
Parliamentary Democracy: Promise and Problems

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is neither simple nor straightforward, but it is feasible. While the twentieth century witnessed some of the greatest political atrocities in human history, it was also the century in which democracy was gradually established and consolidated in large parts of the world. At the end of the millennium, there were more stable democracies than ever before, and there was no continent in which democracy was entirely foreign (Lijphart 1999; Przeworski *et al.* 2000).

To fulfill its promise, democratic government must be benign as well as effective. Many distinguished political thinkers have been fortunate enough to be able to presume government effectiveness—hence their major concern has been to be tame and constrain government power. Yet, democratic government cannot exist without a government capable of enforcing law and order, as Weber (1972) reminded us, and securing revenue, as Schumpeter (1954 [1918]) has pointed out. At the same time, democracy must mean limited government—the existence of a protected private sphere in which the government is prohibited from regulating, and a set of human and civil rights that it is obligated to respect. While the precise boundaries between the public and the private sphere are constantly revised, there must be some form of private sphere and some commitment to a set of citizen rights (Dahl 1971).

Popular government may take many forms, but contemporary exemplars are predominantly *representative* democracies. Thus, popular sovereignty is exercised through *delegation* from citizens to individual politicians and collective actors, in particular political parties. Just as citizens in democratic societies may delegate important tasks in their private lives to specialists (e.g. their medical treatment to physicians and the education of their children to teachers), they delegate the greater part of their public life to politicians.¹ Moreover, those who are directly elected in turn delegate to specialists

¹ Or, to be more precise, such acts of delegation have happened in the past, or are assumed to have taken place. Indeed, most citizens face a set of rules of delegation that was set up without their formal participation.

many of their more specific tasks. It is politicians who deliberate, make laws, and take other political decisions. And, eventually, these decisions are implemented by bureaucrats that politicians recruit and supervise.

You cannot always trust politicians, or, for that matter, anyone else to whom you delegate. Hence, delegation is inherently risky. The danger of any delegation is that it may turn into abdication, that the person who delegates may lose control rather than get help. To avoid such disasters, delegation to politicians needs to be coupled with some mechanism of accountability, some way in which these politicians can be checked and controlled, and if necessary removed, if their behaviour or performance in office is unsatisfactory. Democracy therefore means effective but limited government containing mechanisms of *delegation* as well as *accountability* (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999: 29; Powell 2000; Strøm 2000).

Parliamentary government, which we shall formally define later in this chapter, is the most common way to organize delegation and accountability in contemporary democracies. Of the thirty-six states with a minimum of 19 years of democratic experience covered in Lijphart's magisterial *Patterns of Democracy* (1999), as of 2003 only five—the United States, Switzerland, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Venezuela—are not parliamentary by our standards (see below).² Woldendorp, Keman, and Budge (2000), who apply less restrictive criteria and claim to have excluded only tiny states, count forty-five parliamentary states by our criteria (though not necessarily by theirs). In fact, about a third of the world's population live under this regime form, a larger proportion than for any other system of government. The states that feature parliamentary constitutions span all continents and include some of the largest countries in the world (India), as well as some of the most economically advanced and powerful (Japan), and some of those commonly considered to have the highest qualities of life (Canada, New Zealand). Yet, Europe remains the heartland of parliamentarism. In Western Europe (leaving aside microstates such as the Vatican), only Switzerland is not parliamentary. And by and large, the great majority of European citizens accept their parliamentary constitutions as legitimate vehicles for popular representation.

This volume examines political delegation and accountability in the parliamentary democracies of Western Europe. Our aim is to add to our understanding of parliamentary democracy both empirically and theoretically. Empirically, we survey the institutions that govern political delegation and accountability in seventeen Western European parliamentary democracies. Electoral and governmental institutions in Western Europe display great variation, with consequences for democratic delegation and accountability. While such observations are commonplace, our knowledge of the range that parliamentary institutions take is still remarkably unsystematic and incomplete. *Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracies* is certainly the most ambitious, as well as the most comprehensive, account of the institutions of democratic delegation in

² Lijphart (1999) also classifies Israel as non-parliamentary after the introduction of a directly elected Prime Minister in 1996. A recent institutional reform has once again removed this anomaly, however, and returned Israel to the set of parliamentary systems.

Western European parliamentary democracies. Indeed, to our knowledge it is the only contemporary survey in the English language.³

Yet, much as we believe that such a comprehensive institutional survey is a significant contribution to the study of parliamentary regimes, we are even more convinced that our understanding of such governments needs to recognize the ways in which government institutions serve to express and constrain the voice of the citizens. What are the governance problems to which different institutional configurations are a response? How effectively do the institutions in the parliamentary repertoire address such problems? Do the various parliamentary institutions in themselves give rise to any governance problem? And can we observe any changes over time in the ways in which parliamentary systems confront the delegation issues facing them?

These are, broadly speaking, the questions which this volume will address. In order thus to illuminate important facets of the policy processes of parliamentary democracy, we employ agency theory, or the principal-agent approach (see e.g. Moe 1984, 1997; Pratt and Zeckhauser 1985; Furubotn and Richter 1997). There are three reasons, we believe, why this is a fruitful approach to the study of parliamentary democracy and popular representation more generally. One is that it gives us a general framework by which a variety of apparently unrelated representation issues can be understood. One of the main messages we wish to convey is that the same framework can be used to answer questions that have hitherto often been studied in mutual isolation, by different scholarly communities, and in needlessly complex and diverse sets of terms. A second virtue of this framework is its simplicity and parsimony, which will permit us to spend less time on cloudy and confusing definitional debates. Finally, and very importantly, this is a framework that lends itself to rigorous and precise theoretical reasoning. Indeed, a substantial body of theoretical results concerning delegation and accountability has been developed in the social sciences. Yet, agency theory has not been applied to parliamentary systems of government in any comprehensive manner. Adapting agency theory to the study of parliamentary democracy and applying it to the political institutions of Western Europe is a huge task that in this volume we can only begin. We do hope, however, that we can lay foundations on which other, more specialized studies can build.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. In the next section we look at the historical origins of parliamentary government and show how the term sometimes denotes a historic system of government in which the parliament had wrested control

³ This, of course, is not to say that the agency problems of representative democracy have previously gone unnoticed. Dennis C. Mueller's impressive *Constitutional Democracy* largely shares our normative concerns and analytical perspective, seeing democracy as a giant agency problem (1996: 17). The empirical research that comes closest to our concerns, although it does not share our analytical foundations, is the British Democratic Audit project (Weir and Beetham 1999), which measures British democracy against a set of democratic standards and covers all steps in the chain of delegation. Finally, numerous individual authors, mainly examining a single step in the chain of delegation in a single country, have identified problems of delegation and accountability stemming from preference divergence and information asymmetries (see Chapters 2 and 3). They have provided valuable information on delegation and accountability in their respective countries, as can be seen from the references in the seventeen country chapters. We build on all this work.

over much of national politics out of the hand of a hereditary monarchy. This historical meaning of the term parliamentary government (or parliamentarism) often creates confusion when it is used in reference to modern representative democracies. This problem is addressed in the section titled Parliamentary Government. In the following section, we compare the regime type of parliamentary democracy with its main rival, presidentialism. Even though there has been a heated debate about the relative merits of parliamentary versus presidential government, surprisingly little is known about the strengths and weaknesses of parliamentary democracy as a mechanism of delegation from voters via politicians to civil servants. We then begin to develop our own principal-agent approach to the challenges of delegation and accountability in parliamentary democracies. The final section outlines the rest of the book.

THE HISTORY OF PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

Unlike American federalism or presidentialism, parliamentary government was not the product of deliberate institutional design. Rather, it gradually evolved in Britain over several centuries.⁴ Norton (1981: 12) identifies 1688 as the beginning of parliamentary dominance, when Parliament prevailed in its conflict with King James II, who was forced to flee the country. Parliament was then in 1689 effectively able to select the new King, William of Orange, and to impose significant constraints on his powers. According to Lowell (1896: 3), the roots of parliamentary government can be traced back to 1693, when the King first appeased the House of Commons by appointing a government out of the party (the Whigs) that enjoyed a majority there. Important further developments occurred in the late eighteenth century, when William Pitt the Younger, based on solid support in the House of Commons, established the leading role of the cabinet vis-à-vis parliament and, in conducting its daily business, vis-à-vis the monarch. At that time the cabinet was still that of the Crown, though as a rule cabinets were appointed that could count on the support of the House of Commons. Yet, the Commons was still dominated by the King and the aristocracy, who controlled access to the vast majority of seats.

In 1830, however, the House of Commons forced Wellington to resign over his unwillingness, due to a deep split among the Tories, to engage in parliamentary reform. Earl Grey's subsequent Whig Cabinet persuaded the King to dissolve Parliament and then won the general election on the issue of parliamentary reform. The reform passed the House of Commons but was held up by the House of Lords. Grey then asked the King to create enough new peers to force the reform through the Lords. When the King refused, Grey, backed by the Whigs, tendered the cabinet's resignation. The King unsuccessfully tried to install a new Wellington cabinet but eventually had to invite the Whigs back into office and accept their terms. In the end, the House of Lords

⁴ See, for example, Mackintosh (1968); Kluxen (1983); Norton (1981); Judge (1993) ch. 1; Cox (1987); see also Goldsworthy (1999).

pre-empted the appointment of many Whig peers and passed the reform bill—The Representation of the People Act—which eliminated or reduced the weight of small boroughs, where elections were often corrupt, and created new seats in towns and cities. The electorate increased from 220,000 to more than 500,000. By 1866, increasing wealth had swollen the ranks of voters to more than one million.

After the 1832 Reform Act, the Crown appears to have had scant influence over cabinet appointments or deliberations—and thus became the ‘dignified part’ of the British Constitution (Bagehot 1963 [1867]). The House of Commons, on the other hand, criticized and could dismiss the cabinet and in most cases also determine cabinet appointments. Over the subsequent decades, party government was established, and the cabinet came to dominate the House of Commons. According to Gary Cox (1987), this was an indirect response to heightened electoral competitiveness. Members of Parliament (MPs) became more active because their re-election increasingly depended on their visibility and constituency service. Yet, while parliamentary activism was individually rational, it was collectively self-defeating. Too many active and ambitious MPs seeking position-taking and credit-claiming opportunities threatened to overburden the parliamentary agenda and induce institutional paralysis. Hence, those procedural rights that had been abused by visibility-seeking MPs were abolished and the cabinet’s agenda control strengthened.

Parliamentary behaviour also became more party-based as the larger constituencies required both a different kind of campaigning and greater activity in Parliament. This process accelerated with the electoral reform acts of 1867 and 1884, which enfranchised a much larger electorate. Now the fate of cabinets was no longer decided on the floor of the House of Commons, as it had been in the ‘golden age’ of parliamentary government (1832–67), but by the general electorate. ‘Members of Parliament were gradually relegated to being representatives of that opinion, and their freedom of parliamentary action was correspondingly diminished’ (Norton 1981: 16). Consequently, cabinet members and MPs began to address the general electorate rather than the House of Commons. Procedural reform continued and led to the evolution of a government-managed parliament (Norton 1981: 19–20).

The Swedish Experience

Britain was the birthplace of parliamentary government, and it is first and foremost through the British influence that this form of government has spread throughout the world. Yet, as early as the eighteenth century there were other and largely independent precursors of modern parliamentary and party government. In a less robust and eventually less influential form, parliamentary government existed in Sweden between 1719 and 1772 (Roberts 1986). This period, the ‘Age of Liberty’, began when after the wars of the early eighteenth century, the Swedish King lost his country’s great-power status and a considerable amount of his own powers vis-à-vis the Riksdag (the Swedish Parliament, which then consisted of four Estates Chambers). The new constitution placed the King’s Council (rather than the King himself) at the core of executive power.

The King was free to appoint the members of the Council, but only from among the three candidates suggested by the Riksdag. In the Riksdag, one of the four Estates, the Nobility, dominated the proceedings, and the committee system played a major role.

Parliamentary groups at least resembling parties developed by the late 1730s, when some nobles began to form an opposition group known as the Hats (an allusion to the military background common to many in this group). They later extended their organization to the other Estates. The Hats referred to the established Riksdag leadership as the Caps (after Night-Cap) because they considered them to be old and tired. The Hats also more actively sought to regain the military great-power status that had been lost earlier in the century. In 1738 the Hats were strong enough to take control of the Riksdag. They also took control of the King's Council (the cabinet of the time) by refusing to approve the conduct of ministers who allegedly had failed to follow Riksdag decisions. In modern terms, this was essentially a vote of no confidence (or censure) against these ministers (Linnarsson 1943). When the King asked for new candidates for the Council, only candidates from the Hat 'party' were nominated. By 1739, power in the Council was firmly in the hands of the Hats. Metcalf (1977: 7) thus aptly describes the first decades of the Age of Liberty, '[s]tep by step since 1720, the Estates and the Council had introduced limitations on the King's constitutional rights and privileges—not through any formal amendment of the constitution, but through *de facto* expansion of their own powers and the subsequent evolution of constitutional usage'.

The Hats kept this power for 26 years, at times using a name stamp when the King refused to sign documents, until by 1765 the Caps mustered enough support to wrest control of the Riksdag out of their hands. But even though they were stronger supporters of the King, the Caps did not refrain from taking control of the Council for themselves. The Hats regained power in 1769, and the Caps again in 1771, but by now economic troubles and infighting among the parties and the Estates had eroded support for the system. That year the old King died, and only a year later the new King (Gustav III), supported by the army, ended the 'party system' and restored the powers of the monarchy (Hadenius 1994).

Parliamentary Government Conquers Europe

Parliamentary government later spread through the British Empire 'organically' and to other parts of Europe by diffusion. Yet, there was certainly no 'tidal wave' of parliamentarism until the second half of the nineteenth century. Since the development towards parliamentary government was often irregular, with both incremental and revolutionary steps as well as reversals, the national 'birth dates' are often difficult to pinpoint precisely. France introduced ministerial accountability to parliament in 1792. Most other European countries followed in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Parliamentary government (in this sense of ministerial accountability) was thus first introduced in Belgium and Luxembourg in 1830, The Netherlands in 1848, Italy in 1867, Spain in 1869, Norway in 1884, Denmark in 1901, with Austria, Finland, Germany, Iceland, and Ireland following after the First World War (Gerlich 1973: 100–1). At the same time, wealth requirements for representatives gradually disappeared (Manin 1997: ch. 4).

In some countries parliamentary *democracy*, based on universal (or, at least, universal male) suffrage, followed only after considerable delay (e.g. Norway 1897, The Netherlands 1917, Sweden 1917, Britain 1918, Italy 1919, Belgium 1919, and Luxembourg 1919), while in other countries the breakthrough of parliamentary government and full adult suffrage coincided. The latter pattern was particularly prevalent in those countries that had a regime change after First World War, most notably Germany and Austria. In some countries, the enfranchisement of women was delayed even more (Italy 1945, France 1946, and Belgium 1948) (Colomer 2001).

Since the Second World War especially, parliamentary government has proven itself to be a highly resilient regime type, as there have been few cases of authoritarian backsliding once parliamentarism has been introduced (Stepan and Skach 1993; Przeworski *et al.* 2000). Yet, in several countries the first wave of democratization failed (e.g. Germany, Austria, Spain, and Italy), and a few countries have a record of more than one failed attempt to establish parliamentary government and/or democracy (Greece, Spain) (von Beyme 1973, 1999; Colomer 2001: 217). Such cases indeed account for the parliamentary democracies represented in this volume—Greece, Portugal, and Spain—which in their present form date from the 1970s.

PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

The terms *parliamentarism*, *parliamentary government*, and *parliamentary democracy* are often used interchangeably, and so far we have not established any explicit distinction between them. Before we engage in a more substantive discussion of parliamentary government and democracy, however, we need to clarify our use of these key terms. Let us first consider *parliamentary government* as a positive term denoting a particular institutional arrangement.

The term parliamentary government was not used until 1832 in Britain and the late 1830s on the continent (von Beyme 1999: 29–33). Competing terms include representative government (J. S. Mill 1984 [1861]), responsible government, and cabinet government (Bagehot 1963 [1867]). Note that the term parliamentary government conventionally focuses on the relationship between parliament and government. There is no necessary connection to citizens and full universal suffrage. Parliamentary government is thus possible without democracy. Indeed, such early theorists of parliamentary government (though they did not use this term) as John Stuart Mill and Walter Bagehot favoured a limited franchise.

