
GOVERNANCE UNDER PRESSURE: HOW PRESIDENTIAL AND PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEMS RESPOND TO MODERN CRISES (UKRAINE WAR, CLIMATE, AND AI GOVERNANCE)

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Abstract

Governance in the twenty-first century is increasingly characterized by crises that are complex, transnational, and fast-moving. Traditional policy frameworks are no longer adequate to address simultaneous challenges such as geopolitical conflict, environmental breakdown, and technological disruption. How a state responds to such crises depends largely on its constitutional architecture. This paper explores how presidential and parliamentary systems perform under conditions of stress, focusing on three defining crises of our time: the Ukraine war, the climate emergency, and artificial intelligence (AI) governance. Drawing on comparative political theory and empirical analysis, the paper finds that presidential systems offer decisive and stable leadership but face risks of unilateralism and institutional gridlock. Parliamentary systems, in contrast, deliver coordinated and legitimate action through collective responsibility but may suffer from instability and slower coalition negotiation. The paper concludes that effective governance under pressure requires hybrid institutional strategies — balancing speed, legitimacy, and accountability through robust oversight and transnational cooperation.

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1. Introduction

Democratic institutions are designed not only for routine governance but also for resilience under stress. Modern governance is “governance under pressure,” facing wars that reshape alliances, planetary ecological crises that threaten survival, and technological revolutions that outpace law. In such contexts, how states make and implement decisions becomes a matter of survival for both society and democracy itself.

The Russia–Ukraine war, which erupted into full-scale invasion in 2022, tested the speed and unity of democratic governments worldwide. The climate crisis, meanwhile, challenges governments to plan across decades, balancing economic and ecological imperatives. The rise of artificial intelligence poses an entirely new category of governance challenge — a non-territorial, data-driven threat that demands agility, ethics, and international cooperation.

In this context, constitutional design—whether presidential or parliamentary—determines how power is distributed, how accountability operates, and how quickly policies can be enacted. Presidential systems (such as those of the United States and Brazil) separate powers among executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This offers checks and balances but can slow decision-making during emergencies (Lijphart, 2012). Parliamentary systems (such as the United Kingdom, Germany, or India) fuse executive and legislative authority, promoting coherence and efficiency but risking executive dominance if legislative oversight weakens (Cheibub, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how these two models respond to modern crises by comparing their reactions to the Ukraine war, climate change, and AI governance. It also identifies institutional lessons and reforms necessary to improve democratic performance under stress.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Comparative political theory provides several frameworks to evaluate institutional resilience. This study applies a comparative institutional performance model that assesses governance through five criteria:

1. **Decision-making speed and coordination** – how quickly and coherently policies are formulated and implemented.

2. Policy durability and continuity – whether policies survive leadership transitions and maintain legitimacy.

3. Executive discretion and emergency powers – the degree of unilateral authority exercised by the executive.

4. Legislative oversight and accountability – the mechanisms by which parliaments or congresses supervise the executive.

5. Administrative capacity – the strength of bureaucratic institutions, expert agencies, and implementation mechanisms.

This research synthesizes academic sources (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997; Lijphart, 2012), international policy analyses (OECD, 2023; European Commission, 2024), and government documents. It uses a case-comparative method, contrasting how presidential and parliamentary systems handled three concurrent global crises.

The Ukraine war serves as a test of emergency response and security coordination. The climate crisis examines sustained, long-term planning. AI governance highlights adaptability to technological disruption. Together, they reveal the deeper dynamics of governance under pressure.

3. Governance Structures Under Pressure

Presidential Systems

Presidential systems are characterized by the separation of powers, fixed executive terms, and direct election of the president. This arrangement creates stability and decisional autonomy but often leads to policy gridlock when the legislature is controlled by the opposition. The president's ability to act unilaterally—through executive orders or emergency decrees—can produce swift action during crises but raises concerns of democratic overreach (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997).

During crises, presidential systems rely heavily on executive prerogative. For instance, U.S. presidents can impose sanctions, declare emergencies, or deploy military resources without prior congressional approval, though such measures require later ratification. However, reliance on

emergency powers risks weakening institutional checks and normalizing exceptional governance (Brennan Center for Justice, 2024).

Parliamentary Systems

In parliamentary systems, the executive emerges from and remains accountable to the legislature. This creates strong policy coordination between branches and allows governments to pass crisis measures quickly when supported by a majority. The fusion of power enables collective responsibility, where both government and parliament share accountability (Lijphart, 2012).

However, the strength of parliamentary action depends on political stability. Majority governments, such as the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic, can legislate rapidly. Coalition governments, such as Germany's three-party alliance, must negotiate, sometimes slowing action but increasing consensus legitimacy.

The institutional contrast becomes visible during crises: presidential systems act decisively but unilaterally; parliamentary systems act collaboratively but depend on cohesion.

