

Great Britain and Ireland

Variations in Party Government

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The United Kingdom included the territory of the present Republic of Ireland until 1922. The Republic inherited most of its political institutions and much of its political culture from the union. Though its secession was violent, relations between the successor states are probably the most intimate in Western Europe. English is spoken in both. England, with roughly five-sixths of the population of the British Isles, and above all London, with its overwhelming economic and cultural impact, remain the social centres of gravity whatever the formal political arrangements. Irish citizens can vote in all British elections, while inhabitants of the disputed territory of Northern Ireland are automatically entitled to both British and Irish citizenship.

Clearly territorial differences exist within the British Isles, otherwise there would not have been an Irish secession or devolution to regional parliaments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (1997–1999). But these are played out within a unifying cultural context. The central institutions of both the United Kingdom and Ireland are distinguished by extraordinary stability. Parliamentary government, with power centralised in a cabinet supported by a partisan majority in the lower house, goes back in both cases to the system which emerged in Britain in 1868, and which in its essentials (also at the bureaucratic level) has not been altered since. It has survived transferral (in the Irish case), two world wars, two social and political revolutions in the post-war period, and went on unchanged to the twenty-first century. Such stability is good in itself. But the limited ability of the traditional institutions to cope with an extended role may limit socio-economic intervention by government.

The strong cultural and political similarities between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland render their political

differences all the more interesting, as they can generally be traced to one or two key institutional contrasts which render party strategies, and hence political outcomes, very different between the two states. We thus have the ability to draw a highly controlled institutional comparison to see why, in spite of many resemblances, their contemporary politics differ so much. The basis of such differences is to be found in the electoral system and the way it reflects underlying cleavages.

ELECTIONS

Underlying cleavages and policy issues

The major British cleavage has usually been identified as class – based on accumulated social differences in type of occupation (factory-based manual work versus others), education, accent, lifestyle, place and type of housing, trade union membership, income and the life experiences which stem from these. Class cleavages were intensified in the inter-war period by the removal of cross-cutting territorial cleavages, with the secession of southern Ireland, and the general decline of religion as a serious political force. In voting terms class influences reached their apotheosis in the early post-war elections from 1945 to 1959.

Class as a political cleavage both produced and was sharpened by Labour and Conservative conflict over this period. The decline of the religious and Irish cleavages caused the weakening and near disappearance of the old cross-class Liberal Party. This transformed earlier three-party competition into effective two-party competition by 1935 – a situation which continued at the electoral level until 1964 and which, because of the electoral mechanisms described below, meant that Labour and Conservatives were the only serious competitors for governmental power until the 1980s.

The social bases of the class cleavage weakened after the 1950s. This was due in part to industrial and economic changes which reduced the numerical strength of the manual, factory-based, unionised working class, the core of Labour support. Services grew at the expense of manufacturing: manufacturing itself changed, reducing the role of both skilled and semi-skilled manual workers such as ship-builders and miners, and even of repetitive assembly-line operatives such as car workers. They were replaced by more skilled or more flexible workers, often part-time, with women increasing to half the work force and extensive immigration from South Asia and Eastern Europe. The life experiences of most workers became increasingly divergent from those of the traditional unionised manual worker, who stayed in one job, one establishment and often one house all his life. Economic change was intensified by the levelling effects of the comprehensive welfare state introduced by Labour from 1945 to 1948.

The traditional, static bases of the class cleavage thus began to erode quickly after 1959. This process was mirrored in the rise of Liberal voting and the increase of electoral volatility in the 1960s and 1970s. At first this led to rapid Conservative–Labour alternation in government. By the 1980s, however, as the Labour vote shrank

Table 2.1 Elections to the House of Commons, 1945–2005

Year	Turnout	Labour	Liberal	Conservative	Scots & Welsh	Others
1945	76	48	9	40	0	3
1950	84	46	9	44	0	1
1951	83	49	3	48	0	0
1955	77	46	3	50	0	1
1959	79	44	6	49	0	1
1964	77	44	11	43	1	1
1966	76	48	9	42	1	0
1970	72	43	8	46	1	1
1974	79	37	19	38	3	3
1974	73	39	18	36	4	3
1979	76	37	14	44	2	3
1983	73	28	25	42	2	3
1987	75	31	23	42	2	2
1992	80	34	18	42	2	4
1997	72	43	17	31	3	6
2001	59	42	19	33	3	6
2005	61	35	22	32	4	7

