If we accept that there has to be some division of labour in politics and that there are limitations to public participation in decision-making, then we need a theory of political representation. That is to say, we need an account of what representatives should do, what sort of people they should be and how they should discharge their duties. Representatives will undertake those tasks that citizens lack time or opportunity to undertake. But upon what understanding of representation should the design of a system of representative government be based? On the answer to this question hangs the issue of how we evaluate the competing models of indirect democracy that we have identified.

These various models of representative government were in part distinguished from one another by the extent to which they offered competing accounts of representation. Within the Westminster conception of democracy the emphasis was placed on the importance of governing political parties being accountable to the electorate. This in turn involved relatively few political parties competing for office, with parties in office enjoying the conditions that would enable them to govern effectively, in particular a secure parliamentary majority and control over the legislature. We can call this the ‘responsible government’ model of representation. In the representational model of democracy, by contrast, the emphasis was upon seeing the legislature as broadly representative of varieties of political opinion. In consequence, representational systems typically have a relatively large number of political parties competing for office, shared executive authority, broad representation on legislative committees and an emphasis upon compromise among competing opinions in the construction of governing coalitions. The distinguishing characteristics of these two conceptions,
therefore, turn on the competing conceptions of representation that each contains. Moreover, it is clear that these conceptions are also related to the role that the electoral system is expected to perform.

As Lijphart (1994, p. 10) has noted, there is broad agreement among electoral system experts that the two most important dimensions of electoral systems are the electoral formula and district magnitude (that is the number of representatives elected per district). The two main varieties of electoral formula are the winner-take-all, first-past-the-post system and various systems of proportional representation. In the former, candidates win office by securing the single largest share of the vote, whereas in the latter candidates are elected in proportion to the votes they receive. However, it is also clear that the exact effects of the different formulae interact with the size of the typical district, with a larger district for example reinforcing the trend in first-past-the-post systems towards disproportionality. Thus, in the limit, in an at large election covering the whole country the simple plurality formula would give all the seats to the party with the largest share of the votes.

If we focus simply on the electoral formula, thinking of single-member district systems, then the ‘mechanical effect’ of the first-past-the-post system alone will create conditions in which there is a tendency towards the under-representation of smaller parties in the legislature. Moreover, there is also a ‘psychological’ effect arising from the desire of citizens not to waste their votes, which will reinforce the original mechanical effect (Duverger, 1964, pp. 216–28). Thus, a central feature of the responsible government model of democracy is the first-past-the-post electoral system in which winning parties acquire the right to govern, but are held accountable for their performance at election time. Conversely, the emphasis with the representational model of democracy on the importance of having a broad sweep of public opinion influencing the making of law and public policy is naturally associated with proportional representation schemes of elections, giving rise to the large number of political parties many of which will represent only small segments of public opinion.

The constitutional model of democracy shares with the Westminster model the notion that governing parties should be made accountable to the electorate, and in this respect the two