Parliamentary regimes are characterized by a number of specific and interrelated institutional features, upon which its dynamics hinge. To illuminate these institutional effects, a number of authors, most notably Bryce (1921), Loewenstein (1957, 1975), Verney (1959), and von Beyme (1973, 1999), have sought to provide comprehensive definitions of parliamentary government. Their mutual differences notwithstanding, these definitions collectively include the following criteria:

1. There is a dual executive (split between the head of government and the head of state).
2. Parliament has formal or informal investiture powers.

3. The cabinet is a collective decision-making body.
4. Cabinet Ministers are usually also members of parliament.
5. The cabinet is politically responsible to the parliamentary majority.
6. Parliament has means of control (interpellations, committees of inquiry, etc.) over the cabinet.
7. The parliamentary majority can force the cabinet to resign.
8. This power is in most cases balanced by the Prime Minister's power to dissolve parliament.

The properties listed above certainly jointly describe a number of salient features of parliamentary government. Yet, while such a comprehensive conception enhances our configurative understanding, it does not cleanly differentiate between parliamentary government and other regime forms. It is commonly acknowledged that not all parliamentary systems exhibit this list of features in its entirety, and conversely that some of these properties adhere to non-parliamentary systems as well. But a characterization that specifies neither necessary nor sufficient conditions is not very helpful analytically. Moreover, it is not clear whether some of these properties are simply the behavioural consequences of others. Most comprehensive definitions do not make it clear what are definitional properties of parliamentary government and what are contingent features or mere behavioural regularities. Even if in principle these conceptual problems could be solved, the problem remains that some of these criteria are difficult to operationalize. And the more (necessary) definitional criteria we add, the more likely we exclude from the parliamentary category constitutions that otherwise have very much in common.

Minimal Definitions

We believe in the virtues of simple and unambiguous classifications, and hence will not attempt to provide a comprehensive definition. Rather, we prefer a minimal definition, which should provide the simplest and sharpest analytical tool by which we can distinguish parliamentary systems from others. Several such minimal definitions have been proposed. Lijphart (1984: 68, drawing on Epstein 1968) defines parliamentary government as 'a form of constitutional democracy in which executive authority emerges from, and is responsible to, legislative authority'. The 'emergence' criterion denotes that Prime Ministers are selected by parliament, though Lijphart includes in this category cases in which the head of state appoints the Prime Ministers, who 'emerge from interparty bargaining' (1984: 69).⁵ Similarly, Sartori (1997: 101) states that 'parliament is sovereign' under parliamentarism and that this regime type requires 'government to be appointed, supported and, as the case may be, dismissed, by parliamentary vote'.

Stepan and Skach (1993: 3) define a parliamentary regime as a system of mutual dependence: '(1) The chief executive power must be supported by a majority in the

⁵ In a later publication Lijphart (1999: 116–8) adds 'collective or collegial executives' as a third criterion, and thus moves a step away from a minimal definition.

legislature and can fall if it receives a vote of no confidence. (2) The executive power (normally in conjunction with the head of state) has the capacity to dissolve the legislature and call for elections'. And Shugart and Mainwaring (1997: 14–5) thus define parliamentary in contrast to presidential democracy: 'While in presidential systems the head of government is popularly elected, this is not the case with the Prime Minister in parliamentary systems. Furthermore, the electoral terms of the government and the assembly are fixed in presidential systems but not in parliamentary systems'.

Useful as these contrasting definitions are, they are not quite satisfactory. There are three problems. One is analytical: some of the terms of these definitions are ambiguous, or do not effectively partition the world's democratic regimes. The second problem is empirical: Some definitions, if taken seriously, would lead us to categorize particular political systems in ways that few analysts seem to find compelling. The third and most important problem is theoretical: None of these definitions tell us what is *democratic* about parliamentary democracies. We shall address the first two of these problems below, and the third and most important one later in this chapter.

The first (analytical) problem is thus that many existing definitions of parliamentary government are operationally ambiguous. Different scholars using the same criteria may classify the same political systems differently, as Robert Elgie (1998) has amply demonstrated. Also, there are political systems that by common agreement are neither parliamentary nor presidential. Indeed, much of the literature on regime types has concerned itself with such hybrids as the French Fifth Republic or Switzerland. In the case of the French Fifth Republic, the executive does not emerge from the legislature, whereas in Switzerland it does not depend on the legislature's confidence. How, then, do we categorize France? Is it parliamentary or presidential? And what about Switzerland? Or Poland? Or Russia? In fact, a growing number of constitutions do not fit the standard definitions. These constitutions, and the French Fifth Republic in particular, have spawned a growing literature on 'semi-presidential' or 'premier-presidential' government (Duverger 1980; Shugart and Carey 1992; Sartori 1997; Elgie 1998, 1999).

The second (empirical) problem is that if parliament's role in the 'emergence' (Lijphart) or 'appointment' (Sartori) of the cabinet means some form of active selection, then this criterion simply does not very faithfully describe the process of government formation in systems conventionally labelled as parliamentary. It is true that in some such systems, for example Ireland, parliament actually elects a Prime Minister by majority vote. In other systems, such as Italy, parliament must, after a new Prime Minister has been appointed, approve the incoming cabinet in an investiture vote. In most cases, however, there is simply no mechanism by which parliament directly selects the Prime Minister or cabinet. Britain, the birthplace of modern parliamentary democracy, has no such institutional vehicle. Nor does Austria, Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, or Norway, just to name a few (for empirical surveys, see Laver and Schofield 1990; Bergman 1993; De Winter 1995: ch. 4; and Chapter 4 of this volume). In the real world, then, parliamentary government rarely means that the legislature actually elects or appoints the executive (von Beyme 1973: 41–3). A similar problem is that those definitions that include the executive's dissolution power (e.g. Stepan and Skach 1993; Shugart and Mainwaring 1997) by implication exclude cases that are

normally understood as parliamentary. In declining order of severity, this problem applies to Norway, whose constitution simply does not permit early parliamentary dissolution, Germany, in which it is limited to rare circumstances explicitly described in the constitution, and Sweden, where dissolution is contained by the strong disincentive that a new parliament would be elected only for the remainder of the dissolved parliament's term.

The Accountability Criterion

To avoid such definitional problems, a number of authors have resorted to a truly minimalist concern with cabinet accountability. In his monumental *The History of Government*, S. E. Finer (1997: 1590), drawing on the nineteenth century Swiss constitutional lawyer Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, distinguishes parliamentary government from constitutional monarchy by the responsibility of ministers. While under constitutional monarchy the cabinet ministers 'are appointed by and dismissed by the monarch and are responsible to him alone', under parliamentary government 'they are responsible to the legislature which can force them to retire, or, if the legislature is very strong, can actually impose them on the monarch'. The same definition of parliamentary government has been used to distinguish it, not from its historical predecessor, but from other democratic regime types, in particular presidentialism. Hence, to Strong (1963: 73–5), if the assembly has the power to remove the executive, the regime is parliamentary. Likewise, Steffani's (1979: 39) defining criterion is that the government can be removed from office by parliament. Finally, according to Riggs (1988: 252) the crucial difference between parliamentary and presidential constitutions is 'whether or not the head of government can be replaced by an assembly vote'.⁶

What thus characterizes parliamentary government is that the cabinet must be tolerated by the parliamentary majority, not that the latter actually plays any direct role in the selection of the cabinet. This preserves a core element of all the definitions discussed above, namely the idea of executive accountability to parliament, whereas it disregards the question of selection. Political systems that we conventionally label as parliamentary have much more in common with respect to the former criterion (cabinet accountability) than with respect to the latter (cabinet selection). It is also not clear that the way a cabinet emerges matters as much as its accountability. Diermeier and Feddersen (1998), for example, argue that it is the confidence relationship, the threat of being voted out of office, that accounts for greater party cohesiveness in parliamentary systems than under presidentialism (see also Huber 1996; Baron 1998). These are issues to which we shall return at length later in this volume.

In this volume we adopt this minimal definition. Hence, *parliamentary government* refers to the institutional arrangement by which the executive is accountable, through a confidence relationship, to any parliamentary majority. Thus, in our minimal definition,

⁶ Riggs (1988: 252) also mentions presidential veto rights and the possibility of executive policies not endorsed by the assembly as 'natural consequences' of presidentialist systems. However, they are 'not the essence of presidentialism'.

