Our discussion of the institutions within which political parties operate continues in this chapter. Having described in Chapter 3 how parliaments are elected and how they work, we turn now to the rules for cabinet formation. We need to understand that most European democracies have a parliamentary system in which the cabinet with a prime minister or chancellor at its head is appointed by the parliament. Besides the prime minister or chancellor, there are individual cabinet members responsible for foreign affairs, national defense, education, agriculture, and so on. There are also some semipresidential systems with a president elected by the people and a prime minister appointed by parliament. We will illustrate such systems with the case of France. At the level of the European Union (EU), we have neither a parliamentary nor a semipresidential system but a very complex interaction among the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council, and the Council of Ministers, all to be explained in Chapter 14.

Sometimes parliamentary systems are unstable, but we will show that this is by far not always the case. In fact, cabinet formation may take many different forms, and we will illustrate this with examples from Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, and France. In the United States, the president, as head of the executive branch, holds also the symbolic role of head of state. In Europe this is different—the prime minister or chancellor is not head of state; this role belongs to a monarch or a civilian president.

In the United States, the relationship between the legislative and executive branches of government is characterized by a system of checks and balances. The president, as chief executive, is elected not by Congress but directly by the people—if we disregard the aspect of the Electoral College. Congress cannot oust the president with a vote of no-confidence. The only exception, impeachment, is very different from a vote of no-confidence. On the other hand, the president cannot dissolve Congress and call for early elections.

Most European democracies have a parliamentary system with rules that are fundamentally different from those of the American presidential system. The most important characteristic of the parliamentary system is that the executive is selected by the parliament and depends on the confidence of parliament for survival. The voters elect their parliament, which is, therefore, the sole body that can claim to represent the will of the people in a direct way. The ways in which presidential and parliamentary systems relate voters to the legislative and executive branches of government are presented in Figure 4.1.

The executive branch in a European parliamentary system is the cabinet, which is headed by a prime minister whose role is very different from that of the U.S. president. (Depending on the country, the prime minister may have the title of chancellor.) In the United States, cabinet members are appointed by the president and serve at his pleasure.
Some cabinet members may come from the Congress; however, if they accept a cabinet position, they must give up their seat in Congress.

In a parliamentary system, leading members of parliament form the cabinet. The prime minister is merely the first of the team—hence the term prime minister, or in Latin *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The rule is that the prime minister and the other ministers retain their seats and voting rights in parliament while serving in the cabinet. There are, however, a few exceptions to this rule. In Switzerland, Norway, and the Netherlands, cabinet members are required to give up their parliamentary seats. There are also exceptions to the rule that cabinet members are selected from the parliament. Especially in crisis situations, it may happen that persons with high reputations from outside parliament are asked to serve in the cabinet. This was, for example, the case in Italy during a severe crisis in 1993, when the president of Italy’s central bank was called in as prime minister.

Within any particular cabinet, the prime minister’s role may be stronger or weaker, depending on the individual’s personality and the overall political circumstances. Legal authority also plays a role. In Germany, for example, the chancellor is particularly strong because he or she has the legal authority to give directives to other cabinet members. This authority is not available in many other countries, where the prime minister must rely on more informal means to exert influence.

A new cabinet must win a vote of confidence in parliament. In some countries an explicit vote of confidence is not necessary. In such cases, the cabinet is formally appointed by the head of state—for example, by the queen in Great Britain—and it is assumed that the cabinet has the confidence of parliament unless the latter explicitly expresses its lack of confidence. This technicality does not change the basic fact that the cabinet depends on the confidence of parliament. In a vote of confidence, party discipline is imposed. If a member of parliament breaks party discipline in a vote of confidence, this is likely to lead to severe sanctions and, in some cases, even expulsion from the party. To understand the vote of confidence, we must understand that the relevant
actors are not individual members of parliament, but the parties. The question is not how individual X, but how party X, will vote.

Just as parliament gives its confidence to the cabinet, it may withdraw this confidence at any time. The only formality required is a vote of no-confidence, which is a political act and does not imply that the cabinet has done something improper or illegal. Thus, a vote of no-confidence is very different from impeachment in the United States. An impeached and convicted U.S. president leaves political life in disgrace, whereas a prime minister whose cabinet loses a vote of confidence usually stays on as a member of parliament. He or she even may continue to play a leadership role, for example, as head of the opposition. How parliaments handle votes of confidence and no-confidence varies greatly from country to country. The most influential factor is whether a single party controls a majority in parliament and is thus able to form a cabinet of its own.

Before we begin our overview, a clarification is necessary for Americans who wish to read European newspapers. In Europe the cabinet is often called the “government”; in Great Britain, for example, one speaks of the government of Gordon Brown. In French the term is gouvernement. In the United States, by contrast, the term government has a much broader meaning, referring not only to the executive branch, but also to all three branches together. When Americans mean “government” in the European sense, they often speak of the administration, such as the Obama administration. When Europeans speak of the administration, they mean the state bureaucracy. These semantic differences show that often it is not easy for either Americans or Europeans to read newspapers from the other side of the Atlantic.

**SINGLE-PARTY MAJORITY CABINETS**

In this section we discuss situations in which a single party possesses an absolute majority (50 percent + 1) in parliament and forms the cabinet alone. Great Britain is the classic example of this situation, and we use it as our illustration. In Great Britain, general elections usually give an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons to either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. Since 1945, there have been only two brief exceptions to this rule, both in the 1970s. The upper house of Parliament, the House of Lords, can be largely disregarded in the process of cabinet formation.

If one party has an absolute majority in the House of Commons, cabinet formation is straightforward because party discipline is imposed: The majority party simply forms a cabinet. This can be well illustrated by the events following the 2005 election, when Labour won 356 of the 646 seats (see Table 4.1). After this victory, it was clear that Labour would form the cabinet. Who would be the prime minister and the other cabinet members? For this question, we must distinguish between two situations: Either the winning party was already in power before the election, or it was in opposition. In 2005, Labour had been in power since 1997. In accordance with the idea of never changing a winning team, most members of the old cabinet, including the prime minister, Tony Blair, retained their positions. The second situation was illustrated in 1979, when the Conservatives, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, won the elections as the opposition party. In such cases, the concept of a shadow cabinet is important.
TABLE 4.1 Voter support and parliamentary seats in the 2005 general election to the British House of Commons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Voter Support (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>30.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


During the period of opposition, a party announces the names of members who would fill the various cabinet positions in the case of electoral victory. This cabinet-in-waiting is called the shadow cabinet. Its members act as spokespersons of their party in parliamentary debates. The shadow foreign minister, for example, confronts the actual foreign minister in debates on foreign affairs. This is a good training ground, because it gives the shadow foreign minister experience in foreign affairs should his or her party win the next election.

How can a member of Parliament advance in the party to become a member of the cabinet or the shadow cabinet? Because the House of Commons is very large, with more than 600 members, there will always be many more ordinary members than leaders. The leaders sit on the front benches to either side of the aisle—the government on the right side of the speaker and the opposition on the left side. The distance between the front benches is two swords plus one foot, a reminder of the long tradition of the House of Commons. The nonleaders must sit at the back and are therefore called backbenchers. How do backbenchers become leaders? They must prove themselves to their peers in Parliament. If this is done successfully, they may one day rise to a cabinet position and, ultimately, perhaps even to the prime ministership.

In order to become prime minister, one must first be party leader. The two major parties have different rules of how they elect their leaders. These internal party rules are changed quite often. The current rules for the Conservatives are that as a first step there is a nominating process among the Conservative members of Parliament (MPs), whereby two candidates are nominated. In a second step these two names are submitted to ordinary party members. In contrast to American parties, British parties have members who formally enroll in the party and pay an annual fee (see Chapter 3), as is done when joining any club or association. Whoever of the two candidates wins the most votes among party members is elected party leader. If the party is in government, the party leader becomes prime minister; if the party is in opposition, the party leader becomes leader of the opposition.

Labour also has a two-step election process. As for the Conservatives, for Labour, too, the nominating process begins in the parliamentary group. To be nominated, how-
ever, the rules are different. It is sufficient for a nomination to get the support of 12.5 percent of the Labour MPs. Thus, it is mathematically possible to have more than two nominations. In the second step, ordinary party members have one-third of the votes, another third goes to affiliated trade unions, and the last third to all Labour members of the House of Commons and the European Parliament (for the latter see Chapter 14). As we see, the selection process for the British prime minister is quite different from the one for the American president. What are the main differences? Are there also similarities? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the two selection processes?

If we compare the career path of a British prime minister with the usual path to the American White House, the differences are striking. Of the last six presidents, four became presidents without any prior Washington experience: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. All four, in fact, made beneficial use of the argument that they were not part of the Washington establishment. The elder Bush had much Washington experience before becoming president—for example, as head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)—but he had been in Congress for only a short period of time. Barack Obama was merely a first-term senator. Thus, none of the last six presidents had established a long and distinguished career in Congress. British prime ministers, by contrast, complete a long apprenticeship in the House of Commons before entering office. Which career path is preferable? An American president who comes from outside may have the advantage of bringing a “fresh wind” and a new outlook, but this advantage is countered by a lack of experience, which can be seen as a real disadvantage. As former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt notes:

> It remains a pity that the process of nominating and electing [an American] President does not pay any attention to their foreign political expertise or experience or ability. They have never been tested in it, whereas in a parliamentary system, people who make it to the top have been tested first.¹

Although a British prime minister first needs the support of his or her party colleagues in Parliament, broader support is also needed. A successful candidate must appeal to ordinary party members and, in the time of television, increasingly to the public at large. The latter aspect means that a British prime minister is becoming increasingly similar to the American president with regard to leadership style. Both have to be able to communicate well with the general public. Blair was very adept in this respect, while Brown is less charismatic as a public figure.

Differences between Great Britain and the United States are also striking with regard to the role of the opposition. In Great Britain, as long as the government party does not lose its majority through defections or losses in elections for vacant seats (by-elections), it can pursue whatever policies it chooses. In the Falkland Islands crisis of 1982, for example, the Labour Party had no means of impeding the war policy of the governing Conservatives. When the government decided to send warships to liberate the Falkland Islands from Argentine occupation, there was nothing that the opposition could do about it. Under the British system, the majority cabinet governs with an absolute mandate. This mandate is buttressed by the norm of collective responsibility, which is a uniquely British doctrine. It states that all members of the cabinet must support the official government line. If not, they must be willing to resign their posts. The purpose of this
doctrine is to signal to the people the unity of the government. One of the most spectacular resignations occurred during the buildup to the Iraq war when the leader of the House of Commons, Robin Cook, resigned from the cabinet on March 17, 2003, stating that he “cannot accept collective responsibility for the decision to commit Britain now to military action in Iraq without international agreement or military support.”

The function of a motion of no-confidence submitted by the opposition needs clarification. As long as the governing party controls an absolute majority of the parliamentary seats, such a motion has no chance of success. The governing party has enough votes to defeat such a motion, which will be supported only by the opposition. So why submit a motion of no-confidence to begin with? The purpose is not to topple the government but to give the opposition the opportunity to say what it finds wrong with the policies of the government and what it would do instead. The government, in turn, has the opportunity to defend its policies. In this way, the voters see the differences between the governing and the opposition parties. On election day the choices are thus clear: The voters can opt either for a continuation of the existing policies or for a change to the policies advocated by the opposition.

In order to understand why, in a vote of no-confidence, members of Parliament vote strictly along party lines, one has to understand the role of the so-called whip. Whips are members of Parliament who exercise supervisory functions. Headed by a chief whip, the whips must make sure that all their colleagues are present for an important vote, particularly for a motion of no-confidence. Because voting is public, they also see to it that everyone is following the party line. Both the governing party and the opposition have whips. The expression entered into the parliamentary vocabulary during the eighteenth century. It was taken from fox hunting, which was very popular at the time in the British upper class but is now illegal. The “whipper-in” had the task of keeping the hounds in the pack. The highest level of required party discipline is the three-line-whip, where the agenda point to be voted on in the House of Commons is, in a literal sense, underlined three times. MPs rarely deviate from the party line in order to take a position on an issue that is particularly popular in their district. Giacomo Benedetto and Simon Hix have investigated who the most likely party rebels are and whether their number has increased. The main finding is that former cabinet ministers and backbenchers without hope for promotion are most likely to vote against their party. These two groups are least likely to fear sanctions from the party leadership. Since the 1960s, the magnitude of internal party revolts has increased, although overall such revolts are still rare.

By contrast, in the United States, a congressperson’s first interest is his or her constituency, not his or her party. It is electoral success in the constituency that ensures political viability, not party loyalty. As a result, congresspersons have a tendency to first ensure the support of their constituency, oftentimes through inefficient, so-called pork-barrel projects (e.g., when a congressperson attaches a rider consisting of a post office, a bridge, or a highway to be built in her constituency to an omnibus bill) rather than by displaying party loyalty.

In the United States the distinction between governing and opposition parties is much less clear than in Great Britain. Prior to the 1996 American presidential elections, the Democrats controlled the White House and the Republicans controlled Congress, so that in the election campaign it was often unclear who could take credit and who was to
blame for governmental policies. This situation of divided government happened again after the 2006 midterm elections, this time with a Republican president confronting a Democratic Congress. In Great Britain, the governing party must take full responsibility for all government policies. As a consequence, the voters have a clear choice: continue with the governing party or oust it. Americans prefer to check and balance governmental power. Which system is more democratic, and what is the meaning of the term democratic in this context?

Although the executive branch in Great Britain, when compared to that in the United States, has more leeway to pursue long-term policies, its power should not be exaggerated. First, it must contend with powerful interest groups outside the House of Commons. Second, the British cabinet also must consider the wishes of its backbenchers; otherwise it might suddenly be faced with serious internal party rebellion. A good illustration is the ousting of Margaret Thatcher as prime minister in November 1990 after she had been in office since 1979. Thatcher was increasingly seen in her own party as arrogant and autocratic. As we have seen, British prime ministers are also leaders of their parties. They need to be reappointed on a yearly basis for this position, although this is usually a formality for a sitting prime minister. In November of 1990, however, Thatcher was challenged by her former defense minister, Michael Heseltine, who had been dismissed by Thatcher from his job in the cabinet and forced to take a seat on the backbenches. From there he began to organize an effective campaign against the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and stood as candidate against her. At the time, the Conservatives had the rule that the selection process was limited to its parliamentary group. In the first ballot Heseltine lost, but only narrowly, so that Thatcher did not reach the number of votes required by the party rules. She was still confident that she would win the second ballot, for which fewer votes were necessary to win. However, when important cabinet members told her that she might not have the necessary votes or even that they would personally vote against her, she withdrew her candidacy. In the second ballot, two other powerful party members entered the race: the foreign minister, Douglas Hurd, and the finance minister (the chancellor of the exchequer), John Major. Again there was no winner, but Major was very close, so the two other candidates withdrew in his favor and no third ballot was necessary. Thatcher was bitter, accepted from the queen the title of nobility “Lady,” and moved to the House of Lords.

Another example of the limited power of a British prime minister is of how Tony Blair was forced to resign in 2007. Blair was the strongest European supporter of the war in Iraq and was often ridiculed as a poodle of Bush. Blair came increasingly under attack from his own Labour Party, especially from its left wing. He was in a far more uncomfortable position than Bush who, after his reelection in 2004, could not be removed from office short of impeachment. Since Blair’s position as prime minister was based on his position as party leader, he risked being removed from his leadership position in the party as had happened to Thatcher. Blair found a more elegant way to leave office. In the fall of 2006, he announced that he would leave office within a year as party leader and, therefore, as prime minister. On May 10, 2007, Blair followed up on this promise and set June 27 as the date he would leave office. Thanks to this prolonged retirement phase, Blair was able to bring about substantial progress to the situation in Northern Ireland (Chapter 13) and to attain some other successes so that he could leave
office in relatively good standing. To make his announcement on May 10, 2007, Blair went to his electoral district where he had begun his career and which he still represented in the House of Commons. To great applause, he declared:

“So, I’ve come back here to Sedgefield, to my constituency, where my political journey began and where it’s fitting that it should end. Today I announce my decision to stand down from the leadership of the Labour Party. The party will now select a new leader. On the 27th June I will tender my resignation from the office of Prime Minister to the Queen. I’ve been Prime Minister of this country for just over 10 years. In this job, in the world of today, I think that’s long enough for me, but more especially for the country. And sometimes the only way to conquer the pull of power is to set it down.”

In contrast to the situation after Thatcher’s ousting, there was little competition after Blair. The chancellor of the exchequer (finance minister), Gordon Brown, had for a long time been the favorite to succeed Blair. Therefore, the succession process was more of a formality. There was only one other candidate, John McDonnell of the left wing of the Labour Party. Brown stood domestically pretty much where Blair stood, stressing more free market elements than the left wing of the party (Chapter 3). With regard to Iraq, however, Brown took his distance from Blair, calling the heavy involvement of Britain in the war an error. Brown, born in 1951, has a PhD from Edinburgh University. After some university teaching, he entered the House of Commons at the relatively young age of 32. He is the author of several scholarly books, including a book titled *Values, Visions, and Voices*.

As we have seen previously, to be nominated in the Labour Party as candidate for party leader, 12.5 percent of all Labour MPs are needed; in this situation, this meant 45 votes. Brown reached a superb result with 313 votes, while McDonnell attained a mere 29 votes and was therefore not nominated as candidate. Thus, Brown was the only candidate, but he still had to go through the second phase of the election process. Six candidates made the nomination as candidates for deputy party leader, so that the second phase still had some suspense. In the following weeks, Brown and the six candidates for deputy party leader had to confront ordinary party members in so-called hustings in various places in the United Kingdom. *Hustings* is an old-fashioned word for election platform; its usage shows the love of the British for traditions. Party members could ask questions in advance and, as a sign of modernity this time, on the Internet. At the hustings in Coventry on May 20, 2007, for example, a Robert Smith of Nottingham asked the following pertinent question: “How will you assure that Labour reconnects with voters who were lost as a result of the decision to go to war in Iraq?”

At a party convention in Manchester on Sunday, June 24, 2007, Gordon Brown was officially made party leader amid much warm applause. He accepted the election with the following statement: “It is with humility, pride and a great sense of duty that I accept the privilege and the great responsibility of leading our party and changing the country.” Brown expressed his basic political values as follows:

I am a conviction politician. My conviction that everyone deserves a fair chance in life. My conviction that each of us has a responsibility to each other. And my conviction that when the strong help the weak, it makes us all stronger.
With regard to Iraq, Brown cautiously distanced himself from Blair in stating that “We will meet our international obligations,” but pointedly adding that “we will learn lessons that need to be learned.” Domestically, Brown pledged to continue the moderate centrist course of Blair. On the one hand, he stated, “I believe in a British economy founded on dynamic, flexible markets and open competition. . . . If people think we will achieve our goals in the future by retreating to failed approaches of the past, then they have not learned the lessons I have learned from the past ten years.” On the other hand, Brown stressed that he will look out for the poor, in particular with regard to health care, education and housing, exclaiming, “As a party we have always known that we succeed best when we reach out to and engage the whole community. So here I stand proud of our Labour party but determined that we reach out to all people who can be persuaded to share our values and who would like to be part of building a more just society.” Exactly as scheduled and mentioned above, three days later, on June 27, Brown took over as prime minister from Tony Blair.

The cases of Thatcher and Blair show that the power of a British prime minister is not unlimited, even if she or he has a majority in Parliament. The real challenge comes not from the opposition party but from within her or his own party. It is interesting to note that during the November 1990 crisis, the Labour opposition submitted a motion of no-confidence against the government. As expected, according to the British rules of the game, party discipline among the Conservatives worked, and the motion was defeated. Submitting the motion gave Labour the chance to criticize the disarray of the government. Labour did not, however, expect to win the motion of no-confidence.

Typically in the British cabinet, there is an open, frank discussion concerning decisions to be made in which every cabinet member is heard, but the prime minister has the right to sum up the discussion. Votes are virtually never taken. Patrick Gordon Walker, a former member of the cabinet, describes an imaginary cabinet meeting. After a lengthy discussion, the prime minister sums up and concludes as follows: “Is the cabinet agreed with my summing up and the additional points made by the chancellor? (Silence, with a few muttered ‘agreed’).” This summing up gives quite a bit of power to the prime minister.

Finally, we must address the question of how the government party and the opposition party compete with each other in the British system. The normal pattern is that they both take a moderate position in the middle, where there are the most voters, as Great Britain has a unimodal distribution of the electorate, as depicted in Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3. Margaret Thatcher was a notable exception to this rule because she pursued very conservative policies. She had the ambition not simply to appeal to the preferences of the voters but to change these preferences. As we remember from Chapter 3, she was never able to attract a majority of the voters; she became prime minister only because the opposition was so badly split.

The Labour Party, too, at times, tried not simply to appeal to the existing preferences of the voters but to change these preferences. When in opposition after 1979, Labour advocated very leftist policies, insisting in particular on a strongly state-controlled economy. However, the party came to acknowledge that the financial “markets remained nervous about the possibility of a Labour victory . . . Labour did moderate its policies in an attempt to reassure markets.” At the forefront of these changes was Tony
Blair, who took over as leader of the party in 1994. Under his leadership, Labour abandoned its commitments to nationalization and dropped from its program the demand for “common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.” Blair hailed the day of this decision as “a day of destiny for our party and our country.” Blair also took up traditional Conservative values such as fighting crime. After his speech at the party convention in September of 1996, the British Union Jack was projected on the wall behind him, which emphasized that Labour was no longer willing to leave the theme of patriotism to the Conservatives.

A year after taking office, Gordon Brown was confronted with the global financial and economic crisis, which made it difficult for him to find the best policy position for the Labour government. On the one hand, he tried to stay with the third way in the middle; on the other hand, he had to intervene more often in the economy than he had promised when he took office. He was not successful with this balancing act and as a consequence lost more and more of his initial popularity. There was also a scandal of many MPs charging inappropriate personal expenses to taxpayers, a scandal that Brown did not handle well. In June 2009, in elections to the European Parliament, Brown’s Labour party suffered an embarrassing defeat, falling to 16 percent of voter support. The BBC had the headline: “Labour slumps to historic defeat.” This dismal result offers us a third illustration of how a party attempts to get rid of its prime minister, this time, however, unsuccessfully. A few cabinet ministers resigned and asked Brown to do the same, and this call came also from a fair number of Labour backbenchers. Brown, nevertheless, managed to survive. He reshuffled the cabinet, bringing in new cabinet members loyal to him. The rebellion in the backbenches was also not strong enough to topple him.

**MINIMAL-WINNING CABINETS**

In a parliamentary system, when no party controls a majority in parliament, the process of cabinet formation is very different from that in Great Britain. One possibility is the formation of minimal-winning cabinets, where as many political parties as are necessary form a coalition to attain a majority in parliament. In other words, all coalition partners are necessary to form the cabinet; there are no surplus members in the coalition. Should we not expect all cabinet coalitions to be of a minimal-winning size? What is a rationale for adding more parties than are necessary to win? Why include, say, a third party in a coalition if two parties have enough votes for a majority in parliament? As we will see in the next section, such oversized coalitions can and do occur.

