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POLITICAL PARTIES AND DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE, ISRAEL, AND TURKEY

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The United Kingdom Party System

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Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) party system is 'one of the oldest, strongest, and most stable of the party systems in Europe' (Mair 2009: 283). Simplifying only a little, it comprises two major parties—Conservative and Labour—that dominate both government and the House of Commons. These parties have collectively shaped the agenda, generated most of the 'big ideas', and made the UK what it is today. The performance of British democracy depends almost entirely on these two parties (Bartle et al. 2019, Clark 2018, McGann et al. 2023).

The current UK party system has moulded British politics for 100 years. For much of the last 50 years, commentators have speculated whether that mould might break (Webb and Bale 2021). Such speculation has sometimes been based on incontrovertible evidence that the public are discontented with the parties and the choices they provide. At other times it has been based on little more than the 'unnatural' longevity of the system. It often seems that the system does not adequately reflect contemporary political conflicts. Nevertheless, the two parties have staggered on, fitfully adapting to preserve both themselves and the system.

The Two-party System

A party system comprises a recurring interaction between the parties that make up that system (Sartori 2005). The UK's framework conditions mean that the goal of parties is to win a majority in the House of Commons. Since 1918, all but four governments have been either Conservative or Labour single-party administrations. All four coalitions involved the Conservatives. Three were Tory administrations in all but name. The 1918 coalition, under the Liberal Lloyd George, overwhelmingly relied on Conservative MPs. The

Conservatives supplied most MPs in the National governments from 1931 to 1940 and dominated the 2010 to 2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Labour, by contrast, has only shared power in wartime coalitions from 1915 to 1918 and 1940 to 1945.

Figure 3.1 displays the number of days that the parties have been in office by each government.[1] To simplify things, the three peacetime coalitions are classified as Conservative. This visualization illustrates the pendulum-like swing from one side to another. Yet the swing of this pendulum is far from regular. If we exclude the three Tory-dominated coalitions, the Conservative advantage (16,475 days to 12,096) is pronounced. If we include coalitions, the Conservatives have been in government for almost twice as long: 22,899 days to Labour's 12,096. While the 20th century was the 'socialist era' of increased government activity and collective action, it was the 'Conservative century' in terms of governments (Jenkins 1988; Seldon and Ball 1994).

Figure 3.2 illustrates how the two parties have dominated UK politics. The broken line displays their combined share of the vote. From 1918 to 1929 the parties won on average 69% of the vote. From 1931 to 1970 they won over 90%. In February 1974, the two-party joint share fell by 14-points. It drifted downwards until 2010 when it reached just 65%. Two-party domination seemed to have been re-established in 2017 when it rose to 82%, but it fell to 76% in 2019 due to a sharp fall in the Labour vote.

Figure 3.2 also illustrates the growing gap between the two parties' share of seats and share of the vote. The two parties' share of the vote fell steeply from the 1950s, but their share of seats (represented by the solid line) declined much less. This is simply because the plurality electoral system insulated the
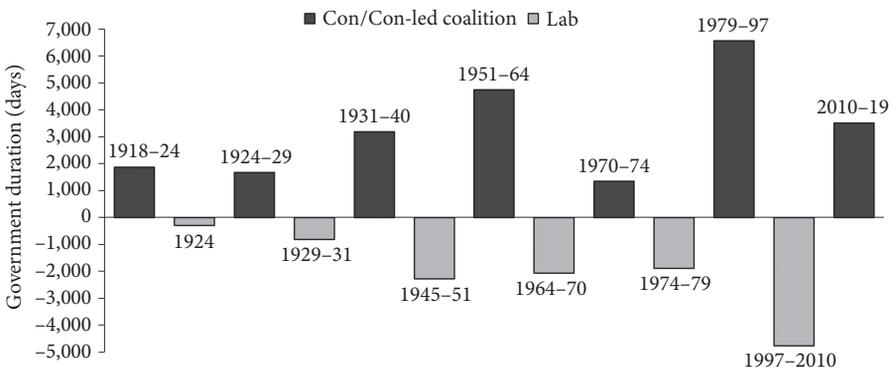

Figure 3.1 Government duration (days in office), 1918–2019
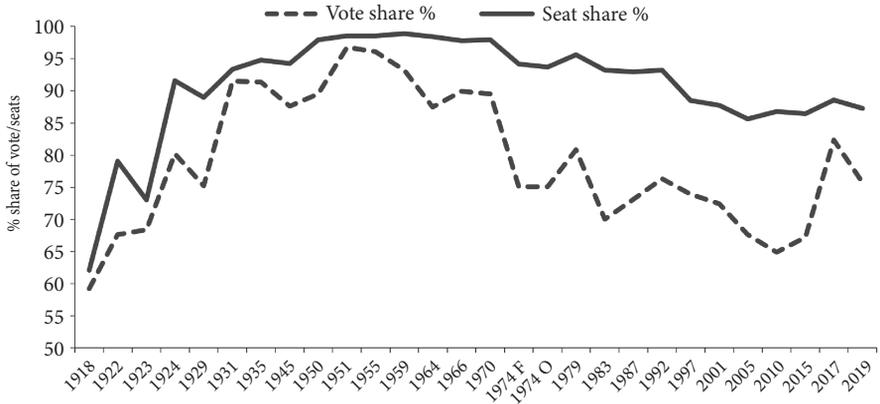
Source: Authors' calculations

Figure 3.2 Conservative and Labour joint seat and vote share, 1918–2019

Source: Authors' calculations based on Pilling and Cracknell 2021

two parties. From 1931 to 1970 the difference between the two parties' seat and vote shares averaged just 6 points. From 1974 to 2015, it averaged 18 points.