*parliamentary government is a system of government in which the Prime Minister and his or her cabinet are accountable to any majority of the members of parliament and can be voted out of office by the latter, through an ordinary or constructive vote of no confidence.*⁷ For simplicity, we shall also use *parliamentarism* as a shorthand for a parliamentary system of government.⁸

PARLIAMENTARY VERSUS PRESIDENTIAL GOVERNMENT

Rules matter to the extent that they affect the game that is played. So also with political regime types such as parliamentarism. Much of the current literature on parliamentary government is concerned with its political effects compared to other regime types. The most frequent alternative is presidentialism, and there is a sizeable literature comparing their respective effects and merits.⁹ Bryce (1921: ii. 464–76) was probably the first scholar systematically to assess the comparative merits of modern parliamentarism and presidentialism (plus the Swiss executive council). Bryce compared these regime types along three dimensions, captured in three questions:

1. Which of them best succeeds in giving prompt and full effect to the Will of the People?
2. Which is best calculated to guard against errors into which the people may fall by ignorance, haste, or passion?
3. Which secures the highest efficiency in administration?

Bryce did not provide a clear answer to his third question. Yet, in his words,

the Presidential system leaves more to chance than does the Parliamentarian. A Prime Minister is only one out of a Cabinet, and his colleagues may keep him straight and supply qualities wanting in him, but everything depends on the character of the individual chosen to be President. He may be strong or weak, wise or short-sighted. He may aim at standing above party and use his authority and employ his patronage with a single eye to the nation's welfare, or may think first of his own power and his party's gain, . . . (Bryce 1921: ii. 469)

In modern parlance, variance in governance will tend to be greater under presidentialism, and this may lead risk-averse citizens to prefer parliamentarism. Yet, it is unclear how significant this variance will be.

Bryce did, however, provide influential answers to his first two questions. He considered parliamentary government superior with regard to 'giving prompt and full effect to the Will of the People': 'Efficiency is most likely to be secured by the

⁷ For systems with bicameral legislatures, it suffices for the Prime Minister and cabinet to be accountable to the majority in one chamber. Empirically, this is typically the lower chamber. Constitutions under which the Prime Minister and cabinet are accountable to both chambers, such as Italy, are the exception.

⁸ We are aware that this common usage can be criticized because an 'ism' typically refers to a normative perspective or movement. Indeed, in the nineteenth century parliamentarism was a democratic movement against autocratic rule (Schütt-Wetschky 1984: 38–9).

⁹ Other democratic alternatives are assembly (or convention) government (Loewenstein 1957, 1975; von Beyme 1973, 1999) and Swiss directoral government.

Parliamentary system, because whatever the Executive needs it is sure to obtain from its majority in the Assembly, subject of course, to any check which the existence of a Second Chamber may provide'¹⁰ (Bryce 1921: ii. 475). With regard to Bryce's second question—which system guards better against errors caused by ignorance, haste, or passion—he favoured presidentialism: 'by dividing power between several distinct authorities, it provides more carefully than does the Parliamentary [system] against errors on the part either of Legislature or Executive, and retards the decision by the people of conflicts arising between them' (1921: ii. 474).

Before arriving at his verdict, Bryce discussed at some length the merits and demerits of parliamentarism and presidentialism. In the present context it may suffice to summarize his judgement on parliamentarism. Parliamentary government, according to Bryce,

concentrates the plenitude of popular power in one body, the Legislature, giving to its majority that absolute control of the Executive which enables the latter, when supported by the Legislature, to carry out the wishes of the majority with the maximum of vigour and promptness... The essence of the scheme is that the Executive and the majority in the Legislature work together, each influencing the other; the Cabinet being in fact an Executive Committee of the Legislature... The working of the scheme presupposes not only the existence of parties, but a sentiment of party unity strong enough to induce the majority in the Legislature to entrust a large discretion to the Cabinet, and to support it, except now and then in very grave matters, with a trustful loyalty which assumes its action to have been right till proved to have been wrong. (Bryce 1921: ii. 465)

This description led Bryce to identify the following merits of parliamentary government: It is

calculated to secure swiftness in decision and vigour in action, and enables the Cabinet to press through such legislation as it thinks needed, and to conduct both domestic administration and foreign policy with the confidence that its majority will support it against the attacks of the Opposition. To these merits there is to be added the concentration of Responsibility. For any faults committed the Legislature can blame the Cabinet, and the people can blame both the Cabinet and the majority. (Bryce 1921: ii. 465–6)

However, these merits of parliamentarism 'are balanced by serious defects' (Bryce 1921: ii. 466), among which Bryce counts excessive partisanship and erratic policy making. In his view, parliamentary government nurtures an 'unhealthy' competition between politicians and parties: 'The system intensifies the spirit of party and keeps it always on the boil.'¹¹ Even if there are no important issues of policy before the nation there are always the Offices to be fought for. One party holds them, the other desires them, and the conflict is unending, for immediately after a defeat the beaten party begins its campaign to dislodge the victors' (Bryce 1921: ii. 466).

¹⁰ Obviously, Bryce did not consider minority governments, which account for 37% of Western European governments in the 1945–99 period (Müller and Strøm 2000: 561). Under this type of government, parliaments are less likely to be the willing executor of government policies.

¹¹ Bryce (1921: ii. 335) attributed the 'decline of parliaments', his famous thesis, to the rise of party machines and the multiplication of parties, which, in turn, was said to cause cabinet instability and faulty compromises in policy-making.

Bryce also seriously questioned the capacity of parliamentary governments to generate policy outputs that are in the long-term public interest. First, the accountability to parliament would force cabinets to think first and foremost about the short-term popularity of their policy proposals. A cabinet, he argued, is disposed 'to think too much of what support it can win by proposals framed to catch the fancy of the moment, and to think too little of what the real needs of the nation are' (1921: ii. 467). Moreover, Bryce suggested that parliamentary government would encourage hasty and half-baked decisions: 'Lastly, the very concentration of power and swiftness with which decisions can be reached and carried into effect is a source of danger. There is no security for due reflection, no opportunity for second thoughts. Errors may be irretrievable'. Presidential government, on the other hand, 'was built for safety, not for speed' (Bryce 1921: ii. 468).

Although Bryce's analysis has largely been eclipsed by more recent scholarship, we find it incisive and rich in intuition. As later chapters will show, the choice of regime type does in fact involve a trade-off between such concerns as efficiency and the risk of faulty (counter-productive or, at least, suboptimal) decisions. Moreover, this trade-off is associated with regime type much in the way that Bryce suggests. Also, Bryce's concern with the connection between parliamentary government and partisanship continues to be valid. Yet, whereas Bryce could only speculate about these relationships in somewhat imprecise terms, we can examine delegation and its concomitant problems in much more precise and rigorous ways, and examine an empirical record that is much larger and better documented. But before we embark on our main project, let us briefly examine the more recent debate that these improvements in our understanding have occasioned.

The Contemporary Debate

The contemporary literature on the merits of parliamentary government is characterized by three substantive concerns and three approaches. The three substantive concerns are the effects of regime types on (1) regime stability, (2) policy outputs and their fit with citizen preferences, and (3) the process of governance. The first approach to these questions maintains the classical distinction between presidential and parliamentary systems and attempts to identify the relative merits of one versus the other. The second approach similarly maintains this classification of regime types but then adds further criteria so as to differentiate subtypes within each of these main categories. For scholars in the third tradition, however, the presidential-parliamentary distinction is epiphenomenal or simply less consequential than other differences between democratic constitutions.

The influential work of Linz (1994) exemplifies the first approach above. Linz argues that the 'temporal rigidity' of presidentialism potentially undermines democratic stability. Under presidential government, citizens are stuck with their agents (the President and the legislature) until their respective terms expire. Under the worst-case scenario, the 'Linzian nightmare' (Ackerman 2000: 645), the constitutional design of presidentialism results in divided government, deadlock, crises of governability, and

eventually the breakdown of democracy. Parliamentary government compares favourably, because it allows the removal at any time of executive office holders who have lost the trust of the legislature.

