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Visions of democracy and the limits of parliamentarism

Is a separation of powers between the executive and the assembly desirable? Proponents of parliamentary government do not believe so. They highlight the advantages of the fusion of power between the government and the assembly majority, not least the avoidance of executive personalism (Ackerman 2000; Linz 1994; Samuels and Shugart 2010).[1] Yet the parliamentary fusion of powers also creates important trade-offs in the design of democracy (Lijphart 1992a; Shugart and Carey 1992). Voters directly authorize a single collective agent, the assembly, who is charged with the two different, and partly conflicting, tasks: selecting a government and keeping it in office, on the one hand; making laws and controlling the government, on the other. As a result, the design of the assembly's electoral system and of the confidence relationship between executive and legislature must respond to conflicting goals. Designs that allow voters to make a clear choice between competing cabinet alternatives conflict with those that represent voters fairly and allow legislative proposals to be deliberated and decided upon issue by issue.

Since trade-offs exist under any form of government, our task is (a) to understand how competing goals can be balanced under parliamentarism; and (b) to compare this balancing to what is possible under the separation of powers. This chapter tackles the first part of this task. I distinguish two polar visions of democracy—simple and complex majoritarianism—and argue that trying to approximate them under pure parliamentary government is difficult and risky. Many parliamentary democracies position themselves between the two conceptual extremes. They thereby achieve a form of normative balance but have to give up on the most demanding goals of each vision.

I first explain why I consider it necessary to replace well-known distinctions such as that between majoritarian and consensus democracy (Lijphart

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[1] Of course, they may believe in other aspects of a broader notion of the separation of powers, which includes, e.g., the judiciary or federalism.

1984, 2012). Then I elaborate on the proposed conceptual contrast between simple and complex majoritarianism. Next, I discuss the risks and difficulties of trying to approximate these two polar visions, especially within the confines of a parliamentary system of government, and I explore the strategies for achieving some normative balance between the extremes. Finally, I operationalize each vision in terms of three goals and map the resulting patterns of democratic majority formation for 22 non-presidential democracies in the period 1993–2018 (see appendix). The sample includes pure parliamentary systems, semi-presidential systems, and the assembly-independent system in Switzerland.

Visions of democracy and the separation of powers

Political science has long suggested that there exist competing visions of democracy, and it has produced a number of proposals about what these visions are (Gerring and Thacker 2008; Lijphart 1984, 2012; Powell 2000). I add another one here, for two main reasons. First, I do not accept the widespread idea that one of these two visions is "majoritarian," while the other is not (Lijphart 1984, 2012; Powell 2000). Democracy is fundamentally built on the idea of majority rule, and our conceptualization of competing visions of democracy should reflect this. These visions should be understood as *different visions of majority rule*.[2]

Second, I am interested in exploring how visions of majority formation interact with forms of government. The existing conceptual approaches are not well suited for this purpose. One reason is that they often make the fusion or separation of powers between executive and assembly part of the definition of the two visions. For example, Gerring and Thacker (2008: 18) distinguish two comprehensive models of democratic governance, which they call decentralism and centripetalism. Each model lumps together many distinct institutions and features, including the form of government and the structure of the assembly. This approach fixes the relationship between forms of government and visions of democracy conceptually from the outset. It does not help us to explore this relationship empirically or to think creatively about constitutional design. The question whether bicameralism can be an alternative to

[2] Of course, some democracies may depart from majority rule and require supermajorities to pass ordinary legislation (e.g. McGann 2006: 183). Such departures are not my focus here and the extent to which they exist in democracies is frequently exaggerated. Institutions such as strong second chambers may render legislative decision-making supermajoritarian, but I argue in Chapters 6 and 8 that this is not necessarily the case.

presidentialism—central to my argument in this book—does not arise at all, as both institutional schemes are presumed to be part of the same "decentralist" model.

Another downside of existing approaches is that important causal consequences of the separation of powers are neglected (Ganghof 2010). This point is best illustrated with the influential case of Switzerland. The seminal works of Lijphart (1984, 2012) and Powell (2000) ground one of the polar visions of democracy in the so-called Westminster model. Crucial components of this model are (a) a parliamentary system of government; (b) plurality elections in single-seat districts; (c) a two-party system; and (d) one-party majority cabinets.[3] Both authors associate this model with the very idea of democratic majority rule and thus call it majoritarian democracy. The alternative model, which they respectively call "consensus" and "proportional" democracy, embraces proportional representation (PR) and multiparty competition. The tricky task is to specify the *conceptual* alternative to the Westminster model. As Lijphart (1984: 14) asks: What is its logical opposite? Both authors take their cues from the Swiss case. They interpret the country's convention of representing the four largest parliamentary parties in the cabinet (the "Magic Formula") as a rejection of majority rule. Lijphart (1984: 23, emphasis added) sees it as an effort to "maximize the size of the ruling majority instead of being satisfied with a bare majority." For Powell (2000: 92), it embodies the idea that "all the representative groups in the assembly should have influence on policy making in proportion to their size."

Yet both of these interpretations neglect a key fact: Switzerland does not have a parliamentary system. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Magic Formula cabinets imply neither consensus nor proportional influence because the cabinet parties are not veto players. Since the assembly does not have to keep the cabinet in office, there is no need for coalition discipline. Swiss parties do, in fact, form minimal-winning coalitions on controversial issues and, hence, are indeed often satisfied with a bare majority.[4] As discussed in Chapter 2, the majoritarian features of the Swiss constitutional system also help to explain why the Magic Formula emerged in the first place. By neglecting the separation of powers, we risk painting a biased picture of how democracy works in Switzerland.