To make comparisons with other multi-party systems, it is useful to examine standardized indicators. Figure 3.3 displays the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) and effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) from 1945 to 2019. The two-party dominance is illustrated by the almost flat line for the ENPP, which varies between 2 and 2.5. The increased willingness of voters to support parties other than the two parties of government is illustrated by the increase in the ENEP from around 2 in the 1950s to 3.9 in 2015. The gap between the two indices increased from roughly 0 in the 1950s to around 1 by 2010. It then peaked at 1.35 in 2015. The gap closed in 2017 as both major parties made gains but re-opened as Labour lost votes in 2019. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 both illustrate that the electorate has become more willing to vote for parties that had little prospect of either forming or participating in the government.

Although the two parties disliked coalitions with other parties, electoral competition compelled them to become broad coalitions themselves (King 2009). These coalitions were so broad that it should have been possible to form a party made of the left wing of the Conservative party and right wing of the Labour Party or have some degree of cooperation 'across the aisle', as Americans say. National governments of the sort seen on continental Europe were never needed, but even when they were possible, they were never seriously considered. While the parties often struggled to agree on policy, the one thing that both parties agreed on was that the 'other' party was 'beyond the pale'.
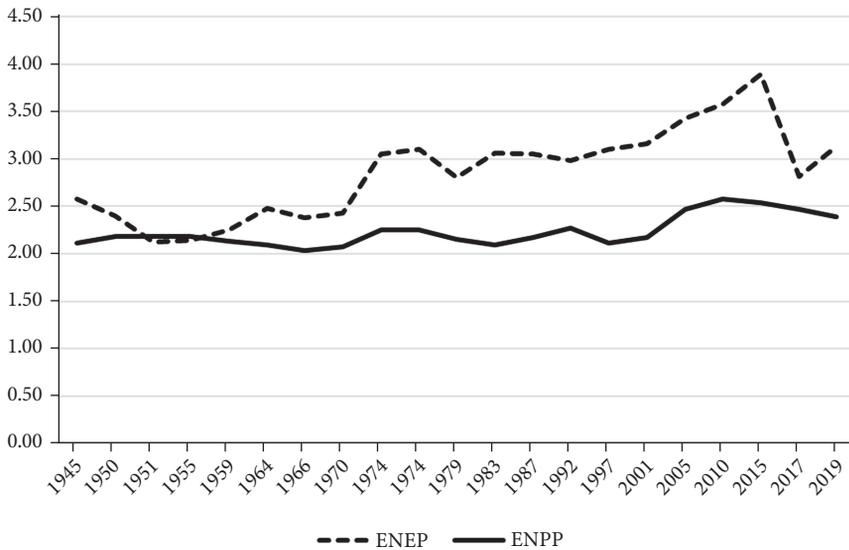
Figure 3.3 Effective number of electoral and parliamentary parties, 1945–2019

Note: ENEP—effective number of electoral parties, ENPP—effective number of parliamentary parties

Source: Döring et al. 2022

Framework Conditions

The 'closed' nature of the party system provides the electorate with the same binary choice at every general election (Mair 2009). This limited choice is a product of the 'framework conditions'—constitutional rules or conventions, and the electoral system. Most studies tend to emphasize the impact of the electoral system (Duverger 1954). Nevertheless, other constitutional rules matter a lot. In the UK's 'political' constitution the enforcement of conventions is a matter for politicians drawn from the two major parties, not the courts (Griffiths 1979). These parties have a common interest in maintaining the conditions that sustain the system (Katz and Mair 1995). This is most obvious in relation to the electoral system but extends to the broader constitution.

Constitution

One of the reasons for the longevity of the party system is the importance that the constitution attaches to 'strong government' (King 2009). This is a product of parliamentary sovereignty, the rule that Parliament has unlimited legal

authority (Dicey 1885). It is also a product of the convention that a Prime Minister must command the confidence of the Commons. British governments can always act without depending on other parties. Historically, this rule encouraged the formation of parties to control the executive (Cox 1987). Since the UK is weakly bi-cameral, the party that controls the Commons can act as an 'elective dictatorship' (Hailsham 1976). The government controls the parliamentary agenda, and party loyalty is strong. The 'strong government' mindset extends beyond Westminster. Most voters think of elections as a chance to choose a government, not a local representative.

Strong government in a two-party system requires a strong opposition to provide voters with a choice. Government proposals are invariably opposed by the 'other side'. The continual reproduction of binaries makes choices comprehensible to the electorate (Budge 2019). The larger of the two main parties forms the government and the other becomes the 'official' opposition. The leader of the official opposition draws a salary paid for by public funds. They appoint a shadow cabinet and establish a 'government in waiting'. Significant resources are placed at the disposal of this institutionalized opposition. The funding formula for the allocation of money to support opposition parties in their parliamentary duties is based on representation in the Commons. This favours the official opposition over other parties (Kelly 2020). Other features of the parliamentary system reinforce the binary choice. Prime Minister's Question Time in the Commons gives MPs a chance to question the Prime Minister for 30 minutes once a week while the Commons is in session. These exchanges are dominated by exchanges between the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition and between Conservatives and Labour. The major parties rarely engage with challenger parties, denying them opportunities for publicity.

Control of the Commons is determined by the electorate and the electoral system. To make their choices, voters must be informed. Since party membership is small, voters have traditionally relied on the mass media for information (Bartle 2006). The UK national press is highly partisan and reinforces binary perspectives. The Conservatives have usually enjoyed the overwhelming support of the newspapers. Yet since newspaper readership is self-selecting, it has limited electoral impact. Broadcasting is potentially more impactful but regulated to ensure 'due impartiality' (Ofcom 2020). The definition of impartiality is heavily influenced by the parliamentary status quo. Most news stories are framed by the government and 'official' opposition. Alternative perspectives are often ignored. The major parties have cultivated relations with the media who want to hear from those parties that might form the government. Both parties know how to shape the political

agenda and provide content that satisfies the media's news values. The major party domination of the media has changed a little with the rise of social media, which provide platforms to those beyond the mainstream. Populists on both the right and the left have used social media to shift the major parties towards their polar positions. Both the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader in 2015 and the victory of the Leave Campaign in the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union owed much to the activities of these 'keyboard warriors'.

