Chaos and complexity in the party system

Chapter 4: The two-party system: 'all else is embellishment and detail'

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The 2019 general election provided the UK electorate with the same fundamental choice as at every other general election since 1931: a choice between a Conservative and a Labour government.[1] When it came to choosing their local MPs, voters had other options, of course. In England, Scotland and Wales, the Liberal Democrats and Greens fielded candidates in most constituencies, and in Scotland and Wales, the two nationalist parties provided voters with even more choice.[2] In 2019 these four established challengers were joined by two new parties that had emerged in the context of the deadlocked Parliament: the Independent Group for Change (or Change UK) formed by dissident Labour and Conservative MPs, and the Brexit Party, a populist vehicle formed by those who had campaigned to leave the European Union and who felt this decision was being frustrated by 'the elite'. In some constituencies these challengers mattered a great deal. In the overall scheme of things, they were embellishments and details.[3] The two-party system was not on the ballot paper anywhere in 2019 but it triumphed again over challenger parties old and new.

The two-party system was a key element of Britain's traditional constitution that minimised the demands on the people but gave them great power of choice.[4] The winning party could almost always claim a 'mandate' for the programme set out in its manifesto and be held accountable for its actions at subsequent elections. General elections thus provided the people not only with the power to select their government but also to decide the broad direction of policy. Many elements of the traditional constitution have changed but the two-party system largely endures. That is does so represents something of a puzzle. The class and religious bases of the historic party coalitions – a centre-left Labour Party representing the unionised industrial working class, non-conformists and city dwellers, and a centre-right

Conservative Party representing the middle class, the established church, the English core and rural dwellers – have waned. New social conflicts based on age, education, identity and geography have emerged, exacerbated in some respects by the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum. In Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London, new devolved assemblies have been established based on proportional representation, which has increased the number of parties contesting and winning seats. The multi-party modernism of the devolved assemblies stands in marked contrast with Westminster's two-party traditionalism.

Some commentators have wondered whether contemporary conflicts can be contained in the present two-party system or, indeed, any possible two-party system.[5] Some reformers have demanded a more plural House of Commons and cooperation in place of competition.[6] Others have pressed for the electorate to have a more direct say over policy via referendums. Voters too have started to be affected directly by changes in the party system. The 2010 general election produced a hung parliament and the first peacetime coalition since 1939.[7] The 2017 election resulted in another hung parliament and a minority Conservative government propped up by a confidence and supply agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).[8] The relative simplicity of post-war politics, in which the Conservatives or Labour could claim a clear mandate to govern, seemed long gone.

This chapter analyses party competition in Britain from a systemic and long-term perspective. It explores how the party system has changed over time but continues to be dominated by two parties. It introduces the other parties that featured in the 2019 election, albeit as supporting actors. Above all, it explains why, despite all the political tumult of the preceding years, the electorate in 2019 was ultimately faced with the familiar choice between a Conservative or Labour government, and why challenger parties -- both old and new – continued to be held in check.

The party system, 1918-2019

The current two-party system was firmly established at Westminster and in the popular psyche by 1931. Historically, Britain had two other identifiable two-party systems. From the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, politics was dominated by the Tories, who supported monarchical or aristocratic rule, farming interests and the Church of England, and the Whigs, who opposed monarchical power, championed the middle classes and advocated religious freedoms. Around the mid-nineteenth century both parties split and reformed as a result of disagreements and the challenges associated with the extension of the franchise.[9] The Tories split over the repeal of the Corn Laws in the 1840s and formed the new Conservative Party that championed traditional values, the established church and imperial power. The Whigs split and largely moved towards the new Liberal Party that stressed personal freedom, non-conformism and free trade. These two parties co-existed for around 60 years, slowly adapting to new demands. By 1918 an increasingly assertive Labour Party, formed less than two decades earlier, sought to replace the Liberals rather than continue cooperating with them in an electoral pact. Helped by an expanded electorate, trade-union support and changing public expectations about the role of the state, Labour adopted a socialist programme. This move coincided with a fatal split in the Liberal Party that made it difficult for the older party to respond – though the Liberals could not have fended off Labour's challenge without radical policy change.[10]

Since 1918, all but four governments have been either Conservative or Labour single-party administrations. Three of the four exceptions were Conservative-dominated coalitions. The 1918 coalition government, led by David Lloyd George, a Liberal, relied on the support of 379 Conservative MPs. The National Governments that existed between August 1931 and May 1940 were formally a coalition of Conservative, National Labour and National Liberal MPs, but the Tories supplied 470 of the 554 National MPs after the 1931 election and 387 of

the 429 National MPs after 1935. The Conservatives also dominated the 2010 coalition with 310 MPs to the Liberal Democrats' 57. The remaining exception was Churchill's wartime coalition, in which the Conservatives and Labour genuinely shared power.

FIGURE 4.1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4.1 shows how the two major parties have alternated in power and the number of continuous days that each has been in office. It excludes Churchill's wartime coalition. The periods of Conservative government include the three Tory-dominated coalitions. If the governments are simply presented in chronological order there seems to be a pendulum swinging between Conservative-right and Labour-left. Yet, this pendulum is far from regular. Including the three coalitions, the Conservatives have been in government for almost twice as long as Labour: 22,899 days to 12,096. Even if we exclude the periods of coalition, the Tory advantage (16,475 days to 12,096) is pronounced. British politics might have been dominated by collectivist and egalitarian ideas – but it was dominated by Conservative governments.

The two major parties have also dominated elections. The broken line in Figure 4.2 displays the combined Conservative and Labour share of the vote since 1918.[11] From 1918 to 1929 the two parties jointly won on average 69 per cent of the vote. From 1931 to 1970, they won on average over 90 per cent of the vote. In February 1974, the two-party vote suddenly dropped by 14 points and subsequently drifted downwards. Its post-war nadir came in the 2010 general election when it plumbed 65 per cent. The two-party domination of the vote seemed re-established in 2017 when it returned to 82 per cent. The subsequent fall in 2019 to 76 per cent suggested otherwise.

FIGURE 4.2 ABOUT HERE

Despite the diminished two-party share of the vote, the Conservatives and Labour remained completely dominant in Parliament. The solid line in Figure 4.2 displays the two-party seat share in the House of Commons. This always exceeded vote share because the electoral system over-rewarded the two major parties. From 1931 to 1997 the two-party seat share never fell below 90 per cent, topping out at nearly 99 per cent in 1959. Its lowest ebb was the 86 per cent recorded in 2005. These trends in vote and seat share produced a visible gap between the two parties' hold over seats and their hold over voters.

Figure 4.3 displays the vote shares for the individual parties since 1918. Several phases are evident: 1918-29, 1931-70, 1974-2010 and 2015 to present. The years from 1918 to 1929 witnessed a period of intense three-party competition for votes and the emergence of the present two-party system. From 1931 to 1970 the Conservatives and Labour competed on (more or less) even terms. Across the whole period the Tories enjoyed a slight advantage over Labour in vote share (48 to 44 per cent). Across the 1945-70 period, which excludes the complicating effects of the National Governments, Labour enjoyed a slight advantage over the Tories (46 to 45 per cent). Whichever of the two major parties was behind in terms of the vote in this period was rarely very far behind the winner. The average lead for the winner was a mere 3.9 points. In a distant third place, the Liberals averaged just 7 per cent. No other party received a significant share of the vote. Despite having lasted only 40 years – 25 years if you focus narrowly on post-war politics – this period of two-party domination is often characterised as the 'traditional' party system. Fifty years after it ended, it continues to influence understandings of how party politics should operate.

FIGURE 4.3 ABOUT HERE

From 1974 to 2010 both major parties received far smaller shares of the vote. The Conservatives averaged 37 per cent and Labour 35 per cent. At the same time, the average lead for the winning party, 7.4 points, was far larger than in the previous 25 years. The traditional system characterised by intense two-party competition gave way to one characterised by 'alternating predominance', with the Conservatives winning four successive elections from 1979 to 1992 and Labour winning three from 1997 to 2005.[12] A related development was a surge in support for the Liberals, later the Liberal Democrats. The 'third party' secured on average around 20 per cent between 1970 and 2010. In 1983 the Liberals in alliance with the Social Democrat Party (SDP), with whom they merged in 1988, won 26 per cent of the vote and came within two points of second-placed Labour. Meanwhile, support for other parties crept up slowly and from a very low base. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won 30 per cent of the vote in Scotland in October 1974 but its remarkable success proved short-lived. Nationalist sentiment in neither Scotland nor Wales challenged the two-party system.

In the three general elections from 2015 to 2019 the Conservatives averaged 41 per cent of the vote and Labour averaged 34 per cent, suggesting another period of Conservative predominance. The most significant developments, however, occurred among the challenger parties. In 2015 the Liberal Democrat's vote share collapsed from 23 to 8 per cent. The nationalists' share of the vote rose dramatically as a result of the SNP's surge in Scotland, where it won 50 per cent of the vote. At the same time, there was a spike in support for other parties. The Eurosceptic right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 13 per

cent of the vote, and the Greens picked up 4 per cent. In 2015 challenger parties other than the Liberal Democrats and nationalists picked up nearly 20 per cent of the vote.

The vote shares documented in Figure 4.3 were rarely reflected in seat shares. As Figure 4.1 demonstrated the two-party share of the vote went down after 1970 but the two-party share of seats did not. Instead, the electoral system alternately flattered the two major parties, as shown in Figure 4.4. Small shifts in support for the Tories and Labour were translated into tidal waves of gains and losses. Governments on both sides secured landslide majorities. The growth in support for the Liberals after 1970 did not translate into seats until 1997, when the party won 46 seats, but its seat share still lagged behind its vote share. The growing support for most of the challenger parties produced few seats. In 2015, UKIP's 13 per cent of the vote translated into just one MP. The single and hugely important exception to this rule has been the SNP. The surge in its support in 2015 was translated into a tidal wave of gains in Scotland, where it won 56 out of 59. The SNP has been the 'third party' at Westminster ever since.

FIGURE 4.4 ABOUT HERE

Pendulum politics

The balance of advantage in the two-party system varies over time. In general, when the Conservatives are up, Labour are down. When Labour is up, the Tories are down. There are, of course, exceptions. In 1924, 1951 and 2015 both major parties' vote shares rose as the Liberal Democrats' declined.[13] In February 1974 and 1983 both major parties' votes fell as the Liberals' shot up. Nevertheless, in most cases the two parties' vote shares have moved in

the opposite direction. Broadly speaking there are three explanations of this pendulum-like tendency of the two major parties' shares of the vote.

