

Unit 4: Party and Electoral Systems and Citizen Organizations

Unit 4 explains how the six course countries turn votes into power. It covers electoral systems and the goals behind their rules, the party systems that organize competition in each country, what political parties actually do, how social movements and interest groups press demands on government, and the difference between pluralist and corporatist interest representation.

AP Comparative Government and Politics

Party and Electoral Systems and Citizen Organizations

About 13 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read it in order the first time because the topics build on each other. Electoral systems shape party systems, party systems shape what parties can do, and the last two topics show how citizens and organized interests act outside parties. Exam questions usually name a country and ask you to identify its system, or they describe a rule and ask what the rule is designed to do.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the tables to review the distinctions that exam questions test most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Party and Electoral Systems and Citizen Organizations is 13 to 18 percent of the AP Comparative Government and Politics exam. The electoral systems table in topic 4.1 is the single most-tested piece of content in the unit. Learn which country uses which system before you learn anything else here.

4.1 Electoral Systems and Rules

An **electoral system** is the set of rules that turns votes into seats or offices. The course tests five types, and each one is attached to specific countries. Learn the definitions first, then the country table on the next page.

First-past-the-post (FPTP), also called **plurality**, means the candidate with the most votes in a single-member district wins, and no majority is required. A candidate can win a seat with 35 percent of the vote if the other candidates split the rest. FPTP is simple and tends to favor large parties, which is why it usually produces legislatures where seat shares do not match vote shares. The UK elects its 650 members of the House of Commons this way, one per constituency. Nigeria uses FPTP for both chambers of its National Assembly, the 109-seat Senate and the 360-seat House of Representatives.

Proportional representation (PR) allocates seats in proportion to votes, usually through party lists. A party that wins 30 percent of the vote gets roughly 30 percent of the seats. PR matches votes to seats more accurately than FPTP, and because smaller parties can win seats, it tends to produce multi-party legislatures. In this course PR never appears alone. It appears as one component of the mixed systems in Mexico and Russia.

Trap. FPTP asks who got the most votes in each district. PR asks what share of the vote each party got overall. Do not call a system PR just because many parties compete. The UK has several parties in Parliament but uses FPTP, and Nigeria has multiple parties but uses FPTP in both chambers.

Mixed systems combine both methods. Some seats are filled by FPTP in single-member districts and others by PR, usually from party lists. Mexico and Russia both use this type, and the details differ enough that the exam tests them separately. Mexico's Chamber of Deputies elects 300 members by FPTP and 200 by PR, and its Senate elects 96 by plurality and 32 by PR. Russia's State Duma elects 225 deputies by FPTP and 225 by PR on closed party lists, with a 5 percent national threshold for the PR seats.

A **two-round system** requires a majority to win. If no candidate gets one in the first round, the top candidates face each other in a runoff. Iran uses the two-round system for both its legislature, the 290-member Majles, and its presidency. Two-round systems add a legitimacy step that FPTP skips, since the eventual winner must command a majority.

Non-competitive elections are the last category. In China, candidates rise through the party hierarchy and there is no opposition, so elections ratify decisions the party has already made rather than choosing between alternatives. The National People's Congress is constitutionally the highest state organ of power, but in practice it ratifies Chinese Communist Party decisions.

The Electoral Systems Table

This is the table to memorize. Every row pairs a country with its system and the details the exam expects you to know.

COUNTRY	SYSTEM	DETAILS
United Kingdom	FPTP	650 members of the House of Commons, elected in single-member constituencies, terms up to 5 years.
Nigeria	FPTP	Senate (109 senators, 3 per state plus 1 for the Federal Capital Territory) and House of Representatives (360 members, 4-year terms), all in single-member constituencies. The president needs a plurality plus at least 25 percent of the vote in two-thirds of the states.
Mexico	Mixed parallel	Chamber of Deputies: 300 elected by FPTP and 200 by PR (3-year terms). Senate: 96 elected by plurality and 32 by PR (6-year terms).
Russia	Mixed parallel	State Duma: 450 deputies with 5-year terms, 225 elected by FPTP and 225 by PR on closed party lists with a 5 percent national threshold.
Iran	Two-round	The 290-member Majles (4-year terms) and the president (4-year terms) are both chosen through two-round elections. Every candidate must be vetted by the Guardian Council.
China	Non-competitive	Candidates rise through the party hierarchy. There is no opposition, and elections do not offer voters a real choice between alternatives.

