

The Democratic Quality of Institutional Regimes: a Conceptual Framework

André Kaiser, Matthias Lehnert, Bernhard Miller
and Ulrich Sieberer

University of Mannheim

Lijphart's spectrum of democracies – recently expanded by Jack Nagel to a sub-majoritarian sphere of pluralitarian systems which use disproportional electoral systems in order to manufacture majority governments from minorities in the electorate – is based on only one dimension: inclusion of preferences. Political scientists in the Lijphartian tradition wrongly assume that inclusion of preferences, which is an input characteristic, automatically leads to responsiveness, which refers to actual policy decisions and hence is an output characteristic. We therefore add 'responsibility' as a second input characteristic and employ it alongside the inclusiveness of institutional regimes. We argue that in representative democracies there exists a trade-off between inclusiveness and responsibility. This trade-off helps us to measure the democratic quality of institutional regimes. The now expanded spectrum of democracies based on these two dimensions shows that majoritarian democracy proper – in which governments represent a majority of individual preferences but not more than necessary – is the best possible combination of the two democratic values.

Jack H. Nagel (2000) suggests a conceptual revision of Lijphart's famous democratic continuum between the consensual and majoritarian ideal-types. Starting out from the basic question of 'how many people have their preferences taken into account in the policy decisions of government?' Nagel follows Lijphart (1984, 1999) in making the inclusion of preferences the central discriminating criterion of democratic institutional regimes (Nagel, 2000, p. 119). But then he goes on to argue that the structure of Lijphart's continuum – with the strong emphasis on its endpoints – does not fit the real spectrum of democracies. Referring to the case of New Zealand Nagel shows that Westminster systems – generally taken for perfect examples of majoritarian democracy – fall short in fulfilling the very own characteristic of majoritarianism: they are not strictly based on popular support of more than half of the people but generally function by plurality. This gets most evident at the electoral level: the first-past-the-post system does not require 50 percent of the votes plus one – which would be truly *majoritarian* – but only more votes than any other competitor – what Nagel calls *pluralitarian*. At the legislative level such tendencies continue. Given that in most cases MPs are obliged to vote in accordance with a majority decision in caucus government policies may in fact only represent the preferences of a very small part of the electorate. So Nagel states that 'at the limit, democracy can mask rule by a small elite or even an elected dictator' (2000, p. 118). He concludes that the Lijphartian continuum must be extended to a sub-majoritarian sphere, reaching from nearly majoritarian democracy to constellations of 'elective dictatorships', extreme versions of pluralitarianism, which he calls 'ostensibly democratic' regimes (2000, p. 119). In this new continuum majoritarian democracy properly understood is no longer an endpoint but must rather be

placed near the middle – dividing the spectrum into a consensus and a pluralitarian sphere.

This revision is likely to be commendable and fruitful for comparative politics as it gives way to a more subtle analysis and might answer empirical questions by referring to systemic structures. Using this concept Nagel himself shows why New Zealanders' disappointment after the switch from the first-past-the-post to a German-style proportional representation electoral system is far from surprising. In Nagel's terms institutional reform has not helped achieve a more consensual system but only effected a change from pluralitarian to majoritarian democracy as the new system manufactures minimal winning coalitions representing a bare majority of the voters' preferences (Nagel, 1998). In institutional terms at least there is no need for political actors in New Zealand to form oversized or grand coalitions which would be truly consensual in the original Lijphartian sense (Lijphart, 1999, pp. 90–113).

In our view, however, there is still one problem left. Since the 1960s critics of Lijphart's consensual model – and its sibling, the so-called 'consociational democracy' – have argued that its democratic virtue must be doubted because it is prone to an oligarchic and elitist sealing off of decision making from the electorate (Lustick, 1997). The central device of consensus democracy is a broad coalition representing as many preferences as possible. If unanimity is its ideal as Nagel states, consensus systems should even aim at all-party-coalitions (2000, p. 117). But if almost every preference is represented by government only little potential for governmental change is left. Elections – normally an instrument for voters to sanction governmental disregard of their preferences – become a blunt weapon. This failure obviously cannot be explained by a lack of consensus but rather derives from its overindulgence. Defining democracy mainly by the inclusion of preferences, political scientists in the Lijphartian tradition neglect a crucial virtue of democracy that is generally and misleadingly referred to as 'responsiveness'. Not only should voters have their preferences taken into account in governmental decisions but also should they be able to sanction governmental disregard of their will. In *Democracies* Lijphart considers responsiveness as the core virtue of democracy and defines it as 'government in accordance with the people's preferences' but then implicitly equates it with 'inclusion of preferences' (1984, p. 1). We doubt that inclusion of preferences, which is an input characteristic of a political system, automatically leads to responsiveness, which refers to actual policy decisions and accordingly is an output characteristic. A second input characteristic is needed which takes into account the voters' capacity to sanction governmental misbehaviour. We therefore use 'responsibility' as a second dimension alongside the inclusion of preferences on which the original Lijphart and the remodelled Nagel uni-dimensional concepts are mainly based.¹ We nevertheless do not drop responsiveness which is a crucial characteristic of democratic institutional regimes. In our concept the systemic level of responsibility together with the inclusion of preferences characterise the input side and responsiveness characterises the output side of a democratic institutional regime.

We will further argue that in representative democracies there exists a trade-off between inclusiveness and responsibility which helps us to measure the democratic quality of institutional regimes. Note that our proposal focuses on institutional

settings, not on socio-cultural aspects. It applies for systemic capacities of democratic political regimes which are structured by institutional arrangements, not for empirical cases in which political actors may or may not make use of these capacities.² The new spectrum of democracies based on two dimensions shows that majoritarian democracy proper – with proportional representation as a crucial feature but with no requirement of broad-based coalition governments – is the best possible combination of the two democratic values.³

The Concept

The Two Dimensions: Inclusiveness and Responsibility

As shown above, only one dimension on the input side of the political process – inclusion of preferences – is not sufficient. Therefore we introduce an additional dimension – responsibility of the government. With this we refer to the ability of the electorate to put pressure on the government in policy decisions and to punish it for not fulfilling its promises. From these two input dimensions one can obtain a measure of the democratic quality of a given institutional regime.

The first dimension resembles Lijphart's notion of inclusiveness. The basic question is: how many individual preferences are represented in government? As we are talking about representative systems though, election results do not automatically translate into the policy decisions desired by the electorate. Individual preferences can thus only relate to the persons chosen to hold public office and cannot be seen as a direct inclusion into the policy-making process. There are plenty of reasons why actual policy decisions may not reflect the preferences of the government's supporters in the electorate: tactical and strategic decisions by the political actors; self-interested behaviour; policy learning processes; change of personnel; context changes, which is maybe the most frequently used explanation or excuse for breaking promises in politics; and negotiations resulting in compromises and logrolling, which is especially true for coalition governments.

