

5. Political parties

In the 2017 UK General election, two parties got 82.4% of the vote, and 579 of the 650 seats in Parliament (42.4% and 40%; 317 and 262 seats, respectively). The votes each of these two parties received maps on reasonably closely to how many of the 23 General elections each has won over the last 89 years (12 and 11). This fact reflects some stability in the British political system, and justifies its characterisation as a 2-party system.

This essay will also follow these approximate proportions. It will look at the history and values of the two main parties, and give a brief mention to the main 3rd Party. It will conclude with a brief look at possible signs of weakening in the system.

The Conservatives

Since the equalisation of the vote for all adult males and females in 1929 (89 years ago), the Conservatives have won 12 of the 23 elections and led governments for 53 of those years. Commonly nicknamed the “Tories”, the Party’s official name is “The Conservative and Unionist Party”.

During the “exclusion crisis” and “Glorious revolution” of 1685-88, two Parliamentary factions formed. One was the Whigs, who believed that Parliament had the authority to choose the monarch. They established the joint monarchy of William and Mary. The other was the Tories, who believed in the hereditary principle and hence supported James II as the rightful heir. The Whigs won that battle and dominated the Commons for most of the early 18th century.

Then things began to gradually turn in favour of the Tories. While in opposition in Parliament, they grew stronger throughout the country, rallying opposition to what was seen as a Whig cabal controlling the state. Things turned decisively during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars with France, from 1792-1815. While the big Whigs were seen as international businessmen who cared more about themselves than the nation, the Tories successfully stood out as patriots.

After the war, the Tory Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington, was notoriously repressive and became one of British history's most unpopular. The Whigs fought back and came to power on promises of reform. They passed the first Reform Bill in 1832. It was then that the Tories, now with a base of support in local government, realised they needed a new vision and image. An MP called Robert Peel, put forward what was called his “Tamworth” Manifesto, with the intention of rebuilding Tory popularity after the Wellington years. He was the first to use the words “The Conservative Party”.

The Tamworth manifesto accepted the 1832 Reforms, but declared them final. It said that Conservatives are not always against reform, but they must be justified. As far as the Constitution is concerned, no more reforms are needed. On the strength of his bold platform Peel soon came to lead the Conservatives.

The big issue in the 1840s were the Corn Laws. These laws created trade barriers by taxing imported

grain and in the process made bread relatively expensive. They were bad for the poor, but good for big landowners, who made a lot of money from high priced corn. Peel, a vocal defender of the Corn Laws, was the natural choice of the wealthy gentry and aristocrats. Even after the 1st reforms, these landowners were grossly over-represented in the electorate.

As Prime Minister however, Peel changed his position. Famine in Ireland from 1844 brought the issue to everyone's attention. Suddenly opposition reached explosive proportions. To the dismay of his Conservative supporters, Peel and a handful of followers allied with the Whigs to abolish the Corn Laws in 1846. The Conservatives were split.

The Disraeli years

Throughout this time and on into the 1850s and 60s, the Conservatives were in the forefront of resistance to the growing calls for further democratic reform. It was around this time that a novelist and skilled speaker called Benjamin Disraeli joined with a group of Conservative aristocrats to create "Young England".

They argued that all this rebellious talk of democracy was a sign of declining morals, which in turn was a symptom of industrialisation. In the country life of the past, a social safety net had been provided by responsible landowners; a strong, caring Church provided moral guidance and an active village community gave a strong sense of belonging. These things didn't exist in the new industrial cities.

Young England argued that improving the conditions of the urban poor meant not just their material, but also their spiritual needs. Through better attendance at Church, more local festivals, charity and community work, they believed that the moral safety net of the countryside could be transplanted into the new cities.

The campaign helped Disraeli build his popularity in the Conservative Party. After 1866, when a coalition government became Conservative dominated, Disraeli's profile rose dramatically. Lord Derby was Prime Minister but sat in the Lords, and he gave Disraeli the job of representing him in the Commons. This is when Disraeli gained a reputation as a master political organiser.