Policy thermostats

The first explanation of pendulum politics is a consequence of the fact that governments control policy and voters have preferences about policy. Labour tends to expand government activity, in the form of regulation and higher levels of taxation and public spending, while the Conservatives tend to pursue less. Both tendencies are strong because party ideology is important to members and because inertial forces make it difficult for governments to reverse course.[14] Voters, on the other hand, are ambivalent about government activity. They want government to provide public services, reduce unemployment and tackle poverty. They also want lower taxes, less bureaucracy, lower inflation and personal benefits.[15] The result of this ambivalence is that as the government supplies more activity, the electorate wants less; and as it supplies less, the electorate wants more. Public policy preferences respond like a thermostat, signalling when things are 'too hot' and 'too cold'.[16] At some point government policy tends to 'overshoot' the electorate's ideal point and, after a time, policy gets out of line with preferences.

Figure 4.5 displays non-military government expenditure (NMGE) as a proportion of GDP from 1951 to 2017.[17] This can be thought of as a simple indicator of government activity. Labour governments should be expected to increase NMGE over time and Conservative governments to reduce it. Three of the four Conservative governments and two of the three Labour governments fit this pattern. The two exceptions are in the economically unstable 1970s. Rising unemployment compelled the 1970-74 Tory government to increase spending whereas rising inflation compelled the 1974-79 Labour governments to reduce

spending. Otherwise, Labour has tended to engage in ‘more’ and the Conservatives in ‘less’ government activity.

FIGURE 4.5 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4.6 displays shifting responses to a British Social Attitudes (BSA) question that asks whether the government should increase or decrease taxes and spending. Responses to such questions reflect social desirability biases. In every year since 1983, for example, the BSA has asked this question and a majority have preferred increasing taxes and spending. Nevertheless, these responses change over time and these changes are inversely related to government activity as measured by NMGE. From 1983 to 1997, for example, preferences moved left as the Tories reduced government activity. From 1997 to 2010 preferences moved right as government activity increased under Labour. Preferences again moved left from 2010 to 2018 as the Conservative-led coalition and then single-party Tory governments reduced government activity. Similar thermostatic responses are observed in a wide variety of survey questions relating to welfare, public spending and inequality.[18]

FIGURE 4.6 ABOUT HERE

Evaluations of party competence

Voters want policies that honour their values and governing competence in the achievement of consensual outcomes like a healthy economy, well-managed public services and corruption-free government. Figure 4.7 displays quarterly estimates of the public’s overall assessments of the three major parties’ competence based on responses to a wide range of

survey items that ask which party is best able to deal with an issue or problem.[19] The estimates suggest that the two major parties have had comparable reputations for competence. They also suggest the Liberals and their successors, who had no experience of governing, were regarded as far less competent.

FIGURE 4.7 ABOUT HERE

The estimated competence scores suggest that the Conservatives enjoyed a significant advantage over Labour from the 1950s to the early 1960s, after which Labour moved ahead. From the late 1960s the Tories gained an advantage that was eliminated in the early 1970s, around the time of the oil-price shocks that destabilised western economies. The Conservatives moved ahead of Labour yet again from 1975 and remained there until the mid-1990s. The sharp decline in assessments of Labour competence from 1981 to 1983 coincided with a collapse in support for the party. From around 1993 until 2005 the positions were reversed, with Labour enjoying a competence advantage. The sharp decline in evaluations of Tory competence after 1992 and 'Black Wednesday' – when the UK was forced out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism – preceded New Labour's triumph in 1997.[20] The Conservatives moved ahead around 2008 but lost their advantage once in government. Following the 2017 general election, Labour's evaluations improved then fell. In the quarter before the 2019 general election the parties were tied.

Over the full 68 years the Conservatives on average scored slightly higher than Labour on competence by 31.3 to 30.8. Such evaluations have a powerful effect on party vote shares at general elections net of policy considerations. The patterns displayed in Figure 4.7 suggest that the pendulum swings in part because governments lose their reputation for

competence. This implies that the parties have their fates in their own hands. There is, however, one additional consideration that qualifies this proposition.

The costs of ruling

Ruling parties tend to lose a portion of their support, net of all other factors – such as economic conditions – between successive elections. This phenomenon has been labelled the 'costs of ruling'.[21] Evidence across time and space suggests that parties lose somewhere in the region of 2-3 points in vote share for every four years they are in government. In a multi-party system, the effects of the costs of ruling can be extremely complex. In a simple two-party system, the votes lost by the governing party are transferred to the other party, leading eventually to a turnover of power.

Although the evidence is clear, the reasons for the costs of ruling are unclear. It may simply be that governments are punished for bad times and rewarded for good times. It may also be that the electorate has unrealistic expectations of what government can achieve. It may simply be that voters believe that party alternation is desirable in itself.[22] Yet while the costs of ruling provides hope to opposition parties, they would be unwise to rely on it. The old adage that 'oppositions do not win elections, governments lose them' needs to read 'Governments are capable of losing elections – but only if there is an Opposition party available that people are willing to vote for.'[23] A party that advocates policies out of line with public preferences will struggle.

Causes of the two-party system

It is now time to consider the puzzle noted in the introduction and explain why the two-party system has been so resilient over the last century. The explanations overlap and there is no

obvious place to start. Nevertheless, it makes some sense to examine the most abstract and most easily missed explanation first.

Party systems

The term 'party system' trips off the tongue so easily that it is all too easy to overlook its significance. A 'system' consists of recurring interactions between component parts. The component parts in a party system are the electorate and political parties. Both have goals that they pursue within the system. Voters are motivated by considerations of policy and competence, as noted.[24] Ideally, voters would get policy that honours their values and beliefs *and* governing competence, but this is not always available. In some cases, the party that has the most attractive policies also enjoys the best reputation for competence. In other cases, the party that has the most attractive policies is thought incompetent. The electorate may have to choose between a party with preferable policies and another that is more competent.

Parties also have mixed motivations: they want to achieve their vision of the good society and enjoy the fruits of office.[25] In some cases these motivations coincide. In others policy motivations overwhelm office-seeking objectives. In general party members have strong policy motivations. A party may be pulled towards its polar position. If most voters are located to the centre this move is likely to cost votes. A party might still win elections if it has a competence advantage but if it does not, it will be punished. The feedback from elections and office-seeking motivations are likely to produce pressure to moderate by moving away from a polar position. These competitive forces compel the parties to adapt or fail.

The Conservatives and Labour have long dominated Britain's party system. This simple fact has provided both parties with numerous advantages, including party memberships, finance and extensive organisations that can recruit and train candidates and mobilise potential voters. Because the two parties are fixtures, voters are familiar with them

and have impressions of their basic stances and reputations. Most voters have developed a generalised sense of 'being' supporters of one party or another.[26] Indeed, the two parties represent such familiar points of reference that it is difficult to think about political choices other than as being organised by them. As one observer noted, 'The principle explanation for the existence of a two-party system is … that we have a two-party system.'[27]

Dominating the party system has also enabled the Conservatives and Labour to advantage themselves in other ways. Since they alternate in government, they naturally choose laws and rules that benefit their collective interests. Not surprisingly, some challenger parties and the public see the two major parties as a cartel that stifles competition.[28] Populist politicians use terms 'the establishment', 'the Westminster establishment' and 'the liberal elite' to describe those that they believe are arrogantly unresponsive to 'the people'.[29] The notion that the two major parties have – in some sense – become part of the state is not wholly unfounded.

The constitution

Two-party politics has long characterised British politics. Before the present Conservative-Labour configuration, as seen, there were other two-party systems. Both the Whig-Tory and Liberal-Conservative systems pre-dated the adoption of a uniform model of single-member constituency representation in 1948. This suggests that there is something about the British constitution beyond the voting system that tends towards two-party politics.

One of the reasons for the longevity of the two-party system may be the peculiar importance that its parties and people attach to the goal of 'strong government'. Britain's most important constitutional rule is parliamentary sovereignty: Parliament enjoys supreme legal authority, and no other institution can constrain it.[30] By convention a prime minister can only become prime minister if they command the confidence of the House of Commons. This

rule of government formation is crucial. Historically, it encouraged the formation of organised parties in Parliament to control the executive.[31] Today, it means there are few limits on a government's power, other than periodic elections. The House of Lords is weak. The courts uphold parliamentary sovereignty. For all practical purposes parliamentary sovereignty means government-of-the-day sovereignty.[32] The government dominates the parliamentary agenda. It proposes and the opposition opposes. This 'power hoarding' mindset extends beyond Westminster. It encourages voters to think of elections as a chance to select a government rather than a local representative.

The opposition is hugely important in this context because it provides competition. While the larger of the two main parties forms the government of the day, the other becomes 'Her Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition' or the 'official' opposition. Its leader is entitled to a salary paid for by public funds and appoints a shadow cabinet that scrutinises ministers, serves as a credible alternative government and, most importantly, provides voters with choice. The work of all opposition parties in Parliament is supported by the system of 'Short money'. The funding formula advantages the official opposition. In 2018/19, for example, some £7.9m was allocated to Labour, £645,000 to the Liberal Democrats and £809,000 to the SNP.[33]

The balance of power in the House of Commons is determined by the electorate and the electoral system. Until recently voters have relied on the news media for most of their information about political matters. The principle of a free press is well established and newspapers can be as biased as their proprietors allow. There is an identifiable 'party in the media' on both sides. Broadcasting is potentially more impactful and heavily regulated. All broadcasters are required to be impartial even if they do not receive public funds. The Communication Act 2003 and Ofcom guidelines basically define impartiality by reference to the status quo. While 'both sides' in political arguments are given opportunities to express

their views it is largely assumed that there are usually only two sides. The two major parties spend most of their time attacking each other and rarely engage with challenger parties. Most stories are framed around the government's and official opposition's lines because of their established positions. In election campaigns, broadcasting regulations also advantage the two major parties. Challenger parties find it difficult to cut through. In 2019 the Liberal Democrats were excluded from a two-headed televised debate between the prime minister and leader of the opposition. Neither the courts nor Ofcom were willing to stop it going ahead.[34] The rise of social media has reduced the major parties' advantages to a degree. Nevertheless, traditional or 'legacy' media, like the constitution, are still largely organised around the logic of two-party politics.

