

Elections, Representation and Parliament

Weekend 2 : Session 1

Elections, Representation and Parliaments

Topics for consideration

1. Keeping governments responsive
2. Representative assemblies
3. Parliamentary government
4. Parties and majority government
5. Coalition and minority government

1. Keeping governments responsive

- Key government office holders can be (and are) replaced at periodic elections

Also (and equally important)

- A constitutional framework which limits government activities
- Laws made only with the consent of a representative assembly
- Freedom of speech, assembly and association

2.1 Representative assemblies

What should an assembly represent?

- The range of views in the political community?
- A variety of interests in the political community?
- Support or opposition to the government?
- An expression of the public interest?
- The views of two or three political parties?
- All, some or none of the above?

2.2 Representative assemblies

What does a representative assembly do?

- The principal source of authority for making laws (the legislative process)
- The source of authority for the raising and spending of public funds
- A forum for inquiring into the activities of government
- A forum for the discussion of matters of public concern

3.1 Parliamentary government

*A preliminary question: What is 'the government' ?
(note the information in the Glossary)*

- All the agencies in the public sector?
- All the government departments and the public service?
- The most important elected officials such as the premier and ministers who meet in cabinet (the government of the day)?
- The lieutenant-governor?
- All or some of the above?

3.2 Parliamentary government

What is parliamentary government?

- Key government officers (premier and ministers) chosen from and accountable to the assembly
- A government stays in office (power) only if it has majority support in the assembly
- Elections for the assembly select both members and potential governments

3.3 Parliamentary government

Some consequences:

- The assembly can force a government to resign
- The assembly can support a government but reject or amend government legislation
- The parliamentary process generates an opposition and alternative government(s)
- Parliament tests leaders and those who aspire to leadership

3.4 Parliamentary government

An aside: Why is the premier such an important office in BC? And how is the premier chosen?

- The premier is the person asked by the lieutenant governor to form a government which can maintain majority support in the assembly
- The premier is the link between the political executive and the lieutenant governor (the head of state)
- The premier is head of government: if the premier resigns, so do all the ministers

3.5 Parliamentary government

Why 'responsible' government?

Because governments are subject to:

- Assembly majority for continuing existence
- Assembly authority for raising/spending funds
- Assembly authority for new/amended laws
- Questions and inquiries on government activities
- Debate/challenge on issues of public importance

4.1 Parties and majority government

Disciplined parties change the dynamics of a parliamentary system

- Governments is assured of assembly majority
- Government has a veto on legislation
- Voting in assembly is by party blocs
- Important discussion is in party room not the assembly
- Assembly business is controlled by government
- Scrutiny of government is greatly curtailed

4.2 Parties and majority government

In sum, the government dominates the legislative process

- The assembly's major function is reduced to airing matters of public concern
- The news media and the courts become more important for political opposition to the government