Note: 'Scots & Welsh' includes the Scottish National Party and the Welsh National Party (Plaid Cymru). Northern Irish and other minor party votes are included in 'Others'.

and the Conservatives gained a large enough plurality (42 per cent) to keep themselves permanently in government, it appeared that they were the main beneficiaries, and Labour the main losers, from the social changes that had been under way. Strengthened by a Social Democratic split from Labour in the early 1980s, the Liberal Democrats had also improved their electoral standing to a point where their results (especially in 1983) rivalled Labour's. These points are illustrated in Table 2.1, which shows voting support for the major parties as well as turnout for the post-war period.

The General Election of 1997 marked a turning point in party-political terms. Labour gained a large parliamentary majority over the Conservatives, though with only 43 per cent of the vote. The Liberals doubled their number of MPs to become a significant parliamentary force for the first time in the post-war period, while the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists held their ground. These results were more or less duplicated in the elections of 2001 and 2005: the major development was a collapse in turnout from just over 70 per cent to around 60 per cent. The success of Labour and to a lesser extent the Liberals has been attributed to their ability to appeal to a new classless type of voter mainly in the South East of England while keeping their old bases in the peripheries. However, as Table 2.2 illustrates, the latter are now subject to erosion.

The territorial variation in British political loyalties is illustrated by Table 2.2, which reports the results of voting for the legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Recently, the Scottish Nationalist Party has emerged as the plurality party in Scotland. In mainland Britain, Scotland and Wales give strong support to Labour but also to Nationalist parties pressing for regional independence. In Northern Ireland the British unionists and Irish nationalists monopolise local representation.

Table 2.2 British regional elections, 1998–2007

	Labour	Liberal	Conservative	Nationalist	Others
Scotland – Parliament					
1999	39	14	16	29	2
2003	35	15	17	24	9
2007	32	16	17	33	2
Wales – National Assembly					
1999	38	14	16	28	4
2003	40	14	20	21	5
2007	32	15	22	22	9
Northern Ireland – Assembly					
1998	–	7	39	36	18
2003	–	4	49	41	6
2007	–	5	45	41	5

Note: In Northern Ireland, 'Conservative' includes Democratic Unionist and Ulster Unionist; 'Nationalist' includes We Ourselves (Sinn Féin) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

The English regions share Scottish and Welsh problems of industrial decline, unemployment and social deprivation and hence have mostly supported Labour. Generally speaking, the Conservative vote goes down and the Labour and Liberal votes go up the further one goes north and west from London.

The differentiated pattern of regional results illustrates a central point about the main British political cleavage – it is only partly based on class as such. It would in fact be more accurate to describe the central political division as an accumulation of regional and class conflicts rather than purely class ones – an accumulation in which the territorial and regional dimension is now more important than class, if they can be separated out at all.

The reason why territorial and class cleavages overlap, both socially and politically, is that the manufacturing and extraction industries associated with the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution – mining, steel, shipbuilding and textiles – developed in the peripheries rather than the core of Britain – in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and the North of England rather than in London and the South East. Thus the classical industrial proletariat also developed in these areas, in the new metropolises of Glasgow, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Cardiff and their associated mining and mill towns. In many ways the culture and social experiences of these areas were shaped by the existence of the new class and its social and political struggles. Existing regional contrasts with the South East of England, the stronghold of established institutions and of the traditional elite, were reinforced by, and became entangled with, class ones.

Industrial change brought about the partial collapse of the older industries of the North and West in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The new service industries grouped themselves around London, the largest market and communications centre. At the same time the negative redistribution of wealth from poor to rich, fostered by Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997, hit most severely in the peripheries, where the poor were concentrated in larger numbers.

