

11.1 The origins and development of the British party system

Introduction

Political parties have a long history in Britain, but modern mass political parties have their origins in the waves of electoral reform, starting in 1832, that extended the franchise (right to vote). Before the 1830s the two parties – the Whigs and the Tories – existed not as mass political parties with formal institutions outside Parliament and a mass membership, but merely as groups of like-minded individuals within Parliament, bound together by ideas, friendship or family ties. With electoral reform, however, came a need to organise – to mobilise the (however slowly) expanding electorate in support of one's party. Certainly, by the time the Labour Party was formed at the start of the twentieth century, political parties were organisations that would be more familiar to anyone studying their modern counterparts.

Different types of party systems

It is often said that Britain operates as a two-party system. The truth or otherwise of this statement will be discussed below, but the statement itself does beg the question 'what other kinds of party systems exist?'

The two-party system

Where a two-party system operates, two fairly equally matched parties compete for power. Smaller parties might also be involved in elections but they will have no realistic prospect of breaking the monopoly held by the big two.

Britain is often cited as a two-party system (see debate below). The US would be another good example.

The single-party system

In some countries a single party is able to monopolise government, ban other political parties and exercise total control over all candidates, where elections occur at all.

This type of system operated in the USSR and in many Eastern European states after the Second World War and in Nazi Germany.

The dominant-party system

This system exists where many parties may exist but only one ever gets elected, or at least forms the senior member in a coalition government.

In Japan the Liberal Democratic Party remained in power for 38 years following its formation in 1955.

The multi-party system

In a multi-party system many parties compete for power and the government will often pass between coalitions formed by different combinations of parties.

Prior to electoral reform in 1993, Italy was often seen as a classic multi-party system. Israel is another good example.

Is Britain a two-party system?

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| <div style="background-color: black; color: white; font-weight: bold; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">YES</div> <p>The Labour and Conservative Parties are the only parties that have a realistic chance of forming a government in the near future or being the senior partner in a coalition.</p> <p>Even in the 2001 general election the Labour and Conservative Parties secured 75% of the popular vote and around 90% of the seats in Parliament.</p> <p>Despite making progress, the third party (the Liberal Democrats) is still a long way behind the second party (the Conservatives), even when the latter is probably at one of its lowest ebbs.</p> <p>There is a good deal of stability in the 2001 result when compared to that of 1997. The swing from Labour to Conservative was only 1.8% and numbers of seats for each party hardly changed. Less than 30 seats changed hands.</p> | <div style="background-color: black; color: white; font-weight: bold; text-align: center; padding: 5px;">NO</div> <p>The Labour Party won 246 seats more than the Conservative Party in 2001, whereas the Conservative Party only won 114 seats more than the LibDems. Do we really have two parties capable of winning power?</p> <p>Of voters, 25% backed a party other than the big two, and the 90% share of seats gained by Labour and the Conservatives remains artificially exaggerated by the electoral system.</p> <p>The rise of the Liberal Democrats as a third party ignores the fact that they are often second to Labour in the North and West and the Conservatives in the South and East.</p> <p>Although there appears to be a good deal of stability in the system, the raw figures mask a lot of localised swing (differential swing) as well as a massive fall in turnout. A party that could mobilise the 41% of the population who chose not to vote could clearly break the two-party system.</p> |
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Could Britain become a multi-party system?

Many of the countries said to have multi-party systems have electoral systems more geared towards creating multi-party outcomes. It is no coincidence that countries that abandon PR systems (Italy, for example) often see a decline in minor party support. The introduction of PR in Britain could, therefore, bring about a multi-party system where coalition government would become the norm – though even in countries such as Ireland (using STV) they could not be said to have a true multi-party system. It could also be argued that we already have a three-party system or (more accurately) three two-party systems in different constituencies: Labour v. Conservative, Labour v. LibDem, and Conservative v. LibDem. In other areas we see genuine three-way races and in some Scottish constituencies four-way races, where the Conservatives are the outside bet.