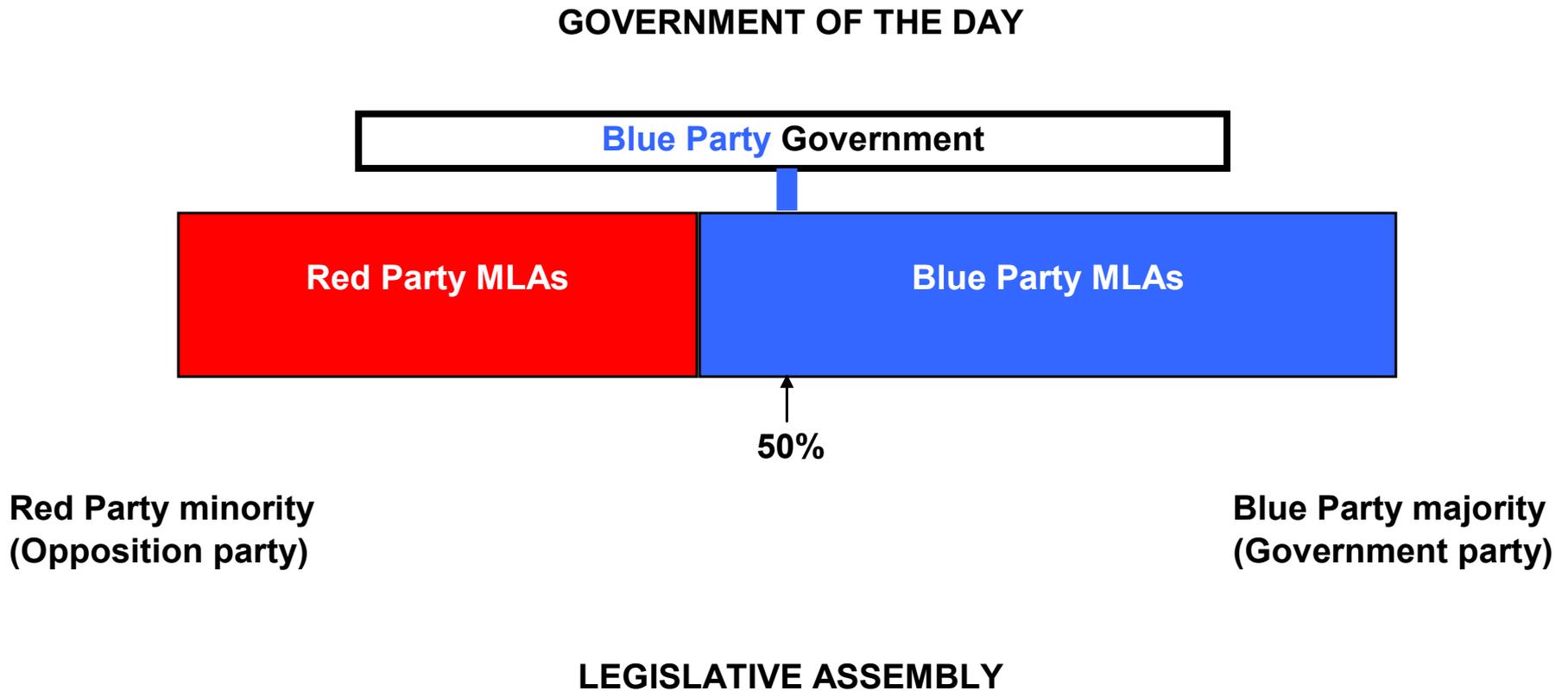
5.1 Coalition & minority government

But what about coalition and minority governments?

What are the differences between majority, coalition and minority governments?

Some diagrams may be useful

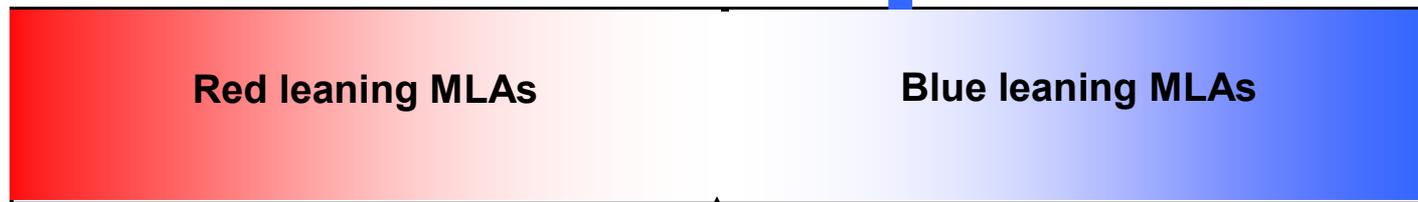
**1. Government and the legislature -- what we are used to today:
Two disciplined parties, one forming the government,
the other in opposition (majority government)**



