Two Types of Democracy

Most democracies fall into one of two types, parliamentary or presidential. The primary difference between them is how each type organizes the three main branches of government: the legislative branch that makes the laws, the executive branch that carries out the laws, and the judicial branch (courts) which interprets the laws.

Parliamentary Democracy

The most common form of democracy in the world is parliamentary democracy. In a parliamentary democracy, all three branches of government answer to the same body: the parliament. In fact, the executive branch and legislative branch are both part of the parliament. The leader of the government holds the title of prime minister.

Citizens do not vote directly for the prime minister. Instead they vote to elect their local representative or “member of parliament.” Once parliament is in session, the members then elect a prime minister to lead the government. The prime minister chooses other parliament members to become part of the cabinet or executive branch of the government. The prime minister also appoints judges to the judicial branch, or court system.

The prime minister and cabinet are part of the parliament, so they answer directly to the legislature. This means that they stay in power as long as the legislature supports them. As such, the prime minister does not have a set “term of office.” The prime minister and cabinet can be removed from power at any time through a “no confidence vote” of the parliament. When this happens, elections are held right away to choose new members of parliament who will elect a new prime minister and cabinet.

Since the entire government is controlled by one body (the parliament), one political party usually has all of the power in a parliamentary democracy.

In addition to having a prime minister, most parliamentary democracies also have a ceremonial “head of state” who may hold the title “president” or may be a powerless monarch. This person presides over formal functions but has no authority.

Presidential Democracy

In a presidential democracy, the three branches of government are independent of one another and have separate powers. The leader of the government holds the title of president and is in charge of the executive branch. The legislative branch is usually called the congress.

Citizens vote directly to elect the president and also vote to elect local representatives to the congress. Judges of the judicial branch are appointed by the president and confirmed by the congress.

Each branch of government in a presidential democracy has limited powers to affect the other two branches. This is often called checks and balances.

Each member of the government serves for a certain number of years or “term of office” at which time the citizens vote to re-elect the official, or choose someone else. It is possible for an elected official to be removed from office before their term is up, but only possible if they commit a serious crime.

Since the congress and the president are elected separately, more than one political party may hold power in a presidential democracy.

In this system the president is both the head of the government and the head of state.
Comparing & Contrasting Two Types of Democracy

Complete this Venn diagram using the information you learned in your reading.
Two Types of Democracy

1. Legislative Branch -

2. Executive Branch -

3. Judicial Branch -

Parliamentary Democracy

4. In a Parliamentary ________________________, all ________________________ branches of ______________________________ answer to the same body: the ________________________.

5. What is the leader of the government called? ______________________________________

6. Do citizens vote directly for the Prime Minister? ____________________________________

7. How is the Prime Minister elected? ________________________________________________

8. Does the Prime Minister have a set “term of office”? _________________________________

9. Since the entire _________________________ is controlled by __________________ body (the _________________________), one _________________________ party usually has all of the _________________________ in a Parliamentary ______________________________.

10. What type of leader other than the Prime Minister does a Parliamentary Democracy have? ____________________________________________________________________________

11. What is the role of the “head of state” or the “president” in a Parliamentary Democracy? ____________________________________________________________________________

Presidential Democracy

12. In a Presidential Democracy, the ______________________ branches of government are ______________________ of one another and have ______________________ powers.

13. Who is the leader of a Presidential Democracy? _____________________________________
14. What branch of government is the president in charge of? ___________________________

15. What is the legislative branch called in a Presidential Democracy? __________________

16. Do citizens directly elect the president? ________________________________

17. Each branch of government in a ___________________________ Democracy has 
_______________________ power to affect the other __________________ branches. This is 
called __________________________ and ___________________________.

18. Are there set “terms of office” in a Presidential Democracy? __________________

19. Since the __________________________ and the __________________________ are 
elected separately, more than one __________________________ party may hold 
____________________ in a __________________________ Democracy.

20. In this system the __________________________ is both the head of the 
_________________________ and the head of __________________________.