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An unpredictable pendulum: UK electoral dynamics in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

Post-war electoral dynamics were framed by a two-party system that usually provided single party governments with a legislative majority. These conditions promoted a pendulum-like swing of votes between two parties that alternated in office. The electorate responded 'thermostatically' to governments by moving in the opposite direction to policy and imposed the 'costs of ruling.' The major parties competed by moderating their positions and building reputations for competence. They vacated the centre in the 1970s and suffered a loss of their reputations for competence, leading to an increase in the centre-party vote. When the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed after 2010, niche parties, such as Reform UK, the Greens, and the Scottish National Party, picked up support. These developments have produced increasingly complicated dynamics. The major parties now risk losing votes to parties on their flanks. This reduces the appeal of moderation and causes uncertainty about strategy. Governments still suffer from thermostatic effects and the costs of ruling, creating opportunities for a wider range of opposition parties. These dynamics will produce volatility that the plurality electoral system will amplify to produce even more astonishing electoral turnarounds, and complicate strategic decision-making for parties.

Keywords UK general elections · Party competition · Electoral volatility · Public opinion

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Introduction

The 2024 general election produced some of the most astonishing turnarounds in UK electoral history. Labour, which had won just 202 seats in 2019—the party's worst result since 1935—romped home with 411 seats. The Liberal Democrats did proportionately even better, jumping from eleven seats in 2019 to 72, their best result for a century. Remarkably, Labour doubled the number of its MPs through a mere 1.6-point increase in its share of the vote, whilst the Liberal Democrats multiplied their MPs more than sixfold with a 0.7-point increase in their vote share.[1] These bizarre effects were largely a consequence of the catastrophic collapse in support for the incumbent Conservatives. The Tories won just 23.7% of the vote, down 19.9 percentage points on their 2019 share, and just 121 seats, 244 fewer than their 2019 tally of 365. This represented the largest ever fall in vote share experienced by any UK party, and the worst result in the Conservatives' history. This dramatic reversal of fortune overshadowed strange results in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party (SNP) went from winning 48 out of 59 seats in 2019 to just nine out of 57.[2]

These shifts continued a run of astonishing turnarounds in recent general elections. Labour's vote share increased by 9.6 percentage points between 2015 and 2017 and fell by 7.9 points between 2017 and 2019. The Liberal Democrats steadily gained votes from 1997 to 2010, when they entered a coalition with the Conservatives, but then suffered a 15.1-point fall in their vote share and lost six-sevenths of their MPs in 2015. The Conservatives, despite being in power since 2010, experienced their own queasy ride on the electoral roller coaster even before the disaster of 2024. They won a tiny overall majority in 2015, lost that majority whilst increasing their vote share by 5.5 points in 2017, and then won a thumping majority in 2019 despite gaining just 1.3 points. During the same period, the SNP went from 6 to 56 MPs, then back to 9. For more than a decade, chaos has lurked beneath the apparent order of 'alternating predominance' in the UK party system (Quinn 2013).

In some ways, the 2024 election illustrated established electoral dynamics. Voters' preferences moved in the opposite direction to government policy. Approval of the government's record and their reputation for competence trended downwards over time. The electorate held the Conservatives accountable for their neglect of the public services, the sleaze associated with Boris Johnson's government, the incompetence of Liz Truss and her disastrous 2022 'mini budget', and the rising costs of living. The plurality electoral system amplified these factors and translated them into a dramatic transfer of power.

In other ways, the election confirmed the emergence of new dynamics underpinned by multiparty politics. The electorate has increasingly voted for parties that can neither win seats nor hope to form the government. In 2024, the populist Reform UK (RUK) won 14.3% of the vote and five seats. The Greens won 6.4% of the vote and four seats. The SNP won 30.0% of the vote in Scotland despite its setback. Five Independent candidates, opposed to Labour's policy on Gaza also won seats in the

[1] Vote share refers to UK vote share throughout this paper.

[2] Scotland lost two constituencies between 2019 and 2024 through boundary changes.

House of Commons. Electoral dynamics were once characterised by regular pendulum-like swings between two major parties. The same dynamics now produce chaotic outcomes in a multiparty system.

We develop this argument in three steps. First, we describe the traditional pendulum-like swings that continue to characterise the transfer of power between the two major UK political parties. Second, we describe changes in the party system that have eroded the same two parties' electoral supremacy. Third, we examine how party system change and greater electoral choice, increasingly distort traditional electoral dynamics.

The traditional pendulum

Different dynamics operate at different levels of electoral competition. These vary across regions, constituencies, and neighbourhoods. From a purely UK-wide perspective, the most obvious and most politically important dynamic since 1922 has been the periodic if irregular transfer of governmental power between the Labour and Conservative parties. During this time, other than the period of National Government between 1931 and 1945, Labour governments have been followed by Conservative governments, and Conservative governments have been followed by Labour governments. The only uncertainty about this dynamic has been around how long each party would govern before voters called time on its efforts and entrusted power to its rival.

This pendulum-like dynamic rests on several well-known systemic foundations. The first is a constitution that confers considerable legislative power on the government of the day. Parliament comprises two chambers, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords, but the former has enjoyed legislative primacy since the 1911 Parliament Act (King 2007). The government is formed by the party or set of parties that enjoy a majority in the Commons. This 'fusion' between the executive and legislative branches greatly enhances the government's influence over law-making (Bagehot 2009). Since the government of the day dominates the Commons, it enjoys de facto control of a sovereign parliament. British governments have little fear of being blocked by the courts when it comes to making laws. Nor do they need to worry all that much about trespassing on the rights of sub-national governments. Parliamentary sovereignty means government-of-the-day sovereignty.

The second foundation is a constitution that encourages two-party politics (Mair 2009; Bartle et al. 2024). The requirement for governments to command the confidence of the Commons provides politicians with incentives to co-operate in parties to distribute the spoils of office (Cox 1987). The plurality electoral system, moreover, tends to promote the emergence of two major parties. It deters smaller parties from standing in constituencies where they are unlikely ever to win, especially if there are significant financial costs resulting from lost electoral deposits (Duverger 1954). It also dissuades voters from 'wasting' their vote on parties that could not win a constituency or form the government, because it risks letting a less preferred party win. This tendency towards two-partism, combined with the government's ability to direct parliamentary law-making, produces an essentially government–opposition

mode of electoral competition. Whilst the majority party forms the government of the day, the second largest party forms the official opposition and acts as an alternative government in waiting. Yet, the opposition is essentially powerless in a majoritarian system. The imbalance between their capacities to influence events is often acknowledged in the saying: 'Oppositions don't win elections. Governments lose them' (King 1998, p. 205).

The third foundation is the character of the two major parties. The identity of these two parties was fixed in the 1920s when Labour replaced the Liberals as the opposition to the Conservatives (Pugh 2002). Labour advocated the expansion of state activity to provide public services like health and education and a massive expansion of welfare. This proposal was so popular that it compelled all parties to take positions on this dimension (Bara and Weale 2006). The newly enfranchised working class directly benefited from this policy, as did many in the middle class, who took jobs in the expanding public sector, or used public services. Political debate was shaped by the choice between 'more' government intervention, more collective action, and more equality with Labour, or 'less' with the Conservatives.