2. Government and the legislature: no disciplined parties (government dependent on shifting coalitions)

GOVERNMENT OF THE DAY

Blue Government with variable support

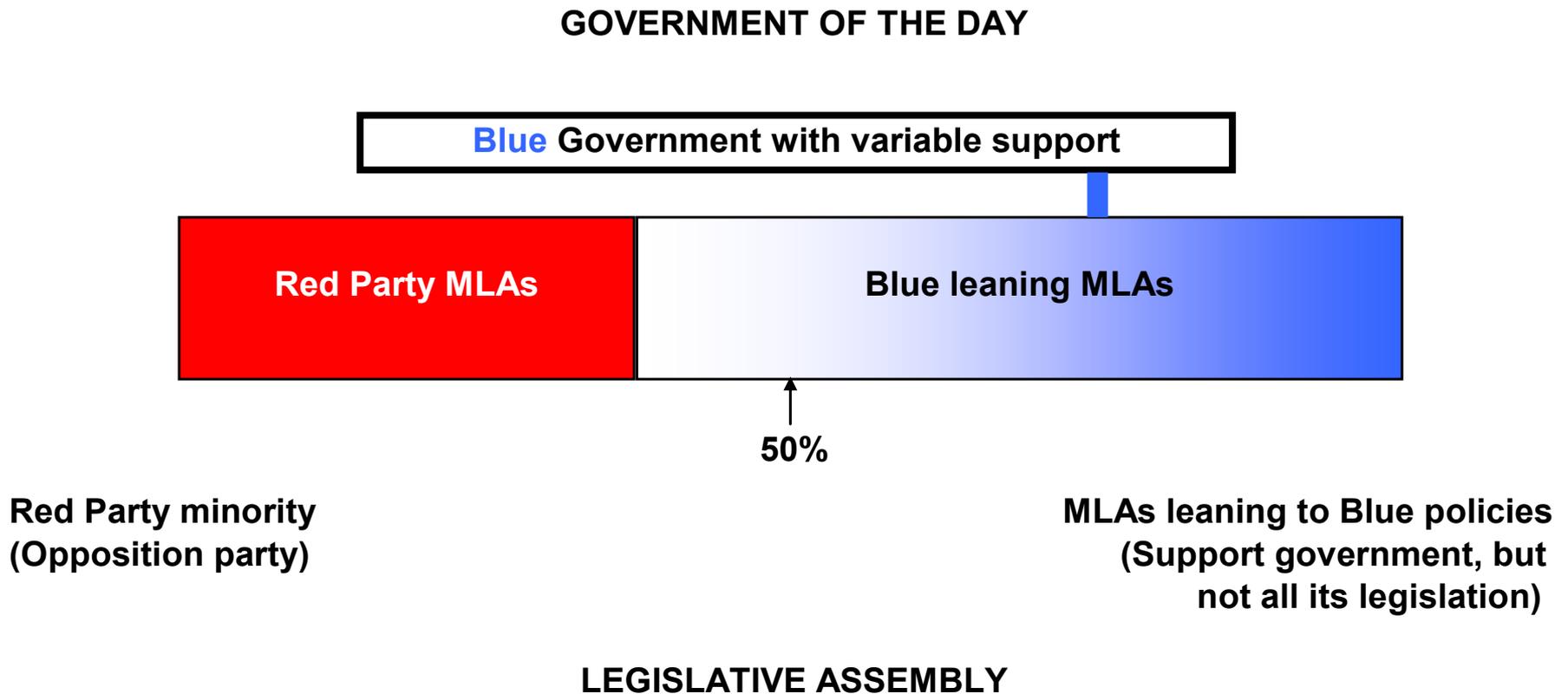


MLAs leaning to Red policies
(Generally oppose government)

