Types of Democracy

The democratic form of government is an institutional configuration that allows for popular participation through the electoral process. According to political scientist Robert Dahl, the democratic ideal is based on two principles: political participation and political contestation. Political participation requires that all the people who are eligible to vote can vote. Elections must be free, fair, and competitive. Once the votes have been cast and the winner announced, power must be peacefully transferred from one individual to another. These criteria are to be replicated on a local, state, and national level. A more robust conceptualization of democracy emphasizes what Dahl refers to as political contestation. Contestation refers to the ability of people to express their discontent through freedom of the speech and press. People should have the ability to meet and discuss their views on political issues without fear of persecution from the state. Democratic regimes that guarantee both electoral freedoms and civil rights are referred to as liberal democracies.

In the subfield of Comparative Politics, there is a rich body of literature dealing specifically with the intricacies of the democratic form of government. These scholarly works draw distinctions between democratic regimes based on representative government, the institutional balance of power, and the electoral procedure. There are many shades of democracy, each of which has its own benefits and disadvantages.

Types of Democracy

The broadest differentiation that scholars make between democracies is based on the nature of representative government. There are two categories: direct democracy and representative democracy. We can identify examples of both in the world today.

Direct Democracy

Direct democracy places all power in the hands of the individual. When political decisions must be made, all members of a polity gather together and individuals cast a vote. In theory, this sounds like the ideal form of government. There are no intermediaries. Each person is treated as an equal, and each person is given a chance to directly influence the policymaking process. In practice, however, this system is hard to implement. Historically, small political communities tend to use direct democracy. In small towns or indigenous communities where everyone knows one another and the issues under debate directly affect them, such an arrangement is ideal. However, once there is an expansion in the size of the electorate and the scope of policy areas, direct democracy can become unwieldy. In America today, thousands of laws are implemented and repealed on a daily basis. Applying a direct democracy framework in this type of political environment would be quite difficult.
Representative Democracy

As political communities change and evolve, so does our understanding of how democracy should be implemented. The second major type of democracy is referred to as representative democracy. This political arrangement establishes an intermediary political actor between the individual and the policy outputs of the state. Through the electoral process, one person or a group of people are elected and assigned with the task of making decisions on behalf of the group of citizens that they represent. In the United States, we have multiple intermediaries. Each state has two representatives in the upper house, or Senate. In the lower house, or House of Representatives, the number of intermediaries appointed is based on the population size of each state. It is important to note that while the power of the individual is diminished slightly, political representatives are still beholden to the group that they represent, also known as their “constituency.” In the US, members of both the House of Representatives and Senate face regular elections, during which the public evaluates their performance. If citizens are pleased, then it is expected that the representative will be re-elected. This repetitive process creates a relationship of accountability between voters and those that they put into power. Electoral defeat serves as a deterrent to a politician’s temptation to err from the preferences of his or her constituency.

The creation of the intermediary role begs the following questions: What does it really mean to be a representative of the interests of a collective of individuals? What if the set of policies that voters want does not really serve their interests? What should the representative do? Some scholars argue that it is the responsibility of the elected representative to carry out the wishes of the constituency, even if it harms them. This is known as the “delegate model.” Conversely, some argue that politicians are specialists. While voters continue to engage in their everyday lives, politicians are in the thick of congressional debates. They understand the intricacies and implications of policies more than their constituents ever could, so in some circumstances, political leaders should be given the benefit of the doubt. This model is known as the “trustee model.” The trustee model does not mean that voter-representative accountability is unimportant; rather, it recognizes asymmetries in information and knowledge that exist between the public at large and elected officials. One could argue that it is actually impossible to represent the interest of every voter. Consequently, all representatives are trustees as they must make educated guesses about what their power base would want and should want. Sometimes representatives will be right, and sometimes they will be wrong. What is important is that we place our trust in their ability to make rational and well-informed decisions. The electoral process responds to a representative’s failure (real or perceived) by most likely removing the representative from office.

Systems of Democracy

The broad category of “types” of democracy can be further divided into “systems” of democracy. There are two subcomponents of the representative type: the
parliamentary system and the presidential system. There is one “system” that is a subcomponent of the direct type, which is mixed regimes. The factors that distinguish one system from another are electoral procedure, the distribution of power between the executive and the parliament, and the role of political parties. All systems have fully functioning legislatures that specialize in the following tasks: managing the budget, helping to form public opinion, representing the public at large, and controlling the government.

