

UK Politics and Government – Political Parties

Politics Edexcel and AQA – revision notes – based on Hodder Education revision guides

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Political parties are an essential mechanism in representative democracy, both in terms of representation of citizens at the elected governing bodies, and as a vehicle for political participation and recruitment of public support. Consequently, they are also important for cohesion and legitimacy, and ultimately, stability.

Features

- Associations of people sharing similar views and seeking to promote and implement those views.
- Seeking to gain governmental power at local, regional and national level: candidates are running to win an elected office.
- Promoting a broad package of policies across different areas: a shared set of political and ideological goals.
- Most parties have a system of formal membership and hierarchy.

Functions

- Representation = of the views and interests of certain sections in the society.
- Selecting candidates for office at all levels.
- Governance = seek to govern.
- Organisation of the vote = party volunteers especially during campaign time to promote turnout and legitimacy.
- Leadership = recruited from within the party.
- Educate the public on relevant issues.
- Provide an organised mechanism for political participation.
- Policy making = as part of the ideological manifesto and public mandate.
- When in opposition = holding the existing government accountable.

Positive aspects

- Provide opportunities for political action.
- Inclusive.
- Holding the government to account.

- Helping to make elections an effective process and bridging the gap between politics/parliament and the general public.

Negative aspects

- Can emphasise divisions and engineer conflict at the expense of consensus.
- May win with a minority of the popular vote, yet claim legitimacy towards policy choices that can be highly controversial.
- May become elitist with a domination of a small and 'closed' leadership group.

Funding

Sources of funding

- Membership subscriptions.
- Fundraising events.
- Donations by individuals and corporations.
- Loans from wealthy individuals or banks.
- Candidates' own self-financing.

Issues

Large parties have a massive advantage over small parties, and that is damaging to the democratic process.

Another issue is potential corruption and conflict of interests.

Each party receives grants from the Electoral Commission, plus some funding for research.

Call for a reform

- Impose restrictions with a relatively low cap.
- Impose restrictions on party spending.
- Restrictions on donations.
- Replace all funding with state funding that is paid out of general taxation.

Arguments for

- Minimise corruption.
- Will reduce the advantage that large parties have over smaller parties and will encourage similar starting point for all parties. Equality.
- Improve democracy by encouraging participation from groups that lack funds.

Arguments against

- Spending taxpayers' money on practically private organisations and candidates.
- The parameters of distribution of the funds.

- The independence of parties might be undermined.
- State funding may lead to excessive intervention and regulation.
- The state would be forced to fund extremist parties, unless of course they are altogether banned.

The party spectrum

- **A note:** consider sociological theories to contextualise party politics.

Left-wing politics

A political ideological position often associated with socialism, social justice, social democracy and equality.

Regulation of capitalism and the free market, welfare state, protection of workers' rights, state control of certain industries (energy, rail and mail systems), redistribution of wealth through taxation, generous minimum wage, support of trade unions and positive working conditions, equal rights for all groups, and aid to poorer countries. Often higher taxation to fund welfare policies. Equality of opportunities and meritocracy.

Right-wing politics

A political ideological position often associated with conservatism, traditionalism and less inclination for change.

Promoting free market and capitalism, acceptance of social and economic inequality, limited role for the state for intervention and regulation, low taxation on individuals and corporations, limiting welfare levels, hardline on crime and punishment, preference towards community rights overriding individual human rights, tough stance on law and order and on national security, privatisation of education as a business (marketisation), minimal state intervention in the economy. Tend to be hawkish on defence and foreign affairs.

Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats with emerging minor parties

- Scottish National Party, SNP.
- Plaid Cymru, 'a centre-left to left-wing, Welsh nationalist political party in Wales, committed to Welsh independence from the United Kingdom. It campaigns on a platform of social democracy and civic nationalism. The party is a strong supporter of the European Union and is a member of the European Free Alliance (EFA).'
- Green Party.
- Democratic Unionist Party, DUP.
- Sinn Fein.