There can be little doubt that the people's ability to influence not only the personal composition of the government but also – directly or indirectly – policy outputs is a vital aspect of a democratic system. In order to guarantee such a link between choice of representatives and policy decisions there has to be a realistic chance for making the government accountable for its actions and, in case of broken promises, for throwing it out of office in the next election.

We argue therefore that a second dimension must be included on the input side that we call 'responsibility' and operationalise as 'chance of alternation'. Here the question is: how many voters have to change their vote – and thereby make the government accountable for its actions – in order to make alternation of government possible? In a system with a high chance of alternation, relatively small changes in votes will have over-proportional effects on the result in terms of alternation. Only if a political system grants a minimum chance of alternation governments can be expected to take regard of voters' preferences and to be responsive with regard to policy outputs. In this perspective the link between inclusion of preferences and policy responsiveness is governments' perception that their actions may be sanctioned by voters. The likelihood that this is the case depends on the

systemic level of responsibility a political system exhibits. Whereas inclusiveness refers to the systemic potential of an institutional regime to take regard of individual preferences in a prospective way, responsibility is concerned with voters' ability to assess government behaviour on a retrospective basis. Both dimensions denote the way preference coalitions are structured by political institutions: inclusiveness stands for their size, responsibility for their changeability. It is important to point out that 'alternation' in our concept is restricted to the change of a major governing party whether governing alone or in a coalition, because only such a change will result in a real shift in the direction of policy making. Minor changes like the exchange of a small coalition partner do not count as alternation because it is unlikely that they will result in policy changes to such an extent that one can talk meaningfully about punishing the government. Again, we are focusing on systematic features of a polity favouring alternation, not on the question of whether this really occurs.

Of course there are various means for citizens to sanction government behaviour other than through the ballot box, such as conventional and unconventional forms of political protest, media campaigns, or recourse to legal action. However, we are talking about established democracies. If there are differences between them in this respect, they are certainly not substantial.⁴ Therefore the really important differences in this group lie with institutional arrangements. As Lijphart's research has shown the types of electoral system and party system are sufficiently highly correlated with other institutions on what he calls the 'executives-parties dimension' to serve as predictors for the overall character of an institutional regime. To this have to be added the variations found between democracies on the 'federal-unitary dimension' which comprises institutions such as second chambers or constitutional courts. Undoubtedly these may also affect the inclusiveness of an institutional regime – mostly in an indirect way by establishing veto points that can be used by oppositional actors to force the government into compromises (Lijphart 1999; Kaiser 1998).

The Operationalisation of the Two Dimensions

Inclusiveness: Popular Cabinet Support. The first dimension – 'inclusiveness', as we call it – can fairly easily be operationalised as 'popular cabinet support', i.e. the percentage of the total vote that got the acting government into office (Crepaz, 1996). This percentage depends on several institutional parameters, the most important of which is the disproportionality of the electoral system:⁵ the more proportional the electoral system is, the more voters have to be included in order to reach a majority of seats. Therefore, governments in proportional representation systems tend to be based on higher inclusion on the electoral level than governments in first-past-the-post systems in which a majority of seats is easily obtained with far less than 50 percent of the popular vote. At this point we have to add one important counting rule: minority cabinets, especially those that govern for a long time, depend on legislative support parties in order to get a majority for their agenda. Therefore we argue that the percentage of votes for these support parties has to be added to the percentage of the minority cabinet in order to get a realistic measure of the popular cabinet support. This may be difficult to decide in those

few cases where governments depend on changing partners on an issue-by-issue basis.

The use of the terms 'inclusiveness' and 'inclusion' is well suited to demonstrate the difference between the institutional features of a polity and empirical cases: we refer to the institutional characteristics of a polity that do or do not favour the inclusion of preferences as 'inclusiveness'. The term 'inclusion', on the other hand, is used when referring to the percentage of preferences that are actually included in the process of choosing a government in a specific polity at a certain point of time. So the value of 'inclusion' is variable and can change easily through elections or the behaviour of political actors, whereas the 'inclusiveness' of a polity is stable and can only be changed through institutional reform, especially through changes in the electoral system.

Responsibility: Proportionality of the Electoral System and Number of Relevant Parties. The second dimension – governmental responsibility of a polity – is operationalised as the chance of alternation. While it is less obvious how this chance can be measured, we think that it depends on two factors: the disproportionality of the electoral system and the number of relevant parties in the party system.

The more disproportional an electoral system is, the more likely it is that small changes in votes are amplified into large shifts on the representative level. Therefore, a highly disproportional electoral system allows alternation with smaller changes on the electoral level, and gives a smaller group of disappointed supporters of the acting government the chance to punish it. A perfectly proportional system, on the other hand, requires a genuine change in majority support to make alternation possible. This, again, only holds with regard to the systemic logic of electoral systems. There can well be empirical cases where a highly disproportional electoral system perpetuates the predominance of a plurality if this plurality is dispersed in just the right way, especially in first-past-the-post systems with differently sized constituencies. But also in these cases, a fairly small change in the votes for the government may lead to alternation.

The second important determinant of the chance of alternation is the party system. Giovanni Sartori's concept of relevant parties seems to be best suited to illustrate the effects of the party system on the chance of alternation.⁶ According to Sartori a party has to be counted as relevant when it, first, gains parliamentary representation and, second, has either 'coalition' or 'blackmail potential' (1976, p. 123). Among competitive party systems Sartori distinguishes between three main types: two-party systems, moderate pluralism and polarised pluralism. These types show distinct characteristics in terms of the chance of alternation they offer.

A two-party system is characterised by centripetal competition between two relevant parties competing for the absolute majority of seats. Both of them are willing to govern alone whenever they can (Sartori, 1976, p. 188). If voters in a two-party system are disappointed with and turn away from the acting government (whether by changing their vote or, more frequently, by not participating in the election), alternation is a very likely outcome. Actually, the chance of 'alternation is *the* distinguishing mark of the mechanics of twopartism' (Sartori, 1976, p. 186 emphasis original). Interestingly, Sartori refers to the 'expectation rather than the actual

occurrence of governmental turnover', which fits nicely into our concept based on the systemic characteristics of a polity rather than empirical cases (1976, p. 187).

