



How do federal countries choose their governments?

The variety is almost infinite, but patterns can be seen

BY LOUIS MASSICOTTE

Governments of federal countries could not be more different. Consider, for example, two days in four federal capitals. In Washington, D.C., on February 2, 2005, US President George W. Bush gave his annual state of the union address to a joint session of both houses of Congress. On that day in Ottawa, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin and his cabinet ministers were responding to barbed questions from opposition MPs during question period. In Delhi on February 25, 2005, the Indian parliament faced pressure to pass a bill that would guarantee 33 per cent female representatives in the lower house, or Lok Sabha. That same day in the Bundestag in Berlin, federal Justice Minister Brigitte Zypries was defending her department's internet services for citizens against criticism by opposition members who claimed that Austria under a conservative coalition had much more of its justice department online.



The Bundestag, Berlin.

The fact that a country has a federal government does not make it any easier to predict what type of political system it is likely to have — or what changes it is likely to make in that system. But a few clear patterns can be seen. Federal countries include those with presidential systems like that of the United States, as well as Westminster-style parliamentary systems like those of Canada, Australia and India, plus parliamentary systems that usually govern through coalitions, as in Germany and Austria. Switzerland provides us with one of the very few examples of a system in which the legislature elects the federal cabinet.

While some federations are old and stable democracies, others oscillate between democracy and authoritarianism. The family of federations includes republics (Germany), parliamentary monarchies (Belgium), monarchies in which the sovereign is represented by a governor general (Australia), and even more or less absolute monarchies (the United Arab Emirates). No electoral system has gained the upper hand among federations, which provide us with examples of practically every type of electoral system. And while the existence of a second chamber in parliament is often cited as an essential feature of federations, Micronesia, Venezuela and St. Kitts & Nevis do not have one.

The first major choice that every federal country has to make is whether to have a presidential system — with

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separation of executive and legislative powers — or a parliamentary system, where the prime minister and cabinet members must first win seats in parliament.

The office of a president

Federal countries with a presidential system keep their legislative and executive powers separate. The executive power rests in the hands of a single person, the president, who is elected by the population as a whole. The United States has been keen to ensure that the way in which the president is chosen reflects the country's federal character. Technically speaking, this ruler is elected by an electoral college composed of delegates chosen by popular vote in each state, which votes as a whole at the electoral college level. The number of delegates from each state is equal to the number of seats it has in the House of Representatives (which varies in accordance with its population), plus two more, to reflect the number of senators. As a result, the relative weight of smaller states represented in the electoral college exceeds their demographic weight.

Currently, the 33 least-populated states plus the District of Columbia together have 198 votes. The four largest states (California, Texas, New York and Florida), with a total population roughly equivalent to the 34 smallest units, have only 147 votes. A candidate who is trailing nationally in the popular ballot can nonetheless win an election if he or she systematically garners the votes of the smallest states — which explains the election of George Bush in 2000, even though his competitor, Al Gore, won the popular vote. As another indication that the founding fathers wanted to favour the small states is the fact that if no presidential candidate obtains an absolute majority of electoral college votes, the House of Representatives elects the president from among the three top candidates; but each state has only one vote, regardless of the size of its population.

In Switzerland, every four years both houses of the Federal Assembly hold a joint session and elect the seven members of the Federal Council, the country's cabinet. Here again, a slight adjustment favours the smaller constituent units, the Swiss cantons. While the distribution of the 200 seats in the National Council reflects the population, each canton has two seats in the 46-seat Council of the States (each of six "half-cantons" is allotted one seat). However, Swiss deputies vote along party lines, not according to which canton they come from.

The United States is now the only federation making use of an electoral college to elect a president. In Argentina, Brazil,



Mexican President Vicente Fox greets Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin.

Mexico, Venezuela and Nigeria, as in Russia (a semi-presidential system) and Austria (a parliamentary system), the president is elected by direct universal suffrage, and the winner is determined solely on the basis of the total

number of votes he or she gets nationwide, regardless of their geographic distribution.