As Kaiser (1997: 422–3) has observed, the subsequent debate over the advantages and disadvantages of parliamentary and presidential democracy is characterized by its asymmetrical focus on the inherent problems of presidential constitutions. Several contributions have lent theoretical (Colomer 1995; Riggs 1997) or empirical (Stepan and Skach 1993; Przeworski *et al.* 2000) support to Linz's negative assessment of the effects of presidentialism on regime stability. Colomer (2001: 213), who differentiates between parliamentary systems with majoritarian versus proportional electoral systems, shows that the regime survival rate of proportional-parliamentary democracies is considerably greater than that of presidential democracies, which, in turn, do better than majoritarian parliamentary ones. Other studies, however, place presidential democracy in a more favourable light (Shugart and Carey 1992; Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; von Mettenheim 1997). Lane and Ersson (2000: 117–42), for instance, show that parliamentary systems clearly outperform presidential ones in democratic stability and socio-economic development. However, if socio-economic development is understood not as a consequence of regime type, but rather its environment, much of the difference between presidential and parliamentary government disappears.

Regime stability may be a necessary condition for good government, but citizens in many advanced industrial democracies perceive little systemic threat. In such circumstances, debate over regime performance often shifts to more specific policy outcomes. Scholars interested in this second major concern often emphasize dimensions that cross-cut the presidential–parliamentary distinction. Thus, Powell (1982, 2000), Lijphart (1984, 1999), and Tsebelis (1995, 2002) create their own regime typologies.

Powell (1982) examines electoral participation, government stability, and political order (the absence of turmoil and violence) in twenty-nine democracies between 1958 and 1976. Distinguishing three regime types—presidential systems, majoritarian parliamentary systems, and representational parliamentary systems—Powell concludes that '[e]ach of the constitutional arrangements has some advantages and disadvantages', which in large part reflect their political party systems (1982: 218). In his more recent study, Powell (2000) distinguishes more simply between majoritarian and proportional systems. His only presidential system, the United States, is classified as mixed because of the combined impact of the (majoritarian) single-member plurality electoral system, low party discipline, and separation-of-powers institutions. Powell finds proportionalism more conducive to the formation of governments close to the median citizen (2000: 41).

Focusing on a broad range of performance indicators for stable democracies around the world, Arend Lijphart (1984, 1999) argues that the combination of parliamentary government and proportional representation (PR) electoral systems is optimal. More specifically, Lijphart (1995, 1999) finds that 'consensus democracies' (which feature parliamentary government and PR elections) perform slightly better than majoritarian systems (presidential systems and parliamentary systems with

majoritarian elections) macro-economically, but 'a great deal better with regard to many qualitative aspects of democracy: the representation of women and minorities, income equality, voter participation, citizens' satisfaction with democracy, and the proximity between the government and the median voter' (Lijphart 1999: 258–93, 2000: 168–9).

We shall return to several of these concerns later in this volume (see especially chapter 23). Note, however, that some of the advantages that Lijphart reports for consensus democracies may reflect the fact that several of his performance indicators directly or indirectly privilege polities with expansive governments and a large public sector. Such an explanation would be consistent with the work of Persson and Tabellini (1999), who contend that in presidential systems, the chief executive will seek support from those legislators that are 'cheapest to buy'. In parliamentary systems, on the other hand, the members of the executive are forced to sustain the majority that keeps them in power. They are not free to seek support where it is least expensive but must instead embark on more ambitious government programs. Hence, parliamentary systems foster a more expansive and expensive public sector. Empirically, Persson and Tabellini show that, even when they control for per capita income, openness of the economy, age of the population, and ethno-linguistic fractionalization, presidential systems indeed have smaller government shares of gross domestic product (GDP) (see also Boix 2001).

The third major focus of the contemporary literature is on governance and policy-making itself. This is in many ways the approach that is closest to our own concerns in this volume. Moe and Caldwell (1994) thus argue that systems of parliamentary government distinguish themselves with regard to policy efficiency. Legislators, they argue, have incentives to respond to the particularistic demands of interest groups. Under presidential government this leads to the creation of comparatively ineffective bureaucratic structures. Once successful, interest groups prefer to insulate government agencies from future democratic control. In order to protect their policy gains, they lobby for excessive regulation of the agencies, which, in turn, renders these administrative units ineffective (see also McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast 1987). In contrast, parliamentary systems of the Westminster type do not allow for such entrenchment of institutions, since any new parliamentary majority can dismantle the regulations. Hence, there is no incentive to 'overregulate' government agencies and thus cripple them. However, Moe and Caldwell (1994) concede that they compare US presidentialism with the most contrasting type of parliamentarism—the 'Westminster model'—and suggest that coalitional parliamentary systems may be much more similar to presidential ones.

In their study of government capabilities, Weaver and Rockman (1993) distinguish three tiers of explanation. The first tier distinguishes presidential from parliamentary systems. Since the United States is their only case, Weaver and Rockman do not further distinguish between presidential regimes, but they do provide a sub-classification of parliamentary systems. The second tier thus comprises what they call 'regime' and 'government type' (multiparty coalitions versus alternating single-party government versus dominant-party). The third tier includes other institutional features such as

federalism, bicameralism, judicial review, and non-institutional factors such as political culture.

Weaver and Rockman's comparison focuses on the impact of institutional arrangements on the government's steering functions (policy innovation, resource targeting, loss imposition, priority setting, coordinating of conflicting objectives, and policy implementation), maintenance functions (policy stability, maintaining international commitments), and political tasks (representing and reconciling diversity, managing conflict, and representing new interests). They conclude that 'the distinction between parliamentary systems and the US system of checks and balances...captures only a small part of potential institutional influences on governmental capacity' (Weaver and Rockman 1993: 445–6). The 'effects of specific institutional arrangements...are neither uniform nor unidirectional' (Weaver and Rockman 1993: 454). In some cases concentrated power is better, in some cases the institutional arrangements make no difference, and in some cases concentrated power is worse.

Similarly, in his review of policy output differences between parliamentary and presidential systems, Eaton (2000) examines the effects of veto players, the visibility of policy negotiations, the systems' biases toward collective or particularistic goods, the accountability of individual office holders, interest group strategies, and delegation to bureaucrats. He concludes that although there are systematic differences between presidential and parliamentary systems, these 'in most cases...tend to wash out' when variation within each regime type is considered (2000: 371).

George Tsebelis' (1995, 2002) contributions are in some ways much in the spirit of Weaver and Rockman, but within a much simpler and more parsimonious theoretical framework. Tsebelis maintains that the critical regime characteristics are the number and preferences of veto players. Presidential governments tend to have more veto players than parliamentary ones. But the distinction between parliamentary and presidential systems is epiphenomenal to the dynamics of democratic policy-making. Whether parliamentary or presidential, Tsebelis argues, systems with few and ideologically homogeneous veto players are more conducive to policy change than those with many and heterogeneous ones.

To put the contemporary regime literature in a nutshell: scholars disagree as to whether parliamentary government is superior to presidentialism with respect to such substantive concerns as regime stability and policy performance, or whether there are no meaningful differences. While some merits of presidentialism have also been identified, this regime type has found fewer enthusiastic defenders. There is broad agreement that substantial differences exist among parliamentary democracies (see e.g. Loewenstein 1957, 1975; Verney 1959: 18; Steffani 1979: 43–4; Sartori 1997: 101), and yet surprisingly few efforts have been made to map out the variety of parliamentary institutions and to carefully assess their implications. Moreover, while the contemporary literature thus has shed considerable light on the systemic as well as policy consequences of different regime types, it has paid scant attention to what makes parliamentary democracy, or for that sake any other form of democracy, *democratic*. In other words, we still need to address the *theoretical* problem identified earlier in this chapter. It is to this concern that we now turn.

THE PARLIAMENTARY CHAIN OF DELEGATION

The policy process in contemporary democracies, from voters all the way to the civil servants that ultimately implement public policy, can be viewed as a process of *delegation*, in which those authorized to make political decisions conditionally designate others to make such decisions in their name and place. The basic normative assumption is that policy-makers in a democracy should do what the citizens want them to do.¹²

In democratic societies, citizens delegate to politicians first and foremost through elections. *Democratic* elections need to satisfy a number of criteria. They must be held under conditions of political competition (freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, and freedom of candidacy), and there must be an independent and competent administration, as well as appropriate judicial bodies, to implement the election law (for the ‘classic’ argument, see Dahl 1956: 84, 1971: 3, 1989: 221–2; for a recent application, see Choe 1997).

As the primary democratic institution, elections have a double nature, allowing for delegation as well as accountability (Powell 2000). As mechanisms of delegation, elections vest politicians and parties with a mandate, and as instruments of accountability they provide the opportunity to hold politicians and parties responsible for their actions in office. In the former (mandate) perspective, parties and politicians present their programmes and credentials to the voters and are elected on the basis of the voters’ programmatic choices and their own perceived competence.

Elections can induce accountability to that extent that elective offices are attractive and that incumbents therefore generally would like to remain incumbents or even to rise in the political hierarchy, the motivation identified by Schlesinger (1966) as progressive ambition. The fear of electoral punishment is a strong incentive for incumbents to remain in tune with their voters’ demands (see e.g. Sartori 1987: 156). Even if representatives have no ambition to run again, or when term limits prohibit them from doing so, the salutary effects of electoral accountability may operate indirectly. In such cases, the electoral connection constrains politicians through their collective affiliation with political parties, which seek to remain in business well beyond the terms of individual politicians, and hence do their best to make incumbents with discrete ambition (i.e. ambition that does not extend beyond their current term of office) behave *as if* they would face the electorate again (Schlesinger 1991; Wittman 1995; Carey 1996; Müller 2000).

Yet, democratic elections are only the first step in the delegation process. John Stuart Mill’s prescription for the ‘proper office of a representative assembly’ thus stresses the need for parliamentary delegation to the cabinet. Since ‘no body of men... is fit for

¹² There are at least three arguments which can be made against this assumption. First, because of the problems of preference aggregation, it may simply be impossible to know what citizens want (Riker 1982). Second, if doing what the citizens want means doing what the majority (or plurality) of citizens want, there are normative limits to majority rule (human rights). Third, elitists may claim that leaders know their followers’ interests better than the latter do themselves (see Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999). We return to these issues in Chapter 3.

action', parliaments 'ought not to administer' (Mill 1984 [1861]: 249), 'or to dictate in detail to those who have the charge of administration' (1984 [1861]: 250). A parliament 'is as little fitted for the direct business of legislation as for that of administration', Mill (1984 [1861]: 254) maintained. Accordingly, it 'has never been thought desirable that Parliament should itself nominate even the members of a Cabinet' (Mill 1984 [1861]: 253). Hence, parliament should not make administrative decisions, select ministers (or even civil servants), or even legislate in a substantive sense.

Instead of the function of governing, for which it is radically unfit, the proper office of a representative assembly is to watch and control the government: to throw the light of publicity on its acts: to compel a full exposition and justification of all of them which any one considers questionable; to censure them if found condemnable, and, if the men who compose the government abuse their trust, or fulfil it in a sense which conflicts with the deliberate sense of the nation, to expel them from office, and either expressly or virtually appoint their successors. (Mill 1984 [1861]: 258).

Mill favoured a system in which parliament delegates extensively and limits itself to the tasks of controlling the executive and to be an arena for public debate. There are, however, many ways in which citizens can delegate to politicians, and many ways in which politicians can delegate among each other. Let us therefore consider more systematically the nature of democratic delegation from voters to those who govern. This is a chain in which we can identify at least four discrete steps:

1. Delegation from voters to their elected representatives.
2. Delegation from legislators to the executive branch, specifically to the head of government (the Prime Minister).
3. Delegation from the head of government (Prime Minister) to the heads of different executive departments.
4. Delegation from the heads of different executive departments to civil servants.

This chain of delegation is mirrored by a corresponding chain of accountability that runs in the reverse direction. Thus, democratic constitutions contain mechanisms that allow principals to delegate and that make agents accountable. Indeed, what makes democratic regimes democratic is precisely that they contain mechanisms by which the citizens can select and control their representatives.

This view of representative democracy as delegation and accountability is, of course, a simplification (see Chapter 3). Yet, building on this framework, we can now spell out an ideal-typical definition of *parliamentary democracy*. We will use this term for two specific purposes: (1) to anchor our understanding of parliamentary institutions in a conception of popular sovereignty, and (2) to flesh out a configurative model from which we can most easily understand how this form of government differs from alternative constitutions, and particularly presidentialism. Yet, we should stress that this model is an ideal type, designed to capture in an extreme form a bundle of attributes that are positively associated with parliamentary regimes, though not necessary ingredients.

In its ideal-typical form, then, parliamentary democracy is a chain of delegation and accountability, from the voters to the ultimate policy-makers, in which at each link (stage), a *principal* (in whom authority is originally) delegates to an *agent*, whom the principal has conditionally authorized to act in his or her name and place. The parliamentary chain has the following characteristics:

1. It is *indirect*, in that voters (the ultimate principal) directly elect only their parliamentary representatives. All other agents are only indirectly elected and accountable to the citizens.

2. Thus, parliamentary democracy means a particularly *simple* form of delegation.¹³ In each link of the parliamentary chain, a single principal delegates to a single agent (such as a member of parliament).¹⁴ Voters in a presidential system, in contrast, typically elect multiple competing agents (such as, for example, a President and members of two separate legislative chambers).

3. In a similar fashion, under parliamentary democracy agents are accountable to a single (though not necessarily individual or unique) principal. Cabinet Ministers, for example, report to a single master (the Prime Minister), and ultimately to a parliament in which a single committee controls their jurisdiction. Likewise, civil servants have a single principal, their respective Cabinet Minister. In a presidential system, on the other hand, agents may have multiple principals. Civil servants, for example, may report to the President as well as to both legislative chambers. Parliamentary democracy, then, means simple accountability as well as simple delegation.

The ideal-typical *parliamentary democracy* thus features an indirect chain of command, in which at each stage a single principal delegates to only one agent (or several non-competing ones), and where each agent is accountable to one and only one principal. Thus, *indirectness* and *singularity* set parliamentarism apart from other constitutional designs, such as presidentialism.

PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRATIC DELEGATION

Delegation is often problematic, and delegation in national governments is no exception. Such problems have not gone unnoticed. Robert Michels, for example, was both aware of the need to delegate to party leaders and highly critical of its effects: 'democracy is inconceivable without organization', he wrote, yet organization 'gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization says oligarchy' (Michels 1962: 61, 365). In the same spirit Robert De Jouvenil ([1914] quoted in Loewenberg and Patterson 1979: 21) coined the well-known dictum that two

¹³ Note that if we take the idea of singular agents to its logical extreme, the ideal-typical parliamentary democracy is also a unitary state (such as Britain, New Zealand, or Sweden, but not Austria or Canada), with a unicameral parliament (such as the Nordic countries or, again, New Zealand).

¹⁴ In our elaboration of this framework in Chapter 3, we recognize that even under an ideal-typical parliamentary democracy, principals sometimes delegate to multiple agents. Yet, these agents do not generally compete with one another.

revolutionaries, only one of whom is a member of parliament, have less in common than two members of parliament, only one of whom is a revolutionary. There are also numerous references to 'downstream' delegation problems between ministers and civil servants, from Max Weber (1972: 572–4), who in naming ministers 'dilettantes' and civil servants 'experts' clearly indicated agency problems, all the way to the popular television comedy series *Yes, Minister* (Lynn and Jay 1981).

The contemporary literature continues to express concern about delegation, though perhaps in a more disaggregated fashion than in the classical literature. Yet, larger claims about the possibility of democratic delegation have by no means been abandoned. They range from those who hail the virtues of democratic delegation to those who think that delegation equals abdication. Among those who celebrate the successes of parliamentary delegation are Klingemann, Hofferbert, and Budge (1994), who find that government expenditure in several policy areas responds to party manifestos. Among the less sanguine analysts, there are those who claim that delegation works, but only at election time. One important strand of modern democratic theory, the competitive model, puts great store in accountability at election time. All voters can do is to choose a set of politicians who appear more likely to do the 'right things' and to punish politicians who have not done so (see Schumpeter 1942; Riker 1982). In a more cynical formulation, then, the people rule directly only on election day; otherwise they are ruled by the politicians to whom they have delegated the task of making authoritative decisions (Schattschneider 1960: ch. VIII; Sartori 1987: 28–31, 86–9).