Electoral system

The most obvious reason why Britain's two-party system endures is its plurality electoral system. The simple rule that the winning candidate in each constituency needs more votes than any other candidate profoundly influences the behaviour of electors and parties.[35] If there were two candidates, voters could cast a sincere vote for their preferred candidate since it would also enable them to stop their least preferred candidate. If there are more than two candidates, voters may cast a tactical vote in order to elect their second-choice candidate and/or to prevent their least preferred candidate from winning. In short, their vote depends on their relative preferences for the candidates, the number of candidates and each candidate's likelihood of winning. If a party is unlikely to gain a plurality, voting for it will be a 'wasted vote'. Over time, such parties will have their vote 'squeezed'. After the 2017 election the two major parties were in first and second place in 522 out of 650 seats.[36] The Liberal Democrats were second in just 35 constituencies and the Greens runners-up in just one. Casting a ballot for these challenger parties might help them build on that vote in later elections. It might

represent a symbolic rejection of the major parties. In terms of choosing a representative, however, it would be largely pointless. Parties know that too. The cost of fighting a losing campaign – in terms of effort and lost deposits – can deter them from investing resources into seats or even fielding candidates.

National considerations increase the squeeze on challenger parties. The old adage that a Westminster election is really 650 individual contests is misleading. General elections are, above all, opportunities to choose a government, and that choice is either Labour or Conservative. Unless there are strong forces in their favour, challenger parties are subject to a double squeeze: X will not win here, X will not form the government.[37] The collapse of the Liberal Party documented in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 illustrates this well. In 1924 the Liberals fielded 339 candidates and won 18 per cent of the vote and 40 seats. In 1929 they fielded 513 candidates and won 23 per cent of the vote and 59 seats. In 1931 the party fielded just 119 candidates, won 7 per cent of the vote and took 39 seats. By 1931 it was clear to all that the party was no longer a serious competitor for government.

Most accounts suggest that the electoral system is an exogenous cause of the two-party system but the choice of voting system is chosen by the two major parties. The two-party system predated the universal adoption of the single-member plurality system for Westminster elections. Since Parliament is sovereign and only Labour and the Conservatives are likely to govern, the voting system is unlikely to change. Some in the Labour Party toyed with electoral reform immediately after its fourth consecutive general-election defeat in 1992. Ahead of the 1997 election, the party leadership promised an inquiry and then a referendum that would allow voters to choose between the plurality system and a proportional alternative. True to its word, the incoming Labour government established an independent commission on electoral reform. In 1998 this body recommended a hybrid system called ‘alternative vote plus’ that would use the alternative vote in constituency elections and a regional top up to

reduce disproportionality.[38] The promised referendum never happened. Labour made progressively weaker commitments to review the system in subsequent manifestos. It then resurrected the issue of electoral reform in 2009 ahead of an anticipated hung parliament. As a sweetener for potential coalition partners, its 2010 manifesto promised a referendum on introducing the alternative-vote system (AV) but without any regional top up. As sweeteners go, it was somewhat soured by the fact that AV can be more disproportional than the plurality system.[39] In the event, the 2010 election led to a hung parliament with the Conservatives as the largest party. The Tories matched Labour's offer of a referendum on AV in their coalition agreement with the Liberal Democrats but left themselves free to campaign against it. The 2011 poll elicited little interest and voters emphatically rejected AV with 68 per cent voting 'No' and 32 per cent 'Yes' on a turnout of just 42 per cent.

Party adaptation

The present party system's resilience owes much to the constitution and the electoral system. It also owes a great deal to the underlying social conflicts and political issues that it embodies. The system is rooted in Labour's adoption of a socialist programme in 1918.[40] Its advocacy of massive increases in public spending to provide healthcare, education and welfare appealed to the interests of the newly enfranchised and majority working class. It was so popular that it compelled the Conservatives to accept that government should play a greater role in the economy and society. From that point on, elections were structured around a choice between 'more' government activity with Labour, and 'less' with the Tories.

In any system, outputs in one period feedback as inputs into the next. The expansion of the state after 1945 modified party coalitions. It created a new middle class employed by the state with a vested interest in government activity. Many voters also came to rely on the state for health, education and transport. These groups tended to coalesce around Labour.

Workers in the private sector and homeowners were usually less willing to pay taxes to fund this activity and tended to coalesce around the Conservatives. From the 1960s onwards, immigration from the Commonwealth added another distinct social group to the coalition in favour of government activity. In more recent years, younger voters have increasingly looked to government for assistance with tuition fees, low wages and housing. Over time the electoral coalitions have evolved as society has evolved.

Policy tends to track public preferences because the electorate generally rewards moderation and punishes extremism. Labour's lurches to the left in February 1974 and 1983, for example, were associated with reductions in its vote share. Its move to the centre in 1997 was rewarded with a 9-point increase in its vote share (see Figure 4.2). Likewise, the Conservatives' moves to the right in 1983 and 1987 reduced their vote share, though not enough to prevent victory. The two major parties' distance from the centre during this time even created space for the Liberals to grow their support. Other factors can lessen the effects of moderation and extremism. Labour's centrism helped it sustain its vote share in 2001 but not in 2005 when anger over the Iraq war cost it support. In 2017, the collapse of UKIP, the continued toxicity of the Liberal Democrats and a disastrous Conservative campaign help to explain why Labour's vote share shot up by 8 points even as the party moved further to the left.[41] Net of these factors, however, moving left almost certainly cost Labour votes.

The occasional lurches of the parties to their polar positions are something of a puzzle given the parties' office-seeking motivations. One explanation is that the parties do not appreciate the impact of these moves. This is unlikely but cannot be altogether excluded. Parties may be able to move towards their preferred polar positions if the enjoy other advantages as a result of enduring party loyalties, assessments of party competence or the operation of the plurality electoral system. The signals sent by voters may be misinterpreted as indicating a preference for radical policies. Parties sometimes fall into the hands of

individuals for whom ideological convictions outweigh the pursuit of office. The Labour Party in particular is prone to periodic lurches towards its polar position.

Despite the centrality of economic issues, the two-party system has always incorporated issues associated with other social conflicts. The Conservatives historically defended the established Church of England, whereas Labour was founded by non-conformists who were keen to free themselves from its orthodoxies. The 1964-70 Labour government did much to ensure a more 'permissive society', making divorce and abortion easier and legalising homosexual relations.[42] The Conservatives generally resisted these changes though some Tory MPs supported liberalisation. Many working-class voters held more traditional views but remained tied to Labour out of loyalty or because they attached more importance to economic issues.

In recent years party loyalties have been strained by new cross-cutting issues. Some relate to personal freedom, sexuality and recreational drugs. In general, younger and better educated voters support liberalisation while older and less educated voters oppose it. The most impactful issues, however, relate to immigration. The fault lines are again age and education, as Maria Sobolewska explains in Chapter 5. Younger and better educated voters tend to view immigration positively, older and less educated voters view it negatively. In the mid-2000s the influx of workers from Eastern Europe strained the loyalties of many Labour voters who felt threatened by migrants. Both Labour ministers and activists – who tend to be younger and better educated – largely welcomed this influx. The issue drove a wedge between Labour and its traditional supporters. Some defected to minor parties like the British National Party or UKIP. Others abstained. When David Cameron announced an 'in-out' referendum on EU membership, the issue of immigration became bundled up with EU membership and concerns about national sovereignty. The 2016 referendum gave people the chance to register their concerns about immigration and 'take back control'.

The 2016 referendum produced two groups of voters whose party loyalties were out of line with their positions on Brexit: Conservative Remainers and Labour Leavers. Large portions of both groups switched between the two main parties in 2017 but both the Conservatives and Labour were sufficiently ambiguous to retain some voters in the respective groups. After two years of Brexit delay both major parties resolved the tensions by prioritising party unity and following their members' preferences. The Tories adopted a policy of leaving even without a deal. Labour adopted a policy of renegotiating a deal and then putting it to the people in a second referendum.

In the aftermath of Brexit, a new coalition of the young, the educated, ethnic minorities and sizeable portions of Remainers coalesced around Labour. This group supports government activity, personal freedoms and a closer relationship with Europe. The new Conservative coalition consists of the old, the less educated and many white voters and Leavers in former Labour areas. This group supports traditional values and looser links with the EU. When it comes to government activity the Tories' new recruits are out of line with the party's commitment to a smaller state. The Conservatives promised Leavers in former Labour seats that they would 'level up' variations in wealth. Boris Johnson has allegedly described himself as a 'Brexity Hezza'.[43] This allusion to Lord Heseltine, a former Conservative deputy prime minister and advocate of state intervention, implies a commitment to continued public spending in 'left behind' areas. Tories of a free-market disposition may resist these policies. These contradictions may cause tensions in the Conservative coalition.

Voters and the party system

The system of alternating single-party rule represents one way of governing Britain but there are alternatives. Other countries – and the devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – provide their electorates with more choice by adopting a proportional

electoral system. Such systems almost invariably lead to power-sharing coalitions. The policies that emerge are often demonstrably closer to public opinion but the direct link between election outcomes and government formation is broken.[44]

Most individuals do not have strong preferences between single party or coalition government. As is the case with many abstract issues, individuals are ambivalent and their responses often reflect misunderstanding. Nevertheless, when preferences are aggregated, they become intelligible. Over the last three decades, British Social Attitudes has asked respondents whether it would generally be better to have a government formed by 'one political party on its own' or 'two political parties together – in coalition.' Figure 4.8 shows that, on balance, there was a clear preference for single-party government from 1983 until the early 1990s, when the public became more evenly divided on the merits of the two options. The public's experience of coalition from 2010 to 2015, however, seems to have put the cause of power sharing back. Support for single-party government shot up in 2011 and support for coalition government fell back. There is no data for 2019 but it seems unlikely that the public's experience of the Brexit deadlock advanced the cause for power sharing.

FIGURE 4.8 ABOUT HERE

Evidence from the British Election Study (BES) provides further evidence of popular support for single-party government. Between 2014 and 2017, respondents consistently tended to agree that 'it is more difficult to know who to blame when parties govern in coalition' or that 'parties cannot deliver on their promises when they govern in coalition.' Conversely, respondents consistently tended to disagree that 'coalition governments are more effective than single party governments' or that 'coalition governments are more in tune with the public than governments formed of one party.'[45]

Traditional claims about the virtues of the two-party system still seem to be widely accepted. Even in the unlikely event that one of the two parties – presumably Labour – were to adopt the cause of proportional representation, it seems that they would be hard put to convince a sceptical public in a referendum. Public opinion towards coalitions provides another reason why the two-party system is likely to endure.