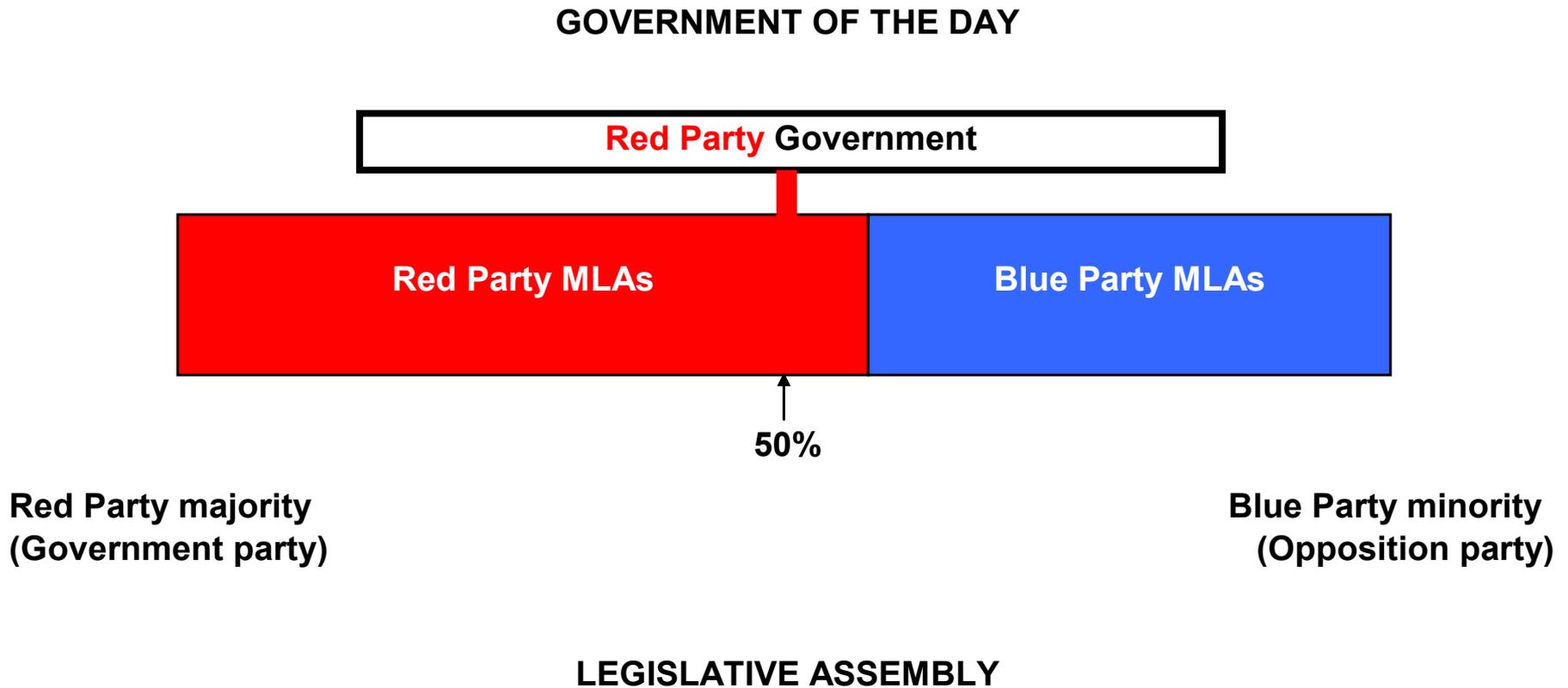
MLAs leaning to Blue policies
(Support government, but
not all its legislation)

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

3. Government and the legislature: one disciplined party with other MLAs forming a loose association to support the government (fragile majority government)



