Types of Political Systems

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Doc. Marek Rybář, PhD.
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Normative basis of democratic government

- 1. governing must be linked to elections
- 2. government is constrained by constitutional limits (vertical and horizontal accountability)
- Government in representative democracies may take several forms, the most common are presidentialism, parliamentarism and semi-presidentialism

Parliamentarism 1/2

- Is a system in which:
- 1. there is a head of government distinct from the head of state; the head of government is elected by the parliament and accountable to it
- 2. the terms of the executive and of the parliament are not fixed, they are mutually dependent

Parliamentarism 2/2

- The executive without a parliamentary support will normally resign; the cabinet often has the power to dissolve the parliament and to call for new parliamentary elections

- "an almost complete fusion of executive and legislative powers"; members of the executive are typically recruited among the most senior members of parliament, i.e. they simultaneously hold positions in the two bodies

Presidentialism 1/2

- Is a system where

- 1. president is simultaneously the head of government and the head of state, s/he is directly elected; and

- 2. the terms in office of the president and the parliament are fixed and not connected (a system of mutual independence)

Presidentialism 2/2

- The executive led by president cannot dissolve the legislature and and call the new elections; the legislature may not remove the president

- Presidentialism is a system of mutual independence of the two branches of power

- Members of parliament may not simultaneously hold executive positions (strict separation of powers)

Semipresidential systems

- It is the arrangement with a president directly elected for a fixed term, AND with a prime minister and his/her cabinet accountable to the parliament

- Originally, M. Duverger (1980) also added that the president had to have "quite considerable powers", this feature is now abandoned in favour of a purely institutional understanding of the concept

Directorial form of government

- It exists only in Switzerland
- The executive (the so-called Federal Council) is composed of seven persons, each of them individually elected by a joint decisions of the two chambers of parliament
- The term of the Federal Council is fixed, it overlaps with the term of the parliament
- However, it is not accountable to the parliament and cannot be voted out of the office

Directly elected Prime Minister

- A short-lived system that existed in Israel between 1996 and 2003

- Prime Minister was directly elected by all voters in a majority runoff system (simultaneously with parliamentary elections)

- the PM and his government was accountable to Parliament, in case of successful no confidence motion, early elections were to be held

Differences among parliamentary systems

- The extent to which parliament is "rationalized" is the key explanatory factor:

- How difficult *de facto* is it for the parliament to pass a vote of no confidence to the cabinet?

- To what extent does the government control the parliamentary agenda?

- How difficult is it for MPs to submit "private member's bills"?

- It all depends on the so-called party discipline

Single-party majority cabinets 1/2

- The UK as a typical example

- With an absolute majority in the House of Commons, cabinet formation is straightforward, since party discipline is imposed (a CP majority of 365 out of 650 seats in 2019 elections)

- The opposition forms a shadow cabinet, a future government-in-waiting, and hopes to win the next parliamentary elections
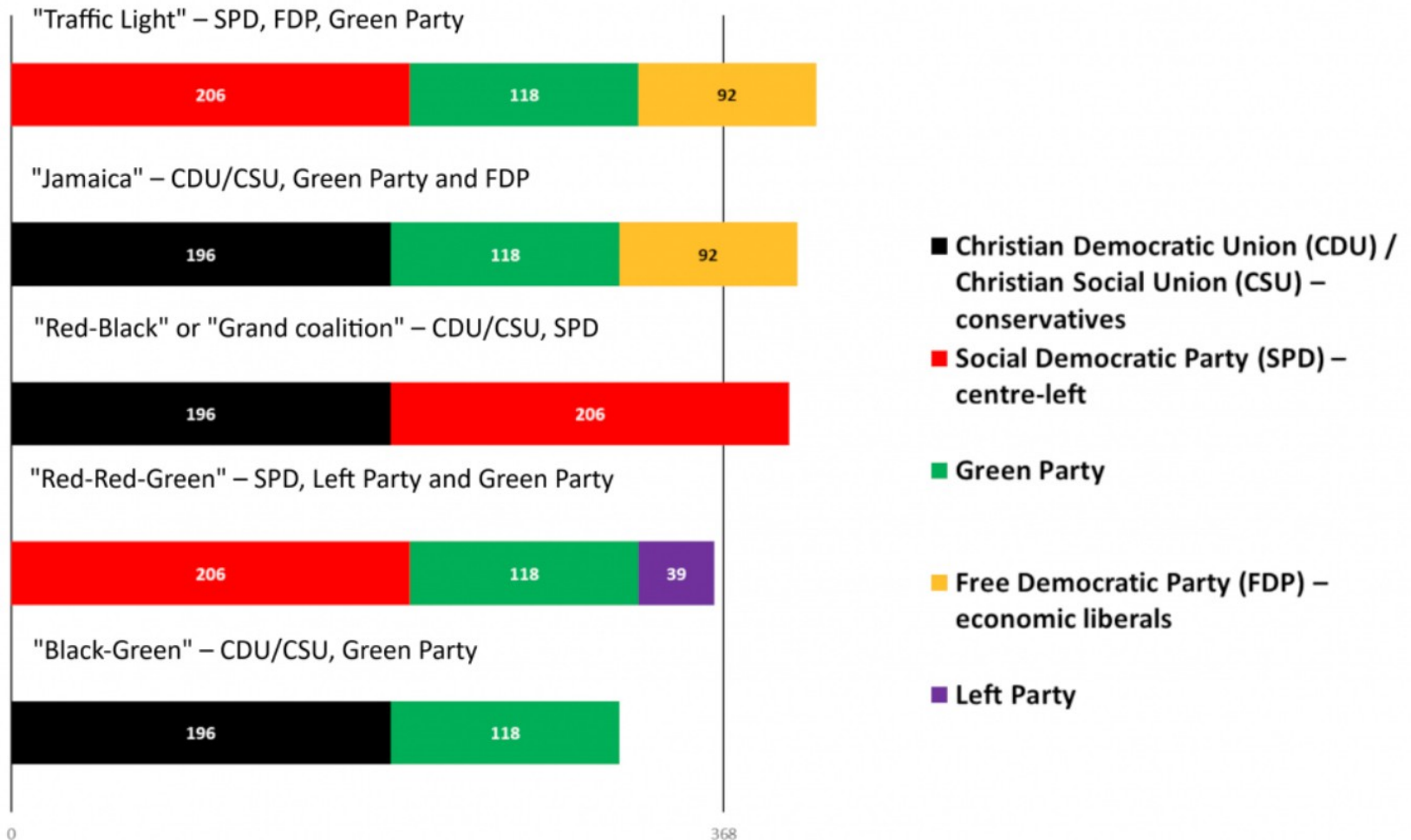
Single-party majority cabinets 2/2

- The norm of collective responsibility, a uniquely British doctrine: all members of the cabinet must support the official line

- In a vote of no confidence, MPs vote along strictly party line (the role of party whip)

- The executive is not omnipotent: it must contend with powerful interest groups outside parliament and must also consider the wishes of party backbenchers

Minimal-winning cabinets 1/2

- In most parliamentary systems, no party controls a parliamentary majority

- One possibility is to form coalition government with as many parties cooperating as are necessary to form a coalition to attain a majority in parliament

- Germany after 2017 elections: SPD 206, CDU/CSU 196, the Greens 118, FDP 92, AfD 78, the Left 39, (total 709 parliamentary seats)

- 355 seats needed to form the MWC

Minimal-winning cabinets 2/2

Majority of seats in parliament

"Traffic Light" – SPD, FDP, Green Party

| 206 | 118 | 92 |

"Jamaica" – CDU/CSU, Green Party and FDP

| 196 | 118 | 92 |

"Red-Black" or "Grand coalition" – CDU/CSU, SPD

| 196 | 206 |

"Red-Red-Green" – SPD, Left Party and Green Party

| 206 | 118 | 39 |

"Black-Green" – CDU/CSU, Green Party

| 196 | 118 |

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- Christian Democratic Union (CDU) / Christian Social Union (CSU) – conservatives
- Social Democratic Party (SPD) – centre-left
- Green Party
- Free Democratic Party (FDP) – economic liberals
- Left Party

Oversized cabinets 1/2

- Include more parties than are necessary to attain a parliamentary majority

- Switzerland: four largest parties form a 7-member Federal Council and divide the seats along the so-called "magic formula" 2:2:2:1