The 1980s thus saw a re-emergence of the territorial basis of British politics, where Conservative governments drew their parliamentary majorities from the South East of England and Labour MPs came almost exclusively from the North and West. At the extremes, the Conservatives had no representation in Scotland and Wales, while hardly a Labour MP came from South East England outside the deprived area of central London. However, the success of Labour in 1997 and 2001 in attracting voters from the South East now means that the Conservative political base there is threatened.

Sharp territorial contrasts underline the essential nature of political conflict in Britain, between a coalition of dispersed groups (both social and territorial) supporting Labour and a centrally located and privileged group supporting the Conservatives – who can thus enhance their electoral appeal as defenders of the national ‘British’ interest. The restored Liberals, who may yet bridge the gap between Labour and Conservatives, have been penalised by an electoral system which privileges regionally concentrated parties. They thus secured few parliamentary seats even when they received one-quarter of the national vote. Meanwhile nationalist parties, who have more concentrated local support, can extend their representation.

One can gain a further insight into the concentrated and cumulative nature of the central British political division by comparing it with the Republic of Ireland. Secession from the United Kingdom appealed to the most socially distinct stratum in Ireland, the rural Catholic peasantry and small-town bourgeoisie. It was violently opposed by Protestants, above all in the only industrialised area of the island around Belfast, in the North. Independence when it came was thus accompanied by partition – the rural south and west going to the republic while Northern Ireland stayed as a province of the United Kingdom.

Within the new republic there was no obvious social cleavage around which the new party system could organize. Incipient differences between the overwhelmingly largest city, Dublin, and the rest of the country were diverted by the immediate issue of whether to accept partition or to fight on. The nascent party system divided itself on these lines in the midst of an ongoing civil war. The pro-Treaty group which formed the first government became Party of the Gael (Fine Gael), while the constitutional opposition, and governing party for most of the time from 1932 onwards, became Heroes of Destiny (Fianna Fáil). Their names indicate the appeal of both to Irish nationalism. Both subscribed to the social doctrines enunciated by the Catholic Church. There was a tendency for Fine Gael to uphold the economic interests of Dublin and the east coast, as perceived by the upper bourgeoisie. In the 1930s Fianna Fáil constructed a western small-farmer and Dublin working-class alliance. These lines were very blurred, however, and easily overcome by tactical and election considerations. Fianna Fáil’s creation of a near majority election coalition meant that Fine Gael’s only chance of government office was to ally itself with smaller parties, often of a radical agrarian or proletarian nature. Increasingly, from the 1950s onwards, its ally was the Labour Party.

The Labour Party, an offshoot of the all-British Labour movement, had held aloof from the nationalist controversies of the 1920s in its pursuit of social reform. This gave it permanent minority status, averaging about 10 per cent of the vote in national elections. While giving support to Fianna Fáil in the 1930s, it went into coalition with

Table 2.3 Elections to the Irish parliament, 1948–2007

Year	Turnout	Labour	Fine Gael	Fianna Fáil	Others
1948	74	9	20	42	19
1951	75	11	26	46	7
1954	76	12	32	43	7
1957	71	9	27	48	16
1961	71	12	32	44	13
1965	75	15	34	48	3
1969	77	17	34	46	3
1973	77	14	35	46	5
1977	76	12	31	51	7
1981	76	10	37	45	8
1982	74	9	37	47	6
1982	73	9	39	45	6
1987	73	6	27	44	11
1989	69	10	29	44	17
1992	69	19	25	39	17
1997	68	10	28	39	21
2002	64	11	22	41	26
2007	66	10	27	42	20

Note: Votes are counted on first ballot.

Fine Gael in return for promises of reform in the 1950s, 1970s and 1980s. The increasing volatility both of voting and of the party system in the 1990s, associated with an economic boom and recession, produced an increase in Labour support (particularly in Dublin, to 26 per cent of the vote in 1992). This made Labour a desirable partner for Fianna Fáil in the new coalition government which emerged after the election of that year. Subsequently Labour governed with Fine Gael till 1997. A market liberal party, the Progressive Democrats, has been Fianna Fáil's preferred coalition partner from 1997.

