



Executive Power

Leaders of democratic governments govern with the consent of their citizens. Such leaders are powerful not because they command armies or economic wealth, but because they respect the limits placed on them by the electorate in a free and fair election.

➤ Through free elections, citizens of a democracy confer powers upon their leaders that are defined by law. In a constitutional democracy, power is divided so that the legislature makes the laws, the executive authority enforces and carries them out, and the judiciary operates independently.

➤ Democratic leaders are neither elected dictators nor “presidents-for-life.” They serve fixed terms in office and accept the results of free elections, even if it means losing control of the government.

➤ In constitutional democracies, executive authority is generally limited in three ways: by a system of checks and balances separating the national government’s executive, legislative, and judicial powers; by federalism, which divides power between the national government and the state/local governments; and by constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights.

➤ At the national level, the executive is limited by the constitutional authority vested in the legislative branch and by an independent judiciary.

➤ Executive authority in modern democracies is generally organized in one of two ways: as a parliamentary or a presidential system.

- In a parliamentary system, the majority party in the legislature forms the executive branch of the government, headed by a prime minister.

- In a parliamentary system, the legislative and executive branches are not entirely distinct from one another, since the prime minister and members of the cabinet are drawn from the parliament. In such systems, the political opposition serves as a chief means of limiting, or checking the authority of the executive.

- In a presidential system, the president is elected separately from the members of the legislature.

- In a presidential system, both the president and the legislature have their own power bases and political constituencies, which serve to check and balance each other.

➤ Democracies do not require their governments to be weak, only limited.

Consequently, democracies may be slow to reach agreement on national issues; yet when they do, their leaders can act with great authority and confidence.

➤ At all times, leaders in a constitutional democracy function within the rule of law that defines and restricts their authority.