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[3] I focus on these four features, but the alleged model has many potential attributes. Russell and Serban (2021) argue that the concept has become too stretched to be useful.

[4] None of this is to deny other "proportional" or "consensual" features of Swiss politics (Linder and Mueller 2021). But it matters whether consensual behavior and conventions are grounded in constitutionalized minority vetoes or, rather, in fundamentally majoritarian institutions (McGann 2006).

The empirical studies of Lijphart (1984, 2012) and Powell (2000) have been groundbreaking in many ways, but neither of them was designed to corroborate the conceptual ideas on which they are built. These ideas are presumed and become the theoretical lens through which reality is perceived. To understand how the fusion or separation of powers shapes democratic majority formation in different countries, we might need a different lens.

Simple versus complex majoritarianism

I propose to contrast two polar visions of democracy: complex and simple majoritarianism (Ganghof 2015a).[5] Both of these ideal-typical visions embrace majority rule but differ in their views on how majorities ought to form in a democracy. What distinguishes the two ideals is not how large majorities ought to be or how much relative influence parties ought to have, but how they approach the inherent cognitive and coordinative complexity of politics in modern societies.[6]

The ideal of simple majoritarianism is to reduce this complexity as much as possible in order to reduce the cognitive demands on voters and the coordinative demands on separate political parties. Too many partisan options are seen as presenting voters with a "conceptual obstacle" (Carey and Hix 2011: 385). In its most extreme version, therefore, simple majoritarianism envisions a process in which only two disciplined political parties compete in a unidimensional conflict space; one party becomes the clear winner and dominates the legislative process. In this ideal, voters can directly select a government and clearly see who is responsible for past decisions (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

Complex majoritarianism, by contrast, embraces the cognitive and coordinative complexity that results when multiple parties stake out distinct positions in a multidimensional conflict space. Institutional constraints on the emergence of new parties and the dimensionality of party competition are seen as unfair and unnecessary simplifications of public deliberation and legislative

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[5] The term "complex majoritarianism" is also used, in a different sense and context, by Melissa Schwartzberg (2013). She is concerned with the stability of constitutions and uses the term in opposition to supermajority requirements for constitutional changes. In her conception, complex majoritarianism in constitutional change involves public deliberation and time delays.

[6] "Majoritarianism" does not here describe a particular normative conception and justification of democracy. For this use of the term, see, e.g. Abizadeh (2021).

voting (e.g. Christiano 1996: 261; McGann 2006, 2013). In its most extreme version, complex majoritarianism also envisions that different legislative majorities can be built on different issues—just as in Switzerland. This is seen as a way to include all voters fairly in legislative deliberation and decision-making (e.g. Nagel 2012; Powell 2000: 256, n. 9; Ward and Weale 2010). In the words of Powell (2000: 256, n. 9), different sets of parties and citizens will form the majority on different issues, so that "it is important that the policy-making coalition not be locked into place by the immediate election outcome."[7]

Importantly, both of these visions of majority formation embrace the values of electoral accountability and fair representation, but they engage different *theories* about what the realization of these values requires (Ganghof 2016b).[8] Proponents of simple majoritarianism equate accountability with simplicity: two-party competition is "easy for voters to comprehend; and comprehension aids accountability" (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018: 236). Accountability is essentially equated with "clarity of responsibility" (Powell 2000; Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits 2016). By contrast, proponents of proportional representation highlight how low entry barriers for new parties help to keep *all* parliamentary parties accountable (McGann 2013: 111). Issue-specific decision-making even allows voters to keep parties accountable for their participation or non-participation in specific legislation coalitions, thereby making the idea of accountability even more cognitively demanding (Ganghof 2016b: 226).

The respective theories of representation are different, too. For example, a large literature in political science follows Powell (2000) in measuring the "congruence" between the policymakers and the median voter in some conflict space (for a critical review, see Sabl 2015). Within this approach, the difference between the two visions boils down to their conceptions of the relevant median. Simple majoritarianism tries to reduce the conflict space to a single dimension and to approximate the position of some "global" median voter (Huber and Powell 1994; Powell 2000, 2019).[9] Complex majoritarianism, by contrast, assumes a multidimensional conflict space and is concerned with the position of the median voter on each separable issue (Ganghof 2015a; Nagel 2012; Ward and Weale 2010).

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[7] As I discuss elsewhere, Powell's study embraces conceptual ideas that are in tension with one another (Ganghof 2015a).

[8] In contrast to this view, it is often suggested that one democratic vision prioritizes accountability, the other representation (e.g. Carey and Hix 2011: 385).

[9] E.g., Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018: 236) claim that with "only two parties in the game, political competition tends to be based on economic interests … ."

The two visions under pure parliamentarism

Having sketched the two polar visions in general terms, we can now apply them to the stages of democratic majority formation in a pure parliamentary system. While Powell (2000) focuses on the distinction between the pre-electoral and post-electoral stages, I distinguish four possible stages at which the process of coalition-formation and majority-formation can be completed (Figure 5.1). These stages are related to the two polar visions for a simple reason. When the process of democratic majority formation is completed at an early stage, complexity is reduced; when it is postponed to a later stage, complexity increases. The first and last of these stages thus correspond roughly to the two polar visions, while the two intermediate stages can be understood as attempts to achieve some normative balance (Ganghof 2015a). We will see that these two intermediate stages also dominate the actual political processes of advanced parliamentary democracies. The following considers each of the four models of majority formation in turn.