Embellishments and details: the challenger parties in 2019

British general elections continue to be a choice ultimately between a Conservative or a Labour government. Yet, voters also have other options, even if these are 'wasted votes' when it comes to choosing a government. From a systemic perspective, voters can back one of the challenger parties to send a message that the two major parties need to pay more attention to neglected issues, such as regional government or the environment. Voters can also signal their dissatisfaction with the two major parties and use challenger parties as 'a bucket to spit in'.[46] Such behaviour can be hugely consequential at a local level. High levels of support for one of the challenger parties can make it harder for one or both the two major parties to win a seat. What are embellishments and details at the macro level can be hugely important at the micro level. It is to these embellishments and details that we turn now.

The Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats are the oldest of the challenger parties. Their long history provides clues about what drives behaviour in the party system since it was their growing support between 1950 and 2010 that was intimately related to the decline of the two-party vote. In principle, these developments could represent voters being pushed away from the two major parties or being pulled to the centre party. There are good reasons, however, for believing that 'push' rather than 'pull' factors best explain the Liberal Democrats' growth.[47] While the party

has long fretted about what it can do to increase its vote share, it has ultimately relied on one or other, or both, of the two major parties to push voters towards them.[48]

The growth in centre-party vote is associated with three systemic factors. The first is social change, specifically an increasing middle class, increasing levels of education, an expanding public-sector workforce and a consequent increase in liberal values. Since the centre party was out of office between 1922 and 2010, it cannot have contributed in any way to these changes; it was simply the beneficiary. The second factor underlying Liberal Democrat growth was the behaviour of the Conservatives and Labour. When either of the major parties vacated the centre, parts of the electorate found themselves closer to the Liberal Democrats and some switched despite 'wasted vote' arguments. In some cases, local-election successes helped convince voters that they could win the seat.[49] In February 1974 Labour lurched to the left and the Liberal vote share increased by 12 points. In 1983, Labour and the Conservatives simultaneously moved to their polar positions and the SDP-Liberal Alliance shot up by 12 points.

The third factor pushing voters to the centre-party were comparative assessments of party competence such as those displayed in Figure 4.7. In February 1974, for example, the Conservatives diminished reputation pushed voters to the Liberals. Assessments of Liberal Democrat competence were not directly affected by economic conditions since it was never in power. Assessments of Liberal Democrat competence were driven almost entirely by evaluations of the two major parties. The only thing the party did to influence assessments of their competence was to join a coalition in 2010. As Figure 4.7 shows this decision damaged its reputation for competence.

The Liberal Democrats' decision to enter a coalition also had a direct impact on the party's vote, reducing it by around 15 points.[50] It continued to cost them in 2017 and 2019. The reasons for this are simply stated. One consequence of the Conservatives' relative

electoral success was that over time, the Liberal Democrats acquired a reputation as a centre-left party. By the mid-1990s at a constituency level they were largely in competition with the Tories. The party signalled its unwillingness to form a coalition with the Conservatives.[51] This encouraged non-Conservative voters to vote tactically against the Tories from 1997 to 2010 and netted the Liberal Democrats extra seats (see Figure 4.4). When the party jointed a Conservative-led coalition in 2010, many voters felt duped. Support for the party halved within a few months.[52] The sense of betrayal was heightened by the coalition government's cuts to public spending that appalled many of the left-of-centre voters who had 'lent' the Liberal Democrats their votes. At the 2015 general election the Liberal Democrats experienced their own 'costs of ruling'. The magnitude and speed of this reversal of fortune was astonishing.

After the 2015 debacle, the Liberal Democrats tried to restore their fortunes by electing a new leader, Tim Farron, who was untainted by personal association with the coalition. The result of the 2016 referendum on EU membership boosted the party's membership. Many Liberal Democrats hoped that its consistent pro-European views would remove the stain of coalition and attract back many Remain voters who were disappointed by Labour's timidity in opposing Brexit. These hopes were dashed in 2017. The party gained two seats lost but lost votes. The Liberal Democrats looked to their own actions to explain their failure. Some blamed Farron's failure to cut through to voters and allegations that Farron – as an Evangelical Christian – believed that gay sex was a sin. In the wake of the disappointing result Farron resigned and was replaced by the 74-year-old Sir Vince Cable.

The Liberal Democrats' reduced number of MPs meant that the party was bit-player in the drama that unfolded at Westminster following the 2017 general election. The break-away Independent Group of Labour MPs, later known as Change UK, initially appeared to represent a threat to the Liberal Democrats, especially when they were joined by three

moderate Conservative MPs. But that new group soon imploded. Some of its more prominent MPs, including Luciana Berger and Chuka Ummuna (formerly Labour) and Heidi Allen and Sarah Wollaston (formerly Tory), later joined the Liberal Democrats, as did two Tory rebels, Sam Gyimah and Antoinette Sandbach. The chaos surrounding the Brexit negotiations and Labour's reluctance to support a second referendum provided the Liberal Democrats with an opportunity to unite Remain voters in Remain seats. The party was buoyed by its second place in the May 2019 European Parliament elections, when it received 20 per cent of the vote. It was further buoyed by polling evidence that suggested the party was poised to win 73 seats.[53] Cable stepped down in July 2019 and was replaced by Jo Swinson. The youthful new leader suggested that she was a candidate for prime minister and that a Liberal Democrat victory would provide a mandate for revoking Brexit without a further referendum.

After the European elections, events moved quickly and worked against the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives replaced the unpopular Theresa May with Boris Johnson. Labour adopted its second-referendum policy, enabling it to claw back some of its lost support among Remainers. The Liberal Democrats then played a crucial role in ensuring a December general election by voting for the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill. The party claimed that an election was necessary to halt the passage of the Withdrawal Bill, but others believed that the party was simply cashing in on its new-found support. Once the campaign got underway it was clear that the Liberal Democrats had lost momentum. When Swinson was given a platform to appeal directly to voters, such as on the BBC's *Question Time* programme, her messages fell flat. Her promise that a Liberal Democrat victory would allow them to cancel Brexit provoked anger from Leavers. Swinson was also challenged about her support for austerity as a minister in the 2010 coalition government.[54] As ever, the wasted-vote argument was deployed against the Liberal Democrats at the local level and support for the party fell back in the campaign. Overall, the party increased its vote share by

3.8 points but suffered a net loss of one seat, reducing them to just 11 MPs. The party's 13.8 per cent share of the vote was lower than in any general election between 1974 and 2010. Although the Liberal Democrats recorded spectacular increases in some southern Remain seats, such as Surrey South West, Esher and Walton, Buckingham, Finchley and Golders Green, and Hitchin and Harpenden, it was rarely enough. To cap a bad election night, Jo Swinson lost her own seat in East Dumbartonshire to the SNP by 149 votes.

In the wake of their defeat some Liberal Democrats found comfort in the fact that they were in second place in 92 seats, 80 of which were Conservative held. This might provide a springboard for future success. Yet their fortunes will continue to be driven by public responses to the two major parties. If the past is any guide one or both of the major parties will move away from the centre or lose their reputation for competence. Yet even this may not restore the Liberal Democrats' fortunes. Other parties may take up their mantle as the main challenger party.

The Brexit Party

The Brexit Party that contested the 2019 general election was the inheritor of the United Kingdom Independence Party. UKIP was originally formed in 1993 to oppose the UK's membership of the European Union. It had performed poorly in general elections until 2015 when a series of developments boosted its support (see Table 4.1). The most important of these was increasing public concern – particularly among older and less educated voters – about the economic and cultural consequences of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. This issue had previously been exploited by the far-right British National Party (BNP), which campaigned primarily in working-class constituencies in the early 2000s. When the BNP fell apart in a bitter internal struggle, UKIP took the opportunity to link the issue of immigration with withdrawal from the EU.[55] UKIP argued that the UK could not

control immigration while being in the single market. The party's prospects were boosted by the formation of a Conservative-led coalition government in 2010. Those voters who were generally disgruntled could no longer spit in the Liberal Democrat bucket because that party was now in government. Those voters who were disgruntled about the specific issue of immigration turned to UKIP. The Tories had promised to reduce net migration 'to the tens of thousands'.[56] They failed to keep these promises – partly because the economy needed migrant labour and partly because the Liberal Democrats resisted 'tougher' policies. Support for this challenger party was again driven by the failures of the major parties.

TABLE 4.1 ABOUT HERE

UKIP contributed to its own success by moving away from its narrow fixation on the EU and using immigration to grab attention. It also adopted a successful populist approach, drawing on dissatisfaction with 'the system' and the seeming unresponsiveness of the elected representatives.[57] These themes resonated after the 2007-08 financial crisis and the 2009 MPs expenses scandal.[58] Nigel Farage, the party's leader, characterised the two major parties as part of a 'Westminster elite' and claimed to speak for 'the people'. His rhetoric found a ready audience among those who had grown disillusioned with the major parties.

UKIP came first in the 2014 European Parliament elections and followed that with success at the 2015 general election. The party fielded 624 candidates and received 13 per cent of the vote. Although it won only one seat, it lost only 79 deposits, showing that it had widespread support.[59] Its success from 2010 onwards contributed to David Cameron's decision to hold an in-out referendum. UKIP subsequently provided some of the more controversial contributions to the 2016 referendum campaign, including the 'breaking point'

poster that claimed to show a hoard of migrants heading for Britain. Arron Banks, one of UKIP's most prominent financial backers, styled the party as 'the bad boys of Brexit'.[60]

Support for UKIP collapsed after the 2016 referendum. Many voters and members regarded their mission as accomplished. Farage stepped down as leader and those who remained tried to rebrand UKIP as an anti-Muslim party. The party failed miserably in the 2017 general election and was riven by bitter personal battles. Yet, as the Brexit process dragged on, many Eurosceptics began to worry that Theresa May's government would produce a 'Brexit in name only' or no Brexit at all. Farage and others launched the new Brexit Party in April 2019. It scored an immediate success by coming first in the European Parliament elections with 31 per cent of the vote. The electoral threat posed by the new party was one of the factors that persuaded Conservatives to replace May with Boris Johnson. The new prime minister rejected a proposed 'Leave alliance' and dealt with the Brexit-Party threat by expressing a noisy intention to leave the EU with or without a deal. Support for the Brexit Party evaporated. In November 2019 the party decided to field candidates only in the 337 seats not held by the Conservatives. Having failed in his previous seven attempts to enter Parliament, Farage declined to stand himself.

