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Comparative Case Study:
Presidential Institutions in the United States and South Korea

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY: POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS & GOVERNANCE

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Learning Objectives

By the end of this article, readers should be able to:

1. Explain how presidential institutions shape executive power, democratic accountability, and governance outcomes in the United States and South Korea.
2. Compare the historical development of the U.S. and South Korean presidencies, including key constitutional moments, reforms, and political turning points.
3. Analyze the structural functions of presidential systems, including executive authority, term limits, legislative relations, judicial checks, and impeachment mechanisms.
4. Evaluate how institutional design and political context influence policymaking, political stability, and public accountability in each country.

Key Terms

Political Institution - A formal or informal structure, rule, norm, or practice that shapes political behavior and organizes how power is exercised within a political system.

Presidentialism - A system of government in which the president serves as both head of state and head of government, usually with a fixed term of office and powers that are separate from the legislature.

Executive Power - The authority held by the president or executive branch to implement laws, direct government administration, conduct foreign policy, and exercise constitutionally defined leadership powers.

Checks and Balances - A system in which separate branches or institutions of government limit one another's power to prevent excessive concentration of authority.

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Impeachment - A constitutional process through which a president or other high-ranking official may be formally accused of misconduct and potentially removed from office.

Critical Juncture - A relatively short period of political uncertainty or change during which decisions made by political actors can place institutions on a lasting developmental path.

Institutional Change - The process through which political institutions shift over time, either through major reforms, gradual adjustments, reinterpretation of rules, or changes in enforcement.

Governance - The way political authority is organized and exercised, including policymaking, institutional accountability, political stability, and the relationship between government and the public.

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Introduction

Presidential institutions play a central role in shaping democratic governance because they determine how executive authority is organized, limited, and held accountable. In presidential systems, the executive is not merely an administrative officer. The president often serves as head of state, head of government, commander in chief, agenda setter, and public symbol of national leadership. These combined roles can give the presidency broad governing capacity, but they can also create risks when executive power grows faster than institutional constraints (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

This case study asks: How do presidential institutions in two democratic systems shape executive power, accountability, and governance when those systems face polarization, corruption, or institutional strain?

This comparative case study examines presidential institutions in the United States and South Korea. Both countries use presidential systems, both separate executive authority from the legislature, and both rely on constitutional checks and balances to prevent excessive concentration of power. Yet the historical development of the presidency in each country differs sharply. The United States presidency emerged from the constitutional debates of the late eighteenth century, where the framers attempted to design an executive strong enough to govern but limited enough to avoid monarchy (U.S. Const. art. II). South Korea's presidency developed through a much more turbulent path, including authoritarian rule, military-backed governments, mass democratic mobilization, and the 1987 constitutional transition to direct presidential elections (ConstitutionNet, n.d.; Dostal, 2023).

This comparison argues that presidential institutions in the United States and South Korea demonstrate how formal constitutional design and historical context work together to shape governance outcomes. The U.S. presidency has gradually expanded through war powers, administrative growth, executive orders, and partisan polarization, creating a powerful executive constrained by Congress, courts, federalism, elections, and term limits. South Korea's presidency, by contrast, remains shaped by the legacy of authoritarian executive dominance and the democratic reforms of 1987, resulting in a strong but politically vulnerable presidency constrained by a single five-year term, legislative impeachment, judicial review, and public mobilization (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987; Dostal, 2023). In both cases, presidential institutions influence

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policymaking, political stability, and public accountability, but they do so through different historical pathways and institutional pressures.

Historical Background

The United States Presidency

The U.S. presidency was created through the Constitution of 1787 as part of a broader institutional compromise over separation of powers. Under Article II, "the executive Power" is vested in the president, who serves a four-year term and is selected through the Electoral College. The framers rejected both legislative supremacy and hereditary monarchy. They wanted an executive who could act with energy, especially in foreign affairs and law enforcement, while remaining subject to constitutional limits. This design reflected a central tension in American institutional development: the presidency needed enough power to govern, but not so much power that it could dominate the republic (U.S. Const. art. II; United States Senate, n.d.).

The early presidency was shaped not only by constitutional text but also by precedent. George Washington's administration helped establish norms of executive leadership, cabinet consultation, peaceful transfer of power, and voluntary retirement after two terms. These early practices became part of the informal institutional structure of the presidency. Hall and Taylor's discussion of institutionalism is useful here because institutions include not only formal rules but also procedures, routines, norms, and conventions that shape political behavior (Hall & Taylor, 1996). In the U.S. case, constitutional rules and presidential norms developed together.