Trap. The most common mistake in this unit is swapping Mexico and Russia. Mexico is 300 FPTP plus 200 PR in the Chamber of Deputies, with 3-year terms. Russia is 225 plus 225 in the State Duma, with 5-year terms and a 5 percent threshold on the PR lists. Different ratios, different chambers, different terms, and only Russia has the threshold. Drill the pair until you cannot mix them up.

Trap. China does not have a competitive electoral system to classify. When a question asks which system China uses, the answer is non-competitive, not FPTP or PR. The party hierarchy, not the ballot, decides who holds office.

4.2 Objectives of Election Rules

Electoral rules are designed with goals in mind, and the course tests whether you can match a rule to its goal. Three goals cover almost every question.

Representation means seats mirror votes and diverse groups get a voice. PR serves this goal best, because a party with 20 percent of the vote gets roughly 20 percent of the seats instead of being shut out of every district. **Governability** means the rules produce clear winners and workable majorities so government can actually govern. FPTP serves this goal, because it tends to concentrate seats in the largest parties, and the two-round system serves it by guaranteeing the winner a majority. **Stability** means outcomes are predictable and fragmentation is limited. Thresholds serve this goal by keeping tiny parties out of the legislature. Russia's 5 percent threshold for its Duma PR seats is the course's clearest example.

No system maximizes all three at once. Every rule trades one goal against another, which is why exam questions often ask what a rule sacrifices as well as what it achieves. PR buys representation at the cost of governability, since more parties in the legislature can mean harder coalition-building. FPTP buys governability at the cost of representation, since a party can win a majority of seats with well under a majority of votes.

Why Mexico and Russia Chose Mixed Systems

Mixed systems are a deliberate compromise between representation and governability. The single-member seats keep a direct link between a representative and a district, which voters understand and which tends to produce clear winners. The PR seats give a voice to parties whose support is spread too thin to win districts outright. The PR component adds fairness for smaller or regionally dispersed parties without giving up the decisiveness of district races. In Mexico, the 200 PR deputies and 32 PR senators do this work. In Russia, the 225 closed-list Duma seats do it, and the 5 percent threshold keeps the legislature from fragmenting into tiny parties, which is the stability goal doing its part of the compromise.

Trap. When a question asks what the PR component adds to a mixed system, the answer is about representation of parties that cannot win districts, not about making the system simpler. Mixed systems are more complex than pure FPTP. The added complexity is the price of the added fairness.

Nigeria's 25 Percent Rule

Nigeria adds a rule on top of FPTP for its presidency. A candidate needs a plurality of the national vote *and* at least 25 percent of the vote in two-thirds of the states. The purpose is geographic spread. Nigeria is divided along regional and religious lines, with the Hausa-Fulani concentrated in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest, and the Igbo in the southeast. Without the rule, a candidate could win by running up huge margins in one region while being unknown everywhere else. The rule forces the winner to build support across the country's regions, which serves the representation goal in a divided society. Exam questions about this rule are really asking whether you understand that electoral rules can be designed for national unity, not just for picking a winner.

Malapportionment and Gerrymandering

Malapportionment means districts have unequal populations, so some votes count more than others. If one district has 50,000 people and another has 200,000, each voter in the smaller district has four times the influence. **Gerrymandering** means drawing district boundaries to favor one party, packing its opponents into a few districts or cracking them across many. Both are ways district-based systems can distort representation.

Trap. Unequal people is malapportionment. Rigged lines are gerrymandering. A map can be fairly drawn and still malapportioned if populations have shifted since the last redistricting, and a map can have equal populations and still be gerrymandered. Keep the cause separate from the effect.

4.3 Political Party Systems

A **party system** is the pattern of competition among parties in a country. The course tests four types across the six countries, and the exam expects the country match, not just the definitions.