A system of moderate pluralism (three to five relevant parties) has similar mechanics, i.e. centripetal bipolar competition and small ideological distances between the parties, but is characterised by government of alternative coalitions (Sartori, 1976, p. 179). The existence of these coalitions lowers the chance of alternation somewhat. Governments can afford vote shifts from one coalition partner to another, the major party could find a new partner without changing much of its policy programme or it might survive as a minority cabinet. Nevertheless, the setting of moderate pluralism consists of two opposing blocks, so that genuine alternation is the most common way of reacting to larger shifts in votes.⁷

Finally, with regard to the system of polarised pluralism (with more than five ideologically polarised parties), two of the eight characteristics listed by Sartori bear specific relevance for the chance of alternation: the existence of a bilateral opposition of highly ideological parties and the presence of anti-system parties (1976, pp. 133–40). The bilateral opposition from both ends of the political spectrum in connection with their high ideological distance hinders these parties from joining forces, even if they hold a majority of seats together. The existence of anti-system parties lowers the chance of alternation even further: As these parties 'are excluded almost by definition from alternation in office', the number of potential governing parties decreases (1976, p. 138). A classic example is the 'majority' held by the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) and the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) in the Weimar Republic after the 1932 general election. As a result of the existence of anti-system parties and of centrifugal competition in a multi-polar setting, the strongest centre party is doomed to 'govern indefinitely' (1976, p. 138). This party may from time to time change its partners – 'peripheral turnovers' in Sartori's terminology (1976, p. 139) – and reshuffle portfolios somewhat, but a genuine alternation is not possible – at least not within the limits of a democratic system.

The question remains of how to include Sartori's type of predominant-party systems in which one party sustains an absolute majority of seats for at least three consecutive elections (1976, p. 199). First, we have to point out that this type belongs to the competitive systems 'in which – even though no alternation in office actually occurs – alternation is not ruled out and the political system provides ample opportunities for open and effective dissent' (1976, p. 200). Second, predominant-party systems can develop both out of a two-party format without alternation and out of a multi-party format in which one party becomes dominant. The predominant-party system is a rather feeble setting that can change rapidly, if the major party loses its dominant position for whatever reason. It might therefore be useful to look at the format it developed from and might fall back into: with regard to the systemic characteristics a predominant-party system in a two-party format offers a far greater chance of alternation than in a polarised pluralist format. If fair competition is granted and electoral fraud is impossible, the dominant position of one party does not greatly change the systemic chance of alternation of the entire system. As with empirical cases of two-party systems

where – for whatever reason – no alternation actually occurs, predominant-party systems can be treated as functionally equivalent to the type of party system they resemble best if the dominance of one party is neglected.

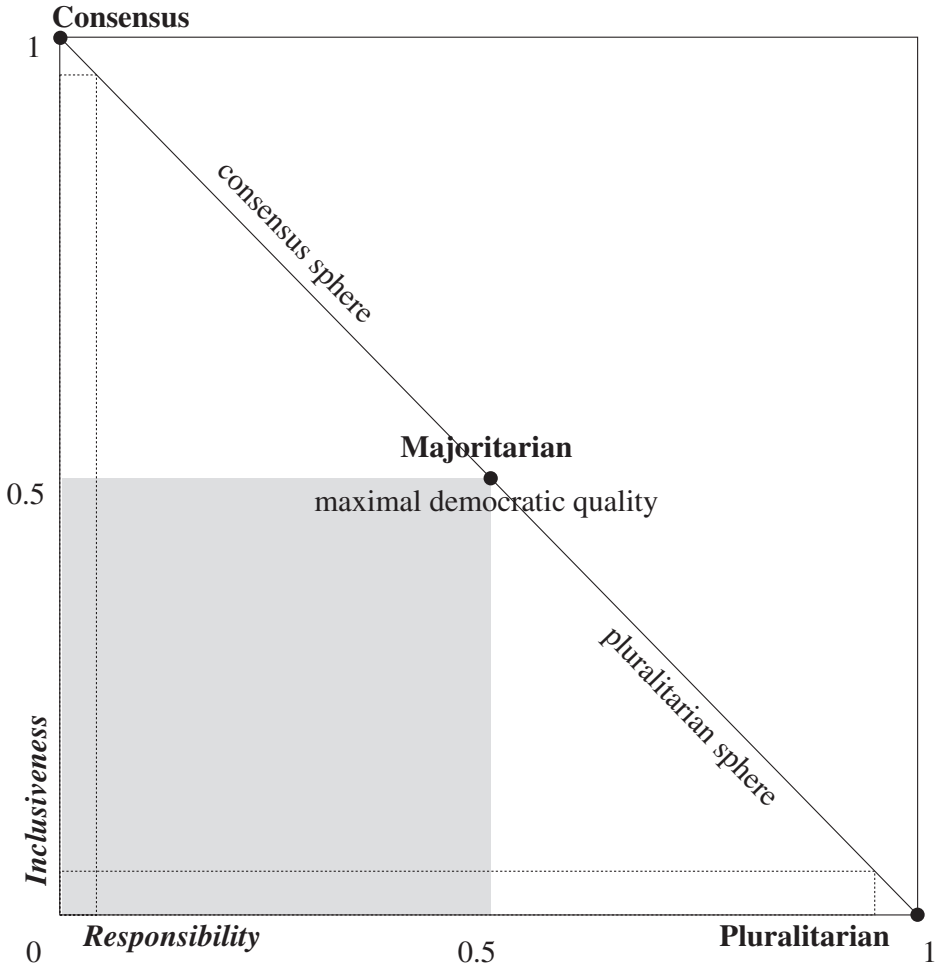
From examination of Sartori's types of competitive party systems we conclude that the chance of alternation (understood as the exchange of the major governing party) decreases, the more relevant parties exist in a party system and the more polarised this system is. It is maximal in a two-party system and becomes minimal in polarised pluralism with moderate pluralism as an intermediate type.

Again, minority cabinets have to be treated according to their actual functioning. This means that – parallel to their higher inclusiveness – the chance of alternation they offer is smaller than it appears at first glance. Legislative support parties have to be counted as belonging to the government's block. This lowers the chance of alternation as these parties are not easily available for an alternating government.

