

The book ends with a guide to further reading in which we provide detailed suggestions for those who want to extend their understanding beyond the material contained in this book. To document our assertions, chapters do contain traditional references to sources, but these are generally kept to a minimum. Additional sources are listed in the guide to further reading. When actual research findings are reproduced in our text, the sources are documented in notes to the tables and figures concerned.

Chapter 2

Studying Elections, Parties and Voters

This is a book about voters, politicians, parties (sometimes referred to as 'actors') and electoral politics (sometimes seen as the 'stage' upon which these actors perform). In it we see elections as providing a sort of ritualized encounter in which voters engage politicians and parties. In order to understand the nature of these encounters, we need to describe how they fit into the wider political system – by which we mean both the institutions of government and the party system (electoral systems are described in Chapter 3). So first we will distinguish three fundamental types of institutional context on the basis of the differences in these characteristics. Subsequently we will argue that these wider contexts and the largely institutionalized ways in which elections are conducted provide the opportunity for learning to take place and habits to form, both for voters and for parties.

The political context: party systems

Elections are about choice, but in different countries voters have more or less choice depending on the nature of the party system. The US has a two-party system. Those parties have changed in character over the course of history, and other parties have competed successfully in American elections; but since 1912 there has been no presidential candidate with a realistic chance of winning who was neither a Democrat nor a Republican, and no minor party has won seats in the Congress since the 1920s (occasionally a seat is won by an 'independent'). Today, and for most of the past century, at American elections voters have had a choice between just two parties. So, at each election, if one party does not win the presidency then the other one must. The same applies to each of the houses of Congress.

However, the US is just about the only established democracy with a party system that can reasonably be characterized as a two-party system. In other established democracies voters almost invariably have more choice. Even in countries such as Britain and Canada, which are sometimes thought of as two-party systems because one or other of only two parties generally forms a majority one-party government, voters do have additional parties to

choose from. These might be called ‘effectively two party’ systems. Sometimes they are known as two-and-a-half party systems (Blondel 1972; cf. Sartori 2005), but this is misleading. In Britain, for example, there are currently 11 parties represented in Parliament, and most voters have a choice between four or five parties running candidates in their *constituency* (what Americans would call a *district*). The system is effectively a two-party system because the minor parties receive very few votes (and very few seats), not because there are few minor parties.

Then there are genuinely multiparty systems, which exist in most other established democracies. In multiparty systems it is not common for any one party to win a majority of the seats in the legislature, so parties have to cooperate in forming coalition governments – though in some countries, such as Sweden and Spain, the largest party is frequently large enough to govern alone, sometimes as a minority government with tacit support from other parties. In multiparty systems voters have the choice between more than two genuine contenders for government power. Sometimes as many as five or more parties are potential members of a governing coalition, depending on the outcome of an election.

The concept generally employed to distinguish between these different types of multiparty system is the concept of *fractionalization* or the *effective number of parties*.¹ In an effectively two-party system fractionalization is low because most people are voting for just two parties. As the effective number of parties increases so fractionalization increases because more votes are going to the smaller parties. Even in genuinely multiparty systems the extent of fractionalization is of interest in distinguishing systems with relatively few true contenders for government power (like the Netherlands or today’s Poland) from countries like Poland during the early 1990s or France during the Fourth Republic (1946–58) when most parties were very small.

Party systems are shaped by political entrepreneurs (politicians, especially party leaders) who react to the opportunities provided by different electoral systems in the context of different historical traditions and social settings. Generally, where there is demand for a particular type of party such a party will be provided; but whether that party will be successful electorally depends not only on the number of people voting for it but also on the rules of the electoral game. On the whole, countries that have few successful parties do so because the system penalizes additional parties by means of what we will see are effectively high costs of entry.

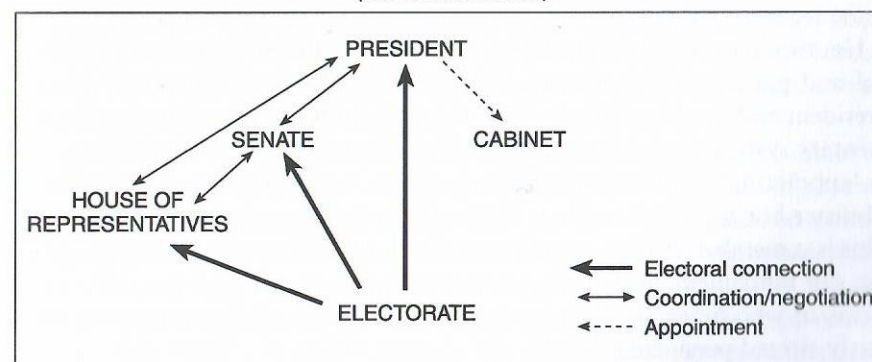
So established democracies can be divided into three types. These are distinguished, first, according to whether they are presidential or parliamentary (with the US presidential system constituting a type of its own) and, second, among parliamentary systems, whether they are essentially two-party systems or genuinely multiparty systems. We will first explore the difference between presidential and parliamentary regimes.

The institutional context: presidential versus parliamentary

In presidential systems the Chief Executive is directly elected. In parliamentary democracies the executive – which is not a single person but the entire cabinet – is elected indirectly. Among established democracies there is only one true presidential system: the US. Exploring the difference between parliamentary and presidential systems is therefore also to explore the differences between the US and other established democracies. We have already in the previous chapter introduced one fundamental respect in which the US differs from other countries – that of the lack of party discipline and the corresponding failure of US elections to be as policy-oriented as they are elsewhere. What we have to say here about the differences between parliamentary and presidential systems of government helps to explain that distinction but also adds additional detail that helps to explain American idiosyncrasies.

The easiest way to picture the difference between a presidential and a parliamentary system is in terms of two diagrams. The presidential system is very straightforward in democratic terms. As shown in Figure 2.1, candidates for each office are elected directly by the people. Leaving aside minor complications such as that provided by the US Electoral College (see Box 1.1), one can picture the electorate as a body of people with direct links to the President (the executive) as well as to the legislature, which is generally referred to as the Congress (House of Representatives and Senate).² One component of the government is not linked directly to the electorate: this is the cabinet (and the bureaucracy that is directed by it), which is appointed by the President and is answerable to him. The picture is complicated mainly because there are so many elected institutions. Thus, the diagram shows arrows from the electorate to the House, to the Senate, and to the President.

Figure 2.1 *Electoral and other linkages in a presidential system (the United States)*

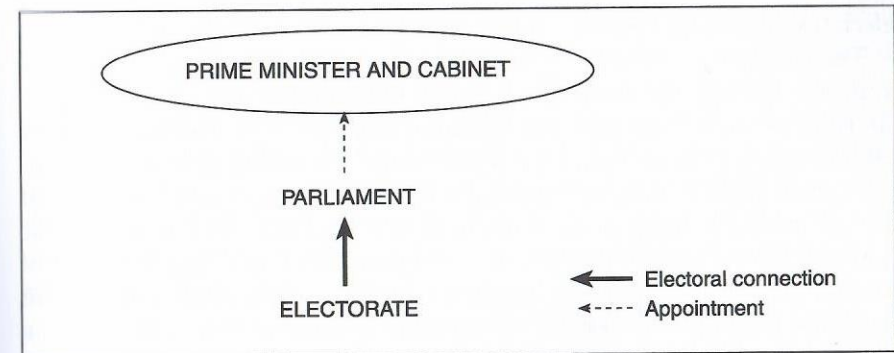


In addition to these arrows that show the electoral connection to each office, a number of double-headed arrows represent coordination activities – the negotiations that need to be conducted between President and Senate, between President and House of Representatives, and between House of Representatives and Senate, in order to produce a bill that can be passed by both houses of Congress and signed by the President. Though the concepts are really simple, there are a lot of arrows. Each arrow represents a relationship that has to be studied and understood in order to understand how the government functions and what role is played by elections in such a system.

