

informed regarding the activities of group leaders. Pluralistic politics provides a valuable supplement for electoral politics when people want to influence the actions of public bureaucracies. Career administrators are somewhat insulated from electoral outcomes, but their actions still influence public policies in many ways.

Career administrators also recognize that support from political groups can be very helpful when agencies need a budget approved or protection from unfriendly elected officials. That support is only likely to appear if agencies respond to those groups, however. Critics complain that those relationships can mean commitments made during election campaigns are undercut by relatively concealed interest group-agency relationships.

### CRITICISMS

One of the most important criticisms of pluralistic politics is that it is biased in favor of people of higher socioeconomic status. People of higher social class are more likely to belong to political groups and are more likely to be active in the groups to which they belong. In addition, business groups are over-represented among the ranks of interest groups, and there are relatively few groups speaking for the poor, the poorly educated, or the homeless. The distribution of political resources needed for group influence—resources such as money, information, organization, and convenient access to officials—is also biased in favor of upper-class interests. Although the extent of bias is subject to dispute, its existence is widely recognized.

In a related vein, some critics charge that pluralism paints an inaccurate picture of the distribution of political power. Some analysts contend that power is much more concentrated in a small number of people and that ordinary people have virtually no influence on important societal decisions, in part because leaders often conceal information or mislead the public. In addition, many important decisions are not made in the political arena, but in corporate boardrooms or in social networks among powerful people.

**SEE ALSO:** Issue Salience and Voting Behavior; Plurality Vote; Two-Party System.

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## Plurality Vote

PLURALITY IS THE most widespread winner-take-all (or majoritarian) electoral formula. The working of plurality is straightforward: the candidate (or, in some cases, the candidates) who receives the most votes wins the election. Plurality is typically used in single-member districts, and in most cases is employed for legislative elections. Among the advantages of plurality are more direct links between voters and their representatives, more decisive elections, and enhanced governmental accountability. Important drawbacks of plurality are the under-representation of minorities and third parties, disproportional results, and the fact that a party or a candidate can win an election with fewer votes than the opposing party or candidate.

Advocates of plurality argue that in countries such as the United States or Britain, which use single-member district plurality elections for their national legislatures, the system provides more democratic accountability than in countries using proportional representation. However, the logic behind this claim is different in each of the two cases. In the United States, where representatives are more responsive toward their constituents, elections provide citizens with an opportunity to judge individually the performance of each incumbent.

In Britain, plurality elections, combined with a parliamentary system, lead to a two-party system and single-party governments. In this case, voters see legislative elections less as an opportunity to make a judgment about the performance of their representative, and more as a chance to choose the government. Accordingly, a

vote for a Labour or a Conservative candidate is mostly the expression of the voter's wish to ensure a majority for one party or the other, and, by doing so, to see their preferred party forming the government.

In parliamentary systems using proportional representation, the governmental majority is typically backed by a majority of popular votes. In parliamentary systems using single-member district plurality, this is seldom the case. In Britain, for example, the last time a party won a majority of votes was in 1935. However, proponents of plurality argue that the efficiency of single-party government is worth the cost of having a government backed by only a plurality of voters. Nonetheless, critics point out that even this is by no means assured, that is, the party that wins the most seats is not always the party that wins the most votes. In Britain, this happened in 1951 and then again in 1974. In New Zealand, this happened in both the 1978 and the 1981 parliamentary elections, the Labour Party won more votes than the incumbent National Party. However, the National Party won a majority of seats on both occasions. Such occurrences raise questions, not only about the fairness of this kind of electoral system, but also about the claims that plurality ensures governmental accountability.

A similar phenomenon, a candidate with less than a plurality of votes winning the election, occurred four times in the history of presidential elections in the United States: in 1824, 1876, 1888, and 2000. However, the election of the U.S. president is indirect, via the Electoral College, and a counter-argument is that the institutional framework of the United States did not assign any particular significance to the popular vote; rather, it was designed in such a way as to ensure that the candidate winning enough support across a number of states would be able to translate this into a majority of votes in the Electoral College.

A more serious problem is when plurality fails to encourage candidates to moderate their positions. If candidates position themselves along a liberal-conservative ideological continuum, the expectation is that only moderate candidates have a chance to win. But there are significant historical examples when this expectation failed to materialize, such as Chile's 1970 presidential election, when the leftist Salvador Allende was elected with only 36.6 percent of the popular vote. This eventually led to a military coup and the breakdown of Chilean democracy. Papua New Guinea provides a further example of how plurality can have perverse effects in a polity fragmented

along ethnic and linguistic lines. Unlike ideology, ethnicity is not a matter of degree, and Papua New Guinea's switch to plurality for its parliamentary elections after 1975 led to a significant increase in electoral violence and further fragmentation, rather than consolidation, of its party system. For instance, in the 1997 parliamentary election, 62 of 107 seats in the legislature were won with less than 20 percent of the vote, and 15 of these were won with less than 10 percent.

**SEE ALSO:** Electoral College; Majority Rule; Two-Party System; Voting Methods; Winner-Take-All System.

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## Political Action Committee

A POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE (PAC) is an organization that raises and contributes money to, or spends money in support of, candidates or political parties. The term PAC does not appear in federal law; rather, these organizations are officially known as "separate and segregated funds" because money raised and spent must be kept separate from the general treasury of the sponsoring organization, such as a union or corporation.

Labor unions pioneered the use of PACs, but individual corporations, professional and trade groups (such as the American Medical Association or National Association of Manufacturers), and ideological or single-issue interest groups, such as the National Rifle Association, have formed PACs. Also, in recent years, members of Congress with party leadership aspirations have begun to raise and distribute money to assist their fellow partisans in election campaigns using so-called leadership PACs. Despite some public concerns about PACs, these organizations play an important role in financing congressional candidates.