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Global, national and societal initiatives directed at reversing democracy's current tribulations

Fergus Neilson

The last three decades have seen considerable erosion of liberal democracy across many countries. Building on his 2023 *BESS* paper on the widening 'trust divide' between the electorate and the elected, Fergus Neilson sets out three clear principles – covering systems of government, institutional balance and societal trust – that would help reverse the broader trend toward autocracy.

Introduction

The most recent annual report from V-Dem shows that advances in democracy made over the last 35 years are being eroded (V-Dem, 2023). A concurrent drift into autocracy is underway in at least 42 of the 193 United Nations members, meaning that 70 percent of the world's population now live in autocracies. This article draws on academic literature, cross-country comparison and empirical research using data accessed from credible supranational sources, such as the World Bank, to review and analyse the trend toward autocracy and how it can be reversed at three levels:

1. Global principles: by rejecting or radically reforming presidential systems of government.
2. National policies: by working to ensure that executive creep and politicisation are prevented from undermining the institutions and independent judiciaries that maintain the balance of power essential to effective democracy.

3. **Societal priorities:** by acknowledging that narrowing the trust divide between the elected and the electorate should take precedence over the pursuit of individual re-election. Over the past twenty years, it is a widening trust divide that lies at the very heart of growing dissatisfaction with modern democracy and thereby amplifies the risk it poses by opening the door to emergent autocracy.

Global principles – reject presidentialism and quasi-presidentialism

This article first examines the global principles underpinning systems of government to hypothesise that a parliamentarian, rather than a presidential system, is a more democratic and effective form of government. Democracy is best served by parliamentary or mixed systems and ill-served by presidentialism, primarily because the personalisation of an overpowerful presidential role is often the first step along a slippery path into autocracy.

In seeking both academic and empirical support for this hypothesis, this article:

1. Compares the classical duo of parliamentarianism and presidentialism;
2. Argues for an alternative three-way division of government categorisation;
3. Reviews a dataset that includes all 38 current and six prospective OECD members, ranked against seven independent variables and assigned to one of three categories – parliamentarian (PARL), presidential (PRES) and a mix of both (QUASI); and
4. Evaluates the state of contemporary democratic government.

Parliamentarianism vs presidentialism

As with any cross-country study, one of the primary methodological problems is the wide variation between countries in the two headline categories – which is hardly surprising in a world of almost 200 independent nations. The presidential category includes the United States (US), with a population in 2023 of almost 335 million; it also captures Gabon (in reality, and until recently, the personal fiefdom of the Bongo family), with only around 2.2 million. The spectrum of parliamentary democracies is equally diverse, from India's population of 1.4 billion to the Duchy of Luxembourg with fewer than 300,000 people, more than 45 percent of them foreign-born. Regardless, we can broadly define the differences between parliamentary and presidential systems and identify the advantages and disadvantages of each.

In parliamentary systems, "the head of government … and his or her cabinet are dependent on the confidence of the legislature and can be dismissed from office by a legislative vote of no confidence or censure" (Lijphart, 1992, p. 2). In the presidential form of government, on the other hand, the president is popularly elected for a fixed term and can only be ejected by impeachment. In a parliamentary system, the executive consists of the prime minister and their cabinet and is collective or collegial. A president, by contrast, is essentially a one-person executive with a purely advisory cabinet selected and sackable at the president's will; a system that encourages the opposite of limited, balanced and shared power.

It can be argued that presidential systems are more stable, more democratic (with the popular and direct election of a president), characterised by mutual independence between executive and legislature, and biased towards more limited

government. Presidentialism does, however, run the risk of executive/legislative gridlock, temporal rigidity, excess concentration of power and operation "according to the rule of winner-take-all … an arrangement that tends to make democratic politics a zero-sum game" (Linz, 1990, p. 56). Parliamentary systems, by contrast, are characterised by mutual dependence between executive and legislature, greater flexibility when conditions change and power sharing, and are usually less prone to policy and legislative gridlock.

In the academic literature, there is ongoing debate around the relative advantages of the two systems. Sartori suggests that parliamentarianism will only work when it is served by parliamentary-fit parties, parties that have been socialised into being relatively cohesive and disciplined (Sartori, 1997). Lijphart advises that "the combination of parliamentarianism with proportional representation should be an especially attractive … (option) … to newly democratic and democratizing countries" (Lijphart, 1991, p. 72). Others also point to the higher probability of regime collapse under presidentialism (Samuels and Eaton, 2002). However, "what one thinks of the ultimate merits of presidentialism depends … (ultimately) … on what one thinks about the urgency of political change in given country" (Fukuyama *et al.*, 2005, p. 103).

The weight of the argument does, however, bias towards parliamentarianism, including the view that, all things being equal, "parliamentarism should be more successful than presidentialism in coordinating diverse views and interests", and better at dealing with "the persistent institutional conflicts that characterize political life in all democracies" (Gerring *et al.*, 2009, p. 31). However, is there a third way that acknowledges the variations within each system?

A third way

Comparisons between parliamentarianism and presidentialism began in the early 1990s (Linz, 1990; Lijphart, 1991). Subsequent research broadened the debate to accommodate a third form of governance, semi-presidentialism and/or semi-parliamentarianism (Sartori, 1997; Bahro *et al.*, 1998), proposing multiple sub-categorisations of government that take account of veto players, the chain of delegation and the impact of specific regional and cultural variations (Tsebelis, 1995).