In the general election the Brexit Party obtained 2 per cent of the vote. Its influence on both the campaign and outcome was limited. It did well in Leave-voting former mining constituencies like Barnsley East, Barnsley Central, Wentworth and Dearne, Doncaster North, Don Valley, Rother Valley, Easington and Blaenau Gwent, where a Conservative vote was socially unacceptable. Otherwise its intervention did little to alter the outcome.

From a systemic perspective, however, both UKIP and the Brexit Party have been impactful. They have influenced the direction of policy, even though they came nowhere near government. UKIP's success in the late 2000s persuaded the Conservatives to hold a referendum. Hard-line Tory Eurosceptics used the threat of the Brexit Party to strong-arm

their party to ‘get Brexit done’. Voting for – or threatening to vote for – these parties was not a ‘wasted vote’. There are other targets – such as human rights legislation – that might motivate future campaigns.[61] The issue of immigration is also likely to provide further opportunities. Centre-right parties can suppress populist parties but only by mimicking their policies.[62] Authoritarian populist parties are likely to remain a fixture of Britain’s party system.

The Greens

Britain is unusual among Western European countries in having a weak Green party.[63] This is at least in part because other parties – particularly the Liberal Democrats and Labour – have incorporated environmental concerns in their programmes. Nevertheless, support for the Greens has increased over recent elections, as displayed in Table 4.2.

TABLE 4.2 ABOUT HERE

Increased support for the Greens in part reflects the declining significance of old class-based issues and the rise of cultural issues. Green voters tend to be young, better educated and have post-material concerns – chiefly about the environment, but also democracy, human rights and freedom.[64] Support for the Greens has risen as a result of the expansion of educational opportunities, increasing concerns about climate change and – as always with challenger parties – disillusion with other parties.

Like all other challenger parties, the Greens find it difficult to convert votes into seats under the plurality voting system. The party does better where proportional electoral systems are used, such as in the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and especially in London. Success in these elections has encouraged the party to field more candidates in general elections. Despite

the costs of fighting losing campaigns, the Greens have never fielded fewer than 300 candidates since 2010 (see Table 4.2). In 2015 they fielded a record 573 candidates, losing 442 deposits or £221,000. For all its efforts the party has just one seat at Westminster. It has held Brighton Pavilion since 2010 partly as a result of a strong personal vote for its lone MP, Caroline Lucas. The Greens remain vulnerable to being squeezed. In 2017 when the Labour campaign attracted younger and better educated voters the party's share of the vote fell. In 2019 its share of the vote rose as voters turned away from Labour.

For the moment the Greens appear unlikely to pose a serious electoral threat to the other parties. Despite their massive efforts in the 2019 general election the party came second in just Bristol West and Dulwich and West Northwood, both seats with massive Labour majorities. They have few obvious 'target' seats. If the environment rises up the agenda, they are likely to prosper. Comparative studies suggest that if mainstream parties respond by emphasising their environmental credentials, they tend to increase the importance of the issue and boost support for the Greens still further because they are assumed to 'own' that issue.[65] Environmental issues have not yet reached that level of public concern. Such a development would pose difficulties for Labour, particularly if it seeks to claw back working-class voters who are more concerned with jobs than post-material issues.

The nationalist parties

In addition to the challenger parties that contest almost every seat are those nationalist parties that cannot hope to form a government at Westminster since they only contest seats in their region. The goal of these parties is to break the union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, creating an independent Scotland and Wales and, in the case of Northern Ireland, a united Ireland. Sinn Féin's Irish nationalist MPs never take their seats in Parliament because they do not recognise its legitimacy. Nevertheless, all these parties can matter a great deal in their

respective regions and may influence the behaviour of parties and voters in England where upwards of 86 per cent of the population live.

The historical relationship between Scotland and England was one of suspicion punctuated by conflict. Scotland united with England in 1707 but retained its distinctive legal and educational systems. The Scottish National Party (SNP) was established in the early twentieth century with the goal of breaking the union. It attracted little support until the late 1960s when a growing sense of difference north of the border led first to a decline in support for the Conservative Party. Labour came to be seen as the defender of Scottish interests. Nevertheless, in the 1974 general elections the SNP used the issue of North Sea oil to campaign to keep the benefits of 'Scotland's oil'.[66] The SNP vote share in Scotland rose to 30 per cent in October 1974 but it won only 15 per cent of the seats (see Table 4.3). Labour responded by offering a measure of devolved government. These proposals were supported by a narrow majority of Scots in a referendum in early 1979. Nevertheless, the plans for devolution were shelved because 40 per cent of the electorate did not support the proposals, a requirement set out in the referendum's paving legislation.

TABLE 4.3 ABOUT HERE

Support for the SNP fell during the eighteen years of Conservative rule after 1979 but support for devolution did not. In 1997 the Scots voted in another referendum in favour of establishing a new Scottish Parliament with wide primary law-making powers. Labour won the first two Scottish Parliament elections and governed in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Since the elections were fought under a proportional system, the SNP was unhindered by the wasted-vote argument and fared much better than at Westminster. It rebranded itself as a centre-left party that stood up for Scotland and portrayed Scottish

Labour as London's representatives in Scotland. By 2007 it had won enough seats to the Scottish Parliament to form the government in Edinburgh. However, the SNP still struggled to convert its support in Scottish Parliament elections into votes and seats at Westminster. In the 2010 general election it gained a mere 20 per cent of the vote.

After winning an overall majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections, the SNP felt strong enough to call a referendum on Scottish independence. The Scots rejected independence by 55 per cent to 45 per cent in the 2014 vote but the referendum forged strong identities for 'Yes' and 'No' to independence. The referendum also compelled Labour to defend the union in alliance with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Labour's claim to represent Scottish interests was cast into doubt. In the 2015 general election the SNP won 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland and Labour was reduced from 41 to just one seat.

The SNP suffered a reverse in the 2017 general election, when its vote share fell back by 13 points. Labour won seven seats, the Conservatives won 13 and the Liberal Democrats won four.[67] The Nationalists remained in first place with 35 per cent of the vote and 35 seats. In 2019 the SNP raised the prospect of a second referendum on independence. By then it was clear that the UK was likely to leave the EU. The Scots had been told by the main parties in the 2014 independence referendum that they might not be able to join the EU as an independent nation. Now Scotland was being taken out of the EU, despite having voted overwhelmingly to remain. Together with the prospect of a Conservative government in London, Brexit was enough to tip the balance in favour of the SNP. Labour was again reduced to one seat, the Tories to six and the Liberal Democrats retained four seats. The SNP won 48 of the 59 seats in Scotland. The party immediately demanded a second referendum on independence and the Conservative government in London immediately rejected it.

The SNP's victories north of the border have had systemic implications. They have been used as campaign weapons by the Tories in England. In 2015 Conservative general

election posters portrayed Ed Miliband, the then Labour leader, as someone in the pocket of the SNP in the event of a hung parliament. Such claims may have influenced a small number of voters in the last two general elections. They may have a greater impact in the future.

Plaid Cyrmu, the Welsh nationalist party, has been unable to match the success of the SNP in Scotland (see Table 4.4). Wales has been integrated with England far longer than Scotland, and it has been more fully integrated. There is no distinctive legal system as in Scotland and the Welsh education system is less distinctive. Its politics have also long been dominated by Labour. Welsh nationalists have never had an issue such as North Sea oil to generate a sense of difference or grievance. Whereas a narrow majority of Scots supported devolution in 1979, nearly 80 per of voters in Wales opposed it in their referendum. The 1997 referendum on the creation of a Welsh assembly was also much closer than the equivalent poll in Scotland. The measure was approved by just 50.3 per cent. Labour has governed in Cardiff, either by itself or in coalition with another party, ever since.

TABLE 4.4 ABOUT HERE

Welsh national identity is based around the Welsh language, which is spoken by a small majority. Nevertheless, the Welsh Parliament or Senedd has been running for over twenty years and has established its reputation. In 2011 voters in Wales agreed to extend its powers. Wales, like England, voted narrowly to leave the EU in 2016, and UKIP and the Brexit Party have performed well there. On election night in 2019 the Conservatives gained six seats and Labour lost six. Labour's grip on Wales looked more fragile than at any point since 1945.

Conclusions

The outcome of the 2019 general election confirmed that the two-party system is likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Anywhere but in Scotland – a statement that covers around 90 per cent of the electorate – voters who wish to eject the Conservatives at the next general election must hope that Labour can build an electoral coalition and develop a programme that unites a broad swathe of the left and centre left. Those who wish to prevent a Labour government must place their trust in the Conservatives.

Neither of the two major parties are likely to disappear any time soon.[68] Neither is likely to embrace a more cooperative politics based on proportionality and coalitions. If the past is any guide governments will disappoint and the pendulum will swing to the opposition. If the current opposition is unattractive other parties may well gain votes but are unlikely to gain seats. It is possible that there may be more hung parliaments and that minor parties could demand electoral reform as the price for coalition. The major parties, however, are likely to govern as minorities. And even if one of the parties were to accede to such demands there would be one final obstacle. It is now widely accepted that any change to the electoral system must be endorsed by voters in a referendum. Recent experiences have damaged public perceptions of coalitions. This, together with all the other forces that reduce politics to a binary choice, means that challenger parties are unlikely to bring down the two-party system.

Notes

[1] Leslie Lipson. 'The two-party system in British Politics', *American Political Science Review* 47 (1953), 337-58; Paul Webb, *The Modern British Party System* (London: Sage, 2000).

[2] Northern Ireland is largely detached from the rest of the UK party system. It has traditionally returned a very small number of MPs. The developments in the province are beyond the scope of this chapter.

[3] The phrase comes from Peter Pulzer's famous comment on the social basis of electoral competition in Britain: 'class is the basis of British party politics; all else is embellishment and detail.' See Peter G. J. Pulzer, *Political Representation and elections in Britain* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 98.

[4] Anthony King, *The British Constitution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 39-62.

[5] Patrick Dunleavy (2005) 'Facing up to Multi-Party Politics: How Partisan Dealignment and PR Voting Have Fundamentally Changed Britain's Party System', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 58, 503-532.

[6] Power Commission, *Power to the People: The Report of Power – An Independent Inquiry into Britain's Democracy* (London: The POWER Inquiry, 2006),

[7] Philip Norton, 'The politics of coalition' in Nicholas Allen and John Bartle (eds) *Britain at the Polls 2010* (London: Sage, 2011), pp. 242-65.

[8] Rosie Campbell, 'A coalition of chaos' in Nicholas Allen and John Bartle (eds) *None Past the Post: Britain at the Polls 2017* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 190-213.

