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Patterns of Majoritarian and
Consensus Government in
Twenty-One Countries

AREND LIJPHART

DEMOCRACIES

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Consensus Government
in Twenty-One Countries*

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YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN and LONDON

Published with assistance from the
Louis Stern Memorial Fund.

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Designed by James J. Johnson
and set in Melior Roman type by
Graphic Composition Inc.
Printed in the United States of America by
Murray Printing Company, Westford, Mass.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Lijphart, Arend.

Democracies: patterns of majoritarian and
consensus government in twenty-one countries.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Democracy. 2. Comparative government.

I. Title.

JC421.L537 1984 321.8 83-14639

ISBN 0-300-03115-7

0-300-03182-3 (pbk.)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Preface

This book is a systematic comparison of the two basic models of democracy: majoritarian (or Westminster) and consensus. I have borrowed this pair of contrasting terms from Robert G. Dixon, Jr., and my definitions are similar, though not identical, to his. The components of consensus democracy, according to Dixon, include “federalism, separation of powers, the bicameral structure of legislatures, with each house representing a somewhat different electorate and requiring a double scrutiny of all measures, the committee and seniority system used within legislatures, the state-based rather than nation-based political party system, requirements for extraordinary majorities to enact certain kinds of measures, the executive veto power and the power to override it with an extraordinary majority, and numerous other formal arrangements and informal practices.”¹ This list of characteristics overlaps my eight elements of consensus democracy to an important extent.

My concept of consensus democracy is also inspired by and

1. Robert G. Dixon, Jr., *Democratic Representation: Reapportionment in Law and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 10. See also the comparison between Madisonian and populist democracy in Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

related to my earlier work on consociational democracy.² In this book, I use the term *consensus* rather than *consociational* not just because the former is shorter—and easier to pronounce!—than the latter, but because there are crucial differences between their meanings. For one thing, my earlier writings took consociational democracy as their point of departure and contrasted it with majority rule; here I start out with an analysis of the majoritarian model, from which I derive the consensus model as its logical opposite. Furthermore, the four characteristics of consociational democracy—grand coalition, segmental autonomy, proportionality, and minority veto—are clearly recognizable in, but not coincident with, the eight characteristics of consensus democracy described in this book.



I presented a preliminary version of the first two chapters of the book as a paper to the International Workshop on “Political Science in the 1980s” organized by the Instituto de Estudos Econômicos, Sociais e Políticos de São Paulo, Brazil, in November 1981. I am grateful to the participants for their helpful comments. Among the other many helpful critics, too many to list exhaustively, I should like to single out Nathaniel L. Beck, Robert G. Cushing, and Adam Przeworski for special thanks. I am also grateful to Kenneth R. Mayer for his research assistance and to Monica Ann Paskvan, Barbara J. Sutera, and Barbara K. Ziering for typing the manuscript.

Some of the chapters of the book draw on my earlier work. I acknowledge with gratitude the permission to reprint a few passages from my articles “Power-Sharing versus Majority Rule: Patterns of Cabinet Formation in Twenty Democracies,” *Government and Opposition* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1981):395–413 (chapter 4), and “Consociation and Federation: Conceptual and Empirical Links,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 3 (Septem-

2. See, in particular, Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

ber 1979):499–515 (chapter 10); and from my chapters “Political Parties: Ideologies and Programs,” in David Butler, Howard R. Penniman, and Austin Ranney, eds., *Democracy at the Polls: A Comparative Study of Competitive National Elections* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), 26–51 (chapter 8), “Introduction: The Belgian Example of Cultural Coexistence in Comparative Perspective,” in Arend Lijphart, ed., *Conflict and Coexistence in Belgium: The Dynamics of a Culturally Divided Society* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1981), 1–12 (chapter 2), and “Os Modelos Majoritário e Consociacional da Democracia: Contrastes e Ilustrações,” in Bolivar Lamounier, ed., *A Ciência Política nos Anos 80* (Brazil: Editora da Universidade de Brasília, 1982), 95–115 (chapters 1 and 2).