Germany, since 1969, is a good illustration of how minimal-winning cabinets are formed. In the 1969 election to the Bundestag, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) received 242 seats, the Social Democrats (SPD) 224, and the Free Democrats (FDP) 30. The CDU/CSU felt that they had won the election, and they pondered the question of whether they should enter into a coalition with the SPD or with the FDP. They were shocked when late on the night of the election the SPD and the FDP announced that they had made a deal. With a combined 254 seats, these two parties were just above the necessary majority of 249, so they could win a vote of confidence in parliament. Legally, everything was in order, but a public debate began over whether the procedure
followed on election night was in accordance with the spirit of basic democratic principles. The question was raised whether excluding the party with the most votes from the cabinet violated the will of the electorate. The counterargument was that more voters had supported the SPD and the FDP together than the CDU/CSU alone, so the new cabinet was, in fact, based on the majority will of the people. What emerged from this debate was the informal rule that the voters should be informed of the coalition intentions of the various parties before the election. It should not be left to a few leaders to decide on election night what coalition is to be formed. In many other European democracies, however, such an informal rule does not exist; thus, the composition of the cabinet may still be decided by a few key leaders on election night.

In Germany, with the Greens emerging in the 1980s and maturing in the 1990s, it has not only become more difficult to say with whom a coalition will be formed but what the outcome of an election will be. For example, it was widely assumed that for the 1998 election, the CDU/CSU and SDP would form a grand coalition, until the actual results were in and the SDP and the Greens proved to be stronger than expected. This election result led to a rethinking of possible coalition partners and, having a numerical majority for a possible “red-green” coalition, momentum grew for the formation of such a coalition after the election. Indeed, such a coalition was promptly installed.

Similarly, during the short campaign in the summer of 2005, and particularly after the formation of the Linkspartei (Left Party), which consisted of a more leftist part that split off from the SPD and combined with the PDS (the Communist Party of former East Germany), it was assumed that the CDU/CSU would form a coalition with the FDP. Again, actual election results interfered with coalition plans made before the election: The CDU/CSU disappointed bitterly and even together with the FDP would not have had a majority of seats in the German Bundestag, obliterating all promises to form a CDU/CSU and FDP coalition. Finally, a grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and the SPD formed, and because the CDU/CSU was slightly larger than the SPD the chancellorship went to the former, with Angela Merkel of the CDU as chancellor. Since the late 1960s, the German party landscape has become much more variegated, making it very difficult to tell voters before an election takes place with whom large parties will form a coalition. For the September 2009 election, however, the old informal rule again applied. Before the election, the CDU/CSU and the FDP announced that they would form a coalition if together they would have enough votes. They indeed received together a majority, and, as announced, formed a coalition.

Another informal rule regarding cabinet formation developed from an episode in the fall of 1982 in the middle of a legislative period. The coalition of the SDP and the FDP was still in office, but there were increasing strains between the two coalition partners, especially over economic matters. Under the strong influence of its economics minister, the FDP advocated more free-market solutions, broke its coalition with the SPD, and entered into a coalition with the CDU/CSU. Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt was thus replaced as chancellor by Christian Democrat Helmut Kohl in a parliamentary vote. The reason Schmidt was ousted was not his unpopularity; on the contrary, opinion surveys indicated that Schmidt was more popular than Kohl at that time. The reason was that the FDP changed coalition partners. A public debate began as
to whether a small party should have the power to replace the chancellor in this way; after all, the FDP had campaigned in the parliamentary election of 1980 with the promise to continue their coalition with the SDP. Was this promise valid for the entire legislative period? Was it a betrayal of the voters to change coalition midcourse? The argument was made that a cabinet had been formed without due input by the voters. Early elections were demanded for such situations so the voters could decide. Kohl took this demand seriously, and in the spring of 1983 early elections took place. The coalition of the CDU/CSU and the FDP won and thus had a direct mandate from the voters. It seems likely that in the future, changes of coalitions will no longer occur without a prior election. This would be an informal rule supplanting the formal rule of the “constructive vote of no-confidence.” This is a special German feature that we do not find in any of the other countries discussed in this chapter. The constructive vote of no-confidence means a cabinet can be overthrown only if, with the same vote, a new cabinet is selected. Thus, a vote of no-confidence cannot merely be negative regarding the current cabinet, but also must be “constructive” in forming a new cabinet. This rule was applied in the 1982 change from the Schmidt to the Kohl cabinet. What the new informal rule seems to say is that for a change in cabinet, new parliamentary elections are preferred to the instrument of the constructive vote of no-confidence. This happened again in 2005 when the coalition of the SPD and the Greens was so weakened by the emergence of the Left Party that the coalition was no longer viable to govern in an effective way. The SPD/Green coalition was replaced, as noted, by a coalition of the CDU/CSU and the SPD—not with a constructive vote of no-confidence, but rather after early elections. The development of a set of widely accepted, informal rules for the process of cabinet formation was important for the stability of Germany. This contrasts with the Weimar Republic, before Hitler’s takeover, when deep disagreements existed about the very rules for cabinet formation. Today, the political elites by and large agree on how the game should be played.

One of the central features of parliamentary systems is that executive authority not only emerges from legislative authority, but that executive authority is also responsible to it. The vehicle by which this responsibility is carried out is enshrined in Article 68 of the German Basic Law (Grundgesetz), which allows for the chancellor to call for a vote of confidence. If it fails, the president can dissolve parliament and call for new elections. In the spring of 2005, Schröder lost on purpose a vote of confidence so that early elections could be called. The reason he asked members of his own party and the members of the Green Party to withdraw their support for his government was occasioned by the SPD’s defeat in the Land elections of North Rhine-Westphalia. Losing this election also meant that Schröder lost majority support in the German upper house, the Bundesrat. He lost this election due to the unwillingness of many voters in that region to go along with his plans to revamp the German welfare system, known as Agenda 2010, which would involve painful cuts in Germany’s hitherto generous welfare system. Using Article 68 of the Basic Law raised serious constitutional issues insofar as it was argued that losing a Land election does not constitute a sufficient reason to force a dissolution of Parliament. After all, his government still had a majority in the Bundestag, Germany’s lower house. In effect, Schröder asked members of his own ruling coalition to vote against him to ensure losing the vote of no-confidence, thereby forcing new
elections. Some constitutional theorists were concerned about this “insincere” use of Article 68. Nevertheless, the German Supreme Court eventually concurred with the decision of Parliament, and the German president, Horst Köhler, (see later in this chapter) also gave a green light for new elections to take place on September 18, 2005.

Once the seats were tallied, it was clear that five parties gained representation in the German parliament (Table 4.2). None of the “expected” combinations such as between the SPD and the Greens or between the CSU/CSU and the FDP gained enough seats to form a coalition based on a majority of seats. In the ensuing coalition negotiations, various options were entertained, such as a “traffic light” coalition (Red [SPD], Yellow [FDP], Greens), or a “Jamaica” coalition (Black [CDU/CSU], Yellow, Green—the colors of the flag of Jamaica). The central problem of such negotiations is not only the need to find a combination that ensures a majority, but also a majority of parties that can actually work together. Oftentimes, this automatically excludes particular combinations, such as a red-red-green combination. Neither of the two “red” parties (the SPD and the Linkspartei) was willing to share executive power with the other, as they had split up over major policy differences just a few months before the election.

Eventually, on October 10, 2005, three weeks after the election, negotiations over the formation of a grand coalition with the first female chancellor in German history, Angela Merkel, were initiated. In the tradition of parliamentary systems that the party with the highest vote share also gets to determine who becomes chancellor, for the CSU/CSU this meant yielding many important ministries to the SDP.

The grand coalition of the CDU/CSU and the SPD had to deal with the severe recession of 2008–2009, not a task that helped their popularity with voters. Both governing parties lost in the September 2009 election, SPD much more so than the CDU/CSU. The voter support for the SPD dropped from 34.2 to 23.0 percent, for the CDU/CSU from 35.2 percent to 33.8 percent. The big winner was the FDP increasing its voter support from 9.8 percent to 14.6 percent. As already mentioned, this allowed the formation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Voter Support (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives (CDU/CSU)</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>36.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Democrats</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Party</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Greens</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of a CDU/CSU and FDP coalition as desired by both sides. A majority in the Bun-
destag, however, was only reached because the CDU/CSU got 24 surplus seats, while
none of the other parties got any (for the concept of surplus seats see Chapter 3). As the
CDU/CSU was again the larger party in the coalition, Angela Merkel stayed on as chan-
cellor. At the left, the big story was the catastrophic defeat of the SPD while the Left
Party and the Greens won 3 percent and 2 percent respectively. One reason for the se-
vere defeat of the SPD was the drop in voter turnout from 77.7 percent to 70.8 percent.
Many former SPD voters stayed home, frustrated by the economic performance of their
party in the grand coalition. Other former SPD voters turned to the more radical Left
Party and the Greens, neither of which had any government responsibilities. The losses
of the CDU/CSU were less severe because Chancellor Merkel was personally popular,
taking a centrist position on many issues and projecting a motherly image. With the
FDP as her new coalition partner, she will have to move more to the right for economic
matters.

We have seen in this section that cabinet formation is more challenging in systems
that use proportional representation because there are usually a multitude of parties in
parliament. In Great Britain, with winner-take-all, cabinet formation is straightforward.
Whoever wins the election forms the cabinet. However, with a higher number of parties
gaining representation, cabinet formation becomes more complex. One option is to
form minimal-winning coalitions with just enough parties to win but not more.
Germany is a good illustration for this option. There has never been a coalition with sur-
plus coalition partners. Minimal winning can also be understood in a stricter way in the
sense that a coalition includes only as many individual members of Parliament as are
necessary to win. With this definition, the grand coalition of the CSU/CSU and SDP
from 2005 to 2009 was not minimal winning. To be sure, both parties were necessary to
reach a majority in Parliament. The coalition, however, included many more members
of Parliament than 50 percent + 1. By contrast, the 1969 coalition of the SDP and the
FDP was not only minimal winning with regard to the number of parties but almost also
with regard to the number of members of Parliament since it included 254 members,
barely above the required majority of 249. Another classical minimal-winning coalition
in both senses was formed in Ireland after the 2007 elections (Chapter 3). Fianna Fáil
with 78 seats and the Greens with six seats formed a coalition. With 84 seats together,
they had just enough votes to control an absolute majority in the 166-member Irish par-
liament.

Oversized cabinets

Although they do not occur often, certain circumstances encourage the formation of
oversized coalition cabinets. Oversized cabinets include more coalition partners than
are necessary to attain a majority in parliament. Switzerland shall help to illustrate the
concept of oversized coalitions. Switzerland is the only system in Europe where once a
government (called the Federal Council) is set up by the legislature, the legislature can-
not dissolve it. The members of the government are elected individually by the legisla-
ture for the entire legislative period of four years. Thus, in Switzerland, unlike in a
regular parliamentary system, the government is not responsible to the legislature, at least not in a formal way. Thus, the term of responsible government as previously explained does not apply to Switzerland. Of course, in order to pass legislation, the government still depends on the support of the legislature, but the legislature has no way to withdraw the confidence from the government and thus topple it.

The cabinet is elected in a joint session of both houses of parliament. The lower house, called the National Council, has 200 members, each Canton being represented according to its population. The upper house, the Council of States, has 46 members, 2 from each Canton. When modern Switzerland was founded in 1848, the United States was taken as a model for the Swiss bicameral system, with the National Council corresponding to the House of Representatives and the Council of States to the Senate. The size of the Swiss cabinet—seven members—is unusually small. That size is fixed by the Swiss constitution. Another specifically Swiss feature is that all seven cabinet members are of equal rank, and no one carries the title of prime minister. There is merely a rotating chair on a yearly basis strictly according to seniority.