The fourth foundation is the ultimate arbiter between choices of government: the electorate. Voters generally want parties to govern competently, and they want policies that honour their values (Erikson et al. 2002). Together, these motivations drive the pendulum-like swings of power between parties through two distinct if related dynamics: a thermostatic policy effect and the costs of ruling performance effect. In the 'ideal' two-party system, these dynamics simultaneously reduce the vote for the government and increase votes for the official opposition and produce a turnover of power between the two that keeps policy broadly in line with public preferences, and means voters ultimately control their laws and governments. In practice, one or more of the major parties has failed to occupy the centre or demonstrate competence. This has made it for difficult the electorate to use their vote to control policy and led to the growth of parties that cannot hope to form the government.

Thermostatic policy effects

The first dynamic is related to policy and the parties' policy or ideological motivations. Labour governments pursue policies that encourage *more* collective action and *more* government intervention, to achieve *more* equality. Conservative governments pursue policies that encourage *more* personal incentives, *more* market provision, and *more* personal freedom (Bartle et al. 2011). When they form the government, both have powerful levers to shift policy left or right. These levers include laws, taxes and spending, and numerous executive decisions—and they are exercisable subject to few checks and balances.

It is difficult to adequately summarise 'policy' in a single indicator because government activity is so varied. It can be approximated by total managed expenditure—the amount of money that the government spends each year, expressed

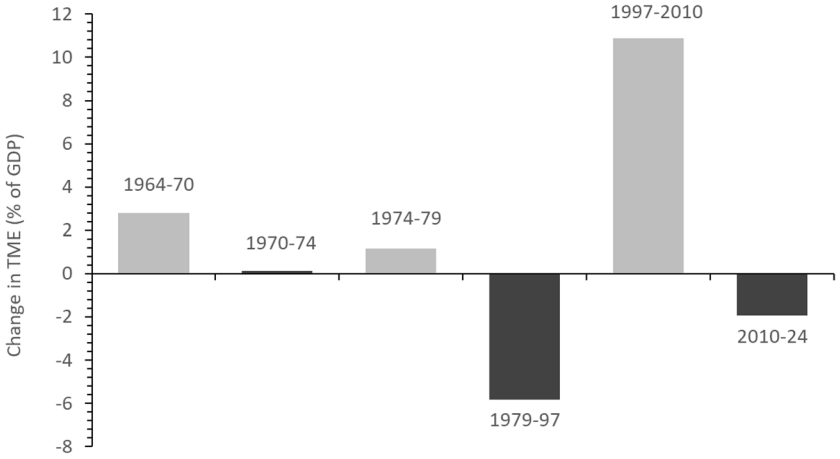

Fig. 1 Change in total managed expenditure, 1964–2024. *Source* Office of Budget Responsibility (2024)

as a proportion of GDP (Office for Budget Responsibility 2024).[3] Conservative governments are generally expected to reduce this, whilst Labour governments increase it. This tendency is illustrated in Fig. 1, which displays changes in expenditure for all governments since 1964.[4] Labour governments generally increased spending and shifted policy to the left. Conservative governments reduced spending and shifted to the right. The single exception is the Heath Conservative government, 1970–1974 that famously U-turned on its commitments to cut the state (Kavanagh 1986). Every other government conforms to expectations—even the 1974–1979 Labour government that (also famously) cut spending under the terms of an IMF loan.[5]

The electorate also has preferences on economic issues. In contrast with parties, however, it has moderate policy preferences—either because most voters have a mixture of left and right positions across issues or because many people are ambivalent about government activity (Zaller 1992). The typical voter wants the state to provide public services like healthcare, education, and welfare and to reduce unemployment and inequality. They also want lower taxes, less bureaucracy, lower inflation, and worry about the disincentive effects of welfare. The electorate's *current* preferences depend on *current* policy (Wlezien 1995). As governments

[3] Conservative governments often preside over real terms increases in total managed expenditure but prefer the proceeds of growth to be returned to individuals. Expressing expenditure as a proportion of GDP better reflects the debate between the two major parties.

[4] Change is calculated as total managed expenditure in the last full year of a government minus expenditure in the last full year of the previous government. Using full years as the points of comparison excludes those years where public spending was affected by both governments.

[5] We treat the 2010–2024 government as a single unit, but it is worth noting most of the reduction in this period was driven by the spending plans of the 2010–2015 Conservative-led coalition government. There was a 4.4% fall in total managed expenditure during this period in line with that government's 'austerity' targets. Thereafter, spending increased by 2.5%.

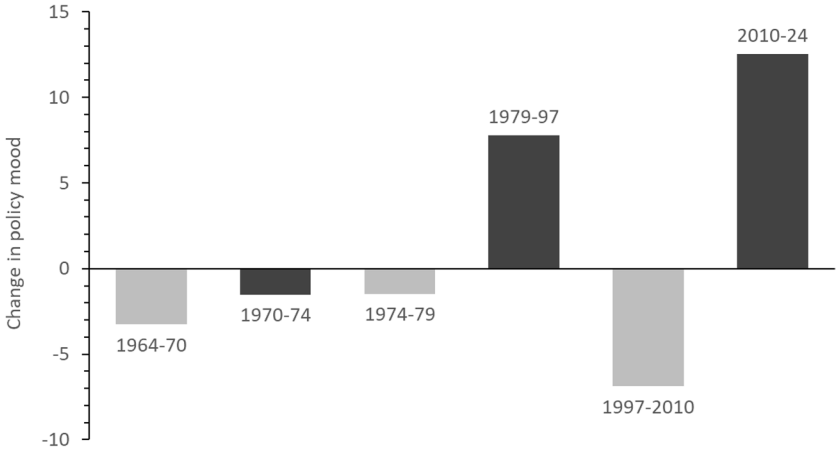

Fig. 2 Shifts in the policy mood, 1964–2024. *Source* Authors' estimates

provide 'more' spending, the public increasingly prefer progressively 'less.' As governments provide 'less', the public respond by increasingly prefer progressively 'more.' In short, public preferences across economic issues move in the opposite direction to policy (Bartle et al. 2011). This 'thermostatic' response dynamic contributes to pendulum-like shift of votes, and the alternation of power.

Figure 2 displays changes in the average left–right preferences (or positions) of the electorate (the 'policy mood') between 1964 and 2024.[6] This indicator measures public preferences for 'more' or 'less' collective action, government activity, and equality (Bartle et al. 2011). Scores above the horizontal indicate a leftward movement of preferences. Scores below the horizontal indicate a rightward movement. The thermostatic relationship between party and mood is clear. Mood moves left under Conservative governments (1979–1997 and 2010–2024) and right under Labour governments (1964–1970, 1974–1979, and 1997–2010). The single exception is again Heath's government between 1970 and 1974 when preferences moved right (Kavanagh 1986).