In December 2019 election

Conservatives

- Increase the number of nurses by 50,000.
- No rise on income tax, VAT or National Insurance.
- Increase pensions by at least 2.5% per year.
- No selling homes in order to pay for care.
- Reach net zero on carbon emissions by 2050.
- Spend 6.3 billion on 2.2 disadvantaged households.
- Introducing a points-based immigration system.
- Continue with universal credit.
- Launching a commission to examine the powers of the Supreme Court and the Human Rights Act.

Labour

- Scrapping the benefit cap and two-child limit.
- Scrapping university students' tuition fees.
- Launching a British Recovery Bond to help people save and invest in Britain.
- Provide loans for 100,000 new businesses across the UK.
- Extending business rate relief and VAT cuts to hospitals and leisure industry.
- End public sector pay freeze.
- Providing local councils with funding to avoid raising tax.
- Investing £30 billion in creating 400,000 new green jobs.

Liberal Democrats

- Funding for the NHS with a penny income tax rise.
- Providing a free childcare for all children aged 2-4.
- Generating 80% of energy from renewable sources by 2030.
- Increase taxes on frequent flyers.
- Recruit 20,000 new teachers.
- Legalise cannabis.
- Freezing of rail fares.

The Conservative Party

Origins

- A group in parliament that supported Pitt the Younger split from the Whigs and became to be known as the Tories. Pitt the Younger became a Prime Minister in 1783 at the age of 24.
- Ideological roots in the philosophy of Edmund Burke.

- Patriotic, pro monarchy, traditionalist.
- 1834 – establishment of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Robert Peel.
- Following up on the Great Reform Act of 1832, the party became less associated with only aristocrats and with growing support for gradual reforms.
- The death of Disraeli 1881 – the party began spreading its activity and organisation outside parliament gaining increasing public support.

Key events

- 1906 – losing power until the 1920s except when being part of the wartime coalition.
- From the 1920s to 1945 – dominant, including Churchill’s coalition government in World War II.
- From the 1950s to the 1970s: post-war consensus = One Nation conservatism, pro-welfare and support for mixed economy.
- 1975 – Margaret Thatcher became the leader, shifting towards New Right position with emphasis on privatisation, deregulation and lower taxes.
- 1979-1997 – in government for a long period and dominating politics under Thatcher (1979-90) and Major (1990-97).
- After being in the opposition for a long period, return to government power in a coalition with the Lib Dems from 2010 until 2015.
- A majority government after the 2015 general election, lost in snap election in 2017, were forced into a Confidence and Supply arrangement with the DUP, and under Boris Johnson, regaining majority in 2019.

Conservatives, economic policy

- *Laissez-faire*, free market with minimal state intervention and regulation.
- Post-war, the party softened and embraced a greater state role in the economy.
- From the 1970s, adopted a neoliberal economic stance = free markets, privatisation, lower taxes, lower governmental spending, lower welfare, and minimal state intervention.
- When in government, cut off public spending = austerity measures introduced by Osborne in 2010.
- Supporting tax cuts, although under Thatcher income tax was reduced but other indirect taxes were increased.

Conservatives, law and order policy

- The party of ‘law and order’.
- Strict prison punishment and the view that it is an effective deterrent.
- Right Realism = crime is real and zero-tolerance policy.
- David Cameron speech = ‘hug a hoodie’ to symbolise a softer stance.

- However, police force was cut down by more than 20,00 since 2010 as part of the austerity measures in the coalition with Lib Dems 2010 and later as a majority government.

Conservatives, welfare policy

- Some, especially One Nation conservatists regard welfare as a noble obligation towards those less fortunate, *noblesse oblige*.
- Modern Conservatives, especially New Right, favour minimal welfare policies, arguing it created an underclass, people living on state benefits for life.
- Welfare dependency is linked with crime, single-parent families and breakdown of shared values that are necessary for consensus, cohesion and stability.
- Welfare reforms via universal credit.
- While originally opposed the NHS, subsequently increased acceptance and support along the introduction of private providers and increased competition.