A full-fledged grand coalition has existed in Switzerland since 1959. The three largest parties, the Free Democrats, the Christian Democrats, and the Social Democrats, each had two seats in the Federal Council. The Swiss People’s Party as the fourth-largest party got the remaining seat. Until the elections of 1999, the Swiss People’s Party remained in fourth place, and the three other parties stayed in the top three positions so that the Federal Council kept the same formula, 2:2:2:1, for the distribution of the seven seats. The elections of 1999, however, brought a big change in the ranking of the top four parties: The Swiss People’s Party was able to overtake the Christian Democrats, who fell to fourth place. The mathematical logic would have been that the Swiss People’s Party would have gotten a second seat at the cost of the Christian Democrats. The composition of the Swiss Federal Council, however, is not merely a function of mathematical formulas. Parliament in 1999 decided that the Swiss People’s Party had first to demonstrate that its position among the three largest parties would not be a short-lived phenomenon. Thus, the party remained for the time being with a single seat in the Federal Council. By 2003, the Swiss People’s Party had even become the largest party in the National Council, and considering also the results for the Council of States, it was now definitively among the largest three parties, while the Christian Democrats had clearly fallen to fourth place. As a consequence, the Christian Democrats lost their second seat to the Swiss People’s Party.

The October 2007 parliamentary elections kept the ranking of the four top parties (Table 4.3). The Swiss People’s Party increased its voter support from 26.7% to 28.9%, the Christian Democrats slightly increased from 14.4% to 14.5%, while the Social Democrats went down from 23.3% to 19.5% and the Free Democrats from 17.3% to 15.8%. Because there was much stability, the expectation was that the party composition of the Federal Council would remain the same: two Swiss People’s Party members, two Social Democrats, two Free Democrats, and one Christian Democrat. But things did not go at all according to the traditional Swiss playbook. The Swiss People’s Party has a very charismatic leader in the person of Christoph Blocher, who four years ago was elected to the Federal Council. This time, Parliament preferred another member of the Swiss People’s Party, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, and Blocher lost his seat. This was
only the fourth time in modern Swiss history since 1848 that a sitting Federal Councilor was ousted.

What happened? The Swiss People’s Party is at the right wing of the Swiss party spectrum, taking an especially hard line on restrictions on immigration. For the parliamentary elections, the party had a poster with three white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Switzerland. This poster was severely criticized both in Switzerland and abroad for being racist and xenophobic. Blocher had played a crucial role in the election campaign, although it is Swiss tradition that federal councilors should stay as much as possible above the partisan fray. Blocher often used demeaning language against political opponents, which is considered as unbecoming for a federal councilor. All these factors allowed the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Christian Democrats, and some Free Democrats to oust Blocher and to replace him with the more moderate and conciliatory Widmer-Schlumpf.

The leadership of the Swiss People’s Party had announced in advance that it would not Blocher’s replacement with another member of the party. In such a case, the elected candidate would either not accept the election or, if he or she did, would be expelled from the party. This is exactly what happened. Widmer-Schlumpf accepted her election and was, therefore, expelled from the party.

Samuel Schmid, also of the Swiss People’s Party, ran for reelection and won. The party, however, had decided to give up his seat out of protest should Blocher not be re-elected. Since Schmid was not willing to give up his seat, he too was expelled from the party. Widmer-Schlumpf and Schmid helped to create a new party, the small Bourgeois Democratic Party. Therefore, the grand coalition of the four largest parties no longer existed since the Swiss People’s Party was now in opposition. One year later, however, Schmid resigned over a scandal in his department and was replaced with Ueli Maurer, a true representative of the Swiss People’s Party since he had been for a long time its successful president. The Swiss People’s Party wants to be back with a second seat in the Federal Council, and if this happens, the disruption of the grand coalition will have been a short interlude.

**Table 4.3** Voter support and parliamentary seats in the 2007 general election for the Swiss National Council

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Voter Support (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Swiss People’s Party (SVP)</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Democratic Party (SPS)</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Democratic Party (FDP)</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democratic Party (CVP)</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party (GPS)</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>200</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are the Swiss by nature more cooperative than others? This hypothesis must be rejected, because there was a time when the Swiss played the game of cabinet formation very competitively. For many centuries after its foundation in 1291, Switzerland was a loose, mainly military federation of independent Cantons. The country lacked a common executive at the national level. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Switzerland experienced a bitter fight over the issue of centralization of power. The Free Democrats advocated more centralization, while the Christian Democrats, at that time called Conservatives, fought any attempt to create a central executive. This conflict led to a short civil war in 1847, won by the Free Democrats. As the winners, the Free Democrats established a constitution in 1848 that provided for a national executive: the seven-member cabinet. For parliamentary elections, the winner-take-all system was chosen. In the first elections, the Free Democrats received a parliamentary majority and used this majority to form a cabinet consisting only of members from their own party, a single-party majority cabinet as is the custom in Great Britain. In election after election, they renewed their majority in Parliament and each time filled the cabinet posts with their own people.

A turning point came in 1891, after nearly a half-century, when the Free Democrats still had a majority in Parliament but offered one of the seven seats to the Conservatives. In 1918, the Conservatives received a second seat, with the Free Democrats still controlling the other five seats. In the same year, the winner-take-all system for parliamentary elections was changed to the current system of proportionality. The same development—from confrontation to cooperation—happened with regard to the Social Democrats, who began to gain parliamentary strength early in the twentieth century. Initially, the Social Democrats had been treated as outcasts. When they organized a general strike in 1918, the cabinet intervened with troops. This resulted in bloody clashes, and on several subsequent occasions Parliament refused to accept any Social Democrats in the cabinet. The turning point here came during World War II, when the first Social Democrat was allowed to join the cabinet. In 1959, the Social Democrats received a second seat and thus had representation corresponding to their electoral strength. The principle of proportionality is applied not only to political parties but also to the linguistic groups in Switzerland. The country has four official languages, with 63.7 percent of the population speaking German, 20.4 percent French, 6.5 percent Italian, and 0.5 percent Romansh—a language spoken only in Switzerland. A variety of other languages are spoken in Switzerland, mainly by foreigners, but none of them has official status. The French and Italian speakers together always have two or three seats in the cabinet, corresponding to their proportion in the population. These rules of proportionality in cabinet formation are not written down in the constitution or in special laws but are based on informal, mutual understandings.

The logic of the Swiss grand coalition is not that the major parties agree on a common program but rather that the major parties should all be represented when the Federal Council makes its decisions. Often no consensus is reached in the Council such that a decision is made by majority vote. Such votes should in principle be kept confidential, but sometimes they are leaked to the media. As the recent events described above indicate, working together in the Federal Council has become more difficult. Some political scientists have proposed a change to minimal-winning coalitions as explained in the
previous section. But the idea of grand coalitions is so ingrained in Swiss culture that no such change is likely any time soon.

Oversized coalitions are not unique to Switzerland. Even Great Britain, the classic example of a competitive democracy, went through a period of an oversized coalition during World War II, when Conservatives, Labour, and Liberals together formed the cabinet. If an oversized coalition includes all major groups of a country, one also uses the concept of power sharing. This concept is often discussed as a solution for multicultural societies, and we will come back to it in Chapter 13.

MINORITY CABINETS

We speak of **minority cabinets** when the party (or parties) forming the cabinet does not possess a majority of the seats in parliament. Sweden offers good illustrations of why minority cabinets form and how they operate. An episode that occurred in April of 1996 illustrates how the Social Democratic cabinet managed to govern despite its minority status. It negotiated with the Center Party a package of measures to reduce the budget deficit. This package included, among others, cuts in aid for developing countries and an increase in energy taxes. As the leader of the Center Party emphasized, his party was not part of the cabinet and wished to keep its independence for other parts of the budget.\(^\text{13}\) In the same way, the Social Democratic minority cabinet sought on a case-by-case basis support from other parties.

The Social Democrats again formed a minority cabinet after the 2002 election. As Table 4.4 shows, they only had 144 out of 349 seats (41.2 percent). After some initial wrangling they secured the cooperation of the Left Party and the Greens to support their

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Voter support (%)</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Democrats</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal People’s Party</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian Democrats</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left Party</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center Party</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Party</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^\text{13}\)Sweden has a single house of Parliament.

policies on a case-by-case basis. Such arrangements may be described as “contract parliamentarism,” which regulates the roles and functions between the governing parties and the support parties. Such a contract is typically of a written nature, is public, extends beyond any specific legislative deal, and includes members of the support parties to serve at high levels, but not cabinet-level positions. The two support parties, the Left Party and the Greens, were allowed to place functionaries into several ministries but were not able to secure any ministries for themselves.

The September 2006 elections allowed Sweden to have a cabinet with a majority in parliament. The four parties of the right—the Moderates, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Center—together attained 178 of the 349 seats, which was a majority allowing Fredrik Reinfeldt, leader of the Moderates, the largest of the four parties, to become prime minister of a four-party coalition. The Social Democrats with 130 seats were still the largest party, but since the four parties of the Right controlled a majority in Parliament, the Social Democrats had to give up power after having been in office since 1994.

Sweden illustrates how there can be quite different reasons why political parties do not enter a cabinet yet are willing to support cabinet policies on a case-by-case basis. It is especially noteworthy that a party may prefer to be outside rather than inside the cabinet. Joaquín Artés and Antonio Bustos show this in an excellent study of a Catalonian nationalist party in Spain, the Convergencia I Unió (CiU). The two largest Spanish parties, the Popular Party on the right and the Socialist Party on the left, sometimes formed minority cabinets supported from the outside by the CiU. This small party of the Catalan region found that it was to its advantage to stay outside the cabinets but to support the cabinets both of the Left and the Right on a case-by-case basis. Under these conditions, the cabinets depended more on the CiU than if it had been in the cabinet. As Artés and Bustos conclude from their study, “Collaboration with the governing parties was beneficial for a relatively small nationalistic party like CiU in terms of programme fulfillment.”

Minority cabinets are not unique to Sweden and Spain. Even Great Britain, where normally one party wins a majority and forms a single-party majority cabinet, occasionally has minority cabinets—for example, during two brief periods in the mid-1970s. It should be clear by now that chaos will not necessarily result if a majority coalition cannot be formed in a parliamentary system. With minority cabinets, governmental life can continue in an orderly way for quite a while.

CABINET INSTABILITY

We have now discussed four European democracies in which the executive cabinet is selected by the parliament: Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. In each of these countries different rules govern the process of cabinet formation, yet all four countries have relatively stable executives. This finding should lead us to reject the hypothesis that selection of the executive by parliament necessarily leads to instability. Indeed, it seems that stability is possible under widely differing circumstances. By the same token, there is no guarantee that a parliamentary system leads to cabinet stability. Italy offers
the prototypical example of high cabinet instability under a parliamentary system. We will also briefly describe an episode of cabinet instability in the Czech Republic.

Ever since the end of World War II, the Italian parliament has had a large number of parties, but so does the Swiss parliament, and we have seen how much cabinet stability Switzerland enjoys. In contrast to Switzerland, however, Italy always had strong parties at the extremes, the Neofascist Italian Social Movement on the Right and the Communists on the Left. Until the end of the cold war, these two parties were always excluded from cabinet positions. The argument for their exclusion was that they did not accept basic democratic principles. Cabinet formation, therefore, was always limited to the moderate parties in the middle: Christian Democrats, Liberals, Republicans, Social Democrats, and Socialists. Immediately after World War II, the Christian Democrats had close to, and at one time even slightly above, a majority in Parliament. They developed into the governing party; without their participation, no cabinet could be formed. The prime minister and other key ministers were always selected from the ranks of the Christian Democrats.