These shifts in the electorate's preferences for more or less collective action affect election outcomes. A rightward movement preceded the Conservatives' return to power in 1979, and a leftwards movement preceded the election of Labour in 1997. The rightwards movement from 1997 foreshadowed the Conservatives' eventual victory in 2010. The mood moved sharply back and to the left from 2010 onwards as a result of the coalition government's programme of austerity. Strikingly, the mood in 2019 was as leftward as it had been in 1997. This suggests that the Conservatives victories in 2017 and 2019 owed a much to other factors, not least the desire to 'get Brexit done' (Johns 2021). The mood continued to move left after the Conservatives

[6] Change is again calculated as the estimated mood in the last full year of a government minus estimated mood in the last full year of the previous government. The full details of how mood is estimated are laid out in Bartle et al. (2011). The series in that publication was based on survey 436 items and 3016 separate administrations, from 1945 to 2005. The mood displayed in Fig. 1 is based on a far larger database consisting of 950 unique survey items and 8480 separate administrations from 1945 to 2024.

fourth victory and contributed to Labour's victory in 2024. Nevertheless, it is clear that shifts in mood do not immediately translate into votes and lead to alternation of governments. This is because the politics of 'more or less' is overlaid by the politics of 'better or worse.'

Competence and the costs of ruling

The second dynamic relates to the electorate's response to the government's performance. The electorate reward governments for making things 'better' and punish them for making things 'worse.' Voters' perceptions of government competence are typically measured by responses to survey questions such as: 'Do you approve or disapprove of the government's record to date?' (Hellwig and Singer 2023).[7] Figure 3 displays monthly approval of the government since 1946. This series is complex. Approval starts off high for most governments, decline and rallies a little before each election. Long-lived governments, such as the Thatcher/Major administration, the Blair/Brown New Labour government, and most recent Cameron/May/Johnson/Truss/Sunak government plumbed the depths of disapproval. Equally, turnovers of power in 1997, 2010, and 2019 are associated with leaps in approval—reflecting either the relief that the old government has gone or optimism about the new government. Governments are also punished for making things worse or failing to provide reassurance during crises. The ERM crisis in September 1992, and the collapse of Northern Rock Bank in 2007 had a visible negative impact on approval (Bartle et al. 2023). Yet governments are rewarded with higher approval when they make things better or provide reassurance, such as delivering on the plan to rescue UK banks in 2008 (Bartle et al. 2023). They are also rewarded for dealing well with international crises. Victory in the Falklands War in June 1982 and the Iraq War in April 1991 provided reassurance that the nation would be defended and boosted approval. The government was similarly rewarded for its initial response to COVID-19 in mid-2020 but the scandals of 'party-gate,' allegations about the handling of pandemic-related contracts, and lying by the prime minister, were punished by lower approval from 2021/2022. Kwasi Kwarteng's 'mini budget' in September 2022 led to a rise in interest rates, made people feel worse and also damaged approval. After these tumultuous events, the dial barely shifted. The elevation of Sunak to prime minister had negligible effect, and approval of the government's record flatlined (see Fig. 3).

The impact of 'events' means that the dynamics associated with approval of the government's record are complex. Systemic factors, however, have a powerful cumulative effect. Statistical analyses show that as the economy gets 'better' (unemployment falls and the stock market rises) people grow more optimistic about their personal and the nation's economic future and reward a government that they

[7] Government approval is estimated using the dyads ratio algorithm to various questions that refer to the government's record (Stimson 1999). The series estimated here includes indicators that refer to approval of the government's record only. The Executive Approval project measure includes approval of the prime minister's record (Hellwig and Singer 2023). Nevertheless, the two series are highly correlated ($R = 0.92$).

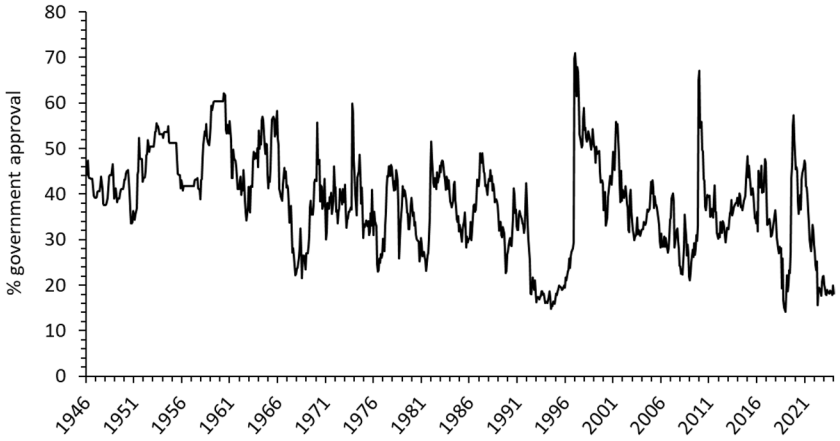

Fig. 3 Monthly approval of the government's record, 1946–2024. *Source* Authors' estimates

associate with that optimism by expressing approval (Sanders et al. 1987; Bartle et al. 2023). As the economy gets 'worse' (unemployment rises and the stock market falls) people grow more pessimistic and punish the government by withdrawing approval.

All governments tend to lose both approval and votes for reasons that have nothing to do with identifiable aspects of performance. The causes of these 'costs of ruling' are uncertain (Wlezien 2017). Voters may have unreasonable expectations of what governments can achieve and are disappointed. They may place more weight on negative than positive information. Whatever the reason, the cost of ruling results in governments being punished more for their failures than rewarded for their successes (Soroka 2014). This asymmetry is consequential. Most estimates of the costs are in the order of 1.6–2.5 percentage points per electoral cycle (Nannestad and Paldam 2002).

These forces tend to drain support for governments and the eventual alternation of power. Figure 4 displays the relationship between approval of the government's record and the share of the vote won by the incumbent. The positive relationship is clear, but the outliers are also informative. The governing party received a higher share of the vote than expected in 1992 and 2019—elections that resulted in a fourth successive Conservative victory. The outcome of these elections clearly reflected the weaknesses of the main opposition party, rather than enthusiasm for the government. In 1992, the Tories' victory reflected doubts about Labour's economic competence (Sanders 1998). In 2019, their victory reflected doubts about Labour and divisions on the left/remain wing of politics (Johns 2021). Both cases illustrate that 'Governments are capable of losing elections—but only if there is an Opposition party available that people are willing to vote for' (King 1998, p. 205).