But even this view is too positive for some. Even if delegation works on election day, it may have unintended and negative consequences. According to Mayhew (1974) the 'electoral connection' triggers legislative behaviour that is individually rational (by enhancing re-election prospects) but that does not contribute to, and may even undermine, the collective goals of the United States Congress. Hence, individual congressmen engage in 'advertising', 'credit claiming', and 'position taking'. The 'electoral connection' thus induces members to shirk their legislative responsibilities, in which credit claiming is more difficult. Similarly, Fiorina (1977: 39–47) argues that congressmen devote their time and energy to casework and pork-barrel politics rather than legislation. While legislation is likely to be controversial to at least some voters, pork-barrel politics and casework are largely popular. In the most cynical interpretation, the lack of emphasis that representatives put on legislation creates problems that are then resolved piecemeal by the same politicians whose re-election is guaranteed by exactly these services.

Finally, the message of the most severe critics, is that delegation simply does not work. Politicians and other public officials are autonomous, and citizens have no real influence on what their representatives are doing. Consequently, politicians may misbehave in one of two ways: policy drift or rent-seeking. In the former case, 'Politicians may want to pursue their own ideas even if these differ from those of citizens' (Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999: 40). In the latter case, they may use political power to chase material advantage. The 'grabbing hand' perspective in economics argues that politicians do not maximize social welfare but instead pursue their own selfish objectives (Shleifer and Vishny 1998: 4). The literature on rent-seeking politicians indeed claims that 'governments transfer wealth not just among subgroups of citizens but also directly to

themselves' (McChesney 1997: 35). Rent extraction by politicians becomes more likely when institutions allow them to cloud responsibility for inefficient government action. And according to influential theories of bureaucracy, non-elected public officials are also likely to behave in ways that defy the voters' preferences (Downs 1967; Niskanen 1971).¹⁵

Problems of delegation thus give rise to some of the most scathing criticisms of modern democracies. Although much of this scholarship does not focus squarely on parliamentary government, and although we may differ with many of its premises, it holds major implications for our investigation of parliamentarism. Parliamentary systems certainly face their own delegation problems, with critical implications for our assessment of contemporary democracies. But although it is hugely consequential whether parliamentary delegation does or does not work, we need sharper tools and a more detailed plan of campaign before we can properly return to this debate. It is to these needs that we next attend.

Agency Problems

Let us now return to the problems of delegation under parliamentary democracy. We shall discuss these problems in the language of agency theory. The difference between what the principal wants and what the agent delivers is known as agency loss (the technical definition will be made clear in the Chapter 2). Principals (in our case, citizens) may be poorly served by their agents (politicians) for either of two reasons (or both). One problem is that the agents may have preferences that differ from those of the principals. The other problem is that the principals may not know enough about their potential agents to get the best possible deal from them. The latter, informational, problem may in turn come in two forms. First, principals may not be able to choose the right agents in the first place (*adverse selection*). Second, principals may not be able to keep their agents honest and diligent (*moral hazard*). In the Chapters 2 and 3, we shall expand on these problems and their application to the chain of delegation in parliamentary democracies. In this section we briefly review the extent to which the literature on parliamentary democracy has identified adverse selection and moral hazard problems. While the initial and final stages of the parliamentary chain of delegation have traditionally been seen as beset with delegation problems, much less concern has been given to delegation from the parliamentary majority to a Prime Minister or cabinet, or to delegation within the cabinet. Yet, agency loss can occur in any link in the parliamentary chain of delegation, and only if the whole chain works can the democratic promise be fulfilled.

Adverse Selection

After the first wave of European democratization crested immediately following the First World War, problems of parliamentary democracy soon figured prominently in

¹⁵ For a theoretical critique of Niskanen (1971), see, for example, McLean (1987: 89–100) or Dunleavy (1991). For an assessment of the empirical fit of Niskanen's theory, see Blais and Dion (1991).

the political debate. Among the principal protagonists in this debate were Gaetano Mosca and Carl Schmitt, whose contributions had a more lasting impact than most others. A core element of their critique was that parliament had been robbed of its power. Although, of course, he never used this label, Gaetano Mosca was centrally concerned with the problem of adverse selection, specifically with the dominance of parliament by societal elites. In his view, elections were controlled by organized minorities, leaving the great majority of people little effective choice of candidates (Mosca 1950: 135–6). Consequently, parliaments would represent the interests of wealthy and powerful elites rather than the popular majority. Mosca also saw this selection problem as a cause of patronage politics. ‘Influential voters’, that is societal elites, would make MPs intervene in administrative and judicial processes. Because the MPs would depend on the ‘influential voters’, and the government, in turn, on the MPs, ‘all moral and legal considerations’ would be pushed to the background. The government and the representatives’ ‘permanent and obvious conflict between duties and interests’ would lead to a situation in which ‘the bureaucracy and the elected bodies, which are meant to check each other, corrupt each other’ (Mosca 1950: 217).

As Mosca presented his concerns, they do not pertain specifically to parliamentary regimes. The charge that powerful societal elites control elected politicians can be levelled against any system of representation (see, for instance, Mills’ (1956) critique of the United States). Mosca most likely associated these problems with parliamentary government because it was the regime under which he lived. At the end of his career, however, Mosca (1947, 1950: 215) conceded that parliamentarism had to be compared with other real-world regimes, in particular those that preceded or succeeded it (i.e. constitutional monarchy and Fascism, respectively). In this comparison, the delegation problems of parliamentarism seem less damning. Mosca also suggested remedies for the problems of parliamentary government (Mosca 1950: 219–22), namely

- greater independence and security of judges,
- greater independence of audit offices,
- government decentralization, and
- more civic engagement among the well-educated and wealthy.

In the terms with which this volume will examine parliamentary democracy, most of these suggested remedies constitute constraints on the agents in the democratic chain of delegation. As we shall see in later chapters, it is intriguing to note the striking ways in which much of Mosca’s reform agenda is being heeded, more than half a century later. But that is a story to which we shall return in Chapters 4 and 22.

Moral Hazard

Mosca does not seem to have seriously considered the ways in which mass political parties might help solve the delegation problems with which he was concerned by elevating the representatives of more humble classes. Yet, although political parties might have helped counter adverse selection, they brought their own problems.

Writing in a time when parties had already become the dominant political players, Ostrogorski (1907: ii. 712–17) lamented that they had practically destroyed political accountability. Under party-based parliamentary government, he claimed, ‘the responsibility which is supposed to govern parliamentary relations comes to nothing but general irresponsibility’, because the MP’s responsibility ‘disappears in that of the party’... ‘however incompetent or culpable’ ministers may be, ‘it is impossible to punish one of them without punishing all’. Given party cohesion, under party government the fall of a cabinet could only happen by ‘accident’. In between elections the government ‘can do very much what it likes’. Parliamentary control ‘is almost non-existent’. Thus, Ostrogorski’s main point is the lack of accountability under party-based parliamentary government. In a word, his complaint is that parties foster moral hazard.

Likewise, in his famous *English Government and Politics*, Frederic Austin Ogg argued that executive agenda control in practice had eroded the cabinet’s accountability to parliament: ‘Armed with paramount rights of initiative, supported by procedural rules drawn in their favour, and holding the power of life and death over Parliament itself, the cabinet indicates what is to be done; and Parliament, on its part...dreading the consequences of refusal, complies’ (Ogg 1936: 461).

Echoing the concerns of Ostrogorski, Carl Schmitt regretted the abandonment of a separation of powers between parliament and government. In his view, ‘narrow and narrowest committees of parties and party coalitions make decisions behind closed doors’ (Schmitt 1969 [1923]: 52). Note his concern here with what the principal–agent approach labels ‘hidden action’, which can be a source of moral hazard. Like ourselves, Schmitt conceived of parliamentary democracy as a chain of delegation, with parliament as a committee of the people and the cabinet a committee of parliament. To him, the value of parliamentary government stemmed from rational and public discussion among the MPs. Once all the relevant information had been tabled and discussed, this should lead to ‘true and right policies’. Clearly, under ‘proper parliamentarism’ some learning and enlightenment would take place. This, however, would no longer be the case if parliamentary debate were a mere ‘façade’. Thus, the fusion of executive and legislative powers creates severe accountability problems. In Chapter 3 we shall return to similar concerns about transparency.

Yet important early twentieth-century authors, in particular Max Weber and Hans Kelsen (see also Herman Finer 1931), defended parliamentary government against real-world alternatives that were all non-democratic. Weber’s writings on parliamentary democracy were essentially an attempt to convince his more reluctant German fellow citizens of its virtues.¹⁶ In contrast, Kelsen (1926, 1929) gave a more balanced assessment. He considered parliamentary government the only possible way to realize the idea of democracy in the world of his day (Kelsen 1926: 5). Yet, he also identified delegation problems and suggested remedies. Specifically, Kelsen called parliamentary government a ‘compromise between the democratic demand for freedom and the principle of the division of labour’, hence delegation (Kelsen 1926: 7, 1929: 29). According

¹⁶ See ‘Wahlrecht und Demokratie in Deutschland’ (1917) and ‘Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland’ (1918), both reprinted in Weber (1988).

to Kelsen, parliamentary government is characterized by a ‘fiction of representation’ that consists of two components: (1) the idea that parliament is only the representative (‘Stellvertreter’) of the people and (2) that the people can issue their will only in parliament and through parliament, despite the fact that they do not give the MPs binding instructions. This leaves the parliament legally sovereign and hence the decisions of parliament may deviate from the preferences of the voters (Kelsen 1926: 10, 1929: 30). Thus the problem is the ‘irresponsibility of the MP vis-à-vis his voters’ (Kelsen 1926: 14).

Kelsen’s concerns resonate with many subsequent authors, for whom the fusion of the parliamentary majority and the chief executive creates special accountability problems, especially on ‘minor’ issues. While the electoral connection may secure accountability on major issues, it is likely to be inadequate when issues fall short of catching the voters’ attention or causing their alienation. In other words, accountability breaks down when the ultimate principals, the voters, have a severe information problem. Their direct representatives, the Members of Parliament, whose information is considerably better, are bound by party loyalty (or discipline) and hence may not wish to ‘rock the government’s boat’ (King 1976). In this respect, parliamentary government perverts the representatives’ incentives: Were government MPs to take seriously their duty to hold the executive accountable, they might raise the voters’ attention to the wrongdoings of their co-partisans in the executive branch, with likely adverse electoral consequences. The fusion of legislative and executive powers may also cause bad policies, if the parliamentary majority invariably is willing to turn all government proposals into law. Thus, policy failures are likely to result from the abandonment of parliamentary scrutiny.

Phrased in the terms employed in this volume, Kelsen thought the main problem of parliamentary government to be moral hazard and considered the electoral accountability mechanisms to be insufficient. Consequently, he suggested three remedies:

- the referendum,
- political parties that allow for participation between elections, and
- special corporatist parliaments, which assemble expertise not available in parliament.

These suggested remedies empower the ultimate principal, the voters, and aim at overcoming the information problems vis-à-vis MPs. Note that, in language that Lupia develops in the Chapter 2, Kelsen’s remedies focus in large part on *ex ante* mechanism of agency control, whereas Mosca largely favoured *ex post* instruments (see Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991). The debate between these competing vehicles of popular sovereignty continues to this day.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Representative democracy means delegation, and delegation is problematic for several reasons. In this chapter, we have briefly identified some delegation problems that will be discussed at greater length in the following chapters. Preference divergence and asymmetric information may make a mockery out of political representation and lead to such problems as adverse selection and moral hazard. Because such agency problems exist, democracy requires not only delegation, but also accountability. The aim of this

volume is to explore the ways in which delegation and accountability works in the parliamentary systems of Western Europe and thus to understand the conditions that favour and constrain popular sovereignty. We focus on those political institutions that impinge on delegation and accountability throughout the democratic chain of delegation. As subsequent chapters will show, institutions can solve or at least ameliorate agency problems in several ways.

The co-editors and contributors to *Delegation and Accountability in Parliamentary Democracy* have had two main objectives. The first aim is to identify the problems of delegation that parliamentary democracy implies and to identify and assess the institutional solutions that might be brought to bear on them. Our second goal is to provide a comprehensive and theoretically guided survey of the institutions of parliamentary democracies, and to describe in greater detail how the democratic process of delegation and accountability operates in the Western European heartland of parliamentary democracy. With regard to both aims we try to identify trends over time. These are interrelated objectives, but they are not modest ones.

Our empirical investigation includes all Western European countries that meet our minimal definition of parliamentary government, that is, all those in which the chief executive (generically referred to in this study as the Prime Minister) is accountable to, and can be removed for purely political reasons by, any parliamentary majority. By this criterion, the only West European country (apart from some mini-states) that during 2003 fails to enter our sample is Switzerland. Of course, by casting our net so widely, we are including a set of political systems that are dissimilar in many ways. Thus, we are including majoritarian as well as consensus democracies (Lijphart 1999), systems with few or many veto players (Tsebelis 1995, 2002), systems with unrestricted versus highly restrictive dissolution powers (Strøm and Swindle 2002), and systems with single-member district as well as proportional electoral systems (Cox 1997).

Some may find that the most consequential and controversial of our decisions is that we include countries oftentimes referred to as semi-presidential (Duverger 1980; Elgie 1998, 1999). It is customary to regard France, Finland (at least until the constitutional reform of 2000), and Portugal (until the constitutional reform of 1982) as semi-presidential, based on the Presidents' direct election and the authority they have exercised in legislation or policy-making and/or over the formation and termination of cabinets as well as over the calling of elections. For the 1975–85 period Greece may be added to the list of semi-presidential regimes, since the President—although not directly elected—was vested with important powers. There is a broader category of semi-presidentialism to which also Austria, Iceland, Ireland, and Portugal (since 1982)—even though their respective *effective* presidential powers seem much more limited—belong by virtue of the fact that their heads of state are popularly elected. Yet, we include all of these countries in the present study because we believe that their common mechanisms of delegation and accountability, and particularly the accountability of the chief executive to parliament (our minimal definition of parliamentarism), are more important than the features that set them apart. That is not to say that these distinctions are unimportant, however, and in fact a central concern of ours will be to demonstrate how and to what extent they actually do shape popular governance.

This volume consists of three major sections. The first section contains two additional theoretical chapters. Chapter 2, by Arthur Lupia, discusses the general problem of delegation versus abdication and introduces the principal-agent framework within which we seek to understand parliamentary democracies. Chapter 3, by Kaare Strøm, brings together this analytical approach and our empirical project. It elaborates a conception of the democratic chain of delegation, contrast the governance mechanisms that characterize parliamentary versus presidential systems, and discusses the implications of these institutional differences for the problems of democratic delegation and accountability.

The second section, and the bulk of this book, consists of eighteen chapters. In the first of these chapters (Chapter 4), we detail the most important mechanisms of delegation and accountability that exist at each stage of the parliamentary chain. This chapter is cross-national and presents a wealth of information in tabular form. It also discusses the broad range of variation in institutional structures that we find across Western Europe. Chapters 5–21 apply our perspective and questions to seventeen West European countries, beginning with Austria and proceeding alphabetically through to the United Kingdom. The country chapters all have a common structure and address the same sets of questions. They cover the entire post-Second World War period (or the period since the latest introduction of democratic government) and report relevant changes in the rules and conventions governing the governance process. These eighteen chapters present the most systematic and detailed cross-national survey that is available on institutional arrangements (accountability mechanisms) in parliamentary democracies, in 2003.

Each chapter focuses on four discrete stages in the delegation process: (1) delegation from voters to parliamentary representatives, (2) delegation from parliament to the Prime Minister and cabinet, (3) delegation within the cabinet, and (4) delegation from individual cabinet members to civil servants. These detailed discussions are followed by a section on external constraints, that is, constitutional and other mechanisms that impinge on democratic delegation and limit the discretion of the relevant constitutional actors. The country chapters give a full account of the mechanisms of delegation and accountability. They also discuss how effective they are in solving the problems of delegation.

In Chapters 22 and 23, as we return to the broader picture of parliamentary democracy today, we assess our lessons. We are here particularly concerned with the prominence of certain agency problems and with the growing importance of constraints. As we will argue, the relationship between parliamentary democracy and institutional constraints is becoming increasingly complex. While this may accentuate certain agency problems, current trends also point toward certain promising developments. And while the historical lessons presented in this chapter remind us that parliamentarism has been and still is a very robust system of government, the parliamentary democracies of Western Europe are facing a number of very important challenges.

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