If we turn to the parliamentary system we see a picture (Figure 2.2) that is conceptually more difficult to understand, but organizationally much simpler. As in the case of the US we start with an electorate and this electorate elects a legislative body – the Parliament. Some parliamentary systems are unicameral, which means they only have one house containing directly elected representatives (these individuals are known by various names in different countries but in this book we will refer to them all as elected representatives – or representatives for short). Just as the US has a bicameral legislature, so do certain parliamentary systems; but in contrast to the US the ‘upper’ house in parliamentary systems generally has significantly fewer powers than the lower house (and, more importantly, it is subject to discipline by the same political parties). Moreover, the electorate does not generally elect the upper house directly in parliamentary systems. Therefore only the lower house needs to be pictured here. The executive (the government) is chosen by parliament, not by the people. So when the people elect a parliament they are indirectly electing an executive also. Sometimes this is a completely automatic process. If one party wins a majority of the seats in the Parliament that party will form the executive and the party’s leader will become the head of the government, the Prime Minister (at such times parliaments act just like the American electoral college – see Box 1.1 – translating the will of the voters automatically into a choice of executive). When no single party wins a majority of the seats in the Parliament, the mechanism by which the Parliament chooses an executive is more complicated, but we will come back to that later.

Here we have to stress another fundamental difference between presidential and parliamentary systems. In a presidential system the people elect a president and he or she appoints a cabinet to direct the executive. In a parliamentary system, by contrast, it is the Parliament that plays the primary role in ‘appointing’ the Prime Minister – indeed it ‘appoints’ not only the Prime Minister but the whole cabinet. ‘Prime Minister’ just means ‘first minister’. This is a member of the cabinet who is more important than other members but not fundamentally different in terms of how he or she is recruited or in terms of who he or she is answerable to. Prime ministers are not just indirectly elected presidents.

Figure 2.2 *Electoral and other linkages in a parliamentary system*



So the diagram shows the Parliament appointing a cabinet which is led by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is thus an integral part of the cabinet but plays a major role in choosing its other members. In practice the Prime Minister and cabinet are selected as a team. In the case of a one-party cabinet, the Prime Minister will be the leader of the party and will generally have been so long before an election took place. So, when voters place a parliamentary majority in the hands of one party, they know who their Prime Minister will be – though the exact identity of the other members of the cabinet may not be known and will to some extent be a matter for negotiation between the Prime Minister and other Members of Parliament.

In a parliamentary system, once a government has been chosen, the coordination problems which make up such a big part of politics in America do not exist as such (there are no double-headed arrows in Figure 2.2). Another way of saying this is that the American system has a dual chain of command rather than a single one (Strøm 2000). As long as a cabinet has the confidence of the Parliament, the Parliament will support that cabinet, its policies and its legislative proposals. Should there be a serious difference of opinion one of two things will normally happen. Either some accommodation will be reached or the cabinet will resign and a new one will be appointed (perhaps after new elections) that does have the confidence of the Parliament. Because of this, no arrow is required in the diagram to represent coordination between parliament and cabinet.

This is the primary consequence of a system in which the cabinet is appointed by the Parliament: the executive and legislative branches of government (cabinet and parliament, respectively) will generally agree on policy. However, the primary role of the Parliament is to oversee the operations of the government, acting as a sort of stand-in for the electorate. It is as though, in the period between elections, the electorate had delegated its legitimating powers to the Parliament. In the unlikely case of serious disagreement between

parliament and government, parliament withdraws its support thus forcing a change in the composition of the government (and thus of its policies) or new elections, after which the new parliament appoints a new cabinet.³

This brings us to a final contrast between parliamentary and presidential systems. Though the presidential system provides no way of resolving an impasse between President and Congress other than by holding elections, elections in the US are held on a fixed timetable established in the constitution: the Congress every two years, the President every four. So, in the event of an insoluble disagreement between the President and Congress the country will experience real gridlock – not just the minor inconvenience of an inability to agree on some legislative proposal – and might have to wait until the next election for an opportunity to resolve it. In the American system, an impasse of this kind cannot be resolved by replacing the cabinet (because the President cannot be replaced between elections) or by calling an early election (because the system does not allow for such an eventuality).

Of course, even in parliamentary systems, because the circumstances that would bring about an early election are well known, and because the likely outcome of an election is also generally knowable (from opinion polls), it is quite rare in practice that insoluble conflicts arise between government and parliament. A famous book by a retired British cabinet minister (Morrison 1954) contains a chapter entitled ‘How Government and Parliament Live Together Or Die’. Early elections are nevertheless quite common and often originate from insoluble conflicts within the government itself (Gallagher *et al.* 2005). The government generally proposes policies that it hopes will in due course bring support from voters, and the Parliament goes along with these proposals on the same basis. Only in the event of grave lack of judgment on someone’s part (Prime Minister or Members of Parliament) does the scenario sketched out above play out, with the government being defeated in parliament on a crucial issue or a vote of no confidence, leading to a new government or new elections being called. But because this is the ultimate resort that keeps the system running without coordination problems, the voter has an importance in parliamentary systems that is ordinarily lacking in the US. This is actually somewhat paradoxical since it has been shown that election outcomes have a stronger impact in terms of changing the executive in presidential systems (Maravall 2008). But the problem in presidential systems is that replacing the executive does not, on its own, necessarily result in the implementation of policies that the voters want. A new president still has to deal with a congress whose political complexion is often unchanged (see Box 2.3 on Mexican politics).

The fact that in most parliamentary systems new elections can be called at short notice has a number of other consequences, some of them quite surprising. A primary consequence is that parties must hold themselves ready for the possibility that an early election will be called. This means that every

party must to some extent keep its party platform and lists of candidates updated. Early elections do not provide parties with sufficient time to hold a party conference (what Americans would call a ‘convention’) in which a platform of campaign promises can be put together. For this reason it is normal for parties in parliamentary regimes to hold party conferences annually (some hold them every six months) so as to ensure that they are constantly ready for the possibility of an early election. The frequency of party conferences also means that various party offices have to be constantly manned. Party organizations in parliamentary regimes cannot be allowed to fall into disarray, as frequently happens in the US during the four years that pass between party conventions.

Indeed, the leaders of the various parties in a parliamentary system find it quite easy to stay in the public eye, since they all have roles in parliament. Moreover, the frequency of party conferences also ensures that parties have regular opportunities to present publicly their policies, which is one of the reasons why elections in these countries are more policy oriented than in the US. Because policies are better known there is also a larger premium on continuity. A party dare not make an unprepared major change to its program for fear of losing credibility and/or confusing its voters. Keeping roughly the same program and only incrementally adapting it, convention after convention, election after election, ensures that, even though the voters are not paying any more attention to politics than they do in the US, there is not the same need for a long campaign to bring a party’s policies and candidates to the attention of voters. In the US, the long gap between party conventions, together with the fact that a party can adopt as candidate for high office someone that most voters have never heard of, allows American parties much more flexibility in coming up with candidates and election platforms that break with past tradition (and thereby try to avoid blame for past failures); but this adaptability is one reason why American voters are less aware of what these platforms contain.

On the other hand, the very fact that European voters do know (and are attached to) their parties’ policy positions makes it hard for policy-oriented parties to change drastically their existing policies or to take new policies on board, since they can lose support in the process. In multiparty systems this rigidity of policy-oriented parties is largely balanced by the ease with which new parties can arise to propose policies that established parties are ignoring, but in two-party (or quasi-two-party) parliamentary systems like the British it is also difficult for new parties to gain support, so the political system can prove quite resistant to new ideas. Environmental policies, for example, were more slowly adopted in Britain than in the US or Germany. And the change that led the British Labour Party to start referring to itself as ‘New Labour’ in the 1997 parliamentary elections in Britain actually took more than 20 years to accomplish (and a major split in the party in the early 1980s).

The fact that US parties can quite easily change their policy orientations also makes it easier for new issues to come onto the policy agenda and provides one reason why new parties find it hard to get a foothold. New political parties are generally founded on an issue that existing parties are neglecting (as happened in Germany with the foundation of the Green Party). This does happen in the US, but if newcomers have some degree of success it is easy for the major parties to simply adopt the policy that was proving successful, thus pulling the rug out from under any new party that was founded to promote that policy. In the US, three-party battles over policy have been relatively rare, though one such battle occurred in 1992 when Ross Perot ran for President as a third-party candidate, opposing the North American Free Trade Agreement and promoting a balanced budget.