Party-centered majority formation

This corresponds roughly to the Westminster model or what I have called simple majoritarianism. It aims at completing majority-formation at the first stage: only two parties form, both of which need to be broad, long-term coalitions of different societal groups. If the winning party forms a majority cabinet and dominates the legislative process as a single veto player, the process of majority formation is essentially completed at the first stage. Cases like the United Kingdom or the Australian state of Queensland approximate this model.

Alliance-centered majority formation

There are multiple parties, but they group into two competing alliances before the election. One alliance gains a majority and dominates the legislative
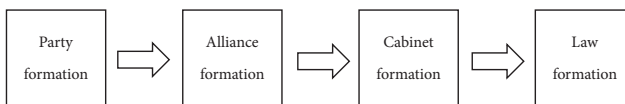

Fig. 5.1 Four stages of democratic majority formation
Source: adapted from Ganghof et al. (2015: 62).

process as a veto-player coalition. Majority formation is essentially completed at the second stage. Germany in the 1980s and 1990s approximates this model.

Cabinet-centered majority formation

Multiple parties compete separately in elections but form a fixed majority coalition afterwards. They establish each other as veto players and execute a joint coalition program, for which they take joint responsibility. Majority formation is essentially completed at the third stage. Finland approximates this model (Ganghof et al. 2015).

Legislature-centered majority formation

Multiple parties compete separately in elections and one of them forms a minority cabinet that builds issue-specific legislative coalitions in the legislature. These coalitions on specific laws or issues complete the process of democratic majority formation. Denmark approximates this model to some extent (see "How parliamentary government constrains issue-specific decision-making").

While the polar models of completing majority formation at the first or the last stage may seem attractive under idealized conditions, they are associated with significant risks and difficult to stabilize in practice—especially under pure parliamentary government. I discuss these risks and difficulties for both visions in turn.

The limits and perils of simple majoritarianism

In a complex world with multiple dimensions of political conflict, a two-party system is difficult to create and maintain. The attempt to do so creates a number of risks. I will focus on biased representation, power concentration, and affective polarization. It is important to keep in mind that the following discussion is about the *ideal* of simple majoritarianism—as espoused, for example, by Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018)—and the implied normative justification of electoral institutions. I make no empirical claims about why certain electoral institutions were chosen or have been maintained in particular countries (see, e.g. Colomer 2018).

Note first that a two-party system *in the assembly* would be easy to engineer. For example, we could allow voters to choose between party lists in a single, jurisdiction-wide electoral district. If no party achieved an absolute majority in the first voting round, a second round (or "run-off") between the two top parties could determine the winner. These two parties would gain assembly seats in proportion to their final vote shares. The problem with this kind of system is that it would not only concentrate a lot of political power in the elite of the two winning parties, but it would probably also fail to reduce the number of parties that participate and gain votes in the first round. Voters' cognitive burden would still be high.

Partly for this reason, proponents of simple majoritarianism defend the practice of electing representatives in single-seat districts (SSD), preferably under plurality rule (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). They hope that this type of majoritarian electoral system will reduce the number of candidates and lead to the same two-party system in each district. Yet this hope rarely turns into reality (Dunleavy and Diwakar 2013; Kollman 2018; Moser et al. 2018). In parliamentary systems such as Canada, India, or the United Kingdom, SSD-plurality elections do not generate two-party systems, certainly not in terms of voters' choices. The ideal of simple majoritarianism can therefore have important negative consequences in the real world.

Biased representation

One is that SSDs tend to severely bias democratic representation. This happens even when district boundaries are drawn in a fair way—which they often are not (McGann et al. 2016). Many votes for a party can be wasted when they are located in districts where a party normally wins with large majorities. This has been a particular problem for left parties, whose voters are concentrated in urban areas (Rodden 2019). Partly as a result of this fact, two-thirds of post-war (1945–2003) governments in SSD systems were right or center-right, whereas the distribution of governments under PR was rather balanced (Döring and Manow 2015). A related problem is that SSD systems can lead to a large number of districts that are uncompetitive and thus "safe" for a particular party.

Within the logic of simple majoritarianism, some of these problems could in principle be tackled by creating larger electoral districts designed to be "microcosms of the country itself" and thus allowing parties "to stand for the nation's average voter" (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018: 238–239). However,

the geography of modern societies makes this extremely difficult, if not impossible. Taken to its logical extreme, simple majoritarianism might require the random assignment of voters to nonterritorial districts (Rehfeld 2005).

Power concentration

Another potential consequence of SSD-plurality elections is the concentration of power. In contrast with other studies (e.g. Bernauer and Vatter 2019), I do not see power concentration as a part of any democratic *ideal*. After all, if the ideal of simple majoritarianism could be approximated in the real world, power concentration would be limited by the fact that (a) electoral districts are microcosms of the country; (b) the winning party has an absolute majority in the electorate and in parliament; and (c) this party is itself a long-term coalition of different groups (Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). In reality, though, SSD often allow an electoral plurality—and sometimes even an electoral minority—to win a majority of seats in parliament and dominate the legislative process. The ideal of simple majoritarianism then degenerates into "pluralitarian" democracy (Nagel 1998; Santucci 2020).