- The logic is not that all four parties agree on a common program but rather that all should be represented when the Federal Council makes its decisions

- If no consensus is reached, a majority voting will decide

Oversized cabinets 2/2

- Oversized cabinets are often established when societies are fragmented on religious, linguistic or ethno-regional grounds

- The idea is to allow each group to participate in the political process

- More often created in times of war, during economic crises or in the wake of cataclysmic political events

Minority cabinets 1/2

- When the party (or parties) forming the cabinet does not possess a majority of parliamentary seats

- Frequent in Spain and Scandinavian countries, especially in Sweden, Denmark and Norway

- After the 2021 Canadian elections, a single-party minority government of the Liberal Party was formed (160 seats)

- It was 10 seats short of a parliamentary majority

Minority cabinets 2/2

- Occupying the ideological centre and dividing the opposition

- Policy-oriented rather than office-seeking politicians

- Anticipated voter reactions restrict office-seeking behaviour

Caretaker cabinets

- Sometimes it takes quite a long time for a coalition government to be put together

- In such cases, the old cabinet stays in office as caretaker cabinet

- It handles everyday business but cannot take major initiatives

- Following the 2020 Slovak elections, a majority government was formed but one party left it and joined the opposition to pass a vote of no confidence in 2022

- the cabinet stays in office until early elections

Differences among presidential systems

- Contrast the case of the US presidentialism and many Latin American presidential systems:
- Two-party vs. multiparty format
- Strong constitutional prerogatives of the US presidents vs. not-always-so-strong Latin American ones
- Weak horizontal accountability in Latin America vs. strong horizontal accountability in the US

Are parliamentary systems better?

- Cheibub a Limongi (2002):
- differences in the survival of presidential and parliamentary systems cannot be derived from the way they are constituted
- Deadlocks are not so common in presidential systems; they also exists in parliamentarism
- coalition governments also exist in presidentialism

Are parliamentary systems better?

- the key to effective governance is the **centralization** of decision-making and the **monopolization** of the legislative agenda, otherwise there is a risk of a lack of coordination and "stalemate"

- centralized decision-making more common in parliamentarism, but not always (France and Italy as ineffective parliamentarisms in the past, and conversely Brazil as an example of effective multiparty presidentialism)

Are parliamentary systems better?

- there are no guarantees that the president will have support of a parliamentary majority in **presidentialism**

- parliamentarism is a system in which the establishment and continuation of government is conditional on the consent of parliament

- however, minority governments are common in parliamentary systems

Legislative success of governments

- In parliamentarism, majority and minority governments have roughly the same legislative success rate of around 83%,

- while presidents with a majority support have a success rate of 67.5%

- and presidents without a majority support have a success rate of 62.2%

Presidents and multipartism 1/4

- in Latin America (1979-2006), only two presidentialisms with a two-party system - Mexico and Costa Rica; the rest had multi-party systems

- coalitions necessary for the functioning of the system

- coalitions in presidentialism are different from parliamentarism: the president is the de facto permanent *formateur* who tries to put together coalitions to push through legislative proposals

Presidents and multipartism 2/4

- cabinet posts and other appointments
- "*pork*" and
- *policy* concessions
- these are often more important than ideology and party identity of the MPs who support the president

Presidents and multipartism 3/4

- strong constitutional powers of the President to be able to sustain the initiative and ward off potential counter-proposals from the opposition

- Latin American experience suggests that constitutionally weak presidents cannot govern effectively in multiparty parliaments

Presidents and multipartism 4/4

- But that does not mean a *blank cheque* from parliament or a usurpation of powers by the president

- at the same time, there are strong control mechanisms for parliament, the courts, the prosecutor's office, etc., including against the president

- all branches of government must be effective and strong

Policy implications of government systems 1/2

- Gerring et al (2009): parliamentary systems have visible advantages over semi/presidential systems in a number of aspects

- Examines only democratic regimes and their impact:

- Political development (corruption, quality of bureaucracy, political stability, rule of law)

- economic development (GDP per capita, infrastructure, level of investment)

Policy implications
of government systems 2/2

- parliamentarism is positively related to a range of outcome indicators, suggesting its cumulative effect on governance
- parliamentarism is probably better able to function as a tool for coordination