A case that seems to run counter to our argument is Austria, where grand coalitions have been formed most of the time after World War II, although the party system is characterised by a small number of relevant parties and may qualify for moderate pluralism if not at times even for a two-party system. The central factor seems to be the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), which was not considered an acceptable partner by either big party because of its ideological position until recently.⁸ Therefore, the two major parties, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ) and the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP), did not have a choice other than continuing their coalition, as neither was willing to serve as a minority government. Whenever one of them reached an absolute majority of seats, it governed alone (ÖVP 1968–71, SPÖ 1971–83). All grand coalitions have indeed been minimal winning, even though their share of seats in the lower chamber was between 67 and 95 percent. We are therefore not left with the question why grand coalitions are formed in Austria, but rather why no other small party succeeded in gaining representation and tipping the scales as partner in alternating coalitions. The most likely answer is the experience of the interwar period when the competition between the socialist and catholic 'Lager' ended in the breakdown of the democratic regime and brought Austria to the edge of a civil war. Therefore co-operation of the two big parties was the logical alternative to a renewal of conflict after World War II. When faced with the choice of fighting or embracing each other, the two parties opted for the less dangerous alternative. A second factor may be Austria's special international situation as a non-aligned state between East and West, which may also have made cooperation of the big parties the logical solution. As a result, we may consider Austria one of the empirical cases where alternation hardly occurs even though its system displays a medium chance of alternation.⁹

The Trade-off between the Two Dimensions

The Trade-off and the Expanded Spectrum of Democracies. After having established the need for two dimensions on the input side – inclusiveness and responsibility – we now consider the relationship between values on these dimensions. We argue that within the variety of representative democracies a trade-off exists

Figure 1: The Spectrum of Democracies as a Trade-off Line

between inclusiveness and responsibility and that the expanded spectrum of democracies proposed by Nagel can be interpreted as this trade-off line (Figure 1). We concentrate on the electoral level though, i.e. we do not deal with effects resulting from concentrating power in the hands of a small group of politicians on the legislative and cabinet levels. Our basic proposition is that the higher the inclusiveness of a system the lower is its systemic chance of alternation and vice versa. In a system with high inclusiveness, a large shift in votes is required to make alternation in government possible. The chance of such an alternation is inversely related to its inclusiveness because the acting government can afford higher losses in votes if it is based on a solid majority. On the other hand, alternation becomes more likely the smaller the margin by which a government was elected because, in this case, a small number of lost votes will result in a change of government.

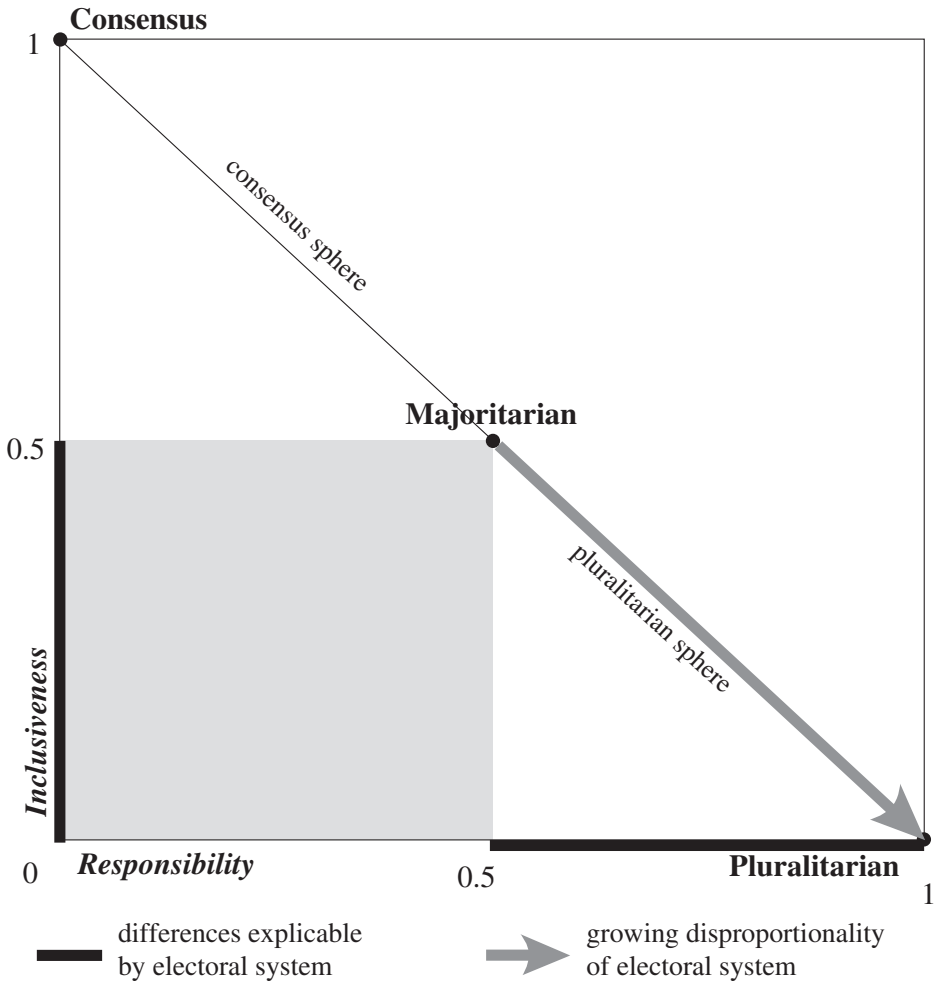
The Electoral System as a Trade-off. The trade-off between inclusiveness and chance of alternation also shows in a variable we use to operationalise the two dimensions: the electoral system and particularly its disproportionality. There is a lot of literature about the different tasks and aims of electoral systems (Nohlen, 2000). Some of the conflicting goals can be illustrated through our trade-off concept: a disproportional electoral system, especially the classic first-past-the-post system with single member constituencies, aims at bringing about a clear majority of seats from a plurality of votes. This leads to a low level of inclusiveness but at the same time promotes a higher chance of alternation. A proportional electoral system, on the other hand, tries to translate the dispersion of votes into seats as accurately as possible. This leads to inclusiveness above the 50 percent level but at the same time limits the chance of alternation. Even a perfect proportional representation system, however, does not by itself promote consensual democracy, as New Zealanders have had to realise. It is merely the precondition for establishing at least a majoritarian system (Nagel, 2000, p. 121).

Therefore the electoral system can be held responsible only for distinctions between truly majoritarian and pluralitarian systems: the more disproportional the electoral system the further down it places a system in the pluralitarian sphere because it lowers its inclusiveness and increases its chance of alternation. Systems in the consensual sphere cannot be explained by the electoral system alone but by the type of party system and other institutional features promoting higher inclusiveness (Figure 2).

Presidentialism

Presidential democracies are notoriously difficult to sort into types of democracy. Lijphart, for example, hesitates to commit himself whether their institutional characteristics are more akin to majoritarianism or to consensualism (Lijphart, 1994; Kaiser, 1998, p. 208). To some extent, we run into similar difficulties here. In parallel to what we propose with regard to minority governments, however, we argue that in order to get a realistic measure of the popular cabinet support it is not enough to count just the percentage of the vote for the president. Presidential democracies are checks-and-balances systems where legislative decision-making is based on an agreement between a majority of the legislature and the president. If the president vetoes a parliamentary decision this can usually be overridden by a two-thirds majority in the legislature. In all cases the effective decision-making rule is clearly higher than 50 percent plus one vote. So is the effective popular cabinet support. The systemic necessity to arrive at rather high levels of inclusiveness in order to avoid gridlock may be reinforced by voting patterns in mid-term elections and by split ticket voting. As the very concept of alternation belongs to the habitat of parliamentary democracies there is also a problem with our second dimension. How can we come up with a meaningful measure of the chance of alternation if the logical starting-point for that, the concept of institutionalised opposition, is alien to presidential systems?