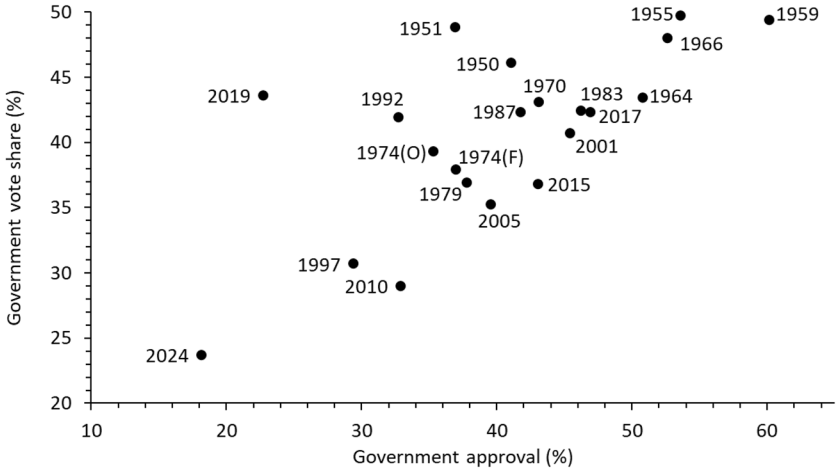

Fig. 4 Approval of the government's record and government vote share, 1950–2024. *Source* House of Commons (2023, 2024) and authors' estimates

The importance of a viable opposition is further supported by Fig. 5, which displays perceptions of the parties' reputations for competence. This score is based on responses to all those survey items that ask respondents which party would be 'best' to deal with specific issues.[8] The two parties had broadly comparable reputation scores until the early 1980s, when the Conservatives' reputation rose above Labour's. This lasted until around the time of 'black Wednesday' in September 1992 and the UK's forced withdrawal from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism. Labour's lead lasted until late 2005, several months after the general election. The failure of opposition parties—first Labour, then the Conservatives, and then Labour again—to establish a reputation for competence meant that the electorate has been faced with a continual choice between the lesser of two evils. This, together with the thermostatic movements in mood, may explain the pattern of 'alternating predominance' between 1979 and 2010, where both parties have spent extended periods in power (Quinn 2013; Bartle et al. 2019; McGann et al. 2023). A weak opposition enabled governing parties to push policy further to their polar positions.

The Conservatives regained a reputational advantage from 2007 until around 2019—though this was not as large as that for the Thatcher/Major or New Labour period. From 2021, evaluations of the Conservative party's reputation for competence fell—just like approval. Labour's reputation for competence increased, as it broke its association with the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. By July 2024, Labour's reputational advantage was larger than ever. After a 14-year wait, the electorate finally had an opposition worth voting for.

[8] The competence series is estimated using the dyads ratio algorithm (Green and Jennings 2012). The reputational competence displayed in Fig. 5 is based on 187 unique survey items and 4961 separate administrations from 1951 to 2024.

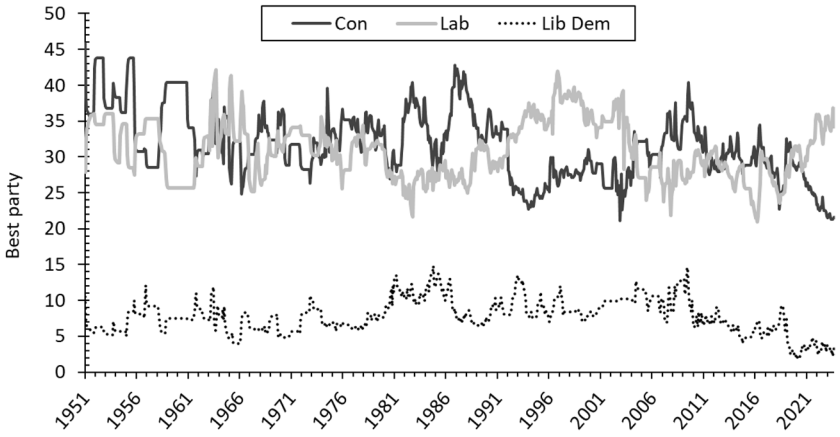

Fig. 5 Monthly reputation for party competence, 1951–2024. *Source* Authors' estimates

The changing party system

A properly functioning two-party system requires a credible and viable alternative to the government of the day. When the official opposition is competitive, voters are free to use their votes to hold incumbent governments to account and to provide new governments with a mandate. Recent decades, however, have been characterised by long periods when the official opposition has been uncompetitive. Labour fell short in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the Conservatives failed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the same time, recent decades have also been characterised by far more electoral choice that has weakened the traditional government–opposition axis of competition. Party fragmentation has many causes. Some reflect long-term social and demographic changes that have eroded traditional identities and loyalties (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Other causes reflect new economic conditions and the changing expectations about government. Yet others reflect the performance of the two major parties and the entrance of new competitors in the electoral marketplace. But if the causes are myriad and uncertain, the consequences are clear.

Simplifying only a little, the party system evolved in two stages. The first was marked by a rise in the vote for the Liberals (later Liberal Democrats) from the late 1950s onwards. The vote for this party peaked in 2010, when it entered the first peacetime coalition since 1931 (Quinn et al. 2011). The second stage was marked by the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015, the growth of niche parties, including populists such as the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Brexit Party and RUK, and the Greens, together with the rise of the SNP at a sub-national level in Scotland.

Vacating the centre

In the two-party system, it was believed that—other things being equal—parties would be advantaged if they occupied the centre (Webb and Bale 2021).[9] These parties could moderate without fear of losing radical voters because there were no electorally viable parties on their flanks. Even if there had been, it was assumed that voters would not want to let the other side win and would not abandon their party—however disillusioned they were.

The electoral strategy of moving to the centre ground matched the partisan consensus about policy. The Conservative party largely accepted the reforms introduced by the post-war Labour government (Kavanagh 1986). The Labour party looked to consolidate their policy achievements and resisted attempts to veer leftwards (Crewe and King 1995). The two parties' leaderships ensured that both remained focussed on the political centre. This task was more difficult for Labour because its constitution had clear ideological goals and gave its annual conference the final word on policy (McKenzie 1955). Since party members tended to be more radical, there was constant pressure to move left (Webb and Bale 2021). The leaders of the largest trade unions used their bloc votes at annual conference to moderate Labour's platform (Minkin 1992). These internal struggles gave Labour a reputation for disunity. Conservative leaders were freer to follow a winning strategy. The party was united by its opposition to Labour and gave their members no direct say over policy (cf. Kelly 1980). For much of the post-war period unity was the Conservative party's secret weapon.

Figure 6 displays the positions of the three major parties on the left–right dimension (RILE score), as showed by content analyses of party manifestos (Budge et al. 2001; Allen and Bara 2021). The post-war consensus was shattered by economic crises in the 1960s and 1970s. Both parties vacated the centre. Labour moved left following disappointments with the 1964–1970 Wilson government. Trade union leaders allied themselves with left-wing members in the party following a period of inflation that eroded real wages (Kavanagh 1986). In February 1974, the party produced its most left-wing programme since 1945 (Crewe et al. 1977; Seyd 1987). The second shift took place between 1979 and 1983 as a result of disappointments with the 1974–1979 Labour government. The 1983 manifesto advocated a massive expansion of state activity, nationalisation, the repeal of anti-trade union laws and the withdrawal of from the then Common Market, without a referendum. Labour lost votes in both February 1974 and 1983 whilst in opposition. It was these movements—not shifting evaluations of Labour's competence or the costs of ruling—that were to blame for the 5.9-point reduction in vote in February 1974 and 9.3-point reduction in 1983. Labour moved to the centre under Neil Kinnock, John Smith, and Tony Blair. Nevertheless, many members yearned for more radical positions. Party- and affiliated members have gained greater say in the choice of leader and have tended to select one of the candidate that offers *more* collective action, *more* government intervention, and *more* equality. Labour shifted

[9] Parties could move towards their polar position if they enjoyed a reputational advantage. This may have been the case for the Conservatives in the 1980s.