Further power concentration can result from the attempt to process multidimensional political conflicts within, rather than between, separate parties. To see this, consider how Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018) describe the underlying ideal. They emphasize that, while two-party competition necessarily involves coalition-building between different groups and interests within the catchall parties, these coalitions are built and maintained for the long term—as opposed to the short-term interparty coalitions in multiparty systems. Their hope is that the leadership of this long-term coalition "implements the policy that maximizes the joint utility of the groups from which it draws its electoral support" (Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006: 253). Rosenbluth and Shapiro (2018: 35) compare these intra-party coalitions to marriages, while likening inter-party coalitions to hookups.

Yet the quality of relationships depends not only on their time horizon, but also on the control that participants have over it. Inter-party coalitions tend to give their member groups greater control through the ever-present exit option, while intra-party coalitions tend to delegate a lot of power to the party leadership. Maybe this leadership has good incentives in a unidimensional conflict space—for example, the incentive to represent a society's median voter. In a multidimensional space, though, a skilled party elite can maneuver in ways that different voter groups can hardly track and are incapable of controlling.

It can engineer logrolls across dimensions, and strategically reconfigure these logrolls over time. As a result, it may be able to implement far-reaching changes *against the preferences of a voter majority*. And since the entry of new parties is heavily restricted by the electoral system, voters may not have any plausible way to sanction this behavior at the ballot box (McGann 2013). Jack Nagel (1998) brilliantly analyzed this form of hidden, elite-driven minority rule in New Zealand before the move to PR. He concludes that the "facade of majority government too often conceals a logrolled reality of minorities rule over specific policies" (Nagel 2012: 9–10). If one-party majority government is like a marriage, it may involve quite a bit of marital domination and neglect.

Polarization

Another potential consequence of trying to represent multidimensional voter preferences with only two parties is social and affective polarization. The parties tend to be pushed towards bundling separable issues into heterogeneous and incoherent platforms, shaped more by the underlying political geography of modern societies than any logical relationship between the different issues (Rodden 2019, 2020; see also Drutman 2020). The resulting programmatic heterogeneity and incoherence within the parties also imply that voters' cognitive burden might not, in effect, be lower than in a multiparty system—and more susceptible to systematic misinformation. Both parties have incentives to focus their campaign resources on providing voters with targeted information about the *most extreme* positions within the *other* party, rather than accurate information about their own platform (Cox and Rodden 2019). As a result of such "demonization," voters feel distant to the out-party and increasingly hostile towards its supporters, while not feeling close to their preferred party either.[10] Some long-term marriages make everyone miserable.

Intensified polarization can also become a danger to democracy, as polarized voters become more willing to turn a blind eye on democratic backsliding as long as it helps their own side (Graham and Svolik 2020; Przeworski 2020). By contrast, when multiple parties stake out distinct positions in a multidimensional space, they make it easier for voters to find parties they feel close to, and they allow for the formation of parties and coalitions that bridge

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[10] The demonization of the other party may be more likely when a two-party system exists in the context of a presidential system of government (Cox and Rodden 2019).

the geographical divide of modern political societies, at least to some extent (Rodden 2019, 2020).

The limits and perils of complex majoritarianism

Complex majoritarianism rejects any constraints on the number of parties and envisions issue-specific inter-party coalitions in a multidimensional conflict space. This polar vision of democratic majority formation, too, is difficult to approximate in the real world and is associated with specific risks. I will first discuss these difficulties and risks in general terms and then with a specific focus on the constraints of a parliamentary system of government.

Dealing with complexity

Complexity may overwhelm voters (Carey and Hix 2011: 385). A greater number of options and a greater dimensionality of political positions may lead them to learn less about these options, to use problematic heuristics, to commit voting errors, or to abstain from voting altogether (see Cunow et al. 2021 and the literature cited therein). Complexity also reduces clarity of responsibility, which may have a number of negative consequences, for example, reduced turnout or increased corruption (Park et al. 2019; Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits 2016). Responsibility becomes particularly hard to assign when coalitions are formed in an issue-specific manner (Ganghof 2016b).

The complexity of multiparty politics in a multidimensional conflict space may also overwhelm parties' capacities for coordination and compromise. Much-discussed risks include lengthy and failed attempts at forming governments, unstable governments, legislative deadlock, and particularistic or clientelistic legislative deals that externalize the costs of decision making to excluded groups (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). Complexity might also become a danger for democracy itself, for example, by making it too difficult for the opposition of would-be authoritarians to coordinate effectively (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018: Chapter 11).

Parties can choose strategies of coalition-building and majority formation that may reduce complexity and facilitate effective coordination, but these strategies will often lead them away from the ideal of issue-specific decision-making. This ideal is sometimes formulated in terms of highly simplified analytical models, in which uncertainty and transaction costs play no role

(Ward and Weale 2010; see also Lupia and McCubbins 2005). In the real world, political actors' interest in reducing transaction costs and making legislative processes more routine and predictable may lead them to build a fixed majority coalition that legislates on all issues.[11] One way in which such a coalition may facilitate compromise and decision-making is logrolling (de Marchi and Laver 2020). This means that parties trade issue positions: Party A accepts party B's position on an issue B cares strongly about, and B returns the favor on an issue A cares strongly about.[12]

How parliamentary government constrains issue-specific decision-making

While actors may try to limit issue-specific majority formation under any form of government (see, e.g. Chaisty et al. 2018: 46), parliamentarism subjects them to specific constraints. Since the assembly has the task of keeping the cabinet in office, parties face strong incentives to stabilize governments by building majority coalitions of veto players (Tsebelis 2002). This can be actual majority coalitions or minority cabinets with formalized majority support in the legislature (Strøm 1990). In both cases, issue-specific majority formation becomes more difficult or is ruled out completely. The majority coalition is typically fixed as long as the cabinet is in office, which tends to lead to better legislative performance (Thürk 2021).