The dominant position of the Christian Democrats turned out to be a basic weakness of the system. In a democracy, voters should have a realistic possibility of ousting a party from power. But in Italy, there was simply no numerical alternative to a cabinet led by the Christian Democrats, because cabinet participation of Communists and Neofascists was out of the question. Whatever the election results, until the early 1980s, the prime minister was always a Christian Democrat. It might be expected that the dominant position of the Christian Democrats at least had the advantage of leading to cabinet stability, but the opposite was true. Cabinets were usually short-lived, and Christian Democratic prime ministers succeeded one another at brief intervals. This occurred in part because the Christian Democratic Party was in fact a loose federation of several independent factions. Each faction was identified with a particular leader and had a strong organization of its own.

During the time of Christian Democratic dominance, cabinet formation was mainly a result of infighting among these various factions. If a faction was excluded from important cabinet posts, it maneuvered to overthrow the cabinet and replace it with a cabinet dominated by its own people. As a consequence, Italy had frequent cabinet crises despite the fact that the prime minister was always a Christian Democrat. The composition of the cabinet constantly changed, but the game was always played among the same few politicians. They were mostly Christian Democrats but also included some members of the smaller parties of the middle. A key actor might have been prime minister in one cabinet, absent from the next one, then foreign minister, and prime minister again in still another cabinet. An extreme case was Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, who held posts in 36 cabinets, including seven turns as prime minister. As Carol Mershon aptly characterizes the situation, “Cabinets in Italy both changed and remained the same.” Because of this basic stability it was not costly to overthrow a cabinet, because the politicians responsible for a cabinet crisis could be surely predicted to participate again in future cabinets.

The end of the cold war changed Italian politics in a fundamental way, but cabinet instability continued. As we have seen in Chapter 3, the fear of a Communist takeover in Italy had gone; the Communist Party changed its name to Democratic Party of the
Left and hence became a potential coalition partner to form a cabinet. Another important development was the discovery of major political corruption scandals involving virtually all political parties and key sectors of the business community. We have also seen in Chapter 3 how the electoral system in Italy was changed through a popular referendum from proportionality to a mixed system, where three-quarters of the members of Parliament are elected by winner-take-all and the remaining quarter by proportionality. In March 1994, the first election under the new system brought great changes among the political parties. The Christian Democrats suffered heavy losses although they had changed their name to Popular Party; the Northern League was greatly strengthened; the Italian Social Movement changed its name to National Alliance and also had a great electoral success; and finally, a new party, Forza Italia founded by Silvio Berlusconi, immediately became an important player in Italian politics.

Forza Italia, the National Alliance, and the Northern League together had a majority in Parliament, and they tried to form a cabinet, but there were great ideological differences among the three parties. The Northern League wanted to decentralize the country, whereas the National Alliance favored a strong central authority. Umberto Bossi, the leader of the Northern League, raised questions of whether the National Alliance was too authoritarian to participate in the government. The leader of the National Alliance, Gianfranco Fini, made every effort to project the image of a modern and respectable party. He repeatedly described the Holocaust as an error that led to horror, but for many this was too weak a condemnation of the Fascist past. It was disturbing that at the victory celebration of the National Alliance at Rome’s Piazza del Popolo, hundreds of youth in the crowd gave straight-arm Fascist salutes and chanted “Duce! Duce!” as was the custom during the regime of Benito Mussolini. It was also a worrisome sign that one of the seats of the National Alliance was won by Alessandra Mussolini, the dictator’s granddaughter. She declared before the elections: “Fascism was a very important part of history that can no longer be demonized or canceled out. But it’s history, and no one is thinking of introducing it again.” After the elections, many newspapers in other European countries expressed great worries that the Neofascists would participate in a future Italian government.

But what about Forza Italia and its leader Silvio Berlusconi, who was to be prime minister of the new cabinet? Would he be able to hold the parties of the Right together and to make sure that the National Alliance would not gain too much influence? What was his program? He attracted voters mainly by his smooth personality and much less by any specific program. To be sure, he advocated tax cuts and more free-market policies, but when, after the elections, he described the goals of the future government, it all sounded very vague. He postulated the need for “all types of freedom: the family, the individual, business, the free market, competition, profit, solidarity, Christian traditions, respect and tolerance toward all, even our adversaries.” The New York Times called Berlusconi “Italy’s Knight in Teflon. With his business empire and his 70-room villa outside Milan, and with his sense of personal style, Mr. Berlusconi has packaged himself as the Italian dream.”

It was only after six weeks of arduous negotiations that, in May 1994, Berlusconi was able to put together a cabinet of his Forza Italia, the National Alliance, and the Northern League. But in December of the same year Berlusconi resigned. There were
major defections in his coalition; furthermore, his brother received a suspended jail sentence for corruption charges, and Silvio Berlusconi himself was interrogated about his business dealings. Because it was not possible to put together a new coalition among the parties represented in Parliament, a banker without political affiliation, Lamberto Dini, formed a caretaker cabinet of so-called technicians. This cabinet was able to survive for about a year, but then early parliamentary elections were called for in April 1996.

These elections ended with a victory of the Center–Left. The Democratic Party of the Left, the Popular Party, the Greens, and some smaller Center–Left parties had put together an electoral alliance called the Olive Tree, which gained the most parliamentary seats, although not quite an absolute majority. In the vote of confidence, the Reform Communists supported the government of the Olive Tree, which was headed by Romano Prodi of the Popular Party, a respected university professor of economics. Despite their support of the vote of confidence, the Reform Communists refused to be represented in the government, which, therefore, had a minority status. It was an indication of the delicate position of the Reform Communists that one of their members voted against the government and in protest left the party. The Prodi government was the fifty-fifth since World War II, but Prodi promised that it would be an exceptional government in the sense that it would survive the entire legislative period. It did not.

In 1998 the Reform Communists withdrew their support from the Prodi government, considering it not enough to the left. Then Massimo D’Alema of the Democratic Party of the Left could again get the support of the Reform Communists although not their entry into the government. D’Alema was prime minister for two years but resigned in 2000 after a severe defeat of the Left in regional elections. For the remainder of the legislative period in 2001, Socialist Giuliano Amato headed still another cabinet of the Left. In the legislative elections of 2001, the Right won a majority, and it was once again Berlusconi who became prime minister. He stayed in office the entire legislative period from 2001 to 2006, a first in Italy since World War II. This did not mean that Italy was no longer plagued by instability—there was constant infighting among the coalition partners of the Right. At one point Berlusconi was even forced to resign as prime minister, only to succeed himself.

For the April 2006 general elections, Berlusconi, a master of staging political spectacles, vowed to stay in power. In February of that year, he declared himself to be the “Jesus Christ of Italian politics,” who sacrifices himself for everyone. Earlier, he also compared himself to Napoleon in describing his achievements during the past five years in office. Berlusconi, the richest man in Italy, controls significant elements of the Italian media. He directly controls two private television channels and, as prime minister, indirectly controls three public TV channels. In addition, as explained in Chapter 3, he pushed through a change in the electoral law, making it 100 percent proportional in the hope that would help him win the election.

Berlusconi’s challenger was again Romano Prodi, an economics professor, former Italian prime minister, and former president of the European Commission (Chapter 14). In terms of personality, Berlusconi and Prodi could not have been more different. Berlusconi was the flashy, populist showman and former cruise ship crooner, and Prodi was the bookish, dull, technocratic professor. Predictably, the campaign leading up to the April 10, 2006, election was one of most bitter in recent Italian history.
It also proved to be one of the closest elections. For the lower house, Prodi’s Center–Left Union coalition won 49.8 percent of the popular vote while Berlusconi’s Center–Right House of Freedoms (Casa delle Libertà) coalition won 49.7 percent, a difference of only 25,000 votes compared to the 38 million votes cast. In the upper house, it first appeared that Berlusconi had won, but after the votes of the Italian expatriates were counted, the Prodi coalition also won a wafer-thin majority in the upper house of 158 seats over 156 seats for the Berlusconi coalition.

Despite the extremely close outcome, based on proportional representation, Prodi had a comfortable majority in the lower house in terms of seats. How can this be? The distribution of votes for the lower house was based on a single nationwide district, with the proviso that the party coalition that wins a plurality in terms of votes will get at least 340 out of 630 seats (54 percent), the so-called “majority bonus.” The idea of this quirky law was to ensure solid majorities, thus increasing the effectiveness of lawmakers to pass legislation. It is ironic that the author of this law was Silvio Berlusconi himself, who was now hurt by this majority bonus clause. Sometimes politicians try to be too smart!

The majority bonus ensured that while only 25,000 votes separated the two major coalitions, Prodi’s L’Unione had 74 seats more than Berlusconi’s Casa delle Libertà in the lower house. Another change that backfired for Berlusconi was to allow Italian expatriates to vote in these elections for the first time, because he assumed that they would vote for him. However, not only did they not vote for him, but the expatriates’ votes were the ones that broke his political back. Six Senate seats were allocated for Italian expatriates in four gigantic global districts: Europe (two seats); Asia/Africa, Oceania, Antarctica (one seat); North/Central America (one seat); and South America (two seats). Of the six seats, four went to Prodi’s coalition, one to Berlusconi’s, and one to an independent party.

With a very slight majority in the Senate, it was difficult for Prodi to put together a stable coalition. In contrast to the first Prodi cabinet in the 1990s, this time the Reform Communists were willing to enter the cabinet. Its leader, Fausto Bertinotti, got the important and prestigious job as president of the Chamber of Deputies. It was quite a sight to see someone who still called himself a Communist preside over the debates in the lower house of parliament. In 2007, Democrats of the Left and the Daisy Democracy merged into a single party called the Democratic Party. In Some at the left wing of Democrats of the Left objected to the merger and joined more leftist parties. The major problem of the Prodi cabinet was that it depended on several splinter parties at the extreme left. Indeed, at one point Prodi lost a crucial vote in the Senate, which forced him to resign. But as Berlusconi did in a similar situation (see previously), Prodi followed himself, having been able to put his coalition again together. The end of Prodi as prime minister, however, came in January 2008 when a small party left his cabinet so that there were no longer enough votes in Parliament for Prodi to win a vote of confidence. In April 2008 early elections were called, which brought the parties of the right back to power, once again with Berlusconi as prime minister. He attempted to merge all parties of the right into a single party, but the Northern League refused, showing once again the shaky nature not only of the left but also of the right. Berlusconi managed, however, to merge his Forza Italia with the National Alliance into a new party, Popolo della Libertà (People of Liberty). Although since 2001 Italy has had only two prime ministers, Berlusconi and Prodi, the country is still plagued by great instability because both the
Right and the Left are internally badly split. As Italian political scientist Paolo Bellucci puts it, “The Italian party system is still unstable . . . in a constant state of flux.” To understand Italian politics has not become easier—on the contrary. A further unpleasant element came into play when in 2009 Berlusconi was increasingly criticized as being too flirtatious with beautiful young women, leading his wife to publicly ask for a divorce. Italian politics may be colorful but not necessarily efficient. Things got even worse for Berlusconi when in October 2009 Italy’s highest court overturned a law that had given Berlusconi and a few other high office holders immunity from prosecution while in office. This ruling means that Berlusconi has to appear in court for several corruption charges. He reacted with great anger, claiming that the judges were of the political left and were thus out to get him. He ended the press conference with a defiant “Viva Italia, viva Berlusconi” (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1  (Telegraph, April 15, 2008) Analysis: Silvio Berlusconi Back on Trial

Some things never change in Italy. Silvio Berlusconi was re-elected as prime minister on Monday, but by Friday he will be back on trial in Milan.