The presidency expanded during periods of crisis. The Civil War strengthened presidential authority under Abraham Lincoln, particularly in relation to military power and emergency action. The Progressive Era and New Deal further expanded the presidency through administrative agencies, economic regulation, and national policy leadership. Franklin D. Roosevelt's four electoral victories broke Washington's two-term norm and led to the Twenty-Second Amendment, which formally limited presidents to two elected terms. This change shows how informal norms can eventually become formal constitutional rules when political actors perceive a need to prevent future abuse or imbalance (United States Senate, n.d.; Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).

The modern presidency has continued to grow through executive orders, national security authority, budgetary leadership, media visibility, and party polarization. Whittington and Carpenter

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argue that executive power must be understood as part of American institutional development, not as a fixed constitutional category (Whittington & Carpenter, 2003). The presidency has gained power as the federal government has grown and as presidents have become central actors in policy formation, crisis response, and public communication. This growth has increased governing capacity, but it has also intensified conflict over the limits of executive authority (Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).

The South Korean Presidency

South Korea's presidency developed under very different historical conditions. The Republic of Korea was founded in 1948 after Japanese colonial rule, liberation, division of the Korean Peninsula, and the establishment of separate governments in North and South Korea. The first South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, governed through an increasingly authoritarian presidency and used constitutional amendments and coercive tactics to remain in power. This pattern established an early association between presidential authority and executive dominance (ConstitutionNet, n.d.; Dostal, 2023).

South Korea's subsequent political development was shaped by military rule and authoritarian presidentialism. Park Chung Hee, who came to power after a military coup in 1961, created a developmental state that oversaw rapid economic growth but limited political freedoms. The 1972 Yushin Constitution concentrated power in the presidency and allowed Park to rule through an authoritarian constitutional order. After Park's assassination in 1979, Chun Doo-hwan's military-backed government continued authoritarian practices, including repression of democratic movements (ConstitutionNet, n.d.; Dostal, 2023).

The major turning point came in 1987 (ConstitutionNet, n.d.; Dostal, 2023). Mass protests, labor activism, student organizing, and pressure from civil society forced the regime to accept constitutional reform and direct presidential elections. Capoccia's concept of a critical juncture is useful for understanding this moment. A critical juncture is a period of uncertainty in which political choices have a heightened chance of shaping long-term institutional development (Capoccia, 2015). South Korea's 1987 transition fits this model because the reform process created the constitutional framework that still structures the presidency today (Capoccia, 2015; ConstitutionNet, n.d.).

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The 1987 Constitution created a directly elected president serving a single five-year term (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987). The single-term limit reflected South Korea's authoritarian experience. Reformers wanted to prevent presidents from using state power to extend their tenure. This design was meant to create democratic accountability by ensuring alternation in office. However, the same rule also created a presidency with a compressed time horizon. Presidents have only one term to pursue their agenda, cannot seek reelection, and often face declining influence as the next election approaches (Dostal, 2023).

South Korea's democratic period has included repeated presidential scandals, corruption investigations, and impeachment crises. President Roh Moo-hyun was impeached by the National Assembly in 2004, but the Constitutional Court rejected the impeachment and restored him to office (Lee, 2005). President Park Geun-hye was impeached in 2016 and removed by the Constitutional Court in 2017 after a corruption scandal that produced mass candlelight protests (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2017). President Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached after declaring martial law in December 2024 and was removed from office in 2025 after the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment (Reuters, 2025a). These events show that South Korea's presidency remains powerful, but also unusually exposed to formal and public accountability mechanisms.

Structural Functions

The U.S. and South Korean presidencies share the basic features of presidentialism. In both countries, the president is separately elected from the legislature, serves as chief executive, exercises command authority over the military, appoints major officials, conducts foreign policy, and plays a central role in national political leadership. However, the structure of presidential power differs in each system because of term limits, legislative relations, party systems, impeachment procedures, and constitutional courts (U.S. Const. art. II; Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987).

In the United States, the president serves a four-year term and may be elected twice. The possibility of reelection creates both an accountability mechanism and a political incentive structure. A first-term president must consider public opinion, party support, and reelection prospects. A second-term president is constitutionally barred from running again, which can reduce direct electoral accountability but may also allow more freedom in policy decisions. The U.S. system also creates shared powers between the president and Congress. Congress writes laws,

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controls appropriations, confirms many presidential appointments, approves treaties through the Senate, and has the authority to impeach and remove federal officials. The president can veto legislation, recommend policy, negotiate internationally, and direct executive agencies (U.S. Const. art. II; United States Senate, n.d.).

