain amount of leeway regarding when to hold elections, which must occur every four to five years. If the prime minister’s party is viewed favorably, he will likely go ahead and proceed with elections. However, if his party has lost popularity, he may wait to hold elections until the party is in a better position (Hague and Harrop 336).

Lastly, unitary systems can be detrimental to local areas. Since unitary government relies heavily on centralisation, local authorities do not have as much power. Theoretically, the central government can even abolish local governments (Helms 177). Although each municipality elections members of
parliament to represent their interests in the Palace of Westminster, local governments have few policy-making powers, which can lead to local problems remaining stagnant.

Although unitary government in parliamentary systems does lack some of the balances of presidential systems, notably judicial review and a separately elected executive and legislature, it provides the country with a stable, efficient, decisive government that is highly accountable to the people.

First Among Equals

In the parliamentary systems, the executive consists of more than just the prime minister. Rather, it is made up of a cabinet led by the prime minister (Hague and Harrop 336). Since the executive is collegial, the prime minister is the primus inter pares, or first among equals, in the executive branch. The prime minister selects about 20 parliamentary colleagues based on ability, reliability, seniority, gender, popularity, party standing, policy record, and loyalty to the party to form the cabinet (Dunleavy et al. 30). The collegial executive has both pros and cons.

One of the most significant benefits of a shared executive is collective responsibility. When the executive is collegial, the entire executive branch takes responsibility for all decisions. Collectively, they are accountable to the legislature (Hague and Harrop 337). This encourages unity within the executive and mandates discussion about key issues (Curtis 234). Although the prime minister is the first among equals, cabinet ministers can have significant leverage if they have an independent political base (Dunleavy et al. 31). Additionally, all decisions must be unanimous within the executive, which means that the prime minister needs the support of his cabinet to govern effectively and prohibits him for assuming too much individual power (Hague and Harrop 337).

Another benefit of a collegial executive is the diversity in viewpoints. Although cabinet ministers come from the same party as prime minister, they provide fresh viewpoints and represent more interests. This prevents the executive branch from acting solely on the prime minister’s interests (Curtis
Moreover, each cabinet member chairs a committee and brings that committee’s decisions to the cabinet meetings. This ensures that the important issues are thoroughly discussed before the executive makes a decision.

On the other hand, a shared executive branch in parliamentary systems also has disadvantages. Although it encourages unity and prohibits too much prime ministerial power, collective responsibility impedes the decision-making process (Hague and Harrop 340). While the U.S. president can make decisions even if his cabinet does not unanimously approve, the prime minister cannot make decisions without undivided support. This slows executive decision-making. Since ministers’ political reputations are on the line, some of them choose to act individually rather than collectively (Elgie 42). If ministers refuse to compromise their own beliefs for the sake of a unanimous decision, they are obligated to step down. Also, despite the fact that cabinet members should be on an equal level, there is an informal hierarchy that tends to sway the cabinet’s decisions (Curtis 236).

Furthermore, “presidentialisation,” the concept that prime ministers are gaining more prominence in the cabinet and almost acting like presidents, has been detrimental to the collegial executive. In the past few years, the cabinet has become more reactive than proactive, approving and rejecting committee decisions rather than making them (Helms 88). With the creation of the Cabinet Secretariat during David Lloyd George’s premiership, the previously informal cabinet decision-making process became more centralised to the benefit of the prime minister (Elgie 35). Essentially, cabinet ministers have begun to lose strength (King). If they maintain a low profile, have a historically-sound reputation, and do not request budget increases, cabinet ministers will be able to wield more autonomy. However, if they wish to change the status quo, their authority could be jeopardised (King).

While the collegial executive in parliamentary systems allows more diversity in executive decisions and stimulates unity and discussion within the executive branch, it does impede the decision-making process. Moreover, the “presidentialisation” of the premiership has detracted from the purpose of the collegial executive, given the prime minister more power than originally intended, and weakened
the role of the cabinet. Despite these shortcomings, collective executive does provide some balance within the executive branch and prohibits the prime minister from exercising too much authority.

A Second Head

The final aspect of parliamentary systems is a separate head of state and head of government. In 1867, Walter Bagehot wrote, “In such constitutions there are two parts:…first, those which excited and preserve the reverence of the population—the dignified parts, if I may so call them; the next the efficient parts—those by which it, in fact, works and rules…” (Bagehot 6). In parliamentary systems, the prime minister typically serves as the “efficient part,” in Bagehot’s terms, and the monarch or president acts as the “dignified part.” The two heads offer both benefits and detriments to parliamentary systems.

A key benefit is that the two heads “depoliticises” the head of state (Curtis 233). Since the monarchs are born into the position, they symbolise unity rather than the dominance of a particular party. Additionally, since heads of state are not elected in parliamentary systems and serve for life, they provide continuity and stability through the changing heads of government (Curtis 231).

Furthermore, the duties of monarchs are primarily ceremonial. Since the head of government exercises power in place of the head of state, the monarch cannot become authoritarian (Curtis 232). If monarchs had constitutional powers in parliamentary systems, they might misuse them and become dictators. In the United Kingdom, the head of state’s duties, which include opening parliament and other ceremonial tasks, essentially follow tradition and give the system stability and endurance through the ages (Curtis 232).

A disadvantage of having a separate head of state and head of government, however, is that the monarch has a chance of becoming politically involved. In the United Kingdom, the monarch meets with the prime minister once a week. Although nobody knows for sure what happens in these meetings, some argue that a monarch who has been on the throne for a while may be able to influence the political executive (Curtis 232).
Secondly, the separation of the head of state and the head of government in parliamentary systems could lead to a less politically effective system. According to Michael Curtis, those who serve as both the head of state and head of government have enhanced political effectiveness, since they can put their ceremonial powers to partisan use (Curtis 233). For example, in the United States, the president both conducts state visits and exercises significant political authority. The combination of powers allows him to use ceremonial duties to encourage partisan decisions.

Essentially, although the monarch has the possibility of becoming politically involved, the separation of the head of state and head of government provides for a more unpartisan head of state that exercises primarily ceremonial duties to the benefit of parliamentary systems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, parliamentary systems are composed of three aspects: a united executive and legislature, a collegial executive branch, and a separate head of state and head of government. Each component of parliamentary systems offers both advantages and disadvantages to the government. A unitary system lacks a balance of powers and direct election, but makes up for it in providing an efficient and highly accountable government. The collegial executive serves as a check for the prime minister’s authority and brings diversity to the executive branch but, at the same time, slows the decision-making process. Finally, a separate head of state and head of government infuses parliamentary systems with stability, continuity, and tradition, as well as depoliticises the head of state, who only has ceremonial duties. On the other hand, certain aspects of the separate heads allow the head of state to become politically involved and could lead to a less politically effective system. Despite the disadvantages of parliamentary systems, the advantages certainly do outweigh them to a moderate yet secure extent.