Issue-specific legislative coalitions become more likely when parties build "substantive" minority cabinets—those that lack formalized majority support in the assembly (Strøm 1990; Ward and Weale 2010: 26). Even then, however, the resulting flexibility in legislative coalition-building remains constrained by parliamentarism. Since each cabinet party tends to be a veto player on all issues, flexibility is greatest when substantive minority cabinets are formed by a *single party* (Tsebelis 2002: 97–99).[13] But such cabinets are rare, especially in fragmented and multidimensional party systems. In the data set used in

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[11] Much of the political science literature suggests that issue-specific decision-making must be enforced through specific institutional structures; e.g. the delegation of decision-making power to committees or ministries that have exclusive jurisdiction over particular issues (Laver and Shepsle 1996; Shepsle 1979).

[12] A more technical question is whether actors' preferences are separable; that is, whether their ideal policy on one dimension is unaffected by the outcome on another (for a discussion of this "separability" requirement, see Ward and Weale 2010: 33–34).

[13] As Ward and Weale (2010: 26) note, this is not necessarily the case. An important example is Denmark in the 1980s, when a liberal-conservative minority cabinet consisting of four parties lost more than hundred final voting decisions and accepted an "alternative," center-left majority on certain issues (Damgaard and Svensson 1989). But such a constellation is exceptional.

this book, they account for only 7% of all cabinets (20 of 285).[14] Most of them were formed in systems with moderate to high mechanical disproportionality and/or relatively few effective parties. In systems with high mechanical proportionality and many parties, substantive one-party minority cabinets formed only in Norway (but not after 2000) and once, for 17 months, in Denmark (in 2015).[15] Such minority cabinets are rare, in part, because they tend to be more fragile. Comparative research shows that the substantive nature of minority cabinets tends to decrease government stability (Krauss and Thürk 2021). The rarity of substantive one-party minority cabinets reflects the constraints of parliamentary government, and so does the resulting lack of legislative flexibility.[16]

In addition, the logic of parliamentarism makes it difficult to clearly *legitimize* a substantive one-party minority cabinet in a fragmented parliament. When there are several larger parties, none of which holds a majority of seats, which one should have the right to form a one-party minority cabinet? A common answer may be the party with the most votes, but this party may be intensely disliked by the voters of other parties. It might even be the "Condorcet loser," meaning that it would lose pairwise majority contests against every other party. Since the parliamentary system does not separate the selection of the government from the assembly elections, there is no way for voters to legitimize a single-party minority cabinet directly.

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[14] These numbers are for the period 1993–2018 and include the semi-parliamentary systems (see appendix). They exclude Switzerland's non-parliamentary system.

[15] Thürk (2020: 7, 222) also notes how the relative frequencies of different types of minority cabinets have changed. While important studies emphasize the prevalence of single-party (Strøm 1990; Tsebelis 2002: 97) and substantive minority cabinets (Crombez 1996), the share of supported and multiparty minority cabinets has increased over time.

[16] To be sure, specific constitutional rules can stabilize substantive minority cabinets, but they can also make the formation of such cabinets more difficult. This is most obvious in the case of a "constructive" no-confidence vote that requires the election of a new cabinet by absolute majority in order to dismiss the existing one. This rule makes the formation of a minority cabinet *between elections* more difficult, as opposition parties cannot facilitate this formation by abstaining. The rules for government formation after an election could be more permissive, but differing requirements for cabinet formation after and between elections may not be easy to justify. Sieberer (2015) shows that restrictive no-confidence procedures tend to go hand in hand with restrictive investiture procedures. Spain's constitution is somewhat exceptional in this regard. It requires an absolute majority for a constructive no-confidence vote but only a simple majority in the second round of an investiture vote (Ajenjo 2015; Cheibub et al. 2021). Even in this case, though, the constructive no-confidence vote may work against (single-party) minority cabinets. Since opposition parties can anticipate the difficulty of removing a minority cabinet, they may be hesitant to support it—by voting for it or abstaining—in an investiture vote. After the Spanish elections in April 2019, the conditions for a single-party minority cabinet were in many ways very favorable (Field 2016, 2019), but the left-wing Unidas Podemos demanded inclusion into the government, which resulted in a failed attempt to invest a Socialist minority cabinet and new elections in November 2019. After these elections, the Socialists finally agreed to a minority coalition, thus establishing Unidas Podemos as a veto player and reducing the potential for issue-specific coalitions.

Normative balancing strategies under parliamentarism

Having sketched the difficulties and risks of the two polar visions, we can now better understand why many parliamentary democracies may try to position themselves between the extremes. To achieve some normative balance, they can essentially choose one of the two intermediate models of majority formation in Figure 5.1.