South Korea's president serves a single five-year term and cannot be reelected (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987). This term structure is one of the most important differences between the two systems. The rule was designed to prevent authoritarian entrenchment, but it also has practical consequences for governance. Because South Korean presidents cannot seek another term, voters cannot reward or punish them through reelection. Political accountability therefore depends heavily on legislative oversight, public protest, criminal investigation after leaving office, and impeachment in extreme cases (Dostal, 2023).

The relationship between the presidency and the legislature also differs across the two cases. In the United States, separation of powers often produces divided government, partisan gridlock, budget conflict, and litigation over executive action. The president may rely on executive orders or administrative action when Congress is unwilling or unable to pass legislation. This can make governance more flexible in the short term but unstable over time, since later presidents may reverse prior executive actions (Hughes, 2025; Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).

In South Korea, the National Assembly can become a powerful check when the president's party lacks a legislative majority, particularly in a party environment marked by polarization and executive-legislative conflict (Kim & Baek, 2022). However, South Korean presidents have often been described as operating within an "imperial presidency," a term used to capture the concentration of appointment authority, agenda-setting power, bureaucratic control, and prosecutorial influence around the executive. Dostal argues that South Korea's presidency has remained institutionally dominant despite democratic reforms, creating recurring pressure for constitutional change (Dostal, 2023). This tension between formal democratic limits and concentrated executive practice is one of the defining features of South Korean governance (Dostal, 2023; Reuters, 2025b).

Impeachment provides another important structural comparison. In the United States, the House of Representatives has the power to impeach, and the Senate conducts the trial. Removal requires a two-thirds vote in the Senate. This high threshold makes removal difficult, especially in periods of strong party polarization. Presidents Andrew Johnson, Bill Clinton, and Donald Trump

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were impeached by the House but acquitted by the Senate. Richard Nixon resigned before the House could vote on impeachment. The U.S. process is therefore both legal and political, with party control and public opinion shaping outcomes (U.S. Const. art. I; United States Senate, n.d.).

South Korea's impeachment process also begins in the legislature, but the Constitutional Court plays a decisive role in determining removal. Under the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, the National Assembly may pass an impeachment motion when the president or other officials violate the Constitution or law in performing official duties. Once impeachment is passed, the official is suspended from power while the Constitutional Court reviews the case. This system creates a two-stage process: legislative accusation followed by constitutional adjudication. The Court's role gives impeachment a stronger judicial component than in the United States (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987; Constitutional Court of Korea, 2017).

These structural differences show how similar presidential forms can produce different patterns of accountability. The United States relies heavily on electoral competition, congressional oversight, judicial review, and federalism. South Korea relies on a single-term presidency, legislative impeachment, Constitutional Court review, public protest, and post-presidential legal accountability. Both systems seek to prevent executive overreach, but they do so through different institutional tools (Dostal, 2023; Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).

This comparison reflects Hall and Taylor's argument that institutions structure political behavior by shaping incentives, expectations, and available courses of action. The presidency is not simply a formal office; it is a rule-bound institution that channels how political actors pursue authority, resist oversight, and respond to crisis. In both the United States and South Korea, formal constitutional rules matter, but so do informal norms, party incentives, historical legacies, and expectations about accountability (Hall & Taylor, 1996).

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Comparative Summary Table

Feature	United States	South Korea
Presidential term	Four years	Five years
Reelection	President may be elected twice	President may not be reelected
Constitutional origin	1787 Constitution	Current system shaped by 1987 democratic transition
Main executive role	Head of state and head of government	Head of state and head of government
Legislative relationship	Strong separation of powers; frequent divided government	Strong presidency, but National Assembly can become a major check
Impeachment process	House impeaches; Senate tries and removes by two-thirds vote	National Assembly impeaches; Constitutional Court decides removal
Main accountability pressures	Elections, Congress, courts, media, federalism, public opinion	Single term, National Assembly, Constitutional Court, public protest, legal investigation
Main governance challenge	Polarization, gridlock, executive unilateralism	Concentrated executive power, corruption scandals, impeachment crises

Note. *Constitutional features summarized from the U.S. Constitution, the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, and supporting institutional analyses (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987; Dostal, 2023; U.S. Const. art. II; Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).*

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Institutional Accountability Comparison

Accountability Dimension	United States	South Korea
Electoral accountability	Presidents may seek reelection once, allowing voters to reward or punish first-term performance.	Presidents serve one five-year term and cannot seek reelection.
Legislative accountability	Congress may investigate, refuse funding, reject appointments, and impeach.	The National Assembly may investigate, oppose the president's agenda, and pass impeachment motions.
Constitutional review	Courts review executive action, but presidential removal is decided by the Senate after impeachment.	The Constitutional Court determines whether an impeached president is removed from office.
Public accountability	Elections, media scrutiny, protest, litigation, and congressional hearings shape public oversight.	Mass protest and civil society mobilization have played a major role in presidential accountability.
Main risk	Executive unilateralism and partisan protection during impeachment.	Concentrated executive power and repeated impeachment crises.

