

The United States: Majority or Consensus

Does the United States operate more by majority rule or by consensus and negotiation? Below are ten measures of democracies around the world. Read the description for the United States and put an "M" in the right column if it seems more like majority rule and a "C" if it seems more like consensus. Here are some definitions:

- A **majority system** gives power to the candidate or party that gets the most votes, even if the most is less than 50%. A majority system is exclusive in that it concentrates power. It is competitive, and adversarial.
- A **consensus system** accepts majority rule as better than minority rule but says this is only a minimum requirement. The goal is to maximize the size of the majority behind a decision. The consensus model is inclusive, in that it disperses power. It involves bargaining and compromise. It is sometimes termed negotiation democracy.

Measure	Description	M or C
Political Parties	In some democracies there are up to five viable parties that split the vote. In the U.S. we have almost always had two dominant political parties.	
Cabinets	The head of executive agencies like the State Department, Defense Department, the Department of Education comprise the "cabinet." In some democracies, 40% of the vote will get your party 40% of these positions. In the U.S., the President picks the cabinet, though the Senate must confirm the nominees.	
Executive-Legislative Balance of Power	In some democracies, a vote of "no confidence" by the legislative branch will trigger new elections. In the U.S., the President and the Cabinet serve for set four-year terms.	
Electoral Systems	In many European democracies, 40% of the vote gets you 40% of the representatives in the legislature or delegates to a convention. In the U.S. 40% of the vote in general election gets you nothing. But it can get you delegates at a during a primary election or caucus.	
Interest Groups	Some democracies have a few large interest groups (labor, business, farmers) that negotiate with each other and the government to set policy. In the U.S., there are countless interest groups that compete for power and influence.	
Centralization of Power	Some countries like Germany have a single, powerful federal government. The U.S. divides power between the federal, state, and local government. This is known as federalism.	
(more on the back)		

Houses of Congress	Other countries have one legislature or parliament. The U.S. divides legislative power between the House of Representatives and the Senate.	
Constitutions	Some governments can change their constitutions with a simple majority vote. In the U.S., changing the constitution takes a supermajority in Congress and of state legislatures.	
Judicial Review	Some legislatures get to decide on the constitutionality of the laws they pass. In the U.S. laws are subject to judicial review to determine their constitutionality.	
Central Banks	Central banks set monetary policy by controlling the money supply and interest rates. Some democracies allow the party in power to appoint the head of the bank. In the U.S., the chair of Federal Reserve (our Central Bank) serves independently from the President. When his or her term expires, the President can nominate a new chair. The Senate must approve of the choice.	

How many "M" and "Cs" do you have? Are some of these categories more important than others? Do you think the United States operates more by majority rule or by consensus? Why?