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Lesson Plan: Forms of government from a comparative perspective

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Lesson Plan: Forms of government from a comparative perspective

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This lesson plan is designed to introduce students to three forms of government: presidentialism, parliamentarism, and semi-presidentialism. After briefly covering the key characteristics of each form, the lesson plan examines the process of government formation in parliamentary systems. The scenario covers different possible cabinet types and is designed to help students to distinguish between governments with a majority vs. minority status and to differentiate among different coalition arrangements—from minority to minimal winning to surplus to grand coalitions. The lesson plan concludes with an assignment that asks students to identify the current cabinet types in four countries that have parliamentary systems—Canada, Australia, South Africa, and Ireland.

Useful videos on forms of government

British parliament
Canadian parliament

There are four Podcasts that are worth watching: here, here, here and here. The first two compare and contrast presidential and parliamentary systems. The last two are on semi-presidentialism, focusing on the French system.

Useful textbook chapters on forms of government
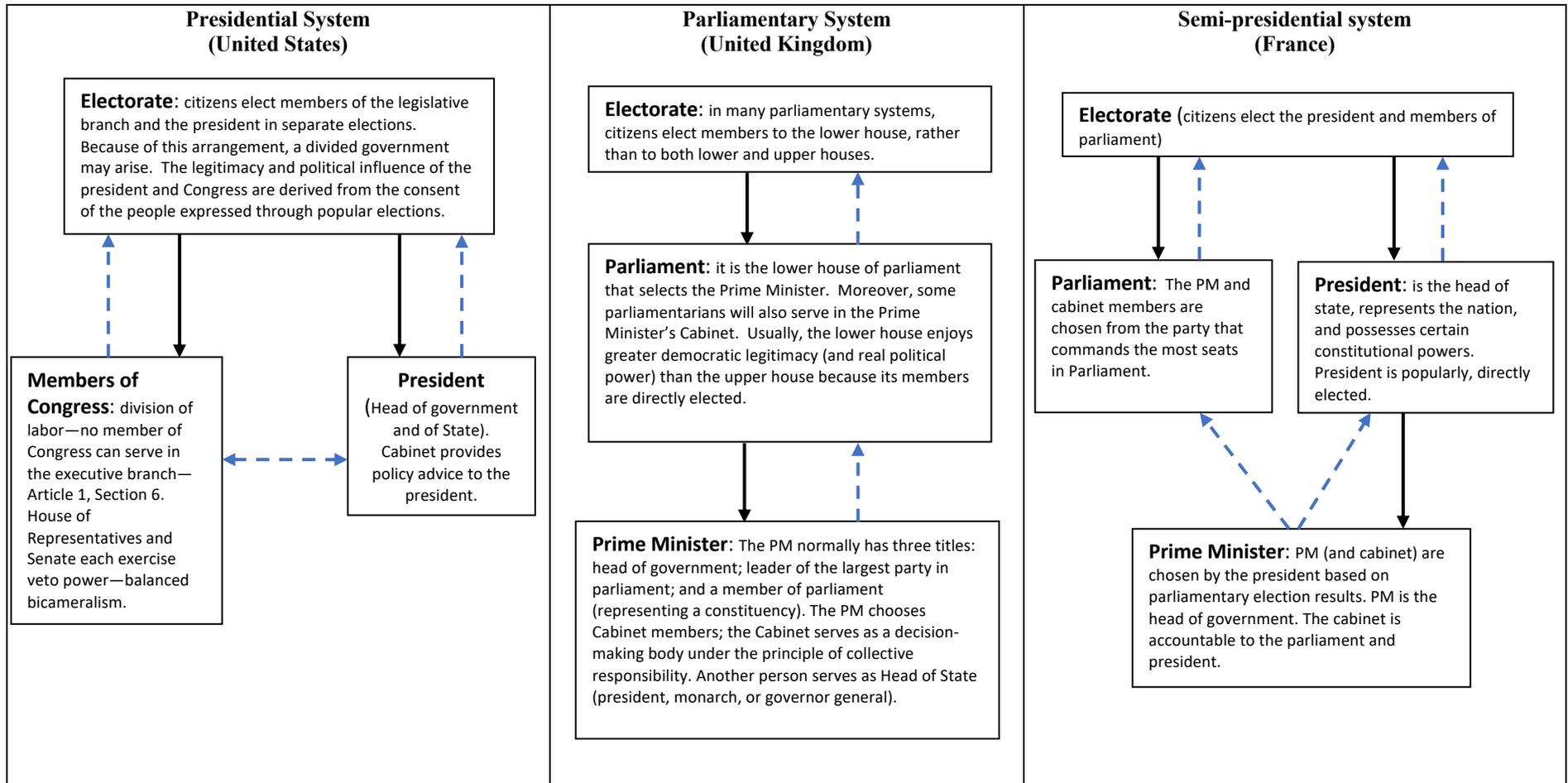William Roberts Clark, Matt Golder, and Sona Nadenichek Golder. 2018. *Principles of Comparative Politics*. Third Edition. CQ Press: Chapter 12.

