



## CHAPTER 9

# Legislatures and Legislators

The chapter begins with a discussion of the role of legislatures, which are of crucial importance in liberal democracies. It then outlines the problem of “representation”—a term that can have several meanings. Does it refer to the social background of elected representatives? Does it mean that legislators should reflect the views of their constituents? How large can a constituency be before the link between voters and representatives is effectively broken?

The chapter discusses the various roles a legislature may perform. Using a wide range of practical examples, it evaluates the merits of “parliamentary” and “presidential” systems of government. The obvious role for legislatures is to pass laws, but the chapter shows that this function is increasingly passing into the hands of the executive branch, even in presidential systems like the United States. Other key functions are outlined, including holding the executive to account, helping to shape public attitudes, and “procedural” functions such as ritualizing conflict and making decisions in a relatively transparent fashion. As the chapter points out, legislatures in different countries perform these functions with varying degrees of success.

The chapter also examines the structure of legislatures, which can be uni- or bi-cameral. Most of them also include a committee system, which is sometimes very effective in holding the executive to account. One major problem discussed at the end of the chapter is the perceived emergence of a “political class,” especially in Western countries like the UK. These people live off the resources of the state, and, while claiming to represent the population as a whole, actually serve their personal interests. The chapter concludes by noting the current low levels of confidence in legislatures, which may indicate a problem with either the way in which laws are formulated or the way they are implemented.

## Chapter Outline

- **The Functions of Legislatures**
  - Representation
  - Governmental
    - Presidentialism versus Parliamentarianism
    - Legislation
    - Ensuring Accountability
    - Formation of Public Attitudes
  - Procedural Functions
    - Ritualizing Conflict
    - Ensuring Transparency
- **Types of Legislature**
- **The Structure of Legislatures**
  - Bicameral Systems
    - Committees
- **Legislators**
- **Conclusion**

## Key Terms

Bicameralism

Cohabitation

Constituency

Deliberative democracy

Federalism

Parliamentarianism

Plurality

Political culture

Presidentialism

Proportional representation

Sovereignty

Substantive representation

Unicameralism

## Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the factors that would lead a state to adopt a bicameral legislature?
2. What is the proper role of a representative? Should the representative act simply as a voice for the desires of the constituency? Should the representative be free to make decisions about policy while in office?
3. What are some of the advantages of a parliamentary system over a presidential system? Explain with specific examples how the advantages and disadvantages of the two systems.
4. What is cohabitation and why is it considered a problem?
5. Is the legislature effective at ensuring the accountability of the executive? Do we expect the media to do a better job of this?

6. What is significant about the five types of legislatures?
7. Women's representation in government lags behind men's. What are some ways to increase women's participation?

## Further Resources

- <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Default.aspx?Language=E>  
Parliament of Canada home page
- <http://pm.gc.ca/eng>  
Prime Minister of Canada website
- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/our-government>  
Accessible explanations of the structure of the American Government from the White House web page
- <http://www.parliament.uk/>  
UK Parliament home page
- <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/news/>  
Home page of The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China
- <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article3700211.ece>  
Editorial from thehindu.com on the role of the "political class" in India
- <https://www.equalvoice.ca/>  
Equal Voice is a multi-partisan group working toward getting women involved in all levels of government.
- <http://www.womenvoters.ca/>  
Canadian Women's Voter Congress encourages more women to get involved in political campaigns and run for political office.
- Bashevkin, S. (2009) *Women, Power, and Politics: The Hidden Story of Canada's Unfinished Democracy*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Trimble, L., Arcsott, J., and Tremblay, M. eds. (2014). *Stalled: The Representation of Women in Canadian Governments*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia.