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Lecture 9

Political Systems
- **Qualitative Differentiations** -

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The principal distinction between anomy, autocracy, and democracy (lecture 8) can be qualitatively differentiated. Dimensions of this differentiation are:

- The separation of political systems from other spheres of society, such as military, religion, state (administration), or economy
- The way of participation (direct - indirect)
- The institutionalized relationship between powers (presidential - parliamentary)
- The institutional way of decision-building (majoritarian - consensus building)
- The spatial fragmentation of powers (unitary - federal)

In this lecture I'll outline these dimensions including some theoretical backgrounds and typical correlations with democracy, autocracy, and anomy.

1. The separation of political systems

According to the functionalist system theory, a modernizing society differentiates into self-positing, but cooperating sub-systems, such as economy, jurisdiction, politics, and science. By this functional differentiation the societal productivity increases in principal. Hence modern society is conceived of as more productive than pre-modern societies - an evolutionary theory.[1]

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[1] Luhmann 1984: Soziale Systeme: Grundriß einer allgemeinen Theorie, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp
(English translation: Social Systems, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995)

Indeed, this theory does not take concrete historical events in consideration - see for instance the fact that the exploitation of huge oil reserves in the Middle-East region since the 1930s has led to exceptional wealth in some countries of this region, particularly Saudi-Arabia. Therefore in those countries the societal and economic pressure on functional differentiation and according institutional alterations is much lower than in other countries. Nevertheless, starting from the main idea of functionalist system theory, we have a possible key to understand processes of functional differentiation.

Figure 1: *Modernization as differentiation of functional sub-systems*
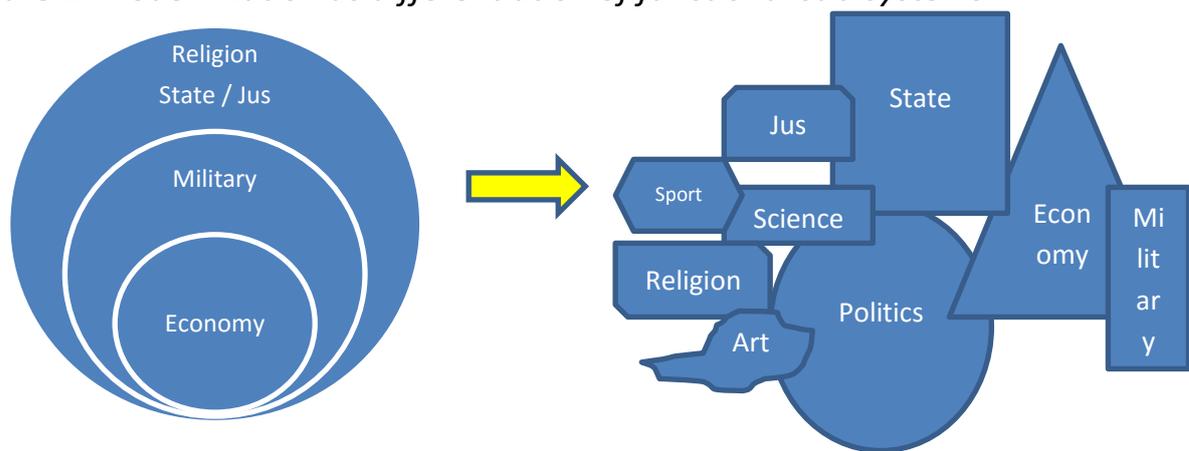
Source: Own presentation

In a **functionally low or non-differentiated society**, religion, state, military, jurisdiction, and economy are closely combined under the hierarchical rule of one sphere, such as religion. This absolute rule may lead until the dissolving of specific functional logics, such as the own logic of science or the own logic of politics. Consequently the whole society operates as one hierarchical unity.

In contrast in a **functionally differentiated (modern) society**, the following assumptions pertain:

a) There is no general supreme power of religion, military, economics or any other subsystem of society.
b) Any sub-system functions at its own logic with a certain competence and charisma. Hence also state and politics are separated from any other subsystem.
c) The state disposes at institutionalized potentials of ordination respectively subordination; but necessary coordination by state takes place in a situational manner: While state instances are empowered to rule in a direct and straightforward way in situations of emergency, if-then patterns and multi-dimensional coordination, such as free

accessible, fair procedures (bound governance), are valid in all routine cases.

d) State and politics influence each other, but they are not identical: While the state including public administration is about preserving institutional structures and implementing selected decisions, politics is about formation of will and public decision-making. The state operates in a more hierarchical structure; politics can fulfill its specific functions only in an order of reciprocal respect and principal equality.

