

# 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

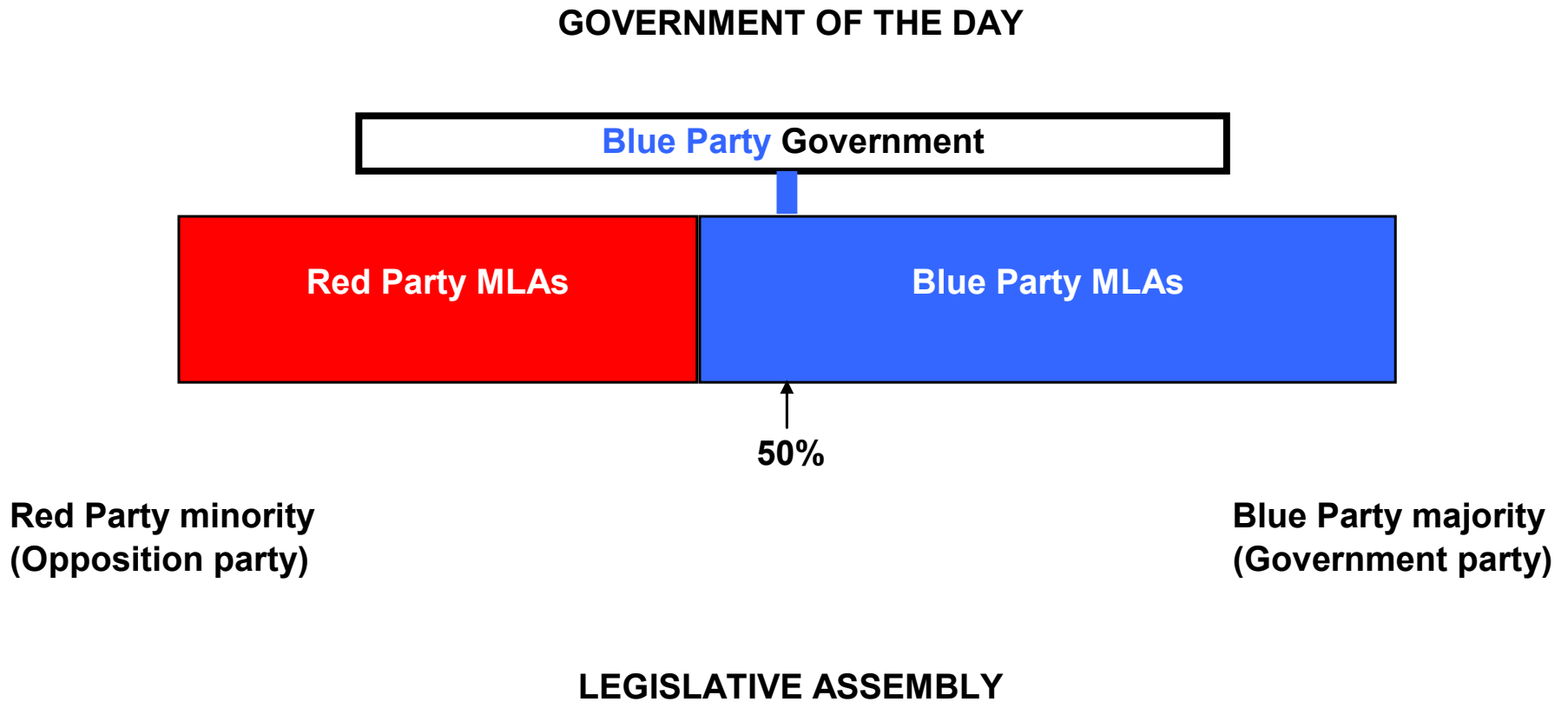
# 5.1 Coalition & minority government

*But what about