Chapter Six Short Answer (Answers Below)

1. Explain the three core components of parliamentary government.

2. Explain the role of head of state within a parliamentary system in terms of continuity.

3. Explain the difference between 1) a coalition and 2) parties with confidence and supply agreements.

4. Explain why parliamentary legislatures are usually characterized by executive dominance.

5. Explain the primary factors that can reduce the likelihood of a majority government.

Answers

1. The three core components of parliamentary government are government by cabinet, responsible government, and collective responsibility. In the parliamentary system, executive power is held by a committee, the cabinet, which wields power collectively (led by the prime minister), and individually, through responsibility for ministerial portfolios. Responsible government demands that the cabinet must maintain the confidence of the house (i.e., a majority of support). Over time, the lower house became the site for the expression of such confidence, and members of the cabinet are generally drawn from it. Finally, cabinet is understood to be collectively responsible for decisions by the government, and members are expected to demonstrate solidarity (i.e., the cabinet as a whole stands or falls as a government).
2. The dual executive in a parliamentary system, divided between the formal head of state and the effective head of government, allows for a balance between democratic responsiveness and continuity of the state itself. While some heads of government (e.g., those with a majority) enjoy considerable stability during their term in power, others (e.g., those operating in a proportional electoral system with little hope of a majority) experience considerable volatility, moving in and out of both coalitions and government itself. Even in more stable cases, there are periods (such as those after parliament’s term ends, or in the run-up to an election) where effective leadership is fragile or in question. Although heads of state exercise a range of discretionary power (some exercise considerable choice of government, others face considerable constitutional constraint), they all present a stable “face” for the state; while governments come and go, the state, embodied in the head of state, abides. It is the durable legitimacy of the head of state that positions those holding the office to exercise a degree of discretion in the formation of government(s), provided that discretion is exercised within the limits imposed by constitutional and conventional limits.
3. In a coalition, member parties lay claim to seats in cabinet, direct control of aspects of policy formation, and consultation on larger government positions. Although members come from different parties, they are understood to constitute a single government. In contrast, parties that sign confidence and supply agreements restrict their support to those bills critical to sustaining the position of the governing party (financial and confidence motions). In return, the governing party agrees to adopt a limited number of policy initiatives from the supporting party. This allows smaller parties to retain some capacity for criticism of the government, while still permitting a greater degree of policy influence than what might otherwise be available. Equally, governments can count on a degree of legislative stability on key issues, without having to make the extensive compromises that characterize the formation of coalitions.
4. The emergence of strong parties, with the consequence that governments can rely on retaining the confidence of the legislature, places the bulk of real power in the hands of the cabinet. Policy-making and legislation, along with the exercise of executive power, are directed by the cabinet, and thus concentrated in a small number of hands. Although a formal division of powers exists, and can be compounded by other factors (such as the need for compromise and negotiation in a coalition), as long as cabinet members can rely on party discipline, they effectively wield the power of both the executive and legislature.
5. One factor is an increase in the diversity of interests. The broader the potential pool of interests, the harder it becomes for a single party to encompass them. This promotes the formation of new parties representing the emerging interests in society. While such new parties face institutional barriers under some electoral systems (such as the first past the post system), their existence does reduce the likelihood of a majority (since it is only in a two-party system that a majority is guaranteed). Proportional representation systems compound this process, in that they remove many of the institutional barriers to party formation and election and encourage the formation of party coalitions, rather than efforts to broker common cause within a single party.