The Parliamentary System

There are more parliamentary systems in the world than presidential democracies. As the name suggests, parliamentary systems are distinct because of the power that they place in the hands of the legislative branch. Examples of this type of system are Germany and the United Kingdom. This institutional configuration involves voters selecting parliamentary representatives. The party that wins the largest number of congressional seats then selects the head of government also known as the Prime Minister, Chancellor, or Premier. One characteristic that is specific to this system of government is the split executive. The split executive consists of the head of government and the head of state. As a member of parliament, the head of government controls the legislative process and sets the policymaking agenda. Conversely, the head of state serves as the ceremonial representative of the country. For example, in the United Kingdom, David Cameron is the head of government. Cameron collaborates with his party on domestic policy, works with opposition parties and negotiates with executives of other countries concerning issues of foreign affairs. Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state. As such, she does not propose, revise or veto laws. She does not control the actions of the Prime Minister and cannot remove him from office. As the ceremonial leader, she is present at state and international events to represent the nation of Great Britain. For example, at the recent 2012 London Olympics, the Queen served as the “face” of the United Kingdom as she greeted the athletes of the world.

The electoral process in parliamentary systems influences the power dynamic between the executive (head of government) and the legislature. While these branches of government are distinct entities, in many ways, they are fused together. Because the Prime Minister is placed in power by members of his own party or a coalition containing his party, there are always commonalities in opinion across various policy areas. The legislature is neither the commander in chief nor does it have the ability to appoint and dismiss members of the cabinet. These are executive responsibilities. What is important here is the common party affiliation. This commonality leads to a mostly cooperative relationship.

When disagreements arise between the legislature and the Prime Minister, which is inevitable, the power of the parliament reigns supreme. It is important to know a little bit more about what these legislative bodies look like to understand how this process plays out and the implications that it has for the democratic process. The electoral system in parliamentary democracies is based on proportional representation. Proportional representation means that parties win seats based not on a majority vote, as is the case in presidential systems (see below), but based on the proportion of votes
that they win. For example, a party winning 35% of votes from the electorate is allocated approximately 35% of the seats in the congress. Such an arrangement ensures that parties representing smaller portions of the constituency are given a chance to influence policy. What the parliamentary system gains in representation, it loses in efficiency and stability. The large number of parties sometimes makes it impossible for a single party to gain the majority that is needed for them to select the Prime Minister. As a result, it is often necessary for parties to form coalitions with one another. The diversity of opinion created by a large coalition often makes it difficult for its members to come to a consensus on policy decisions. When there is a majority party that places the head of government into office, there is a lower likelihood of conflict both within the parliament and between both branches of government. However, in a broad coalition situation, the Prime Minister has more interests to represent, making it difficult for him to make decisions that are agreeable to the coalition. This is where the power of parties is an important variable. When the majority party or the coalition (when there is one) is profoundly displeased with the executive’s performance, they can issue what is called a “vote of no confidence,” removing the Prime Minister from office.

The ability of the legislature to select the Prime Minister, in most cases, creates common policy preferences between both branches of government. While the functions of both entities are distinct, the likelihood of cooperation is much higher. Another benefit of the system is that the legislature is a more approximate representation of the diverse political interests that are present in society. A disadvantage to this arrangement is that the diversity of parties is sometimes so extreme that it creates significant internal dissension in the legislature, which then strains the fused relationship between the parliament and the executive. Disagreement within parliament can lead to deadlock or a situation where the policymaking process is brought to an abrupt halt until the conflict is resolved. Additionally, internal dissension in the parliament strains its relationship with the executive, sometimes leading to a vote of “no-confidence.”

The Presidential System

There are fewer presidential democracies in the world, and they are centrally located in the Americas (North America, Central America, and South America). Scholars claim that while parliamentary democracies are more representative, they are also less stable for many of the reasons cited above. Conversely, presidential systems, which concentrate power in the executive branch, tend to be less representative and more stable. We will use the example of the United States to describe and understand this system of democracy.

Unlike parliamentary democracies where elections happen in stages, in presidential systems, the voting public selects members for both the executive and legislative branches at the same time. The results of the legislative elections have no bearing on the composition of the executive branch. For example, in the United States, it is entirely possible for one party to gain a majority in Congress (both the House of Representatives and the Senate) and for the other party to win the presidency. The
potential for a “split government” increases the likelihood for disagreement and can make the policymaking process difficult.

The fusion of power that is so characteristic in parliamentary systems is not present in presidential democracies. Presidential systems operate under a very distinct separation of powers. The legislature controls the budget, proposes and passes policy, approves appointments to the cabinet positions, and ratifies foreign treaties. The executive serves as commander-in-chief of the national armed forces, appoints executive cabinet members and representatives of the Supreme Court (after his appointments are approved by the Congress), and serves as the head of state and the head of government. It is important to note that the executive is not split in this system. The Congress cannot remove the president from power through a “vote of confidence.” In fact, Congress cannot remove the president from power at all. The only exception is in cases of criminal misconduct. For example, President Nixon came close to facing impeachment or the legal process used to remove a president from office, during the Watergate Scandal in the 1970s. He resigned before he could be impeached. Likewise, the president cannot dissolve Congress. The performance of members in both branches of government is evaluated by the voting public.