coalition and minority governments?*

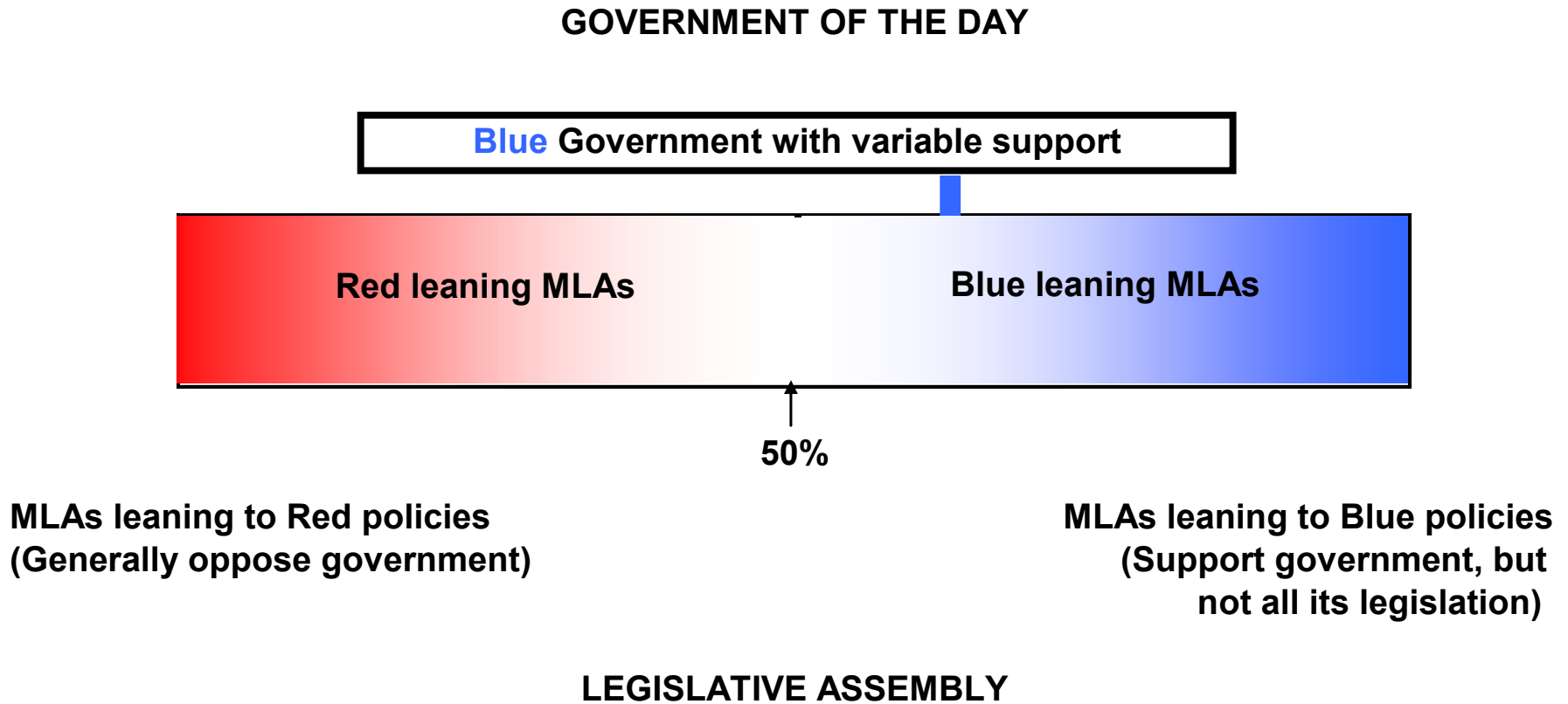
*What are the differences between majority, coalition and minority governments?*

