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The UK Party System

Read and précis notes will be checked before the Lecture.

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A two-party system?

- Think of the House of Commons - we have Government Benches and Opposition Benches.
- We have a Cabinet and a Shadow Cabinet.
- Are we now in a three party system?

A CONDEMNATION

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Look at the historical position ...

- In 1951 the Liberals obtained 2.5% of the vote (97.5% for Cons/Lab).
- Between 1945 and 1970 the Liberals in various elections gained few seats (Libs won an average of 8 seats with 7.05% votes received in eight General Elections).

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Since 1974 the electoral position has changed ...

- For example in 2010 the Liberals obtained 23% of the vote and now have 57 MP's (only 8.8% of the seats).
- This represents a gradual and sustained increase in the third party support.

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Advantages of a two-party system ...

- Elections give clear majorities for one party or another.
- Strong government (majority govt).
- Govt is accountable because strong opposition can win next time.

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Advantages of a two-party system ...

- No one Party has monopoly power - expectation of a change.
- Parties tend to be moderate because they need to attract opposite support.
- If minor parties come up with good ideas - major parties will pinch them to sustain their popularity.

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Problems with the post-war two-party system ...

- In the 1970's the post war consensus around Keynesian Economics and the Welfare state broke down.
- Society was rapidly changing - the concept of the working class supporting Labour and the middles and upper classes supporting the Conservatives also broke down.

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Problems with the post-war two-party system ...

- While the two major political parties were promising more and more - economic decline meant they were able to provide less and less. So people became distrustful of politicians.

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Problems with the post-war two-party system ...

- Thatcher broke the trend - she promised less govt. Labours response in the early 1980's was to become more left wing. Thus, the two dominant parties moved to the extremes of the political spectrum.

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1979/80's ...

- The result of extreme inflexible govt from a minority vote.
- Accountability became meaningless because the debate was about ideology - the difference between the extremes of the left and the right.

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1979/80's ...

- The Liberals started to reach for the middle ground - to provide an alternative to the two extremes.
- In 1983 they obtained 25.4% of the vote (only 23 seats) and were just 2% behind Labour (who had 209 seats).
- This suggests the two party system is inherent.

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Outcome of the voting system

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- What the 1983 result showed was that third parties are not seen as potential governments.
 - Voters like to choose a govt - so the opt for a party that can win. **Tactical voting**
- LibDems thus argued that we need to change the voting system FPTP does not reflect popular opinion.

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Advantages of a multiparty system

- A change in the voting system would produce a multiparty system.
- Under such a system - voters have a wide choice and are more likely to vote for the party/candidate that reflects their views.

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Advantages of a multiparty system ...

- If coalition government is necessary the ruling parties will compromise with each other - the result is that most people will find something they agree with.
- For the first time since 1945 a majority of the population (59%) have the party they voted for in government

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Disadvantages of a multiparty system ...

- Supporters of PR tend to be moderates - those that oppose it tend to have very fixed views and thus would rather be in opposition under FPTP - with an opportunity to win next time.

Such people point out that in a multiparty system ...

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Disadvantages of a multiparty system ...

- Tiny extreme parties could join a coalition and have unwarranted power and influence.
- Negotiations after elections can take a long time - leaving the country without a firm leader and allowing extreme parties to fill the vacuum.

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Disadvantages of a multiparty system ...

- Withdrawal of a small party can lead to a collapse - thus leading to endless instability.
- A party that does not have majority support could govern almost indefinitely in coalition with others (it could also result in a small moderate party being almost always involved).

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Examples a multiparty system

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- Can you give examples - from other countries of difficulties that can arise from having a multiparty coalition approach?
- Is it better to have an extremist party in power?

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Break into three groups and present to class ...

- **Group One** - arguments ... the UK is a two-party system.
- **Group Two** - arguments ... the UK is now a multiparty system.

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See 'medium questions' on page 91 of Heywood ...

- **With the person next to you produce essay plans for each of the eight questions.**
- **Be prepared to present each plan to class.**

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