Changes in the framework conditions have produced party system change. The establishment of devolved institutions in Scotland and Wales from 1998 onwards has nibbled away at the two-party system (Johns 2018).[2] The new legislatures are elected by proportional electoral systems that lower barriers to challenger party success. Other changes have also been impactful. British government was traditionally based on a strict division of labour between parties and the public. The electorate chose governments, but government made all the decisions. The public were never asked to directly decide policy (King 2009). In 1975 the Labour government broke with this tradition and referred membership of the then Common Market to the people. From 1975 onwards anyone who was dissatisfied with the choices provided by the parties could campaign for a referendum. While referendums are not legally binding on Parliament, they are politically binding. Since parties are often internally divided on issues and referendum outcomes divide party members into winners and losers, governments have generally avoided references to the people. When governments have granted referendums—either because of electoral pressure or miscalculation—they have risked destabilizing the party system. The outcomes of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) produced shocks that will reverberate through the system for years (Fieldhouse et al. 2019).

Electoral system

The UK's plurality electoral system for elections to the House of Commons awards seats based on votes obtained in constituencies. Put simply, the candidate with the most votes is elected. If there were just two candidates, the plurality winner would necessarily gain a majority (50% plus one). If there are two or more candidates a candidate can win with significantly less than a majority. This rule affects both voters and parties (Quinn 2017). Voters must consider both their preferences and the probable election outcome. If they

vote for a candidate that cannot win, they arguably 'waste' their vote. Voters may vote strategically or tactically for a less preferred party to stop another less preferred party from winning. Minor parties must consider the likelihood of winning before entering the race. If they nominate a candidate and fail to obtain 5% of the vote in a seat, they will lose their £500 deposit. And, if parties from the same side contest a seat, this may split the vote and let the other side win. This consideration may also dissuade politicians from breaking with their party (Cox 1997).

The plurality system has different effects on minor parties depending on the geographical distribution of the vote. In 2015 the Liberal Democrats received 7.9% of the vote and just 1.2% of the seats because its vote was not concentrated. The anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) won 12.6% of the vote and just 0.15% of seats in the same election. The Scottish National Party (SNP), by contrast, received just 4.7% of the UK vote and won 8.6% seats because its vote was concentrated (Johns 2018).

Changes in the electoral system are likely to have profound impacts on the party system. This is illustrated by the new legislatures created by the Labour's programme of devolution. The Scottish Parliament, Welsh Senned, and Greater London Assembly are all presently elected using proportional systems (Additional Member System). Many voters opted to split their constituency and top-up vote between different parties. Both major parties performed far less well in these elections than their Westminster equivalents. Challenger parties like UKIP, the Greens, the SNP, and Plaid Cymru did better (McLean 2006). The consequences for Labour in the Scottish Parliament were disastrous. It was forced to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats from 1998 to 2007 and then lost power in 2007. The SNP has formed the Scottish government ever since, as a minority, a majority or, from 2021, in coalition with the Scottish Greens. Over time, it established its credibility and an image as the protector of a distinctive Scottish national interest. By 2014 it was confident enough to request a referendum on Scottish independence. Although, the Scottish people voted 55% 'no' and 45% 'yes' to independence, the referendum destroyed Labour's reputation as a party that looked after the Scottish interest. Labour was virtually wiped out in Scotland at subsequent Westminster elections. This example is one reason why the major parties resist demands for further electoral reform.

The contrasting fortunes of the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, and SNP in 2015 illustrated how the plurality electoral system could lead to a multi-party system. Many minor parties could emerge to represent distinct areas. This does not usually happen because regional interests are normally muted and because parties want to win a majority of seats. Nevertheless, if large parts

of the nation decide that they no longer want to remain in the union, these considerations become less important. By 2014 many Scots concluded that they could achieve more by abandoning the pro-Union Labour Party (Johns 2018). This example illustrates how a plurality electoral system can produce rapid transformation of party systems at the regional level.

Resources: membership and finance

Party members have played a limited role in both major parties until recently (McKenzie 1955). In the 1950s the Conservatives claimed 2.8 million members and Labour around one million (UK Parliament 2022). Neither claim can be validated. Record keeping in both parties was poor. Definitions of membership varied across local Conservative associations, and constituency Labour parties routinely exaggerated their membership so they could send delegates to annual conference. By the late 1990s Conservative membership had dwindled to under 500,000 and Labour to slightly lower levels (UK Parliament 2022). These figures are again unreliable, but the accuracy of these records hardly mattered because members had little power. It was only when they acquired responsibilities for electing leaders and selecting candidates that figures became more accurate. From 2002 onwards parties had to produce accounts to the Electoral Commission but did not have to give membership figures. When the accounts include such figures, they provide reliable indicators. Labour membership surged under Corbyn's leadership from 388,000 in 2015 to 544,000 by 2016 and around 575,000 in 2017. Membership fell away after defeat in 2019 and the election of Keir Starmer as party leader in 2020. Nevertheless, by 2022 Labour had 432,000 members, while the Conservatives had just 172,000 (UK Parliament 2022: 4).

Party members have not been important in the UK because the parties did not rely on members for funds and were reluctant to give them a direct say over policy, the selection of candidates, or party leaders (McKenzie 1955). Until the late 1990s, Labour obtained most of its money from affiliated trade unions. The unions in turn obtained votes at the party's annual conference and a say over policy. The Conservatives relied on donations from companies and from rich individuals. From the late 1990s onwards, the unions have become a less important source for Labour as membership of unions has declined and trade unions have withdrawn support. Companies have largely stopped donating to the Conservative party. New limits on election expenditure were imposed under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 spending limits on national campaigns. Nevertheless, parties still

need funds. Both parties became more dependent on individual members and donations from individuals. The first development increased demands for members to have a say over leaders, candidates, and policies. The second has embroiled the parties in controversies about the ethics of donations, transparency, and the influence of donations on party policy.