Conservatives, foreign policy

- During the 19th century, focus on the Empire, redundant during the 20th century.
- Strong defence policy in alliance with patriotism, support for NATO and a close relationship with the USA (Thatcher and Reagan in particular). Army spending and developing nuclear capabilities.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, most Conservatives were supportive of EEC European Economic Community, Thatcher became increasingly sceptic, and in the 1990s the party was rather divided over relations with Europe, especially under Major and over the Maastricht Treaty.
- 2015 – Cameron promises a referendum on EU.
- The 2016 EU referendum (51.9% of voters opted to leave the EU) with continuing division over Europe, but by 2021 the Eurosceptics won the battle.
- Boris Johnson leading the UK out of the EU.

Factions within the Conservative party

(1) One Nation

The main concern is with consensus that is predicated on social cohesion. A rather small minority that wishes to avoid social divisions and emphasise cohesion. Accepting that the state needs to play some regulative role to minimise inequality.

- Tends to support *noblesse oblige* ideas. Thus, a softer view.
- Same for acknowledging the need for a welfare state.
- Recognises the need to maximise social justice.
- Organic society = support for local institutions such as the Church: social institutions are important for social cohesion, consensus and stability.

- Pro-EU.
- Acknowledging 'mixed economy' while supporting private economy.

(2) New Right

A combination of neo-conservative beliefs such as traditional values and law and order, together with neo-liberal views such as limited state intervention and low taxation (Conservative Way Forward).

- Tax on individual wealth.
- Welfare state encourages dependency, underclass.
- Strong police force, strong on law and order, authoritarian state.
- Relatively against EU and pro-US.
- Relatively sceptic about immigration, emphasis on the risks.
- Privatisation alongside limiting the power of the state.

Neo-conservatism = traditional values, law and order, structure of society and the political system and processes, society is naturally hierarchical.

Neo-liberalism = limited state power, regulation and intervention in the economy, free market and privatisation alongside rejection of the welfare state that led to the formation of the underclass.

The Labour Party

Origins

- During the late 19th century, a general growth in trade unions together with various socialists and radically liberal organisations such as below:
- Independent Labour Party = was formed in 1893 to recruit working class candidates to run in UK elections.
- The Fabian Society = an association of radical middle-class intellectuals advocating gradual reforms.
- Social Democratic Federation = a radical Marxist revolutionary group.
- In 1900, the groups mentioned formed the Labour Representation Committee that became the Labour Party in 1906.

Old Labour or Social Democracy = left-wing Labour traditional policies that dominated the party during the 1940s and 1970s and 1980s. Support of renationalisation of key industries with regulation of public services, strong and active trade unions and raising tax to redistribute wealth and fund the welfare state. The state plays an active role and regulative functions, rehabilitation in criminal justice, favouring diplomatic ways to resolve conflicts.

New Labour or Third Way = relatively moderate policies that dominated the party between the early 1990s and 2015. Less militant views on redistribution of wealth via increase in tax, support for the welfare state services and minimise welfare benefits. Focus on equality of opportunity thus redistribution of wealth should not be the focus, mixed economy, diplomacy can fail leading to the need for military intervention, tough on crime while acknowledging the role of social injustice in criminal behaviour.

Key events

- 1918 – new constitution to include Clause IV = commitment to socialism (collective ownership).
- 1924 – first minority government under Ramsay MacDonald.
- 1945-51 – Attlee government, establishing the welfare state and the NHS.
- 1964 – Labour wins the election and implements the abolition of the death penalty, legalisation of abortion and homosexuality.
- 1978-79 – ‘Winter of Discontent’, marred with protest and strikes, and losing the election to Thatcher; nearly 2 decades in opposition.
- 1995 – Clause IV is rewritten marking a shift towards the centre and away from the left, under Tony Blair.
- 1997 – landslide win for Blair and Labour’s government until 2010.
- 2015 – Jeremy Corbyn, Labour is in opposition and shifting towards the left.
- 2019 – the centrist group ‘Independent Group’ of MPs opt out of the party.
- 2020 – Keir Starmer, shifting towards the centre again.