Despite rising to prominence as an opponent of democratic reform, Disraeli, as Party leader in the Commons, called for an extension of the vote. He succeeded in getting the 2nd Reform Bill passed in 1867, to the disgust of many in his Party. The following year he was briefly Prime Minister. For the rest of the century British government was dominated by two powerful Party leaders: Gladstone of the Liberals and Disraeli of the Conservatives.

In a speech of 1872, Disraeli set out Conservative principles as follows: "maintenance of the Constitution, the preservation of the Empire and the improvement of the conditions of the people". When he died in 1881, Queen Victoria sent a wreath of primroses to his funeral. This was seized on as a symbol. A group of Conservatives formed the Primrose League, which ever since has trained politicians, raised money and mobilised grass roots support for the Party. Its slogan was "God, Queen, Country and Free Enterprise".

Conservative philosophy: Reactionary or Liberal?

The Conservatives have traditionally had a strong base of support amongst the wealthiest people in Britain. This brings obvious advantages when it comes to resources, but may also have some less obvious psychological benefits. It is sometimes said that successful business leaders and those raised to power know how to run things properly: they are a “safe pair of hands”. This image of responsibility, allied to some basic instincts, is the psychological base of Conservative support.

The Conservative peer, Lord H. Cecil defined what he called his “natural conservatism” in 1912, as “distrust of the unknown” and “liking of the familiar”. This sounds more like a weakness than a political philosophy, but Cecil considered his fears healthy. The essence of conservatism is the idea that existing institutions have proved themselves “safe and durable” by their survival, so the instinct to defend them is a good thing.

Nevertheless, the Conservatives have occasionally been able to add a hint of “liberal” appeal: in short, they are naturally reluctant to reform, yet prepared to when necessary. Faced with popularity crises, like those under Peel and Disraeli, Conservative governments have carried out significant reforms. In government in 1897, for example, they introduced the Workmen's Compensation Act, which made companies responsible for insuring workers against injury at work.

Notice however that the Party's “liberal” credentials are, it can be argued, thin. It seems happy to carry out reforms that are popular providing they don't contradict the interests of their wealthy supporters. The Workmen's Compensation Act for example, cost the government nothing and businesses a relatively small amount. It was however, a big boost to the private insurance industry. The same government rejected the widespread demand for government backed old-age pensions.

The Conservative view of society is one of fluidity and organic development. It can't be controlled like a machine or redesigned according to a plan, no matter how rational that plan is. Hence responsiveness to the mood of the nation is seen as a virtue, and the maintenance of social peace, a government's main responsibility. The Conservatives have traditionally stood for what they call “One Nation”, in contrast to divisive “class” politics.

This idea also appeals to another instinct: Nationalism. In the words of a 1925 Conservative leaflet, Britishness has a “spirit of adventure, independence of character, individual effort, courage and fortitude.” Here you can see how the idea of self-reliance mixes with the idea of Britishness. At the height of the British Empire, the Conservatives were its greatest protagonists. The Party has always benefited politically by its apparent toughness when it comes to national security and British interests abroad.

This happened for example in 1900, when conflict between British and Dutch colonists in South Africa forced intervention and what became known as the Boer war. The new Conservative government championed patriotism and reform. It introduced the Education Act of 1902, creating secondary schools across the country, arguing that the Empire needed educated workers and soldiers. When considering the liberalness of this reform, it should be noted that it gave large amounts of government money to the Church, which ran most schools at the time.

Because the Conservatives stood in defence of the British Empire, they were fiercely opposed to Irish independence. From 1895 they formed an alliance with some Irish Unionists, hence the official name of the party “The Conservative and Unionist party”. The issue came to a head after the election defeats of 1910.

The new Liberal government put forward plans to grant Home Rule to Ireland (a kind of independence under the British monarch). The Conservative leader, Bonar Law in 1914, said he would support any form of resistance to Home Rule, effectively endorsing violence against the will of the British Parliament.

Conservatism in the age of Parliamentary Democracy

During the First World War, the Conservatives joined a coalition under the Liberal leader Lloyd George, and stood as a coalition in the election after the war ended in 1918. At a famous meeting in October 1922, the Conservative MPs forced the Conservative ministers to leave the coalition government. This assertion of power by MPs is commemorated by the fact that the Conservative MPs group is called the “1922 Committee”.