The trial concerns whether or not he bribed David Mills, the estranged husband of Tessa Jowell, the Olympics minister, to commit perjury on his behalf. [. . .]

Mr Berlusconi’s miserable record in office, comic gaffes and brushes with the law are no obstacle to the country’s highest office. He now has a large enough majority to serve a full five-year term.

His apparent success is all the more surprising given that Italy did not prosper during his last term, which finished in 2006.

Franco Pavoncello, a professor of politics at John Cabot University in Rome, said: “Italians have been disappointed by Mr Berlusconi before, but they have been disappointed by other people too. And the previous Left-wing government was extremely disappointing.

Mr Berlusconi has promised to re-energise Italy by cutting taxes. He also wants to restart the public works projects that Mr Prodi’s government cancelled. These include a giant bridge over the Straits of Messina to Sicily and a return to nuclear power. A huge house building programme has also been mooted.

Measures to cut down on illegal immigration and to remove the gipsy camps around most major Italian cities will be brought in, and Mr Berlusconi is also likely to start a war with the judges and public prosecutors who keep putting him on trial.

However, Mr Berlusconi has not offered any real answers about how he intends to pay for lavish tax cuts and new infrastructure projects. Italy’s public debt is now £1,285 billion and Mr Berlusconi has been warned by the European Union that he needs to reduce his borrowing if he wants to remain within the euro.
In the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, cabinet instability is often-times similar to that in Italy. A particularly difficult situation arose in the Czech Republic after the June 2006 parliamentary elections. In the country’s 200-member parliament, both the parties of the left and the parties of the right had exactly 100 seats. This situation resulted in a severe deadlock. In September 2006, the Civic Democratic Party, a party of the right, attempted to rule with a minority cabinet; within a month, however, it lost a vote of no-confidence and had to resign. In January 2007, three members of the Social Democrats defected by abstaining or being absent in a crucial vote of confidence. This allowed a coalition of the right with the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Greens to win the vote of confidence 100:97. As we have written in Chapter 2, it is noteworthy that the Greens, in Europe usually a party of the left, were willing to participate in a coalition of the right. Instability continued, and the Left attempted several times to overthrow the cabinet with a vote of no-confidence. Finally, in March 2009 four members of the Right defected and supported a vote of non-confidence of the Left, which succeeded with exactly the necessary 101 votes. In this crisis situation, a transitory cabinet of nonpartisan experts was formed with the director of the National Statistical Office as prime minister. All this shows how cabinet stability can be endangered if there is a risk of defections. Cabinet stability depends very much on party discipline within the coalition partners.

SEMIPRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS

In semipresidential systems, there is a president elected by the people and a prime minister elected by parliament. We use France to illustrate the workings of such systems. In Central and Eastern Europe, semipresidential systems have become quite frequent, in particular in Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Lithuania.

The semipresidential system in France was established with a new constitution in 1958 at the beginning of the Fifth Republic. (France numbers each new democratic period in its history; the First Republic was during the French Revolution.) The Fourth Republic (1946–1958) had a parliamentary form of government, and—much like Italy today—was very unstable and had frequent cabinet crises. The country also suffered from internal conflict over its involvement in colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria. In 1958, the turmoil was so great that the parties in Parliament were no longer able to form a viable cabinet. Charles de Gaulle stepped in; in 1940, he had escaped the German occupation by going to London, where he organized the Resistance movement. Returning to France in triumph in 1944, he served briefly as head of the government, but soon, disgusted by the bickering among the many parties, he retreated to his rural hometown to await the hour when he could emerge as the savior of France.

Unlike other strong leaders in French history, de Gaulle did not establish a dictatorship. However, he changed the political institutions so much that his coming to power in 1958 was counted as the beginning of another Republic. He built a political system that was a combination of a presidential and a parliamentary system, with both a president and a prime minister. Since the retirement of de Gaulle, the relation between president and prime minister has changed greatly, but let us first see what the relation
was under de Gaulle himself. As president, he liked to handle the big questions, leaving
the routine day-to-day work to the prime minister. The president was elected by an elec-
toral college and, after 1962, directly by the people. To be elected directly by the people
 corresponded to de Gaulle’s leadership style. He did not want to depend on the goodwill
of professional politicians, whom he detested for their selfish maneuvers. De Gaulle
liked to enter into a dialogue directly with the French people, who in his view had more
common sense than the politicians. De Gaulle saw himself as France’s father figure: If
he explained what had to be done in the higher national interest to the men and women
of France, he was sure they would trust and follow him. De Gaulle believed that his per-
sonal mission was to restore the historical greatness of France. At the end of his
speeches, he used to intone the national anthem and exclaim with a grandiose gesture of
his arms, “Vive la France!”

De Gaulle held office from 1958 to 1969, and during those years he acted in many
ways like a powerful monarch. Many important decisions were made by him alone, and
critics raised the question of whether France was still a genuine democracy. A bother-
some issue was the fact that the president was elected for a very long term—seven
years—and could run for reelection as many times as he wished. Another distinguishing
characteristic was the importance attached to the popular referendum. At first sight, this
seems to have increased the democratic quality of the regime. Indeed, in Chapter 6 we
see how in some European countries, the referendum is used to strengthen the political
role of the people. But, under the rules of the Fifth Republic, the referendum strengthens
the president by allowing him to bypass Parliament and appeal directly to the people.

Still another issue that raised questions about the democratic nature of the Fifth Re-
public was that in its early years parliament had virtually no power. In contrast to the
system of the Fourth Republic, the prime minister was not selected by parliament but
was appointed by the president. Under de Gaulle, the prime minister served completely
at the pleasure of the president, who could dismiss him at any time. The role of parlia-
ment was very limited. Sometimes a new cabinet sought the approval of parliament, but
such approval was not necessary. Under de Gaulle, Parliament also had few legislative
powers, because the president often ruled by executive decrees. With regard to the rela-
tionship between the president and the prime minister, all essential power lay with the
former. The prime minister had to do whatever the president did not wish to do himself.
This system was tailored to the personal needs of de Gaulle, who, as mentioned above,
saw himself as a world leader and liked to concentrate his attention on the big questions
of foreign policy and defense. He left the day-to-day business, and especially contact
with Parliament, to the prime minister.

During the first years of the Fifth Republic, de Gaulle was very popular and much
admired. The French people were grateful that he saved the country from the chaos of
the Fourth Republic and restored order. De Gaulle fulfilled the longing for a strong
leader—as had Napoléon I after the French Revolution, Napoléon III after the revolu-
tion of 1848, and Marshal Pétain after France’s defeat in 1940. But unlike his predeces-
sors, de Gaulle was ultimately not a dictator. To be sure, he eliminated many checks and
balances from the political system of France. He felt responsible only to his beloved
French people. Some feared that this was empty rhetoric and that de Gaulle would se-
cure his reelection by manipulation, but this fear was unjustified. When his first term
was over, de Gaulle sought reelection in a free and open competition. His main adversary was Socialist François Mitterrand, later himself president of France.

Mitterrand forced de Gaulle into a runoff, which de Gaulle won only narrowly; afterwards, much of his charismatic attraction was lost. In May of 1968, he was challenged by a massive student revolt. In the following year, he tried to restore his prestige with a referendum on regional reform and reorganization of the Senate, the upper house of Parliament. De Gaulle hoped that these reforms would be popular and that an overwhelming approval by the people would again enhance the legitimacy of his regime, but he was disappointed when the referendum was defeated by a majority of 53 percent. De Gaulle had seen enough, and although he legally was not required to do so, he resigned from the presidency and retired to his small hometown, deeply hurt.

The United States had a stormy relationship with de Gaulle, who took no orders at all from Washington. He withdrew French troops from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) command, although formally France remained a member of the alliance. (As we will see at the end of the section, in 2009 France came back as a full member of NATO). In later years, American opinion has become more positive toward de Gaulle. In the early 1990s, a survey among political scientists at American universities showed strong support for the view that de Gaulle was a figure of great historical consequence and that he brought “authority and stability” back to France. This positive evaluation in retrospect is due to the fact that the institutions of the Fifth Republic were able to survive de Gaulle. Initially, it was feared that the constitution of the Fifth Republic was tailored too much to the personal needs of de Gaulle. But since 1969, France has had five presidents, and the Fifth Republic is still intact. The presidency is still the most powerful institution in France, although not as much as in the early years of de Gaulle. Since de Gaulle’s resignation, other institutions, in particular Parliament and the prime ministership, have been strengthened so that today the system has more checks and balances than when de Gaulle was at the height of his power.

A major constitutional change came into effect in 2000 that limits the term of the president to five years. What has also been reduced since the time of de Gaulle is the plebiscitary nature of the presidency. The immediate successor of de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, organized a referendum in 1972. But then there was no referendum for 20 years, and it was only in 1992 that Mitterrand used the referendum in the hope of strengthening his political standing. The issue was the ratification of the Maastricht treaty for further European integration (see Chapter 14). Opinion surveys indicated strong public support for the treaty, and Mitterrand hoped to reverse his decreasing popularity with a clear victory in the referendum. But as the day of the referendum approached, public support dwindled and the referendum passed only by the narrowest margin. As in the case of de Gaulle in 1969, Mitterrand learned that the French president could no longer use the referendum for his own purposes, as was the case in the early years of the Fifth Republic. In 2005, President Jacques Chirac submitted the new constitution of the EU (see Chapter 14) to a referendum, and to the embarrassment of Chirac the French people voted against it.

The most ambivalent feature of the Fifth Republic is the status of the prime minister. What happens if Parliament is of a different political orientation than the president? To whom is the prime minister responsible—to Parliament or to the president? This
was no problem up to 1981 because both the president and the majority in Parliament were always of the Right.

Therefore, the selection of the prime minister by presidents de Gaulle, Pompidou, and Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, who were all of the Right, did not encounter opposition in Parliament. In 1981, Socialist Mitterrand won the presidency. Confronted with a Parliament dominated by the Right, he immediately called early parliamentary elections, which the Socialists won (Table 3.1, Chapter 3). It was no problem, therefore, for Mitterrand to appoint a Socialist as prime minister. The dominance of the Socialists came to an end with their defeat in the parliamentary election of March 1986. Confronted with this situation, Mitterrand chose to invite Chirac, a leader of the Right and later president himself, to form the new cabinet. This was the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic that the president and the prime minister had come from opposite ends of the party spectrum. This system of a president of one side of the political spectrum and a prime minister of the other side is called cohabitation. Although there were fears of a constitutional crisis and even of a breakdown of the Fifth Republic, cohabitation worked relatively smoothly. It came to an end in 1988 when Mitterrand was reelected to a second term as president. He immediately called early parliamentary elections, which brought losses for the Right but not enough gains for the Left to reach a majority.

In this situation Mitterrand selected Socialist Michel Rocard as prime minister, who formed a minority cabinet. We have already dealt with the concept of a minority cabinet in the Swedish, Spanish and Italian contexts; the Rocard cabinet serves as another illustration of how minority cabinets can survive. By the spring of 1991, as a result of defeats in by-elections for vacant seats, the Socialists were down to 274 seats in the National Assembly, 15 short of an absolute majority. Where could they find the necessary votes? There were 21 deputies who belonged to no party; the Rocard government could rely on, at most, 14 of these independents to support its policies. Thus, in the best of cases, it still needed at least one defection from either the Communists on the Left or the Christian Democratic Union at the Center. A good illustration of how Rocard could put together a winning coalition was the bill to reform local government that came to a vote in April of 1991. One deputy of the Christian Democratic Union voted with the government; of the independent deputies, 11 did likewise, and three abstained. Because not all deputies were present, the bill could pass by one vote. Sometimes, however, the Rocard government was unable to put together such winning coalitions. But in such cases it could resort to Article 49–3 of the French constitution, which allows the government to engage its survival to depend on the passage of a bill. This constitutional article is formulated in such a way that for the government to fall, the opposition needs a majority of the total membership of the National Assembly—not only of those voting. This is a more difficult requirement for the opposition than in Sweden, Spain, and Italy, where a majority of those voting is sufficient to bring down a government. At first glance such nuances in voting rules may seem trivial and dull, but the case of the Rocard government shows that details of voting rules may be of crucial importance for the survival of a government.

