1990s as a fresh wave of democratization raised anew issues of institutional design. Unicameral legislatures are the contemporary norm. Their number increased in the second half of the twentieth century as several smaller democracies abolished their second chamber, including Sweden (1971) and Iceland (1991). Many smaller post-colonial and post-communist states also embraced a single chamber. By 2012, 115 of the world’s 193 national parliaments (60 per cent) possessed only one chamber (IPU, 2012).

By contrast, bicameral legislatures are most often found in larger countries and in democracies; they are universal in federations, where the second chamber typically expresses the voices of the component states. Note, however, that the separation of chambers is incomplete. Many bicameral legislatures do occasionally meet in common session, not least for ceremonial purposes such as swearing in the head of state.

The choice between one and two chambers is not simply a technical matter of institutional design. Fundamentally, the decision reflects contrasting visions of democracy. Unicameral parliaments are justified by a majoritarian reading of popular control. The proposition is that an assembly based on direct popular election reflects the popular will and should not be obstructed. The radical French cleric Abbé Sieyès (1748–1836) put the point well: ‘if a second chamber dissents from the first, it is mischievous; and if it agrees, it is superfluous’ (Lively, 1991). Also, a single chamber is more accountable, economical, and decisive; it lacks the petty point-scoring which becomes possible as soon as two houses with distinct interests are created.

But the defenders of bicameral parliaments reject both the majoritarian logic of the Abbé and the penny-pinching of accountants. Bicameralists stress the liberal element of democracy, arguing that the upper chamber offers checks and balances. It can defend individual and group interests against