The Conservatives were the biggest Party after the following election, but had now seriously fallen out with the Liberals and couldn't form a coalition. This is when the Conservative leader, Stanley Baldwin took a decisive tactical step. Knowing the opposition was divided he stood aside from negotiations to let Labour form a government.

This first Labour government, with popular demands for radical social reform and relying on Liberal support, was weak. When it broke up in 1925, the Conservatives came back to power. The moment however was transformative. From now on Labour was the new rival, and the Conservatives had to reform the country, if they didn't want Labour doing it their way. The Party toned down its religious and imperialist language and the new government introduced state pensions (which they had opposed in the 1890s). They supported cheap housing schemes and resisted calls (mostly from Conservative MPs) for anti-Union laws. They also enacted the final democratic reform in 1928, allowing all women to vote.

Throughout this time, with the help of the Primrose League, the Conservative party appealed to women on the grounds that it was a protector of the family and children. In terms of voting patterns this may have been a successful strategy. We can't be sure (there were no opinion polls at the time), but it is generally believed that over 50% of women consistently voted Conservative between the wars.

After another struggling short-lived minority Labour government, the Conservatives responded to calls for a National Government. In “emergency” conditions, such as developing economic crisis or the looming threat of war, the 2-Party system can be suspended. The first National Government of the 1930s had MPs from all the major Parties, with a Labour Prime Minister. The second, which formed as Europe was again plunged into war, was led by Conservative leader, Winston Churchill.

Despite the popularity of Churchill as a war leader, the Conservatives lost the post-war election of 1945 heavily. In opposition, responding to the mood of the age, they accepted reforms that they had

previously opposed. They expressed commitment to the NHS, full employment, regional policy and the welfare state, and instead of insisting on the “free market”, they now embraced the “mixed economy”. With this turn they were able to return to government in the 1950s and early 60s.

Two characters of this period are worth mentioning to show contrasting elements of the Party. The leader and Prime Minister of 1957-63 was Harold Macmillan, an open champion of what he called the “middle way”. He argued that sound economic management may even include taking industries into public ownership. As a respected elder statesman, Macmillan represented old-fashioned pragmatic governance. Stability and respect for Government was his priority.

Meanwhile, another Conservative MP and Minister, Enoch Powell, was rising to respectability. This turned sharply into notoriety with a speech in 1968 in which he argued that continued immigration into Britain would cause “rivers of blood”. He espoused what he called “racialism”, the belief that races can’t integrate or live together in harmony. Far from stability and respectability, his rhetoric stoked-up widespread intolerance. Powell became the figurehead of British racism in the troubled decade that followed.

In this new age of media scrutiny and professional politics, the Party felt the need to recruit a new generation. It set up a recruitment and training unit called the Conservative Political Centre. As a result, the social composition of the Party began to change. For most of its history, the Party had been a social mix of workers (often Nationalist and Unionist), country gentry and big businessmen. In the 50s and 60s it is said to have become more “middle class”, that is to say, composed of managers, professionals and small business people. The process was manifest in the internal battles of the mid-1970s.

The Conservatives lost the election of 1974, under the old-fashioned leadership of Edward Heath. This was the opportunity the new generation needed. Determined to break the old aristocratic image and the opportunistic following of Labour's agenda, the Party chose a new leader. Margaret Thatcher was a familiar British type: the local community activist. She was thrifty, energetic, morally upstanding, proud and matriarchal. She was also ideologically driven.

Thatcherism

In the 1970s, as problems in the world financial system caused instability around the world, a new ideology rose to prominence. It was associated with the so-called “Chicago School” and economists such as Milton Friedman. Its economic policy is sometimes called “Monetarism” because of its focus on, some might say fetish of, the money supply.