TYPE	COUNTRIES	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
One-party	China	The Chinese Communist Party. Elections are non-competitive and there is no opposition.
Dominant-party	Russia	United Russia dominates. Other parties exist, but genuine opposition is marginalized.
Multi-party	UK, Mexico, Nigeria	UK: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, SNP. Mexico: Morena, PAN, PRI, MC, PVEM, PT. Nigeria: APC and PDP long dominant, with the Labour Party becoming significant in the 2023 elections.
Factions, not parties	Iran	Principlists vs. reformists. There are no formal Western-style parties.

Electoral systems and party systems connect. FPTP tends to push competition toward two large parties over time, because small parties keep losing districts and their supporters drift to parties that can win. The UK is the closest fit among the six, with Conservative and Labour as the main competitors. PR lets more parties win seats, which is one reason mixed systems like Mexico's and Russia's sustain several parties. This link is worth knowing because the exam asks how a rule in 4.1 produces an outcome in 4.3.

Trap. Dominant-party is not one-party. In Russia, opposition parties exist and appear on ballots, but genuine opposition is marginalized, which is why United Russia keeps winning. In China, there is no opposition at all. If the question says opposition parties exist but cannot really compete, that is dominant-party. If it says no opposition exists, that is one-party.

Trap. Iran does not have a party system in the Western sense. Principlists and reformists are factions, which are informal groupings, not registered parties with platforms and memberships. Every candidate for president, the Majles, and the Assembly of Experts must also be vetted by the Guardian Council, so competition happens inside limits the regime sets.

4.4 Role of Political Party Systems

Parties do four jobs that the exam tests by name. They **mobilize** voters, turning supporters out on election day. They **recruit** candidates, deciding who runs under the party label. They **aggregate interests**, folding many separate demands into a platform a voter can choose. And they provide **accountability**, because voters can throw them out.

In the three democracies, competition is real and parties can lose. The course's clearest accountability example is Mexico in 2000, when the PRI lost the presidency for the first time, ending decades of one-party dominance. Voters used an election to remove a party that had ruled for generations. The UK and Nigeria work the same way in principle, with parties competing and governments changing through elections.

The contrast cases show what happens when those jobs are missing or distorted. In China, there is one party and no opposition, so accountability flows upward inside the party hierarchy instead of through voters choosing between parties. In Iran, factions organize informally rather than as parties, and the Guardian Council vets every candidate, so voters choose only among candidates the regime has already approved. Accountability to voters is limited in both systems, but for different reasons, and the exam tests whether you can say which reason belongs to which country.

4.5 Impact of Social Movements and Interest Groups

A **social movement** is a broad, loosely organized collective effort, often outside formal politics, to change policy or society. An **interest group** is an organized group that presses specific demands on the government. Movements tend to be wider and less formal. Interest groups tend to be narrower and more organized. The line between them can blur, since a movement can grow into an organized group over time.

The course cases show what sustained citizen pressure can produce. Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999, ending military government, after years of pro-democracy pressure. Iran's current theocratic system was established in 1979, a revolution-driven regime change. Mexico's 2000 opposition victory ended PRI dominance through voter mobilization. The mechanism is the same in each case. Movements change politics by mobilizing people outside the party system, which is exactly why authoritarian systems work hard to control them.

Trap. A social movement is not just an interest group with a bigger budget. The distinction the exam tests is organization and scope. Movements are broad and loosely organized. Interest groups are organized around specific demands. When a question describes the actor, match the description to the definition instead of guessing from the cause.

4.6 Pluralist and Corporatist Interests

Pluralism means many independent groups compete to influence government, and the state acts as a referee. Business associations, unions, and advocacy groups all lobby, and no single group is guaranteed a seat at the table. The UK is the course's standard example.

Corporatism means the state organizes interest representation itself. The government recognizes a limited set of groups, such as labor federations and business associations, and brings them directly into policymaking, often licensing or controlling them. Mexico under PRI dominance is the course's key historical case. During the decades of one-party rule, major interests were organized into state-linked structures that channeled demands upward while keeping them under party control. China practices state corporatism today. The party-state decides which groups may exist and represent interests, and no independent groups operate outside party control.