Starting from this view, political systems may be compared according to the criterion whether they underlie the rule of any other societal sphere or not: If the political system is clearly separated from any other sphere it is able to unfold its own specific logic - a modern feature that opens up best chances for **democracy**.

In contrast, if the political system succumbs to the rule of another sphere, such as military, religion, or economy, specific potentials of the political systems are not or only partly used. The consequences of that subordination of politics under military, religious, economic or any other logic depend on the specific actor constellation: If there is a clear prevalence and dominion of one formation, such as one ruling military complex or one ruling religion, **autocracy** is given. In contrast **anomy** up to civil war develops if there are conflicting actors with similar potentials of power.

Between these extremes any specific combination and mixture of functional differentiation is possible, for instance a society with prevailing, but not complete religious rule with other autocratic forces, such as military or state government - see the current situation in some Arabic states. On the other side, also some declared democracies operate in a certain division of power with strong religious, military, or economic forces - see for the USA where powerful economic, administrative, and religious actors over-proportionally influence the pre-selection and practical policies of candidates for Congress and even the U.S. presidents.

2. Ways of participation

Participation of the people is not only a question of degree. It is, rather, also a question of how the people are entitled to participate:

- The most widespread form of political participation in designate democracies is electing candidates for parliament. We may denote this way of participation as **indirect or representative** because the people

select certain representatives that in their turn exhibit power (see more in lecture 10).

- In contrast in some political systems the people are entitled to **directly participate** in political decision-making. Usual ways of exerting this right are substantial referendums and people's initiatives to bring a certain issue on the parliamentary and governmental agenda (see more in lecture 11)
- A third form of participation is **active public communication** about political issues - a kind of participation that may influence the formation of political will as well as decision-making.

In concrete cases we have to analyze what forms of participation take place and how they interact with each other. In doing so we should particularly reflect reciprocal boosts between direct and indirect participation - see for instance the public discussion about a referendum that stimulates a certain parliamentary decision.

3. Presidential or parliamentary democracy?

While autocratic power either operates without differentiated institutions or it subdues executive, legislative, and judicative instances, democracies at least proclaim to have an effective separation of powers. The leading idea of this separation is to limit the power of single instances - a precondition of respect of the people and participation by the people. But how can such separation of powers practically realized?

One basic option is the **presidential system** according to the example of the USA (see figure 2).
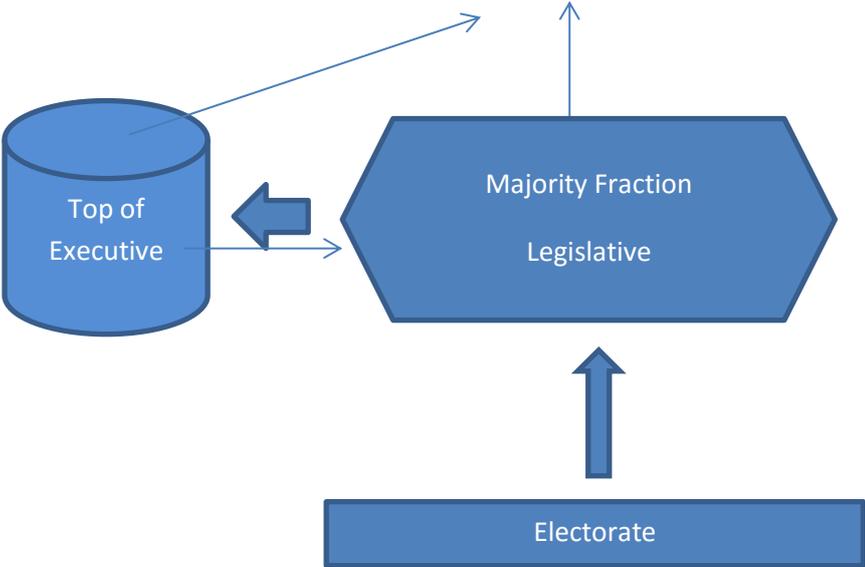
Figure 2: *The presidential system*
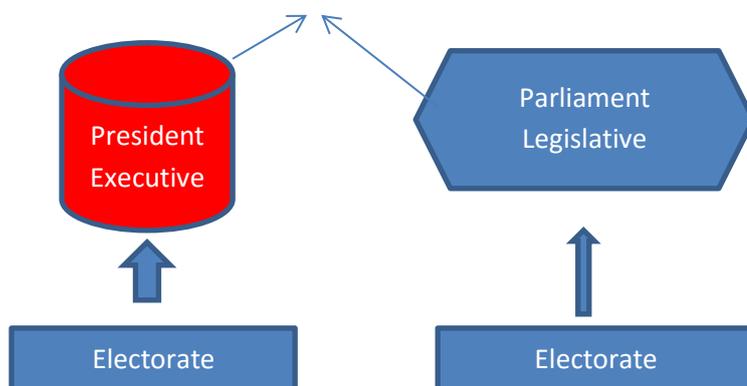
In this system, the president, the head of government, is also head of state and leads an executive branch that is separate from the legislative branch. The