*Some diagrams may be useful*

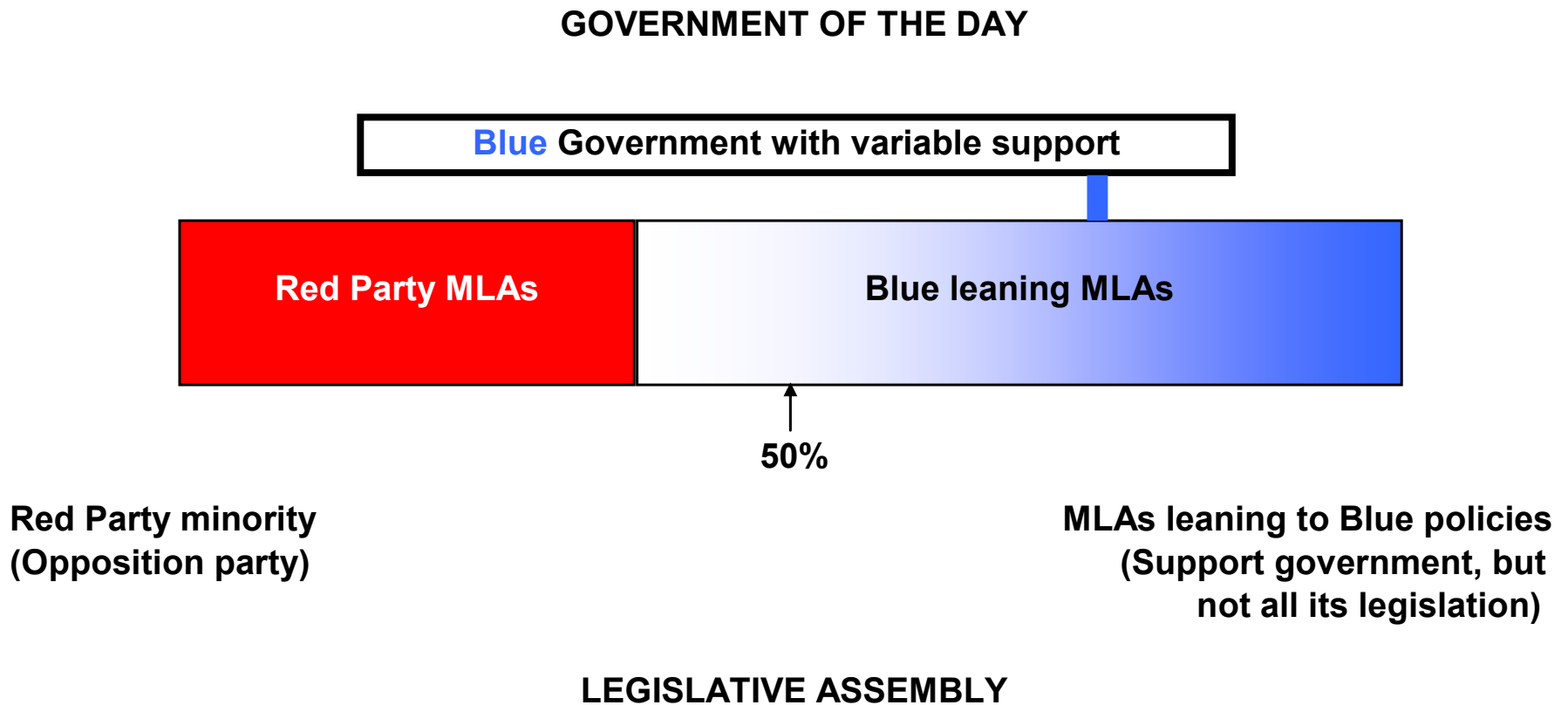
**1. Government and the legislature -- what we are used to today:  
Two disciplined parties, one forming the government,  
the other in opposition (majority government)**