One can say that the relatively loose and unideological nature of party politics in the Republic of Ireland reflects a widespread consensus on major issues, backed by its status as a small country on the European periphery. Its traditional neutrality exempts it from pressures to join in international alliances such as the 'War on Terror'. It can receive substantial benefits from the EU without attracting too much attention. Although the Church has been losing its social dominance, Catholic social doctrine on matters like abortion and divorce still holds sway, eased in practical and individual terms by the proximity of the UK (where both are available). The one threatening and immediate issue – what support to give violent Nationalism in Northern Ireland – has now been solved by the acceptance of a power-sharing Executive there and the establishment of an effective Irish–British condominium over the territory. The one long-term consequence is perhaps the political gains made by We Ourselves (Sinn Féin), the Irish Nationalists in both Northern and South Ireland. But these do not as yet pose much threat to the main parties of the South, especially since its Southern vote went down in 2007.

In contrast, British politics in the new century have been increasingly shaken by New Labour's support for intervention in Iraq and support for the United States in

its War on Terror. While bipartisan, in the sense of being supported by the leadership of both main parties, the issue has split Labour internally, causing a haemorrhage of traditional activists and supporters – particularly on the peripheries of Britain. A first consequence is the steady decline of the party in both Scotland and Wales – signified by the 2007 success of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) – and an erosion of its basis of support in Northern England. The British Conservative Party, in the meantime, has moved, under a new Leader, David Cameron, from a rightist to a centrist image, although his stand on policies remains vague.

Electoral system and party system

A comparison of the British and Irish electoral systems demonstrates, if proof were needed, that differences in the rules for aggregating votes into seats have a profound effect on the handling of these issues and on national politics in general. Ireland has a system (single transferable vote) more geared to obtaining proportionality between party shares of votes and of parliamentary seats than the British. It also offers voters more of a choice between parties and candidates. The British single-member constituencies with simple pluralities would have guaranteed Fianna Fáil, with a plurality of the popular vote in most elections from 1932, a near-permanent majority government in Ireland. Under the actual system of the single transferable vote in multi-member constituencies Fianna Fáil had instead often to form minority governments with outside support – and now coalitions. Conversely, the Irish system, applied to Britain, would have enforced minority or coalition government over the whole post-war period, with marked differences in party style and policies, not to mention the institutional workings of government.

Mainland Britain uses the ‘first past the post’ or single-member, simple plurality electoral system for UK elections. As the name implies, one MP is elected for each constituency on the basis of receiving more votes than any of his or her rivals. There is no requirement to gain a majority. In an extreme case an MP with 33 per cent or even 25 per cent of the vote would win the seat if (s)he got one vote more than any rival.

The consequence is that parties win seats if they have strong local support, and are in a position to win a majority of seats and form a government if such support extends over wide areas of the country. Local minorities do not get represented. A party with wide national support spread evenly, like the Liberal Democrats, gains relatively few seats. This is the reason for extreme discrepancies between the Liberal Democrats’ national vote shares and seats. (In 1983 they and their partners took 26 per cent of the vote but just over 3 per cent of parliamentary seats.) Liberal Democrats are in a strong local minority almost everywhere and hence do not usually win seats. It is Labour and Conservatives who have enough support over wide areas to gain a large parliamentary representation.

However, as we have seen, this support is regionally concentrated – the Conservatives get pluralities in the South East of England, and Labour in the West and North, Scotland and Wales. Despite substantial minorities of the other major party’s supporters existing in its rival’s area of predominance, these minorities are not

represented. The system thus exaggerates regional contrasts in support, so that Conservatives increasingly seem like a regional South East English party in terms of parliamentary representation.

Were a third party like the Liberal Democrats to get up to 37–38 per cent of the vote, its support would necessarily be enough in certain localities to pick up parliamentary seats very rapidly. This is a very high level to attain before gaining influence, however. In effect, ‘first past the post’ operates to consolidate and stabilise the existing party system and thus resists and deflects major movements for change. When these become very strong, it may register such change so rapidly as to destabilise the political situation even further.

