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Traditionally, political parties get bad press. This “ill that is inherent to free governments” is often blamed for impeding the formation of broad based support, since it instils division and a “regime of misfortune”, there, where harmony should reign. In this regard, Gustav Radbruch noted, under the Weimar Republic, the existence of party prudery (Parteiensprüderie). This of course has largely disappeared, but resistance still exists. Depending on the specific modes of functioning and on the country, the phenomenon of the “party State” (Parteienstaat) theorised by Hans Kelsen after the Great War finally became established in most countries of Europe due to the generalisation of government opinion and universal suffrage. In their role as the “auxiliaries of democracy”, political parties have contributed to the creation of a certain coherence in the multitude of individual choices available. It was all the more important to organise these rationally, since the pace of the industrial revolution and urbanisation disrupted quite significantly “the old framework” of 19th century society – such as links and traditional hierarchies, as well the cohesion of social groups. Functioning as indicators of the will of the electoral corpus, they enabled the healing of its fragmentation. However, this development was only possible because of two things: it was on the one hand vital that the issue of the regime’s legitimacy be settled, i.e. that the public institutions be accepted by all of the citizens as a whole, and, on the other, that the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary branches of the political parties work in harmony.

In real terms parties do not just play an electoral role. Their vocation is eminently political, since the formation of the “party government” suggests that they play a vital role, acting in terms of the exercise of power itself. Of course, today political parties struggle to create a structure for themselves and to rationalise democratic policy, but this has not always been the case. This did not suddenly emerge however, as the precedent of the Weimar Republic sadly indicates. As Georges Vedel noted, a democracy struggles to “survive without organised parties; [likewise] it can die because of the parties”.

All events, all of the parties assume their responsibilities in a different way including within Europe’s democracies. On the continent the formation of a coalition often precedes the constitution of a government. In this regard electoral systems are important. Although it might deserve to be nuanced somewhat the triple sociological rule observed by Maurice Duverger seems to retain a certain amount of plausibility: hence the majority, two round vote tends to lead to multiple, incoherent parties, proportional representation to multiple, coherent parties and the majority, single round vote to party dualism. On this point, we might note that the links between modes of voting and the party system are not unilateral, since they mutually influence each other, and that the structure of the political parties is itself marked by the shape of economic and social life.

**Single Party Parliamentary Government**

The UK is rather more Europe’s exception than its rule, since majority parties have traditionally tended to govern alone, but this is not always the case, as illustrated by the 2010-2015 legislature, as well by the one that is about to start. Following the snap election on 8th June 2017, Theresa May found herself forced to form a coalition with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), a Protestant, radical party from Northern Ireland. Indeed with 317 MPs (in comparison to a previous 330), the Tories no longer held an absolute majority in the House of Commons (i.e. 326 MPs). As a result they have been obliged to forge an alliance with this small group (of ten MPs) in order to govern. These “back-up troops” have negotiated their engagement effectively since the Prime Minister had to revise some of the points...
in her programme. The budget allocated to Northern Ireland for example was increased (1.1 billion € over the next two years). The DUP’s support is now secured for Theresa May regarding issues linked to the Brexit, the budget, the economy, security, as well as some decisive votes. Confidence was won by the government on 29th June last.

The mood commonly swings towards the parliamentary government of the dominant party in the House of Commons, since the majority, single round voting method leads to the over-representation of the winners and the under-representation of the defeated parties in the general election. In this extremely common case in the UK, the majority party leads national policy by itself, i.e. without the help of the other party. When we think of what Walter Bagehot called the “electoral function” of parliament, then the victorious party holds the right to govern directly. In this case, it is a kind of democratic election of a two-tiered government, with some saying that this is an “almost popular” election which is said to legitimise the full majority exercise of political power (with the imbalances that this implies). Only a political change in government can bring this to an end, with a ‘reshuffling’ at regular intervals, following possible swings in the electoral corpus’s mood. The majority and the opposition then exchange their scores until the ballot box decide otherwise.

Although this never occurs completely, notably because the Libdems normally succeed in winning seats in the Commons and because the small regional parties almost always have seats within the lower house, the British trend towards the two-party system finds no equivalent on the continent.

Indeed the British trend towards the two-party system and to the leadership of the majority party seems to have disappeared in Spain following the elections of December 2015 and June 2016, whilst in the past it had been confirmed with the “restoration of democracy”. The party system seems to have been disrupted, whilst the voting method had, to date, brought about positive results in terms of government stability and the political alternation in power of the two main parties, i.e. the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and the People’s Party (PP). After an unprecedented political crisis, that was notably punctuated by a dissolution of parliament in May 2016, Mariano Rajoy was invested as the leader of government on 31 October 2016, but he owed his accession to office to the PSOE and the centrist party (Cuidadanos C’s): although the former wanted to avoid a further dissolution of parliament the latter is reputed for its unpredictable behaviour.

In other words, the task of the head of the Spanish government is particularly difficult, since he has no majority on which he can rely.

The multi-party system prevails in Europe in extremely different forms, including in France where voting traditionally takes the shape of a two-round majority method. The fragmentation of the partisan landscape has “grown particularly acute” in Italy. The phenomenon of partitocracy, the lack of parties with a majority, and the exclusion of the Communist Party, has contributed to the creation of great political instability. In Italy, no fewer than 60 governments have succeeded one another since the end of the Second World War, without the electoral reform of 1994 succeeding in establishing long term majority democracy. From this point of view, the Republic of Italy is an exception.

The coalition of conflictual democracy

Another difference from the Westminster model emerges in the culture of the players in the political landscape. On the continent, certain “competitive democracies” function according to a method that is particularly focused on consensus. This feature is not as strong everywhere, since the political culture of the Vth Republic is traditionally one of conflict and theatrical, and even “story book like”.

Incidentally, the majority (of Gaullist inspiration) constantly opened up to centrist parties as of the presidential mandate of Georges Pompidou (1969-1974), without this exclusively matching purely mathematical criteria. This trend finally led to the accession of Valéry Giscard d’Estaing in 1974 to the Elysée, with the holder of the supreme office coming from the liberal movement. With this he achieved a kind of political alternation within the same majority
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(dominated by neo-Gaullists), a prelude to that of 1981. Apart from this particular case, the minorities (of the majority) often seem to depend on the president’s good will in normal times and on that of the Prime Minister when there is co-habitation, particularly when the parliamentary majority is strong. Moreover, the will to legally acknowledge minorities alongside that of the opposition during the constitutional revision of July 2008 tended to attenuate the rigour of this government “authoritarianism” (art. 48 and 51-1), even though the French scenario very much inferior to the “minority rights” (Minderheitenrechte) which exist in Germany. The recent controversies over the attribution of positions of responsibility in the National Assembly at the end of June highlight this.

The present government led by Edouard Philippe includes various trends (such as La République en Marche (LREM)! (Onwards!), the Democratic Movement (MoDem), the Radical Party of the Left (PRG) as well as dissidents from the Republicans (LR) and the Socialist Party (PS)), whilst the presidential party has the absolute majority at the Bourbon Palace. In the National Assembly there are no fewer than 7 political groups – which is a first under the V Republic. In addition to the 17 non-affiliated MPs (of whom 8 are from the Front National (FN)), there is the LREM (314 MPs), the Republicans (100), MoDem (47), the Constructives (Republicans, UDI, independents (35), the New Left (31), France Unbowed (17), and the Democratic and Republican Left (16).

This trend towards confrontation can also be found notably in Romania, which contrasts with the rather conciliatory traditions in Spain, as well, and more especially with the political climate in the Germanic and Scandinavian countries.

The coalition of consensual democracy

The Germanic and Scandinavian countries traditionally lean towards consensus, even though exceptions inevitably do arise. The proportional vote is often practised, which implies a rather substantial party system. The constructive leanings of countries like the Federal Republic of Germany can to be found in the taste of the victorious parties to join forces with other parties in order to govern. Hence when a party has the absolute majority in the Bundestag it tries to form a government coalition, although this is in no way an arithmetic necessity. Here, we are close to a certain “aspiration for harmony”, tinged with a quest for maximum legitimacy in the exercise of power, so that it is vital not to speak so much of “the Chancellor’s democracy” (Kanzlerdemokratie), but of “coalition democracy” (Koalitionsdemokratie). All of these elements contribute to explaining why the phenomenon of the “grand coalition” (große Koalition) functions quite smoothly, whilst we struggle to imagine it happening elsewhere. In this context, the smallest party in the coalition has a certain amount of influence over its ally, which depends on the structure of the party system and political circumstances.

As a result, coalition democracy leads in reality to “complex, subtle forms of political organisation”. Beyond the strict rules, parties usually conclude coalition contracts (Koalitionsvertrag), in view of facilitating their cooperation within the government and parliamentary coalitions. Hence they come to agreement over the coalition’s working programme, on the cooperation method, as well as over the formation of a “coalition committee” (Koalitionsausschuss). Comprising the leaders of the government majority, this body plays a vital role in decision making.

Inclusive coalition democracy

The Nordic countries for their part practise a kind of “inclusive democracy”, in which political rivals mutually deem themselves partners. Negotiation rules supreme, to the extent that the parties in office reject the employment of their authority to assert their views. Here, it is rather more a question of achieving compromises. This leads (as in Germany) to the contractualisation of political relations, to the point that some parties finally succeed in acquiring a political influence that is greater than their effective electoral weight.
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It is common for these countries to use the solution of the minority government. Parliamentary opposition is then greater than the majority. Moreover, the constitution of a cabinet does not formally require a positive majority. Tolerance without commitment is enough. Hence article 2 of the Swedish Constitution provides that investiture requires a vote by the Riksdag of course, but only rejection by the absolute majority of MPs can prevent the appointment of the head of government. In Norway (art. 12) and Denmark (art. 14), no parliamentary vote is required, which means that the coalition in office asks for support amongst its rivals. The latter then find themselves in the "paradoxical, hybrid position of controlled and self-contained opposition".25 Governments like this do not last until they are overthrown. In fact, unlike in the Weimar Republic, this does not necessarily lead to political instability, due to the replacement majorities according to the issues, as well as the arbitration of the electoral corpus, via the use of the right to dissolution in the event of insurmountable political disagreement. This is especially the case in Denmark26. In this context, it leads to "anticipatory democracy in which provision for conflict is replaced by the provision for compromise."27

This preference for conciliation can be found in Switzerland where consensual democracy emerges via political power that is federated, referred and co-managed28. The country is led by a permanent alliance of the major parties, since compromise is fully sought after and organised within the directorial regime. As a result political relations are softer than in France where cooperation with rivals is often considered to be synonymous to collusion.

The plural approach of the European Parliament

At European Union level, the construction of a sui generis organisation that is free of the State framework has led to significant differences between the European Parliament and national assemblies29. Although, these do not seem totally convincing, parallels to the American system sometimes emerge30, in that the European Parliament cannot be dissolved31 for example. But this is also the case with the Storting and Norway practises a parliamentary system. In other words, there are many possibilities of parliamentary systems, as shown by the attachment of nearly all of the Union’s countries (apart from Cyprus) to this system. These patterns have been communicated by the European institutions themselves, since the Commission worked towards the emergence of a European model of parliamentary democracy, when the new States of Central and Eastern Europe were in the process of joining the Union, as in Bulgaria and Romania32. In all events, the relative independence of the European Parliament regarding the executive bodies (both supranational and national) tends to strengthen its institutional position. It is not obliged to support a government for the entire legislature33. This takes it away from traditional partisan rationale, even though it elects the President of the Commission and approves the appointment of the members of the Commission, which it is allowed to censure.

The regulation of the European Parliament is all the more critical, since the majority rule and partisan discipline have never dominated, to the benefit of a culture of "plurality"34. This seems to distinguish it in many ways from that of the national assemblies. Due to the irreducible heterogeneity that reigns in the Union, a split clearly separating the right from the left has not developed with the same strength in the European Parliament as it has done within the assemblies of the Member States. In fact, the groups play a decisive role35. With the aim of being representative of most of the opinions of the citizens of Europe, this system tends to integrate minorities. Highly influenced by the consensual, the decisions adopted by the European Parliament have normally been the result of large majorities, the shape of which varies depending on the issues at stake. These traditionally cover a great number of political trends, with oppositions regularly being smoothed over during the vote. The borders between the groups are sometime porous, which undeniably facilitates the creation of compromise36. In other words, to copy a typology37, “consensus majorities” (more than one third of the vote by roll call in 2014 according to estimates established by VoteWatch Europe)38, the major coalitions (more than two thirds of the votes by roll call)39, and “left/right confrontational majorities”40 follow each other depending on the subject in hand.
Although in its initial form, a certain trend towards political bipolarisation is now gathering pace, even though increasingly the centre seems to arbitrate parliamentary life. Opposition cannot be ruled out of MEPs traditions. European parliamentary life generates inclusion of course, but also exclusion (desired or not), contest, as well as opposition. However, this is never a perfectly coherent whole, nor is it structured long term, so that it is probably better to speak of parliamentary opposition rather than the opposition as such. Eminently variable, the behaviour of the elected representatives of the opposition regularly seems to follow more individual rather than collective systems.

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## Coalition Democracy in Europe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member State</th>
<th>Country's political colour</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Germany</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 99 seats of the 183 in the Nationalrat)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Austria</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Belgium</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 99 seats of the 183 in the Nationalrat)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bulgaria</strong></td>
<td>Right Coalition (GERB, United Patriots)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cyprus</strong></td>
<td>Minority government (less MPs from the party in office occupy 18 seats of the 80 in the Chamber of Representatives)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Croatia</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 99 seats of the 183 in the Nationalrat)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Denmark</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the parties in coalition occupy 56 seats of the 101 in the Riksdag)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spain</strong></td>
<td>Gouvernement minoritaire (MPs from the party in office occupy 119 seats of the 350 in the Congreso de los diputados)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Estonia</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the parties in coalition occupy 99 seats of the 183 in the Nationalrat)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Finland</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 123 seats of the 200 in the Eduskunta).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>France</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the parties in coalition occupy 131 seats of the 300 in the Voûte Ton Elèn)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Greece</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the parties in coalition occupy 131 seats of the 300 in the Voûte Ton Elèn)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hungary</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the party in office occupy 56 seats of the 101 in the Riksgauguy).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ireland</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the party in office occupy 117 seats of the 199 in the Riksgauguy).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Luxembourg</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the party in office occupy 32 seats of the 60 in the Châmber vun Députéiten).</td>
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<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 122 seats of the 230 in the Assembleia da República)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Romania</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the party in office occupy 170 seats of the 395 in the Camera Deputatilor)</td>
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<td><strong>United Kingdom</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sweden</strong></td>
<td>Majority government (MPs from the coalition parties occupy 138 seats of the 349 in the Riksdag)</td>
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