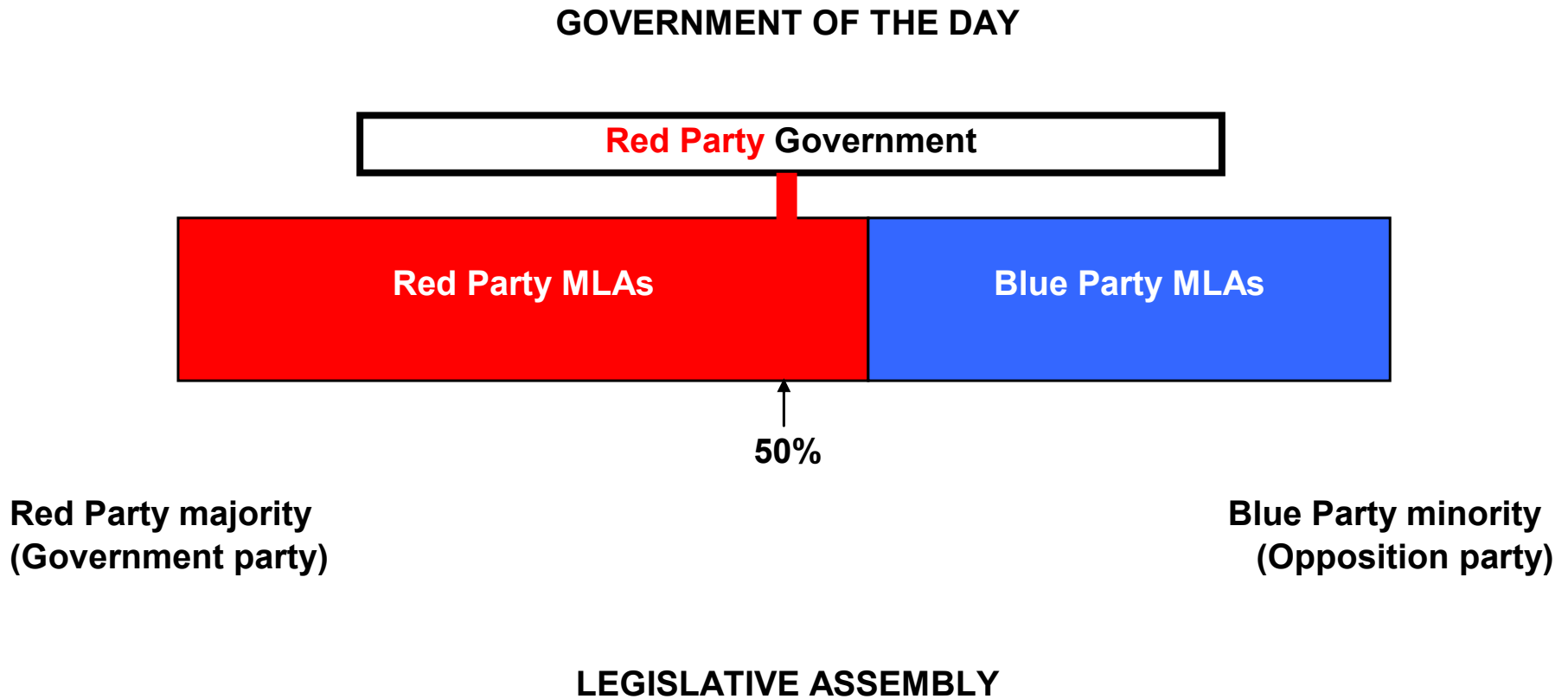
## 2. Government and the legislature: no disciplined parties (government dependent on shifting coalitions)