Party Adaptation in a Strong Party System

Despite the transformation of Scottish politics, the UK has a strong party system. At a national level, challenger parties still find it very hard to break the mould. The identity of the parties that frame the system is a result of historic social structures and a long history of party adaptation (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This section examines the electoral performance, origins, ideology, and adaptation of the two parties over time. The parties endure because the framework conditions protect them and give them time to adapt. The failure of one of these major parties to adapt—first Labour, then the Conservatives, and then Labour again—produced a pattern of 'alternating predominance' from 1979 onwards (Quinn 2012).

UK elections, 1918–2019

Figure 3.4 displays the vote share received by parties from 1918 to 2019. Over those 101 years the Conservative party averaged 41.8% of the vote and Labour 37.5%. From 1945 to 2019 the advantage is somewhat smaller (40.9% to 39.3%) but still visible.

Figure 3.5 displays the seat share won by parties from 1918 to 2019. Over the whole period Conservatives won an average of 49.9% of seats compared to Labour's 40.9%. From 1945 to 2019 the figures are almost exactly equal (46.8% to 46.6%). Figure 3.4 illustrates the pattern of 'alternating predominance' since 1979 (Quinn 2012). The Tories won comfortable majorities in 1979 and 1992 and massive majorities in 1983 and 1987. Labour won 'landslide majorities' in 1997 and 2001 and a large majority in 2005. The Conservatives have won the four subsequent elections. While the first three victories were unconvincing, the party's 56.2% share of the seats in 2019 was impressive.

Votes for 'challenger parties' are the 'canary in the coalmine'—they indicate discontent with the two-party system. The vote share of the UK's traditional third party, the Liberal Democrats, is displayed in Figure 3.4. In the 1950s
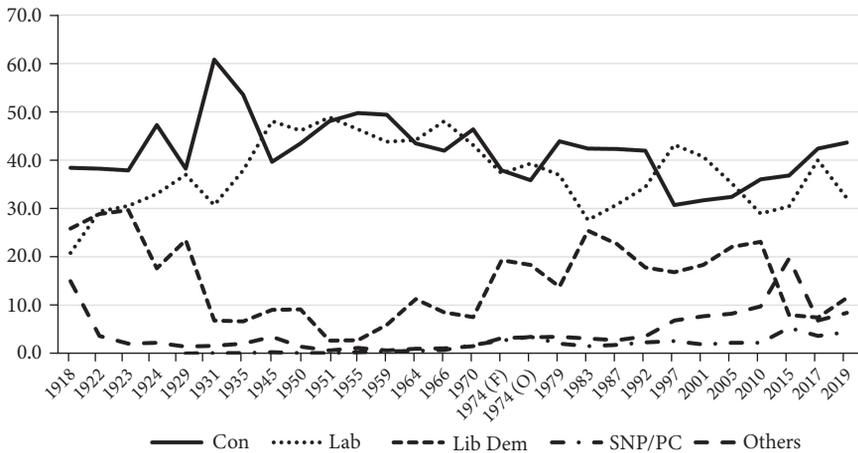
Figure 3.4 Party vote share in UK general elections, 1918–2019

Source: Pilling and Cracknell 2021

its share of the vote share fell to 2% but then trended upwards until 2010. This rise was driven by social changes, including a larger middle class and the expansion of higher education (Heath et al. 1989), the periodic tendency of the major parties to 'vacate the centre' (Nagel and Wlezien 2010) and both parties' poor performance in office (Bartle et al. 2019). Figure 3.5 shows that the electoral system failed to reward the Liberal Democrats with seats even when their vote increased dramatically in February 1974 and 1983. From 1997 onwards, however, it picked up more seats because of tactical voting by Labour voters in Conservative seats.

By 2010 the Liberal Democrats had gained enough for it to enter a coalition with the Conservatives and govern in accordance with a coalition agreement (Quinn et al. 2011). This experiment in coalition politics proved disastrous for the third party (Curtice 2018). Its share of the vote plummeted from 23% in 2010 to 7.9% in 2015 (see Figure 3.4). Its share of the seats fell from 8.8% to 1.2% (see Figure 3.5). This reversal of fortunes represented the largest change in vote share for any party in any general election.

The vote for 'other' or 'minor' parties has generally been small but tended upwards since the early 1970s (Figure 3.4). It peaked in 2015 following the collapse of the Liberal Democrats, a large rise in UKIP vote, a surge in votes for the SNP, and a smaller rise in the Green Party vote. The rise in support for UKIP before 2015 was politically consequential because it was one of the factors that persuaded the Conservative government to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU. UKIP claimed that the two major parties
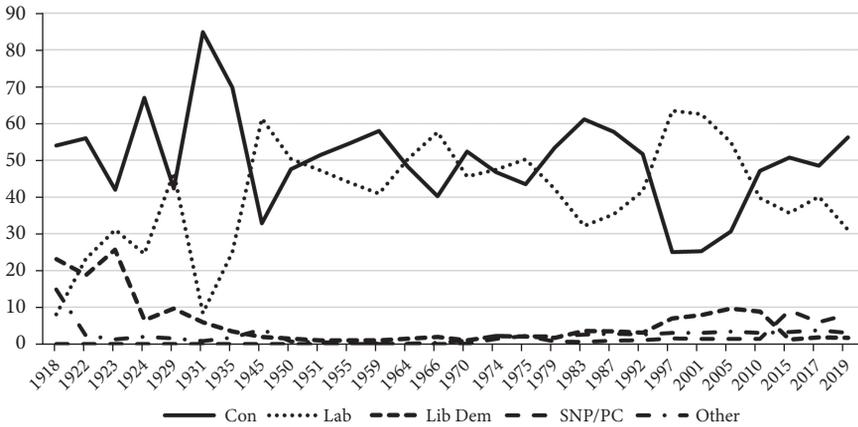
Figure 3.5 Party seat share in UK general elections, 1918–2019

Source: Pilling and Cracknell 2021. Authors' calculations

agreed about transferring sovereignty to the EU. They argued that switching from one side to the other would not provide voters with more control over policy towards the EU. Instead, they argued that the people should be given a direct say in a referendum. These arguments initially had limited impact because sovereignty was an abstract issue. They became more impactful after 2010 when sovereignty became bundled with the issue of immigration. UKIP claimed that the UK could not control immigration while a member of the single market. This made the invitation to 'take back control' much more appealing and was a major factor in both the growth in UKIP vote in 2015 and the Leave vote in 2016.

