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# **PATTERNS OF DEMOCRACY**

Government Forms and Performance in  
Thirty-Six Countries

**SECOND EDITION**

AREND LIJPHART

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which, in principle, a democracy can be organized and run; in practice, too, modern democracies exhibit a variety of formal governmental institutions, like legislatures and courts, as well as political party and interest group systems. However, clear patterns and regularities appear when these institutions are examined from the perspective of how majoritarian or how consensual their rules and practices are. The majoritarianism-consensus contrast arises from the most basic and literal definition of democracy—government by the people or, in representative democracy, government by the representatives of the people—and from President Abraham Lincoln’s famous further stipulation that democracy means government not only *by* but also *for* the people—that is, government in accordance with the people’s preferences.<sup>1</sup>

Defining democracy as “government by and for the people”

1. As Clifford D. May (1987) points out, credit for this definition should probably go to Daniel Webster instead of Lincoln. Webster gave an address in 1830—thirty-three years before Lincoln’s Gettysburg address—in which he spoke of a “people’s government, made for the people, made by the people, and answerable to the people.”

raises a fundamental question: Who will do the governing and to whose interests should the government be responsive when the people are in disagreement and have divergent preferences? One answer to this dilemma is: the majority of the people. This is the essence of the majoritarian model of democracy. The majoritarian answer is simple and straightforward and has great appeal because government by the majority and in accordance with the majority's wishes obviously comes closer to the democratic ideal of "government by and for the people" than government by and responsive to a minority.

The alternative answer to the dilemma is: as many people as possible. This is the crux of the consensus model. It does not differ from the majoritarian model in accepting that majority rule is better than minority rule, but it accepts majority rule only as a *minimum* requirement: instead of being satisfied with narrow decision-making majorities, it seeks to maximize the size of these majorities. Its rules and institutions aim at broad participation in government and broad agreement on the policies that the government should pursue. The majoritarian model concentrates political power in the hands of a bare majority—and often even merely a plurality instead of a majority, as Chapter 2 will show—whereas the consensus model tries to share, disperse, and limit power in a variety of ways. A closely related difference is that the majoritarian model of democracy is exclusive, competitive, and adversarial, whereas the consensus model is characterized by inclusiveness, bargaining, and compromise; for this reason, consensus democracy could also be termed "negotiation democracy" (Kaiser 1997, 434).

Ten differences with regard to the most important democratic institutions and rules can be deduced from the majoritarian and consensus principles. Because the majoritarian characteristics are derived from the same principle and hence are logically connected, one could also expect them to occur together in the real world; the same applies to the consensus characteristics. All ten variables could therefore be expected to be closely related. Previ-

ous research has largely confirmed these expectations—with one major exception: the variables cluster in two clearly separate dimensions (Lijphart 1984, 211–22). The first dimension groups five characteristics of the arrangement of executive power, the party and electoral systems, and interest groups. For brevity's sake, I shall refer to this first dimension as the *executives-parties dimension*. Since most of the five differences on the second dimension are commonly associated with the contrast between federalism and unitary government—a matter to which I shall return shortly—I shall call this second dimension the *federal-unitary dimension*.

The ten differences are formulated below in terms of dichotomous contrasts between the majoritarian and consensus models, but they are all variables on which particular countries may be at either end of the continuum or anywhere in between. The majoritarian characteristic is listed first in each case. The five differences on the executives-parties dimension are as follows:

1. Concentration of executive power in single-party majority cabinets versus executive power-sharing in broad multiparty coalitions.
2. Executive-legislative relationships in which the executive is dominant versus executive-legislative balance of power.
3. Two-party versus multiparty systems.
4. Majoritarian and disproportional electoral systems versus proportional representation.
5. Pluralist interest group systems with free-for-all competition among groups versus coordinated and “corporatist” interest group systems aimed at compromise and concertation.

The five differences on the federal-unitary dimension are the following:

1. Unitary and centralized government versus federal and decentralized government.
2. Concentration of legislative power in a unicameral legislature versus division of legislative power between two equally strong but differently constituted houses.

3. Flexible constitutions that can be amended by simple majorities versus rigid constitutions that can be changed only by extraordinary majorities.
4. Systems in which legislatures have the final word on the constitutionality of their own legislation versus systems in which laws are subject to a judicial review of their constitutionality by supreme or constitutional courts.
5. Central banks that are dependent on the executive versus independent central banks.

One plausible explanation of this two-dimensional pattern is suggested by the classical theorists of federalism—Ivo D. Duchacek (1970), Daniel J. Elazar (1968), Carl J. Friedrich (1950, 189–221), and K. C. Wheare (1946)—as well as by many contemporary theorists (Colomer 2011, 85–100; Hueglin and Fenna 2006; Stepan 2001, 315–61; Watts 2008). These scholars maintain that federalism has primary and secondary meanings. Its primary definition is: a guaranteed division of power between the central government and regional governments. The secondary characteristics are strong bicameralism, a rigid constitution, and strong judicial review. Their argument is that the guarantee of a federal division of power can work well only if (1) both the guarantee and the exact lines of the division of power are clearly stated in the constitution and this guarantee cannot be changed unilaterally at either the central or regional level—hence the need for a rigid constitution, (2) there is a neutral arbiter who can resolve conflicts concerning the division of power between the two levels of government—hence the need for judicial review, and (3) there is a federal chamber in the national legislature in which the regions have strong representation—hence the need for strong bicameralism; moreover, (4) the main purpose of federalism is to promote and protect a decentralized system of government. These federalist characteristics can be found in the first four variables of the second dimension. As stated earlier, this dimension is therefore called the federal-unitary dimension.