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The Westminster Model of Democracy 1

DEMOCRATIC IDEALS AND REALITIES

The literal meaning of democracy—government by the people—is probably also the most basic and most widely used definition. The one major amendment that is necessary when we speak of democracy at the national level in modern large-scale nation-states is that the acts of government are usually performed not directly by the citizens but indirectly by representatives whom they elect on a free and equal basis. Although elements of direct democracy can be found even in some large democratic states (as we shall see in chapter 12), democracy is usually representative democracy: government by the freely elected representatives of the people.

Democracy may be defined not only as government by the people but also, in President Abraham Lincoln's famous formulation, as government for the people—that is, government in accordance with the people's preferences. An ideal democratic government would be one whose actions were *always* in *perfect* correspondence with the preferences of *all* its citizens. Such complete responsiveness in government has never existed and may never be achieved, but it can serve as an ideal to which democratic regimes should aspire. It can also be regarded as the

end of a scale on which the degree of democratic responsiveness of different regimes may be measured. The subject of this book is not the ideal of democracy but the operation of actual democracies that approximate the ideal relatively closely—and that Robert Dahl calls “polyarchies” in order to distinguish them from ideal democracy.¹ These democratic regimes are characterized not by perfect responsiveness but by a high degree of it: their actions have been in *relatively close* correspondence with the wishes of *relatively many* of their citizens for a *long period of time*. Both definitions of democracy will also be used later to distinguish the two basic types of democracy.

As Dahl has shown, a reasonably responsive democracy can exist only if at least eight institutional guarantees are present:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations;
2. Freedom of expression;
3. The right to vote;
4. Eligibility for public office;
5. The right of political leaders to compete for support and votes;
6. Alternative sources of information;
7. Free and fair elections;
8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.²

The first six of these embody the classic democratic right of liberty, especially the freedoms of speech and assembly, and they also imply the second classic democratic value of equality. In the democracies treated in this book, these rights are securely guaranteed without major variations between different countries. Guarantees 7 and 8 are also provided, but substantial differences occur in the way elections and other institutions and practices are organized to insure responsive government. This book will

1. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). See also John D. May, “Defining Democracy: A Bid for Coherence and Consensus,” *Political Studies* 26, no. 1, (March 1978):1–14.

2. Dahl, *Polyarchy*, p. 3.

focus on the variety of formal and informal institutions and practices that are used to translate citizen preferences into public policies. While recognizing and describing these differences, I will also try to discover patterns and regularities, and I will argue that both the variations and the regularities can be interpreted in terms of two diametrically opposite models of democracy: the majoritarian model (or the Westminster model) and the consensus model.

The majoritarian and consensus models of democracy differ on eight dimensions. These will be discussed in a preliminary fashion in the remainder of this chapter and in chapter 2, and they will be analyzed in greater depth in the nine chapters that comprise the bulk of the book (chapters 4 to 12). The twenty-two empirical cases of democratic regimes that will be compared—mainly the democracies of the North Atlantic area but also including Israel, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand—will be introduced in chapter 3. There are twenty-one countries but twenty-two democratic regimes because the French Fourth and Fifth Republics will be treated as separate cases. The concluding chapter (chapter 13) will summarize the overall patterns of democracy that we find in our set of democracies and consider the question: to what extent are the two contrasting models of democracy not only logically coherent but also empirical models?

The principal emphasis throughout the book will be on the interrelationships among the different majoritarian and consensual characteristics. In the concluding chapter, I shall also try to explain the differential incidence of majoritarian and consensual patterns in the twenty-two democratic regimes in terms of the countries' cultural and structural characteristics: the degree to which they are plural (divided) societies, the sizes of their populations, and Anglo-American versus other cultural influences. An additional question worth asking is: how does the type of democratic regime, majoritarian or consensual, affect its performance? My analysis will suggest that majoritarian democracy is especially appropriate for, and works best in, homogeneous

societies, whereas consensus democracy is more suitable for plural societies. Otherwise, there is relatively little variation in how well the democracies analyzed in this book perform. As chapter 3 will show, my cases of democracy were chosen according to exacting standards: they are all democracies of long standing and must also be judged as basically successful. Indeed, one of the principal messages of this book is that there are many different ways of successfully running a democracy.³