Another mechanism by which new policies enter the agenda of American politics is through individual candidates trying out new ideas on an individual basis in their election campaigns. This entrepreneurship on the part of individual candidates ironically contributes to the difficulty of having policy-centered elections in a country where a party's candidates for different offices do not speak with the same voice. In the US each individual candidate has to make himself or herself known to potential voters, incidentally giving enormous advantages to politicians who already hold elected office (incumbent politicians); each individual candidate is generally considered to be the best judge of what message to put before his or her prospective voters. In parliamentary systems it is the party that is responsible for getting out its message, and there is less room for individual candidates to define their own policy platforms. The primary expectation in a parliamentary system is that candidates associate themselves with the program of their party and promise to work hard for its implementation.

Problems of parliamentary government: single-party versus coalition governments

From all of the above the parliamentary system of government may sound like a pretty good system; and, broadly speaking, so it is. It is not by accident that the US is the only presidential system among the 22 countries that have held elections continuously since World War II (though the important role given to voters is not the only reason successful democracies have preferred the parliamentary system). One of the most renowned American analysts of democracy, Robert Dahl, has repeatedly listed a large number of arguments against the adoption of an American-style presidential system by countries involved in a transformation of their systems to representative democracy (Dahl 2002).

The parliamentary system does, however, have a major complication. What happens when, after an election, no single party commands a majority of seats in the Parliament (called a 'hung parliament')? The answer is different in different countries; and some parliamentary systems handle the problem more gracefully than others. Nevertheless, every parliamentary regime is threatened with the possibility that parliament cannot agree on a cabinet, and new elections do not solve the problem. For a variety of reasons the potential for such a crisis is seldom realized in practice.

Some countries minimize the possibility of a hung parliament by employing an electoral system that magnifies the winner's margin to the point of manufacturing an absolute majority of parliamentary seats for the leading party even should that party fail to win a majority of the votes cast. This electoral system (generally referred to as the 'first past the post' or FPTP electoral system and which is used mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries) has the disadvantage, however, of frequently producing governments that do not represent the majority of voters (see Box 2.1 on the British election of 2005). And even though an advantage is given to the winning party in such systems,

Box 2.1 The British general election of 2005

In the British general election of 2005 the Labour party won an historic third consecutive term in office. The party acquired 35.2 per cent of the valid votes cast, which gave it 356 seats in the House of Commons, that is 55.1 per cent of the total of 646 seats. Here is a summary of the election results:

	Votes (%)	Seats (no.)	Seats (%)
Labour	35.2	356	55.1
Conservatives	32.4	198	30.7
Liberal Democrats	22.0	62	9.6
All other parties combined	10.4	30	4.6

Turnout was 61.3 per cent, which implies that the Labour vote amounted to no more than 21.5 per cent of the population of voting age, a record low for British general elections since World War II. During the 1950s the winning party represented approximately 38 per cent of the voting age population, a share that declined to somewhat over 30 per cent in the subsequent period up until 1997, but then fell further to 24 per cent in 2001 and 21.5 per cent in 2005 (cf. Rallings and Thrasher 2007). The FPTP electoral system gives the largest party a larger share of seats than its proportion of votes. Combined with the lower turnout that is a feature of FPTP countries (Franklin 2004), this results in the proportion of the population supporting the winning party falling far below 50 per cent.

this advantage is not guaranteed to be enough to give that party a majority of seats in the Parliament. A hung parliament is still possible even with FPTP elections, and such an outcome generally (three times during the 20th century in Britain) gives rise to a minority government – a government supported by less than a majority of the seats in the Parliament – that exists on the sufferance of other parties and which usually has to call early elections when that sufferance wears thin. In such circumstances the existence of a viable government rests in the hands of parties who are not part of the government and who must show restraint if any government at all is to be carried on. This is not a satisfactory state of affairs, though it is one that Britain and several of its former colonies managed fairly gracefully on those few occasions when it became necessary.

In countries where the electoral system attempts to allocate seats to parties in proportion to the votes cast for each party (so called ‘proportional’ or PR systems used in many continental European countries) it is rare for an election to result in one party gaining a majority of seats in the Parliament. In those countries it is usual for the parliamentary election to be followed by a period of uncertainty as parties court each other as potential partners in a *coalition government*. After a good deal of bargaining a deal is generally struck and a government is formed consisting of two or more parties which have been able to agree on a program of government activity and which between them control a majority of the seats in the Parliament. This system also relies on restraint. Parties must be willing to give up some of their campaign promises and to compromise with other parties on a program of legislation in which all of them find only some of their desired policies included. The process is complicated by the need to make the compromise palatable, which takes time, both at the level of party members and at the mass level of voters who supported the parties in question. A party that too easily compromises on its campaign promises will be seen as ‘selling out’, risking punishment at the next election. But a party can also be seen as too intransigent, also risking loss of support if it is seen as squandering its chances of government participation and of getting at least some of its desired policies enacted – let alone if it is seen as endangering the governability of the country (see Box 2.2).

The process of coalition formation is often a messy one as parties seek the delicate balance between giving way too easily and standing too long on principle. And the outcome of the process can be quite disappointing to voters who supported a party on account of a particular policy that is dropped in the coalition bargaining process.

The often lengthy periods of time between an election and the inauguration of a new government, and the fact that the policies of such a government are indeterminate at the time of an election, is the basis for critiques of PR from supporters and opponents alike. On the other hand, even opponents

Box 2.2 Government formation in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands parties usually keep their cards close to their chest when it comes to the parties with whom they would be willing to form a coalition. As a consequence, the construction of a coalition only starts after the results of a parliamentary election are known. Because parliamentary power is rather fragmented there are – at least in numerical terms – usually multiple possibilities for constructing a majority. Even when taking into account considerations of ideological homogeneity and a desire to keep the number of participating parties to a minimum, there are commonly still several different possibilities. The largest party in parliament is allowed the first try at putting together a workable coalition. This involves several rounds of interparty consultation. Even if this first attempt is successful, it commonly takes up to three months to hammer out a programmatic policy agreement and to recruit a team that is willing to implement it and of which the members are not at each others’ throats. There is no guarantee, however, that the first try will be successful, and additional iterations may well be required. Until a new coalition government has been sworn in, the old government acts as a caretaker but is expected not to take major new policy initiatives.

Since World War II, the average period involved in coalition formation was 85 days (excluding caretaker governments), with a range from 31 days in 1948 to 208 days in 1977 (Andeweg and Irwin 2009).

concede one desirable property of PR elections: far more than in FPTP elections every vote counts and does so equally. In FPTP elections, a district in which one candidate wins by a landslide is a district in which many of the votes were unnecessary. Knowing that one of the candidates in an FPTP election is far ahead in the polls discourages both supporters and opponents from voting, giving rise to the so-called ‘wasted vote syndrome’. And even if a district is closely fought, the votes for the losing parties are effectively wasted. In PR elections this does not happen. Every vote goes towards electing a candidate from one party or another, and every vote above the number needed to elect one candidate for a party goes towards electing another candidate for the same party. PR systems usually see higher turnouts than FPTP systems, and it is generally assumed that the fact that every vote counts in PR systems is the reason for this. Moreover, most PR systems manage successfully to produce effective governments election after election, often with the help of elaborate procedures that have evolved over the years to guide politicians to an acceptable compromise in a reasonable length of time. We will describe some of these procedures in the next chapter.

Though PR systems are often criticized for the indeterminacy that results from the coalition bargaining phase of the process, as with other aspects of parliamentary democracy parties have it in their power to mitigate this problem. Indeed, the entire coalition bargaining process can be virtually eliminated if groups of parties make pre-election pacts or alliances, agreeing with each other beforehand to form a coalition government should they receive sufficient seats in the legislature, and agreeing beforehand on the policies that such a coalition government would pursue. When this is done, the electoral process resembles that in countries where single-party governments are the norm. Voters are able to cast their votes for particular parties knowing what policies would be pursued if those parties (together with their announced coalition allies) were to win the majority of seats in the Parliament. In such elections the uncertainties that result from the coalition bargaining stage in PR elections are considerably reduced. Such situations have occasionally occurred in countries where a successful coalition government asks the voters for a continued lease on life as a team. It has also occasionally happened that a non-incumbent coalition has proposed itself to the voters, as happened in Italy in 2008, in Germany in 1998, in the Netherlands in 1972, and regularly in Norway.