[9] Alan R. Ball, *British Political Parties: the Emergence of a Modern Party System* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

[10] Paul Adelman, *The Decline of the Liberal Party, 1910-1931* (London: Longman, 1981).

[11] The choice of 1918 as a start date is based on more than historical convention. The 1918 general election marked the first election that can be said to have taken place on the basis of almost universal suffrage. The working class and women over 30 could vote. The 1928 election represented the first election when women could vote on the same basis as men.

[12] Thomas Quinn, 'From two-partism to alternating predominance: The changing UK party system, 1950–2010', *Political Studies* 61 (2012), 378-400.

[13] In 1931 and 1951 this was in part the result of the decision not to contest many seats.

[14] Ian Budge, *Politics: A Unified Introduction of How Democracy Works* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[15] John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[16] Christopher J. Wlezien, 'The public as thermostat: Dynamics of preferences for spending', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 981-1000.

[17] This is calculated simply by subtracting defence expenditure as a proportion of GDP from total managed expenditure. The defence spending estimates are available from SIPRI from 1951 (https://sipri.org/databases/milex). Total managed expenditure estimates are from the Office for Budget Responsibility (https://obr.uk/public-finances-databank-2019-20/). Ideally, we would also deduct other 'right-wing' spending on law and order, the courts and so on but this data is not readily available.

[18] John Bartle, Sebastian Dellepiane-Avalleneda and James A. Stimson, 'The moving centre: preferences for government activity in Britain, 1950-2005', *British Journal of Political Science*, 41 (2011), 259-85.

[19] Estimates are based on responses to multiple questions that ask which party is best able to deal with issues and problems. See John Bartle, Nicholas Allen and Thomas Quinn,

'Modelling British post-war general elections, 1945-2017 Party position, policy mood and party competence' Paper prepared for delivery at the Elections Public Opinion and Political Parties Conference at the University of Strathclyde, 13-15 September 2019. See also Jane Green and Will Jennings, *The Politics of Competence: Parties, Public opinion and* Voters (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[20] Anthony King, 'Why Labour won – at last' in Anthony King (ed.), *New Labour Triumphs: Britain at the Polls* (New Jersey: Chatham House, 1998), pp. 177-208.

[21] See Peter Naanstead and Martin Paldam, 'The costs of ruling', in Han Dorussen and Michael Taylor (eds), *Economic Voting* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 17-44.

[22] David Butler and Donald Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: The Evolution of Electoral Preference* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

[23] Anthony King, 'Why Labour won – At last' in Anthony King (ed.) *New Labour Triumphs: Britain at the Polls* (Chatham, N.J: Chatham House, 1998), pp.177-207, p. 205.

[24] Robert S Erikson, Michael B. Mackuen and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[25] Kaare Strøm, 'A behavioural theory of competitive political parties', *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (1990), 565-98.

[26] John Bartle and Paolo Bellucci, (eds) *Political Parties and Partisanship: Social identity and Individual Attitudes* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[27] Ivor Jennings, *The Queen's Government* (London: Pelican, 1964), p. 62

[28] Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, 'The cartel party thesis: A restatement', *Perspectives on Politics*, 7 (2009), 753-66.

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[30] A.V. Dicey, *Lectures Introductory to the Study of the Law of the Constitution* (London: Macmillan, 1885).

[31] Gary Cox, *Making Votes Count: Strategic Coordination in the World's Electoral Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 181-202.

[32] Anthony King, *Does the United Kingdom Still Have a Constitution?* (London: Sweet and Maxwell, 2002), p. 29

[33] *House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper: Short Money* (London: House of Commons, 2020).

[34] Owen Bowcott, 'Lib Dems and SNP lose high court bid over TV election debate', *Guardian*, 18 November 2020.

[35] Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Methuen, 1954).

[36] Ron Johnston, David Rossiter, David Manley, Charles Pattie, Todd Hartman and Kelvyn Jones, 'Coming full circle: The 2017 UK general election and the changing electoral map', *Geographical Journal*, 184 (2018), 100-108.

[37] Thomas Quinn, 'Third-Party Strategy under Plurality Rule: The British Liberal Democrats and the New Zealand Social Credit Party', *Political Studies*, 65 (2017), 740-63.

[38] Independent Commission on the Voting System, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System*, Cm 4090-1, (London: The Stationary Office, 1998).

[39] Independent Commission on the Voting System, *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Voting System*, para. 87.

[40] Judith Bara and Albert Weale, 'Introduction' in Judith Bara and Albert Weale (eds) *Democratic Politics and Party Competition* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.1-20: p. 4.

[41] See John Bartle, 'Why the Conservatives lost their majority – but still won' in Allen and Bartle, *None Past the Post*, pp. 160-189.

[42] Clive Ponting, *Breach of Promise: Labour in Power, 1964-70* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

[43] Tom Newton Dunn, 'Brexit Backstab', *The Sun*, 11 September 2019.

[44] Thomas Quinn, Judith Bara and John Bartle, 'The coalition agreement, who won? The verdict of the content analyses', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 21 (2011), 295-312.

[45] British Election Study Internet Panel. In May 2017, for example, 56 per cent agreed that 'it is more difficult to know who to blame' and 16 per cent disagreed; 60 per cent agreed that 'parties cannot deliver on their promises' and 14 per cent disagreed; 14 per cent agreed that 'coalition governments are more effective' and 47 per cent disagreed; and 29 per cent agreed that 'coalition governments are more in tune with the public' and 34 per cent disagreed.

[46] Austin Mitchell, 'Opposition tied in a tag-wrestling knot - A Labour view of third-party tangles, *Guardian*, 22 January, 1988.

[47] Bartle *et al*., 'Modelling British post-war general elections, 1945-2017'.

[48] Don MacIver, 'Political strategy' in Don MacIver (ed.), *The Liberal Democrats* (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), pp. 173-90.

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[50] Bartle *et al*., 'Modelling British post-war general elections, 1945-2017'.

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[52] John Curtice, 'Remaining in the doldrums', in Allen and Bartle, *None Past the Post*, pp. 58-77.

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[56]Conservative Party, *The Conservative Manifesto 2010: Invitation to Join the Government of Britain* (London: The Conservative Party, 2010), p. 29.

[57] Steve Richards, *The Rise of the Outsiders: How Mainstream Politics Lost its Way* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018).

[58] See Michael Moran, 'The financial crisis and its consequences' in Allen and Bartle, *Britain at the Polls 2010*, pp. 89-119; Oliver Heath, 'The great divide: voters, parties, MPs and expenses', in Allen and Bartle, *Britain at the Polls 2010*, pp. 120-146.

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[60] Arron Banks, *The Bad Boys of Brexit: Tales of Mischief, Mayhem & Guerrilla Warfare in the EU Referendum Campaign* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

[61] John Bartle, David Sanders and Joe Tywman, 'Authoritarian populist opinion in Europe', in Ivor Crewe and David Sanders (eds) *Authoritarian Populism and Liberal Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 49-72.

[62] Tarik Abou-Chadi, 'Niche party success and mainstream party policy shifts – How Green and radical right parties differ in their impact', *British Journal of Political Science*, 46 (2014), 417-436.

[63] Or, more accurately, parties, since the Greens in England and Wales, in Scotland and in Northern Ireland are independent entities.

[64] Sarah Birch 'Real progress: Prospects for Green party support in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 62 (2009), 53–71.

[65] Abou-Chadi, 'Niche party success and mainstream party policy shifts'.

[66] Iain McLean, 'The politics of fractured federalism' in John Bartle and Anthony King (eds), *Britain at the Polls 2005* (Washington: CQ Press, 2006), pp. 97-123.

[67] Rob Johns, 'Squeezing the SNP' in Allen and Bartle, *None Past the Post*, pp. 100-120.

[68] There is one example that provides more hope for reform. New Zealand chose to abandon the plurality system in the mid-1990s. See Jack H. Nagel, 'Social Choice in a Pluralitarian Democracy: The Politics of Market Liberalization in New Zealand', *British Journal of Political Science*, 28 (1998), 223-267.

Table 4.1 UKIP/Brexit Party performance in general elections, 2001-19

	UKIP					Brexit Party
	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Vote (%)	1.5	2.2	3.1	12.6	1.8	2.0
Candidates (N)	428	496	558	624	378	273
Deposits lost (N)	422	458	459	79	337	167
Seats (N)	0	0	0	0	1	0

Source: House of Commons Library

Table 4.2 Green Party performance in general elections, 1992-2019

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Vote (%)	0.5	0.2	0.6	1.0	1.0	3.8	1.6	2.7
Candidates (N)	256	95	145	203	335	573	467	497
Deposits lost (N)	256	95	135	179	328	442	456	466
Seats (N)	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1

Source: House of Commons Library

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Table 4.3 The Scottish National Party performance in general elections, 1974-2019

Year	1974 Feb	1974 Oct	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Vote	21.9	30.4	17.3	11.8	14.0	21.5	22.1	20.1	17.7	19.9	50.0	36.9	45.0
Seats	9.9	15.5	2.8	2.8	4.2	4.2	8.3	6.9	10.2	10.2	94.9	59.3	81.4

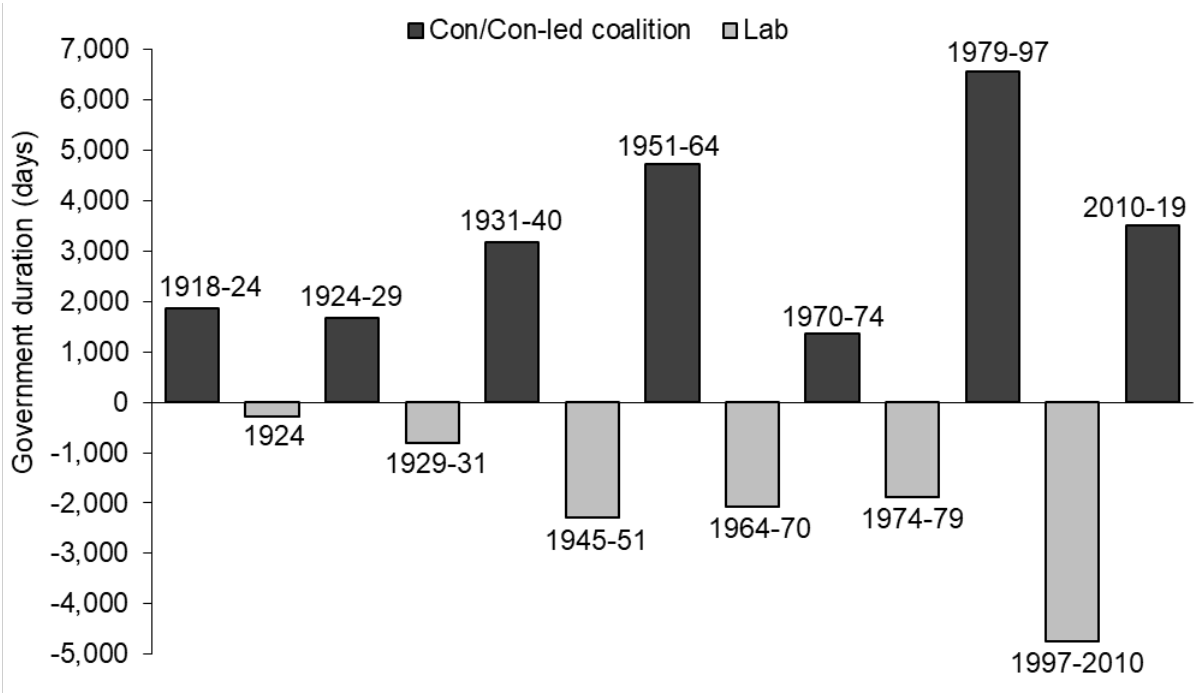
Source: House of Commons Library and author's calculations. Vote is share of vote in Scotland.

