



Functions of parties

Aims

- To describe the main functions of political parties.
- To identify which of these functions are particularly important in the UK.

Materials

IS6: Political parties in the UK

Introduction 10 minutes

Introduce a definition of a political party. Refer to key factors such as common sets of beliefs, an objective to seek power or a share of power, and a commitment to develop policies across most or all of the state's responsibilities.

Main lesson 45 minutes

Distribute IS6 to each student. Referring the students to the first table on IS6, identify and describe the main functions of political parties:

- to aggregate demands from different groups in society
- to mobilise and reinforce popular consent for the political system
- to recruit candidates for office and identify political leaders
- to educate the public on important issues and mobilise voters at elections
- to organise the business of Parliament

Conclusions 5 minutes

Some particular aspects of British circumstances should be identified, notably the key role of parties in reinforcing parliamentary democracy, in administering elections and in organising Parliament.

Extension work

The students should answer the following practice examination question:

Describe the importance of British political parties for the following:

- (1) the organisation of elections**
- (2) the organisation of Parliament**
- (3) ensuring the accountability of government**

(about 100 words each)

Answer notes

- (1)** Key points are that parties encourage people to register, inform them about elections and encourage them to vote. Of course, they also organise the nomination of most of the candidates and inform the electorate about them. In addition, the parties help to ensure that the conduct of elections is fair.
- (2)** The parties determine the agenda of Parliament. They organise key speakers and inform MPs and peers about the business of Parliament. Debates are organised by parties and they also arrange the personnel of committees.
- (3)** This role is carried out largely in Parliament and in the media. Parties organise parliamentary questions and arrange the work of select committees. They provide spokespeople for the media when government policy is being scrutinised. The opposition parties produce alternatives to government policies.



The nature of party government

Aims

- To define clearly the nature of party government.
- To identify the main ways in which political parties characterise British government.

Materials

IS6: Political parties in the UK (already distributed)

Introduction 5 minutes

Explain that British government is completely centred upon the existence of united, coherent parties. Without parties, the whole system would fail to operate.

Main lesson 45 minutes

Describe and discuss the several ways in which British government relies upon the existence of parties for its coherence. These should include the following:

- Parties develop alternative sets of policies that can be judged at elections.
- They select appropriate candidates for election and high office.
- They organise the work of Parliament, creating circumstances for rational debates and decision-making.
- Where parties win elections decisively, they can form clear governments with unity of purpose.
- The principle of mandate and manifesto gives voters a clear choice and can make governments accountable for their actions.
- The interplay of government and opposition creates accountability and educates the public on key issues.

Conclusions 10 minutes

Briefly speculate about what the nature of government would be without party structures. Demonstrate some of the problems that would arise without party organisation.

Extension work

The students should answer these two short examination questions:

- (1) **What is the importance of the doctrine of mandate and manifesto?**
- (2) **What are the main ways in which political parties reinforce parliamentary democracy in the UK?**

(about 150 words for each question)

Answer notes

- (1) Manifestos create coherent sets of policies and programmes of political action.
The doctrine of the mandate ensures that parties can be judged against manifesto commitments when they are in office.
The electorate is given clear alternatives.
The doctrine is a guide to be followed by Parliament when judging policy-making.
- (2) All the main parties support parliamentary democracy and so underpin the system.
Parties organise parliamentary business in a coherent way.
Party patronage is an organised way of staffing committees and selecting parliamentary leaders.
Party discipline enables Parliament to act decisively.
To be implemented, all party policies must ultimately enjoy parliamentary approval.



The two-party system

Aims

- To define the meaning of the term 'two-party system' in relation to the UK.
- To introduce alternative analyses of the party system.

Materials

IS6: Political parties in the UK (already distributed)

WS6: Stimulus–response question

Introduction 10 minutes

Provide a historical perspective by explaining that the UK has invariably experienced a two-party system since the nineteenth century. Refer briefly to the idea of class division creating the two-party divide.

Main lesson 100 minutes

Distribute IS6 and WS6 to each student. Describe the various features of the British political system which suggest that it is indeed 'two-party':

- Refer to the dominance of two-party parliamentary politics throughout the twentieth century, with the exception of the 1910s and 1920s.
- Note that this has been especially marked since 1945, with only two parties forming governments. (Review the statistics on WS6.)
- Note that two main parties dominate the parliamentary agenda.
- The policy agenda has been dominated since the Second World War by Labour and the Conservatives.
- Describe adversarial government–opposition politics, which is dominated by two parties.
- Most finance is attracted by the two main parties.