Problems of presidential systems

Aside from the US, there are seven or eight new democracies (or new semi-democracies like Russia) that are presidential, and several more in Latin America. A number of countries in Africa and Asia that started out as parliamentary systems rewrote their constitutions to become presidential systems.

Presidential systems are actually quite common among new democracies, transitional democracies and shaky democracies. This is because properly functioning parliamentary systems depend on many people observing rather intricate *rules of the game*. Countries without considerable experience of self-government in one form or another are often thought to be better off with a presidential system, not least because such countries often have fluid and fragmented party systems which defy the prerequisites of parliamentary government. A presidential system virtually guarantees that there will always be a government because the President is directly elected by the people and there does not have to be a legislative majority in support of any one set of policies in order for the government to be carried on. Unfortunately, these governments are often not very functional. Because the legislature does not have to get its act together in order to appoint the executive, there is no guarantee that it will ever get its act together; yet this is required for the enactment of legislation. As a consequence, it may be exceedingly difficult for a president to get any legislation enacted at all.

So presidential systems are liable to gridlock, and even at the best of times are quite unresponsive to public opinion. The separation of powers in a presidential system means that the will of a regular majority in the legislature can easily be blocked, as happens in the US. Moreover, the advantage enjoyed by incumbent politicians means that when political change takes place it is quite likely to take place in one branch of the government (House, Senate or President) but not in more than one of the other branches. So a newly constituted majority can find it very hard to get its policies enacted (as was the case for Vicente Fox in Mexico – see Box 2.3). Only when change results in the presidency and both houses of congress coming under the control of the same political party is it at all easy for electoral change to result in policy change – something that only happened eight times during the entire 20th century in the US, a period during which there were no fewer than 20 occasions when political power moved from one party to another in at least one house of Congress or the presidency.

Box 2.3 Mexican politics after the election of Vicente Fox

In Mexico in 1999 a candidate for president was elected who, for the first time in the history of the republic, was not a member of the previously ruling PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party). Vicente Fox was the candidate for the PAN (National Action Party), and he won a comfortable victory in the presidential election. However, his party did not have any chance of gaining a majority in the Mexican House of Deputies, so he found himself facing a legislature that was still dominated by the PRI – the party that had governed Mexico for over 70 years. In this situation it was virtually impossible for him to carry out his legislative program and voters who had supported him hoping for a new dawn in Mexican politics were quite disappointed.

Government formation

We have already noted the fact that, whereas parliamentary elections decide – directly or indirectly – who will run the government and also what policies the government will be able to pursue, presidential elections in the US decide only who will run the government. Who runs the government does of course influence the nature of the policies made by that government, but not in any definitive fashion, as we will see later in this chapter.

Talking about the differences between the two sorts of system is complicated by a difference in vocabulary. Americans use the word ‘government’ to talk about the full complement of people who man both houses of Congress

(and their aides) as well as the whole executive branch. They use the word 'administration' to talk about the members of the executive who get their jobs as a consequence of a new president taking office, and the bureaucracy that is directed by those appointees. In parliamentary systems, on the other hand, the word 'government' refers to what Americans would call 'administration': the cabinet together with the bureaucracy directed by that cabinet (including many who held the same jobs under the previous government). There is no easy way to overcome this disjunction since the government in a parliamentary system includes the whole of the bureaucracy and also extends to cabinet members who are elected members of the Parliament. But since we have no need to refer to the entire apparatus of government in any country we will use the words 'administration' and 'government' interchangeably to refer to the executive branch of government in both types of system. A similar linguistic confusion attends the name given to a member of a governing cabinet who in parliamentary systems is referred to as a 'minister' but in the US is referred to as a 'secretary'. We will refer to such individuals as 'cabinet members' in both types of system.

In the US, the number of people who will change jobs with a change of administration is vastly greater than the number who will change jobs with a change of government in other countries. In the US literally thousands of individuals lose their jobs when there is a change of administration following a presidential election.⁴ These large numbers start with the cabinet members themselves, who are not generally recruited from the Congress (which in any case would require them to resign their seats) and so retain no role in the government of the country when they cease to be cabinet members. But the numbers of individuals who lose their jobs following a change of government in the US – individuals who in other countries would be civil servants – is vastly greater than this, since each new cabinet member expects to appoint every member of his or her department with any responsibility for policy-making: some 4,000 in all. Indirectly, the election decides who all these people are. But the election does not decide policy. Policy only starts to be decided as all these thousands of new faces find their offices, make their connections, pick up the work of their departments and start to build the relationships with Congress and with congressional lobbyists that will be needed in order for legislation to be enacted.

In parliamentary regimes things are different. There a new government takes office with a flurry of movement that looks a bit like a game of musical chairs, as members of parliament who were cabinet members in the old government lose their plush offices and chauffeur-driven limousines to return to their roles as simple members of parliament, giving way to a different set of cabinet members in the new government. In some of these countries a small number of ministerial aides may also lose their jobs to be replaced by aides to the newly appointed cabinet members, but we are talking of a few

dozen individuals at most – not thousands. Where one party wins a majority it takes office immediately, often within 24 hours (see Box 2.4). Much the same is true in cases where victory goes to a preannounced coalition of parties with preannounced policies. In these cases the new cabinet is often in place within weeks and policy starts to be made immediately as veteran civil servants are briefed on the policies of the new government. In such cases the impact of the election on policy is palpable and virtually instantaneous. In cases where one party (or a preannounced coalition) does not win a majority of the seats in the legislature there will often be a significant delay between the election and its policy consequences, as parties bargain with each other and try to find a combination of parties and policies that will yield a majority in the legislature, together with a program of legislation acceptable to all coalition members (see Box 2.2 on government formation in the Netherlands). But still it is rare for this to take as long as the nine months that regularly elapses in the US between the announcement of a presidential election outcome and the date when a new administration is fully in place.

Box 2.4 A transfer of power in Britain

On 2 May 1997 Labour came to power after a prolonged period of Conservative rule under Prime Ministers Thatcher and Major. The results became known early in the night, and the Prime Minister – Conservative John Major – conceded defeat. The next morning Major offered his resignation to the Queen, who subsequently asked the Labour leader – Tony Blair – to form a new government. At 1 p.m. that day, Blair moved into the official Prime Minister's residence at 10 Downing Street and started his first term in office. The 'dead tide' between the outgoing and incoming governments, between Major conceding defeat and Blair being entrusted with the reins of government, lasted little more than 12 hours.

The work done during the period of delay is also very different. In contrast to the US, in a parliamentary regime policy is at the centre of what happens when a new government takes office, even when coalition bargaining is needed. In such countries the election outcome sets the parameters within which bargaining can take place by determining which combinations of parties would be able to control a majority of the seats.

How elections condition coalition bargaining

Political scientists have long been fascinated by the coalition bargaining process, seeing it as an opportunity for testing a variety of theories about

political decision-making. In Chapter 3 we will discuss the formation of coalitions in some detail, but for the moment we want to focus on the way in which elections condition that process. Table 2.1 sets out the implications of an imaginary election outcome for coalition formation. The parties are named at the top of the table according to their policy preferences represented in left–right terms, from left through centre-left and centre-right to right (see pp. 13–14 for a discussion of this political spectrum). The number of seats each party controls in the legislature – a number established in the imaginary election just past – is listed immediately below. These numbers determine which possible coalitions will control more than half the seats in the imaginary 100-seat legislature. We suppose that the cabinet will contain 20 members, and the cells in each subsequent row of the table give the number of cabinet members that each party would expect to have if they joined in a coalition with the other party(ies) with entries in that row. The reason we can be unequivocal about this is that one of the best-established regularities in political science is that parties that are members of a coalition government gain cabinet members pretty much in proportion to the seat shares they contribute to the coalition (Browne and Franklin 1973).