The core of this approach is that the private sector generates wealth and the public sector consumes it. Taxation takes away people’s freedom to spend money how they choose, so the Classical Liberal idea of free trade is coupled to the idea of selling off state assets and cutting taxes. Meanwhile, a government’s priority is to control inflation, which is caused by too much money in the economy. Embraced by Thatcher, this ideology, combined with traditional Conservative values (such as self-reliance and enterprise, and of course, God, Queen and Country), became known as “Thatcherism”.

As Conservative leader and Prime Minister in the early 1970s, Edward Heath had been persuaded by

economists to try cutting government spending. Facing serious economic difficulties however, he changed direction. His “U-turn” was marked by the Industry Act of 1972, which allowed for government money to be used to help industries in trouble, such as shipbuilding. For the new ideologues this “U-turn” would be forever despised. Margaret Thatcher, as Prime Minister after the election victory of 1979, famously said “The Lady’s not for turning”.

Britain in the 1980s was a time of intense social conflict. As unemployment rose sharply the government seemed indifferent. Its ideological commitment to reducing spending drove it into conflict with the Trade Unions. It defeated the powerful miner’s union after a year-long strike. It also disbanded the Local Authority in Liverpool, which defied its spending cuts. With equal measures of admiration and hatred, Thatcher’s government is often cited as the most divisive in modern British history.

In 1982, there was a brief war during which British armed forces swiftly and successfully retook the Falkland Islands, which had been annexed by Argentina. Wars tend to boost nationalism and hence Conservative support. At the same time, the more professional Party machine hired expensive “image consultants” to sell itself. These factors helped sustain Thatcher’s government until eventually, an ill-judged reform tipped the popularity balance.

The 1989 attempt to introduce a Poll Tax (everyone pays the same regardless of wealth) met with intense opposition and even widespread non-payment. Mrs Thatcher’s intense sense of conviction, which had been promoted as a strength, now looked like arrogance. Amid internal divisions, she resigned. The Conservatives clung on to government until 1997, as the ideological tide ebbed. They would eventually return to power, but not before enduring their longest period in opposition. During this time the Party again re-crafted its image, becoming less strident in its ideological language.

Labour

Since the equalisation of the vote for all adult males and females (89 years ago), Labour has won 11 of the 23 elections and lead governments for 36 of those years. The Party’s official name is “The Labour Party”.

Until the 1920s, the only practical choice for most people was between the Conservatives and the Liberals. Both were seen as historic parties of the “establishment”, that is to say, they were connected to wealthy, powerful people. Although it was a 2-Party system, the apparent class bias made the choice limited, particularly for the rising number of urban workers. The idea of MPs who could be better relied on to represent working people had been spreading slowly since the previous century.

In 1890, after the United States imposed an import duty on cloth, British cloth workers’ wages were cut. A strike in Bradford, in the North of England, led to the formation of the Bradford Labour Union, and others were soon formed elsewhere. Instinctively these Unions supported the Liberals, but the Party in Parliament didn’t respond positively to them. Unions do not sit well with the philosophy of free trade.

In 1892, three pioneering working class MPs got elected as “Independent Labour”. The most famous was Kier Hardie, who was said to be the first man to enter the House of Commons wearing a cloth

cap. In those days it was very easy to guess someone's social class by their hat. Upper class people wore top hats, middle class people wore different hats according to their profession; bowler hats for bankers for example, and working class people wore cloth caps. Kier Hardie's entrance into the House in his cap signified a momentous historic change. The House of Commons would not remain a rich man's club forever.

The following year, the Bradford Labour Union led the formation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), although it had very little resources. It put up only 28 candidates in the 1895 elections, and failed to win any seats. Meanwhile, over in Germany, there was a mass Marxist party rapidly gaining working class support. A British version called the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) tried to emulate its model. In 1900, the SDF and the ILP met with some Trade Union leaders to try to get some working class people back into Parliament. They formed the Labour Representation Committee.

This new alliance succeeded in getting just two MPs, before a major boost as a result of the Taff Vale dispute. In a mining valley in South Wales, in 1901, there was a successful rail workers strike. Immediately afterwards, the company sued the Union for its costs, and won. Many Trade Unionists drew the obvious conclusion that they couldn't function without legal protection. This swung many of them behind the idea of having MPs they could rely on.

In 1906 the Labour Representation Committee put forward 50 candidates and won 29 seats. It was soon agreed to form a Party, but agreeing a common political platform was difficult. The SDF put forward a programme for the common ownership of industry. When it was rejected, many SDF members left to form their own party. Although many ILP members and Trade Unionists were sympathetic to Socialism, they favoured building popular support with less radical slogans. This initial split in the newly formed Labour Party is indicative of its conflicted spirit.

Labour's philosophy: Revolutionary or liberal?

Labour is seen as the Party of change, but how much and how fast? In general, it stands for moving power in society away from the rich and toward working people. It may be said to be a "Socialist" Party, but many in the Party don't use that word to avoid negative associations in the minds of many voters. The more "Revolutionary" side of the Party (commonly called the "Left") is proud to use the word and will sometimes suggest that the other side (the "Right") has lost sight of the cause.

The leadership of the Party is typically more Right than Left. It has more career politicians schooled in compromise, and more everyday contact with politicians from other Parties. It tends to argue that Labour's priority should be forming a Government. This means reaching out to people who normally vote for other Parties, establishing working relationships with people in the media, reassuring money markets and encouraging investors. It is sometimes accused by the Left of being "opportunist", which means winning votes by saying whatever needs to be said, while achieving little real change in practice.

The broad membership of the Party tends to be more Left than Right. It is mostly composed of people driven to politics by circumstance, and who are therefore more impatient for change. They are more likely to demand that the leaders stand or fall on principle. While this side of the Party is large

and consists mostly of independently thinking individuals, it contains several “Revolutionary” groups. Because some identify with the Russian revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, they are sometimes disparagingly called “Trots”. They are more generally accused of being “extremists”, whose presence undermines Labour’s electability.

Labour’s conflicted spirit can be seen in its history. Shortly after the First World War (1914-1918), while there were revolutions in Germany and Russia, Labour’s membership swelled. Its Party Constitution was amended to include “Clause 4” which defined the Party’s aim as:

“To secure for the workers, by hand or by brain, the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible on the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service”

In 1923, for the first time, the Party won more seats in Parliament than the Liberals. With Liberal support it was able to form its first government. Under Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, it was briefly able to carry out some measures popular amongst the workers, in particular the Wheatley Housing Act, which gave government money to local authorities to build ½ million houses for rent. The government’s survival however, depended on continued Liberal support.

These were revolutionary times and after only a year and a half the Liberals deserted. The trigger was the “Campbell case” in the summer of 1924. After an article in the Communist Party newspaper called on soldiers not to shoot at workers, the paper’s editor, J.R. Campbell, was prosecuted for inciting mutiny. Labour members demanded that the Chief Prosecutor (who is appointed by the Government) drop the case. When he did, both Conservatives and Liberals accused the Government of political interference in the law. The Liberals voted with the opposition to force an election.

Then, four days before that election, newspapers published a letter purportedly sent by Zinoviev, a member of the Russian revolutionary government. It addressed the Labour party leaders and referred to a secret plan for revolution, which would incorporate Britain into the Soviet Union. The Conservatives won over many Liberal voters by arguing that softness on Labour would allow them to get away with the plan. The “Zinoviev letter” was a fake, but helped the Conservatives return to power in 1925.

These events show the struggle for Labour’s heart. The Party was built on calls for change that gave working people a vision of a better world. Yet for the same reason, it struggled to take the final steps to power. Cautious voters heard the accusations of extremism. It is fair to argue the without that energetic, revolutionary side it may have never been born. Without its pragmatic, liberal side it may have been strangled in its infancy.

Socialism in the age of Parliamentary Democracy

Labour was again the biggest Party in Parliament after the election of 1929. Ramsay MacDonald and the other Labour leaders were now fully at home in Parliament, and played the game well. They formed a coalition government with the Liberals. Soon after, the Wall Street Crash in America triggered the Great depression. In the face of a national emergency, MacDonald formed a “National

government”, which included Conservatives.