Recent work supports the adoption of a three-way categorisation (Cheibub *et al.*, 2014), together with a determination to establish the empirical superiority of one of the three systems over the other two. This article builds on this perspective, analysing a sample of 38 current and six prospective member nations of the OECD and categorising them as either parliamentary (PARL), presidential (PRES) or a mix of both (semi or QUASI). This categorisation is to some extent inevitably idiosyncratic. No previous research has reached a collective agreement on the nations to be classified as QUASI/semi or mixed, nor agreed on what is to be included or excluded from the two headline categories. For example, Austria is noted in one study as the only obviously parliamentarised presidential/parliamentary regime in the world today, but is then excluded as such from the very data set used by its authors (Samuels and Shugart, 2010). Other examples are Ireland, included but not considered desirable (sic); Iceland, excluded because of its population size; and Italy, which is one of several countries included by some researchers but excluded by others (Sartori, 1997; Elgie 2005, 2011, 2016). Despite semi-presidentialism as a term being around since the 1970s, debate continues about its definition and the countries to be

classified as QUASI or semi-presidential (Sedelius and Åberg, 2019). This means there is considerable leeway in the allocation of nations to a category titled mixed, semi or QUASI. See Table 1 for the three-way categorisation of 44 actual and prospective OECD nations as adopted for this analysis.

Empirical evaluation

Thus we now have a third category, which is neither fully parliamentary nor fully presidential – that is, a mixed system in which the constitution anoints a president who:

1. Is elected by universal suffrage;
2. Possesses quite considerable powers;
3. Whose powers are tempered by a prime minister and ministers with authority; and
4. Can stay in office only if parliament offers no opposition.

However, there is considerable variation among those nations nominated as mixed, with no definitive categorisation of any of the generally agreed-upon forms of government. Consequently, in using a dataset of 44 current and prospective OECD nations, this article adopts study-specific classification and allocation of nations into one of three categories (see Table 1). These are PARL, PRES or QUASI. The 44 nations are then scored against seven independent variables, each being a measure of government competence and service delivery: equality of income (Gini coefficient); economic growth (average per cent per annum 2013/18); human development (HDI); voter turnout; democracy (GDI); tax revenue as per cent of GDP; and, only as a scale comparator, population in millions. Other than average annual real GDP growth (2013/18), all data is for 2020 or 2021.

TABLE 1. Three definitional categories of 44 actual and prospective OECD nations

Categories		Nos	Definitions
Presidential	PRES	10	Democratic presidential republics, of which Argentina, Brazil and Peru are prospective members of the OECD
Parliamentarian	PARL	21	Parliamentary democracies of which just one, Croatia, is a prospective member of the OECD
Mixed	QUASI	13	Nations which, if not all alike, are certainly not like either of the two headline categories and include self-declared semi-presidential governments (Lithuania), assembly governments (France), direct collegialism (Switzerland), incipient autocracies (Hungary), and one country with a directly elected prime minister (Israel)

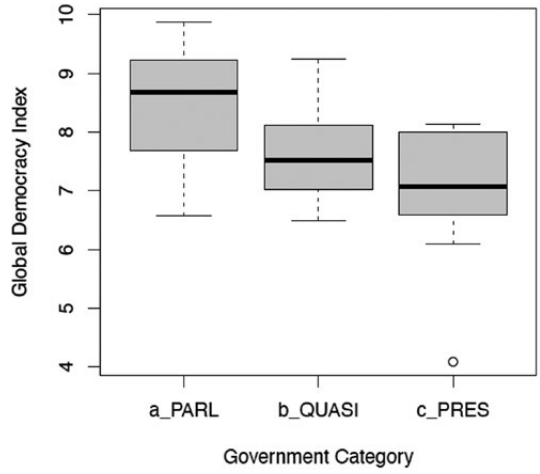
TABLE 2. Performance relativity (averages in each category/variable)

Category	Gini	GDP (%)	HDI	Turnout (%)	GDI	Tax (%)	Pop'n (m)
PARL x21	0.292	2.23	0.918	75.57	8.48	36.5	23.1
QUASI x13	0.317	2.94	0.890	60.80	7.68	33.8	18.9
PRES x10	0.428	2.58	0.826	66.99	7.00	23.6	96.3

The top scoring category in each variable is identified by grey shading, noting that the Gini coefficient sets perfect income equality at zero and perfect inequality at one (see Table 2). Also note that higher relative levels of tax revenue against GDP are characteristic of nations that are considered better at delivering services to, and accommodating the needs of, their citizens. So, in terms of governmental competence and service delivery, four Scandinavian parliamentary nations, with average tax revenues at close to 40 per cent of GDP, are thought to deliver better social outcomes than, say, the presidential US with tax revenue at just under 27 per cent of GDP (versus the OECD average of 34 per cent) (OECD, 2022).

Empirical results show that only on a single variable, average annual real GDP growth, do presidential (PRES) and mixed (QUASI) governments outperform countries governed by parliaments (PARL). In addition, on no single measure, even GDP growth, does presidentialism top the trio. Figures 1 and 2 imply the evident failure of presidentialism to deliver against factors seen as essential to effective democracy.

FIGURE 1. Relative performance on democracy measures (medians and quartiles)[1]

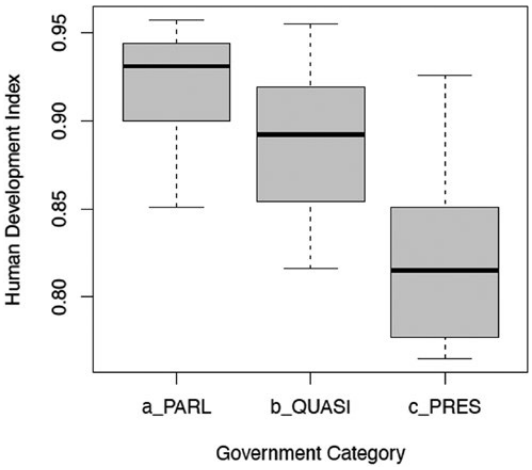


Presidentialism scores poorly against parliamentarianism and mixed forms of government in respect of both global democracy (see Figure 1 above) and human development indices (see Figure 2 following). Therefore empirical evidence suggests that parliamentarianism and mixed forms of government are likely to offer significantly better forms of democratic government than presidentialism.