Table 4.4 Plaid Cymru performance in general elections, 1974-2019

Year	1974 Feb	1974 Oct	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017	2019
Vote	10.8	10.8	8.1	7.8	8.3	8.9	9.9	14.3	12.6	11.3	12.1	10.4	9.9
Seats	5.6	8.3	5.6	5.3	7.9	10.5	10.0	10.0	7.5	7.5	7.5	10.0	10.0

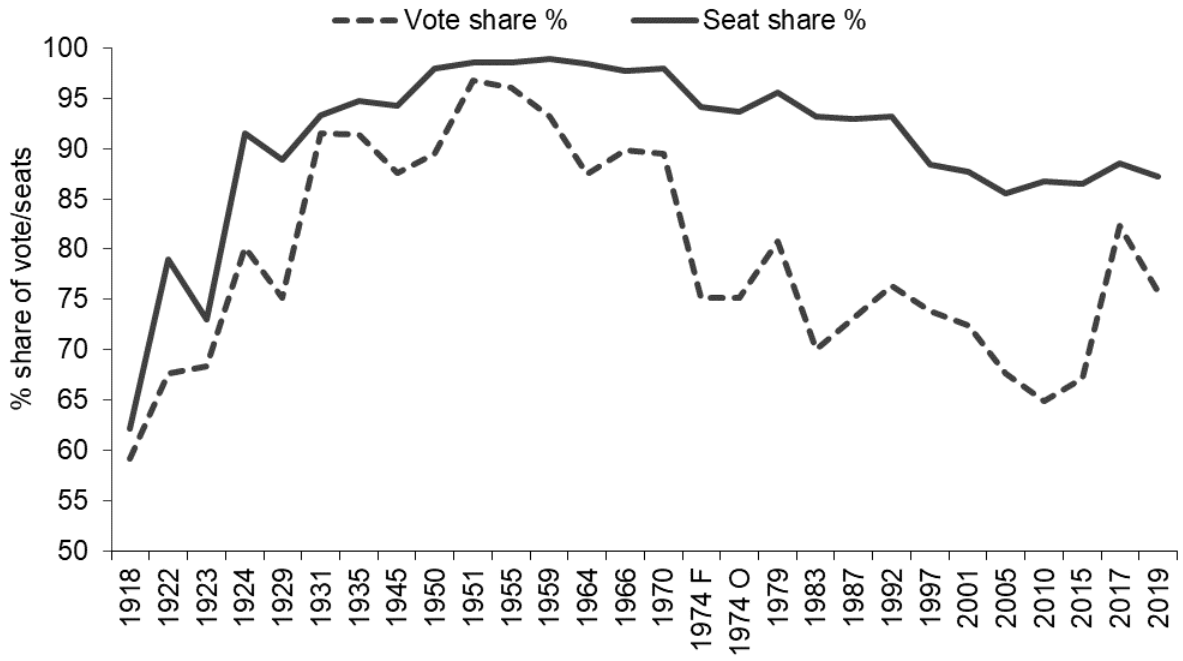
Source: House of Commons Library and author's calculations. Vote is share of vote in Wales.

Figure 4.1 Government duration (days in office), 1918-2019



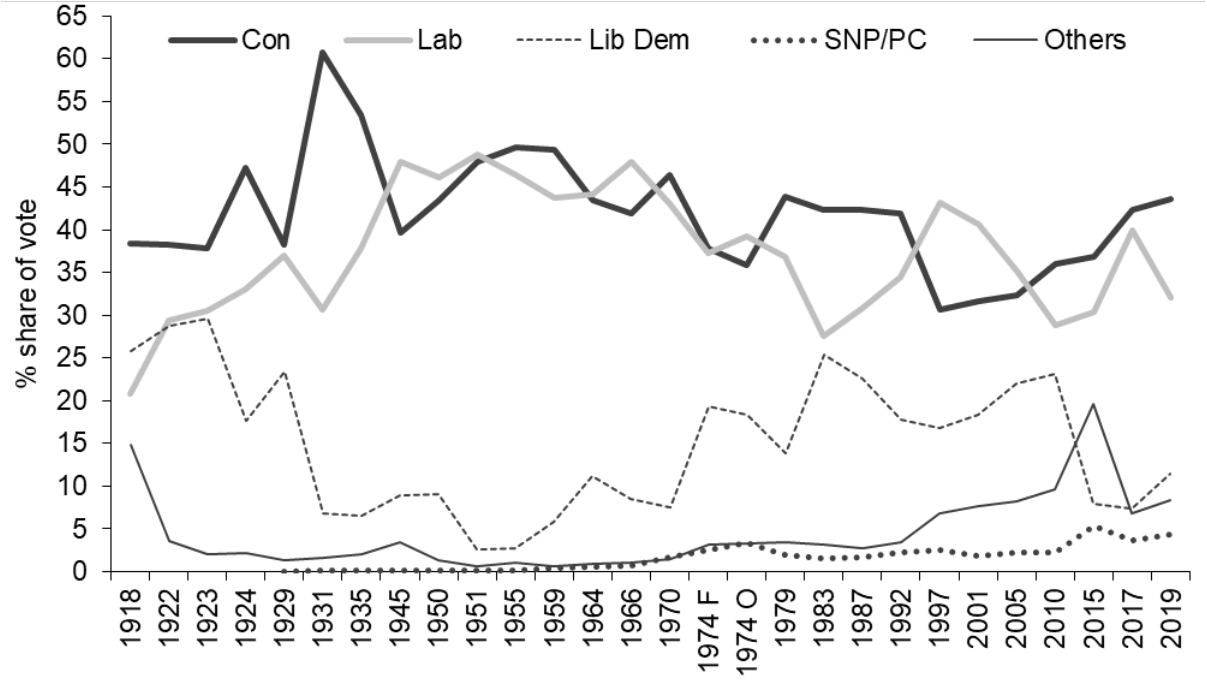
Source: Author's calculations based on dates of government formation.

