

Terms and Ideas

- Presidentialism vs. parliamentarism
- Dual legitimacy
- Cabinet vs. regime instability
- Proportional representation
- Majoritarian system
- District magnitude (M)
- Efficiency vs. representativeness
- Duverger's Law

Questions

Q: What are institutions?

A: Institutions are the structures, rules, and procedures that either constrain or enable behavior and which shape interactions. These can either be formal (such as constitutions and bureaucracies) or informal (such as shared understandings and social conventions). Institutions shape the political order within societies.

Q: What are the different constitutional systems?

A: Constitutional systems concern how the executive is formed and power is organized. We cover three variants: presidentialism, parliamentarism, and semi-presidentialism. Some of the advantages and disadvantages often found in each are outlined in the table below.

System	Brief Description	Pros	Cons
Pres.	Executive and legislature are separately elected; fixed presidential terms; president is both head of state and government	Clear separation of powers; direct electoral legitimacy for the executive; stability of fixed terms	Dual legitimacy creates deadlock; winner-take-all elections encourages polarization; fixed terms increase rigidity; risk of personalism
Parl.	Executive (prime minister and cabinet) is chosen by and accountable to the legislature; no fixed term (confidence votes can dissolve government)	Greater flexibility and coalition-building; less executive-legislative deadlock; accountability through legislative confidence; historically associated with more stable democracies	Produces short-lived and unstable coalition governments; less direct voter choice for executive; can be difficult for voters to know who is responsible for outcomes
Semi-Pres.	Combines a directly elected president with a prime minister accountable to parliament (dual executive)	Combines executive stability and electoral legitimacy with legislative oversight and flexibility; president can dissolve parliament to resolve crises	Confusion between president and prime minister undermines accountability; vulnerable to cohabitation tensions; risk of presidential dominance

Q: What are the different electoral systems?

A: Electoral systems concern how votes are translated into legislative seats. The main distinction is between majoritarian and proportional representation (PR) systems. Some of the advantages and disadvantages often found in each are outlined in the table below.

System	Brief Description	Pros	Cons
Major.	The candidate or party with the most votes in single-member districts wins	Often creates effective and decisive governments; clear accountability as voters know who governs; simple and stable design; fosters moderation and broad appeal	Disproportionate outcomes as small parties are underrepresented; creates manufactured majorities; leads to wasted votes; reduces compromise and coalition-building
PR	Seats are distributed in proportion to votes in multi-member districts	Encourages inclusion and minority representation; reduces wasted votes; leads to higher participation; builds legitimacy in divided societies	Fragments legislatures and leads to low effectiveness; weakens accountability; potential to entrench social divisions; small parties have disproportionate influence as kingmakers

It is important to note that there are vast differences even within these broad categories. For instance, majoritarian systems can be based on first-past-the-post, runoff, or even alternative vote designs. Meanwhile, proportional representation systems can feature either open or closed lists (which influences the strength of parties) and can have one of several formulas to allocate seats. There are also a number of other, less common electoral systems that are used around the world.

Takeaways

Week 10 brought us back to democracies and made us consider how institutional rules are important to their functioning. The different designs that we examined in part determine how governments are formed and what the resulting distribution of power among elected officials is. The core theme is that institutional designs are often double-edged instruments. Each comes with its own tensions and trade-offs, and whether the advantages outweigh the drawbacks can differ over time and across countries. There does not seem to be a best system that consistently holds across all contexts.

Over the next two weeks, we will turn to ethnicity and ethnic conflict. Our discussion on representation and the accommodation of different groups within institutions will be relevant as we consider the factors that either mobilize or mitigate ethnic cleavages. How can multiethnic societies design institutions to manage conflict and prevent violence?