One of the distinct powers available to the executive is the presidential veto. In order for a bill to become a law, it must be approved by a majority in both Houses. Failure of approval in the Senate pushes the bill back to the House of Representatives. A cycle of disagreement will continue until both houses are able to modify the bill in a way that is mutually acceptable. Once a bill clears both the Senate and the House of Representatives, it is presented to the president, who has the power to veto or overturn the law. The presidential veto has long been a topic of debate among scholars, policymakers, and the voting public. According to critics, the ability of one man to overturn a policy, which has been approved by electorally appointed representatives, undermines the spirit of democracy. Another type of veto that is equally controversial is the line-item veto, which allows the president to overturn portions of a law. Both types of vetoes are rarely used. In the event that the president rejects a bill in its entirety, the Senate has the ability to reverse the veto by achieving a 2/3 majority of votes in favor of doing so. This vote is very difficult to achieve because of the majoritarian nature of the electoral system. Recall that in parliamentary democracies, parties win seats based on the proportion of the vote that they win. In presidential democracies, parties win seats when they secure a majority of votes in local and state elections. The higher “winning” threshold results in two parties dominating the system. So, while the balance of power is relatively half and half in both houses, a 2/3 majority is needed to overturn a veto. What does this mean? It means that one party must convince members of one party to betray its comrades and vote in favor of the opposition. Thus, the Senate reversal of a presidential veto is quite hard to achieve.

The separation of power weakens political parties relative to the executive. Political parties do not appoint the executive (though they do select a candidate to run for president). The president must establish a relationship of cooperation across both houses, but his survival in office does not depend on it. The majoritarian electoral system also has important implications for the ideology and level of representativeness of political parties. In parliamentary systems, the fact that appointment is based on
proportional wins allows parties to refine their political message and focus on a very specific portion of the population. Across Europe, there are communist parties, socialist parties, green or environmental parties, social democratic parties, etc…. In presidential systems, the fact that a majority is required means that parties must make themselves appealing to large swathes of the population, more specifically 50% +1 of the voting public. As a result, there are fewer distinctions between both parties, except for on a few key social and economic issues. For example, in the US, republicans and democrats have very different views on abortion, government spending, and taxation. Here, the interests of minorities, both ideological and demographic, are obscured. This two party structure reduces some of the instability caused by coalition politics at the cost of being less representative. In the United States, a reoccurring criticism of the political system is that the Congress does not look like the American populace in terms of gender, race, and socioeconomic background. Alternatively, the absence of coalition politics and the ability of the president to exercise his veto make the policy process relatively less complicated in presidential systems. Finding a consensus between parties is a less daunting task than achieving consensus across four or five parties.

Mixed Systems

Finally, there are some states that practice a form of democracy that does not fit into either the presidential or parliamentary prototype but contains elements of both. These systems are called “mixed” systems. For example, in some semi-presidential democracies, the president is elected according to rules of direct democracy. In this system, the executive exercises a broad range of powers. However, just as in the parliamentary system, he or she can be removed from office. In Switzerland, the president is quite powerful, and he cannot be removed from office by the legislature. Likewise, the president cannot dissolve the parliament. There are numerous other examples of mixed regimes where people have attempted to take the best attributes of each system and combine these attributes into one form of government.

Conclusion

In comparison to other regime types, democracies provide the most checks on the authority of government while providing the most protection of the civil rights and liberties of individuals. There is no “perfect” democracy. All democracies have their strong and weak points. What is important is that there is complementarity between democratic structures and the characteristics, needs, and priorities of the state in which democracy operates. When such complementarity does not exist, the democratic principles of tolerance and negotiation allow for the possibility of reform.

Summary:

- The democratic form of government is an institutional configuration that allows for popular participation through the electoral process.
• The democratic ideal is based on two principles: political participation and political contestation.
• In the subfield of comparative politics, there is a rich body of literature dealing specifically with the intricacies of the democratic form of government. These scholarly works draw distinctions between democratic regimes based on representative government, the institutional balance of power, and the electoral procedure. There are many shades of democracy, each of which has its own benefits and disadvantages.
• There are two types of democracy: direct and representative.
• There are three systems of democracies: parliamentary, presidential, and mixed.
• Parliamentary systems are distinct because of the power that they place in the hands of the legislative branch. In such systems, the executive is split between the head of state and the head of government. Parliament appoints the head of government. Parliament can also remove the head of government through a “vote of no confidence.”
• Presidential systems concentrate power in the hands of the executive, which is not split. The president must establish a relationship of cooperation across both houses, but his survival in office does not depend on it. Congress cannot remove the president unless he or she has committed a criminal offense. A major executive power in this system is the presidential veto, which is hard to overturn.
• Parliamentary democracies have higher levels of representativeness and lower levels of stability. Presidential democracies have lower levels of representativeness and higher levels of stability.
• There are more parliamentary democracies in the world than presidential. Presidential systems are geographically concentrated in the Americas.
• Mixed regimes combine characteristics of both of the major systems (presidential and parliamentary).