Figure 4.2 Two-party seat and vote share, 1918-2019



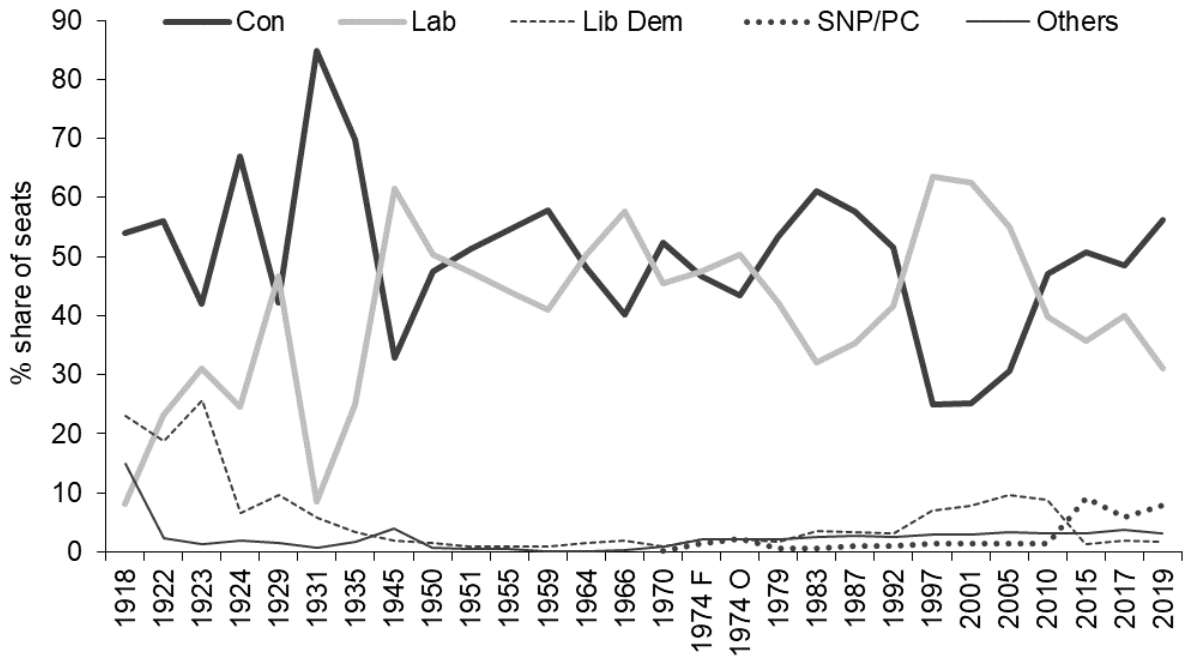
Source: House of Commons Library

Figure 4.3 Parties' vote shares, 1918-2019



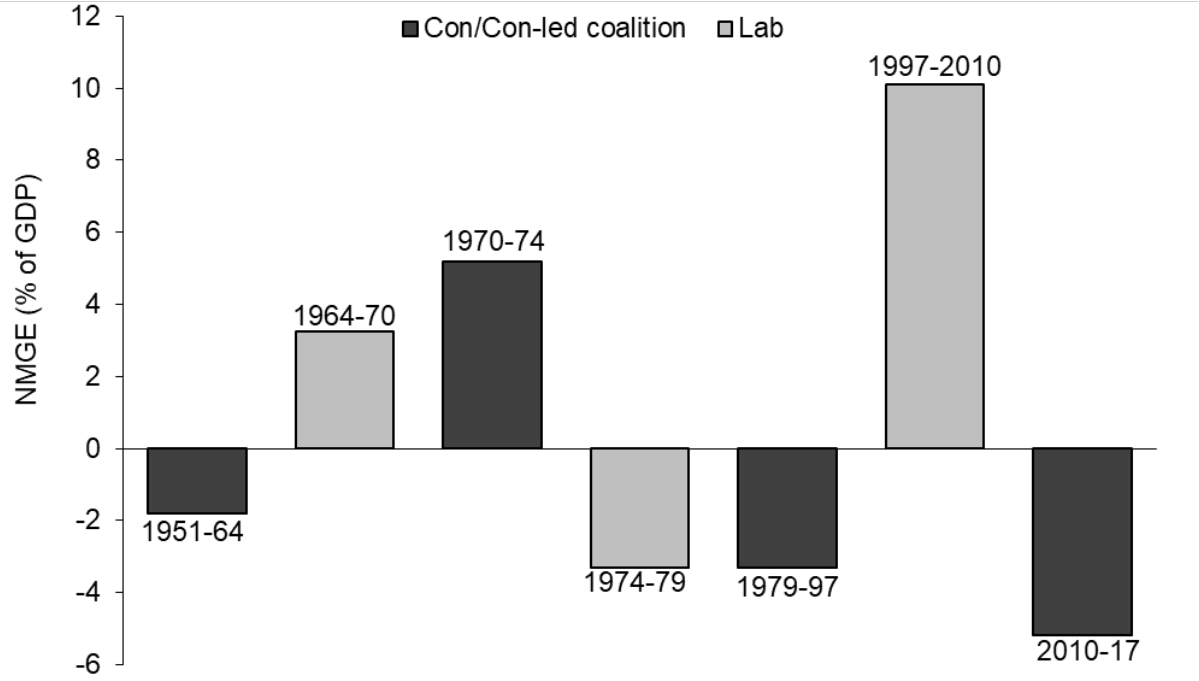
Source: House of Commons Library

Figure 4.4 Parties' seat shares, 1918-2019



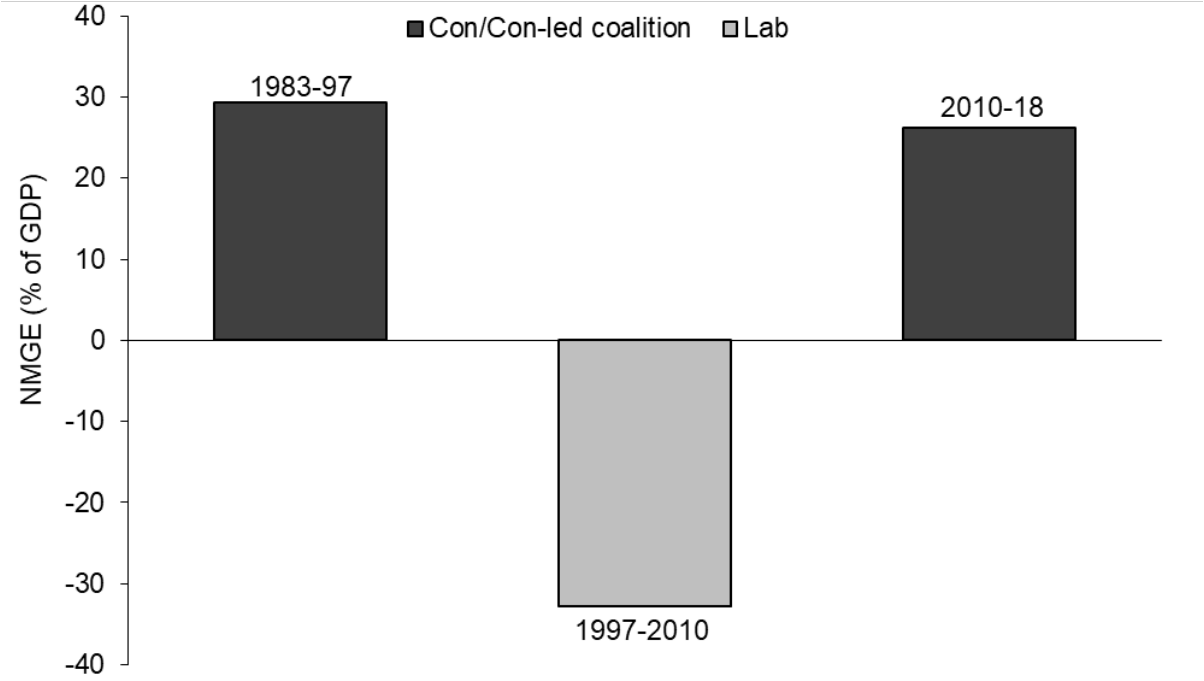
Source: House of Commons Library

Figure 4.5 Change in non-military government expenditure (% GDP), 1951-2017



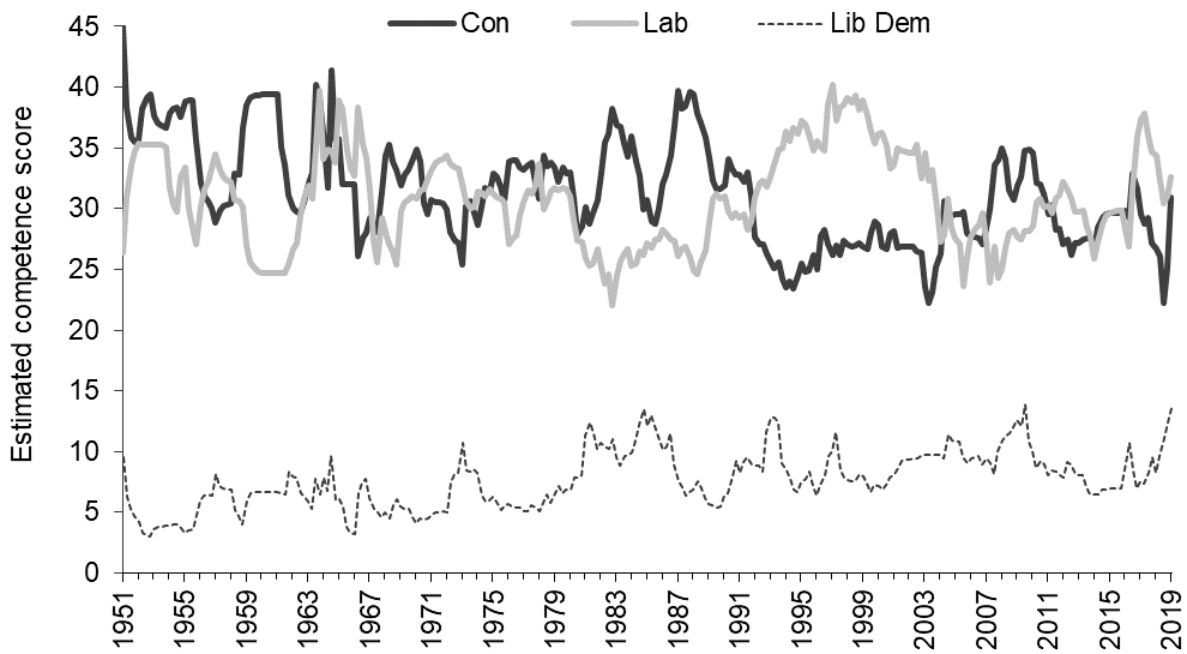
Source: Author's calculations

Figure 4.6 Changes in public preferences about tax and spending, 1983-2018



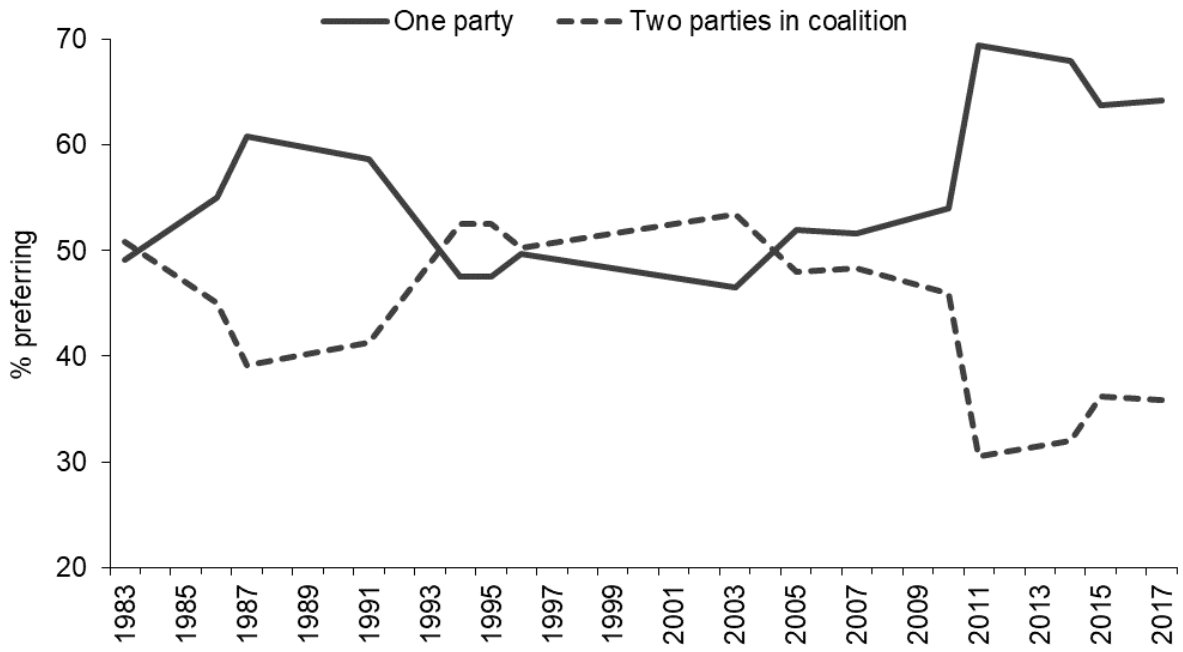
Source: British Social Attitudes

Figure 4.7 Evaluations of party competence, 1951-2019 (quarterly estimates)



Source: Author's estimates

Figure 4.8 Preferences for single-party or coalition government, 1983-2017



Source: British Social Attitudes