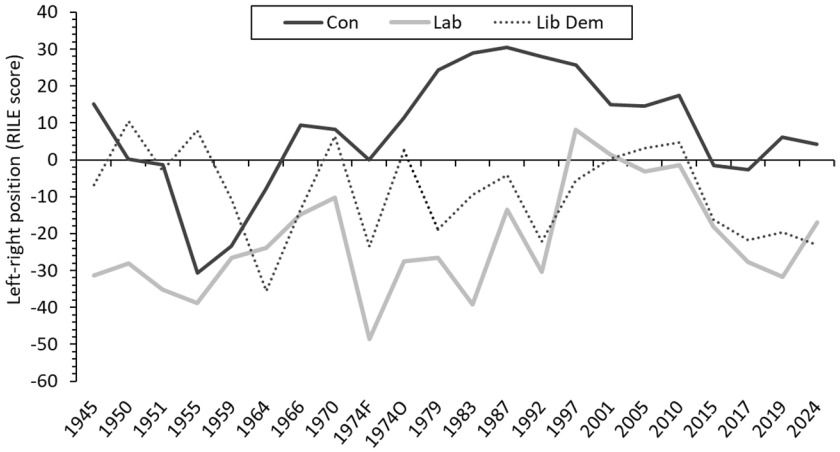

Fig. 6 Left–right positions of the three major parties in general elections, 1945–2024. *Source* MARPOR estimates

visibly left in opposition, first under Miliband in 2015 and later under Corbyn in 2017 and 2019 (Whiteley et al. 2020).

The Conservative party also vacated the centre in response to economic crisis. In 1979 it adopted its most right-wing position ever. The party's policies on trade unions, nationalisation, tax and spending, and welfare shifted to the right. So did its policies on law and order and defence. The party remained relatively right-wing until 2010. It then moved pragmatically back to the centre—first in 2015 following the coalition, and in 2017, when it promised that the state would fill many of the roles performed by the EU. Nevertheless, large parts of the party remained wedded to the Thatcherite policies of a smaller state, lower taxes, and national sovereignty. Conservative party members have been given the final say over party leader since 2001. To be sure, the parliamentary party united behind a single candidate in 2003 and in 2022 to ensure Michael Howard's and Rishi Sunak's elevation to the leadership. But when party members have the final say in the selection of the leader, they have tended to select the most 'Thatcherite' candidate. The exception was David Cameron's election as a 'moderniser' in 2005 (Quinn 2012). Had Liz Truss survived longer than 49 days in 10 Downing Street, it is possible that the party's manifesto in 2024 would have been more right-wing.

The periodic shifts of the major parties had consequences—some immediate, some that played out over the longer-term (Nagel and Wlezien 2010). From 1955 to 1970 the two major parties were on average 14 points from each other according to the (right–left) RILE scores estimated by the Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR) team (Budge et al. 2001). From 1974 to 1992, the two major parties were on average 51 points away from each other according to their RILE scores. From 1997 to 2010, New Labour's move to the centre narrowed the gap to around 17 points. Labour's subsequent move to the left opened up the gap to around 25 points between 2015 and 2024. As the parties' converged, reputational competence mattered more and as they diverged, it mattered less. The movements of

the parties between 1974 and 2010 together with the major parties declining reputations for competence shown in Fig. 6, encouraged the Liberal party to build their organisation at a local level, contest and field more candidates for elections to local authorities and at Westminster. This increased the Liberal (later Liberal Democrat) vote (Steed 1982; Wallace 1982). The centre-party vote increased from 7.2% on average from 1945 to 1970 to 19.1% from 1974 to 2010. The rise of the SDP–Liberal Alliance split the vote on the left, enabling Conservative governments to win large majorities based on a relatively small percentage of the vote in 1979, 1983 and 1987, and a working majority in 1992 (Johnston et al. 2001).

Labour shifted to the centre under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, reducing the average gap with the Conservatives to just 16.9 points between 1997 and 2010. From 2001 to 2010 the Liberal Democrats vote increased as a result of the relatively right-wing position of the Conservatives and Labour's reduced reputation, following the Iraq War, the financial crash of 2007–2008 and the 2009 MPs expenses scandals. In 2010 they won 23.6% of the vote. The Liberal Democrats' decision to enter a coalition in 2010 proved electorally catastrophic—even though the coalition agreement was somewhat nearer the party's 2010 manifesto position than the Conservative's (Quinn et al. 2011). It did not matter that the Liberal Democrats moderated Conservative policies (Clegg 2017). In 2015 their vote fell by 15.5 percentage points—the largest reduction in vote share for any party to that point. The Liberal Democrats were punished not because what they did in government but simply by the fact that it had formed a coalition with the Conservatives. The proportion of respondents expressing an intention to vote Liberal Democrat fell within a few months of the formation of the coalition, even before its policies were enacted. The 'costs of governing' for the centre party were both accelerated and more devastating than those experienced by a single-party government. The Liberal Democrats had gained a reputation as a party of the centre left, so the decision to enter into a coalition was interpreted as a betrayal.

The toxicity of the Liberal Democrats had consequences for the other parties' electoral strategies. It enabled Labour to shift to the left from 2010 onwards under Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn because centre-left voters were less likely to desert the party for the centre. The outcome of the EU referendum in 2016 further disrupted the system. In 2017 remain voters coalesced around Labour (outside Scotland) and the party performed well, gaining 9.6 percentage points in the popular vote and 30 seats (Bartle 2018). The Conservative party also moved left from 2010 onwards, matching the movements in mood following 5 years of austerity, and later to make good on the promise that Brexit would lead to a 'levelling up.' The party's association with the Liberal Democrats made it easier for former centre-party voters to switch for Cameron's form of 'liberal conservatism' (Quinn 2012).

The rise of niche parties

The collapse of the Liberal Democrats did not lead to a revival of a stable two-party system. It was followed by a significant rise in support for 'niche' parties (Meyer and Miller 2015). These can be viewed as either single-issue parties operating on

another dimension or as occupying positions on the flanks of the major parties on the main left–right economic dimension. The right-wing populist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Brexit Party and RUK, focussed on national sovereignty and immigration. The left-wing Greens campaigned on climate change. Both increased their vote, even though they were unlikely to win seats and highly unlikely to either form or participate in a government. They have done so largely through boosting the salience of their issues by campaigning and providing potentially supportive voters with an opportunity to express their beliefs.

