

PARTIES AND POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

2. Models of democracy¹

Estimated studying time: 30 minutes

Dilemmas of democratic systems

In its most general interpretation, democracy is a system where the people, or representatives of the people govern. However, there is always the question of who makes the decisions and how are divergent interests and opinions reconciliated.

There are two answers to these questions, and they are quite different. According to the majoritarian model, the majority must decide in such cases and the minority is excluded from governing. On the other hand, the consensus model strives to involve as many people in making decisions as possible. It is not satisfied with a simple, relative majority and emphasizes compromises and limiting majority power.

It may be misleading when we say the role of minority is limited in the majoritarian model. This does not refer to minorities like ethnic groups and such. It refers to the group that failed to gain a majority in the political competition. The majoritarian model does not involve the restriction of political rights. Instead, it provides full authority to those who gained a majority and leaves the others with less power. In this sense, it could be considered radically democratic compared to certain examples of the consensus model.

The dimension of the division of power

One of the main dimensions in which we can distinguish between the two types of democracies is the division of power. Such characteristics describe the relationship among institutional actors and they are closely related to each other:

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In majoritarian systems, single-party governments are the most common. This could be explained by the two-party system typical in the model that is often reinforced by a majoritarian electoral system. There is a fusion between the legislative and executive branches of power and interest groups are involved in pluralistic competition.

The fusion between the legislative and executive branches is a typical feature of parliamentary systems where the government (or at least its head) is elected by the legislative body. The two branches in this case are not separated but interconnected.

Majoritarian electoral systems are more likely to produce two-party outcomes where there is a high chance single-party majority in the legislature and in turn eliminates the need for coalition governments. While the government itself relies on the support of the parliament, the head of government is often also the leader of the majority party. This creates a situation where the executive may actually dominate the legislative branch.

In consensus democracies on the other hand, proportional electoral systems are quite common and often produce multi-party legislatures that necessitate coalition governments. The diminished unity of the executive branch makes it more vulnerable to the power shifts in the legislature, so there is likely a balance of power between the two.

The dimension of centralization

The other dimension mainly refers to institutional structures and constitutional arrangements: In the majoritarian model, countries often have a unitarian structure with no independent subnational units that could effectively limit the power of the ruling majority. The structure of the legislative body is generally unicameral or asymmetric bicameral. There is no codified constitution and thus there is no specialized body for constitutional oversight. The central bank is not independent from the executive.

In such arrangements, there are no structures and institutions that limit or balance the power of the executive majority. Autonomous subnational units for example could have their own tax systems independent of the central government which would obviously restrict its power. A second parliamentary chamber that represents states or certain social groups could also limit decision-making by the majority. Limiting executive power is one of the most important features of constitutions, while constitutional oversight can also eliminate laws enacted by the majority. Independent institutions in general, are restrictive to executive power.

On the other hand, in consensus systems, the federative structure is more common and there is often an upper chamber that provides representation to subnational units. There are written constitutions, there are constitutional courts exercising oversight that may have the power to overrule majority decisions.

Majoritarian and consensus democracies in real life

We must not forget that these two models describe archetypes – no political system belongs clearly in one or the other. There are however forms of governments that strongly resemble one or the other. Presidential systems successfully adhere to the principle of separation of power because a directly elected president can be truly independent from the legislative branch as opposed to a prime minister elected by parliament. In the case of parliamentary systems, the separation is more abstract and manifests in the role of the parliamentary opposition that has some control and oversight over governing.

A good real life example of a consensus system would be Belgium, Germany, or the European Union itself. The United Kingdom is the most well-known example of the majoritarian model – but do not mistake majoritarian systems to apply for all anglosaxon countries! The United States of America has a presidential form of government, a codified constitution, a federal state structure and a symmetric bicameral legislation – making it resemble the consensus model more.

Advantages and disadvantages of the models

Previously, political scientists considered the majoritarian model superior because it has a high chance of producing stable government and makes political life more predictable. Lijphart however, emphasized the advantages of consensus democracies which are clear for example in terms of representing a wider range of preferences. We can't say however that either model would be superior in every case – both can be and have been successfully implemented over the world.

We don't even have a universally accepted definition for democracy so it would be difficult to say that there is a right way to implement democratic principles. Let's take the following example:

In the 20th century, scientists agreed that a cornerstone of democracy is the presence of a strong opposition that keeps government in check and has a likely chance of taking power. Based on this, Samuel P. Huntington used the so-called two-turnover test to examine political systems. If the government was dismissed on two consecutive elections by the voters, then a democracy was considered consolidated.

However, many consensus democracies, while we would all agree that they are consolidated, would fail the two-turnover test because they have coalition governments that rule for long periods with smaller or larger changes in composition. Like in Germany, where the right-wing CDU has been governing for the last 16 years, although sometimes together with its greatest rival, the left-wing SPD. This

is clearly a situation that does not conform to the majoritarian ideas of democracy.

Literature

Lijphart, A. (2012). Patterns of Democracy. NeW Haven, London: Yale University Press.

Mainwaring, S. (2001). Two Models of Democracy. Journal of Democracy, 12(3), 170–175.
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Questions

1. What is the dilemma faced by democratic systems and what are the two most common answers to it?
2. Describe the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches in majoritarian democracies!
3. What is the connection between the electoral system, the party system and government formation?
4. What are the typical structures of the legislatures in the two models and how do they relate to the structure of the state?
5. Why do we consider strict constitutional rules and oversight a feature of consensus democracy?
6. What type of electoral system is typically used in consensus democracies? What are its advantages?
7. What does it mean that the two models are archetypes?
8. Give a good example for both models!
9. What is the two-turnover test?
10. What are the advantages of the consensus model?