Alliance-centered majority formation

This strategy defends the goals of simple majoritarianism, while allowing for some substantial degree of proportional representation. The central requirement is that there be multiple proportionally elected parties which group into two competing alliances *before* the election. If this grouping is successful, voters can make a clear choice between two cabinet alternatives (Shugart 2001). Pre-electoral alliances may also improve retrospective clarity of responsibility by creating "tighter bonds" between the parties (Powell 2000: 53), and these tighter policy bonds may stabilize cabinets. Electoral systems of the mixed-member proportional or the bonus-adjusted proportional type have been justified as institutions that fit and support this alliance-centered model (Renwick et al. 2009; Shugart and Wattenberg 2003).

This approach to normative balancing has obvious limits, though, as multiple parties must essentially behave like two parties. Such behavior may be more likely to arise when there is only a single dimension of conflict (Ganghof et al. 2015). Pre-electoral coalitions limit individual parties from staking out a clear policy profile in a multidimensional issue space (e.g. Christiansen and Damgaard 2008: 69). For pre-electoral alliances to be credible, they must also continue after the election and are thus incompatible with the issue-specific or policy-specific formation of legislative coalitions. The normative balance achieved by the alliance-centered model is demanding and remains tilted towards simple majoritarianism.

Cabinet-centered majority formation

The second balancing strategy is rarely discussed as such in political science (but see Ganghof et al. 2015). It allows multiple, proportionally elected parties to compete independently in a multidimensional space, while also

encouraging them to build a stable majority coalition of veto players after the election.[17] In this way, elements of complex majoritarianism (PR and multidimensional competition) can be balanced with those of simple majoritarianism (collective responsibility of the coalition, as well as cabinet stability). This sort of balancing may be facilitated by certain constitutional rules of cabinet formation and termination. The requirement of voting the government into office with an absolute majority provides incentives to build majority cabinets (Bergman 1993; Cheibub et al. 2021; Sieberer 2015), and a "constructive" no-confidence vote helps to stabilize cabinets once they are formed (Bergmann et al 2021; Lento and Hazan 2021).

This strategy is limited in that it rules out the most demanding goals of each of the polar visions. Since government formation depends on post-election bargaining, voters cannot choose the government directly; and since majority cabinets tend to establish each cabinet party as veto player on all issues, there is not much flexibility in legislative majority formation. If a constructive no-confidence vote is used to stabilize cabinets, parliaments' power vis-à-vis the cabinet is also substantially weakened (Sieberer 2015). Finally, clarity of responsibility is reduced because voters cannot easily observe cabinet parties' relative influence on government policy (Martin and Vanberg 2020).

The need for mechanical disproportionality

There is a further limitation that the two balancing strategies have in common. They both require a constraint on the (effective) number of parties in parliament and government. In the alliance-centered model, this constraint helps to maintain unidimensional competition and facilitates the formation of two comprehensive alliances. In the cabinet-centered model, fewer parties reduce the cognitive burden for voters and increase clarity of responsibility as well as cabinet stability. Some degree of mechanical disproportionality in the electoral system (e.g. in the form of a moderate legal threshold) seems necessary for normative balancing.

For many authors, the resulting reduction in mechanical proportionality is not much of a problem because they care mainly about how proportionally *actual* votes are translated into seats (e.g., Carey and Hix 2011). If some degree of mechanical disproportionality deters voters from voting for small parties, this is as it should be. Strategic voting helps to limit the number of parties

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[17] This can be multiparty majority cabinets or formal minority cabinets (Strøm 1990).

without reducing observed proportionality too much. Carey and Hix (2011) argue for electoral systems with a moderate district magnitude; that is, with a moderate number of members elected in each electoral district. They estimate the sweet spot to be between three and eight members.

But this argument has limits, too. The evidence shows that even in the electoral sweet spot, the most likely outcome is to have either few parties or high observed proportionality, not both (Carey and Hix 2011; Linhart et al. 2018; Raabe and Linhart 2018; St-Vincent et al. 2016: 8). In addition, proponents of complex majoritarianism insist that mechanical proportionality is what matters. It differs from other goals in that it can reasonably be seen as having intrinsic democratic value (see Chapter 4). In any case, reducing mechanical proportionality shifts the overall balance towards simple majoritarianism.

The empirics of normative balancing

To explore the patterns of democratic majority formation empirically, I focus on a sample of 22 advanced democracies in the period 1993–2018 (see appendix). It includes pure parliamentary systems, semi-presidential systems, and the Swiss assembly-independent system. Switzerland is included because there is a single chain of delegation from voters via parliament to government—and because this inclusion allows us to see the consequences of cabinets that cannot be dismissed in a no-confidence vote. For the semi-presidential systems, I focus on their parliamentary aspects, as explained in more detail below. The parliamentary system of Queensland is included as the only subnational system because it serves as a contrast case for the analysis of the semi-parliamentary Australian states in Chapter 6.