1. *Global Democracy Index* – measures the state of democracy in 167 nations against five different categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. EIU, 2021

Gerring *et al.* support this conclusion, revealing "a strong relationship between parliamentarianism and good governance … (concluding that) … to the extent that these institutions influence the quality of governance, parliamentary systems may offer advantages over presidential systems of democratic rule" (Gerring *et al.*, 2009, p. 1).

FIGURE 2. Relative performance against human development measures (medians and quartiles)[2]



The state of democratic government

The implication of presidential shortcomings, as drawn from the empirical analysis above, is amplified by evidence of backsliding in democratic government over the past decade. With reports showing conclusively that slippage is under way primarily in presidential and semi-presidential regimes. The most recent International Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance (IDEA) listing of key OECD members that have de-democratised in the last year include Brazil, the US, Hungary (all PRES), Poland and Slovenia (both QUASI) (IDEA, 2021). The V-Dem 2021 listing of top ten autocratising countries between 2010 and 2020 includes Poland, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil and the US (V-Dem, 2021).

The most recent V-Dem study reports a record 42 'autocratisers', up from 33 in the previous report, and just 14 democratising countries, the lowest number since 1973 (V-Dem, 2023). Of the six OECD countries designated as autocratising, only one (Greece) is a parliamentary democracy. The remaining five – Brazil, the US, Hungary, Chile, Poland and Turkey – are presidential or mixed democracies. Of the eight OECD countries downgraded from liberal democracy to electoral democracy, six would be designated PRES (Colombia) or QUASI (Austria, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia).

Importantly, the evidence also suggests that presidencies are more vulnerable than parliamentary governments to a shift into authoritarianism (Turkey under Erdogan), the use of extra-constitutional expedients to suppress opposition (Brazil under Bolsonaro), and the ever-present threat of constitutional revision in pursuit of a presidency for life (Russia, China, Venezuela and Nicaragua) (Layne, 2021). Of the 12 current state leaders named and identified as dangerously personalist by Frantz *et al.*, 11 are presidents and one is a head of state in a nation categorised as QUASI. None are heads of government in parliamentary democracies. It is to be noted that "personalist leaders are more than three times as likely as others to oversee a steep decline in democracy during their tenure, and the democratic regimes that they lead are nearly three times as likely to collapse" (Frantz *et al.*, 2021, p. 99).

2. *Human Development Index* – summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development including a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable and having a decent standard of living. UNDP, 2020

Global principles: conclusion and recommendation

Comparative and empirical studies suggest that the personalisation of an overpowerful presidential role is the first step on a slippery slope into autocracy. It seems clear that supporters of democracy should "have no principled reason to choose or maintain presidential government" (Ganghof, 2021, p. 22).

Emerging democracies would be well advised to instruct any Constitutional Convention to highlight that democracy has always been best served by a formal governmental framework designed to benefit from the stability and predictability of parliamentary or semi-parliamentary forms of government, as opposed to the retreat into autocracy that seems now to be characteristic of pure presidentialism.[3]

National policies – preserve and protect the necessary balance between executive, legislature and bureaucracy

The preceding section makes a single global argument that parliamentarian government systems are better than presidentialism at delivering effective democracy and the social benefits that emerge from it. This section argues that democracy and the balance of power essential to effective democracy at the national level are best protected by resisting executive creep and the politicisation of governmental institutions. This argument suggests that long-term success in national government relates not entirely to the system adopted, but also to the operation and competence of specific institutions and individuals involved in supporting and applying adopted constitutional principles.

It is also argued that static models of government neither accommodate the reality of continuous social and political change nor acknowledge the judiciary as a fundamental component of a democracy tripod (Shugart, 2008). From this argument, it is concluded that only by accepting the dynamic reality of institutional cooperation and co-existence can the ebb and flow of power in a democracy be acknowledged as the key driver of judicial independence, impartiality and subsequent legitimacy. Accordingly, parliamentarianism has, thus far, proven less vulnerable to the pursuit of power for the sake of power alone than has presidentialism.

The role and significance of governmental institutions

Democracy works when rules are clear, when it can regulate whatever disputes arise, when its constituent institutions can structure and regulate rivalries through non-obstructive rules, and when compromise is always possible (Przewoski, 1991). Democracy works because it allows for the possibility that the loser, this time, might regain power at the next election. Thus, democracy works where society has equal access to institutions and institutional rules, as well as the incentive to pursue their interests through these rules rather than through conflict.

Which, then, is the best system of government, through which to apply the rules and norms that come with a legitimate democracy? The system with the best rules and institutions for managing conflict resolution and system stability and setting norms and procedures should be considered the optimal form of government. Following the previous section, any evaluation can only involve a two-horse race between presidentialism (including semi-presidentialism) and parliamentarianism. The relative performance of 44 (actual and prospective) OECD nations would seem to place parliamentarian performance ahead of presidential performance (see Figure 3).

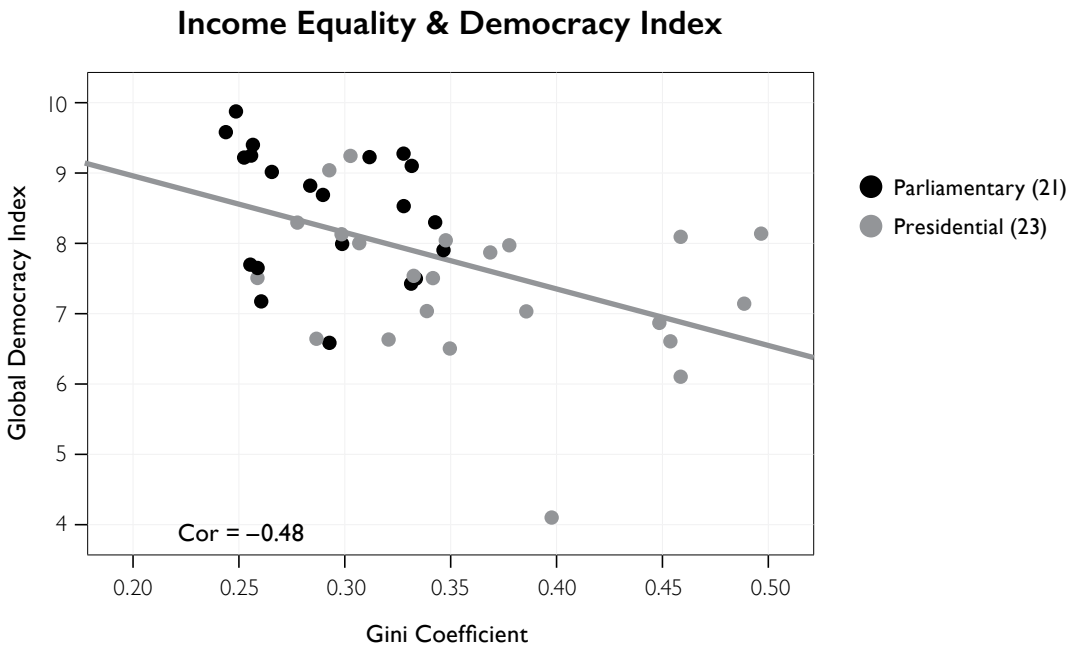
3. Perhaps Chile would also have been better served if their Constitutional Convention had heeded the advice of Napoleon Buonaparte to keep constitutions "short and obscure", where obscure implies the setting of broad principles not specific policies.

At the risk of over-stating the case for parliamentarism, relative comparisons strongly imply that the 21 parliamentary governments do a better job of performing against metrics related to the delivery of democratic freedoms, institutional performance, citizen freedoms and equality in living standards, all of which rely on the independence of an impartial judiciary (see Figure 3).

The 23 nations governed by presidential systems perform less well than parliament-governed nations in delivering income equality and the mix of social, judicial and cultural measures required to ensure legitimate and fully effective democracy (see Figure 3).

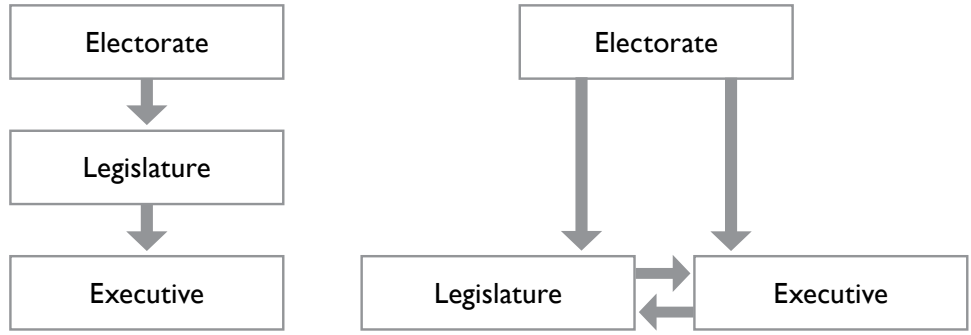
However, despite the apparent advantages of parliamentarianism suggested in Figure 3, it has been argued that parliamentary (hierarchical) and presidential (transactional) systems differ only in how executive power is positioned relative to the legislature and electorate (Shugart, 2008). Shugart's models of parliamentary and presidential power structure both display a pre-eminent role for the electorate and no explicit role for the judiciary (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 3. Institutional Performance: GDI[4] and Gini[5] (actual and prospective OECD members)



4. Global Democracy Index being an annual measure of democracy against five metrics – electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, political participation and political culture
5. Gini Coefficient being a measure of 'statistical dispersion' quantifying the degree of income inequality in a nation. Where '0' implies perfect income equality and '1' implies maximal inequality

FIGURE 4. Shugart's Power Structure Models



Significance of the judiciary

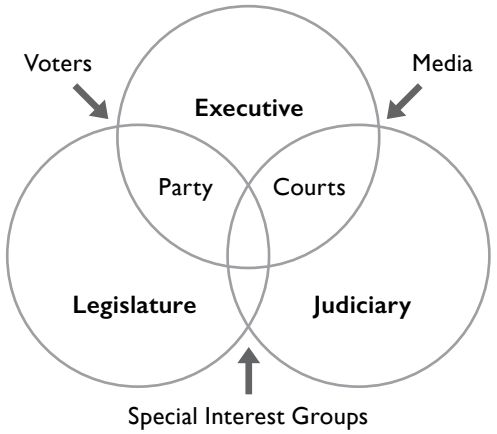
However, the structures shown in Shugart's models do not reflect the reality of actual power relationships in modern democracies, particularly as only an optimist would suggest that real power lies with the electorate. It seems clear that the preferences of an average American have only a minuscule, near-zero, statistically non-significant impact on public policy (Gilens and Page, 2014). The electorate will have influence and participation in some countries; but coercive power? No!

This is because the predominance of executive power is growing in both presidential and parliamentary systems, with neither system allowing for the dynamics of changing power relativities over time, nor for the necessities of realpolitik in the day-to-day operation of government. In addition, as noted previously, Shugart's models do not acknowledge the undeniably crucial role of the judiciary.

Significantly, V-Dem defines liberal democracy as a form of government characterised by judicial and legislative constraints on the executive and the protection of civil liberties and equality before the law (V-Dem, 2023). Furthermore, the first priority of most aspirant autocrats is to co-opt and capture the judiciary (Müller, 2023).

Democracies operate in a much more fluid manner than is implied by Shugart's models, and judiciaries are a much more significant component in the democracy tripod than electorates. Thus, for the purposes of this study, the electorate is relegated to influencer status alongside the fourth estate and special interest groups (lobbyists, unions, charities, etc.), and Shugart's fixed hierarchical boxes (in Figure 4) are replaced (as shown in Figure 5) with a Venn diagram of overlapping sets that more realistically represent the relationship between executive, legislature and judiciary as the driving elements of power at the heart of a dynamic democracy tripod.