In empirical terms we argue that the base-line of our argument – the democratic quality trade-off – still holds. In presidential systems we find that popular cabinet support usually is nearer to the consensual part of the continuum than to the

Figure 2: The Influence of the Electoral System on Democratic Quality

majority point. Clear examples for alternation are highly unusual. Only in cases of landslide victories for candidates of one party both in presidential and parliamentary elections at the same time (such as in 1932 and 1964 in the USA) one could speak of something equivalent to a change of government because this leads not only to unified government but also to strong majorities in both institutions which can cope with some degree of dissension among the legislators on specific policy issues.

Even though responsibility on the aggregate level is relatively low in presidential systems, we may have to take into account other means of creating responsibility on the local level of individual legislators: as they are not dependent on party decisions and discipline, they may be more responsible to their respective electorates.

Indeed, the voting behaviour of representatives in presidential systems is generally oriented more towards local demands than towards a party programme.¹⁰ In institutional terms, this local responsibility is strengthened by one-member constituencies which create a stronger link between legislators and their electorates than does list voting, by relatively short legislative periods, and by the procedure of choosing candidates through primaries. The combination of these factors requires legislators to be more responsive to their local electorate and party selectorate in order to be re-elected. They may therefore adapt their individual voting behaviour in parliament to opinion changes in their constituency.

Therefore responsiveness in presidential systems may be reached not through responsibility of the entire government as in parliamentary systems and as measured by the chance of alternation, but rather through a direct link between the electorate and 'their' legislator. On general policy decisions though, the power of individual legislators to push the interests of their electorate in the legislative process is smaller than the influence of a disciplined parliamentary party. Therefore we argue that the local responsibility in presidential systems does not greatly change the low overall level of responsibility this system type exhibits.

In conceptual terms we have to accept that our operationalisation of the second dimension may not be directly applicable here. As the tenure of the executive does not depend on continuous support in the legislature, there is no need for individual parliamentarians to be subservient to their party caucus. It is debatable how to count parties in systems without a high degree of party discipline in parliament. What is clear, however, is that the effective number of parties is higher than party labels in elections would suggest. So in the case of the USA it is in almost all respects misleading to come up with a figure of around two, given that party unity scores in roll calls only rarely exceed 90 percent and presidential support scores usually are much lower (Malbin, 1993; Stanley and Niemi, 1998). As a result, presidential systems belong to the more consensual sphere of the democratic continuum as their inclusiveness usually is higher than 50 percent and the functional equivalent to an alternation is a rare phenomenon.

Input versus Output Characteristics as Measures of Democratic Quality

Recent attempts at examining democratic quality have been based on concepts that employ either a mix of economic and social performance data or regime endurance as indicators. In both cases these are held to be determined mainly by the democratic political system itself rather than some other factors such as political culture, economic and social structural factors, or the international position of a country (Lijphart, 1991, 1994b; Crepaz, 1996). In our view, there are a number of methodological problems involved here. Arriving at a sample of cases not dominated by rich, mainly Western European political systems, would be the very precondition for a convincing test of hypotheses about the relationship between institutions and performance that would control for social and economic context. Apart from this difficulty the two most important problems are possible spurious correlation effects and intra-group versus inter-group variation in empirical findings. As correlations cannot be directly interpreted as causal relationships, possible background variables

that might both influence institutional design and performance must at least be controlled for. What should also be of much more concern is that time and again specific types of democracy are said to effect some output although empirical findings show that intra-group variance between e.g. different pluralitarian democracies can get as high as inter-group variance between pluralitarian and consensus democracies (Schmidt, 1998, pp. 187–91; Schmidt, 2000, p. 346; Lane, 1996, pp. 207–10). We put our understanding of democratic quality on safer ground by proposing to measure it by intrinsic democratic values, i.e. by aspects of the input dimension of democratic political systems.

The Democratic Quality Measure

Going beyond a purely descriptive look, we propose that our concept allows conclusions about the democratic quality of a polity from examining its input structures, and that this democratic quality is visualised by the area under any point on the continuum representing a specific political system.

The democratic quality of both endpoints of the spectrum is zero. In a representative system with perfect inclusiveness no alternation is possible, so there is no way of punishing the government for breaking promises on policy decisions. A system in which the political elites cannot be effectively held accountable by the electorate for their actions cannot be called democratic. The same is true for the other endpoint. Here the chance of alternation is maximal, but only a very small group of voters take a meaningful part in choosing the government. So a plurality of far less than 50 percent effectively decides about the government, a situation that cannot be called democratic either.

Nagel labels these endpoints ‘unanimity’ (inclusiveness = 100 percent, responsibility = 0 percent in our concept) and ‘elective dictatorship’ (inclusiveness = 0 percent,¹¹ responsibility = 100 percent) and treats them as part of a continuous spectrum. We think though, that a qualitative difference exists between the endpoints and points in between approaching them. Therefore it is justified to give them a democratic quality value of zero whereas all other points on the continuum obtain values higher than zero.

Following from our concept the democratic quality of a system is maximal at the 50 percent setting on both dimensions, where an equal trade-off exists between the two values. Talking about inclusiveness, 50 percent + 1 vote is the ideal point, because all other decision rules effectively result in minority rule: either decisions are made by a minority (pluralitarian systems) or minorities have the ability to block decisions (consensual systems) (Kelsen, 1929, p. 10; see also Rae, 1971, p. 112). The 50 percent point on the responsibility dimension is more difficult to defend. We think though that it is optimal because it offers a realistic chance of alternation without giving minorities of voters too much power by facilitating alternation too much. At this point alternation is as likely to happen as not. In other words, the institutional features of the system favour neither the incumbent government nor the opposition. The result of elections in terms of alternation is as little as possible predetermined by the polity itself. Therefore it is really the will of the voters that decides about an alternation in government.

The area at the 50 percent setting, which we think has a maximal democratic quality, is exactly the spectrum which Nagel calls 'true majoritarianism' (2000, p. 124). As we are talking about a gradual concept it may be preferable to talk about spheres on the continuum rather than placing the types of democracies on distinct points.