4. Case Study 1 – The Ukraine War

Institutional Context

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a global crisis demanding immediate action — military aid, economic sanctions, refugee management, and energy security. How states responded reflected their constitutional design.

Presidential Response: The United States

In the United States, the president holds significant constitutional powers in foreign affairs and national security. President Biden swiftly invoked emergency economic authorities, freezing Russian assets, coordinating NATO sanctions, and approving arms transfers (Congressional Research Service, 2023).

Because of the presidential system's autonomy, these measures were implemented faster than if prior congressional authorization had been required.

Yet, this centralization of crisis power raises concerns. The U.S. has over 40 ongoing national emergencies, many of which remain active for decades (Brennan Center for Justice, 2024). While this ensures agility, it risks normalizing emergency governance and diminishing legislative oversight.

Parliamentary Response: Europe and Ukraine

In Ukraine, wartime governance has required coordination between the presidency and parliament. The Verkhovna Rada enacted martial law and approved budgets for defense and social resilience, demonstrating legislative legitimacy even amid existential threat (Ukrainian Parliament Reports, 2023).

Similarly, European parliamentary democracies such as Germany and the United Kingdom acted rapidly by passing sanctions laws and military aid packages through parliamentary votes. These measures ensured both speed and accountability.

Comparative Insight

Presidential systems exhibit speed through autonomy, while parliamentary systems achieve speed through cooperation. However, policies enacted through parliaments tend to have greater durability and legitimacy. Presidential decisions, while rapid, often lack the institutional buy-in necessary for long-term sustainability.

5. Case Study 2 – Climate Governance

Institutional Challenge

Climate change is a long-term crisis requiring policy continuity across decades and administrations. Governance here is less about emergency reaction and more about institutional persistence.

Parliamentary Systems

Countries like the United Kingdom and Germany illustrate parliamentary strength in long-term climate governance. The UK's Climate Change Act 2008 mandates legally binding carbon

budgets, overseen by an independent Committee on Climate Change. The act has survived changes in government, demonstrating legislative durability (OECD, 2023).

Germany's Federal Climate Change Act 2019 similarly institutionalizes emission targets, obligating ministries to deliver annual reductions and submit reports to parliament.

The European Union adopted the European Green Deal in 2020 and integrated it into law by 2023 (European Commission, 2023). Because the EU operates through parliamentary and supranational mechanisms, climate policy enjoys continuity beyond national elections.

Presidential Systems

In contrast, presidential systems, especially the United States, experience policy volatility. President Obama's Clean Power Plan (2015) aimed to reduce emissions through executive regulation, but it was blocked in court and repealed under President Trump. Later, President Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (2022) reinstated strong climate incentives, but its fate remains uncertain amid political shifts (U.S. Supreme Court Reports, 2022).

This cycle reveals how executive-led environmental policy can fluctuate depending on electoral outcomes. However, federalism provides resilience: state-level programs in California, New York, and Massachusetts have advanced renewable standards independent of federal action.

Comparative Lessons

Parliamentary systems, through legislative entrenchment, provide policy stability essential for climate planning. Presidential systems, however, demonstrate innovation and flexibility, especially when executive agencies and subnational governments compensate for national gridlock.

6. Case Study 3 – Artificial Intelligence Governance

The New Governance Frontier

AI represents a governance frontier where the speed of innovation outpaces legal frameworks. Governments must balance innovation, safety, privacy, and ethics while coordinating across borders.

Presidential Response: The United States

In October 2023, President Biden issued the Executive Order on Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy AI, directing federal agencies to set safety standards, test high-risk models, and ensure civil-rights compliance (The White House, 2023). This executive-led response highlighted the agility of the presidential model.

However, by early 2025, a change in administration resulted in partial rollbacks of the order (Reuters, 2025). Without statutory backing, such policies are temporary, relying on political will rather than institutional permanence.

Parliamentary and Supranational Response: The EU

The European Union's AI Act (2024) provides a contrasting example. Drafted through the European Parliament and Council, it establishes a risk-based classification system and binding compliance obligations. Though the legislative process was lengthy, its legal durability ensures predictable governance (European Parliament, 2024).

Hybrid Innovation: Subnational Action

Subnational actors like California enacted the AI Transparency Act (2025), mandating disclosure of automated decision-making systems (California Legislature, 2025). This demonstrates how decentralized governance can fill regulatory gaps in federal systems.

Comparative Insight

AI governance illustrates the central tension between speed and stability. Presidential systems can mobilize rapid national initiatives, while parliamentary systems ensure comprehensive, long-lasting legal frameworks. The optimal model combines both — quick executive coordination with strong legislative entrenchment.

7. Comparative Analysis

1. Speed vs. Legitimacy:

Presidentialism favors speed through executive authority; parliamentarism ensures legitimacy through legislative consensus.