Trap. Pluralism means many groups competing with the state refereeing. Corporatism means the state organizing and channeling the groups. The test is simple. If the state picks the players, it is corporatism. The UK is the pluralist example. Mexico under the PRI and China today are the corporatist examples.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
FPTP vs PR vs mixed	Check the country table in 4.1. The UK and Nigeria are FPTP, Mexico and Russia are mixed parallel, Iran is two-round, and China is non-competitive.
Mexico's mixed vs Russia's mixed	Mexico: 300 FPTP plus 200 PR in the Chamber of Deputies. Russia: 225 plus 225 in the State Duma, with a 5 percent threshold on the PR lists.
Dominant-party vs one-party	Russia: opposition parties exist but genuine opposition is marginalized. China: no opposition exists at all.
Iran's factions vs real parties	Principlists and reformists are informal factions, not Western-style parties, and the Guardian Council vets every candidate.
Pluralism vs corporatism	Pluralism: many competing groups, state referees (UK). Corporatism: state organizes and channels groups (Mexico under the PRI, China today).
Malapportionment vs gerrymandering	Malapportionment: districts with unequal populations. Gerrymandering: district boundaries drawn to favor a party.
Representation vs governability	Representation: seats mirror votes (PR serves it). Governability: clear winners and workable majorities (FPTP and two-round serve it). Mixed systems trade between them.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

1. Which country elects its lower house using a mixed parallel system of 300 single-member seats and 200 proportional representation seats?

1. Mexico
2. Russia
3. Nigeria
4. United Kingdom

2. Which statement about Russia's electoral system is accurate?

1. The State Duma uses first-past-the-post in all 450 seats.
2. The 5 percent threshold applies to Mexico's Chamber of Deputies.
3. The Duma elects 300 members by FPTP and 200 by proportional representation.
4. The Duma's 225 PR seats are filled from closed party lists with a 5 percent national threshold.

3. In which country are both the president and the legislature elected through a two-round system?

1. Mexico
2. Russia
3. Iran
4. China

4. Nigeria's rule that a presidential winner needs a plurality plus at least 25 percent of the vote in two-thirds of the states is mainly designed to

1. force candidates to build support across the country's regions
2. guarantee the winning candidate a majority in the National Assembly
3. produce proportional representation in the National Assembly
4. prevent any president from serving more than one term

5. Which pairing of country and party system is correct?

1. China: dominant-party system; Russia: one-party system
2. Russia: dominant-party system; China: one-party system
3. Mexico: one-party system; Iran: dominant-party system
4. Nigeria: one-party system; United Kingdom: dominant-party system

6. The United Kingdom is the course's standard example of pluralism because

1. the government licenses one official union and one business association to speak for each sector
2. many independent groups compete to influence policy while the state acts as referee
3. political parties are banned and factions organize all political competition
4. the state sets economic policy through corporatist bargaining with peak associations

7. Which statement about Iran is accurate?

1. Iran has a dominant-party system led by a single ruling party.
2. Iranian parties compete freely with no restrictions on who may run.
3. Competition runs through factions such as principlists and reformists, and the Guardian Council vets all candidates.
4. Iran elects the Majles using first-past-the-post in single-member districts.

8. After years of fragmented legislatures and short-lived coalitions, a country adds an electoral threshold for its proportional representation seats. The threshold is mainly designed to

1. increase the number of small parties winning seats
2. improve the match between each party's vote share and seat share
3. increase descriptive representation of minority groups
4. reduce fragmentation and make stable majorities more likely