The same considerations apply in regard to regionally strong parties like the Welsh and Scottish Nationalists. As these can generate concentrated regional support, they do not suffer from under-representation to the same extent as do the Liberal Democrats. The Scottish Nationalists are still underrepresented, however, to the benefit of Labour. Were they to expand their current one-third of the Scottish vote by another 10 per cent in UK elections they would suddenly gain a majority of Scottish seats. The political effect would be an immediate demand for independence.

The inflexibility of ‘first past the post’ thus enables national parties to ignore many political movements and the demands they voice. Where these become even more widely supported, perhaps because of the frustration generated by stalemate, the electoral system would create a critical situation by suddenly registering the strength of the movement. This may explain the fact that territorial or constitutional change in Britain is liable to come all at once, as in 1997–9, after a long period of inattention and non-response by policy-makers.

The electoral system has other effects on the style and conduct of British government. Members of Parliament do not have to contend with party colleagues for election. This directs their attention to national rather than local affairs, since what counts for getting elected is nomination by a national party, and that in turn depends heavily on leadership endorsement. The dependence of MPs on the national leadership also makes for strong party discipline in Parliament. Nominally party policy is agreed in parliamentary party meetings (subject to endorsement by the annual party conference). In practice the leadership dominates discussion in both, particularly when in government.

Both in its direct and in its indirect effects, therefore, the British electoral system operates to reduce the number of parties by restricting effective parliamentary representation to two. It also tends to give an unequivocal parliamentary majority to only one of the two, thus promoting the creation of strong single-party majority government in the teeth of what is effectively a three-party system at electoral level.

The Irish system works, in contrast, by allowing voters, within constituencies usually of three or four members, to rank candidates in order of their preference. Votes are aggregated by (1) establishing an ‘electoral quota’ which a candidate needs to be elected, which consists of total vote divided by number of seats plus one, (2) electing the most popular candidate and distributing his or her surplus of votes over the electoral quota to the other candidates in proportion to each one’s share of second preferences in the elected candidate’s total set of votes. (3) After this redistribution the

second most popular candidate is declared elected and his or her surplus votes are redistributed among the remaining candidates in the same way. (4) The same procedure is followed until all seats are allocated.

The Irish system makes strong local support in the constituency very important for each candidate, since even if his or her party is preferred (s)he may be ranked well below party colleagues and thus not elected. There is no such danger under the British system (see below). This reinforces the strong localism of Irish deputies and their relative lack of interest in national affairs, which in turn contribute to the autonomy of the national leadership. More important, it creates considerable incentives to form electoral coalitions, as the parties within them can reward each other by urging supporters to give second preference to their partner. The electorally successful coalition of Labour and Fine Gael in the 1970s and 1980s used this tactic. The use of multi-member constituencies also ensures, in contrast to Britain, that strong local minorities can hope to gain a seat. Thus small parties do not need to be in a local majority to gain parliamentary representation. This feature of the system has kept Irish Labour going and, with the acceptance by Fianna Fáil of coalition government, gives Labour and progressive democracy a pivotal role in determining which of the larger parties will govern.

Two factors, however, have tempered the tendency to spread parliamentary seats between parties and create coalition governments. One has been the strong socio-political base of Fianna Fáil, which has made it into a near-majority government on many occasions. The other has been the bias of inherited British traditions and institutions (such as collective cabinet responsibility) towards single-party government. With the emergence of a four-party – or at least two-and-two-halves-party – system at electoral level, the single transferable vote has produced change towards a multi-party coalition system. So far in Britain the election system has prevented Parliament and governments from reflecting Liberal Democrat electoral successes. Not surprisingly a major Liberal Democrat objective is to change that.

PARTIES

As the above discussion indicates, British parties run the whole gamut of ideological tendencies found elsewhere in Europe, from minority nationalism through Green and left socialist parties to mainstream Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives. Only Christian Democracy is lacking, although the Northern Irish Unionists and the Social Democratic and Labour Party are in effect based on religious cleavages – the first representing the Protestants and the other the Catholics of Northern Ireland. The Unionists are exceptional among the peripherally based parties in having socially conservative policies (though not economic ones – they could hardly be, as the province is so dependent on state subsidies). Their *raison d'être* is, however, to support partition and the incorporation of the province within the British state, just as We Ourselves (Sinn Féin), moderately left in terms of overall ideology, supports the union of Northern with Southern Ireland. Unionists have on occasion provided useful parliamentary support for the major parties at Westminster and been rewarded by a change of Northern Irish policy in their favour.