The table tells us that there are a number of ways in which to build a coalition that would command a majority in the Parliament (seven different possible cabinets are listed, named A to G). Which of these is formed will depend on the criteria that parties apply in choosing coalition partners and on their skills in the bargaining process, as we will explain in the next chapter. However, it can be seen immediately from the table that the number of cabinet positions (ministries) received by each party is greatest in the cabinet that controls fewest seats in the Parliament (Cabinet A) and that, for each party, this number declines progressively as the number of seats that the coalition controls increases beyond that minimum needed for control of the legislature. Other things being equal, therefore, parties will prefer to be members of a coalition towards the top of the table (where they would

Table 2.1 *Seats contributed and cabinet members received with various coalitions arising from a 100-seat legislature and 20-member cabinet*

	Parties			
	Left	Centre-left	Centre-right	Right
Seat shares (out of 100)	15/100	23/100	34/100	28/100
Cabinet A (51 seats) ministries		9/20		11/20
Cabinet B (57 seats) ministries		8/20	12/20	
Cabinet C (62 seats) ministries			11/20	9/20
Cabinet D (66 seats) ministries	5/20	7/20		8/20
Cabinet E (72 seats) ministries	4/20	6/20	10/20	
Cabinet F (77 seats) ministries	4/20		9/20	7/20
Cabinet G (85 seats) ministries		5/20	8/20	7/20

control policy-making in more government departments) rather than one towards the bottom of the table where they would have less influence. Other things are not always equal, of course, and the other factors involved in coalition negotiations will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In some ways the hand that is dealt by elections in multiparty systems is analogous to the hand that is dealt by elections in the US. There, too, coalitions have to be built in order to pass legislation – coalitions that combine legislators from one party with those from the other as necessary to compensate for the lack of party discipline in the US Congress. But the hand that is dealt by elections in the US does not play out until after the government has already taken office, as the President and his administration try to build coalitions in Congress to pass legislation. Indeed, it happens bill by bill in an extraordinarily protracted fashion, with different coalitions forming on different issues to get different pieces of legislation passed. And in the American case elections have much less influence because the coalition-forming process is much less affected by the hand dealt at election time. Because it is so protracted, it continues long after the election itself has been forgotten, opening the way for interest groups to dominate the process of coalition bargaining (see Box 2.5 on US health care reform).

Box 2.5 President Clinton's attempt to enact health care reform

In the 1992 presidential election in the US, the candidate for the Democratic Party, Bill Clinton, made a number of promises that helped him to defeat the elder George Bush who was the incumbent President and Republican Party candidate. One was the famous promise to bring better economic times ('It's the economy, stupid!'), a promise he redeemed with flying colors. The other promise that is still remembered was that of enacting health care reform and introducing a system of insurance for more than 40 million Americans who lacked health care insurance and hence access to any but emergency health care. Opinion polls showed this to be a popular promise and, once elected, Bill Clinton (now President Clinton) set about trying to redeem it. He established a high profile commission, headed by his wife Hillary (later Senator for New York and then Secretary of State), who eventually brought forward a plan of legislation to establish a universal health insurance system. However, the proposal was not passed by the Congress – even though this was a Congress in which a majority of both houses were Democrats and thus of the same political party as the President. The reasons are too numerous to list here, but an important role was played by interest groups defending the interests of wealthy insurance companies. The important point for now is that the President was unable to redeem a major campaign promise because he could not get members of his own political party to support the resulting proposals.

Coming back to coalitions in parliamentary democracies with a proportionally elected parliament, the deals and compromises needed to reach agreement on a legislative program happen before a cabinet takes office. Therefore, when the cabinet does take office it does so with a set of proposals that it is committed to carry into law and for which it has the support of parliament. Because coalition negotiations happen behind closed doors, what emerges is based on the best deal that each party can get for the policies it espouses – interest groups have very little role in the process.

Institutional influences on the structure of political life

This repositioning of political bargaining, depending on institutional features, is an excellent example of how institutions affect politics. Politics is all about compromise. Compromises have to be made within parties as well as between them. The same things happen in all democratic polities, but they happen at different times and may involve different groups and different people depending on institutional arrangements, the number of parties and the manner in which elections are fought (the number of parties is also partly a function of institutional arrangements, but we will not go into that here). Different institutions change the whole appearance of political life in a country and give elections a greater or a lesser role in determining policy outcomes. That is what makes institutions so important.

The more issues that elections decide, the more important the election will appear to voters. Additionally, the more influence that voters have, the more important the election will appear to them. In the US, in normal times, elections are doubly eviscerated. Their importance is weakened firstly because they are candidate-centered and do not solve coordination problems between President and Congress or between the two houses of Congress, as they do in policy-centered parliamentary systems. And their importance is weakened secondly because election outcomes, especially for House elections, seem to be more determined by the advantages of incumbency than by agreement of voters with the policy positions of candidates (Fiorina 1989). So elections are generally less competitive and settle fewer fundamental questions in the US than elsewhere, which is one reason why turnout in American elections is so low compared to most other established democracies (Powell 1986; Franklin 2004). In parliamentary systems much more is at stake, and turnout is generally much higher.

However, elections in the US are not invariably eviscerated. Occasionally – once or twice in a century – America has seen elections in which a presidential candidate with radically different policies has won an election at which so many congressional seats changed hands that the checks and

balances normally standing in the way of palpable policy change are ineffective (Brady and Stewart 1991). But such elections are infrequent.

Coming back to the normal run of American elections, the main difference from parliamentary systems is that the party in government is often not in a position to fulfill its most important campaign promises, whereas the opposite is true in parliamentary systems. Americans might well ask ‘Why would we expect politicians to fulfill their promises?’. Evidently it is quite common in the US for politicians to promise some policy and then fail to enact that policy – see Box 2.5 about President Clinton’s attempt to enact health care reform. Not only was President Clinton not able to enact this reform, he also was not punished for his failure when the time came to re-elect him in 1996. Indeed he won this election with a bigger majority than in 1992. The reason for this is that voters generally understood that it was not Clinton’s fault that health care reform was not enacted. He simply could not get the Congress to vote for it. So the 1996 election was fought on other grounds (a balanced budget, for example).

Such a scenario, so common in the US as to arouse no anger on the part of voters, would be most unlikely to occur in a parliamentary democracy. There, a cabinet that formed with the intention of introducing a reform as extensive and high profile as the Clinton health care reform would already have the necessary parliamentary majority in support of that reform. Once a cabinet has been formed and appointed by a parliament, it effectively has a ‘contract’ with that parliament to bring forward certain policies and submit relevant legislation on the expectation that there is a majority in parliament to enact those policies. In such circumstances, if the government did not bring forward the promised policies it might be held accountable at the next election for its failure to do so – if the parliament had not replaced it long before the next election on account of the same failure. Of course, not many policies have the salience in any country that health care reform had in the US in 1992, and it is only on highly salient policies that voters could be expected to be sufficiently aware of government failure as to hold that government to account. But they seldom if ever have the chance to actually do so, even in parliamentary regimes, precisely because governments in those systems generally do deliver on high profile policies of this kind. Much more frequent is the sight of a parliament holding a government to account for failing to enact some promised policy.

Something else we seldom if ever see are elections called to decide an issue that comes up during the term of a parliament – during the period between elections – that was not on the agenda at the time of the previous election. In the modern world it is hard to think of a single occasion when such an election has actually been called, both because parliamentary majorities seldom disagree with the governments they support regarding new policies (giving the voters no role as adjudicators) and because parties have opinion

polls to help them decide what the outcome of such an election would be (providing the opportunity for 'rational anticipation', discussed in Chapter 5, p. 125). But in principle the Parliament could object to any policy proposed by a government that had not been included among the policies put before the voters at the previous election, and it would do so if it feared that a future election would cost a lot of members their seats as a result of the policy concerned. In such circumstances they would not have to wait for the next election to roll around on a fixed timetable. Most parliamentary democracies can call an election at a few months' notice. And the fact that this can happen keeps the politicians focused on what would happen in such an election. In a sense, the politicians in a parliamentary democracy are always looking over their shoulders at the electorate because the electorate is the final arbiter of any dispute between government and parliament.

We should also note in passing that in some parliamentary regimes it is normal for the Prime Minister to be allowed a degree of latitude in calling for an election at the end of a parliamentary term. In Britain, for example, the law stipulates that new elections must be held within five years, but in practice elections are usually called any time within the final year of the parliamentary term (if an election was not held earlier for other reasons). This latitude allows the Prime Minister to take advantage of fluctuations in economic conditions or other developments that might provide his or her party with a marginal advantage in an election. In principle there is nothing to stop a Prime Minister from calling an election at any earlier point to take advantage of a favorable economy or other advantageous factors, but in practice he or she would be restrained by the knowledge that voters really dislike unnecessary elections and would penalize a party that was seen as having called an election merely for partisan advantage (as happened in France in 1997 – see Box 2.6).

Habits and routines

The stability provided by relatively slow-changing institutions gives rise to opportunities for learning on the part of voters and parties. Learning gives rise to habits and habits are necessary for the functioning of the electoral process. Without an important role for habit, everyone would be required to start from scratch at each election and spend inordinate amounts of time acquiring an orientation that allowed them to make sensible choices. This is one reason why elections in newly democratizing countries show great instability. Once systems have become stable, however, voters and parties can act on the basis of existing knowledge and experience in a cost-effective manner. The repeated reiteration of a pattern of behavior or choice constitutes a learning process leading to choices being made increasingly on the basis of habit rather than on the basis of conscious reflection.

Box 2.6 An early French election

The constitution of the French Fifth Republic was written with a built-in possibility of what the French call 'cohabitation' (which has the same meaning in English). France is a semi-presidential system where executive power is divided between the (directly elected) President and a cabinet, which, as in parliamentary systems, can only function if it is supported by a parliamentary majority. The problem arises when the President is of one party while the legislature, and thus the Prime Minister and cabinet, are from a different party. Because the presidential term was originally set at seven years but the Assembly's term at five years, cohabitation was possible towards the end of the term of a president whose popularity was declining (as often happens towards the end of a government's tenure in office). By 1997 this had happened only twice in the history of the Fifth Republic, but Jacques Chirac (President since 1995 and faced with declining popularity) decided to call parliamentary elections after only two years in office, hoping to take advantage of unpreparedness by the opposition socialists and gain a mandate for his party in the Assembly which would then last the remaining five years of his presidency. Unfortunately, the French voters were quite aware of this strategy and what remained of his party's popularity evaporated in the face of what the voters regarded as an unnecessary election called for party political purposes. The conservative majority the President had enjoyed in parliament was voted out and replaced with a socialist majority with which he then had to cohabit unhappily for the remaining five years of his term. Eventually, the prospect of repeated cohabitations for the final years of a presidential term led to an amendment to the constitution establishing five-year terms for the President, so that a new mandate could be found both at the parliamentary and at the presidential level at about the same time. Though the elections were not made simultaneous, the expectation is that parliamentary elections will normally occur within a year of presidential elections, all but eliminating the periods of cohabitation that had proved so irritating to previous presidents.

One of the things that voters need to learn is the habit of voting. In countries where everyone (or virtually everyone) votes, the learning process leading to that habit is evidently short and obstacles are readily overcome. In countries where turnout is lower, those who fail to learn the habit of voting are those who fail to overcome various obstacles that are not necessarily greater in those countries. As far as we know it is rather that the motivation to overcome those obstacles is lower.

Motivation is lowest among voters who have only recently reached voting age, especially so after the lowering of the voting age in many countries has resulted in the enfranchisement of individuals whose educations are not complete and who are, many of them, following courses of study away from

home (Franklin 2004). It seems that learning to vote is principally facilitated by membership in social networks and by contact with people who deem it important that someone newly of voting age votes (Plutzer 2002). Such networks are harder to come by for individuals who are at college or who are in the process of establishing themselves in a new career and social circumstances: precisely the situation of many in the 18–22 age group. In Chapter 1 we referred, in the context of electoral participation, to a general tendency to find retrospectively reasons for our own behavior, even if that behavior came about by chance. Once having ‘found’ such reasons, these stay in force unless the experience was utterly unrewarding (Fiorina 1981). This applies not only to the habit of voting. Just as importantly, each time someone fails to vote at an election it is more likely that they will fail to vote at the following election also. So a lot depends on the situation people find themselves in during the first elections at which they are old enough to vote. Those who are finding it hard to make ends meet, who are working in multiple jobs or who have young children at home are less likely to learn the habit of voting than those in more fortunate circumstances. The result is a link between poverty and non-voting, especially in countries where motivations to vote are low to start out with.

The fact that voting involves a learning process has consequences in all countries for the age structure of the voting electorate: older people are more likely to be voters than younger people. Partly this is what social scientists call an age effect (see p. 16 for a discussion of this type of change): older people have had the time in which to learn their way around their political systems and to acquire the habit of voting, so they vote at higher rates than younger people. But partly it is also what social scientists call a period effect. Learning to vote was easier before the voting age was lowered, because the first election at which most people were eligible to vote came later in life when circumstances for acquiring the habit were more propitious. It is ironic that the well-intentioned extension of the franchise to 18-year-olds in many countries after the mid-1960s (previously the voting age was generally 21 or higher) had the unanticipated consequence of a lifetime of non-voting for many of the intended beneficiaries (Franklin 2004).

We have already mentioned that election outcomes can be affected by who actually does vote and who not. More importantly, who does vote reflects how inclusive the political system is. If large numbers of people regularly fail to participate in elections in some country that puts into question the democratic nature of those elections, especially if those who fail to vote can be expected to hold different political preferences than those who do vote (Piven and Cloward 2000). The most important force that determines whether individuals will vote or not is party loyalty, often known as ‘party identification’. We will focus on this in Chapter 4, but now is a good time to introduce the basic concepts involved.

Socialization, immunization and party identification

About half a century ago, a landmark book called *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.* 1960) was published that established the nature of party loyalty and the manner in which it was acquired in the US. Nine years later, one of the co-authors of this book co-authored *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes 1969, 1974). These two books detail the mechanisms involved and the fact that essentially the same mechanisms operate in a policy-centered as in a candidate-centered democracy. The critical concepts are socialization and immunization, which are different aspects of the same phenomenon.

Socialization is the mechanism by which most norms and values are acquired. The process happens during a person’s ‘formative years’ which stretch – as far as political norms and values are concerned – from childhood into early adulthood. Socialized behavior is habitual behavior not founded in explicit deliberation. It thus provides stability in behavior, unless it is unlearned in later life, which would require severe and persistent dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the socialized habits. This is how we learn most of our behavior patterns, and it seems that this is how many of us learn to identify with politically relevant objects (often parties or ideologies, sometimes labor unions or other political reference groups). The main source of partisanship is, of course, the home; but other powerful socializing agents are neighbors, friends, fellow students and, ultimately, colleagues at work. Important socializing institutions include schools and churches. If these influences reinforce each other, then young adults are virtually certain to enter the electorate with a partisanship consistent with those influences. If the influences are absent or cross-cutting, however (far more likely in the modern world than used to be the case), then initial partisanship is less certain and may be altogether absent.

Partisan influences are most likely to be coherent for children brought up in a homogeneous ethnic or religious environment in which similarity of values and interests has bred uniformity of party preference. So specific religious or ethnic environments have historically been fertile breeding grounds for strong partisanship. Such influences are synonymous with membership in a self-conscious social or ethnic group, and group memberships are commonly regarded as the prime cause of partisanship, since they generate mostly uniform socializing pressures for members of that group.

Once a person reaches voting age a new force comes into play: what Butler and Stokes (1974) called ‘immunization’. This arises from the act of voting itself – or perhaps rather the act of choosing, which precedes the actual vote. By supporting a particular party at the ballot, voters affirm socialized identification with that party, and repeated affirmations of support for the same party eventually lead to a psychological identification with that party which

will then override most normal efforts to pry the voter away. This process of immunization works also in the absence of any socialized party identifications, by way of peer-group influence, careful consideration of choice options, *ex post* rationalization of an impulsive choice or other mechanisms. After supporting the same party for at least three times in successive elections, according to Butler and Stokes, a voter has become virtually immunized against change. One or two affirmations do not do it, however. Even after voting the same way twice, Butler and Stokes found that it was possible for a voter to choose a different party on the third occasion. Such a choice would effectively break the immunization mechanism and, though voters who had defected from an initial partisanship were likely to return to their initial partisanship, still they would need to vote for that party multiple times before becoming immunized against further change. As a result it is possible for some voters never to become immunized, and Butler and Stokes found some such voters in their samples. But most people in most countries do become immunized – generally during the course of their first three elections, and the proportion of committed partisans in the electorate increases steadily with increasing age – especially during the period before a young adult's third electoral experience (Miller and Shanks 1996: 131). It follows that swing voters are generally young voters, something often overlooked by politicians and commentators who are likely to confuse malleable young adults with a much larger category of voters who report being 'undecided', though people can be undecided for all kinds of reasons, while not being malleable in their preferences.

In order to assess how individuals' orientations towards their party system evolve as they age, we may look at the proportion expressing tied preferences for more than just one party. Starting in the early 1980s, Dutch election studies have questioned respondents about the likelihood that they would ever vote for specific parties. Each voter was questioned about all parties represented in the Dutch Parliament and responses were found to reflect their strength of preference for each of the political parties (van der Eijk and Niemöller 1983, 1984), sometimes referred to as the 'propensity to vote' for each party (see Box 1.3).

From these vote propensities it is possible to calculate for each voter how many parties are tied at the highest rating and how many other parties are given an almost equally high rating. Table 2.2 shows – for the Netherlands in 2004 – that younger voters, on average, have more parties tied or nearly tied at their highest rating. Moreover, the difference in preference between the top-scoring party and the average of the scores for all other parties increases steadily from 5.3 among the youngest members of the electorate to 7.2 among the oldest.

From Table 2.2 it can be easily seen that older voters in the Netherlands are less likely to be cross-pressured between different parties and that they

Table 2.2 *Differences in propensity to vote by cohort, Netherlands 2004*

Age in 2004	Per cent tied for first place	Per cent within one point of being tied for first place	Difference between top ranked and mean of other scores
18–22	33	58	5.3
23–27	39	58	5.8
28–32	27	55	5.9
33–37	27	53	5.6
38–42	25	50	5.9
43–47	29	53	5.9
48–53	20	43	6.2
54–57	19	41	6.0
58–63	17	45	6.1
64–67	21	39	6.3
68–73	10	31	6.4
74–77	18	33	6.6
78 and older	10	21	7.2

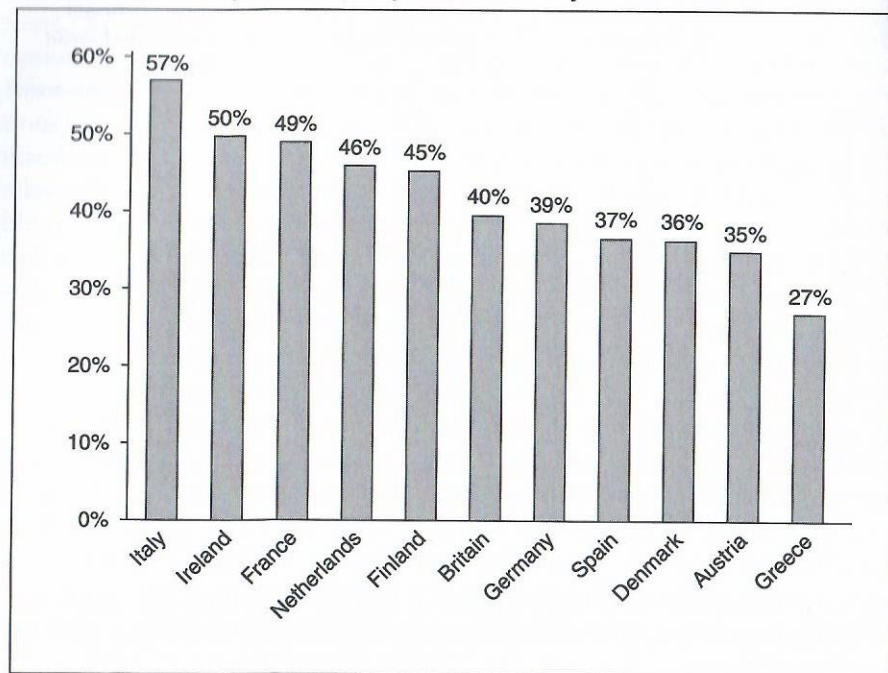
Source: European Election Study (2004).

are more unambiguous in their support of a single party than younger voters are. The same is true in other countries for which we have relevant data (cf. Kroh *et al.* 2007).

The extent to which socialization and immunization result in strong preferences for a single party also differs between countries. The percentage of members of an electorate having more than a single party tied or nearly tied for highest preference is shown in Figure 2.3.⁵ Italy has close to 60 per cent of its voters strongly cross-pressured between at least two parties, more than twice the number of apparently unimmunized individuals as in Greece – but there are good reasons for that (see Box 3.4 about electoral reform in Italy). In other countries the proportions range from 35 per cent to 50 per cent, implying quite a large number of unimmunized voters. Some of these will doubtless have stable affinities with a small number of parties (see Box 2.7) – a situation that seems to be characteristic of contemporary Italy, France, the Netherlands and Finland. But even if less than 30 per cent of an electorate finds at least two parties equally attractive (as in Greece), this implies ample scope for aggregate electoral change, even among older voters (Mair 1997). On the other hand, except in Italy, we find majorities of people in all these countries with a clear preference for just a single party, which attests to the importance of the various processes that generate stable partisan preferences, amongst which socialization and immunization rank high in importance.

The extent to which socialization and immunization restrict the scope for electoral change (except among young adults) also varies considerably between historical periods. Really strong socializing forces require a perva-

Figure 2.3 Percentage of electorate with more than one party closely tied (within one point) for first place, West European countries



Source: European Election Study (2004).

siveness of self-conscious social groups, each of which is linked to a specific political party. In established European democracies, such groups – traditionally mainly defined in terms of religion and class – seem to have declined considerably in size and importance since the 1960s. This is the so-called ‘decline of cleavage politics’ (M. Franklin 1992) that will be described in Chapter 4 (pp. 95–8).

It seems clear that having a single party at the pinnacle of a citizen’s party preferences rapidly leads to (if it does not already start with) a degree of partisan loyalty ‘that merits the shorthand of habit’ (Fiorina 1981). The mechanism that gives such consistency to habitual party supporters is not the ability to ignore evidence of failure by the party they support, but the ability to reinterpret everything they learn about that party and others in the light of their party identification. Partisanship serves as a filter that gives a partisan tint to virtually any political information. Moreover, it gives rise to various ways in which people relate selectively to information that contradicts cherished beliefs: *selective exposure* (avoiding such information), *selective acceptance* (discounting the veracity of such information) and *selective*

retention (the tendency to forget such information). Additionally, partisanship serves as a cue that helps people to ‘fill in the blanks’ in their political knowledge. How is the economy doing? If their preferred party is in charge then the economy must be doing well. Where do they stand on stem cell research? If their party is against it then so are they. Are civil liberties being invaded by the government? Not if the government is being run by the party they support. And so on. In this way partisanship, though itself often the result of socializing influences predating voting age and of early adult decisions, in turn colors almost everything else that relates to the voting act. We will return to partisanship in Chapter 4 (pp. 87–9).

Preferences and choice

In the case of very strong and unique party identifications, voting for a party is a simple reaffirmation of that partisanship. But many voters do not (yet) have a strong party identification, or they identify with an ideology or social group that can be represented by several political parties (see Box 2.7). In all those cases it is likely that voters have preferences for more than just one

Box 2.7 Ideological identification

Party identification has traditionally been assessed by way of surveys in which respondents are asked how they generally think of themselves in relation to the political parties. In the US the question invites people to state whether they think of themselves as Democrats, as Republicans, or as neither. In multiparty systems this has to be phrased differently, usually in the form of two questions: the first asking whether the respondent sees him/herself as an adherent of any political party; the second – if the answer to the first question is yes – asking which party that is. Initially it was assumed that such identification would only exist in relation to a single party, and this assumption could not be challenged so long as only these questions were asked. However, in the 1981 Dutch National Election Study the traditional question was followed up by subsequent questions that probed for additional parties to which the respondent might adhere. It turned out that approximately half of those who had answered ‘yes’ to the original question saw themselves as adherents of more than just one party. Inspection of the combinations of parties mentioned by respondents revealed that these combinations involved political parties that were close together in left–right terms, reason for van der Eijk and Niemöller (1983) to interpret the responses as not reflecting *party* identification but *ideological* identification. Similar results were later found in other countries as well, where they are occasionally referred to as ‘multiple party identification’ (Niemi *et al.* 1987; Schmitt 2000; Garry 2007).

party, and we need to study those preferences in addition to the choice that they make at the end of the day (see Box 1.3). Knowing which party was voted for only gives us information about which party stood first in the voter's preference order, not which party was second or lower, and certainly not by how far those parties lagged behind the first preference party.

In Table 2.3 we illustrate these ideas and the consequences of changing circumstances for preferences and choice in a fictitious example relating preference to votes. In the top panel we look at the consequences of an increase in preferences for one of the two available parties. At the left side of this panel we report for each of five imaginary voters their preferences for each of two parties, and the choice that they make on the basis of these preferences. At the right side we report the preferences and choices of the same five voters after changing circumstances have led to an increase by two units in their preferences for Party A while their preferences for Party B remain unchanged. The division between light and shaded cells separates those voting for Party A from those voting for Party B. As can be seen, the change in preferences between the two time points $t = 1$ and $t = 2$ has no consequences at all for the choices made by any voter in the top panel. Among those who were already voting for Party A at t_1 , their increased preferences for this party at t_2 only makes them more inclined towards that party, and for those who voted for Party B at t_1 , the increase in their preferences for Party A was not sufficiently large to make them alter their choice. Although the distribution of choices is the same at t_1 and t_2 it would nevertheless be incorrect to conclude that nothing had changed. At the very least, Party A has acquired a much stronger position which might help it to weather the effects of adverse developments without actual loss of votes.

In the lower panel we see the consequences of changing circumstances leading to a decrease in preferences for Party A, again by two points, between t_1 and t_2 . In this example, again, most people's choices are unchanged despite the change in their preferences. But this time one voter does switch parties as a result of the change in his or her preferences. For Voter 3, the reduction in preference for Party A was enough to change the order in which he or she ranked the two parties, as highlighted by the shift in the shaded area encompassing the cells involved in a choice of Party B.

The example illustrates two asymmetries in the consequences of political events and developments that impinge on voters' preferences. First, a given change in preferences for a particular party may or may not lead to a change in party choice. Second, increases in preferences for a particular party do not necessarily have consequences for choices that are the mirror image of decreases of the same magnitude. What the consequences are of events and developments on changes in party choice is therefore dependent on the existing structure of preferences, which cannot be deduced from the choices made but which must be observed empirically at each election.

Table 2.3 Preferences and choices for parties in the light of changing preferences

	Preferences and choices $t=1$			Preferences and choices $t=2$		
	Preference for A	Preference for B	Vote choice	Preference for A	Preference for B	Vote choice
Voter 1	8	1	A	10	1	A
Voter 2	7	2	A	9	2	A
Voter 3	6	5	A	8	5	A
Voter 4	3	6	B	5	6	B
Voter 5	2	7	B	4	7	B

	Preferences and choices $t=1$			Preferences and choices $t=2$		
	Preference for A	Preference for B	Vote choice	Preference for A	Preference for B	Vote choice
Voter 1	8	1	A	6	1	A
Voter 2	7	2	A	5	2	A
Voter 3	6	5	A	4	5	B
Voter 4	3	6	B	1	6	B
Voter 5	2	7	B	0	7	B

This apparent indeterminacy of consequences is responsible for a lot of puzzlement in the face of seemingly inconsistent findings regarding the effects of various sorts of circumstances on election outcomes in different countries and at different moments in time. It might seem plausible, for example, to suppose that economic developments should have the same consequences for the vote shares of incumbent parties in Britain in 1992 as in the US in the same or any other year. Yet, on the basis of the asymmetries seen in Table 2.3, it should be obvious why any such expectations are naïve (for worked examples see van der Brug *et al.* 2007a, App. B).⁶

We will discover that preferences derive from a multitude of factors that voters can take into account, such as any party loyalties that they may have developed, their proximity to each party in terms of ideology and particular policies, their assessment of party performance as a steward of government, and so on. The result may well be that a voter's preferences for several parties are tied or nearly so. On election day, the choice of such voters will go to the party which then stands highest in their preference ranking. Still, during the run-up to an election, if the difference between the highest-ranking parties is small, we can imagine this order being changed as a consequence of all kinds of factors. For such voters the election provides a real decision – sometimes perhaps a challenge – as they need to find a basis upon which to break this tie, which may involve factors that, when not seen as 'tie

breakers', would be considered minor, irrelevant or even frivolous. This is often overlooked by analysts who try to understand the bases of voter behavior from answers to the obvious question: 'why did you choose the party you voted for?'. Invariably, such questions yield high proportions of answers that have little or no connection with political matters, such as the personal charm of the candidate, or how cute his children are, or even professions of ignorance such as 'I could not say'. Yet, such answers cannot be interpreted at face value. Voters whose top preferences are tied or nearly tied tend to interpret the question as referring to what broke the tie between equally attractive alternative options. That is obviously something entirely different from the factors that caused them to have high preferences for these parties in the first place (which is what the analyst really wants to know).

When we speak about electoral competition (as we will repeatedly in coming chapters), we refer to the rivaling efforts of political parties to win the votes of this pool of tied or nearly tied voters.

Our discussion so far has focused on what can happen in a particular election. This focus constrains us to consider only changes in preferences that can plausibly occur within a short period of time (e.g. the run-up to an election) during which positions of parties and voters are relatively stable and only limited changes can occur. Seen in a longer-term perspective, however, these constraints are greatly reduced. Over a longer period, all sorts of things can change, thereby establishing new baseline structures of electoral competition within which short-term developments have their consequences – an idea that will be developed further in Chapter 4.

Institutional change

Any electorate will always contain voters who are not immunized, and who therefore provide possibilities for (aggregate) electoral change. Partly this is because there is a constant influx of new voters providing a constant source of potential change. In addition, institutions themselves are not unchanging. They do change, if infrequently, and when they do so they throw everyone back a couple of steps in their processes of habituation. Everyone has to adapt to new rules of the game and figure out how to achieve their goals within the new rules. One institution that has changed repeatedly during the history of virtually all established democracies has been the *franchise* – the right to vote.

At the start of the democratic age only certain adult males were eligible to vote: generally those who owned their own homes or other property and paid taxes. Through the course of the 19th century these eligibility rules were successively liberalized in many Western countries, so that by the early 20th century all adult males enjoyed the right to vote in most countries that are

now established democracies. These successive enlargements of the electorate were responsible for political tidal waves in many countries that brought new political parties into being in response to the policy demands of the newly enfranchised, and these new parties often quickly became major players, replacing existing parties in some countries and adding to the number of parties in others. In the US since 1860, candidate-centered elections enabled the existing two parties to absorb the demands of newly enfranchised voters, but even in that country the growing electorate was responsible for several major political realignments. In the 20th century, further enlargements of the electorate resulted from the enfranchisement of women, the lowering of the voting age and (in the US) the removal of voting rights restrictions that were based on race in certain states. These further extensions of the franchise have not had the same repercussions for party systems as earlier ones, however. Still, party systems have continued to evolve and, whether as a result of the enfranchisement of new segments of a population or for other reasons, the emergence, disappearance, merging, splitting or other transformations of political parties all shake the foundations on which voters' habits were built, so that these habits need to be rebuilt under new circumstances. All such changes increase the likelihood that voters will behave as though unimmunized, and this will increase their responsiveness to short-term political forces.

Yet other forms of fundamental change involve reform of electoral systems, as took effect at the end of the 20th century in Italy, New Zealand and Japan, or in the definition of what offices are to be filled (directly or indirectly) by election. An example of the latter that we will discuss in Chapter 4 (pp. 108–9) is the reform in Israel in the 1990s that instituted direct election to the office of Prime Minister, a reform that was abandoned again only a few years later. Another example that we will discuss in Chapter 7 (pp. 191–3) is the reform in Switzerland that instituted a governmental cartel after World War II. These sorts of changes provide evidence for some of the assertions we have made in this chapter regarding the ways in which the behavior of parties and voters, and the outcomes of elections, are constrained by institutional factors. We will see repeatedly that election outcomes and the electoral behavior of individuals cannot be understood without taking into account the wider institutional context within which they take place.

These changes in the constraints that voters experience are, of course, themselves the result of – deliberate or inadvertent – decisions by voters and party leaders. The institutional context, though usually stable in regard to its major characteristics, is in minor ways constantly in flux, and voters are constantly being forced to adapt in minor ways (even if less often in major ways) to such changes.