Demonstrate that there are alternative analyses. Refer to the 'dominant party thesis', which was shattered in 1997. Also provide evidence of three-, four- and multiparty systems, as follows:

- A growing proportion of votes have been won by the Liberal Democrats (Liberals and the Alliance before 1988) since the 1970s.
- The Liberal Democrats were successful in 1997 in winning 46 seats, increasing to 52 in 2001.
- Labour and the Conservatives have won a declining proportion of the vote since 1970.
- The systems in Scotland and Wales are effectively four-party.
- Elections to the devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland showed a contest between four parties.
- Some regions are contested by three parties, notably the southwest, where Liberal Democrats are strong.
- In local government, votes are divided very evenly among the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties in many regions. Councils are often hung, with no overall control.

Conclusions 10 minutes

Refer to the summary of arguments as to whether the UK has a two-party system, on IS6. Review the stimulus material (WS6). The class and teacher should discuss what the key elements in the data are.

Extension work

Students should complete the stimulus–response question on WS6.



The two-party system

Answer notes

Students should note the mark allocation. The length of answers should reflect this approximately, i.e. (1) 20%, (2) 40%, (3) 40%.

- (1)** This implies that the two main parties effectively dominate the system. They dominate elections, controlling the political agenda, identifying key issues and fighting elections on specific policy manifestos. They hold most of the seats in both houses of Parliament, controlling the business of Parliament between them, arranging its agenda and dominating committee membership. There is no need to quote from the data in this part of the answer, as this will be covered in question (2).
- (2)** Note how, since 1979, the two parties have won the vast majority of the seats and also most of the votes. Figures can be quoted from the first table to illustrate this. The second table shows that the two main parties always form the government alone. Small parties are relatively insignificant. Note that they never have a share in government and win small numbers of votes and seats. Again, data can be quoted to illustrate this point. Ensure that the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists are referred to. Only information from the data need be used as the question specifies this. No credit will be given for evidence not shown by the actual data.
- (3)** Evidence from sources other than the data should be used. The key evidence is as follows. In 1997 the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Nationalists increased their representation markedly — this might be a long-term trend. The 2001 election confirmed the advances made by the Liberal Democrats. In general, smaller parties do well in local government, where they control or share power in many councils. Small parties have also done well in the Scottish and Welsh devolved assembly elections. Note that the electoral system distorts results and underestimates support for smaller parties (data from the first table). There are regions of Britain where there is a genuine three- or four-party contest — the southwest of England is a three-party contest, parts of Wales and Scotland are four-party contests — Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats and Nationalists. However, although the UK might be multiparty in terms of true popular support, this is not reflected in parliamentary results.



Parties and democracy

Aims

- To describe the ways in which political parties enhance democracy.
- To discuss senses in which parties might threaten democratic politics.

Materials

IS6: Political parties in the UK (already distributed)

Introduction 10 minutes

Determine how democracy is to be defined in this context. Refer to such principles as popular influence, government accountability, freedom of participation, freedom of knowledge and expression, human rights, the rule of law and the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Main lesson 100 minutes

Using the last table on IS6, balance the two sides of the argument concerning parties and democracy.

Arguments suggesting that parties enhance democracy include the following:

- the dissemination of information on issues
- opportunities for popular participation in politics
- creating accountability through the mandate and manifesto doctrine
- underpinning parliamentary democracy (refer back to TN1 in this topic)
- reinforcing respect for the institutions of Parliament and government
- institutionalising peaceful opposition

Arguments suggesting that parties threaten democracy include the following:

- The desire for party unity and collective responsibility may stifle real debate on issues.
- Party patronage exerts excessive control over key posts.
- Election campaigns tend to distort issues and may be negative in nature.
- Issues may be over-simplified by party leaderships.
- The need for large amounts of finance may give excessive influence to wealthy interest groups.

Conclusions 10 minutes

Introduce the extension work essay. Explain that students should adopt a balanced approach and use appropriate examples to illustrate key points.

Extension work

Students should write an answer to the following essay:

Assess the extent to which the activities of political parties are a vital part of modern democracies. (about 750 words)

Answer notes

The last table on IS6 provides the main arguments on both sides of this issue. Essays should include:

- an introduction that demonstrates what is meant by democracy in this context — for example openness, opportunities for participation, information for the electorate and meaningful choices
- both sides of the argument fully explained
- a conclusion that states specifically which side of the argument is stronger. A clear conclusion is essential as long as both sides have been discussed fully.