For some in the Party, those who worked with the Conservatives were traitors. Some Labour ministers resigned and some Labour MPs withdrew their support. The Conservatives seized on the opportunity to force an election, standing (with the Liberals and some Labour MPs) as “National government” candidates. The ILP, which was still a strong grass roots organization, stood against them and lost heavily. The new National Government was overwhelmingly Conservative, and would stay that way until the end of the 2nd world war. In that time, the mood in the Party changed. Because of the war, and in part because of the struggle against Fascism, Labour National government ministers were not considered traitors.

After the war, one of those ministers, Clement Attlee, led the Labour party to its greatest victory. The 1945 Labour government was the first to achieve an overall majority and was able to govern without Liberal backing. In terms of its impact on society, it was the most significant Government in British political history. It created the NHS (a free, publicly owned health service) and the “welfare state” (a comprehensive system of support for unemployed and disabled people). It also took public ownership of the Bank of England, the railways, road haulage and canals, and the coal, steel, electricity and gas industries.

The economy however, continued to struggle. After Labour won the election of 1950, the Conservatives dropped their opposition to Labour’s reforms. They also, thanks to a well-publicised deal, promised more American money to fund the new public services. Labour split over charges in the NHS. Unable to form a workable government, Labour called an election in 1951 and lost.

The 1945 Labour Government had adopted and promoted the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes, who argued that governments could spend money to promote economic development. This idea gathered support during the boom years of the 1950s and 60s. Along with the post-war reforms it became part of the so-called “post-war consensus”, that is to say, it was even adopted by the Conservatives (until their turn to Thatcher during the troubled 70s).

Meanwhile, Keynesian economics was seen as an alternative to old-fashioned ideas of Socialism. Labour leader Hugh Gaitskell said that state ownership wasn't good for working people, but instead proposed a regulated free market, redistribution through taxation and comprehensive social services. Equality, fraternity and cooperation, Gaitskell said, would lead gradually to a classless society. At the Party Conference of 1959, he tried and failed to have “Clause 4” removed from the Constitution.

Labour returned to government in 1964. This was a time of significant social and cultural change in Britain, as reflected in the legislation passed under Harold Wilson’s leadership. The death penalty was abolished, homosexuality and abortion were made legal and divorce was made easier. After a Conservative government from 1970-74, Labour won a slim majority. Harold Wilson retired due to ill health in 1976 and was replaced by James Callaghan. This government was Labour's least popular.

The late 70s was a time of economic difficulties in many countries. In Britain it was marked by rising unemployment and inflation. While the Conservatives embraced new economic theories, Labour experienced raging internal conflicts. The Government tried a policy called “wage restraint”, that is to say, holding down public sector pay in an effort to stop rising inflation. Workers, Labour’s

natural base of support, turned against it. The country was hit by many strikes, particularly during what became known as the “winter of discontent” in 1978.

In opposition from 1979, two candidates came forward to be leader: Healey, of the Right, and Foot, of the Left. Foot’s victory, triggered a split. Several leading Labour politicians formed the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which soon allied with and later merged with the Liberal Party. Healey by the way, stayed in the Labour party as deputy leader, a position he won by narrowly beating the prominent Socialist, Tony Benn.

The Blair years

In opposition Labour lost a further three elections. The last of these, in 1992, was to everyone's surprise. In the preceding period, Labour’s leader, Neil Kinnock had expelled some Revolutionary groups and changed the Party symbol from a Red Flag to a Red Rose. His image-changing zeal was taken up by the new leader from 1994, Tony Blair.

On the 50th anniversary of the 1945 Labour victory, Blair gave an interesting speech. He said that the great achievements of that government were possible because it followed the grain of public opinion. Now, as it was then, Labour should not bombard the public with policies, but rather give a clear sense of purpose and direction. The Party was born by distinguishing itself from Liberals, who were averse to public ownership. It was also born out of Trade Unions, who were needed to fight powerful vested interests. Now, Blair said, Labour could no longer be associated with failed state-owned economies, nor dominated by Trade Union interests. It had to represent the whole country.