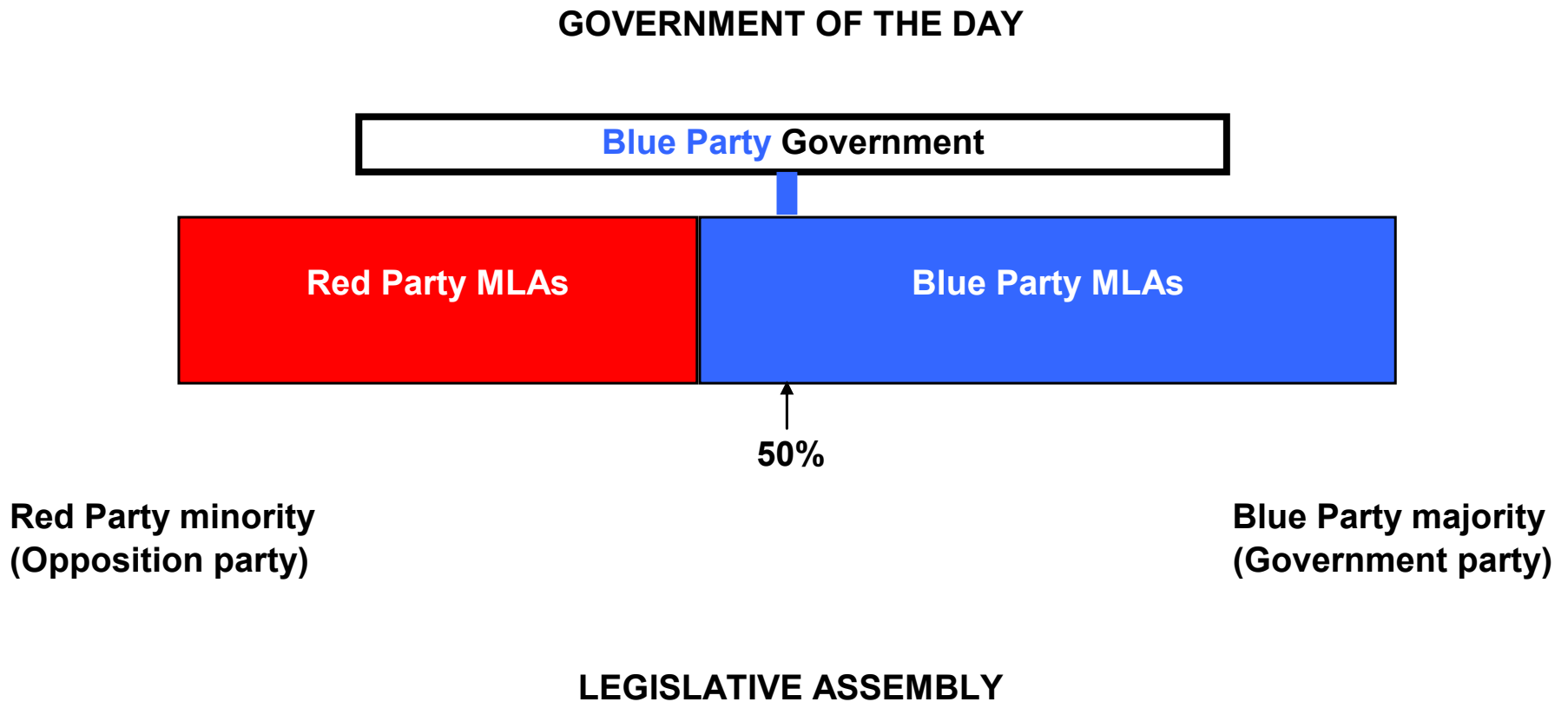
### 3. Government and the legislature: one disciplined party with other MLAs forming a loose association to support the government (fragile majority government)