The Welsh and Scottish nationalists share a left-wing orientation – a natural position to take on the central–periphery cleavage which strongly characterises British politics. Indeed, their ideological tendencies are sometimes to the left of Labour's. Both gained votes in their respective regional elections in 2007. The Scottish National Party wants nothing less than Scottish secession from the British state. The Party of Wales (Plaid Cymru) stands more for devolution than for independence. Its core support is in Welsh-speaking North Wales, which creates internal divisions with English-speakers in South Wales, the most populous area of the country.

While the Green Party and various extreme groups on left and right have gained substantial votes in occasional European and local elections, none has mustered enough support to gain even one British parliamentary seat. The workings of the electoral system will continue to marginalise them for the foreseeable future. It is therefore with the mainstream parties – Labour and Conservative above all – that we ought to be concerned when we discuss the normal workings of politics in the United Kingdom as a whole.

The ideological positions of the major parties as summarised on a left–right scale (see Table 2.4) can be characterised from content analyses of the parties' own programmes at national elections. Left-wing support for greater government intervention in the economy and society, more welfare and social services, and peace and international solidarity abroad contrasts with a right-wing emphasis on individual freedom, incentives, traditional morality and military alliances. These are the 'core' left versus right positions which, on the evidence of their own manifestos, parties take. Labour is consistently to the left of the Conservatives on these points. Usually the parties maintain a fair degree of ideological distance from each other, though this may be modified by strategic and situational factors, when they move closer or take over some of their rival's policies. In the 1950s the Liberals switched between the Conservative and Labour positions, but from the 1960s onwards they became more resolutely centrist and ceased to 'leapfrog' the other parties.

While maintaining their own individuality the parties obviously modify their policies to gain voting support and win elections. In the early 1950s the Conservatives' pledge to accept most of Labour's post-war reforms moved them over

Table 2.4 Left–right placement of parties in Britain

	Welsh PCy	Scottish SNP	Labour LB	Liberal LD	Conservative Con	
←	→				→	→
Left	Centre-left		Centre		Centre-right	Right

Party names:

PCy: Party of Wales (Plaid Cymru)

SNP: Scottish National Party

LB: Labour Party

LD: Liberal Democrats

Con: Conservative Party

Source: Adapted from data in Huber and Inglehart (1995), Budge *et al.* (2001), Klingemann *et al.* (2006), Benoit and Laver (2007), and chapter authors' sources. See references in Chapter 1.

towards the left of the political spectrum. In 1964 and 1970 the two parties came quite close together. The rise of the 'New Left' in the Labour Party and of Margaret Thatcher's 'New Right' among the Conservatives produced a major ideological divergence in the 1980s. Labour's loss of four elections in a row caused far-reaching internal modification of its policies. It moved towards Conservative positions in 1987, returned to the left in 1992 but moved decisively rightward in 1997, 2001 and 2005 with full acceptance of the free-market economy. The Conservatives up to 2005 maintained their old policies of reducing state intervention in society by selling off public enterprises and imposing market-oriented reforms on the welfare state and the education system, but their third successive election defeat has caused them to modify these positions.

It is instructive that the way the major parties present their policies to the public emphasises the class elements in the basic political cleavage and de-emphasises the territorial element. This is partly due to Labour's desire to keep Scotland and Wales under control. Even after it proceeded with devolution in 1997–1999 its main concern was to co-ordinate regional and central action, rather than to leave regional legislatures and governments with any autonomous initiatives. The party has preferred to concentrate on social and economic policy for two reasons. One is straightforwardly electoral: to win power at British level, Labour needs to gain votes in the Midlands and the South East of England, where devolution has no positive connotations. It already has all the support in Scotland and Wales that it needs. The enhancement of social services and general redistribution are points on which all its present and potential supporters can agree, so it would be counterproductive to emphasise territorial questions too much in its electoral appeals.