Operationalizing the two visions

I operationalize each vision in terms of three central goals, which are derived from the above discussion as well as the previous literature, not least the literature on the advantages of presidentialism (Cheibub 2006, 2007; Ganghof and Eppner 2019; Lijphart 2012; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Powell 2000; Shugart and Carey 1992; Shugart 2001; Strøm 2000). I briefly discuss each goal and summarize their operationalization in Table 5.1 (see appendix for details). Second chambers are taken into account in this operationalization whenever

Table 5.1 Operationalizing the two visions of democratic majority formation

Simple majoritarianism	Complex majoritarianism
Identifiability measures how much votes are concentrated on the two biggest competing parties or pre-electoral blocs and whether the cabinet is based on a single party or bloc.	**Proportionality** is the log of the effective district magnitude.
Clarity of responsibility is a duration-weighted measure of cabinet types, where cabinets are ranked according to the clarity of responsibility they create.	**Multidimensionality** measures the "effective" number of dimensions, based on a factor analysis of issue-specific party positions.
Cabinet stability relates the average term length of cabinets to the constitutional maximum.	**Legislative flexibility** is a duration-weighted ranking of cabinet types, based on their potential for issue-specific coalition-building between parties.

Source: See appendix for details of data sources.

they are directly elected and matter for the achievement of the respective goal.[18]

1. The pre-electoral *identifiability* of cabinet alternatives captures the extent to which voters can directly choose between two cabinet alternatives (Strøm 1990; Powell 2000: 71–76). Under parliamentarism, perfect identifiability requires that voters face a choice between only two parties or alliances and that the winning side forms the cabinet. Since we are here focused on the parliamentary system, the potential role of directly elected presidents in creating identifiability under semi-presidentialism is neglected. This role is discussed further in Chapter 9.

2. Retrospective *clarity of responsibility* is generally considered to depend on the number of parties in government, whether the government has majority status in the first or only chamber of the assembly, and whether it faces additional veto players (Powell 2000: 50–67; Schwindt-Bayer and Tavits 2016). It is greatest when a single cabinet party controls all institutional veto points.

3. The relevance of *cabinet stability* is largely derived from the previous two goals (Powell 2000: 61). If an identifiable cabinet alternative is voted

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[18] Italy's Senate is not wholly directly elected. It is treated as such here because the institutions of parliamentary democracy are fully extended to the Senate (see Chapters 3 and 7).

into office but soon replaced by some other coalition without new elections, the potential gains of identifiability are likely to be lost. And even if new cabinets are empowered by new elections, frequently changing cabinets make it more difficult for voters to see who is responsible for policy outcomes.

4. *Mechanical proportionality* requires that x% of the votes of any party—real and hypothetical—is translated into x% of seats. As discussed in Chapter 4, it is the only one of the six goals that can also be valued in purely procedural terms, rather than as a means to an end. It is here approximated with the (logged) effective district magnitude (see appendix).[19]

5. The *multidimensionality* of party positions is measured as the effective number of dimensions based on expert surveys of party positions (Benoit and Laver 2006; Ganghof et al. 2018). It is an imperfect proxy, as we would ideally measure the extent to which formal institutions suppress potential multidimensionality. The actual measure may also capture differences in the societies' conflict structures.

6. *Legislative flexibility* is measured based on a ranking of cabinet types and the differences between forms of government. It is greatest under assembly-independent government in Switzerland, as explained above. In parliamentary systems, it depends on the majority status of the cabinet (substantive minority cabinets being more flexible) and the number of veto players in the cabinet (single-party minority cabinets being more flexible).[20]

Empirical results

Table A.1 in the appendix provides the cases' average values for these six variables in the period 1993–2018. Here, I focus on the broader picture by averaging the three standardized variables for each vision. The resulting summary scores for simple and complex majoritarianism are standardized so that the average value is zero and one unit corresponds to one standard deviation. Figure 5.2 shows these scores together with a linear regression line.

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[19] I do not claim that this is the best way to measure mechanical proportionality. The important point is to focus on formal institutions. An alternative measurement might be based on Taagepera's (2007) seat product. See Li and Shugart (2016), as well as Shugart and Taagepera (2017).

[20] As discussed above, single-party majority cabinets may have a lot of flexibility in intra-party majority formation. Here, the focus is on flexibility in inter-party coalition-building.
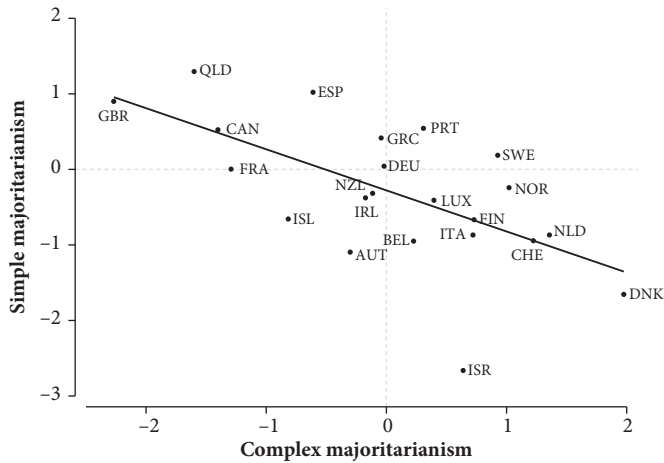
Fig. 5.2 Simple versus complex majoritarianism in 22 democracies, 1993–2018

Notes: see text.

The figure provides two main insights. First, we see the expected trade-off between the goals of simple and complex majoritarianism. No country can simultaneously achieve high values on both dimensions; Portugal and Sweden are the only cases to have above-average values. Second, most countries do have intermediate locations on the trade-off line. The two polar visions are not easy to approximate.