president, directly elected by the people, is not responsible to the legislature and cannot, in normal circumstances, dismiss it. Vice versa, the legislature is, aside of extreme personal failures of the president (*impeachment*), not entitled to dismiss the executive. Political initiatives have to be brought about in a complex process of checks and balances between the president and the legislative. So in the USA the executive can veto legislative acts and, in turn, a supermajority of lawmakers may override the presidential veto.

In contrast, in the so-called **parliamentary system**, the head of executive (prime minister or chancellor) is to be elected by the parliament, and he or she can also dismissed by the parliament. Accordingly, government and majoritarian fraction in parliament closely work together, even may be regarded as different (executive and legislative) parts of the government. The rights of opposition, indeed, are weaker in this system because there is usually no veto-power for oppositional groups - and therefore no system of checks and balances (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: The parliamentary system**

Stimulated by the given institutional preconditions, in presidential systems the parties tend to be relatively open for different political wings. In parliamentary systems, in contrast, parties have to organize majorities for or against the executive. That's why they operate relatively disciplined, mostly with an obligation to vote in accordance with majoritarian party policy - a structure that might be assessed as undemocratic because not free regarding the single deputy.

A kind of combination between presidential and parliamentary systems is formed through **semi-presidential systems** - see for instance the current

French system. In this system, aside of the president, the directly chosen head of state, a second head of executive is working: The prime minister, elected and dismissible by the parliament. Hence there exists a double executive, one around the president, another around the prime minister. Against the impression of a complete contradiction between those two executives, two structures have to be in mind: 1) Whereas the president is mainly responsible for foreign policy and military aspects the prime minister is mainly responsible for the other regular policy issues. Hence there is a certain division of labor. 2) As long as the president's party disposes at the majority of parliamentary mandates the president clearly is the boss. Only in cases of different current majorities in parliament and in presidency (co-habitation), institutional competition comes up (see figure 4).

Figure 4: *The semi-presidential system*
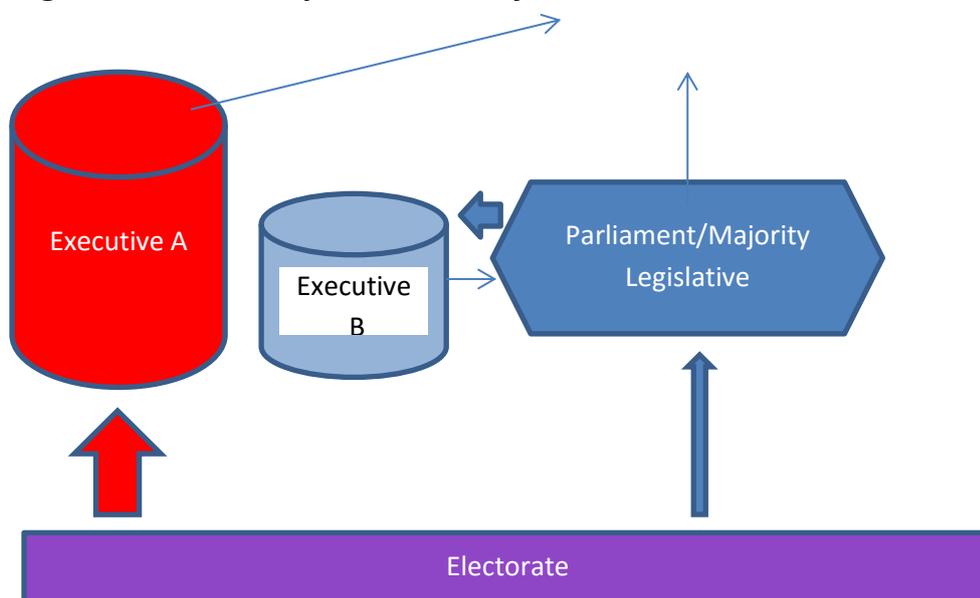
4. Consensus or majority?

The ideal types of consensus democracy and majoritarian democracy refer not only to institutional settings; they also reflect fundamentally different attitudes and socio-political challenges:

- **Consensus democracy** aims at consensual decision. All significant socio-political forces and even minorities are entitled to block decisions by their veto power. That's why consensus democracy implicates relatively intensive processes of communication and bargaining. Those - cost intensive - processes, on the other side, are likely to produce collective measures of, if any, limited scope, deepness, and severity. Altogether

consensus democracy, at least in a short term perspective, turns out to be a relatively inefficient way of problem management.