The variations in the vote for 'other' parties did not generally translate into seats at Westminster. The only exception was the vote for the SNP since 2015. Nevertheless, the threat of challenger parties meant that the two major parties had to factor in these parties to a degree when formulating their electoral strategies.

The Ideology and Performance of the Two Major Parties

In a two-party system the ideology and electoral performance of the parties cannot be studied in isolation. The strategy of one depends on that of the other, and the vote for one party depends on voters' judgements about the 'alternative'. To simplify matters, we start with Labour because the current system was established when it replaced the Liberal party. While the

Conservative party has undoubtedly dominated government, moreover, it has often been on the political defensive. If we are to understand the party system, we must understand Labour.

The Labour Party

The present party system is the third system in the UK. The first, between 1740 and 1840, pitted the Whigs against the Tories. The Whigs opposed monarchical rule, championed the political and economic rights of the urban middle class, and advocated religious freedom. Together with a small group of radicals, they formed a progressive wing in Parliament before mass democracy. The Tories supported the monarch and championed the interests of the aristocrats and the established churches. The second system lasted from 1860 to 1918, when both the parties split. 'Whigs' and 'radicals' were drawn to the Liberal Party that supported personal freedom, free trade, and non-conformists.[3] The Tory Party re-formed as the Conservative party that championed traditional values, empire, and the established church. Both parties developed organizations to mobilize the expanded electorate (McKenzie 1955).

The Labour Party was established in 1906 to achieve working-class representation in Parliament (McKibbin 1974). The Liberal Party recognized the threat that Labour represented and acted to contain it. The Liberals agreed not to compete with Labour in 50 seats in return for being given free runs elsewhere. This helped Labour establish a foothold in Westminster. Nevertheless, Labour's future was far from certain. The Liberals increasingly recognized demands for greater state activity and collective action to enhance individual freedom (Heywood 2017). If the First World War had not intervened, the Liberals may have forged a coalition that incorporated Labour (Marquand 1999).

The First World War split the Liberal Party into two groups: those who supported the coalition under Lloyd George and those who supported a distinctly Liberal alternative under Asquith. In 1918 Labour decided to take advantage of this split and the extension of the franchise to male workers and most women by trying to replace the Liberals. It adopted a new constitution and advocated a massive expansion in state activity. This programme established a new left–right economic dimension that formed the basis of party competition in all future elections (Bara and Weale 2006). Labour ('the left') advocated 'more' government activity, 'more' collective action, and 'more' equality, while the Conservatives ('the right') advocated 'less'.

These developments, coupled with the operation of the plurality electoral system, resulted in the two major parties squeezing the Liberal vote by the end of the 1920s (McKibbin 1974). Labour's electoral strategy focused on mobilizing the majority working class. Nevertheless, it also attracted other social groups to the party's coalition. Labour's proposals to expand state activity appealed to egalitarian non-conformists and radicals. Some in the middle class recognized that an expanded state provided them with opportunities. Labour also advocated polices that favoured urban dwellers and those who lived in the Celtic periphery of Scotland and Wales (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The party failed to attract all former Liberals, however. Many remained suspicious of Labour's socialist and class politics. Labour's post-war victories demonstrated that it could attract enough voters in favourable circumstances, but its limited appeal to the middle class became an increasing handicap as the working class became a smaller portion of the electorate.

The proletarian origins of the Labour Party also affected the party's ethos and the way that it interacted with other parties (Drucker 2018). Labour claimed to be democratic but was heavily influenced by its affiliated trade unions. Supporters of the union link claimed that it kept Labour 'grounded' (Minkin 1992). Conservative opponents claimed Labour was a 'wholly owned subsidiary' of the unions. Others suggested that the union link tied Labour to intellectually timid policies (Marquand 1999). What is beyond doubt is that the trade unions made Labour more tribal and more suspicious of other non-Conservative parties. Labour formed minority governments in 1923 and 1929 rather than form a coalition. It also rejected coalition in 1931 following the economic crisis. MacDonald's decision to form the National Government was regarded as a betrayal. Labour reluctantly joined Churchill's wartime coalition and withdrew before the war with Japan ended. The party's unwillingness to surrender its exclusive right of opposition to the Conservatives has continued. In 1997 Tony Blair was dissuaded from inviting Liberal Democrats to join his government by internal opposition. In 2010 some senior Labour figures similarly urged the party to reject a 'progressive coalition' with the Liberal Democrats, SNP, and Greens that might have prevented David Cameron becoming Prime Minister.

Labour ideas about government intervention, collective action, and equality have dominated British politics in the 20th century. Nevertheless, as Figure 3.1 shows, the party has spent little time in government. The continued contraction of the working class because of deindustrialization raised questions about whether Labour could win an election. Labour's problems were compounded by the fact that the 1945–1951 Attlee government achieved virtually all its goals. This success led to factional disputes. The left wanted to

expand the state, while the right wanted to consolidate. In the 1960s Wilson emphasized the 'white heat of technological change' (Ponting 1989), which untied the party for a time. Nevertheless, Labour again descended into factional infighting as the economic crisis of the 1970s unfolded (Jenkins 1988).