2. Durability:

Parliamentary statutes, such as the EU AI Act, endure across administrations. Executive orders in presidential systems lack permanence.

3. Oversight:

Strong legislative committees—like the UK’s Public Accounts Committee or U.S. congressional oversight panels—are essential to balance emergency powers (Brennan Center, 2024).

4. Institutional Capacity:

Both systems depend on technocratic expertise. OECD (2023) findings show that independent regulators and civil service professionalism, not merely constitutional form, drive policy success.

5. International Coordination:

Integrated parliamentary regions (EU) excel at collective action; presidential systems (U.S.) provide flexible leadership coalitions.

8. Policy Recommendations

For Presidential Systems

Introduce mandatory congressional review for emergency powers. Enact statutory climate and AI frameworks to secure continuity. Encourage bipartisan crisis committees to enhance legitimacy.

For Parliamentary Systems

Strengthen coalition agreements on long-term crises. Institutionalize independent review commissions for oversight. Safeguard minority participation to prevent executive dominance.

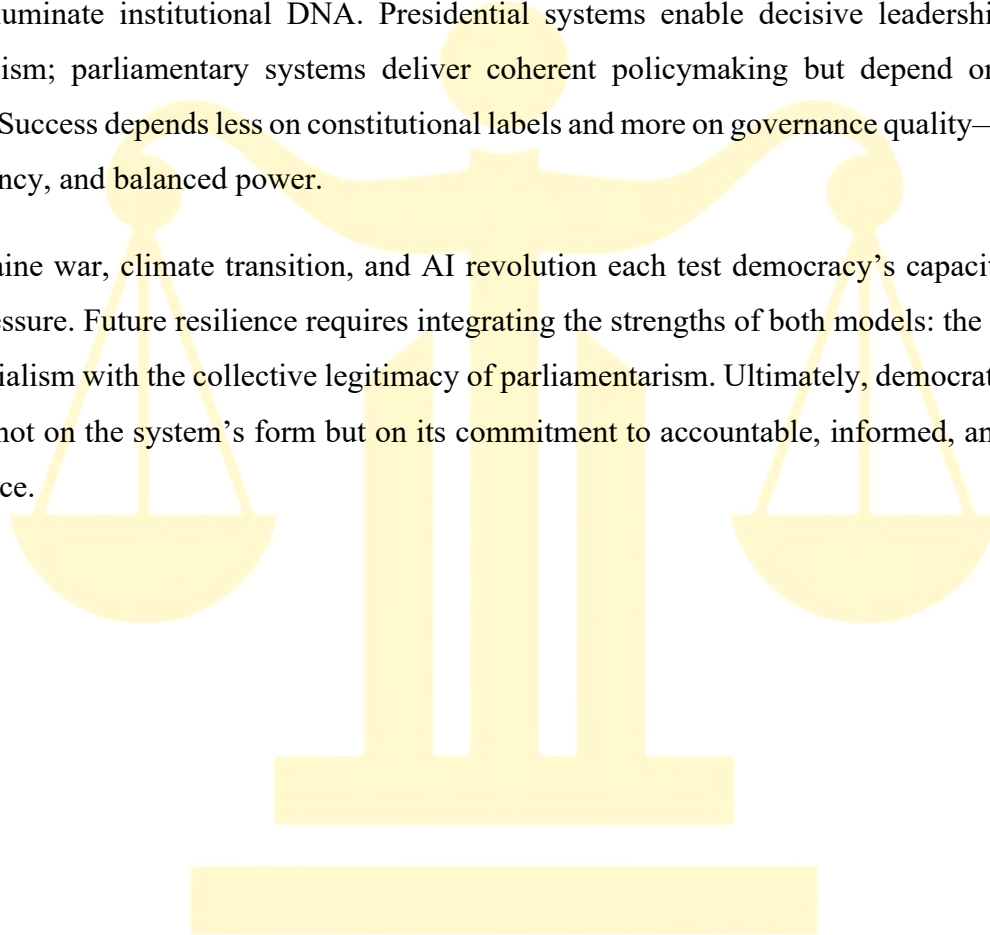
For Both Systems

Build multi-level governance networks linking local and international agencies. Create national foresight units for early crisis detection. Ensure public transparency to maintain democratic trust.

9. Conclusion

Crises illuminate institutional DNA. Presidential systems enable decisive leadership but risk unilateralism; parliamentary systems deliver coherent policymaking but depend on coalition stability. Success depends less on constitutional labels and more on governance quality—expertise, transparency, and balanced power.

The Ukraine war, climate transition, and AI revolution each test democracy's capacity to adapt under pressure. Future resilience requires integrating the strengths of both models: the stability of presidentialism with the collective legitimacy of parliamentarism. Ultimately, democratic survival depends not on the system's form but on its commitment to accountable, informed, and adaptive governance.



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