Note. *This comparison summarizes accountability mechanisms discussed in the structural analysis and connects them to governance effects examined in the next section.*

Comparative Takeaway

The United States demonstrates how an older presidential institution can gradually expand through administrative growth, party polarization, and executive action. South Korea demonstrates how a newer democratic presidency can remain powerful despite formal constraints created after authoritarian rule. Both cases show that presidential systems require more than constitutional text. They require functioning checks, credible accountability mechanisms, and public legitimacy.

Impact on Governance

Presidential institutions affect governance by shaping policymaking, political stability, and public accountability. In both the United States and South Korea, the presidency is a major source of national policy direction. Yet the institutional design of each presidency creates different strengths and weaknesses.

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In the United States, the presidency can provide national leadership during crisis, war, economic instability, and administrative coordination. Presidents can respond quickly to emergencies, direct federal agencies, negotiate internationally, and frame national priorities. This executive capacity has allowed presidents to act when Congress is slow or divided. However, the growth of presidential power has also produced recurring conflict over unilateral action. Executive orders, emergency declarations, administrative rulemaking, and national security decisions can shift policy without new legislation. When the presidency changes parties, policy can swing sharply from one administration to the next (Whittington & Carpenter, 2003).

The U.S. presidency also affects political stability through its interaction with Congress and the courts. The separation of powers can prevent authoritarian concentration, but it can also produce gridlock. When Congress and the presidency are controlled by opposing parties, policymaking may stall. Budget standoffs, appointment delays, government shutdown threats, and litigation over executive actions have become recurring features of American governance. The Washington Post article assigned for this module frames these problems as part of broader stress within American democracy, including polarization, institutional distrust, and conflict over representation and accountability (Balz & Morse, 2023).

The U.S. impeachment process shows both the strength and weakness of presidential accountability. The process exists as a constitutional remedy for serious misconduct, but removal is difficult because it requires broad Senate agreement. In a highly polarized party system, senators may evaluate impeachment through partisan loyalty rather than institutional judgment. As a result, impeachment can become a marker of political conflict rather than a reliable removal mechanism. This does not mean impeachment is meaningless. It can investigate misconduct, shape public debate, and record institutional opposition. Still, the U.S. system makes removal rare (United States Senate, n.d.).

South Korea’s presidency has a different governance profile. The presidency is powerful enough to direct national policy, shape the bureaucracy, manage security issues, and lead economic strategy. South Korea’s rapid economic development occurred under strong executive leadership, especially during authoritarian developmental rule. After democratization, presidents retained substantial administrative authority, but democratic institutions and civil society became more capable of contesting executive abuse (Dostal, 2023).

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The single five-year term has mixed governance effects. On one hand, it prevents presidents from using state power to secure reelection. This reflects the historical memory of authoritarian leaders who extended their rule through constitutional manipulation. On the other hand, the inability to seek reelection can weaken democratic accountability. Presidents may become lame ducks early, especially if their approval declines or their party loses legislative support. The short, nonrenewable term can also encourage presidents to push ambitious agendas quickly, sometimes deepening conflict with the National Assembly (Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 1987; Dostal, 2023).

South Korea's impeachment system has become one of the clearest examples of institutional accountability in a presidential democracy. The removal of Park Geun-hye in 2017 showed that public protest, legislative action, and Constitutional Court review could work together to remove a president involved in serious misconduct (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2017). The removal of Yoon Suk Yeol in 2025 after his martial law declaration further demonstrated the force of constitutional constraints (Reuters, 2025a). These cases show that South Korea's institutions can respond to presidential overreach, but they also reveal recurring instability within the presidency itself. A system that repeatedly requires impeachment to correct executive abuse may be both resilient and strained (Reuters, 2025b).

Mahoney and Thelen's theory of gradual institutional change helps explain why both systems continue to evolve even without complete constitutional replacement. Institutions often change through reinterpretation, enforcement, layering, and shifting power relations (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In the United States, presidential power has expanded gradually through executive orders, administrative governance, war powers, and partisan expectations. In South Korea, the presidency has remained formally limited by the 1987 Constitution, but informal practices of executive dominance, prosecutorial power, party conflict, and public protest continue to reshape how the institution operates (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

The comparison also shows that public accountability does not depend only on formal rules. In both countries, public opinion, media scrutiny, civil society, and party competition affect how presidential power is used and challenged. In the United States, public accountability often runs through elections, congressional hearings, litigation, and media exposure. In South Korea, mass protest has played a more visible role, particularly during the candlelight demonstrations surrounding Park Geun-hye's impeachment and the public response to Yoon's martial law

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declaration. This reflects a broader feature of South Korean democratic politics: civil society has repeatedly acted as a guardian of democratic accountability when formal institutions were under pressure (Constitutional Court of Korea, 2017; Reuters, 2025a).

In both cases, the presidency affects not only policy outputs but also institutional legitimacy. When executive authority is perceived as excessive, unaccountable, or insulated from meaningful checks, the presidency can become a source of institutional distrust rather than democratic coordination. The U.S. case shows how polarization and partisan conflict can weaken confidence in presidential accountability, while the South Korean case shows how repeated impeachment crises can reinforce constitutional limits but also signal persistent strain within the executive system.

The governance effects of the two presidencies therefore cut in different directions. The U.S. presidency offers continuity, global leadership capacity, and institutional endurance, but it faces problems of polarization, minority-rule concerns, executive unilateralism, and weakened trust. The South Korean presidency offers clear democratic safeguards against extended tenure and has shown strong impeachment capacity, but it faces recurring problems of concentrated executive authority, corruption scandals, lame-duck politics, and calls for constitutional reform. Neither system provides a perfect solution to the problem of executive power. Both show that presidential institutions must balance governing strength with accountability (Balz & Morse, 2023; Dostal, 2023; Reuters, 2025b).

Conclusion

The United States and South Korea both demonstrate the importance of presidential institutions in comparative politics. Each country uses a presidential system, separates executive authority from the legislature, and provides constitutional mechanisms for checking presidential power. Yet their presidencies developed through different historical experiences, and those experiences continue to shape governance.

The U.S. presidency emerged from a founding-era effort to avoid both monarchy and legislative weakness. Over time, the office expanded through crisis leadership, administrative growth, party politics, and public expectations. Its main governance challenge today is not the absence of constitutional checks, but the strain placed on those checks by polarization, unilateral

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executive action, and institutional distrust. The American system is durable, but that durability can also make reform difficult.

South Korea's presidency developed through authoritarian rule, democratic struggle, and constitutional reform. The 1987 Constitution created direct elections and a single five-year presidential term to prevent the return of long-term executive rule. Yet the presidency remains powerful enough that scholars and political actors continue to describe it as an imperial presidency. South Korea's impeachment process has proven capable of removing presidents who violate constitutional duties, but repeated impeachment crises also point to unresolved tensions in executive-legislative relations and presidential accountability.

This comparison supports a central lesson from institutionalist analysis: institutions matter not only because of their formal design but because of how they develop historically, how political actors use them, and how citizens respond when institutional power is abused. Hall and Taylor's institutional approaches help explain how rules, norms, and strategic incentives shape behavior (Hall & Taylor, 1996). Capoccia's critical juncture framework helps explain why founding moments and democratic transitions can leave long-lasting institutional legacies (Capoccia, 2015). Mahoney and Thelen's theory of gradual change remind us that institutions continue to shift after they are created, often through small adjustments that accumulate over time (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010).

Understanding presidential institutions in the United States and South Korea therefore helps explain broader patterns of democratic governance. Strong presidencies can provide leadership and policy direction, but they also require strong accountability mechanisms. The key difference between stable executive leadership and executive overreach often lies not in the presidency alone, but in the surrounding institutional system: legislatures, courts, parties, civil society, elections, and constitutional norms. In both countries, democracy depends on whether those surrounding institutions can limit presidential power without making governance impossible.

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Discussion Questions

1. How does the ability or inability to seek reelection shape presidential accountability in the United States and South Korea?
2. Is South Korea's single five-year presidential term a strength, a weakness, or both? Explain your reasoning.
3. How do impeachment procedures in the United States and South Korea reflect different assumptions about law, politics, and constitutional accountability?
4. Which country's presidential system appears better equipped to prevent executive overreach? What tradeoffs come with that design?
5. How do critical junctures, such as the U.S. founding or South Korea's 1987 democratic transition, continue to shape modern governance?

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