From 2010 onwards, both major parties became aware that moderation—particularly on immigration and climate change—risked losing *some* votes to these parties. The Conservatives talked tough on immigration and introduced a plan to process asylum seekers in Rwanda. Labour advocated a radical 'green new deal' to transform the economy. The Conservatives hoped to attract older, less educated, and more socially conservative voters, whilst Labour hoped to attract younger, educated, and socially liberal voters. Both accommodations sat uneasily with their other policies, particularly in relation to the economy, and risked alienating moderate opinion.

The rise of right-wing populist parties from 2012 onwards was driven by increased concerns about immigration and disappointment with the failure of the coalition to control immigration (Clarke et al. 2016). The Conservative Party failed to keep its promise to cut net migration to 'tens of thousands' as set out in its 2010 manifesto. Some Conservatives pinned blame for the failure to meet the promise on the Liberal Democrats, their coalition partner. A substantial portion of voters, however, concluded that all the 'mainstream' parties provided them with no chance to express their opinions. In 2010 UKIP had obtained just 3.1% of the vote. From 2012 onwards there was a steady rise in the proportion of voters expressing an intention to vote UKIP, rising from single figures to the high teens. This surge was a key factor in the Conservative Party's promise to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (Clarke et al. 2016). Yet even this promise did not halt the rise of UKIP. Its vote increased to 12.7% in 2015.

Support for UKIP collapsed after the 2016 referendum because the party's goal had apparently been achieved. Indeed, the two-party system (outside of Scotland) appeared to be largely re-established after the 2017 general election. Remain and leave voters coalesced around Labour and the Conservative party, respectively (Bartle 2018). In the following two years the Conservatives did not deliver Brexit, and Labour proposed a second referendum with the option to remain in the EU. The populist forces quickly reformed as the Brexit Party and won the largest share of the vote in the final European Parliament elections held in May 2019. This led to the resignation of Theresa May and her replacement with Boris Johnson, a candidate committed to leaving the EU even without a deal. In the 2019 general election the Brexit Party agreed not to compete against incumbent Conservatives. This deal helped Johnson win a substantial majority to 'get Brexit done' (Norris, 2019). The Brexit Party rebranded as RUK. It criticised COVID-19 lockdowns, footballers who 'took the knee' and opposed anything 'woke'. It also turned its fire on other constraints on sovereignty, such as membership of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Nigel Farage's decision to stand as an RUK candidate in the 2024

general election prompted a significant fall in Conservative vote intentions. RUK obtained 14.3% of the vote in the general election—but just five seats.

The Greens have made steady advances. Like the Liberal Democrats before them, success is sometimes built on local election performance, where the plurality electoral system does not hold them back, or success in elections held under proportional representation such as elections to the European Parliament (until 2019) and elections to devolved institutions. Voters acquired in these elections have slowly transferred their votes in general elections. The Greens won just under 1% of the vote in 2010 and 3.8% of the vote in 2015. Their vote fell to just 1.6% in 2017 as Labour gained support, and it rose to 2.7% as Labour fell back in 2019. In recent years variations in vote were driven by concerns about climate change and disillusion with Labour, which havered in its commitment to the 'green new deal.' In 2024 voting Green offered a way of registering discontent with Labour's policies towards Gaza and Israel. A Green vote appeared 'safe' because Labour was thought likely to win—and win big.[10] Nevertheless, incumbency provides the Greens with a platform for further advances.

In Scotland, the creation of a Parliament and Executive provided the SNP with an opportunity to build a reputation as the party best to represent Scotland's interests. Once in power at Holyrood the SNP strengthened its reputation as a defender of the Scottish national interest by opposing the austerity of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. By 2016 it was sufficiently strong to call a referendum on independence. After the people narrowly rejected independence, they transferred their votes to the SNP at Westminster elections, resulting in a 'yellow wash' as 56 out of the 59 Scottish seats fell to the Nationalists. As the promise of independence faded, the Scottish executive floundered and became embroiled in scandal, support for the SNP at Westminster fell. Like the Liberal Democrats before them, the SNP found that minor parties could suffer from their own costs of ruling. In 2024 they were reduced to just nine MPs at Westminster.

Complex choices

Many parties and candidates now clutter the electoral marketplace, providing the electorate with more choice than ever. To an unknowable extent, the existence of wider choices—and the larger number of elections—has altered how the electorate behave. The inability of the Conservative and Labour parties to suppress the new parties by incorporating either them or their issues has transformed the political landscape.

The growth in the number of candidates is illustrated in Fig. 7, which displays the total number of candidates at general elections since 1945. Excluding Northern Ireland and the Speaker's seat, the Conservatives and Labour have fielded candidates in just about every constituency since the 1930s—so none of the observed growth

[10] On 1 July 2024, 47% of respondents expected a large Labour majority and a further 21% expected a Labour majority (see https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/who-do-people-think-will-win-the-next-election).

is due to their changing behaviour. The two-party system reached its zenith in 1951 when the Liberals decided to contest just 109 seats. At this point, there were only 1376 candidates in total across the UK. Almost 90% of those candidates were representatives of the two major parties. The steady growth of Liberal and Nationalist candidates provided more choice, increasing the number of candidates to 2135 by February 1974. Only 58.4% of those candidates were Conservative or Labour and 82.6% were representatives of the three major parties. By 2024 only 28% of candidates were Conservative or Labour and a mere 41.5% from 'the big three.' This change was visible on ballot papers. In 1951 there were 2.2 candidates per constituency. In February 1974 there were 3.4, and in 2024 there were 6.9.

There has been a visible tendency for the number of candidates to surge in elections that follow an extended period of party rule. The number of candidates increased by 775 in 1997, 596 in 2010 and 1195 in 2024 (see Fig. 7). Yet again, responses to powerful but unpopular governments have driven change. Nevertheless, this is not the whole story. There was a marked decrease in candidates in 2017. This may have been because smaller parties could not fund another campaign so quickly after the 2015 general election or because the opportunities for smaller parties were apparently reduced after the Brexit referendum. The reduction in candidates may help explain why there was a temporary resurgence of the two-party system in 2017 (Bartle 2021). In any event, the reduction in candidates proved short-lived. The number of candidates increased in 2019, and again to a record 4515 candidates 2024.

The rise in the number of candidates has altered the dynamics of elections. It has also affected the two-party vote, that is, the combined vote share of Labour and the Conservatives. Figure 8 displays the relationship between the number of candidates and the two-party share of the vote from 1945 to 2024. The relationship is negative and strong ($R = -0.88$). The more candidates there are, the lower the major party share of the vote. To be sure, this raises questions about cause and effect. The increasing number of candidates may have been response to decline in intentions to vote for the two major parties. Nevertheless, the strength of the relationship suggests that increased choice is a hitherto neglected explanation of the decline of the traditional political binary.

