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
- ?
Today:

- The Party System
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- Vs. the British Party Systems
- I.e. the impact of devolution
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- The Party System
- Vs. the British Party Systems
- I.e. the impact of devolution
- Problems with the Westminster model
What is a Party?

1. A group of citizens
2. Who want to influence policy
3. By competing in elections for public office

- Main functions:
  - Recruiting candidates
  - Filtering/Aggregating demands from the public
  - Selling policy to the public
  - Political socialisation of citizens

Central to modern, representative democracy (vs. direct democracy)
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What is a Party System?

- A collection of parties and the relationships/interaction between these elements
- The structure of the party system matters for:
  - Government formation/composition (coalitions)
  - Government outputs (policies)
  - Stability of governments
  - Legitimacy and representation
- Features of party systems can be measured
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How to “Measure” Party Systems?

- Various interrelated dimensions including:

  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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The British System in Perspective

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- Single-party governments
- Alternation in government
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- Britain really a two-party system?
  - Irish Nationalists/Unionists
  - Rise of Labour after WW I
  - SDP split from Labour (1981), SDP-Lib Alliance (83-88) → Liberal Democrats (merger)
  - Regionalist parties and Greens, more recently UKIP
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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 Natinon 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
- Euroscepticism
- What do they stand for today?
Conservatives

Let's Stay on the Road to a Stronger Economy.

1.75 million more people in work. 760,000 more businesses. The deficit halved.
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
Who Votes for UKIP?

Controls on immigration. I'm voting Labour 7 May.
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