FIGURE 5. Power intersections at the heart of democracy



This makes it possible to visualise democracy and its three overlapping sets as a system in which there is no strict hierarchy in place, but rather a constant interplay between all three key drivers of the system, as relative power between the three elements ebbs and flows with circumstance. This concept of the power intersect acknowledges that the relative influence of executive, legislature and judiciary will rise and fall over time, within countries and between countries. It also acknowledges that transactional and hierarchical politics are at play in both the parliamentarian and presidential systems, which are perhaps more similarly prone to risk than the empirical evidence suggests.

In parliamentarian systems, the executive directs the legislature by way of the whip and the promise of promotion, while the legislature can remove the prime minister by a vote of no confidence. At the same time, both the legislature and the executive ultimately rely on the judiciary to apply legal standing to their rulings and policy decisions. Effective democracy thus requires a productive interplay between executive, legislature and judiciary. Without balance and cooperation between the three, all governments run the risk of gridlock or backsliding into autocracy.

In the US, the Supreme Court is positioned at the intersect between executive and judiciary and should be a key element in the balance of power between the White House, Washington and individual state court systems. In the United Kingdom (UK), the same overlap can be seen in the role of the Attorney General, who attends cabinet as well as being senior legal adviser to the government, and in the role of the Secretary of State for Justice, who is a member of cabinet and, as Lord Chancellor, is responsible for the efficient functioning and independence of the courts.

What is apparent in many otherwise democratic nations is that this productive and balanced interplay is under attack. Under the sorry history of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss in the UK, the overt and ongoing pursuit of power by the executive branch included undermining the courts, proroguing of parliament, de-funding the BBC, limiting the rights of free assembly and protest, and widening the coverage of the Official Secrets Act. Each initiative is an attempt to broaden the scope and widen the diameter of the executive set in the Venn diagram shown in Figure 6. It can then be argued that there is only a difference in scale, aggression and timing between what Johnson and Truss hoped to achieve in the UK and what Orban and Duda actually achieved in the respective illiberal democracies of Hungary and Poland.

In the US, the republicanisation of the Supreme Court through the selective (and politicised) appointment of judges at federal, state and city levels does reflect the expansion of the executive set over the judiciary set (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2023). It also acknowledges transformation of the Supreme Court itself from being an impartial interpreter of the law into what is, to all extents, a facilitator of both

executive and legislative power that no longer applies the law equally to all citizens, fully justifying re-classification of the US as a flawed democracy (V-Dem, 2023; EIU, 2022).

Why institutional independence matters

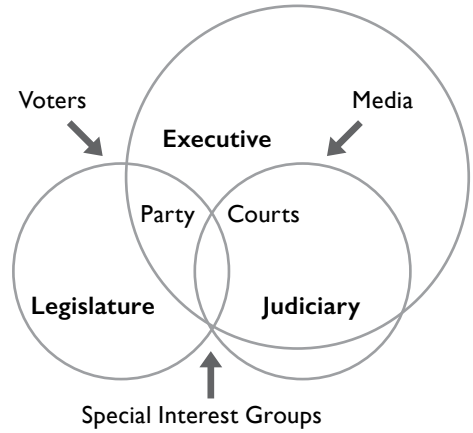
The politicisation of the judiciary in the US and in other aspirant autocracies runs in stark counterpoint to the belief that the rule of law is an essential pillar of democracy, intended to "ensure political rights, civil liberties and mechanisms of accountability that in turn affirm the political equality of all citizens and constrain potential abuses of state power" (O'Donnell, 2004, p. 32). The executive has expanded its powers at the expense of federal and state judiciaries (see Figure 6), leading to an erosion of legitimacy (overuse of shadow dockets), democratic credibility, electoral accessibility and institutional viability (Vladeck, 2022).

Rather than the balance of powers implied in Figure 5, the Venn diagram in Figure 6 reflects the executive creep characteristic of illiberal democracies. Specifically, it highlights the changes that are imposed when an incipient autocrat deals with opposition from the judiciary by sacking recalcitrants and replacing them with co-opted judges and jurists. Figure 6 also illustrates the reality in illiberal democracies, such as Hungary, Poland and even Singapore, where state capture now controls all forms of media by using constraints (access to newsprint), the threat of litigation and/or outright forced sale to regime-sympathetic oligarchs (Kralova and Vetsko, 2022).

The drivers behind institutional development and evolution

I therefore argue for the fundamental importance of independent judicial and legal systems to a successful modern democracy, whether

FIGURE 6. Judicial and legislative capture in 'illiberal democracies'



presidential or parliamentarian. As with much in life, the influence of the judiciary and other institutions will ebb and flow alongside changes in the balance of power between the executive, legislature and judiciary. However, without the genuine independence of these institutions (judicial, parliamentary and bureaucratic) from an overpowerful executive, the very nature of democracy is at risk.

These institutions are rule-enforcing mechanisms that "keep societies from falling apart, provided there is something to keep the institutions from falling apart" (Elster, 1989, p. 147). In many ways, the most important institution in setting rules, ensuring adherence to rules and ensuring cohesion, is a strong and independent judiciary.

The US Constitution has remained essentially unchanged since 1788 (just 27 amendments in almost 240 years),[6] not because of rational choice but because of the virtual impossibility of making

6. In stark contrast, the Norwegian constitution has been amended 316 times in 200 years (1814 to 2014) in order to update the formal text in ways that keep it modern.

changes in a federal system of government.[7] The Supreme Court suffers from a politicised and ageing bench as a consequence of unbending constitutional originalism. Meanwhile, obstruction in the US House of Representatives to the *Protecting Our Democracy Act* and the *For the People Act* is not the rational action of a political party seeking to enhance the operation of a liberal democracy. Rather, it is a historical and sociological legacy of endemic conservatism in non-metropolitan America, which, in turn, is maintained by the constitutionally driven under-representation of the larger, more urbanised and more liberal states[8] and by minoritarianism enabled by the filibuster (whereby a partisan 40 per cent minority in the US Senate can permanently block legislation that is backed by the majority).