For many, Blair represented the best chance of returning to power after nearly two decades of opposition. He stressed unity and employed public relations professionals who became known as “spin doctors”. He was finally able to get rid of “Clause 4” and in an effort to reduce the power of the Trade Unions, changed the Party’s voting system to what was called “One member, one vote”. The slogan for the 1997 election was “New Labour New Britain”.

Blair generally avoided the word “Socialism”, but when pressed offered his own definition. To use his words, it meant: “a society of free individuals who understand their interdependence. They will take responsibility for fighting poverty, prejudice and unemployment. And build one nation: tolerant, fair, enterprising and inclusive”. In government from 1997, he avoided the language of public and private ownership, preferring to talk about partnerships of government and industry.

Due to his role in getting Britain into an unpopular Middle East war, Blair’s personal standing fell. Despite Labour’s victory in 2005, Blair stood down as Party leader soon afterwards. He was replaced by the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, who stood down after the election defeat of 2010. The mood in the Party now followed the grain of public opinion, which had become suspicious of Blair’s carefully crafted image-making. In preference to prominent Blair supporters, Labour elected the more genuine and trustworthy, Ed Miliband.

As leader Miliband carried out a Party reform that would have unexpected and far-reaching consequences. In the name of encouraging more grass roots participation, Miliband changed the way the Party elects its leader to fully one-member, one vote. Until then an Electoral College system had

given MPs and Trade Unions greater weight. With equal votes, the broad Party membership, which tends more to the Left than the Right, elected Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015. He has promised a new type of politics.

A multi-party system?

Although Britain is said to have a 2-Party system, there is another Party that gets almost as many votes as the two biggest. However, it gets proportionately fewer seats in Parliament. These are the voting results for the 2010 election, and the number of seats in the House of Commons this lead to.

Party	Number of votes (millions)	% of votes	Number of seats
Conservative	10.7	36.1	306
Labour	8.6	29	258
Liberal Democrats	6.8	23	57
Other		11.9	29

While the difference in the number and proportion of votes between the two main parties and the third is relatively small, the difference in the number of seats in Parliament is relatively large. This is because of the electoral system used in Britain. It is called a “first-past-the-post” system because only one candidate from each local Constituency becomes the MP. Second place gets nothing. Losing by one vote is the same as losing by thousands. Because the third party is more likely to come second in each Constituency, it is likely to have a smaller proportion of MPs than votes.

The third Party, today known as the Liberal Democrats, has its origins in the 19th century Whigs. They began using the word “Liberals” in 1859 and attracted the brilliant radical thinker, John Stuart Mill. In 1865, while engaged in the fight to widen the electorate, William Gladstone emerged as leader. In part thanks to their democratic credentials they won the first election in which all adult males could vote, with a lot of working class support. They won nine further elections until pushed into 3rd place by Labour in 1922.

When the SDP split from the Labour party in 1981, there was some hope among Liberals that they would bring Labour supporters with them. An alliance was formed, followed by a merger. In 1988, the Social and Liberal Democratic Party was formed. It was later official shortened to the Liberal Democrats, and is now commonly referred to as the “LibDems”. Nevertheless, support for the 3rd Party has remained relatively constant. The breakaway from Labour did not significantly shift voting patterns.

Politically, the LibDems prioritise what they call the 5 E's: Economic policy, Environment, Education, Electoral Reform and Europe. Between 1992-2003, they were the only major Party to say they would raise taxes. Their plan was a 1p/£ tax increase to fund education. They gained some respect for their honesty, but the tax itself wasn't popular. In 2005 they said that it would only apply to incomes over £100,000/year. This proved more popular, and may have been a factor in raising their vote in 2010.

In that election, the Conservatives won 309 seats, Labour won 258 and the LibDems won 57. With no overall majority, the Conservatives invited the LibDems to form a coalition. LibDem leader, Nick Clegg, became deputy Prime Minister. As part of the deal, the LibDems had to drop a promise to make Universities free. This was not popular and is thought to have significantly damaged the Party's image.