- **Majoritarian democracy** constitutes just the contrary: Operating with the sword of a majoritarian decision political minorities can be overruled. Communication and bargaining are only necessary to bring about a majoritarian coalition, at least at the first glance, a much more cost-effective proceeding.

Cost effectiveness, however, should be assessed not only in a short term view, and above all, given preconditions of decision-making should be reflected: In a highly fragmented sociopolitical structure, such as in a culture of deep social, ethnical, and religious cleavages, majoritarian ways of decision-making are simply not possible because the involved groups do not trust and try to gain relative wins towards each other. Even if a decision based on principles of majoritarian democracy would be forced, for instance from outside, it would be misguided in this situation because the involved actors would obstruct its implementation. And in the longer run, given chances of controlling a conflict process would be given away.

In contrast, in a constellation of relatively compact interests and based on solid trust, energetic public policies, produced by majoritarian democracy, are possible and mostly favorable. Since strong coordination mostly lies in the common interest (provided that there is reciprocal respect and sufficient participation by the people). Therefore both, consensus democracy and majoritary democracy, are legitimate and according to the individually given preconditions favorable. The challenge is to deliberately choose the right way and to optimally use given capacities.

Positive and negative examples of that challenge can be checked in many countries all over the world, amongst them some Arabic states (Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iraq and others), many European countries, particularly in Northern Europe, South America countries (Argentine, Uruquay and so forth), and many Asian states.

5. Unitary or federal states?

The denotations *unitary* and *federal* refer to the structure and linkages of state institutions in space, comprising executive, legislative, and judicative instances: Unitary states are guided by the unitary principle of one state, federal states by the principle of confederacy. The comparison of these both ideal types is insofar moderate as the completely centralized state on the one side and pure structures of autonomy on the other are dismissed.

Unitary states may be divided into regional institutions, such as communal entities or provinces; but those sub-institutions have a weak legal status and can be reversed at any time by the central level. The representatives of sub-domains do have only relatively weak influence. **Federalism**, in contrast, is the organizational principle of a well-structures common entity wherein in principle equal members have formed an overarching entity. At it the legal powers of the member states are protected in an irresolvable manner.

There are different sub-types of federalism:

1) **Dual (or divided) federalism**, wherein different institutional levels dispose at different powers and responsibilities,
2) **Cooperative federalism**, wherein different institutional levels are jointly responsible for managing certain tasks.
3) **Competitive Federalism,** wherein a structured competition between member-states is enabled trough a certain legal framework.

In unitary states political changes may be pushed and implemented relatively directly and fast. Above all, political forces interested in preserving the unity of an entity hope to have better opportunities to crack down any efforts to reach regional autonomy of even separation. Unitary states of this kind, indeed, are exposed to the risk of underestimating or even overseeing powerful regional movements and efforts - lastly increasing the risk of losing the entity of a country. Federal states, in contrast, are able to get aware of and handle special regional problems in a sensitive way. Therefore, even in cases of distinct regional structural differences, federalism is often considered to be particularly able to integration.

In practice there is a broad and rich spectrum of opportunities to graduate and mix federal and Unitarian elements. And often there are forward and backward processes of more unitary and more federal structures - see the example of Germany since the 1960s.

6. Combinations

Altogether we see a broad spectrum of institutional options to shape governmental systems in an optimal way: A well-advised politician will make the **optimal choice** in all outlined dimensions, differentiation, division of powers, participation, way of decision, and space. In doing so, he or she will take the given preconditions and observable alterations of them into consideration (see table 1).

Table 1: *Governmental systems - Overview*

	Separation	Division of Powers	Participation	Way of decision	Space
A	Diffused	Presidential	Direct	Consensus	Federal
B	Separated	Parliamentary	Indirect	Majoritarian	Unitary

Finally **constellations** between single choices in individual dimensions can play a role: Parliamentary, indirect, and majoritarian institutions usually tend to strengthen each other (see for instance Great Britain). Vice versa, direct, consensus, and federal institutions go well together (see for instance Switzerland). In **Tunisia**, after a long period of time with fundamental confrontation between authoritarian and secular forces on the one side and islamic forces on the other, a certain combination of separation and diffusion between state and religion has been developed that appears to enable a way of vital democracy with a semi-presidential structure, prevailingly indirect and majoritarian ways of decision, and a rich administrative structure (24 *gouvernements* and 264 delegations).