From pendulum to chaos

The gradual emergence of a multiparty system has complicated competition. In the past the major parties focussed on the 'other' party and could ignore all others. What mattered was the swing of the pendulum between Conservative to Labour. The growth of the Liberal Democrats did not alter the advantage of occupying the centre ground. The emergence of the right-wing populists and Greens *has* modified it—to a degree. As long as immigration and national sovereignty remain potent issues the Conservatives must worry that moderation on these issues, necessary to attract potential Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green voters, will produce offsetting losses to RUK on their right flank. Similarly, as long as environmental issues are important Labour will worry that concessions to car owners or homeowners on 'net

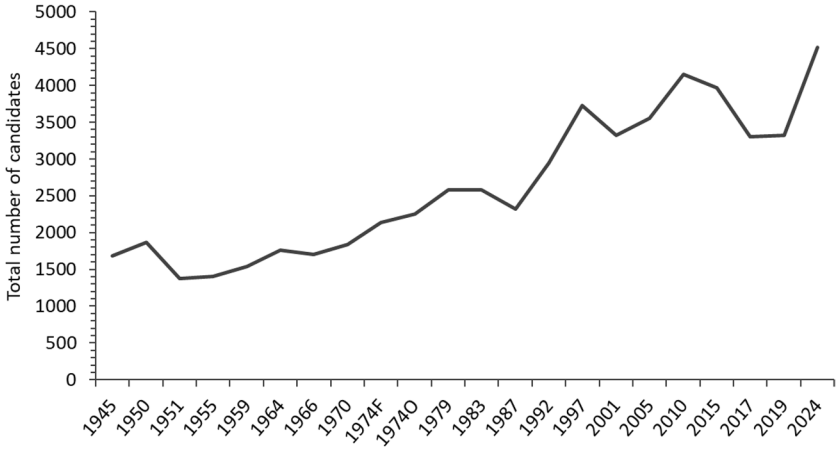

Fig. 7 Total number of candidates in general elections, 1945–2024. *Source* House of Commons (2023, 2024)

zero' targets will produce offsetting losses to the Greens. And, if the situation in the Middle East worsens—or another international crisis requires intervention—Labour must fear losing votes to the Workers Party of Britain, the Liberal Democrats, or the Greens. In a crowded marketplace, party strategies and tactics depend on both external developments and the responses of many parties. The need to placate voters who feel intensely about particular issue may strengthen the hands of radicals within the parties who want to abandon the centre and offer 'real socialism' or put 'clear blue water' between themselves and others. In the traditional party system British electoral dynamics could be summarised by a simple pendulum—popularised by David Butler's 'swingometer' (Crick 2018). In the new fragmented system political scientists must use complicated 'flow of the vote' diagrams showing movements to and from many parties (Fieldhouse et al. 2019). Even these new representations may be insufficient to describe the complexity because they often ignore non-voting and cannot easily incorporate new parties or genuine independents.

Internal party dynamics may compel one or both of the major parties to vacate the centre. In times of crisis, such as in the 1970s and 1980s, parties tend to fall back on ideology in order to provide them with a basis for action in uncertain times (Budge 1994). Ideological motivations are likely to prove stronger for party members who have the final choice of leader. Other things being equal, members prefer ideological candidates. To be sure, Sir Keir Starmer found a way to resolve the conflict between policy and office-seeking goals. He campaigned as a left-wing candidate for the leadership in 2020 and pivoted to the centre after his election. Conservative leaders may follow suit. But if both major parties can only remain competitive by deceiving their members, it will be difficult to sustain the party organisation at a local level. Not suprisingly, both the major parties have reputations for division.

Political competition is complicated by the unpredictable operation of the plurality electoral system—'the other national lottery' in a multiparty system (Beetham and Weir 1998; Johnston et al. 2001). The geographical distribution of

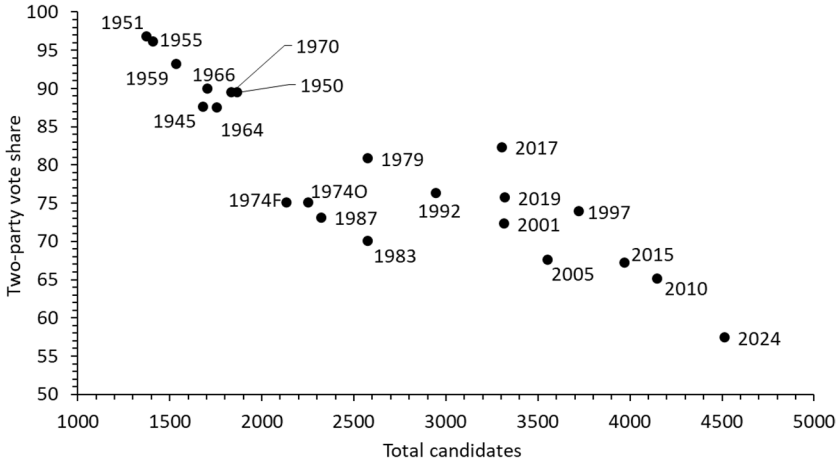

Fig. 8 Number of candidates and two-party vote share in general elections, 1945–2024. *Source* House of Commons (2023, 2024)

the vote—and the ability to mobilise potential voters—is crucial to party success. The plurality system provides parties with incentives to target constituencies and informally coordinate with other parties. The outcome of the 2024 general election was driven in part by the careful targeting of seats by the Labour party and Liberal Democrats, facilitated by an informal understanding to focus on 'winnable' seats. Since these parties were rarely in direct competition, they did not require a formal pact. Tacit inter-party cooperation has a long history (Bogdanor 2022, pp. 732–733). In 2024 the Liberal Democrats vote increased by a mere 0.7 percentage points, but they gained 61 seats. Other parties, like the Greens and RUK, will have to develop a similarly effective targeting and ground operation if they are to convert votes into seats (Denver and Hands 1997). They are unlikely to be able to cut deals with the major parties.

The structure of competition varies across constituencies and from election to election, as a result of local traditions and shifting national fortunes. This makes the electoral battleground difficult to summarise. A party in third or even fourth place in a given constituency may be able to win it at the next election if votes are evenly spread across more parties. Nevertheless, Table 1 makes a stab at illustrating electoral battlegrounds after 2024. It simply displays the number of seats in which the parties were in first or second place. Applying this standard, Labour–Conservative contests account for slightly less than half (219 + 87 = 306) of all the 632 seats in Great Britain. In these seats at least, remaining in the centre is the optimal electoral strategy for Labour. The next largest group are 92 seats where Labour and RUK are in competition—89 of which are held by Labour. In these seats Labour should worry about the consequences of failing to control immigration and/or moving too far from the centre. If there are by-elections in 'red wall' seats that voted to leave the EU and were captured by the Conservatives in 2019, RUK may be *the* threat to Labour—particularly if the Conservatives fail to provide an alternative. Similarly, there are

47 seats where Labour is in competition with the Nationalists (40 of those in Scotland). Labour must worry about being portrayed as an English party in Scotland and Wales, but Labour must also worry about allowing RUK and the Conservatives to portray it as 'anti-English' in England. Labour's success in 2024 was based in large part on conditions that will not apply again—opposition to a long-lived and unpopular Conservative government. It is vulnerable on many fronts and cannot hope to win simply by comparing their behaviour with, or warning the people about the dangers of, 'the other lot.'