THE WESTMINSTER MODEL: NINE MAJORITARIAN ELEMENTS

The essence of the Westminster model is majority rule. The model can be seen as the most obvious solution to the dilemma of what is meant by “the people” in our definition of democracy. 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 is: the majority of the people. Its great merit is that any other answer, such as the requirement of unanimity or a qualified majority, entails minority rule—or at least a minority veto—and that government by the majority and in accordance with the majority’s wishes comes closer to the democratic ideal than government by and responsive to a minority. The alternative answer to the dilemma is: as many people as possible. This is the essence of the consensus model; as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, its rules

3. Democratic performance has also been stubbornly resistant to meaningful and precise measurement. In the strongest attempt so far to measure how well democracies perform, G. Bingham Powell uses three indicators: executive stability or durability, voting turnout, and the absence of large-scale violence. Chapters 5 and 7 will show, however, that executive durability is not a good measure of democratic performance at all; it merely indicates the strength of the executive in relation to the legislature. Voting turnout is a weak and peripheral aspect of performance. And large-scale violence is fortunately a very rare occurrence in all of our democracies. See G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Contemporary Democracies: Participation, Stability, and Violence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

and institutions aim at broad participation in government and broad agreement on the policies that the government should pursue.

In this book the term *Westminster model* will be used interchangeably with *majoritarian model* to refer to a general model of democracy. It may also be used more narrowly to denote the main characteristics of British parliamentary and governmental institutions; Great Britain's Parliament meets in the Palace of Westminster in London. The British version of the Westminster model is both the original and the best-known example of this model. It is also widely admired. Richard Rose points out that, "with confidence born of continental isolation, Americans have come to assume that their institutions—the Presidency, Congress and the Supreme Court—are the prototype of what should be adopted elsewhere."⁴ But American political scientists, especially those in the field of comparative politics, have tended to hold the British system of government in at least equally high esteem.⁵

One famous political scientist who fervently admired the Westminster model was President Woodrow Wilson. In his early writings he went so far as to urge the abolition of presidential government and the adoption of British-style parliamentary government in the United States. Such views have also been held by many other non-British observers of British politics, and many features of the Westminster model have been exported to other countries: Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and most of Britain's colonies in Asia and Africa at the moment of their independence. Wilson referred to parliamentary government in accordance with the Westminster model as "the world's fashion."⁶

The Westminster model consists of the following nine inter-

4. Richard Rose, "A Model Democracy?", in Richard Rose, ed., *Lessons from America: An Exploration* (New York: Wiley, 1974), p. 131.

5. Dennis Kavanagh, "An American Science of British Politics," *Political Studies* 22, no. 3 (September 1974):251–70.

6. Woodrow Wilson, "Committee or Cabinet Government," *Overland Monthly*, January 1884, quoted by Walter Lippmann in his introduction to Wood-

related elements, which will be illustrated by features of the British political system—deliberately described in rather stark terms, the necessary nuances to be added later—particularly as it operated in the period from 1945 to 1970:

1. Concentration of executive power: one-party and bare-majority cabinets. The most powerful organ of British government is the cabinet. It is usually composed of members of the party that has the majority of seats in the House of Commons, and the minority is not included. Coalition cabinets are rare. Because in the British two-party system the two principal parties are of approximately equal strength, the party that wins the elections usually represents no more than a narrow majority, and the minority is relatively large. Hence the British one-party and bare-majority cabinet is the perfect embodiment of the principle of majority rule: it wields vast amounts of political power to rule as the representative of and in the interest of a majority that is not of overwhelming proportions. A large minority is excluded from power and condemned to the role of opposition.

2. Fusion of power and cabinet dominance. In his enduring classic, *The English Constitution*, first published in 1867, Walter Bagehot states that “the close union, the nearly complete fusion of the executive and legislative powers” is the key explanation of the efficient operation of the British government.⁷ Britain has a parliamentary system of government, which means that the cabinet is dependent on the confidence of Parliament—in contrast with a presidential system of government, exemplified by the United States, in which the presidential executive cannot normally be removed by the legislature (except by impeach-

row Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 13.

7. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: World's Classics, 1955), p. 9.