After his second term ended in 1995, Mitterrand retired and died soon afterward. The next president was Jacques Chirac of the Right, whom we have met previously as prime minister during the time of cohabitation with Mitterrand. After his first term of
seven years ended, he gained reelection, but now according to the new rule only for five years. For the 2007 presidential elections, there were speculations that Chirac would run again, which would have been possible since France has no term limits. But given his age of 74, he decided against it. His favorite candidate was his prime minister, Dominique de Villepin. However, an outsider, Nicolas Sarkozy, was able to get the nomination. Sarkozy’s crucial step was when he managed to win the leadership position of the Union for the Presidential Majority (UMP), the major party of the Right and Chirac’s own party. Having reached this position, Sarkozy easily obtained the nomination at the party convention. He had proven what a shrewd politician he was in outmaneuvering Chirac and Villepin.

The Left entered the race with Ségolène Royal, the first time that France had a woman as a serious candidate for president. Jean-Marie Le Pen of the radical Right ran again despite his age of almost 80. The race became more lively and also more unpredictable when François Bayrou entered the race as candidate of the Center. His party was the Union for French Democracy (UDF). Traditionally, French politics pits the Left against the Right so it was something quite new to have a serious candidate at the center. French people were very interested in the race. Some election events in soccer stadiums attracted more than 40,000 people; in both rounds of the elections turnout was more than 80 percent (compare this with turnout in American presidential elections). Voter turnout in France is helped by the fact that the entire country is a single electoral district so that every vote really counts. In the United States, by contrast, there are always only a few contested states, so-called swing states.

Just as for parliamentary elections (see Chapter 3), for presidential elections, too, there are two ballots, one week apart. To be elected in the first ballot, a candidate would need an absolute majority (50 percent + 1). Given that there are always numerous candidates, there is no chance that a candidate is elected in the first ballot. The two top vote getters of the first ballot then enter the second ballot. In the first ballot of the 2007 elections, the four main candidates reached the following percentages of the votes (the remaining 13.9 percent went to eight minor candidates).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nicolas Sarkozy</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ségolène Royal</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>François Bayrou</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Marie Le Pen</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the basis of these results, Sarkozy and Royal could enter the second ballot, where the main battle was for the centrist voters of Bayrou. Since the UDF is traditionally more a party of the right, Sarkozy was more successful with the former Bayrou voters than Royal. Sarkozy could also get many Le Pen voters, although Le Pen had told his voters to vote for neither candidate in the second ballot. What all major opinion polls had predicted, then happened, a clear victory for Sarkozy with 53.1 percent of the votes.

Sarkozy had a good and fast start, and within a few weeks two-thirds of the French people were pleased with how he began his presidency. After he had courted in the election campaign Le Pen voters at the right, he moved now quickly to the center and even to the left; he made a prominent Socialist, Bernard Kouchner, his foreign minister. Kouchner is very popular in France as the founder of the organization Doctors Without
Borders. Socialists got so upset with Kouchner that they immediately expelled him from the party. It was a great coup of Sarkozy to pull away Kouchner from the Socialists. Sarkozy was not less successful with the UDF, making one of their prominent members, Hervé Morin, the defense minister. Most importantly from a symbolic perspective, Sarkozy appointed Rachida Dati as justice minister. She was only 41 years old, had grown up with 11 siblings in a North African ghetto of a small French town, and her father was from Morocco and her mother from Algeria. In the cabinet of 15 members, seven were women. The average age of the cabinet members was very low for French politics: only 52, the same age as Sarkozy. All this sounded like a fresh start for many French people.

François Fillon, politically close to Sarkozy, became prime minister. He had written a book in which he argued for a strengthening of the presidency. This view fit well with the ambition of Sarkozy, who wanted himself to make all important decisions, both domestically and in foreign affairs. As we have seen previously, the relationship between president and prime minister was always an issue in the Fifth Republic; with Sarkozy the president was clearly the dominant figure and the prime minister was more a coordinating director of the cabinet. Sarkozy quickly brought a lighter style to the Élysée Palace, showing himself, for example, in jogging outfit, which would have been impossible to imagine with all his very formal predecessors. As promised in the election campaign, Sarkozy wanted in many fields a rupture with the past, which he did.

The successful start of Sarkozy’s presidency brought the Left very much in disarray. Even before the presidential elections, there were severe splits in the Left between those who wished to move more to the center and those who wanted to keep a very leftist position. These splits became more severe after the presidential elections, with much blame going around for the election defeat. For the parliamentary elections a few weeks later, we need to compare Table 4.5 with Figure 3.9 in Chapter 3; we see that the party of Sarkozy, Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), could increase its voter strength from 33.3 percent to 39.5 percent in the first ballot.

Thus, Sarkozy could use his increased popularity to help his party. Also importantly, Sarkozy did profit from a split of the party of Bayrou, the UDF. Some members of the UDF founded a new party to the right of Bayrou, called New Center, who received 2.4 percent of the votes in the first ballot and allied itself with the UMP of Sarkozy. Bayrou created his own new party more to the left, called Democratic Movement; it received 7.6 percent of the votes. Thus, the UDF no longer exists. The Socialists did not do as badly as expected despite their internal fights; with 24.7 percent of the votes they stayed at about the same level as five years before. On the other hand, the parties at both extremes of the party spectrum lost. The National Front of Le Pen went down from 11.3 percent in 2002 to 4.3 percent. This was even worse than the showing of its leader in the presidential elections. The Communists were down from 4.8 percent to 4.3 percent. The Greens lost, too, going from 4.5 percent to 3.3 percent in the first round of elections.

As we have learned in Chapter 3, the French parliamentary election system greatly helps the largest party, and this happened again in 2007. As we recall, to be elected in the first ballot a candidate needs 50 percent + 1 in his or her district. As Table 4.5 shows, only a single Socialist reached this threshold compared with ninety-eight UMP
candidates, including the prime minister, Fillon. All together, 110 candidates were elected in the first ballot with the remaining 467 seats filled in the second ballot one week later. For the reasons explained in Chapter 3, in the second ballot in almost all districts only two candidates remained, mostly a candidate of the left and one of the right. With this winner-takes-all system, the largest party has the advantage, and, indeed, the UMP received 216 additional seats for a total of 314 seats from both ballots. The Socialists could add 184 seats to the one they won in the first ballot. Compared with the previous elections, for both ballots together, the Socialists could take away quite a few seats from the UMP. What had happened between the two ballots so that the UMP, which had improved its voter percentage in the first ballot, did not do as well in the second ballot? The French election system allows voters to have second thoughts between the two ballots. With the presidency in the hands of the UMP and the prospect that the UMP would get an overwhelming majority in Parliament, many voters came to the conclusion that it would be a good idea to strengthen the Socialists in the second ballot. This shows that the French election system allows for quite sophisticated voting.

Despite such strategic voting in favor of the Socialists, the fact remains that Sarkozy’s party continued to control Parliament, although with a reduced majority. The basic result of the 2007 presidential and parliamentary elections was that France
remains divided between the Right and the Left, or as the French say, “entre la droite et la gauche.” Bayrou failed in his effort to establish a strong centrist party. French people since the French revolution in 1789 have stayed either to the left or to the right.

Sarkozy’s honeymoon was quite short, and later in 2007, he had already begun to lose popularity. He was criticized for being hyperactive and behaving like a celebrity. Politically, he had to deal with protests and strikes against his economic and social reform program, especially after the outbreak of the global economic and financial crisis. In poor neighborhoods on the outskirts of Paris, where most inhabitants are Muslim immigrants from North Africa, there were violent riots. As might have been expected, the many enduring problems of France could not be quickly solved, even by a new president full of energy. In one aspect important for the United States, in 2009 Sarkozy brought about a big change by bringing back his country as a regular member of NATO, over protests of the Left opposition.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Parliamentary and Presidential Systems**

In Chapter 13 on power sharing, we will argue that in deeply divided societies particular constitutional features may have a higher chance of achieving social peace than others. With the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the formation of many new and independent Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s, questions of “constitutional engineering” have emerged. In other words, what advantages and disadvantages do various forms of political institutions have? Is it possible that some institutions can make a tense political situation even worse by systematically excluding particular groups, while others allow for the inclusion of a variety of such groups into government and thus alleviate potential problems?

One can think of constitutions very much like architectural structures. Architects and urban studies specialists have uncovered that it is possible to literally build aggression into some structures. High-density buildings with little green space, few trees, and no areas for children and adolescents to play tend to generate aggression among the inhabitants of such structures. The same logic can be applied to constitutions: If they systematically disadvantage particular groups, limit their opportunities to voice their opinions, either underrepresent them or not represent them at all, and provide privileged access to some and not to others, it is possible to build political upheaval into particular constitutions. In this chapter we have highlighted cabinet formation, which speaks directly to the relations between the executive and legislative powers. What are the advantages and disadvantages of presidential systems and parliamentary systems?

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Presidentialism**

The main advantages of presidential systems are threefold. First, legislative terms are fixed. Americans are used to very “regular” election intervals. Every four years, like clockwork, there is a presidential election. This regularity provides executive stability that allows for predictable policy planning. The president cannot be removed, save via the impeachment clause.
Second, the chief executive is popularly elected. This enables the American president to claim to speak for the majority of the people. In parliamentary systems the chief executive, the prime minister, cannot claim to have the same kind of popular mandate as an American president, although in systems with two major parties it is very clear to voters who will be their prime minister, depending on which party they vote for. This is not always so clear, however, in multiparty systems, from which the prime minister emerges as a result of protracted negotiations after the legislative elections.

Third, presidential government is “limited government” as a result of the separation of powers. This stands in stark contrast to the “fusion” of powers in parliamentary systems, where in the case of Great Britain, the executive and legislative authorities almost always are made up of the same party. This puts enormous power into the hands of the prime minister. However, in the American case, the founding fathers ensured that presidential powers are checked and balanced by separate institutions in order to make it as difficult as possible for any one particular institution to dominate the political agenda.

Through examining the disadvantages of presidentialism, it becomes clear that in most cases they are simply the obverse of the very advantages just highlighted. For instance, the fixed legislative terms can easily be interpreted as leading to “temporal rigidity,” meaning incapacity of the legislature to impose changes on executive authority. Once a president has won an election, there is no mechanism, save for impeachment, to remove him or her from power. This incapacity for changing the commander in chief can prove detrimental when cataclysmic circumstances such as wars necessitate a quick adjustment of leadership to a changing environment or when a president is involved in questionable affairs. An example is Richard Nixon, who continued to stay in power for over one-and-a-half years after it became public knowledge that he was involved in the Watergate scandal.

Another disadvantage of presidentialism derives directly from the separation of powers argument: Precisely because there is separation of powers, there is gridlock. One could describe the American constitution as “gridlock by design.” This was most clearly shown during the Clinton administration when Bill Clinton waved his “veto pen” and blocked budget bills coming from the Republican Congress, leading to shutdowns of governmental services on two occasions. This is particularly relevant if there are incoherent majorities between the president and the two houses of the legislature, which means that either one or even both houses are of a different party from the president’s. It is of course less of an issue if there are coherent majorities.

