

European Political Systems

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Summary

Differing political systems in Europe were identified. Similarities and differences were considered such as formal structure, where power and authority actually lie, effectiveness of governance, democratic aspects and similar. Examples from outside Europe were also considered where relevant.

Generally the structures identified, although perhaps superficially similar, in practice worked in different ways, so that comparison between systems and evaluation of their effectiveness, for example in dealing with a pandemic, was all but impossible.

European political systems differ. As to whether one is better than another - the answer seems to be that it depends - circumstances, history, culture, characteristics of the people.

Political Structures

There are three types of Political Structures in Europe.

- The Unitary System (where power is concentrated in the centralised authority) is utilised in the UK, Brunei, Swaziland and the Vatican amongst others.
- The Federal System (where power is divided and a great deal of power is vested in the people) operates in Germany, the US, Mexico and others.
- The Confederated System, where power is decentralised and concentrated in the state and national governments. Proponents include Belgium, Switzerland, Russia and the EU.

Ceremonial Heads of State

Heads of State fulfil a non-partisan and unifying role in nationhood. Examples are **Queen Elizabeth II** of The United Kingdom, the **Kings** of the Netherlands (**Willem Alexander**), Belgium (**Philippe**) and Spain (**Felipe VI**). Where there are no crowned heads available, the role is filled by appointing a President, sometimes with more than ceremonial powers. Some Presidents have limited executive powers in times of national emergencies like in the case of **Federal President Steinmeier** of Federal Germany.

Executive Heads of Government

The actual powers of Executive Heads of government vary. In Russia, France and the USA (**Presidents Putin, Macron and Trump**) the Executive powers considerably exceed greatly those exercisable by **Prime Minister Boris Johnson** of the UK; whose powers have been recently curtailed by Parliament and the Supreme Court.

In Germany, **Chancellor Merkle** is able to exert considerable powers by virtue of the (currently) strong coalition between the CDU and the CSU and also due to her lengthy tenure in office.

Right to vote

Generally, citizens aged 18 or over are entitled to vote in local, provincial or county, national and European elections. In Scotland, the age was reduced to 16 in respect of Scottish local and devolved parliamentary elections. So there is little substantial difference in the right to vote; the major difference in respect of voting is in the electoral system where some form of PR is the norm in Europe and elsewhere, except for the UK.

Parliaments

In all forms of political structures members of parliament are voted in by the general plebiscite. In the Federal and Confederate structures there are normally parliaments in the constituent parts of a State. The powers of these regional parliaments are sometimes very extensive and, in some cases, inviolable by national parliaments. Even in the Unitary system in the UK, there are devolved parliaments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but not in England. In all instances these are national or federal or regional parliaments voted in by all eligible voters directly, thus providing a democratic basis.

The EU parliament of just over 700 MEPs from 27 countries is elected directly by voters in each member state by various systems of proportional representation based on drawn-up party lists where the number of first choice and secondary (transferable) votes determine how many of its candidates are sent to the European Parliament. The major debates are held in the Assembly in Strasbourg for a week once each month, while committee work and meetings with expert advisors and lobby groups mostly take place in Brussels where the European Commission is located. The EU parliaments consider and debate draft legislation proposed by the EU Commissioners, National parliaments and their own special interest groups.

European Commission

The EU is run by five main institutions: the European Council (provides political direction), the Council of the European Union (also known as the Council of Ministers), the European Parliament, the European Commission (oversees the proposals of legislation and functioning of the EU) and the Court of Justice. The Commission has law enforcement powers. EU laws override national laws.

Systems regarded as most effective

Germany and its Federal System is regarded as very powerful and its economy derives its strength from the large industrial regions. France's system is highly centralised around President Macron with regional parliaments only having minor influence. The first past the post system in the UK is sometimes thought to encourage polarity and to discourage co-operative action across the political divide.

How close is Government to the people

Opinions voiced considered both the **Swiss** and the **Italian** governments to be very much in touch with its people, while that of **Germany** is not considered to be close to the man in the street. In the **UK** the Prime Minister is largely regarded as having an overbearing influence and is apparently not listening to his constituents.