Why Majoritarian Systems are Superior

Our argument seems to be pretty much along the very traditional lines. We conclude that majoritarian democracies have the highest democratic quality. However, it may be worth reminding ourselves that it is exactly this type of political system that has been neglected in recent discussions by Lijphart and others. They tend to ignore institutional regimes that in their terminology would be mixed cases – neither the traditional Westminster model nor the Lijphartian consensus model. It might be a semantic problem. Since systems such as Germany are being dealt with in the consensus versus Westminster dichotomy, their special traits get ignored. Now that Nagel's terminology moves such cases to the middle of the spectrum and attributes the redefined label 'majoritarian' to them their importance is being stressed again. The purpose of this section is to show that the maximal democratic quality of majoritarian systems in terms of their input characteristics may have positive effects on their output characteristics as well.

First, the fact that usually minimal winning coalitions are formed introduces a great amount of stability into the system. It is true that cabinet durability in pluralitarian democracies with one party in government is slightly higher than in cases of minimal winning coalition governments (Lijphart, 1999, p. 137). On the other hand, coalition partners agree on certain principles upon forming government. This puts them on a relatively clear-cut path, denying major changes in course (Klingemann *et al.*, 1994). Compared to pluralitarian systems this mechanism makes it more difficult to significantly change positions on programmatic issues between elections. In comparison to consensus democracies the fact that oversized coalitions can be avoided assures that party programmes need not be too much watered down in the process of negotiating coalition agreements.

Second, since the number of participating parties in minimal winning coalition governments is usually limited and thus costs of decision making are not too high, majoritarian systems can be expected to be able to adjust relatively quickly to urgent problems, faster than consensus democracies can.

Third, it can be argued that the existence and influence of opposition parties significantly affects the way a democratic political system produces policy outputs. In consensus systems, however, there is *de facto* no opposition. Oversized coalitions encompassing nearly all major parties simply do not leave much room for a credible alternative government. In majoritarian democracies opposition parties exist and can present themselves as serious contenders to the government. Although we do not explicitly model their activities here, depending on their strength opposition parties may have indirect influence on both inclusiveness – by pushing minority interests – and the probability of government alternation – through presentation of alternatives to government policy.

Fourth, in contrast to pluralitarian democracies majoritarian systems normally use proportional representation electoral systems. Therefore they reflect modern society more realistically by allowing a more diverse spectrum of political interests to enter the legislative arena. In this way they may also be more open to innovative political problem solving than pluralitarian systems that restrict access to the decision making process.

To sum up: majoritarian systems are characterised by political stability through government durability and openness towards new political interests but at the same time maintain flexibility. These features give majoritarian systems a distinct profile which can be considered superior over the other two types.

Democratic Quality and Direct Democracy

The concept of democratic quality as laid out above presents a clear winner: the majoritarian system. Quite obviously this scheme ignores a number of mechanisms that can significantly alter the way democracy works in reality. Take as an example Switzerland, a prime case of consensus democracy and – following from the exceptionally high number of relevant parties – a country with a very low probability of government alternation and thus low democratic quality. One would expect a considerable degree of dissatisfaction with this institutional regime. Nonetheless Switzerland clearly is a stable democracy. What are the instruments that dissolve the trade-off the representative side of our model is based upon? Looking at Switzerland we find that it offers two direct democratic mechanisms: the initiative and the referendum. One can argue that it is these instruments, which make the trade-off that comes along with consensus democracy more acceptable.

If in a consensus country responsibility is low, how then can the government be punished for not responding to voters' interests? It could be argued that referendums in a way present a functional equivalent to the threat of government defeat in pure representative systems. Since referendums offer the voters a way to have legislation passed despite government objections one can speak of punishment without election. It can safely be assumed that there is always a high probability that there will be a party within an oversized coalition willing to introduce legislation for a referendum if there is enough pressure in the electorate. Legislation rejected in parliament may thus become law through a referendum – or the other way round: a parliamentary compromise bill may be rejected in a referendum if it is not widely supported in the electorate. One might argue that this mechanism dissociates alternation and elections – effectively voiding their importance. Consequently it could be argued that the character of a consensus system is changed through referendums – as these are decided by majority rule – towards majoritarianism. To defuse this argument we present empirical evidence from the 44th session of the Swiss parliament – the prime example of direct democracy in the modern world. Out of a total number of 479 bills introduced between 1991 and 1995 only 40 were subjected to a referendum.¹² This small portion of 8.3 percent can hardly be considered significant enough to justify the argument above. Thus the quantitative impact of referendums on the basic characteristics of the consensus system is limited. Responsibility defects, as illustrated by these figures, can never be totally offset through the application of direct democratic means as they

are not something that takes place on a regular basis and with rather short intervals in between.

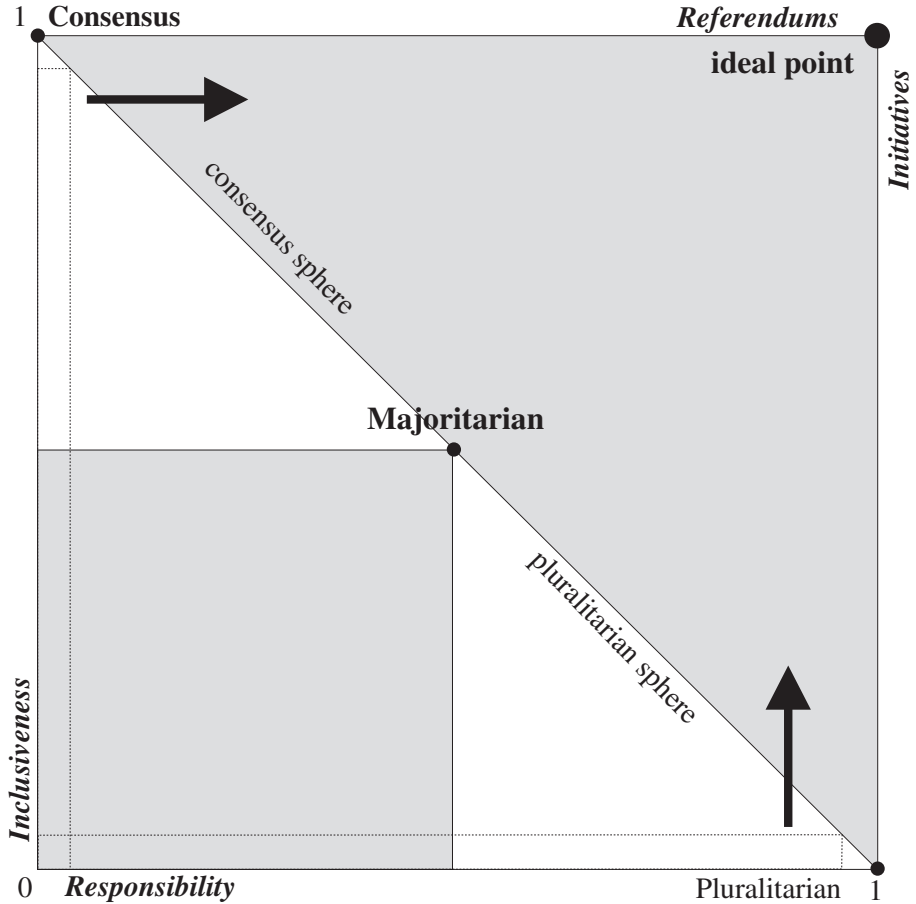
Looking at the other type of democracy with low democratic quality, how can the lack of inclusiveness in pluralitarian systems be compensated for? A one-party government which is predominantly concerned with the interests of its own supporters can, by way of the initiative, be forced to introduce legislation in the interest of minorities that would otherwise not be taken into account.¹³ Even if unsuccessful, an initiative denies a majority the ability to act quickly and therefore is useful to apply pressure. So under any circumstances an initiative helps to include more interests in the political process. A combination of both initiative and referendum might enhance inclusiveness in pluralitarian systems even further. This way possible resistance in parliament could be bypassed by use of a referendum. Yet it has to be conceded that this combination of direct democratic mechanisms may destabilise the legitimacy of governments to a considerable degree, if parliamentary opposition parties start to make use of referendums in order to overcome parliamentary majority decisions (Kielmansegg, 1998).