The LibDems have had significant internal differences, particularly since Tony Blair's "New Labour" changed Labour's image in the 1990s. During the period of Labour government some prominent LibDems published the "Orange Book", favouring more stress on "free markets". It is only recently, since Jeremy Corbyn became Labour leader, that this position has gained strength. Some LibDems have argued that Labour's move to the Left makes them the best choice for moderate voters.

Challenges

Is the 2-Party system a good thing? Some good arguments can be made for it. Note that the system is not just about free opinions, but has an "official opposition" whose job is to find faults in government policy. In general, this works in much the same way as an adversarial justice system: by forcefully exposing alternatives it helps us resist confirmation bias. This compels politicians to test and improve their ideas, and finally gives voters a simple choice.

On the other hand, the system can be criticised for encouraging a kind of tribalism and group-think. This occurs when people gain status from Party membership, only listen to their own side and substitute loyalty for reason. The 2-Party system can also be said to freeze conflicts, that is to say, when people simply form antagonistic groups on either side of a debate, it kills dialogue and problems linger.

Although anyone can stand as an "independent" candidate in a British General election, in practice, Party candidates almost always win. Not only are Parties useful for mobilizing support, there is often a strong tendency to vote by Party affiliation. On top of that, the Party leader carries a lot of weight. They feature quite heavily in the media, giving people plenty of opportunity to develop a liking or disliking for them. Although every vote in a General election is for a local candidate, Party leaders heavily influence the vote. It is not unreasonable to suggest that this gives Party leaders and organisers too much power.

When it comes to who wins elections, affiliation and motivation are important. The winner is often determined not by "floating voters", that is to say, people who are prepared to change who they vote for, but by how many loyal voters choose to vote. For example, when the Conservatives win elections, it's because many loyal Labour voters don't vote, while many loyal Conservative voters do.

This adds another interesting perspective on how British Government works in practice. Because the Conservatives are associated with sound economic management, and Labour is associated with progressive reform, the alternation of the Parties in government could be seen as the varying strength of the motivation for stability or change. From this perspective the 2-Party system can be credited

with reflecting the popular mood and regulating the pace of change.

Nevertheless, there are signs that old loyalties may be weakening and the number of “floating voters” rising. In the 1960s, 80% of the population said they were loyal voters for one Party and this was intergenerational. If both parents were Conservative, 89% of young people were also; if both parents supported Labour, 92% were. This loyalty diminished with age, but remained strong. Today, while people are still relatively loyal to a Party, it is not intergenerational. People are no more or less likely to vote for the Party their parents voted for.

With this gradual change has also come a slight weakening of the dominance of the big two (or three), with some support trickling away to the national minority parties (who accounted for around 5-10%). Very recently, there has also been a rise of support of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), whose main platform is opposition to the European Union. In the 2015 election they took 12.6% of the vote, taking 3rd place from the LibDems. Their vote has since slumped to less than 2%, perhaps as a result of Brexit (see essay 7).

From 1929 (when all adults were given equal voting rights) and throughout the rest of the 20th century, the Conservatives and Labour got over 70% of the vote. With the 3rd Party (the Liberals or LibDems) the total was over 90%. In the 21st century, big Party dominance seemed to wane slightly, falling to around 65% for the big two in the election of 2015 (77% including the 3rd Party). The trend however, is not consistent. In the 2017 election, over 82% of the electorate voted Conservative or Labour. The 3rd Party’s diminishing vote was just enough to push the big three’s total back over 90%.

January 2018

John Gandy

References

- Clark, Alistair (2012) *Political Parties in the UK*
- Carr, R & Hart, Bradley W (eds) (2013) *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party*
- Dalton, R.J & Wattenberg, M.P (eds) (2000a) *Parties without partisans*
- Diamond, P (2015) *New Labour's old roots*
- Jones, Bill & Norton, Philip (2004) *Politics UK*
- Lipset, S.M & Rokkan, S (eds) (1967) *Party systems and voter alignments*
- Marr, Andrew (2004) *The making of modern Britain*
- Moran, Michael (2005) *Politics and governance in the UK*
- Seldon, A & Ball, S (eds) (1994) *Conservative Century: the Conservative party since 1900*
- Vernon, James (2014) *Distant strangers: how Britain became modern*