Political parties in the UK

Functions of parties

Function	Description
Aggregation	Parties organise and bring together a variety of demands into a coherent political programme.
Support mobilisation	By supporting the authority of democratic institutions, parties underpin popular consent.
Candidate recruitment	Parties try to ensure that appropriate candidates are selected.
Leadership selection	Parties incorporate systems to give potential leaders experience and to enable them to learn political techniques.
Education and socialisation	Parties bring key issues to public attention, educate the public on those issues and inform the electorate about political debate.
Organising government and Parliament	Parties play a key role in ensuring the effective working of political institutions.

Does the UK have a two-party system?

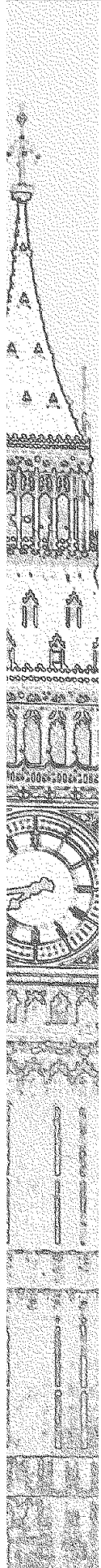
Arguments for 'yes'	Arguments for 'no'
Labour or the Conservatives always form the government.	Smaller parties have won increasing proportions of the vote in recent elections.
The two main parties still dominate voting proportions.	Small parties do well in certain regions.
The two main parties dominate the policy agenda with small parties being squeezed out.	In elections to devolved assemblies, Liberal Democrats and Nationalists did well.
The two main parties dominate the parliamentary agenda and parliamentary business.	Local elections are often contested by three or more parties.
Parliament is geared towards government-opposition confrontation.	Although two parties dominate the winning of seats in Parliament, they have never dominated the voting. The electoral system merely discriminates against the other parties.
The two main parties dominate campaign funding.	
The two main parties have larger memberships than others.	



Political parties in the UK

Do parties enhance or threaten democracy?

Enhance	Threaten
They encourage people to participate in politics. This happens through party activity, campaigning at elections, voting and standing for office.	Excessive party patronage means that key posts go to party 'placemen' rather than there being open competition for posts.
Parties present key political issues to the public. Different sides of arguments are presented.	Parties might over-simplify issues, especially in election campaigns.
Parties uphold the authority of Parliament and reinforce respect for institutions.	Adversarial politics engaged in by the parties might reduce parliamentary business to a ritual.
Parties administer elections, encouraging people to vote and presenting election issues clearly to the electorate.	The need for increasing amounts of finance for fighting elections creates excessive influence for rich interest groups, such as big business or media organisations.
Parties recruit leaders and appropriate candidates for office.	Excessive party unity and collective responsibility might stifle democratic debate within parties.
Legitimate parties ensure that there is a peaceful transition of power after elections.	





Stimulus–response question

Study the following data and then answer the questions that follow.

Performance of political parties at general elections, 1979–2001

Year	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat (or Alliance)		Scottish Nationalist	
	Seats	% votes	Seats	% votes	Seats	% votes	Seats	% votes
1979	339	43.9	269	36.9	11	13.8	2	17.3
1983	397	42.4	209	27.6	23	25.4	2	11.8
1987	376	43.4	229	31.7	22	23.2	3	14.0
1992	336	42.3	271	35.2	20	18.3	3	21.5
1997	165	31.0	418	44.5	46	17.0	6	22.5
2001	166	31.7	413	40.7	52	18.3	5	20.1

Note: Scottish Nationalist percentage refers to the percentage of the vote in Scotland only.

Government majorities, 1970–2001

Year	Size of majority
1970	Con. +30
1974 Feb.	Lab. -33
1974 Oct.	Lab. +3
1979	Con. +43
1983	Con. +144
1987	Con. +102
1992	Con. +21
1997	Lab. +179
2001	Lab. +167

Note: the minus figure in February 1974 indicates a minority government.

Source: adapted from Neil McNaughton, *Success in Politics* (John Murray, 2001).

Questions

- (1) What do you understand by the term ‘two-party system’? (10 marks)
- (2) Using the data shown, what evidence is there that the UK is a two-party system? (20 marks)
- (3) What arguments can be raised to suggest that the UK is now a multiparty system? (20 marks)