Answer Key

- 1. A.** Mexico's Chamber of Deputies uses 300 FPTP seats plus 200 PR seats. B is the Mexico-Russia swap: Russia's Duma is 225 plus 225. C is wrong because Nigeria uses FPTP for both chambers, with no PR component. D is wrong because the UK uses FPTP in 650 single-member constituencies, with no PR component.
- 2. D.** Russia's Duma fills its 225 PR seats from closed party lists subject to a 5 percent national threshold. A is wrong because the Duma is mixed parallel, 225 FPTP plus 225 PR, not all FPTP. B moves Russia's threshold onto Mexico, which has no such threshold in this course. C gives Mexico's 300/200 split to Russia; the ratios are the giveaway.
- 3. C.** Iran uses the two-round system for both the 290-member Majles and the presidency. A is wrong because Mexico uses a mixed parallel system. B is wrong because Russia uses a mixed parallel system. D is wrong because China's elections are non-competitive, with candidates rising through the party hierarchy and no opposition.
- 4. A.** The rule forces a winning candidate to earn support beyond one home region, which matters in a country divided along regional and religious lines among the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo. B is wrong because legislative majorities come from separate FPTP elections to the National Assembly, not from the presidential rule. C is wrong because Nigeria uses FPTP, not proportional representation. D is wrong because the two-term limit is a separate rule; the 25 percent requirement is about geographic spread, not term limits.
- 5. B.** Russia is the dominant-party case: United Russia dominates while genuine opposition is marginalized. China is the one-party case: the CCP faces no opposition. A reverses them, which is the trap this question tests. C is wrong on both halves: Mexico is multi-party and Iran has factions, not parties. D is wrong on both halves: Nigeria is multi-party and the UK is multi-party.
- 6. B.** Pluralism means many independent groups compete to influence government while the state referees, and the UK is the course's standard example. A describes corporatism, where the state licenses official groups. C describes Iran, where factions rather than parties organize politics and the Guardian Council vets candidates. D describes corporatist bargaining, which belongs to Mexico under PRI dominance or China today, not to the UK.
- 7. C.** Iran's politics run through factions, principlists vs. reformists, rather than formal Western-style parties, and the Guardian Council vets all candidates for president, the Majles, and the Assembly of Experts. A is wrong because the dominant-party case is Russia, not Iran. B is wrong because Guardian Council vetting restricts who may run. D is wrong because Iran uses the two-round system, not FPTP.
- 8. D.** A threshold keeps tiny parties out of the legislature, which reduces fragmentation and serves the stability and governability goals. A states the opposite of what a threshold does. B is wrong because a threshold slightly reduces proportionality rather than improving it. C is wrong because descriptive representation is unrelated to thresholds; nothing in a threshold rule targets minority inclusion.

When you check your answers, note which distinction each miss came from. Make a flashcard for that distinction and drill it spaced out over the next few days instead of rereading the whole section. If you missed one of these questions, the same distinction is worth practicing again in Rycal, where the AP Comparative Government and Politics deck has flashcards for it and more practice questions use the same kinds of traps.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud before you look back, and mark the ones you cannot finish. Anything you cannot say out loud yet belongs in your flashcard deck. In Rycal, add those items to the AP Comparative Government and Politics deck and let spaced review bring them back over the next few days.

- Define first-past-the-post and name the two course countries that use it for their legislatures.
- Explain how proportional representation allocates seats and why it tends to produce more parties.
- Describe the two-round system and name the country that uses it for both its legislature and its presidency.
- Reproduce the electoral system of each of the six countries from memory, with the seat details.
- Contrast Mexico's mixed system with Russia's mixed system, giving the ratios and the threshold.
- Explain the three objectives of election rules and give one rule that serves each.
- Explain what the PR component adds in Mexico's and Russia's mixed systems.
- Define malapportionment and gerrymandering and tell them apart.
- Classify each country's party system and explain the dominant-party vs. one-party distinction.
- List the four jobs parties do: mobilize, recruit, aggregate interests, provide accountability.
- Explain why Iran has factions rather than parties and what the Guardian Council does to candidates.
- Define social movements and interest groups and give one course-country example of citizen pressure changing outcomes.
- Define pluralism and corporatism and name the course example of each.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP Comparative Government and Politics deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

First-past-the-post (plurality), Proportional representation (PR), Mixed parallel system, Two-round system, Non-competitive elections, Representation, Governability, Stability, Electoral threshold, Malapportionment, Gerrymandering, One-party system, Dominant-party system, Multi-party system, Factions, Interest aggregation, Accountability, Social movement, Interest group, Pluralism, Corporatism.

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