National policies: conclusion and recommendations

The ambiguity that embraces possible conclusions about the relative strengths and weaknesses of parliamentary and presidential forms of government, the competing influence of electorates and judiciaries, the interplay between stability and dynamism, and the drivers of decision making at individual and institutional levels presents a quandary. Is more research needed or can a clear decision be reached based on observation of the world as it appears to be?

If the latter, there can only be one conclusion: that the pursuit of politics is the pursuit of power. While the judiciary aims to play the long game based on precedence, it is the rational choices of individual members of the executive that control most of the day-to-day outcomes. Until then, the judiciary and the public service must work together to oppose executive creep, as they did in halting Boris Johnson's attempt to prorogue Parliament and must do if Viktor Orban is eventually to be removed as de-facto president of Hungary.

It should certainly be of concern that, through his term in office, Donald Trump gradually increased pressure on the Justice Department to erode its traditional independence from presidential control. Trump's declared priorities for his second term in office generally fit into the unitary executive theory or government that holds the president of the US as having the power to directly control the entire federal bureaucracy including the judiciary and that Congress cannot fracture that control by giving some officials independent decision-making authority (Swan *et al*., 2023).

This leads to the conclusion that it is only by accepting the reality of a dynamic structure of institutional cooperation and co-existence that we can acknowledge that the balance of power in a democracy is the key driver of independence, impartiality and subsequent legitimacy in the judiciary and bureaucracy. In addition, as the following section confirms, it is voter frustration – with an executive ambitious to extend its politicisation of what should be independent judiciaries, electoral commissions, administrative affairs tribunals and other public sector entities – that is driving much of the growing dissatisfaction with liberal democracy and reducing public trust in government.

Or, as stated by one of the public figure interviewees for this study, a former Australian Federal Minister, "that goes back to my point about the breakdown of trust. If people don't think they can trust our politicians to lead and the institutions of government to do the right thing, they will look elsewhere for security".

7. Requirements for US constitutional change: 2/3 majority in both houses and 3/4 of all US states, while Norway requires only a three-quarters majority in the unicameral Storting for amendments to come into immediate effect.
8. California, with a population of 39 million, has two senate seats, as does Wyoming with a population of barely 585,000.

Societal priorities – fix the obvious stuff highlighted in voter surveys from Australia, the UK and the US

It can be argued that, at the societal level, it is only by pursuing a narrowing of the trust divide between the elected and the electorate that modern democracies can counter the very real threat of emergent autocracy (Neilson, 2022 and 2023).[9]

The previous section argued that real power does not lie with the electorate. However, without the trust of a supportive electorate, no democratic government can resist the incursion of populist grandstanding and its possible regression into autocracy. Only by listening to the concerns of an electorate and implementing the operational changes that the electorate considers important can the trust divide be narrowed to the point where populists and incipient autocrats become marginalised.

The research on which this section is based suggests that the electorate is more keenly interested in operational and institutional reforms aimed at repairing the mechanisms of government than in immediate gratification, and on prioritising system renewal over the partisan distribution of bread and circuses.

Assessing electoral concerns

My research was carried out between September 2021 and March 2023 by way of interviews with current and former Australian politicians (n = 23), and with questionnaires directed at a sample of mostly mature age voters in Australia, the UK and the US (n = 188).[10] The research aimed to assess the extent to which trust in government has declined over the past decades. It also sought respondent views on what changes in operational behaviour at the institutional level might work towards narrowing the trust divide and restoring confidence in democracy.[11]

Survey results suggest that if liberal democracies are to resist their current adversities, they should acknowledge the trust divide, understand its causes, recognise its risks, implement operational reforms aimed at restoring voter trust in democracy, and prioritise the performance of institutions and politicians charged with its care (Neilson, 2022).

Social, business and educational (former high school contemporaries) contacts in Australia (n = 124), the UK and the US (n = 64) responded to questions about voting behaviour, satisfaction with democracy and trust in government as it currently operates. They were also asked for open-ended suggestions on reform and five contextual questions relating to the respondent's home country, age, work status, gender and highest education level achieved. It is clear from Table 3 following that most respondents expressed a low level of satisfaction with democracy.

TABLE 3. Relative ranking of satisfaction with democracy

Respondent category	Respondents	Satisfaction
Australian social and business contacts	87	3.03
Queensland contacts	37	3.00
UK high school alumni	34	2.51
UK social contacts	20	2.54
US social contacts	10	2.50
Total/Average	**188**	**2.85**

Note: Score on satisfaction with democracy: where 1 = totally dissatisfied and 5 = totally satisfied

9. This section, Societal Priorities, is derived from Neilson, 2022 and 2023
10. Voter survey questionnaire was directed in early 2022 to 574 social, business, and educational contacts in Australia, the UK and the US, with full responses received from 188 participants.
11. Trust Divide is defined as the gap between voters' expectations of, and their perceived satisfaction with, the performance of politician and government institutions.

Australian respondents did score a higher satisfaction with democracy (circa 3.0 out of 5.0) than did respondents from the UK and the US (circa 2.5). Australian politicians, seemingly satisfied with their own performance, scored highest at 3.4.

As noted, respondents were requested to evaluate the extent to which they trusted their respective governments and institutions of government. They were asked two questions:

1. What is **your level of trust** in your national government **today**?
   Where 1 = very low and 5 = very high.
2. Has your **level of trust** in your national government **changed** over the past 10 years?
   Where minus 2 = much lower, 0 = not changed and plus 2 = much higher.

The results show that over the last decade, trust in government has declined across the Anglosphere and is now defined by 53.5 per cent of survey respondents as Low or Very Low. Only 15.5 per cent of all respondents expressed a trust score of High or Very High. In Australia, just 18.6 per cent of 124 respondents scored their trust in government as High or Very High, and only Queenslanders scored Very High (see Table 4).