Labour, economic policy

- Clause IV reflects the party’s socialist sentiments rooted in public ownership of key industries aligned with nationalisation.
- 1945-51 – the government adopts Keynesian approach arguing that the government needs to increase consumers’ demand to boost economic growth by expanding government spending on infrastructure and education.
- During the 1970s, there is a growing disagreement within Labour between the inclination towards increased state regulation and control versus greater privatisation and encouragement of free market policies.
- New Labour government did not reverse existing privatisations.
- In 2008, the credit crunch, Labour bailed out some banks.
- In the last couple of decades increased support for investments in order to stimulate the economy (in contrast to conservative austerity measures).
- Under Corbyn, party supports renationalisation of the railways with key public utility providers such as water.

Labour, law and order policy

- Traditionally, a softer approach, being called 'soft on crime' compared with the 'tough on crime' for Conservatives.
- Blair developed the idea of 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'.
- After 9/11 focus on fighting terrorism and radicalisation.
- Measures such as ID cards, detention without trials etc are considered unacceptable.

Labour, welfare policy

- General orientation is towards social justice and equality, thus support for the less fortunate poorer groups, welfare services, benefits.
- 1945-1951 – expanding welfare services and the inception of the NHS in 1948.
- New Labour supports welfare reforms to include more means-testing and increase private funding and providers.

Labour, foreign policy

- Often characterised by a certain degree of disagreement over foreign policies and international affairs including attitudes towards wars and conflicts.
- During the Cold War, Labour more pro-West.
- The Iraq War was a key example, with a backbench rebellion in 2003.
- The Labour leaders Ed Milliband, Jeremy Corbyn and Keir Starmer opposed the Iraq War.

Liberal Democrats

- The Liberal party until the early 20th century was one of the two big parties in the UK and thereafter was replaced by the Labour party and became a small third party.
- In 1981, a split within the Labour by the 'Gang of Four', leading to the formation of SDP.
- The SDP joined the Liberal Party and later becoming the Liberal Democrats.
- In 2010, they won 23% of the vote and joined a coalition government with the Conservative party led by Cameron, and Nick Clegg became Deputy MP.
- Since forming the coalition government lost much of the support it gained earlier over breaking the promise to oppose tuition fees.

Policies

- Generally, social liberal policies, support for welfare policies, mixed economy and strong support for civil liberties.

- Mixed economy = a combination of elements from capitalism and socialism, of free markets, private property and governmental regulation and intervention.
- Welfare state to increase equality and opportunities with a strong educational system balancing class, ethnic, religious and social divisions.
- Advocates constitutional reform: codified constitution, proportional representation and an elected House of Lords. Abolition of inherent privilege.
- Stronger checks and balances, decentralising power.
- pro-EU with intense campaign favouring a second EU referendum.
- Multiculturalism and diversity.

Classical liberals = Orange Book

The Orange Book: Reclaiming Liberalism, a book written by a group of prominent British Liberal Democrat politicians and edited by David Laws and Paul Marshall in 2004.

Classical liberalism, 19th century = maximising personal freedoms and minimising the role of the state.

- Free markets and free trade.
- Personal freedom.
- Small government and reduced spending.
- Modern liberals, late 19th century: personal freedom while acknowledging that some state intervention is necessary for greater equality and opportunities to increase social justice.
 - Freedom can be enhanced alongside the welfare state to facilitate equality of opportunity.
 - Gradual tax = lower income with different levels of tax than on higher income.

Others

Scottish National Party, SNP

- On the political Left.
- Support for public sector health and education.
- Advocating Scotland to become an independent state within the EU.
- In 2011 – formed a majority SNP government in the Scottish parliament, leading to the independence referendum in 2014. The vote ‘Yes’ was lost, yet the SNP gained momentum afterwards.
- In 2015 general election – won nearly all the Scottish constituencies.
- Left-of-centre on the ideological spectrum, pro-EU and advocating Scotland to join the EU as an independent country.

United Kingdom Independent Party, UKIP

- On the Right.
- During the 1990s, a number of anti-EU parties, in particular the Referendum Party.
- After 1997, an increased influence in the European Parliament elections, with greater prominence to Nigel Farage.
- Conservative vote is migrating to UKIP because of the EU position.
- Since the EU referendum UKIP lost support that migrated back to the Conservative party.
- Leaders such as Farage left UKIP in the late 2018 to dissociate themselves from Tommy Robinson, the far-right activist.
- Complete withdrawal from EU.
- End BBC license fee.
- Caps on immigration.
- Strong police force, increase police numbers.
- **Reform UK** = not technically the same as UKIP but it is considered to be its political successor in terms of ideology, leadership and voter base. The party was founded (2018) by Farage and initially was called the Brexit Party.

Green party

- On the Left.
- Support for a Green New Deal, strong on environmental issues.
- Close ties to the EU.
- Political reform: electoral system and lowering of voting age.

Plaid Cymru, Welsh Nationalists

- On the Left.
- 'Resigning' to an unlikely full independence and focus on increased measures.

Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, Northern Ireland and Conservatives

- On the Right.
- Close ties with Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.
- Open border between the Republic of Ireland after Brexit.
- Rejection of liberal policies such as same-sex marriage.

Sinn Fein, Northern Ireland and Irish Nationalists

- On the Left.
- Reunification of Ireland.
- Increase of living wage.
- Northern Ireland to re-enter the EU in the event of reunification.

Party system

Refers to how many parties gain representation and influence in the political system.

Factors examining the party system

- How many parties realistically can form a government.
- How many parties have representation in the assembly, parliament and legislature.
- How many parties have significant impact on politics and policy choices.

1 – Dominant party = one party dominates the number of seats in the legislature and being the only party in government, especially during consecutive elections: operating within a democratic political framework.

2 – Two-party = only two established parties have significant representation.

- Adversarial system between government and an official opposition.
- Regular competition for power through general elections.
- Other smaller parties play a role but with little influence.

3 – Three-party = three parties have significant representation.

4 – Multi-party = four or more parties have significant representation with smaller parties with a significant impact on politics.

- Several parties with a realistic chance for an executive role, often in a coalition.
- Power-sharing inevitable, but often at a cost ideologically.
- Elections thus may be more frequent due to a breakdown of coalitions.
- Can be unstable governments.
- Smaller parties can exercise more influence through 'extortion' in negotiations and threat to the stability of the coalition.

UK type of party system?

A two-party adversarial system.

FPTP ensures that only two dominant parties, Labour and Conservative, have a realistic chance to win the election.

Parliament is based on a government and an opposition (government-in-waiting).

Translated into number of seats for these two parties in parliament.

However, less so in other regions in the UK: SNP controls the Scottish government.

Labour formed a coalition with the Lib Dems in Wales after the 2016 Welsh Assembly elections.

Northern Ireland has its own parties for the Northern Irish Assembly including Sinn Fein and the DUP.

Some argue that the UK is characterised by a dominant party system because there is usually only one party forming the government, and often in successive elections.

Regarding multiparty system option:

Some parties gaining greater representation and sometimes influence, resorting to the need to coalition agreements.

However, the FPTP electoral system does make it practically impossible for a permanent multi-party system to materialise and stabilise.

Factors affecting party success

- (1) **Leadership** – popular and charismatic leaders can make a significant impact.
 - See theories of leadership.
 - But, the ‘Cleggmania’ in 2010 did not materialise the ‘hype’.
- (2) **Image** – perceived unity of the party, modern, relevant, trustworthy, competent and effective.
- (3) **Funding** – the need for consistent financial stability, and not only for election campaigns, to keep and run party institutions smoothly and effectively.
- (4) **Organisation** – effective organisation and party bodies in various government levels, including local, regional and national. A mechanism for recruitment and campaigning.
- (5) **The influence of the media** – depending also on the nature of the campaign.
 - Presenting images of party leaders.
 - The influence of opinion polls as shaping public opinion and turnout.
 - Newspapers may be identified with a particular party and policies.