Table 1 shows that the Conservatives are second to Labour in 219 seats. This suggests that the Conservatives should move towards the centre to attract Labour voters and/or wait for Labour to suffer the usual costs of ruling and thermostatic policy effects. There are also 84 (20 + 64) Conservative–Liberal Democrat contests, where moving left may again make sense. Notably, there are just 11 seats where the Conservatives and RUK are in direct competition. All five RUK seats are former Conservative-held seats. The Conservatives may conclude that they need to move right to win these seats—but these gains would be more than offset by failure to gain Labour and/or Liberal Democrat seats. If the Conservatives do not moderate, ideological motivations will have prevailed over electoral incentives. Many Conservative members sympathise with RUK on immigration—just as they sympathised with UKIP in 2015. In short, the best electoral strategy is far from obvious to both major parties.

Constitutional convention and the plurality electoral system used to squeeze politicians and voters into the Conservative–Labour binary. They no longer constrain parties and the electorate. There is little prospect that people could be squeezed into a new political binary, anytime soon. The niche parties argue that simply switching between the major parties does not allow the electorate to influence policy. In the colourful words of George Galloway, the major parties are 'different cheeks of the same arse.' Both major parties face the same fundamental problem: how to accommodate enough voters in a polarised age to 'win' an election and demonstrate their legitimacy. Many voters do not seem to be willing to compromise on the key issues of immigration and climate change. This makes it difficult to accommodate them in the same party.

Conclusions

The focus of the next general election will be on whether Labour delivers on its promise of 'change.' If Labour increases the size of government, as it has in the past, we can confidently expect to observe dynamic thermostatic effects. The electorate will move right. These effects may be offset by reputational advantages if Labour builds and sustains its reputation for competence: it may well win re-election because the politics of 'better or worse' tend to have a more immediate effect than the politics of 'more or less.' In the long run, thermostatic effects and the costs of ruling will take their toll. If Labour fails to deliver, their vote may fall much quicker, and the electoral system will translate vote changes into a tidal wave of seat changes.

Table 1 The battle ground after the 2024 general election

	Second place							
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Nationalist	Reform UK	Greens	Other	Total
First place								
Conservative		87	20	5	9	0	0	121
Labour	219		6	41	89	39	17	411
Liberal Democrats	64	2		6	0	0	0	72
Nationalist	6	6	0		0	0	0	9
Reform UK	2	3	0	0		0	0	5
Greens	2	2	0	0	0		0	4
Other	0	5	0	0	0	0		5
Total	293	105	27	52	98	40	15	

Source Authors' estimates

The two major parties are great survivors. The plurality electoral system has often insulated them from the consequences of their mistakes and failures and enabled them to adapt and survive. The growth of other parties, beginning first with the Liberal Democrats and their successors, and later with niche parties, has complicated their tasks. The major parties must consider the response of minor parties, and the electorate's willingness to cast their ballots for parties that have no prospect of forming the government. The electorate appears willing to express its support for the values of those parties and less worried about wasting its votes than before. This is why the 2024 general election produced 'the most disproportional election result' in British history (Topping, 2024).

The unnatural longevity of the party system raises questions about the continued ability of both major parties to adapt, whilst maintaining their traditions. Both the Conservatives and Labour have proven to be vulnerable to takeover by their more radical wings in recent years (see Quinn et al. 2024). The Conservative party is no longer simply a pragmatic party focussed on winning power. It has an ideology and an addiction to tax-cuts and a smaller state. If it carries this ideological logic too far it may be thought to have abandoned the centre ground and unable to take advantage of the government's unpopularity. Labour could again win as the lesser of two evils.

The plurality electoral system should give opposition parties some hope. The fitful development a multiparty system means that there are few safe constituencies across the UK. Labour's majority in 1997 was almost the same as that in 2024. It took three elections for the Conservatives to erode Labour's majority to form a coalition. In 1997, however, the average Labour majority in the seats it won was 13,226. In 2024 it was 7813—a significant difference, even allowing for turnout. Different parties in different constituencies may be well positioned to take seats off Labour in by-elections and future general elections. The minor parties might gamble on the

next election throwing up equally strange results. If history is any guide, even the most formidable majorities can be whittled away. Given the right circumstances, the next election could produce a hung parliament. If that happens electoral reform will be on the table. The dynamics of British politics could be transformed forever, and the electorate would be compelled to recognise the compromises that are needed to govern by consent. The electorate's response to the Liberal Democrats participation in the coalition, however, suggests that these are lessons still to be learned.

The minor parties also face their own internal problems. UKIP was subject to divisions—particularly after it achieved its goal of a referendum and a vote to leave. The attempts to rebrand the party as an anti-Islam party failed in 2017. The populist leaders are well aware of the threat. When Nigel Farage founded RUK in 2020, he took a controlling interest in the company that owns the party. This has now been relinquished, and party members—in theory at least—have more control. To this point, party members have been willing to follow their charismatic leader. That willingness may erode, especially if new parties threaten to enter the electoral marketplace.

Whatever happens to individual political parties, British electoral politics is likely to remain chaotic for the foreseeable future. The systemic implications of chaos should not be underestimated. A majoritarian logic still frames Britain's constitution. This logic is predicated on a single party winning a majority in the House of Commons and claiming a mandate to wield parliament's law-making powers. It is also predicated on the idea that the electorate holds governments accountable because they can turn to an alternative government on the opposition benches. Adversarialism between the government of the day and the official opposition is hardwired into parliamentary practice and in the surrounding news and social media environments. Problems arise, however, when these features of the constitution meet an increasingly fragmented party system. Single parties struggle to win parliamentary majorities, as happened in 2010 and 2017. Single party majority governments may also be formed on small shares of the vote, as happened in 2005 (35.2%), 2015 (36.9%) and 2024 (33.7%). In such circumstances, claims of government mandates become less convincing, and governments may lack legitimacy. Government legitimacy may be further eroded by the many lines of criticism coming from more directions and amplified on social media. Governments may act less responsibly, in the sense of making prudent and consistent decisions (Birch 1964), if they are driven by competing partisan considerations on multiple fronts. On that note, it is likely that the UK would still have closer relations with the European Union, its largest trading partner—and perhaps still be a member—were it not for the Conservative party's past fear of UKIP on its right flank. Moreover, the absence of a single alternative to the government of the day makes it harder for the electorate to punish governments and to keep policy broadly in line with public preferences. To be sure, the chaos may eventually abate. If it does not, the British constitution will need to find new ways of accommodating a less predictable type of politics.

Data availability The data for the tables and figures are available from the lead author on request.

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