From 1945 to 1970 the Labour leadership was protected from the demands of the left by the trade unions. From the late 1960s, however, the trade unions swung leftwards in response to the failures of Labour governments. Labour lurched left in February 1974 and again in 1983, vacating the centre, increasing support for the third parties (Whiteley et al. 2021). In 1974 the impact of these changes was concealed by the disastrous performance of the Conservatives. In 1983 the party had no such luck. It faced a Conservative party buoyed by military success in the Falklands War and an economic boom and went down to a landslide defeat (Jenkins 1988). Only the electoral system saved them from an even greater loss of seats.

Labour's tendency to vacate the centre had a dramatic effect on British politics. In 1981 a significant portion of the party's right broke away to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). This party fought the 1983 and 1987 general elections in alliance with the Liberals (Crewe and King 1995). This split contributed to a dramatic rise in the third-party vote, but the electoral system again protected Labour from losing seats. The Liberals and SDP merged to create the Liberal Democrats in 1988. Labour moved back to the centre under the leaderships of Kinnock and Smith. From 1994 onwards Blair speeded up the party's 'modernization' by accepting many Conservative policies on trade unions, privatization, and lower income taxes. The party was re-branded as 'New Labour' and appealed to the educated middle class by emphasizing education, constitutional reforms to protect human rights, liberalizing laws relating to sexuality, protection of the environment, and expanding the competence of the EU. These adaptations, together with Conservative failures, resulted in Labour landslide victories in 1997 and 2001 and a significant majority in 2005. This unusual period of Labour predominance ended when Labour went down to a heavy defeat in 2010 following the financial crisis.

Blair also modernized Labour by reducing the power of trade unions over policy. The unions' share of the vote at the annual conference that decided policy fell. The balance of power shifted to ordinary members who were more concerned about social issues than the working class. Since participation is higher among the educated and middle class, Labour increasingly reflected their concerns. By the mid-2000s most Labour members and virtually all its most prominent figures were middle class (Bellucci and Heath 2012). These changes, together with disillusion following Blair's support for the invasions

of Iraq and Afghanistan, resulted in the election of Corbyn as leader in 2015 by party members, despite his minimal support among Labour MPs. This pulled the party further left.

The gap between the party and its working-class supporters on non-economic issues under New Labour was not entirely new. The Wilson government's support for reforms of the laws relating to homosexuality, divorce, and abortion were driven by middle-class advocacy groups (Ponting 1989). Any differences between the classes were not electorally consequential because these were secondary issues. Labour governments in the 1970s balanced limits on immigration with laws to end racial discrimination. As the non-economic dimensions of politics grew in importance, the electoral risk increased. By the late 1990s, Labour's liberal policies appealed largely to young, educated, and middle-class voters (Sobolewska 2021). So did Labour's enthusiasm for the EU. This led it to allow workers from the new member states in Eastern Europe to immediately work in the UK from 2004. Net migration to the UK surged. Concerns about the impact of immigration on employment, wages, and public services increased, particularly among the working class. Over time, large parts of the white working class came to feel that Labour no longer represented them (Evans and Tilly 2017). These concerns initially resulted in declining turnout. From the mid-2000s they produced increasing working-class support for the British National Party and UKIP (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

In the 2016 referendum on EU membership, older voters, the working class, and less educated voters overwhelmingly voted to 'take back control'. Younger voters, the middle class, and more educated voters overwhelmingly voted Remain (Clarke et al. 2017). Victory for Leave meant that Labour was out of line with working-class Leave voters. In the 2017 general election Corbyn promised to honour the decision to leave but to negotiate a new withdrawal agreement to protect labour rights and the environment. The party also announced popular plans to increase government spending and nationalization. This united the party and helped Labour attract the votes of enough Leavers and Remainers to gain votes and seats and produce a hung Parliament. By 2019 adversarial politics reasserted itself. Labour's members demanded a distinctive Labour policy that a renegotiated withdrawal agreement should be put to a second referendum with the option to remain. Corbyn agreed in order to unite his party ahead of an election (Whiteley et al. 2021). He then declined to say how he would vote in that second referendum. This satisfied no one. Leavers felt betrayed by the promise of a second referendum. Remainers felt that Labour lacked commitment to the EU. Some Remainers moved to the Greens, others to the Liberal Democrats. The party's

2019 coalition quickly eroded. Labour was soundly defeated in 2019, winning fewer MPs than at any election since 1935. Most strikingly, the Conservatives outpolled Labour among the working class. Many seats with long Labour traditions (the so-called 'red wall') fell to the Conservatives. While the vote for 'Remain' parties exceeded that for 'Leave' parties, it was scattered across more parties (Johns 2021).

After the defeat, Labour elected Starmer as leader. Despite making promises to retain the left-wing policies of his predecessor, he reined in the party's ambitious spending and nationalization plans. He also nodded to working-class patriotism when the party sang 'God Save the King' at the 2022 annual conference. He moved to exclude left-wingers from senior positions and selection as parliamentary candidates in key seats. He also barred Corbyn from standing as a Labour candidate again after the former leader criticized a report about antisemitism under his leadership. Labour's return to the political centre, following the New Labour model, was completed with brutal determination.

The Conservative Party

Since the UK is a two-party system, any analysis of Labour says much—but not everything—about the alternative. While Labour has been electorally unsuccessful, the Conservative party has won election after election with generally sizeable majorities (Seldon and Ball 1994). While Labour styled itself as the party of the workers, the Conservative party has portrayed itself as a national party that transcends narrow interests (Butler and Stokes 1974). And while Labour has demonstrated commitment to big ideas, the Conservative party has—with one notable exception—prided itself on its pragmatism.

The Conservative party, like the Tory Party before it, has drawn support from those groups that support the status quo: owners of industry, the middle class, homeowners, members of the established church, and farmers, together with unionists in the three Celtic nations. Deindustrialization, social mobility, the spread of property ownership, and migration from the cities have all increased the size of these groups. Yet the party has always attracted many working-class voters. Indeed, since workers were long the majority class, the party obtained over half of its vote from this source in the 1950s and 1960s (Butler and Stokes 1974). Some of these were repulsed by socialism or labourism. Others deferred to their 'social betters' (McKenzie and Silver 1968). The leftward movement of policy after 1945 led some workers to conclude that welfare was too generous, taxes were too high, and

personal incentives had been eroded (Bartle et al. 2011). In a two-party system the Conservatives were the only other option. The Conservative party's continued association with symbols of 'Britishness' including the monarchy, armed forces, and churches consolidated its reputation as the 'national' party.

The Conservative party of Churchill and Macmillan in the 1950s prided itself in its pragmatism (Heywood 2017). Some have claimed that party ideology was summarized by a principled commitment to the free market (Willetts 1992). Yet while this is true of Margaret Thatcher, she is the exception to the rule. The Conservative party has usually simply tried to 'conserve'. It has favoured traditional institutions like the nation, the established church, and the family. Nevertheless, it has also accepted Burke's advice about the need to 'change to conserve' (Burke 2015). This willingness to adapt was most clearly illustrated by its acceptance of the National Health Service (NHS) from 1948. The Thatcher administration's attempt to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' from 1979 to 1990 was the exception to the party's tendency to accommodate the public mood. Thatcher had the freedom to pursue those goals because Labour was widely thought to be extreme and incompetent in the 1980s. From 1997 to 2005, the Conservative party became more ideological and tied to Thatcherite policies. Its vacation of the political centre contributed to the period of Labour predominance. Nevertheless, the party rediscovered its pragmatism under Cameron. It accepted the need for coalition in 2010 and adopted many of the policies of its Liberal Democrat coalition partners when in government.

The most enduring basis of the Conservative party's appeal is its claim to be the national party. It is for this reason that the issue of Europe caused it such problems. From the 1960s to the late 1990s most of the party viewed membership of the Common Market, the European Economic Community, and the EU as in the British national interest. The Heath government took the UK into the Common Market in 1973. Many Conservatives, including Thatcher, campaigned to remain in Europe in the referendum in 1975. Thatcher accepted the expansion of European competence in the European Single Act 1986. Yet by the late 1980s some Conservatives became worried about the erosion of national sovereignty implied by further integration. In her 1989 Bruges speech Thatcher proclaimed the need to maintain national distinctiveness. These views led to her removal as leader in late 1990. This, in turn, signalled the start of a long struggle about European policy that created disunity. From the mid-1990s the struggle was heightened by the emergence of challenger parties such as the Referendum Party and later UKIP. The leadership tried to unite the party by adopting increasingly Eurosceptic positions, but none satisfied the demands for a 'repatriation of sovereignty'. In 2005 Cameron

warned his party that 'banging on about Europe' was damaging. He appeared to win the argument. Over time, however, support for withdrawal from the EU increased, especially among party members.

The Conservative party has traditionally been advantaged in the competitive struggle for the vote by the fact that party members rarely tried to determine policy or constrain its leaders. Only the leader has authority to make party policy in consultation with colleagues. The leaders' duty was simply to stop Labour from winning. The Conservative party made little pretence to be democratic until the late 1990s. Conservative leaders sometimes found it expedient to take note of the mood in the party but never gave members a direct say over policy (Kelly 1989). Over time, members have become more visible. In 1998 they acquired the final say in the election of party leaders, choosing between two candidates selected by Conservative MPs (Quinn 2012). Despite these reforms the parliamentary party was still able to engineer the removal of the unpopular Duncan-Smith in 2003 and ensure that his successor Howard faced no rival. Nevertheless, members' significance increased. They tended to select Eurosceptic parliamentary candidates, and the balance of opinion slowly shifted in a Eurosceptic direction.

Under Cameron the Conservatives settled on a policy of Euroscepticism that fell short of advocating withdrawal. This united the party for a time. The demands for a more sceptical position increased during the coalition, when sensitivity to the Liberal Democrats led to less Eurosceptic policies. From 2010 onwards UKIP performed well in polls (Clarke et al. 2017). Ordinary Conservatives grew alarmed by this threat. The real impulse for change, however, was that Conservatives came to share both UKIP's analysis and prescription. Many concluded that EU integration was unstoppable and that the UK should leave.

Cameron yielded to party pressures by pledging a simple 'in–out' referendum on EU membership in 2013. This was designed to unite the party and stem the growth in support for UKIP in the next general election. When the Conservatives won the 2015 election, Cameron acted on his promise. He called a referendum, recommending a vote to remain. The resulting campaign brutally exposed Conservative divisions. Most MPs supported Remain; most members supported Leave. The eventual decision to leave the EU led to Cameron's resignation and replacement. Theresa May, the new Prime Minister, tried to unite her party by proposing to leave both the single market and customs union. Her initial popularity led her to call a general election in 2017. She promised a 'strong and stable' government but then performed a series of campaign U-turns that made her appear weak. May's

decision to call an election backfired, and the party lost its majority (Bartle 2018).

The May government from 2017 to 2019 became dependent on the small Democratic Unionist Party from Northern Ireland. For two years May's efforts to get a withdrawal agreement were blocked by a combination of opposition MPs, Remainer Conservatives, and Eurosceptics who demanded a clean break with the EU (Quinn 2021). Many Brexiteers feared that 'the Westminster establishment' would block withdrawal and joined the new Brexit party. This party's success in the European elections of June 2019, like UKIP's before it, caused panic. May resigned. In the subsequent leadership election, the party took the enormous risk of electing Boris Johnson—a man with a colourful past—as its leader (Allen 2021). He imposed party discipline by sacking most Remainers in the cabinet and withdrawing the whip from MPs who did not promise to 'get Brexit done'. He then renegotiated the EU withdrawal agreement and manoeuvred the other parties to accept a general election. His campaign combined traditional national appeals for strong government with a commitment to 'level up every part of the country'. While few knew precisely what this meant, it generally implied government activity and spending on a scale that horrified some Thatcherites. Nevertheless, the appeal worked. The Conservatives obtained a massive majority in the 2019 general election.