Pressure for reform

Voter survey responses confirm the findings from the academic literature, credible polling and the international commentariat (as well as feedback from interviews with Australian politicians) as to the poor state of trust in, and satisfaction with, governments across most liberal democracies, and the extent to which levels of trust and satisfaction are declining. However, the voter surveys were not just about the numbers; they were also about asking survey respondents to generate suggestions for changing the way that politicians and parliaments work – specifically, for suggestions on changes that each respondent believed would enhance the degree to which they would trust the system of government as it currently operates in their respective democracies.

Of 151 initial voter survey respondents (social and business contacts in the UK, the US and Australia excluding Queensland),[12] only 11 declined to make

TABLE 4. Voter trust in government

Catchment	The current level of trust where 3 = undecided	Change over the past 10 years where 0 = unchanged
US	3.00	–0.90
Queensland contacts	2.76	–0.65
Australia social and business	2.45	–0.95
UK high school alumni	2.16	–1.15
UK social contacts	2.10	–1.05

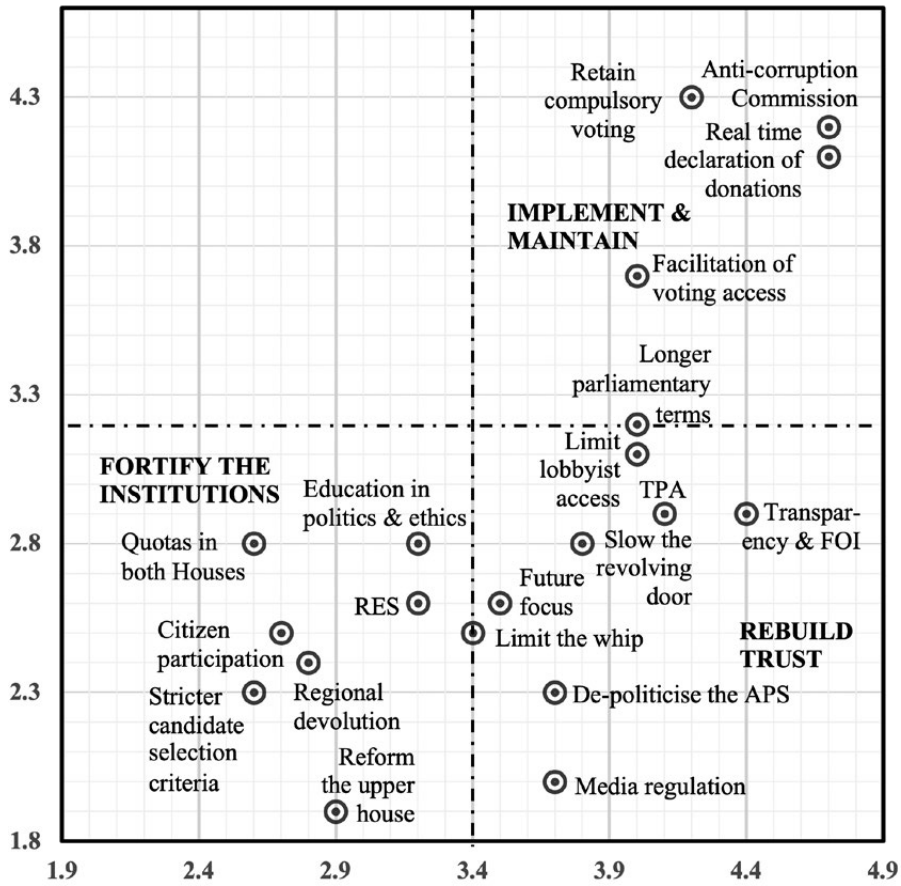
Note: Average levels recorded by voter survey respondents
Trust level in national government: where 1 = very low and 5 = very high
Change in trust over past decade: where minus 2 = much lower and plus 2 = much higher

12. Queensland respondents were not included in the second survey round as their first-round participation occurred too late to allow subsequent participation in the pursuit of suggestions for reform

suggestions for reform. Those who did respond put forward a total of 537 individual suggestions for reform, which were culled to 310 after review and evaluation. These, in turn, were grouped by common attributes into 20 primary reform initiatives. In turn, the 20 primary reform initiatives were returned to survey participants for scoring against Importance and Implementability, which, in turn, allowed construction of the Reform Matrix for Australia (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7. Reform Matrix – Australia[13]

Y-axis – Implementability
Where 1 = challenging and 5 = achievable



X-axis – Importance
Where 1 = optional and 5 = crucial

13. FOI = Freedom of information; RES = Reform the electoral system (move to full FPTP); TPA = Truth in political advertising; APS = Australian Public Service. Respondents -44

A similar matrix was constructed for feedback from UK respondents. Both reform matrices suggest the possibility that a mainstream party seeking to rebuild trust with its constituents should focus on the following:

1. Adopting manifesto statements that, **in the short-term commit to implement and maintain** reform initiatives located in the high/right quadrant of the reform matrix;
2. Working towards reforms intended to **rebuild trust over the medium term** that are contained within the low/right quadrant; and
3. Future-proofing democracy with planning for programmes that **fortify institutions over the longer term**.

Despite some differences, it is worth noting that Australian and UK respondents both place high emphasis (**implement and maintain**) on the need for anti-corruption initiatives, greater transparency on donations and the enhanced facilitation of voting.

Country-to-country coincidence on reforms with applicability to the medium term (**rebuild trust**) included limitations on lobbyist access, the requirement for truth in political advertising, the need for greater transparency in policy decision making and slowing the revolving door for post-ministerial careers. Australian respondents also favoured the adoption of longer parliamentary terms.

Regional devolution, education in politics, citizen participation, stricter candidate selection criteria, electoral system reform and quotas were all acknowledged as longer-term issues.

Both respondent groups acknowledged, consciously or unconsciously, the importance of integrity and independence within government institutions – with a degree of separation from the executive – that are responsible for enforcing codes of conduct, addressing corrupt behaviour, managing elections, tracking donations, curtailing the influence of lobbyists and reviewing the evolution of democracy as it adapts to social, economic and political change.