Israel is an obvious outlier, with very low values on simple majoritarianism. This outlier status is partly rooted in the country's electoral system (Shugart 2021) but solely driven by low cabinet stability. Israel's scores on identifiability and clarity of responsibility are low, too, but similar to those of Austria, Belgium, or Finland (see Table A.1 in the appendix). While its outlier status should thus not be over-interpreted, the case of Israel suggests that some countries may pay a higher price for complex majoritarianism than others.

Note also that we only recognize this outlier status if we aggregate the goals of the two visions separately. The comparison with Lijphart's (2012) approach is interesting here. The regression line in Figure 5.2 captures something rather close to his "executives-parties" dimension, but separating the goals of the two visions allow us to distinguish cases like Israel and Finland. While these two cases achieve similar values on the executives–parties dimension (Lijphart 2012: 244) and complex majoritarianism, they differ substantially with respect to simple majoritarianism. Israel is also one of the cases that "can only be described as having highly contentious and conflictual political cultures"
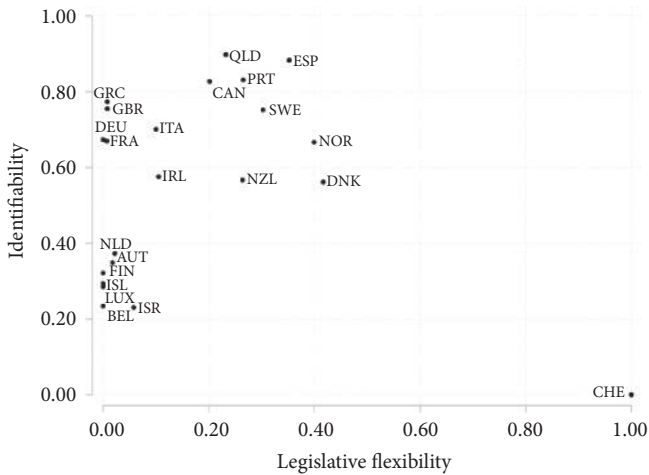
Fig. 5.3 Identifiability versus legislative flexibility in 22
democracies, 1993–2018

Notes: see text.

(Lijphart 2012: 302). This serves as a reminder that complex majoritarianism
does not measure any kind of consensus.

To analyze the results further, Figure 5.3 takes a separate look at the trade-
off between the two most ambitious goals of each polar vision—identifiability
and legislative flexibility—and provides several insights. First, and most im-
portantly, combining high values on both goals is empirically (and logically)
impossible under parliamentarism; there are no cases in the upper-right
quadrant.

Second, the figure highlights the unique position of Switzerland. Due to its
non-parliamentary form of government (i.e. a cabinet whose survival in office
does not depend on the assembly), it is the only case to achieve perfect flexibil-
ity without any veto players. The price to be paid for this flexibility is the lack
of any pre-electoral identifiability of competing cabinet alternatives: cabinet
composition is fixed prior to the election by the Magic Formula convention.

Third, Switzerland also puts the degree of legislative flexibility of the parlia-
mentary systems in perspective. Cases like Denmark have substantially lower
flexibility because minority cabinets typically consist of multiple parties with
veto-player status. As argued above, this is partly due to the inherent logic of
parliamentary government.[21]

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[21] Given Switzerland's legislative flexibility, one might wonder why its overall score on complex ma-
joritarianism is not higher. The main reason is that the data of Benoit and Laver (2006) suggests a
unidimensional conflict space. Other studies paint a similar picture (e.g. Rovny and Polk 2019).

Finally, among the parliamentary and semi-presidential systems in Figure 5.3, we can distinguish three clusters. The first approximates party-centered or alliance-centered forms of majority formation and thus achieves relatively high levels of identifiability at the cost of low legislative flexibility (Greece, Italy, United Kingdom, etc.). The second achieves neither of the two goals because majority formation is predominantly cabinet-centered (Austria, Finland, Israel, etc.).[22] The third cluster reconciles high identifiability with some degree of flexibility. It includes two types of cases: those whose electoral systems imply substantial mechanical disproportionality but whose governments frequently fail to achieve majority status (Canada, Spain, etc.), and those with high proportionality and frequent minority cabinets but also a fair degree of pre-electoral alliance formation (New Zealand and Scandinavia).

Conclusion

How can parliamentary systems of government balance competing design goals? To answer this question, I have distinguished two polar visions of democratic majority formation: simple and complex majoritarianism. Both visions embrace democratic majority rule but have different visions of how majorities ought to form. They reflect different approaches to the cognitive and coordinative complexity of modern politics. Under parliamentarism, the two visions can be spelled out in terms of the stages at which the process of majority formation is completed. Simple majoritarianism aims to complete this process early to keep things simple; complex majoritarianism prefers late completion to fairly represent all voters in actual deliberation and decision-making. In their extreme forms, however, both polar visions create significant risks and do not constitute very robust equilibria. Many parliamentary democracies achieve some degree of normative balancing by taking intermediate positions on the continuum from simple to complex majoritarianism, but they tend to give up on the most ambitious goals of each polar alternative. These democracies do not enable voters to make a clear electoral choice between competing cabinet alternatives, and they do not represent them fairly in the deliberation and legislative decision-making on specific issues or policy areas.

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[22] Recall that in semi-presidential systems with (in practice) strong presidents such as France, presidential elections may increase identifiability (although cognitive complexity remains high in the first round of presidential elections). This is not reflected in the data.