

One-party and coalition government

Democratic accountability in democracies is supposed to be maintained by the fact that free elections allow voters to choose their political representatives. They can either reward good governments with another term of office or kick them out. The overwhelming majority of representatives are elected as party candidates, and it is the party distribution of seats in a parliamentary system that determines the composition of the government. As long as the government can muster the support of a majority of elected representatives in the assembly, it can continue in government.

In dominant one-party systems government formation is straightforward – there is no alternative to the dominant party (see [briefing 13.2](#)). In two-party systems, it is usually also straightforward because the majority party will form the government if it has an absolute majority of seats in parliament, and if it does not it can probably govern with the legislative support of one or more of the other parties, usually minor ones. As a result, two-party systems generally produce one-party government in which the other party forms the opposition. However, one-party government is the exception rather than the rule in most democracies.

Most government in most countries is by **coalition** simply because they have electoral and multi-party systems that make it unusual to have a single-party majority in the assembly. This makes it important to understand the process of government formation and maintenance in multi-party systems with **coalition**

Coalition A set of parties that comes together to form a government.

■ Coalition government

If no single party is large enough to form the government, then a party coalition will have to be formed. Most democracies have quite a few parties that are important enough to claim a position in government, either because their size makes it difficult to overlook them, or because their place in the party system gives them a pivotal role in government formation. The creation of such a coalition often involves long, hard and complex negotiations between party leaders. In some cases, alliances are negotiated before elections (electoral coalitions), but more normally coalitions are constructed after elections, when the parliamentary strength of the parties is known (see [briefing 13.2](#)). This process of bargaining between possible coalition partners is usually a hidden form of ‘horse-trading’ taking place in smoke-filled rooms, but there are some rules governing the process:

1. normally, the leader of the largest party in parliament/assembly has the first chance at trying to form a governing coalition, and as such is known as the *formateur* but if this fails the job passes to the leader of the second largest party.
2. Some constitutions give the head of state the right to nominate the *forma- teur*, though there is often little choice given the first rule.

3. Cabinet positions in a coalition are usually distributed roughly in proportion to the strength of the coalition partners in the assembly, and the leader of one of the largest parties usually becomes the prime minister. Which politicians end up with which cabinet posts is usually a matter of tough negotiation, and pivotal parties in the coalition can drive a hard bargain.
4. If a governing coalition is formed it is then formally invested in office by the head of state, and sometimes parliament must give its formal assent as well.
5. A coalition government that loses a **vote of confidence** in the parliament/assembly is normally required to resign, but remains in office as a caretaker government until a new government is formed.

Vote of confidence A vote of confidence (or no confidence) tests whether the government of the day continues to have the majority support of members of the assembly.

■ Coalitions and government effectiveness

It used to be thought that two-party systems were the best because they tended to result in stable, moderate and accountable government. They often produced clear and stable working majorities in parliament. If only one party was in power it could be held clearly accountable for government actions. In two-party systems, there was a strong incentive for both parties to try to hold to the middle ground and hence moderate policies. The inter-war Weimar government in Germany, and the frequent collapse of coalition governments in the Fourth French Republic and in post-war Italy were often wheeled out as examples to make the point about the instability of coalition government.

It is also claimed that the process of forming coalition government gives too much power to politicians and their wheeler-dealing and secret horse-trading. The outcome of their bargaining may not reflect the preferences of voters, it may also give too much power to pivotal parties, whose support is necessary for successful coalition formation, even if they are rather small and unrepresentative. Experience, however, suggests that coalitions can be as stable as one-party government. Germany, The Netherlands, Scandinavia and Switzerland have all had long periods of coalition government that have been effective, stable and moderate.

It is true that unstable coalitions sometimes require the reconstitution of government between elections – that is, the formation of a new coalition: hence some countries have more governments than elections. But the consequences of instability need not be severe or chaotic. The presence of the same party (or parties) in successive coalitions often gives continuity, and the cautious, inclusive and consensual nature of much coalition government discourages rapid swings of policy from one single-party government to the next. Finally, coalitions are not

unrepresentative of electoral opinion. They often have to be moderate to stay in power, and their frequent inclusion of a centre party as a partner means they tend to be representative of the middle ground of politics.

Parties and democracy

Competition between parties for governing power is at the very heart of democracy. All stable democracies, even those with dominant single parties, have organised oppositions ready to step into office if they are electorally successful. The peaceful transfer of power between parties at election time is a hallmark of a successful and stable democracy. Parties were also crucial in the second and third wave of democratisation where leaders acted on their willingness to accept (many or most of) the democratic rules of the game. Authoritarian governments and dictators often try to hold on to power at any price. Democratic politicians comply with election outcomes that are peaceful and fair.

Nevertheless, party politics is often attacked as harmful and unnecessary in a democracy (see [controversy 13.1](#)), especially when they are corrupt or where party leaders handle themselves and public affairs badly. There can be much truth in these criticisms, but there is also much truth in the counter-argument that there seems to be nothing better than parties. It is probably true that if parties did not exist, someone would have to invent them.

It remains the case, however, that parties across the democratic world, and especially in the older democracies, are losing members and that fewer people are identifying with them. This means that parties are more dependent on sources of money other than individual subscriptions, which has raised the issue of whether to allow them to raise more from private (business?) sources or to subsidise them with public funds. This is a highly controversial matter much discussed when parties run into severe financial problems or find themselves in the hands of wealthy donors to party funds.

■ Lessons of comparison

- There is not much evidence to support the claim that coalition government is unstable, unaccountable, or unrepresentative compared with single-party governments.
- Although there are significant exceptions, proportional voting is associated with multi-party systems and coalition government. non-proportional voting is associated with a dominant party or two main parties.
- The evidence suggests that politicians are not exclusively interested in prestige or the power that goes with government office (office-seeking). They may support surplus majority or minority governments, and they may choose to work outside government if this helps them influence government policy.
- The evidence suggests that the democratic performance of consensus democracies is superior to that of majoritarian systems.