Feedback from Australian politicians

The Australian politicians who responded to a request for an interview (n = 23) also highlighted some of the reforms identified by voters in the follow-up survey. Although the sample was small, the politicians did assign high scores to the importance of: extending parliamentary terms (4.6 out of 5); establishing what has become the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) (4.4); requiring more significant control over, and real-time reporting on, donations (4.3); retaining compulsory voting (4.3); and introducing compulsory education in politics and ethics during the final two years of high school (4.0).

The widest gaps between Australian politicians and Australian voters in scoring for importance were related to the need for better access to voting (digital voting), the level of attention to be paid to the future (climate change, etc.), support for legislation on truth in political advertising and better control over the revolving door for post-ministerial careers. All were scored high by voters and low by the politicians.

Social priorities: conclusion and recommendations

Perhaps the gulf between elected and electorate is best encapsulated in the words of one of the interviewed Australian politicians who, after reviewing a draft of the survey results, stated: "I am deeply opposed to nearly all of your voters' reform suggestions. Most of them would, if enacted, dramatically reduce the sovereignty of parliament, and place it in a subservient position to some sort of council of experts".

That, in itself, suggests voter dissatisfaction in the way that politics is working. This is not to say that the issues that drove recent shift to the right in election outcomes for Greece, Turkey and Finland, namely the cost of living, energy prices and inflation, are irrelevant. Or that manufacturing outrage is electorally easier and more instantly rewarding than the long haul of fixing real (systemic) problems (Economist, 2023). However, feedback from the voter surveys and politician interviews suggests it is equally important that attention be paid to the systemic operational changes (the Obvious Stuff) required at societal level to re-build voter satisfaction with democracy and trust in the institutions that underlie democratic government.

Conclusions

The bookshelves of most students of political science today are almost certainly weighty with warning of the dangers facing liberal democracy around the world (Albright, 2018; Applebaum 2020; Diamond and Plattner, 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Luce, 2017; Repucci and Slipowitz, 2021; Taylor, 2019; Temelkuran, 2019). In optimistic response, however, this article posits a credible hierarchy of initiatives for the recovery of liberal democratic government at the global, national and societal level: reject presidentialism; resist executive creep to preserve the independence of key institution; and reform those mechanics of government process that will work towards closing the trust divide.

In this context, therefore, Australia is assessed against its performance at each level. Overall, a generous marker would say "trying hard, but could do better". At the global level, it seems self-evident that Australia is a fully functional liberal parliamentarian democracy that, against virtually all measures, does deliver on behalf of its voters,[14] from whom little is demanded other than to pay taxes and turn up to vote in all national, state and local elections.

At the national level and under Australia's Constitution, the country's judiciary is independent from other arms of government. Separation of powers means that, in interpreting and applying the law, judicial officers (usually) act independently and without interference from the legislature or the executive. That said, judges at all levels are appointed by the executive government, without interference from the existing judiciary; the very problem that has eroded, and continues to damage, judicial independence in, for example, the US, Hungary and Poland. Over six billion people now live in countries where rule of law is declining (World Justice Project, 2022). Thus far, however, it does not seem to be an issue for Australia, but at 13th out of 140 countries in the World Justice Project rankings against adherence to the rule of law, some improvement should be possible.

At the societal level, the Australian voter survey respondents identified 12 reform initiatives that rank above the median score on importance (see Figure 7). All of them being reforms that the survey respondents believe would enhance the degree to which they would trust the system of government as it currently operates in Australia. Of the 12, five score high on both importance and implementability, but show a mixed record of actual and probable implementation:

1. **Implementation of an anti-corruption commission** – MERIT with Australia's National Anti-Corruption Commission commencing operation on 1 July 2023;
2. **Requirement for real-time declaration of donations** – PASS at state level but still resisted at national level;

14. Australia at ranked 22nd of 84, and is headed by thirteen PARL democracies, five QUASI, two emirates and one PRES (the US) – Quality of Life Index, 2023

3. **Retention of compulsory voting** – DISTINCTION with Australia considered by many as a model to the world;
4. **Facilitation of voting access** – FAIL with digital democracy at least a decade away; and
5. **Extension of parliamentary terms** – UNLIKELY TO CHANGE, despite continuous calls over recent years for extension of the three-year maximum term.

Looking at the remaining seven, there is still a long way to go. Lobbyists have virtually unlimited access to the corridors of parliament (Williams and Tham, 2023). Australia's federal lobbying controls, widely regarded as risible when compared with international standards, certainly fall short of OECD recommendations (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 2023). The revolving door continues to spin for former parliamentarians seeking a new career as lobbyists, and there seems to be little probability that truth in advertising laws as applied to commerce will soon, if ever, be applied to politics. However, looking on the bright side, "studying democracy and the legal system … (is about to) … become mandatory in New South Wales schools … under a revised curriculum designed to bolster knowledge of democratic systems (Harris, 2024, p. 11).

The politicisation of the Australian public service that started under the Hawke and Keating governments continues and shows no sign of abating. Media regulation and defamation laws still highlight concentration in the hands of overpowerful magnates. Apparent prioritisation of the immediate over emergent issues, such as climate change, de-carbonising the economy and dealing with an ageing population, remains a real concern for survey respondents; but all still linger in the too hard basket of many parliamentarians

If liberal democracy is to overcome its current tribulations, it would be advisable that reforms be directed at rebuilding the strength of government institutions at the heart of democracy, and that the necessary reform be introduced within the short term.

In conclusion, "the liberal West can no longer pay long-term lip service to open-ended statements in anodyne support of restoring trust in democracy. This is, and always has been, meaningless and empty sophistry that is just too easy to pass on to the next incumbent. But until such time as our elected representatives decide to put the revivification of democracy ahead of their re-election prospects, the status will ever remain *quo ante*" (Neilson, 2022, p. 39).

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