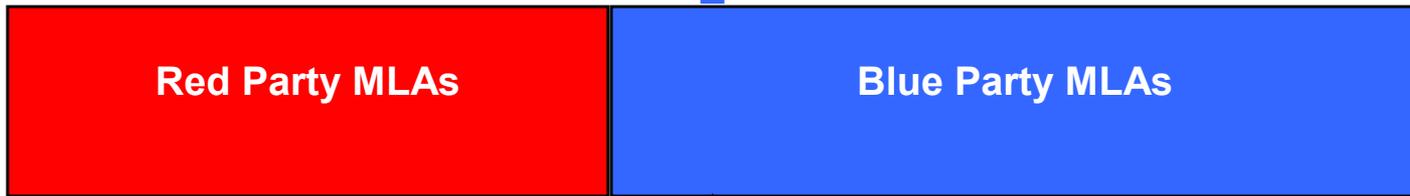
4. **Government and the legislature: Two disciplined parties taking turns to form government and opposition (Red party majority government)**



5. Government and the legislature: Two disciplined parties taking turns to form government and opposition (Blue party majority government)

GOVERNMENT OF THE DAY

Blue Party Government



50%

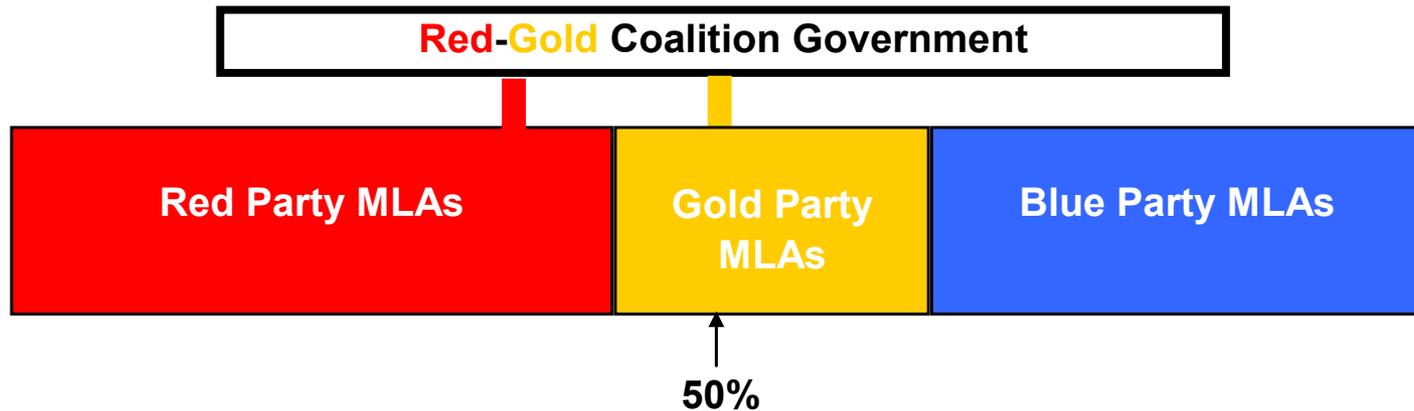
Red Party minority
(Opposition party)

Blue Party majority
(Government party)

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

6. Government and the legislature: three disciplined parties, two joining in a coalition, the other in opposition (Red-Gold coalition government)

GOVERNMENT OF THE DAY



**Red and Gold parties with coalition majority
(Both parties are government parties and both parties have ministers in government)**

**Blue Party minority
(Opposition party)**

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

7. Government and the legislature: three disciplined parties, one forming a minority government, one in opposition, and one holding the balance of power (Blue party minority government)