The third disadvantage is closely connected to the second: If there are incoherent majorities, who is accountable for policymaking? If one or both of the two houses are of a different party than the president’s, inevitable finger-pointing arises as to whose fault it is if policymaking comes to a screeching halt.

Finally, a fourth disadvantage of presidentialism is that it tends to operate in an environment with low party loyalty. Being a loyal member of a party does not guarantee success at the ballot box. Oftentimes, “running against Washington” is precisely what proved successful for some politicians in America, even when the president was from their own party. In a presidential system, success of a representative depends on what he or she did for the district or state that is going to elect her or not. As a result, the tendency to engage in inefficient pork-barrel policies is much higher in a presidential system than in a parliamentary system.
Advantages and Disadvantages of Parliamentarism

Proponents of parliamentary systems highlight the advantages that come with “fusion” between the executive and legislative powers. As we have noted, after parliamentary elections have taken place, the majority party usually also installs the prime minister, leading to a fusion of executive and legislative power. This means no gridlock, clear accountability, and high efficiency of policymaking. In parliamentary systems, particularly with two parties, it is very clear who is responsible for political outcomes, whether they are good or bad. There is no finger-pointing from one branch of government to the next.

Another advantage is that parliamentary systems operate in an environment of strong party loyalty. Intense party loyalty tends to encourage political debates that center on national, encompassing issues rather than district-based issues. It is for this reason that pork-barrel policies are much less of a problem in parliamentary systems than in presidential ones.

Alas, just as we have seen in presidential systems, it is possible to see disadvantages in the very advantages of parliamentarism as well. Precisely because parliamentarism is built on the principle of fusion, it could be argued that it gives too much power to the executive. Those who favor more limited government would be very much concerned with the enormous powers of a prime minister and his or her cabinet.

Finally, because in parliamentary systems executive authority not only emerges from the legislature but is also responsible to it, the legislature can bring down the government by a vote of no-confidence. As we have seen in the case of Italy, this device may make for rather unstable governments. While some decry this ability of the legislative to bring down cabinets as “instability,” others call it “flexibility.”

What becomes obvious is that the choice between presidential and parliamentary systems is driven by negative trade-offs. If effectiveness of policymaking is more important than lengthy debates, a parliamentary system is preferable. If democratic debate, direct election of the president, and separation of powers are more important than effectiveness of policymaking, a presidential system is preferable. Another trade-off refers to stability or flexibility of government: If stability is desired, a presidential system will deliver that, while a parliamentary system will always allow, in the words of Walter Bagehot, a certain “revolutionary reserve” that might come in handy if a change in executive authority becomes necessary.

There are many reasons for preferring either—a presidential or a parliamentary system. One consideration is which system tends to lead to better policy outcomes. A recent worldwide study gives the advantage to parliamentary systems:

The evidence presented here suggests that to the extent that the nature of the executive makes a difference, parliamentary systems offer significant advantages over presidential systems. In no case examined here does parliamentary rule seem to detract from good governance. In most policy areas, particularly in the areas of economic and human development, parliamentary systems are associated with superior governance.

The authors of the study argue that what makes parliamentarism “a more reliable vehicle for good public policy is its capacity to function as a coordinating device.”
Parliamentarism should be more successful than presidentialism in coordinating diverse views and interests, all other things being equal.\textsuperscript{29} This finding, of course, does not mean that the United States should change to a parliamentary system. Yet, it still is worthwhile to consider such findings in thinking about the future of the United States.

**Heads of State**

The president of France has important executive functions but is also head of state. This is similar to the United States, where the president is both chief executive and head of state. In Europe, however, the normal pattern is that the roles of head of state and chief executive are played by two different individuals. The head of state is either a monarch or an elected president and has mainly representative functions.

**Monarchial Head of State**

Great Britain probably best illustrates the functions of a monarch in a modern European democracy. The reigning monarch is Queen Elizabeth II. She appoints the prime minister, but this appointment is a pure formality. It makes for a colorful ceremony with a symbolic value when the queen invites the leader of the winning party to come to Buckingham Palace and asks him or her to form Her Majesty’s next government. The losing party is called Her Majesty’s opposition. An even grander ceremony takes place when the queen opens the first session of Parliament with a speech. The speech is written not by the queen but by the prime minister, who uses it to announce the new government’s program.

In former centuries the symbolic trappings of the monarch also had substance. The king or queen was an important political actor who, for example, had a great say in the appointment and dismissal of the prime minister. Together with other institutions, such as the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the monarch ruled the country. But in a long and slow process, the monarchy lost its substantive power. Today, the saying is that the queen \textit{reigns}, and the prime minister \textit{rules}. Only the trappings of the queen’s power remain, but these trappings have great symbolic value.

The monarchy is quite popular in Great Britain. In our bureaucratic and anonymous world, the public seems to have a great need for colorful images. This need is not well fulfilled by modern-day politicians who, at best, give the impression of being efficient managers of huge government programs. At worst, they appear power-hungry, inefficient, and sometimes even corrupt. In contrast, the royal family does not have to run for office, and its members cannot be held accountable for what goes wrong in the government. Thus, in an ironic way, for a long time the absence of political power contributed to the popularity of the monarchy. The queen was a symbol holding the British nation together.

In recent times, however, the British monarchy has lost some of its popularity. Family quarrels, separations, and divorces are the main reasons. All of a sudden, the royals appeared to be an ordinary family with ordinary problems. It became more difficult to look up to them and to admire them as role models. There were additional problems, such as the fact that the queen agreed only reluctantly to pay taxes. Sensationalism in the media contributed greatly to the problems of the royal family. Prince Charles, next in line for succession, has had particular difficulties. In addition to his di-
orce problems, he is somewhat unsure about how to define his public role. In addition to undertaking the usual ceremonial duties, he sometimes speaks up on controversial issues such as modern architecture and education. It remains to be seen whether he will retain this frankness if, one day, he becomes king. This could cause problems, because the monarchy is supposed to stay above politics.

Although Americans may be most familiar with the British monarchy, several other European democracies also have monarchs. These countries include Belgium, Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden, as well as the tiny countries of Liechtenstein and Monaco. In some of these countries, the monarchical trappings are not quite as splendid as in Great Britain. An extreme case of a stripped-down monarchy is found in Sweden. According to a 1974 constitutional amendment, the king is not even symbolically allowed to appoint the prime minister or open Parliament. The Swedish king has become more of a citizen like everyone else. He does not even get special parking permits. The main task of the Swedish king is to cut ribbons, open museums, and make state visits.

A bizarre episode in Belgium in 1990 shows how politically weak the position of European monarchs has become. The Belgian king declared that in good conscience as a Roman Catholic, he could not sign a new law permitting abortion. To circumvent the unexpected difficulty, the cabinet temporarily suspended the king and promulgated the law on its own power. Afterward, Parliament was called into a special session to reinstate the king.

Spain illustrates how even in modern times there may be situations where a monarch exercises political power. Spain was a dictatorship until the death of Francisco Franco in 1975. Afterward, the monarchy was reestablished with Juan Carlos I as king. Instead of trying to have dictatorial powers for himself, he helped to lead his country to a democratic form of government. But for some time, the Spanish democracy was still frail because Franco supporters remained influential in the armed forces and the police (see Chapter 11). At one point, these groups attempted a coup to overthrow the democratic government. Some officers holding weapons in their hands entered Parliament and began shooting in the air. They hoped to get the support of the king, but Juan Carlos acted forcefully in the defense of democracy and had the coup participants imprisoned. In normal times, he prefers to act as the symbolic figurehead of his country, but if new threats to the Spanish democracy should occur, he can be counted on to step in and exercise a political role.

**Civilian Heads of State**

Germany serves as a good illustration for a civilian head of state. In the long history of Germany, emperors and kings have played significant roles. After Germany’s defeat in World War I, however, the country sent its emperor into exile. When the Federal Republic of Germany was established in 1949, its constitution provided for the office of federal president as head of state. How is the president elected, and what are his functions? Is he as politically powerless as the European monarchs? The German president is elected by a special assembly that consists of all members of the lower house of the federal parliament (the Bundestag) and an equal number of deputies from the state parliaments. Successful candidates must have a reputation that transcends party lines.
The role of president has been interpreted very differently by the people who have filled the office up to now. The first president, Theodor Heuss, played the role of political philosopher, often speaking out forcefully on fundamental questions of the democratic order. He instructed the German people on the value of democracy in a critical period of their history. Gustav Heinemann tried to be a “citizen president,” seeking contact with ordinary men and women and visiting them in their homes. Walter Scheel brought great elegance to the presidency and sponsored many splendid performances by artists at the presidential palace. Richard von Weizsäcker was a rather political president, often speaking out on the great questions confronting the country.

Compared to the European monarchs, the German president exercises more political power and leadership, but also runs the risk of crossing the fine line where he or she might suddenly become too political. Walter Scheel had such an experience at the beginning of his term, when he was rebuked by the chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, who told him, in no uncertain terms, that it was not the business of the president to run the foreign policy of the country. This episode shows the delicate nature of the role played by the German president. Unlike a monarch, whose prestige is assured by a royal background, the German president must earn his or her prestige through public statements that must be neither trivial nor too overtly political. On rare occasions the president has to take over important functions. A recent example, discussed earlier in the chapter, was in 2005, when President Horst Köhler had to decide whether to follow the recommendation of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to dissolve Parliament and to call for early elections (which he did). In May 2009 Köhler was reappointed for another term.

Whereas the German president has more a ceremonial role like a monarch, there are other countries where the president is powerful. As we have seen earlier in the chapter, this is the case in France and some countries in Central and Eastern Europe. In these cases, the president is elected by the people, and we speak of a semipresidential system.

The main message of this chapter is that a parliamentary system is not necessarily unstable. It depends very much on the number and kind of political parties elected to parliament, and this in turn depends to a large extent on the parliamentary election systems discussed in the previous chapter. In order to understand how political parties are constrained by the institutional setting, one has to grasp the complex interactions between rules for parliamentary elections and rules for cabinet formation. To add to this complexity, we introduce in the next chapter the court systems of European democracies.

**Key Terms**

- administration
- cabinet
- confidence of parliament
- collective responsibility
- constituency
- grand coalition
- minimal-winning coalition
- minority cabinets
- oversized coalitions
- party discipline
- parliamentary system
- prime minister
- semipresidential systems
- shadow cabinet
- vote of no-confidence
- whip
- Weimar Republic
Discussion Questions

1. The Italian examples raise a most intriguing question: When do governments come to an end in parliamentary systems? When there is a new prime minister? When there is a new election? When there are new parties in government?

2. Who is more powerful: a president or prime minister?

3. Which system, parliamentarism or presidentialism, enjoys more “checks and balances”?

4. How important is “stability” for a political system? Can a system be “too stable”?

5. In parliamentary systems, legislators can depose a government with a vote of no-confidence. Is this an expression of “democracy” or does it invite dysfunctional political behavior?

6. In which system, parliamentary or presidential, do parties play a bigger role? Why?

7. In which system, parliamentary or presidential, does money play a bigger role? Why?

Notes

10. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the Christian Democrats in Bavaria are called the Christian Social Union (CSU).
11. In Germany the prime minister is called chancellor.
12. Three Cantons split in the past, resulting in six half-cantons. Each of these half-cantons has only one representative in the Council of States. There are 20 full Cantons, hence a total of 46 seats in the Council of States.


20 Ibid.


24 Sarkozy, of course, was not a candidate for parliament although he took a very active part in the parliamentary election campaign.


28 Ibid., 355.