This leaves majoritarian systems. With the highest value on the two representative dimensions, can direct democratic instruments further increase democratic quality here? They do not seem to be attractive for systems of this type. There is already some equilibrium between the two axes. Direct democratic elements might disrupt this balance and therefore reduce the functionality of the system. Furthermore, why should such instruments be necessary in a majoritarian system? Responsibility is sufficiently high to punish the government in elections. And since the government is based on more than 50 percent of the electorate, if there are major issues where a majority in the population disagrees with the government this conflict can be more effectively solved through elections than by means of a referendum.

There is though one exception: as functional equivalents for competition between actors in representative institutions, direct democratic instruments may be a valuable addition even for majoritarian systems when certain issues are not addressed by the representative institutions.¹⁴ This seems likely especially with two classes of issues: questions concerning direct benefits of the legislators, like party and campaign funding, and issues with a strong normative consensus across party lines, like fundamental orientations on foreign or social policy. As none of the representative institutions will address these issues, responsiveness with regard to changing attitudes in the electorate is extremely low. On these issues, a combination of initiative and referendum offers the chance to bypass inactive representative institutions. It seems unlikely though, that either instrument alone can be effective when faced with solid and near unanimous resistance by the representatives. The number of issues not addressed by any actor in the representative institutions will be fairly small in a working and stable representative system. Therefore the importance of direct democratic instruments in majoritarian systems remains low.

Beyond the aspect of compensating for defects on the representative level, direct democracy may also bear symbolic relevance: it gives people the opportunity to take direct influence on certain issues and may therefore foster the perception of popular sovereignty. This may increase the readiness to accept decisions of the

Figure 3: The Trade-Off and Direct Democratic Mechanisms



representative institutions on most issues, regardless of the influence of direct democratic instruments on policy in practise.

The possibility to compensate for deficiencies through direct democratic elements raises an interesting conceptual question. Can the 'ideal point' in the upper right corner of Figure 3 be achieved through direct democracy? The answer seems to be no. Alternation and direct democracy are two concepts that cannot be combined. If everybody can participate in decision making the very idea of alternation becomes absurd – there are no alternatives to turn to. Everybody can voice their own preferences and is not in need of someone else to represent them.

This section demonstrates that with regard to inclusiveness and responsibility direct democratic elements might be an appropriate 'add-on' for consensus and plurali-

tarian democracy. This way the problems these types have, can at least partly be compensated for.

Conclusion

We have shown that by including a second dimension – the systemic potential for responsibility, measured in terms of the chance of alternation in power – a completely different picture emerges from what Lijphart and those who accept his analytical turned normative arguments claim. Inclusiveness is certainly a virtue for democracies but too much of it hinders competition between different political opinions and consequently reduces responsibility. So clearly there is a trade-off involved here. This is by no means a totally new discovery. It merely reminds us of the fact that alongside the different participatory, Rousseauian and consociational strands in democratic theory that put a stress on including as many individual preferences as possible into decision making there has always been a second, more elitist tradition that stresses democracy as competition and accordingly defines it in terms of the power of the people to change government without bloodshed (Popper, 1989; Schumpeter, 1994, pp. 269–83). These two traditions give different answers to the question of which institutional regime best provides for what democracy is all about. However, by combining both dimensions we find that it is neither of the extremes but majoritarian democracy – real majoritarianism as defined by Nagel – that in institutional terms delivers the optimal trade-off of both aims.

(Accepted: 26 June 2001)

About the Authors

André Kaiser, Visiting Fellow, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Paulstraße 3, D-50676 Köln, Germany; email: kaiser@mpi-fg-koeln.mpg.de

Matthias Lehnert, Lehrstuhl fuer Politische Wissenschaft III, University of Mannheim, Seminargebaeude A 5, D-68131 Mannheim, Germany; email: lehnert@gmx.de

Bernhard Miller, Lehrstuhl fuer Politische Wissenschaft III, University of Mannheim, Seminargebaeude A 5, D-68131 Mannheim, Germany; email: bmiller@bmiller.de

Ulrich Sieberer, Lehrstuhl fuer Politische Wissenschaft III, University of Mannheim, Seminargebaeude A 5, D-68131 Mannheim, Germany; email: sieberer@gmx.net

Notes

Thanks to Keith Dowding, Sabine Jung, Peter Graf Kielmansegg and the anonymous referees for helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.

