Overview of Democratic Institutions

Austin M. Mitchell

Hiroshima University

HIROSHIMA
UNIVERSITY

Overview of concepts

- Branches of governments
- Contestation and inclusion
- Presidential and parliamentary systems
- Electoral systems
- District magnitude
- Unitary, federal, and decentralized states
- Direct democracy
- Democracy and dictatorship
- Democratic stability and regime change

Branches of government

Branches of government

There are three common branches of government:

- Executive
- Legislature
- Judicial

In democratic governments the legislature is elected but the executive and judicial branches may or may not be elected.

Branches of government: Executive

Executive offices implementation of the laws of the country.

The executive branch includes:

- the chief executive, who is the head of the government.
- the administration of the government, such as bureaucratic agencies and ministries

In some government systems, the executive is elected by the public.
In other systems the executive is selected by the legislature.

Branches of government: Legislative

The legislative branch is responsible for making the laws of the country.

Legislatures are the primary government body in which discussion of law and policy occurs.

In some democratic systems, the power of the legislature is separated from the executive powers. In other democratic systems, the executive is and legislature powers are combined.

Branches of government: Judicial

The judicial branch has the authority to apply the law to cases and settle disputes.

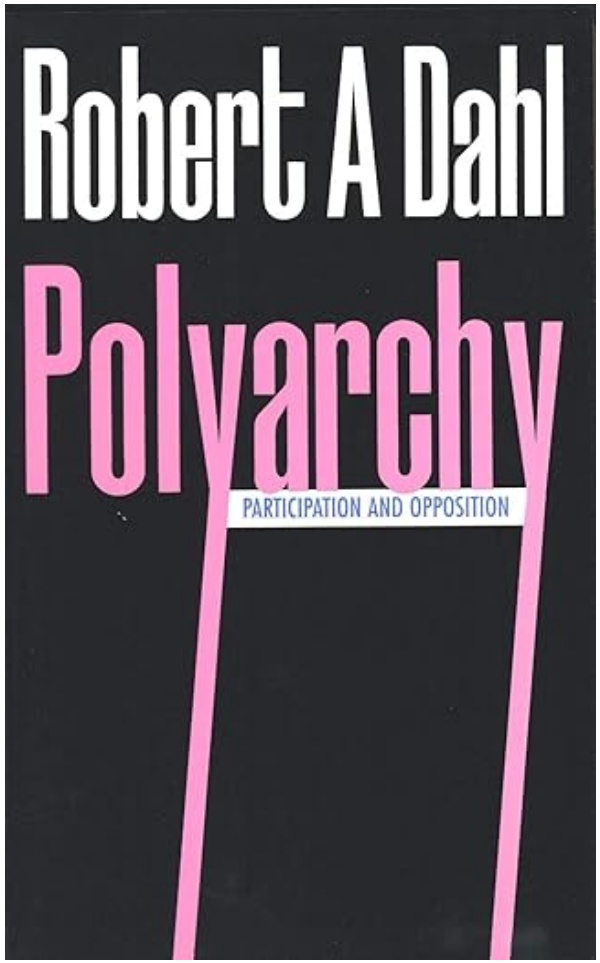
In some democratic systems, the judicial branch has the authority review the actions of the executive and legislative branches.

In many countries, the judicial branch interprets the law but does not make the law. However in common law systems the judicial decisions make law.

Contestation and inclusion

Contestation and inclusion

Robert Dahl argues in *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1971) that governments can be characterized according to two dimensions: contestation and inclusion.



Contestation and inclusion

Robert Dahl suggests that democracies provide eight guarantees:

1. Freedom to form and join organizations.
2. Freedom of expression.
3. Right to vote.
4. Eligibility for public office.
5. Right of political leaders to compete for support and votes.
6. Alternative sources of information.
7. Free and fair elections.
8. Institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference.

Contestation and inclusion

Dahl categorizes these eight guarantees into two theoretical dimensions.

Institutions of contestation
Allow for political opposition and public contestation over government policy and representatives.

Institutions of inclusion
Allow for political participation in determining government policy and representatives.

Contestation and inclusion

Dahl characterized *polyarchy* as a government that allows both contestation and inclusion.

We more commonly use the term democracy instead of polyarchy.

In other words, a democracy is a government that allows:

- the public to express their views of public policy
- the right to vote for policies and representatives.

Presidential and parliamentary systems

Presidential and parliamentary systems

The chief executive is the head of the government.

These titles include : President, Prime Minister, Chancellor, Chief Minister, Premier.

Subnational governments also have chief executives: Governor and Mayor.

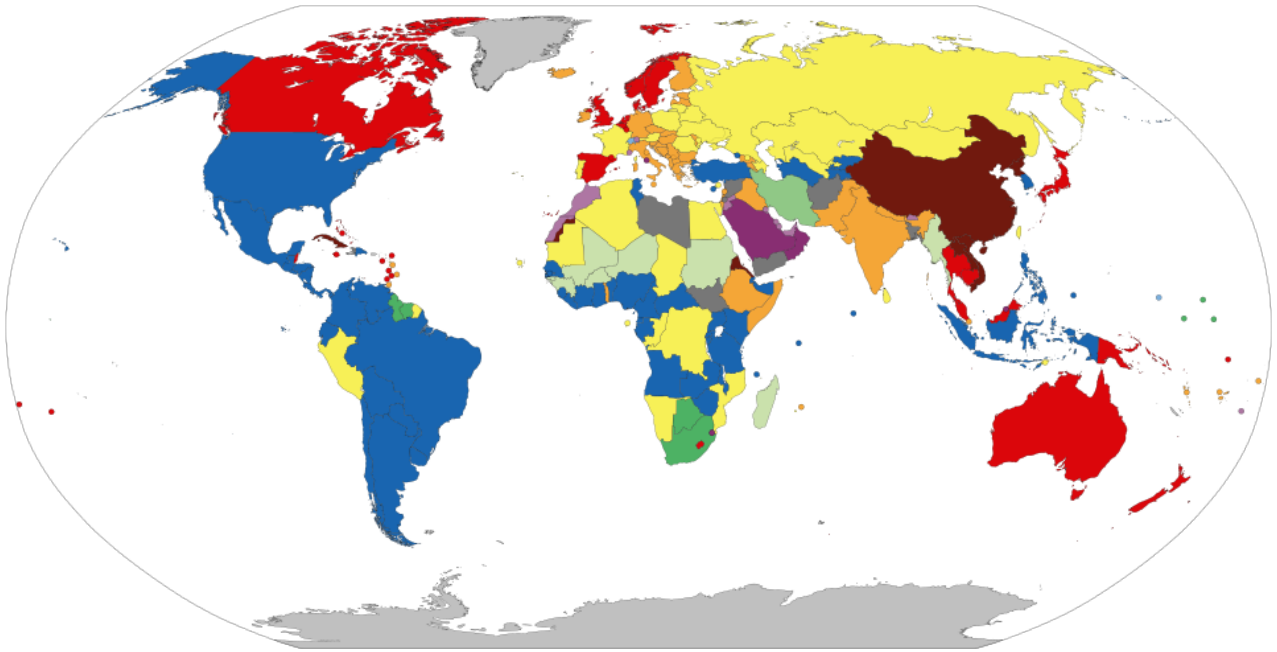
Presidential and parliamentary systems

There are two main ways in which democracies organize the relationship between the executive and legislative offices at the national level.

In presidential systems, the head of the government and their administration remains in office for a fixed term.

In parliamentary systems, the legislative branch may remove the head of the government and their administration by a vote.

Presidential and parliamentary systems



Source: Wikipedia, 2025.

Examples of presidential systems (blue) include: Brazil, the Philippines, and the United States.

Examples of parliamentary (orange) systems include: Bangladesh and Germany.

Semi-presidential systems are in yellow and constitutional monarchies are in red.

Presidential and parliamentary systems

Other mixed systems also exist.

Constitutional monarchies are special cases of parliamentary systems in which the monarch wields limited or ceremonial power. Examples include Japan and the United Kingdom.

Semi-presidential systems have elected presidents who appoint a prime minister and cabinet. However the legislature has the ability to remove the prime minister and cabinet. France is a well-known semi-presidential system.

Electoral systems

Electoral systems

Electoral systems determine how voters select the representatives of government, especially the legislative branch.

There are two basic approaches to electoral systems:

- Proportional representation (PR) systems require electoral districts that elect more than one representative.
- Winner-take-all systems occur in electoral districts that elect exactly one representative.

Mixed systems use combinations of these approaches in which some seats are determined by winner-take-all votes and other seats are determined by PR voting. Japan is an example of a mixed system.

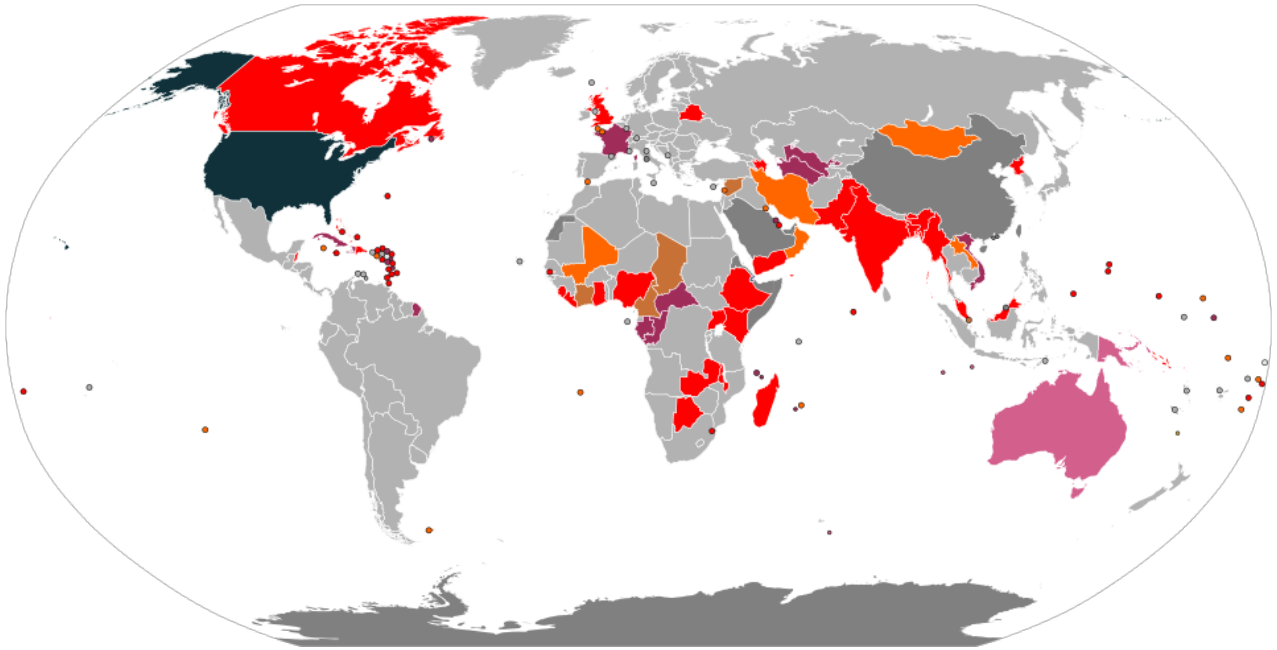
Electoral systems: Winner-take-all

In winner-take-all voting, multiple candidates compete for a single seat.

The winner of the election is determined by either:

- Majoritarian vote in which the winner receives over 50%
- Plurality vote in which the winner has the largest proportion of votes, even if it is less than 50%.
- Ranked-order voting in which voters indicate their ranked preferences for multiple candidates.

Electoral systems: Winner-take-all



Source: Wikipedia, 2025.

Major examples of winner-take-all systems include: Australia, France, India, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

Red represents simple majoritarian elections and other colors represent different types of winner-take-all systems.

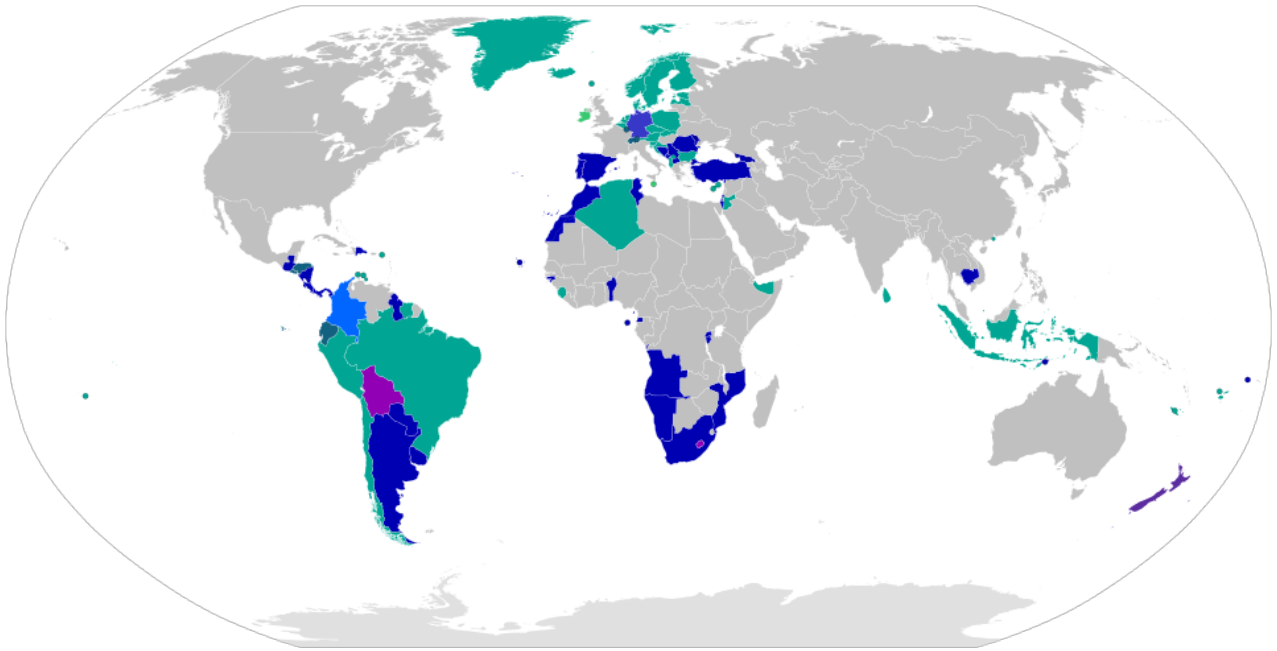
Electoral systems: Proportional representation

In proportional representation (PR) systems electoral districts have more than one seat.

An electoral district in a PR system might have 2 or more available seats in which candidates can compete for.

Since each district has more than one seat, the candidates who win the elections can represent more than one one party.

Electoral systems: Proportional representation



Source: Wikipedia, 2025.

Most of the countries in Europe and Latin America use the PR system.

Electoral systems: Two-party and multi-party systems

The electoral system tends to determine whether a country has a two-party system or a multiparty system.

In winner-take-all systems, there are typically only two viable candidates/parties which tends to create two-party systems.

In PR systems, multiple candidates/parties can compete within each district which tends to create multi-party systems.

Unitary, federal, and decentralized states

Government hierarchy

All countries have national level governments.

Most, but not all, countries have subnational governments.

Subnational governments can be states or provinces, but they can also be local governments such as counties, cities, and towns.

Federal and unitary government systems are different ways of creating legal authority across government tiers.

Unitary governments

In a unitary government, the national government controls the laws of all other governments.

Subnational governments such as provinces, states, or prefectures derive their authority from the national government.

The national government in a unitary system is also called the central government.

Countries with unitary governments include France, Japan, and Bangladesh.

Federal governments

In federal governments, the national and subnational governments have separate authorities.

Subnational governments such as states in federal systems have their own legal authority for some policy areas, though they may be subordinate to the national government authority for other policy areas.

Subnational governments in federal systems often have their own constitutions which are the basis of subnational government authority.

Countries with federal governments include the US, India, and Ethiopia.

Decentralization

Decentralization is the extent to which a national government has devolved policy authority to subnational governments.

A decentralized system allows subnational governments to make policy, raise taxes, and plan their budgets without the direction of the national government.

Both federal and unitary systems can be more or less centralized. However, typically federal systems are more decentralized because unitary systems have legal authority over all subnational governments.

Direct democracy

Direct democracy

Thus far we have only been discussing representative democracy. Another form of democracy is direct democracy.

The term direct democracy refers to when citizens or the public is able to make a political choice without the intervention of political representatives.

A very common form of direct democracy is the referendum. In a referendum, citizens are able to vote on whether a specific policy should pass or not.

City, state/prefecture, and national governments hold referenda, though not all governments all referenda.

Democracy and dictatorship

Democracy and dictatorship

Thus far we have only discussed democratic governments. It will be useful to delineate democratic government from authoritarian government.

Authoritarian governments, or also called dictatorships, do not allow free and fair elections which determine who becomes the head of the government.

We use the term regime type to refer to whether a government is democratic or authoritarian.

Democracy and dictatorship

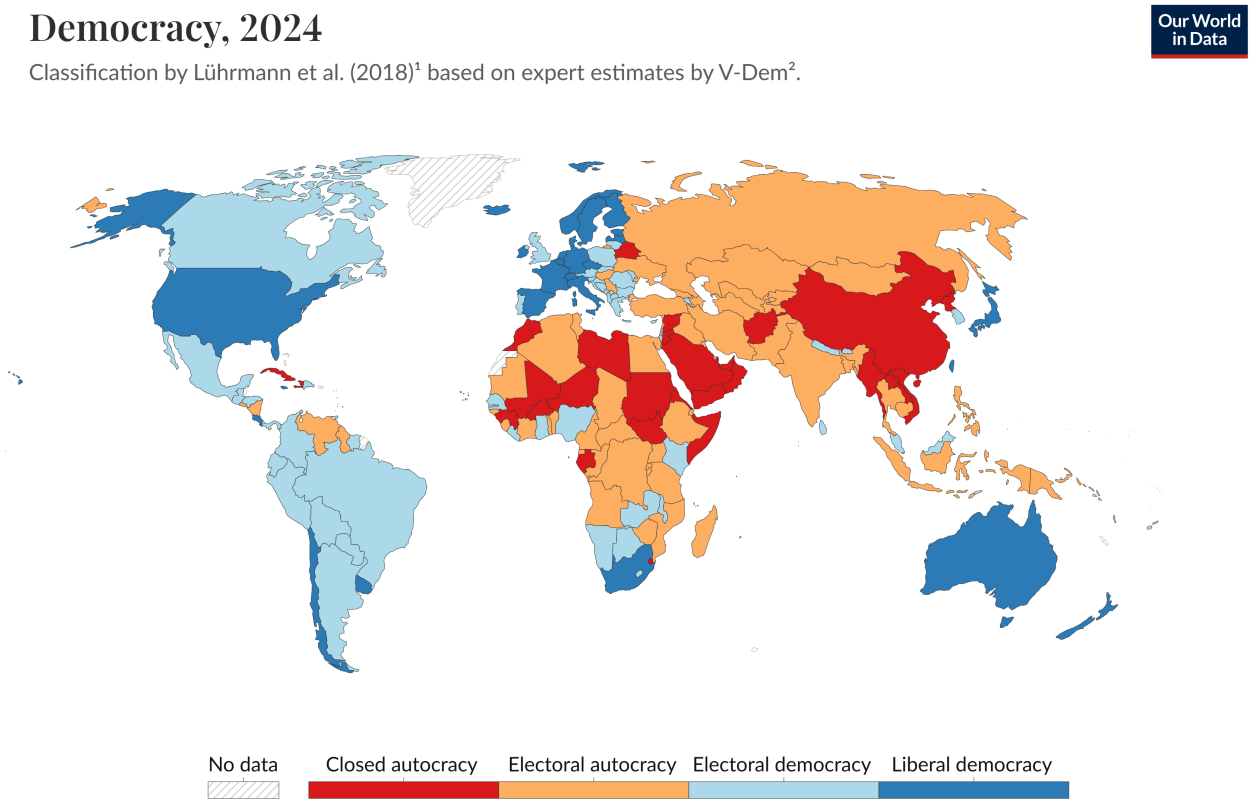
A democratic regime allows the citizenry to choose their representatives through free and fair elections.

Simply having elections does not mean that a government is democratic because not all elections are free and fair.

Some governments allow multiparty elections but the elections are not free and fair. We call these regimes electoral authoritarian dictatorships.

Governments that either do not allow elections, or allow elections in which citizens may only choose one candidate or one party are called closed dictatorships.

Democracy and dictatorship



1. Regimes of the World's regime classification Closed autocracy: citizens do not have the right to choose either the chief executive of the government or the legislature through multi-party elections.
Electoral autocracy: citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature through multi-party elections; but they lack some freedoms, such as the freedoms of association or expression that make the elections meaningful, free, and fair.
Electoral democracy: citizens have the right to choose the chief executive and the legislature in meaningful, free and fair, and multi-party elections.
Liberal democracy: electoral democracy and citizens enjoy individual and minority rights, are equal before the law, and the actions of the executive are constrained by the legislative and the courts.
Read more in our article: The 'Regimes of the World' data: how do researchers measure democracy?

2. V-Dem The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project publishes data and research on democracy and human rights.
It relies on evaluations by around 3,500 country experts and supplementary work by its own researchers to assess political institutions and the protection of rights.
The project is managed by the V-Dem Institute, based at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.
Learn more:

Democratic stability and regime change

Democratic stability and regime change

Regime change occurs when one type of government transitions into a new type of government.

Democratization is the process of a dictatorship transitioning into a democracy.

Autocratization, or backsliding, is the process of a democratic government becoming a dictatorship.

Why countries democratize, and why democracies fail, are major questions in academic scholarship.

Conclusion