Kenneth Newton and Jan W. van Deth. 2012. *Foundations of Comparative Politics*. Cambridge University Press: Chapter 5.

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Forms of Government:
Presidential, Parliamentary, and Semi-Presidential

→ Selection
-- ➤ Accountability

Presidential System
(United States)

Electorate: citizens elect members of the legislative branch and the president in separate elections. Because of this arrangement, a divided government may arise. The legitimacy and political influence of the president and Congress are derived from the consent of the people expressed through popular elections.

Members of Congress: division of labor—no member of Congress can serve in the executive branch—Article 1, Section 6. House of Representatives and Senate each exercise veto power—balanced bicameralism.

President (Head of government and of State). Cabinet provides policy advice to the president.

Parliamentary System
(United Kingdom)

Electorate: in many parliamentary systems, citizens elect members to the lower house, rather than to both lower and upper houses.

Parliament: it is the lower house of parliament that selects the Prime Minister. Moreover, some parliamentarians will also serve in the Prime Minister's Cabinet. Usually, the lower house enjoys greater democratic legitimacy (and real political power) than the upper house because its members are directly elected.

Prime Minister: The PM normally has three titles: head of government; leader of the largest party in parliament; and a member of parliament (representing a constituency). The PM chooses Cabinet members; the Cabinet serves as a decision-making body under the principle of collective responsibility. Another person serves as Head of State (president, monarch, or governor general).

Semi-presidential system
(France)

Electorate (citizens elect the president and members of parliament)

Parliament: The PM and cabinet members are chosen from the party that commands the most seats in Parliament.

President: is the head of state, represents the nation, and possesses certain constitutional powers. President is popularly, directly elected.

Prime Minister: PM (and cabinet) are chosen by the president based on parliamentary election results. PM is the head of government. The cabinet is accountable to the parliament and president.

Some key features of the three systems of government

Presidential system (U.S)	Parliamentary government (United Kingdom)	Semi-presidential Government (France)
The president's and Congress's terms are fixed. There is an explicit system of checks and balances between the executive and legislature rooted in the constitutional division of powers (two-sided arrow depicts the horizontal accountability between the two branches) Both branches of government, although independent of each other, need to work together to make policies. The legislature is the dominant lawmaking body; the president can influence legislators but does not command control of the legislative process. Congress and the presidency can be controlled by different parties. Divided governments emerge because elections to both branches are separate and Congressional and presidential terms do not coincide. During periods of divided government and partisan polarization, Congress and the president struggle to achieve consensus and the policymaking process is more likely to be beset by immobilism and deadlock.	The PM's term is not fixed; it depends on the PM's ability and his/her government to maintain the confidence of Parliament. Parliament can remove the PM via a vote of no confidence. National elections take place when the PM has dissolved parliament. Normally, a parliament's term does not exceed five years. Types of parliamentary governments: *majority* government commands a legislative majority in lower house of parliament; *minority* government does not control more than 50% of legislative seats in parliament. Types of parliamentary majority governments: single-party; grand coalition; surplus coalition; minimal winning coalition. Types of parliamentary minority governments: single-party and coalition. Head of State (HoS) is not directly elected by the electorate. The HoS is a figurehead who does not exercise political power but may serve as a national unity figure or a symbol of stability.	The president's term is fixed; the PM's and parliament's terms are not fixed. In the French SP system, the president and PM may come from different parties. This is called *cohabitation* and happened between 1986-1988, 1993-1995, and 1997-2002. During cohabitation, the balance of influence between the PM and president shifts in favor of the PM. When both executives come from the same party, executive influence gravitates to the president. In many SP systems, executive power is unevenly distributed between the PM and president. Russia has a highly-presidentialized SP system (president is powerful); Austria and Portugal have a parliamentary-like SP system (PM is powerful).

New Lacolle

Parliamentary election took place in New Lacolle on April 2, 2022. A snap election was called by the Liberal Party, which led a single-party minority government for the past 3 years. It called an early election in part because public polls have consistently shown the strong support for the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and of the handling of the country's economic recovery and in part because the electorate has shown increasing frustration with the two main opposition parties over their obstructionist stances during the pandemic and unwillingness to work with the government to find solutions to the rising cost of homeownership and living.

The parliament in New Lacolle is bicameral.
- The House of Councils (upper chamber) is comprised of unelected officials, selected by the prime minister, and serve until the age of 75.
- The House of Commons (lower chamber) is comprised of directly elected officials, serving 5-year terms. There are 240 seats in the House of Commons. The lower chamber can be dissolved by the PM only once during a 5-year term. 121 seats are required to have majority control of the lower house.

The election produced the following results:

Party name	Liberal Party	Progressive Conservative Party	Freedom Party	Green Party	Acadian Party
Popular votes (now/before)	(38%/ 36%)	(31%/34%)	(9%/5%)	(14%/20%)	(8%/5%)
# of seats (now/before)	(109/101)	(89/94)	(7/5)	(25/32)	(10/8)
Ideological position	Center-left	Center-right	Far-right	Left-ecological	Regional-ethnic

Possible types of cabinets (or parliamentary governments):

- The Liberal Party forms a **single-party minority government**. The party doesn't want to form a cabinet with another party, a coalition is out of the question for the leadership of that party. However, the Liberal Party has struck an agreement with the Green Party in which the Green will support policy proposals of the Liberal Party in the House of Commons in exchange for the Liberal Party agreeing to allocate more funds toward the green economy and social policies. That agreement enables the minority government to secure the necessary parliamentary support (134 votes) to promote its policy agenda.
- The Liberal Party forms a **minimal-winning coalition** with the Green Party. This coalition commands a bare majority of parliamentary seats (134 seats). Because the Liberal Party is the largest coalition party—its leader will serve as the Prime Minister and the party will control most of the cabinet portfolios. However, in order to get the Green Party on board, the Liberals have given the Greens two important cabinet portfolios—environment and energy.

- The Liberal Party forms a **surplus coalition** with the Green Party and Acadian Party. This coalition controls more parliamentary seats than required to command a bare majority. So, why include the Acadian Party (the surplus party)? The Liberals want to improve their image among the Acadian people. The Acadian Party in return gets a rare chance of being in the government and, in particular, is handed the cabinet portfolio related to cultural affairs.
- The Liberals form a **grand coalition** with the Progressive Conservatives. The Liberals want to create a highly representative government to help unify the people and usher a strong economic recovery. By sharing executive power with the Conservatives, the Liberals will be able to formulate economic policies that appeal to both left and right voters, helping to build public support for its policies. The Conservatives, for their part, join the grand coalition because they get a chance to shape the new economic policy package and restrain government spending.
- The Liberals form a **minority coalition** with the Acadian Party. The Liberals were looking to create a minimal-winning coalition with the Green Party, but the Greens refused. Forming a coalition with the Freedom Party is out of the question because the Liberals vehemently reject the Freedom Party's anti-immigrant, anti-multicultural, and anti-globalization positions. Because of ideological proximity with the Acadian Party and the Liberal's desire to make inroads in the region of Acadia, the Liberals invite the Acadian Party to join them in a minority coalition.
- A **single-party majority government** cannot be formed given the result of the parliamentary election.

Assignment on forms of government

This assignment is about identifying the type of cabinet in selected countries: majority or minority? single-party or coalition? type of coalition? Please keep track of the names of the legislature for each country, total number of legislative seats, number of seats for majority control, and date of recent election for each country.

Canada

What type of parliamentary government does Canada currently have? Name the party or parties in the cabinet (or government). Specify the number of legislative seats controlled by each party in cabinet. What is the percentage of legislative seats controlled by the cabinet? Consult this website to help you answer these questions: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Canadian_federal_election

Australia

What type of parliamentary government does Australia currently have? Name the party or parties in the government. Specify the number of legislative seats controlled by each party in government. What is the percentage of legislative seats controlled by the government? Consult this website to help you answer these questions: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Australian_federal_election

South Africa

What type of parliamentary government does South Africa currently have? Name the party or parties in the government. Specify the number of legislative seats controlled by each party in government. What is the percentage of legislative seats controlled by the government? Consult this website to help you answer these questions: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_South_African_general_election

Ireland

What type of parliamentary government does Ireland currently have? Name the party or parties in the government. Specify the number of legislative seats controlled by each party in government. What is the percentage of legislative seats controlled by the government? Consult this website: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Irish_general_election