GOVERNMENT OF THE DAY

Blue Party Minority Government



50%

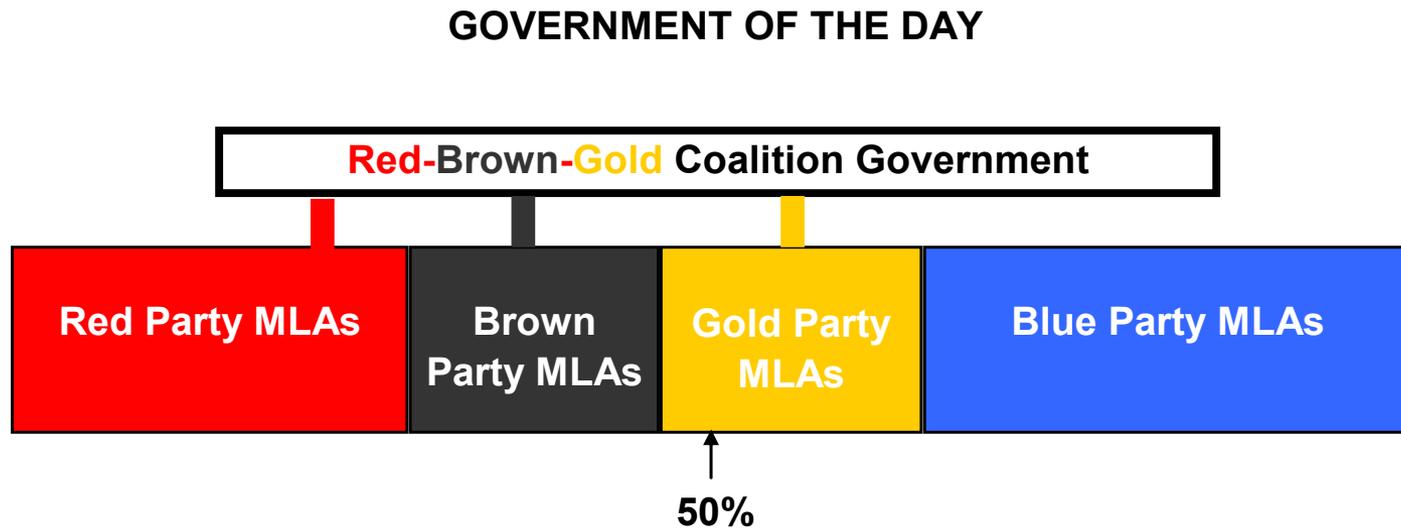
Red Party minority
(Opposition party)

Gold Party holds balance
Supports government (But does not
join government or support all legislation)

Blue party minority
(Government party)

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

8. Government and the legislature: four disciplined parties, three joining in a coalition government, one in opposition (Red-Brown-Gold coalition government)



Red, Brown, and Gold parties with coalition majority
(All parties are government parties and all parties have ministers in government)

Blue Party minority
(Opposition party)

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

5.2 Coalition & minority government

A coalition government with a majority may not differ much from a majority government except:

- The coalition parties may have to compromise in the formation of policy
- The opposition will seek to exploit difference between the coalition parties
- There is the possibility that the coalition will collapse and the government fall
- Tensions between coalition parties may affect electoral campaigning

5.3 Coalition & minority government

Minority government is different from a coalition:

- The government does not control a majority of seats in the assembly
- The governing party relies on the support of another party to stay in government
- The supporting party does not share in government (it has no ministers) but trades support for influence on government policies

5.4 Coalition & minority government

Minority government makes major differences to the parliamentary process:

- The business of the assembly is not controlled by the governing party
- Discussion over policy can now takes place in the assembly
- Changes to legislation can be made without the consent of the government

5.5 Coalition & minority government

And minority government affects how governments behave:

- The assembly can scrutinize government effectively
- Ministers can be forced to resign by the assembly
- The assembly can force an election on a government
- It is difficult for governments to act without compromise
- Action on unpopular policies may be precluded
- More lobbying of assembly members

5.6 Coalition & minority government

Minority governments make parliament a major check on the government

This has major benefits in terms of government accountability and transparency

Some would see costs in terms of policy uncertainty and the ability of governments to make unpopular decisions in the public interest

5.7 Coalition & minority government

Any electoral system can produce majority, coalition and minority governments but:

- Plurality and majority systems are more likely to produce majority governments
- Proportional systems are more likely to produce coalition and minority governments

Elections, Representation and Parliament

Questions for consideration:

- What should assemblies represent?
- What role can assemblies play?
- How does parliamentary government work?
- What are the costs and benefits of coalition and minority governments?