

# Korean Presidential System: Challenges and Alternatives

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# 1. Challenges to Korean Presidential System

- Underdeveloped conciliatory practices of accommodation and compromise in political process, particularly in legislative process
- Excessive confrontation between governing and opposition parties, often resulting in legislative gridlock
- Hostile executive-legislative relationship, leading to weak governability or lowering effectiveness in governing

- Frequent emergence of divided government since 1987 Democratization, exacerbating antagonism between executive and legislative branches of government
- Weakening of president's policy-making capability, as the end of president's term approaches

## 2. Presidential System vs Parliamentary System

- Presidential system:
  - Separation of powers between executive and legislative branches
  - Checks and balances between separated powers
  - Moderate party discipline to overcome potential inter-branch tension or conflict generated by dual legitimacy
  - Candidates for executive and legislative offices often campaign on different grounds and respond to distinct policy demands

- Parliamentary system:
  - Power fusion or power sharing between legislature and the executive
  - PM/cabinet-led system, although the executive is supported or dismissed by parliamentary vote
  - Strong party discipline to complement political instability embedded in parliamentary system

### 3. Critiques of Alternatives to Presidential System

- Parliamentary system:
  - Korean voter's strong yearning for direct election of a national leader
  - Given weak policy-based party competition, likely to consolidate current regionalist party system
  - Weak accountability due to multiple delegation (Executive is voters' direct agent in presidential system, while direct agent of party's legislators in parliamentary system)

- Fragmentation of party system and frequent unprincipled collusion among political parties/politicians
- More likely to have a cartelization of party politics
- Further power shift in favor of big business due to weakened political countervailing force

- Semi-Presidential (Dual Executive) System:
  - Alternation of presidential system and parliamentary system depending on president's control of majority in legislature
  - Excessive concentration of power in president under the same majority due to presidential power to dissolve parliament and hold a new parliamentary election
  - Frequent confrontation between president and prime minister in cohabitation or split majority



## 4. What's to be done?

- Develop more independent governing party which has been excessively subordinate to president
- Enhance autonomy of legislators strictly following party leadership largely due to centralized party nomination
- Enhanced autonomy of legislators can help facilitate compromise and make minority president's persuasive leadership work in legislative process

- Restrain strong party discipline or party cohesiveness obstructing compromise and accommodation, which often leads to legislative gridlock
- Reform party nomination and adopt open primary system for moderate party discipline and more autonomy of legislators

- Build more inclusive political party less controlled by political elites/activists and more widely open to party supporters and voters (party of the electorate vs mass party)
- Shift locus of legislative decision-making from party leadership to parliamentary committees

- Regarding re-electability, two-term presidency with four-year tenure to strengthen accountability  
(Any office deprived of rewards is a wrongly conceived office)
- Concurrent elections synchronizing presidential and parliamentary elections to restrain divided majority and enhance governability