The federalist explanation is not entirely satisfactory, however, for two reasons. One problem is that, although it can explain the clustering of the four variables in one dimension, it does not explain why this dimension should be so clearly distinct from the other dimension. Second, it cannot explain why the variable of central bank independence is part of the federal-unitary dimension. A more persuasive explanation of the two-dimensional pattern is the distinction between “collective agency” and “shared responsibility” on one hand and divided agencies and responsibilities on the other suggested by Robert E. Goodin (1996, 331).<sup>2</sup> These are both forms of diffusion of power, but the first dimension of consensus democracy with its multiparty face-to-face interactions *within* cabinets, legislatures, legislative committees, and concertation meetings between governments and interest groups has a close fit with the collective-responsibility form. In contrast, both the four federalist characteristics and the role of central banks fit the format of diffusion by means of institutional separation: division of power between separate federal and state institutions, two separate chambers in the legislature, and separate and independent high courts and central banks. Viewed from this perspective, the first dimension could also be labeled the joint-responsibility or joint-power dimension and the second the divided-responsibility or divided-power dimension. However, although these labels would be more accurate and theoretically more meaningful, my original labels—“executives-parties” and “federal-unitary”—have the great advantage that they are easier to remember, and I shall therefore keep using them throughout this book.

The distinction between two basic types of democracy, majoritarian and consensus, is by no means a novel invention in political science. In fact, I borrowed these two terms from Robert G. Dixon, Jr. (1968, 10). Hans Hattenhauer and Werner Kaltefleiter

2. A similar distinction, made by George Tsebelis (2002), is that between “institutional veto players,” located in different institutions, and “partisan veto players” such as the parties within a government coalition.

(1986) also contrast the “majority principle” with consensus, and Jürg Steiner (1971) juxtaposes “the principles of majority and proportionality.” G. Bingham Powell, Jr. (1982), distinguishes between majoritarian and broadly “representational” forms of democracy and, in later work, between two “democratic visions”: majoritarian and proportional (Powell 2000). Similar contrasts have been drawn by Robert A. Dahl (1956)—“populistic” versus “Madisonian” democracy; William H. Riker (1982)—“populism” versus “liberalism”; Jane Mansbridge (1980)—“adversary” versus “unitary” democracy; and S. E. Finer (1975)—“adversary politics” versus centrist and coalitional politics.

Nevertheless, there is a surprisingly strong and persistent tendency in political science to equate democracy solely with majoritarian democracy and to fail to recognize consensus democracy as an alternative and equally legitimate type. A particularly clear example can be found in Stephanie Lawson’s (1993, 192–93) argument that a strong political opposition is “the *sine qua non* of contemporary democracy” and that its prime purpose is “to become the government.” This view is based on the majoritarian assumption that democracy entails a two-party system (or possibly two opposing blocs of parties) that alternate in government; it fails to take into account that governments in more consensual multiparty systems tend to be coalitions and that a change in government in these systems usually means only a partial change in the party composition of the government—instead of the opposition “becoming” the government (Lundell 2011).

The frequent use of the “turnover” test in order to determine whether a democracy has become stable and consolidated betrays the same majoritarian assumption. Samuel P. Huntington (1991, 266–67) even proposes a “two-turnover test,” according to which “a democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition [to democracy] loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if those election winners then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later

election.” Of the twenty countries with the longest democratic history analyzed in this book, all of which are undoubtedly stable and consolidated democratic systems, no fewer than three—Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland—fail even the one-turnover test during the more than sixty years from the late 1940s to 2010, that is, they experienced many cabinet changes but never a complete turnover, and six—the same three countries plus Belgium, Finland, and Germany—fail the two-turnover test.

This book will show that pure or almost pure majoritarian democracies are actually quite rare—limited to the United Kingdom, New Zealand (until 1996), and the former British colonies in the Caribbean (but only with regard to the executives-parties dimension). Most democracies have significant or even predominantly consensual traits. Moreover, as this book shows, consensus democracy may be considered more democratic than majoritarian democracy in most respects.

The ten contrasting characteristics of the two models of democracy, briefly listed above, are described in a preliminary fashion and exemplified by means of sketches of relatively pure cases of majoritarian democracy—the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Barbados—and of relatively pure cases of consensus democracy—Switzerland, Belgium, and the European Union—in Chapters 2 and 3. The thirty-six empirical cases of democracy, including the five just mentioned (but not the European Union), that were selected for the comparative analysis are systematically introduced in Chapter 4. The ten institutional variables are then analyzed in greater depth in the nine chapters that comprise the bulk of this book (Chapters 5 to 13). Chapter 14 summarizes the results and places the thirty-six democracies on a two-dimensional “conceptual map” of democracy; it also analyzes shifts on the map over time and shows that most countries occupy stable positions on the map. Chapters 15 and 16 ask the “so what?” question: Does the type of democracy make a difference, especially with regard to effective policy-making and the quality of democracy? These chapters show that consensus democracies score significantly higher

on a wide array of indicators of democratic quality and that they also have better records with regard to governing effectiveness, although the differences in this respect are not as large. Chapter 17 concludes with a look at the policy implications of the book's findings for democratizing and newly democratic countries.