The Conservative party had little time to enjoy its victory. Johnson managed to 'get Brexit done', but his government was immediately overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government enforced lockdowns, outraging many of those who longed for a smaller state. Johnson's government became embroiled in scandal after scandal relating to breaches of COVID-19 regulations by those in government, including the Prime Minister himself. Johnson was finally forced to resign in 2022 after he made a questionable appointment to a sensitive role in the parliamentary party. In the resulting leadership campaign, party MPs presented members with a choice between Liz Truss, a politician who viewed herself as a Conservative in the Thatcherite mould, and Rishi Sunak, who enjoyed far more support among his parliamentary colleagues but was blamed by many for Johnson's resignation. Party members opted for the more ideological Truss, selecting yet another leader who did not enjoy the confidence of their parliamentary colleagues. Her government launched an ambitious tax-cutting plan to boost growth without explaining how it would be paid for. Bond traders took flight and interest rates rocketed. The party's reputation for competence suffered a grievous blow. She quicky resigned and was replaced by Sunak. The new leader set about trying to unite his fractured party around action to stop illegal immigration,

commitments to support the NHS and promises to bear down on inflation. It remained difficult to see how he could adapt in time for a general election that would come in January 2025, at the latest.

The Future

If an intelligent designer who was otherwise ignorant about the past were to design a two-party system to reflect contemporary political conflicts, it is doubtful that they would produce the current Labour–Conservative system. Yet the UK remains a strong and closed system. Challenger parties are unlikely to break the mould by replacing either of the two main parties. This does not mean that the two major parties are invulnerable. British history provides examples of parties that have disappeared because of internal splits or changes in the suffrage. Referendums may produce more chaos, though it is difficult to identify issues that would break the party system. Yet the framework conditions provide parties with time to adapt.

Both parties have been associated with policy failures. Labour presided over an economic crash during 2008–2010. The Conservatives presided over shambolic governments during Brexit, COVID-19, and the short-lived Truss administration. In an era of increasing intra-party democracy, both parties have proved vulnerable to takeover by their radical wings. The empowerment of party members has made it more difficult for leaders to resist the lure of ideological consistency. Both parties have periodically vacated the centre, reducing their credibility. This has allowed governments to either move toward their polar position or act less cautiously, confident that the electorate has no alternative. Such developments have illustrated the weakness of the UK constitution, which depends on voters and politics rather than judges and law. When the opposition fails to offer a credible choice, electoral checks are weak.

The two-party mould of British politics does not appear to be in danger of breaking anytime soon. The current Conservative government is willing to use its predominance to shore up its position. It has put pressure on the BBC to produce more favourable media content. It has also introduced legislation to require voters to use identity cards, even though the evidence suggests that impersonation is a trivial feature of UK elections. This may reduce the vote for non-Conservative parties. These are worrying indications that the party may use its power in the manner of authoritarian populists in other countries (Birch 2021).

Electoral reform would break the mould of the party system, but it is not on the agenda. Only Parliament can change the electoral system, and both the parties that dominate at Westminster and are likely to control government have resisted reform. The Conservatives are steadfastly opposed. The Labour leadership has ignored calls from party members for proportional representation. The party's experience in Scotland illustrated the dangers of that system to the party. Labour still jealously guards its monopoly on anti-Conservative opposition even though its electoral record is poor. And even if Labour were to contemplate reform, it is less likely to happen than in the past because there is now a convention that any reform to the electoral system must be referred to the people. Figure 3.6 displays the public's preferences for single-party and coalition government, from 1983 to 2017. From the early 1990s to late 2000s, roughly equal portions of the electorate preferred single-party and coalition government. After 2010, the public's preferences for single-party government shot up. In short, the experience of coalition between 2010 and 2015 set back not only the Liberal Democrats but also the cause of power sharing.

More recent evidence about public preferences for single-party or coalition government is not yet available. Nevertheless, it seems fair to speculate that the public's desire for strong single-party government can only have been bolstered by recent experience of parliamentary stalemate under May and administrative incompetence under Johnson. There is little prospect that the party system is likely to change anytime soon.
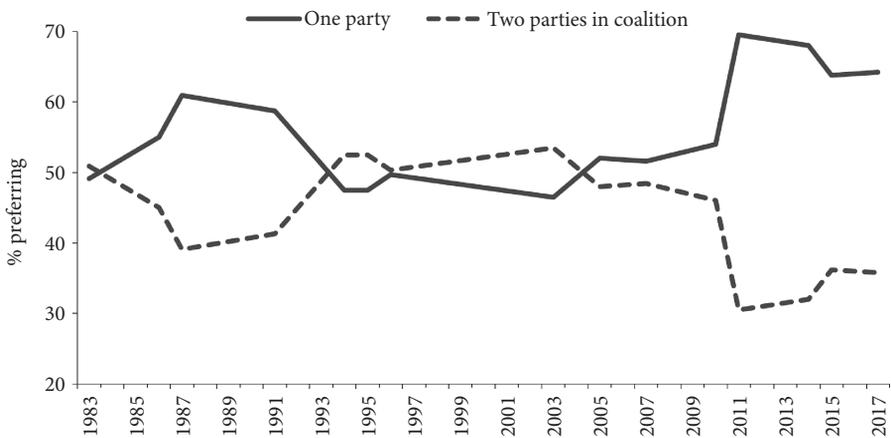

Figure 3.6 Preferences for single-party or coalition government, 1983–2017

Source: British Social Attitudes, https://natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes (Accessed 15 December 2023)

Notes

1. Figure 3.1 excludes the wartime coalition from 1940 to 1945.
2. The party system in Northern Ireland has always been different from that on the British mainland.
3. Non-conformists hold Christian beliefs that do not conform to the established Church of England.

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