

ocrats and Republicans. In the 2006 midterm elections, Jon Tester of the Democratic Party managed to defeat the incumbent Republican Senator Conrad Burns by 3,000 votes, one of the races that allowed the Democratic Party to gain a majority in the U.S. Senate. Republican Denny Rehberg won a landslide election for the U.S. Congress. In 2007, Democrats controlled the Montana senate, and the state house of representatives had a Republican majority. Carol Williams, the Montana senate majority leader, was the first woman to hold the position in the state.

SEE ALSO: Presidential Election of 1964; Wallace, George C.

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Multiparty System

A MULTIPARTY SYSTEM is found in countries in which more than two parties successfully compete for office. It is different from the two-party system found in democracies such as the United States. Multiparty systems are the rule, rather than the exception, in democratic countries. A multiparty system is facilitated by the existence of multiple social cleavages and by a permissive electoral system (proportional representation). Proponents consider that a multiparty system does a better job than a two-party system in representing the variety of interests that exist in modern democratic societies, while critics argue that multiparty systems lead to unstable coalition governments and this, in turn, is a hindrance to coherent policy-making.

To determine exactly at what point a country has a multiparty system rather than a two-party system is not always easy. Through the 1980s, Great Britain's party system was included in the two-party category, while Germany was included among democracies with a multiparty system. Nonetheless, in the parliamentary elections held during that decade, Britain's two largest parties, Conservative and Labor, received together an average of the total vote (72 percent) that was far below the average vote of Germany's two largest parties, Christian-Democrats and Social Democrats (85 percent). In the same elections, Germany's third party, the Free Democrats, won an average of only nine percent of the total vote, while Britain's third party, the Liberal Democrats/Alliance, won 24 percent.

Like the vast majority of advanced Western industrial democracies, both Britain and Germany are parliamentary regimes, in which the partisan balance of power in the legislature determines who forms the government. What justifies calling the British party system of the 1980s a two-party system and the German party system of the 1980s a multiparty system is the extent to which third parties were able to translate their electoral support into representation in the legislature and the government. Britain's plurality elections prevented the Liberal Democrats from gaining more than a handful of seats, and consequently they were unable to have much influence in government formation. In Germany, proportional representation enabled the Free Democrats to translate their electoral support into a sufficient number of seats to hold the balance of power in the legislature.

If Germany had center-left governments in the 1970s, but center-right governments in the 1980s, this was primarily due to the shift in the Free Democrats' alliances. This party was located ideologically in the center, and had enough votes to give a majority to either major party. Between 1969 and 1982, Germany was governed by the center-left coalition between the Social Democrats and the Free Democrats. After 1982, it was governed by the center-right coalition between the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats. The change of government itself was not the result of an election, but was caused instead by the Free Democrats' withdrawal from the government and their forming of a new alliance.

This indicates that there are several key variables that characterize a party system: The number of parties, their electoral and legislative strength, and their ideological location. In parliamentary regimes, the

most important feature of the party system is the number of parties that can influence government formation. When there are only two such parties, as in the case of Britain, where Labor and Conservative parties alternate in office, this is called a two-party system. When there are at least three such parties, as in the case of Germany, it is called a multiparty system. More specifically, before 1990, Germany had a two-and-a-half party system, with two large parties and a third party that, though much smaller than the other two, had a key role in government formation.

When there are four or more relevant parties, it is a genuine multiparty system. Germany became one in the 1990s, with the rise in electoral support for the Green Party, followed by the reunification that brought the former Communist Party of East Germany in as a player in German politics. In the most recent German federal election, each of the two largest parties won about 35 percent of the vote, and a similar share of seats in the parliament, followed by the three smaller parties, the Free Democrats, the former Communists, and the Greens, each gaining between eight and 10 percent of the vote and the seats in the legislature. The government formed after the election illustrates the relatively open-ended nature of coalitions and governments in a multiparty system. After being governed by a coalition between Social Democrats and Greens between 1998 and 2005, Germany is currently governed by a grand coalition between the two largest parties, the Christian Democrats, and the Social Democrats.

Germany is an illustration of how an increase in the number and salience of social cleavages (environmental concerns, East/West divisions) leads to an increase in the number of parties (the rise in electoral support for the Greens and the former Communists). Belgium offers an even clearer example in this respect. After having a two-and-a-half party system in the 1950, and 1960s, it now

has a very fragmented multiparty system. The main reason is the increased salience of language, pitting Dutch speakers against French speakers. Accordingly, all party families split along ethnic lines, so Belgium has two Christian Democratic parties, two Socialist parties, two Liberal parties, two Green parties, plus a Flemish nationalist party, and a Walloon nationalist party.

New Zealand illustrates the other major mechanism through which a democracy can move to a full-fledged multiparty system, namely, an institutional reform. Until 1996, New Zealand used plurality elections, and this led to a two-party system and single-party governments. The 1996 election was the first conducted under a form of proportional representation, and the immediate result was the emergence of a multiparty system. Ever since, New Zealand has had multiparty coalition governments and five to six parties represented in the parliament.

A multiparty system can lead to unstable governments, as in the Fourth French Republic (1946–58), or the representation of fringe parties in the legislature, and sometimes even in the government, as was sometimes the case in Israel. Nonetheless, countries such as Belgium or Switzerland show that fragmented party systems can coexist with relatively stable governments and moderate policies.

SEE ALSO: Proportional Representation; Two-Party System.

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