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

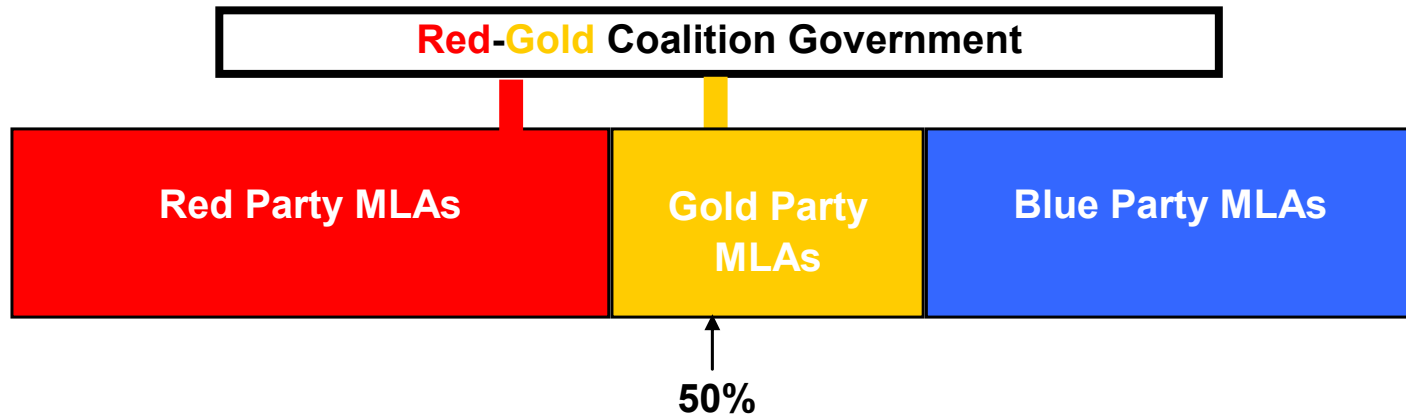


## 5. Government and the legislature: Two disciplined parties taking turns to form government and opposition (Blue party majority government)



**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%

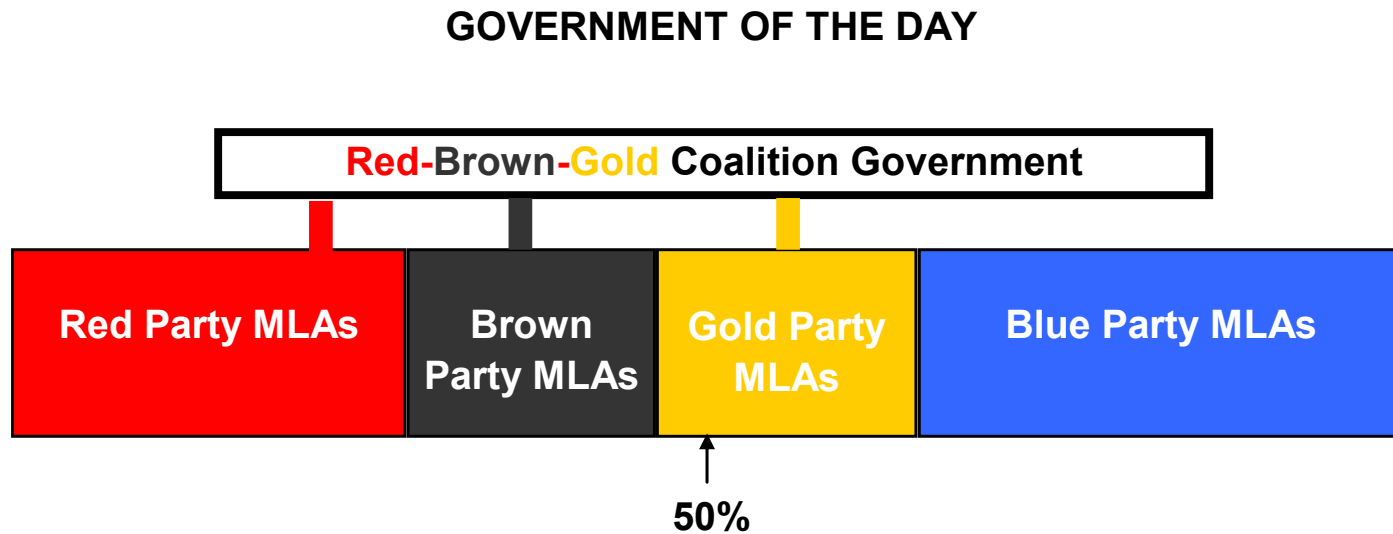
Red Party minority  
(Opposition party)

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?