

# The British Party System(s)

The Political System of the United Kingdom

## Intro

## UK Party Systems

Party Systems: Theory

The Main Parties: History,

Ideology, Organisation

Conservatives

Labour

LibDems

Others

Devolution: Regional Party Systems

Scotland & Wales

Northern Ireland

Convergence and Party Government?



## Conclusion

## Current Events

- ▶ New welfare cuts (12 bn?)
- ▶ Queen visits Germany
- ▶ ?

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- ▶ Vs. the British Party Systems
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- ▶ Vs. the British Party Systems
- ▶ I. e. the impact of devolution
- ▶ Problems with the Westminster model

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  - ▶ Central to modern, representative democracy (vs. direct democracy)

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- ▶ Features of party systems can be measured

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  1. Number of relevant parties
  2. Fragmentation (number + relative size/strength)
  3. Number of relevant conflict dimensions
  4. Degree of ideological polarisation
  5. Coalition and blackmailing potential



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  - ▶ Irish Nationalists/Unionists
  - ▶ Rise of Labour after WW I
  - ▶ SDP split from Labour (1981), SDP-Lib Alliance (83-88) → Liberal Democrats (merger)
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- ▶ Two-party system spells (e. g. 1930s-1960s)

## A Two-Dimensional Ideological Space

- ▶ Many political problems/issues
- ▶ People and politicians are cognitive misers → Left-Right Dimension
- ▶ In most West European countries, two very broad dimensions of conflict
  - ▶ Economic: public ownership/regulation vs. free market
  - ▶ Social: personal liberty/rights vs. conformity/(traditional) social values
- ▶ Does ideology still matter? “Valence” / “Competence”?

# Conservatives

- ▶ From late 19th century, one of the most successful centre-right parties in Western Europe
- ▶ Not a Christian-Democratic party (not based on religious conflict)
- ▶ In favour of welfare state for long spells (“One Nation Toryism”)
- ▶ Became economically ultra-right under Thatcher, which alienated voters and many party members in the long run
- ▶ Dominant political force from 1979-1990s
- ▶ Cameron (since 2005) tries to detoxify Conservative brand
- ▶ Euroscpticism
- ▶ What do they stand for today?

# Conservatives



# Labour

- ▶ Founded ca. 1900 by trade unionists
- ▶ Public ownership, fully employment, redistribution, welfare of the working class
- ▶ Labour struggled between WW I and WW II, but shaped Britain's post-WW II agenda (for better/worse)
- ▶ Radicalised, chaotic and finally split during 1970s (SPD)
- ▶ Reputation for economic mismanagement



## Labour



## “New Labour”

- ▶ Ideological moderation during 1980s (Neil Kinnock)
- ▶ John Smith, Blair, Brown: New Labour; Clause IV abolished in 1995
- ▶ Less working class, less ideological
- ▶ Accepted market mechanisms: nicer, more competent, less stuffy Left
- ▶ Reform and delivery
- ▶ Acceptable/attractive for non-working class people
- ▶ Dominant political force from 1997-07

## Liberal/Liberal Democrats

- ▶ Historically, one of two dominant parties
- ▶ In 1916, split over Irish home rule, since 1918 major 3rd party
- ▶ Growing support since 1960s (not fully translated into MPs)
- ▶ Rather left-liberal/reformist
- ▶ SDP (led by centre-right Labour MPs): EU, PR, constitutional reform, moderate redistribution
- ▶ SDP/Lib electoral Alliance in 1983/87 (about 25% of the vote); merger in 1988
- ▶ Co-operation before 1997, limited co-operation 97-01
- ▶ 2001- LibDems somewhat to the left of New Labour: Against Iraq, against fees, in favour of elected Lords etc.
- ▶ Then: the coalition

## Other English Parties

- ▶ Greens: founded in 1970s, some relevance in local politics, 1% of the vote in 2005
- ▶ BNP: racist and anti-immigrant party, 0.7% of the vote in 2005, becoming more relevant in local politics, but then wiped out in 2014/15
- ▶ Replaced by UKIP: fiercely anti-EU group, problems with discipline/corruption, 2% of the vote in 2005, quickly becoming a major force, now the 3rd party in England

## Who Votes for UKIP?

- ▶ Eurosceptic core, racist undertones
- ▶ Much more respectable than BNP
- ▶ Ford/Goodwin: The Party of the Left-Behind
- ▶ Not just about economy, but also about rapid cultural/ideological change
- ▶ Generational gap, regional disparities
- ▶ UKIP's economic policy vs. interests of their voters
- ▶ UKIP has blackmailing potential

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## Regionalist Parties in Scotland and Wales

- ▶ SNP: Scottish National Party, founded in 1930s, gaining momentum in 1970s and in the new millennium
- ▶ Relatively poor performance in 2005 (on the national level, just 18% of the Scottish vote), relatively strong in 2007 Scottish Parliament Election (33%), 44% in 2011
- ▶ PC: Plaid Cymru, founded in 1925, defender of Welsh cultural heritage
- ▶ 13% of Welsh vote in 2005, roughly 22% in 2007 Assembly elections, 18% in 2011

## Regional Party Systems in Scotland and Wales

- ▶ Different parties (SNP, PC)
- ▶ Different relative importance
  - ▶ Gen Election 2015 Wales: Conservative gains, but Lab still dominant (37 vs. 28), PC 12, UKIP 13
  - ▶ Gen Election 2015 Scotland: SNP 50%, Lab reduced to 25%, Con 15, LD 8, UKIP 2
- ▶ Different relationships (coalitions)



## Northern Ireland

- ▶ Completely different party system, shaped by ethnic/religious conflict
  - ▶ Unionist (Protestant) parties: Democratic Unionist Party, Ulster Unionist Party
  - ▶ Republican/nationalist (Catholic) parties: Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Sinn Fein
  - ▶ Cross-community parties (Alliance, Greens)
- ▶ Mainland UK parties irrelevant/non-existent for all practical purposes (UKIP 3 in Gen Election 2015)

## Parties and Democracy

- ▶ Like in all West European systems, politics dominated (but not monopolised) by parties
- ▶ Unlike in Germany, relatively high degree of centralisation within parties (no strong regional sub-units)
- ▶ Dominance of parliamentary parties and party leaders (who can de-select candidates)
- ▶ Relatively low number of individual members (but SNP)
- ▶ Labour still closely linked to the unions (historically, control of block votes – abolished during 1990s)
- ▶ Conservatives tried to reform the structures but had little success so far
- ▶ Certainly not the most democratic parties in the world

## Convergence/Divergence

- ▶ Centripetal tendencies built into two-party system logic (but is it a two-party system?)
  - ▶ During 1990s, New Labour moved to the right to capture the centre (and because Thatcherism was successful)
  - ▶ Under Cameron, Tories move towards the centre, too
- ▶ Historically, both major parties catch-all parties

## Conclusion

- ▶ Britain a multi-party system with two major parties
- ▶ Regional party systems in **Scotland**, Wales and **Northern Ireland**
- ▶ Parties and party system constantly changing in a struggle to adapt
- ▶ Moderate levels of democracy within parties
- ▶ Parties are dominant political players but do not hold monopoly

# Class questions