The practice of using two ballots — a first round and then a run-off — to elect the president is used in every presidential federal country except Mexico and the United States. Mexico still uses the first-past-the-post system. In the United States, the system allows a candidate to win by obtaining the most votes in each state, but an absolute majority is required at the electoral college level.

In parliamentary systems, executive power resides with the cabinet, or council of ministers, the members of which are chosen from among elected deputies.


When parliament rules

The second major choice for every federal country is how to elect its legislature. Federations that were once under British or American colonial administrations often have single-seat constituencies where the first-past-the-post system (Canada, India, Malaysia, St. Kitts & Nevis) or the alternative-vote system (Australia) prevails. Party-list proportional representation is used in South Africa, Belgium and Austria. Germany has a mixed system of both single-seat constituencies and proportional representation by party list, which both Venezuela and Mexico have chosen to imitate. Until quite recently, the Russian Federation had a superficially similar mixed system, but single-member constituencies are scheduled to disappear in 2007. All deputies will then be elected under a system of proportional representation within a single national constituency, with the proviso that each party must secure at least 7 per cent of the vote.

By opting for national constituency, Russia has differentiated itself from other federations, in which the deputies are elected within smaller territorial entities, whether these be single-seat constituencies inside provincial or state boundaries (Canada, Australia) or much larger multi-member districts spanning the borders of the constituent units (Brazil, Argentina). There is a tendency to protect the smaller units. In Canada, for example, no province can have fewer seats in the House of Commons than it has in the Senate. This enables the tiny province of Prince Edward Island — with a population of 187,000 — to occupy four of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, instead of just one.

Nobody's perfect

No electoral system is free from controversy. A number of Canadian observers maintain that the plurality system has artificially widened disparities among the regions because

the minority parties in each region are underrepresented in the House of Commons. In 1980, for example, the Liberal Party had the support of some 20 per cent of voters in Western Canada, but won only two of the 78 seats in the region, while the Conservatives obtained only one of the 75 seats in Quebec, where they garnered 12 per cent of the votes. The Canadian tradition, which includes at least one representative from each province in the federal cabinet, becomes hard to apply when the governing party wins no seat in several provinces. To offset this problem, several senators from these provinces have been appointed to the cabinet. But because Canadian senators are appointed by the government and not elected, they carry very little political clout. Different ways of choosing the executive in parliamentary and presidential systems in individual countries are shown in the book and booklet to be published in the Forum's Global Dialogue on Federalism series, *Legislative and Executive Governance in Federal Democracies*. 

Electoral Systems

The first-past-the-post system: The candidate with the most votes wins the election. When legislatures are elected this way, there are usually single-member constituencies. There have been instances of candidates winning with only 25 per cent or even 21 per cent of the popular vote.

The majority-vote system: In one version of this system, a candidate needs to win more than 50 per cent of the votes to win on the first ballot. If no candidate meets this requirement, a second or run-off vote is held a week or two later between the top two candidates. The Australians dispense with the second ballot by asking voters to rank the candidates by order of preference on the ballot paper (preferential voting). A candidate is elected if he or she obtains over 50 per cent of the first-choice votes cast. If not, the weakest candidate is eliminated and all second-choice candidates are transferred to the candidates still in the race. This cycle is repeated until one of the remaining candidates obtains an absolute majority.

Proportional representation: Each party gets about the same percentage of seats in the legislature that it won in the popular vote. Unlike the first-past-the-post and the majority vote systems, proportional representation always has multi-member constituencies. Winners are usually chosen from lists of candidates on the ballot from each political party.

Mixed systems: These combine the principle of plurality or majority voting with that of proportional representation. The most compelling experiment of mixed systems is found in Germany, where 299 of the 598 members of the Bundestag are elected by plurality voting in single-member constituencies — a system that guarantees local territorial representation. The 299 other seats are distributed on a party-list basis within each Land, so that the total number of deputies from each party is proportional to the number of votes it obtained.