- 1 This dimension could also be termed accountability, answerability or sanctionability. We prefer 'responsibility' to point out the concept's derivation from the 'responsible government' doctrine. See Birch (1964).
- 2 The discussion of a few empirical political systems in this article serves to illustrate our systemic arguments.
- 3 We concentrate here on improving the institutionalist version of empirical democratic theory which has been heavily shaped by Lijphart's work in recent years. See Kaiser, 1997. This does not mean that we disregard contending approaches – a positive theory conception that starts from individual preferences and treats institutions endogenously as constitutional choices of preference coalitions or

- a normative theory such as the concept of deliberative democracy. On the contrary! It would certainly be a fruitful enterprise to engage in a dialogue between these competing perspectives. However, the purpose of our discussion is more limited.
- 4 There are at least no empirical findings to the contrary so far. For current research endeavours in this respect see Beetham (1994) and Inkeles (1991).
 - 5 Other relevant parameters are the existence of a formal investiture vote forcing the government to actually hold a majority of seats in parliament, the form of a possible vote of no confidence, or the requirement of supermajorities on certain issues and appointments. Such features will increase the inclusiveness of a political system and move it further towards Lijphart's and Nagel's consensual endpoint.
 - 6 Sartori's typological approach is directly concerned with the effects of different constellations of parties on government formation and the chance of alternation. It shows that it is the logic of competition and not the mere number of parties that is crucial here. Therefore we do not use the conventional effective number of parties' indicators. See Sartori (1996) and also Pulzer (1987).
 - 7 The potential for alternation may actually be lower in a system with three than with four relevant parties. In a three-party situation the small centre party tips the scales for which coalition can be formed and which policies will be pursued. Actually changing the coalition partner may be life-threatening if the small party's supporters do not accept the decision. The German party system from the 1950s to the 1980s with the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP) in a pivotal position is a case in point. It switched coalition partners in 1969 and 1982. At both occasions it lost major parts of its core support.
 - 8 Except for a short coalition with the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ) on the federal level from 1983 to 1987 which broke up because of a shift to the right in the FPÖ.
 - 9 The recent inclusion of the FPÖ in a coalition government further supports the argument that the 'Austrian model' has come to an end and that the empirical case approaches the status it should hold from its systemic characteristics: medium on both inclusiveness and responsibility.
 - 10 Fenno shows that members in the US House of Representatives vote according to the demands in their constituencies, explain their vote highlighting local benefits, and make a tremendous effort servicing the district; see Fenno Jr. (1978, pp. 101–53, 224–48).
 - 11 At least under democratic circumstances, the inclusiveness of a political system of course cannot be zero. But, as Nagel has shown for New Zealand prior to electoral reform, under a disciplined party system and with the cabinet itself deciding on the basis of majority rule the number of ministers necessary to succeed in getting a policy position through and accordingly the number of preferences included can be astonishingly low. See Nagel (1998, p. 244).
 - 12 This number is composed of 18 mandatory referendums (changes to the constitution) and 22 facultative referendums (out of 48 proposed). See Linder (1999, pp. 91, 203 and loose leaf) and Parlamentsdienst Bern, *Legislaturrückblick 1991–1995, Anhang G: Eidgenössische Abstimmungen 1991–1995* (www.parlament.ch/D/Veroeffentlichungen/Rueckblick/annexes/Annexe_G1.htm).
 - 13 This recommendation on the application of initiative and referendum runs counter to empirical cases. The UK has recently begun using non-binding referendums with regard to constitutional reform issues, but – in contrast to New Zealand – has so far refrained from introducing initiatives.
 - 14 Of course this is also true for pluralitarian and consensus systems.

References

- Beetham, D. (ed.) (1994) *Defining and Measuring Democracy*. London: Sage.
- Birch, A. H. (1964) *Representative and Responsible Government: an Essay on the British Constitution*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Crepaz, M. M. L. (1996) 'Consensus versus majoritarian democracy: political institutions and their impact on macroeconomic performance and industrial disputes', *Comparative Political Studies*, 29 (1), 4–26.
- Fenno, R. F., Jr. (1978) *Home Style. Home Members in their Districts*. Boston MA: Little, Brown & Co.
- Inkeles, A. (ed.) (1991) *On Measuring Democracy. its Consequences and Concomitants*. New Brunswick NJ: Transaction.
- Kaiser, A. (1997) 'Types of democracy. From classical to new institutionalism', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 9.
- Kaiser, A. (1998) 'Institutional Regimes', in J. W. van Deth (ed.), *Comparative Politics. The Problem of Equivalence*. London: Routledge.
- Kelsen, H. (1929) *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie* (second edition). Tübingen: Mohr.

- Kielmansegg, P. Graf (1998) 'The parliamentary system and direct democracy', *European Review*, 6.
- Klingemann, H.-D., Hofferbert, R. I. and Budge, I. (1994) *Parties, Policies, and Democracy*. Boulder CO: Westview Press.
- Lane, J.-E. (1996) *Constitutions and Political Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lijphart, A. (1984) *Democracies. Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Lijphart, A. (1991) 'Constitutional choices for new democracies', *Journal of Democracy*, 2, (1).
- Lijphart, A. (1994a) 'Presidentialism and Majoritarian Democracy: Theoretical Observations', in J. J. Linz and A. Valenzuela (eds), *The Failure of Presidential Democracy. Comparative Perspectives*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lijphart, A. (1994b), 'Democracies. Forms, performance, and constitutional engineering', *European Journal of Political Research* 25, (1).
- Lijphart, A. (1999) *Patterns of Democracy. Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press.
- Linder, W. (1999) *Schweizerische Demokratie. Institutionen – Prozesse – Perspektiven* Bern: Haupt.
- Lustick, I. S. (1997) 'Lijphart, Lakatos, and consociationalism', *World Politics*, 50, October.
- Malbin, M. J. (1993) 'Political Parties across the Separation of Powers', in P. W. Schramm and B. P. Wilson, (eds), *American Political Parties and Constitutional Politics*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Nagel, J. H. (1998) 'Social choice in a pluralitarian democracy: the politics of market liberalization in New Zealand', *British Journal of Political Science*, 28 (2), 244.
- Nagel, J. H. (2000) 'Expanding the Spectrum of Democracies: Reflections on Proportional Representation in New Zealand' in M. Crepaz, T. Koelble and D. Wilsford (eds), *Democracy and Institutions. The Life Work of Arend Lijphart*. Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Nohlen, D. (2000) *Wahlrecht und Parteiensystem* (third edition). Opladen: Leske und Budrich.
- Popper, K. (1989) 'Über das Problem der Demokratie', in M. Lahnstein and H. Matthöfer (eds), *Leidenschaft zur praktischen Vernunft: Helmut Schmidt zum Siebzigsten*. Berlin: Siedler.
- Pulzer, P. (1987) 'Is there Life After Dahl?', in E. Kolinsky (ed.), *Opposition in Western Europe*. London: Croom Helm.
- Rae, D. W. (1971) 'Political democracy as a property of political institutions', *American Political Science Review*, 65, 112.
- Sartori, G. (1976) *Parties and Party Systems. A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, M. G. (1998) 'Das Politische Leistungsprofil der Demokratien', in M. Greven (ed.), *Demokratie. Eine Kultur des Westens?* Opladen: Leske und Budrich.
- Schmidt, M. G. (2000) *Demokratiethorien. Eine Einführung* (third edition). Opladen: Leske und Budrich.
- Schumpeter, J. A. (1994 [1942]) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London: Routledge.
- Stanley, H. W. and Niemi, R. G. (1998) *Vital Statistics on American Politics 1997–1998*. Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly.