

Different Systems of Democracy

Democracy is not a sharply defined form of government that would need to be implemented in just one and no other way. Both in *theory* and in *practice* there are as many systems of democracy than democratic countries. Nevertheless there are some general features as well as some groups of democratic systems that may be distinguished from each other.

■ **These features are common to all democracies ...**

- **Separation of Powers:**
 - **Legislative Power:** parliament, normally in two chambers
 - **Executive Power:** government and administration
 - **Judicative Power:** courts of justice
- **Constitution**
- **Laws** debated and passed by the parliament
- **Decrees** by the government, based on laws and regulating the details how to the laws shall be applied in practice
- **Elections**
- **Political Parties**
- **Referendums:** Though there are massive differences on how frequent referendums are and on which level they apply (constitution or single laws), the concept as such is known in any practical form of democracy

■ **Democracies can be broadly grouped into three basic types:** Any form of *democracy* tries in its own way to ascertain the *will of the people* and to bring public affairs into line with it. Theoretically this can be achieved by *direct* participation of all citizens (*Direct Democracy*) or by a body of elected representatives (*Representative Democracy*). Within the group of *Representative Democracies* the focus may be on a strong president (*Presidential Democracy*) or on a strong parliament (*Parliamentary Democracy*).

Direct Democracy	Presidential Democracy	Parliamentary Democracy
Example: Switzerland	Examples: USA, France	Examples: UK, Germany, Spain, Italy
Head of State: Any member of government in turn (for one year), no practical importance	The President is head of state <i>and</i> leader of the government	Head of State is a different function than prime minister, it may be a monarch or an elected person
Government: members with equal rights, elected by the parliament, representing all major parties (not really unanimous, but extremely stable)	President elected by the people nominates the ministers [members of government]	Government elected by the parliament based on a majority, may be dismissed by the parliament (especially when based on a coalition of several parties)
Parliament elected for a fixed legislative period, no dissolution; changing coalitions, sometimes even extreme right and extreme left together against the center (though for different reasons)	Parliament elected for a fixed legislative period. Clear <i>institutional</i> separation of parliament and government (but the officials may cooperate as closely as in the other systems, if they like to do so)	Parliament elected for a legislative period, dissolution and early new elections possible if a clear majority cannot be established
Government members <i>need not be</i> members of parliament	Government members <i>need not be</i> members of parliament	Government members <i>must be</i> elected members of parliament
Strong position of the people (frequent referendums on single laws)	Strong position of the president (veto)	Strong position of the political parties
Laws are created in four steps: (1) draft by the administration; (2) consultation of federal states, political parties, entrepreneurs, unions and other interested groups, (3) parliamentary debate and final version passed (4) possibility of a referendum (if a strong party or lobby threatens to call for a referendum, the parliament might be inclined to a compromise, the formal consultation process gives the public a clear view of the critical aspects and the pros and cons already at an early stage.	(1) Laws are debated and passed by the parliament; (2) lobbyists do not have a formal right to be heard, but do exercise some influence on members of parliament in reality; (3) the president may block a law by veto; as the he/she is elected as a personality (not only as a party leader) by the people (not by the parliament), he may or may not rely on a majority of the parliament (there have been times when a president is forced to cooperate with a majority of oppositional members of parliament)	(1) Laws are proposed by the government (being the leaders of the coalition of parties); (2) laws are debated and passed by parliament; (3) lobbyists do not have a formal right to be heard, but do exercise some influence on members of parliament in reality; (4) if there is a solid majority, compromises are sought within the coalition (and may sometimes represent tactics rather than conviction), the opposition may be ignored until the next elections but then laws may be revoked or changed by a new majority
Making laws is slow, for more technically oriented laws that regulate questions of broad public interest but address a small number of professionals, but laws concerning everyday actions may get immediate attention and acceptance by the public.	A strong president may act immediately - but there is a certain risk that he rushes to conclusions he may hardly be willing to withdraw from even if they prove to be unwise from a later point of view.	If there are many small parties in a country, the close dependence of the government on a parliamentary majority may undermine the stability of the government.
History shows that from time to time the Swiss electorate does correct decisions of parliament and government that give in too much to lobby pressure, so <i>Direct Democracy</i> seems to offer effective <i>checks and balances</i> . But sometimes it just takes a long time (decades, not years) until a new idea is finally broadly accepted.	The separation of powers - though it might seem very clear in theory - does not automatically provide more effective <i>checks and balances</i> between parliament and government than in a <i>Parliamentary Democracy</i> .	If there are only two relevant parties and one has a comfortable majority, the parliamentary system offers few effective <i>checks and balances</i> .