The other factor shaping the Labour leadership's priorities lies in the party's origins as a class-based political movement and in the basic values built into the party as a result. The party's core beliefs centre on the question of social and economic equality. As we have seen, this is also a matter of central importance to the remoter peripheries where the underprivileged are more concentrated. Labour stands historically for the elimination of poverty, steady improvement in public services and in ordinary people's living standards, the narrowing of income and wealth differentials, wider and more evenly spread opportunities, and the abolition of social and legal distinctions based formally or informally on social status. Recently it has paid growing attention to racial and sexual equality as well as class equality. Its international outlook also originates in egalitarian values: traditionally it has supported transnational organisations, seeing them as a more effective road to international peace and world redistribution than military alliances. This is why the government's unquestioning support for America's proactive military policy has caused such divisions within Labour.

Unlike some other European socialist movements, Labour has downplayed political reform, seeing in the undefined reserve powers of the state and its formally unlimited parliamentary sovereignty a useful instrument for imposing social change. This accounts for its late support for devolution and unwillingness to consider radical constitutional change. In spite of its reforms after taking office in 1997 it is reluctant to support major political change, or to consider a formal electoral alliance with the Liberal Democrats, being still attracted by the untrammelled action as a single-party government which the present set-up gives it.

For the Conservatives, political power *per se* has been much more important and they have historically been willing to make more ideological concessions than Labour to get it. They have therefore been quite consistent in upholding the unitary British state and unlimited parliamentary sovereignty (which as we shall see gives effective autonomy to the leadership of the majority party), and in opposing attempts to codify the constitution, which would reduce governmental power *vis-à-vis* other groups in society. They have even been prepared to accept that at times Labour may have access to power, counting on their own electoral strengths to minimise such periods. In this they have not been mistaken. The Conservatives controlled the government for thirty-five years of the half-century from 1945. Although they lost the last three elections, they show no sign of abandoning their support for an ‘elective dictatorship’ of a single-party government based on a minority of the vote.

Conservative core values thus relate primarily to the idea of a strong state which will secure social order. Different elements in the party emphasise different aspects of this role – on the one hand as an instrument of law and order through police, courts, school discipline and traditional religious morality, on the other as a supporter of paternalism and hierarchy, with basic welfare for the less well-off. In the first part of the post-war period this latter point of view seemed electorally popular with the majority of the population, so the party pragmatically accepted it as a policy to gain power, which it held from 1951 to 1964. The subsequent Labour government’s attempts to impose widely unpopular measures such as comprehensive (neighbourhood) schools and a further redistribution of wealth gave strength to a New Right element in the Conservative Party. This element mounted a radical attack on Labour policies, in favour of re-establishing an entirely free-market economy, cutting welfare and increasing wealth differentials. Traditional Conservatives who did not themselves feel the same attachment to a free market were reconciled to this stance by its reassertion of state authority in the face of the social opposition, particularly from trade unions, which the changes provoked (see the next section). This combination of ‘free market, strong state’ underlay Conservative policies from the mid-1970s onwards, reaching its full flowering in the period of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership (1979–1990). The reassertion of state authority also applied to foreign policy, where it fitted happily with Conservative support for NATO and a strong military and diplomatic position. The electoral successes of Thatcherism, with its particular appeal to the upwardly mobile sectors in the South East and Midlands of England, reconciled even the non-free-marketers to the Conservative position during the 1980s.

The breakdown of the Thatcherite synthesis came with the question of closer British integration into the European Community, which pitted its ‘free-market’ elements against supporters of the ‘strong state’. For them the concept of British sovereignty became increasingly important as it seemed to be threatened by the growing powers of the European Commission under the Single European Act of 1986–1987 and especially the Treaty of Maastricht of 1992–1993. For the free-marketers, led by Mrs Thatcher’s successor, John Major, the liberalisation of trade within a larger European market was of greater importance, even though they diverged radically from other European governments on questions of social protection from free-market forces. The opposition between the two elements within the party

overwhelmed the Conservatives after their electoral defeats in 1997 and 2001. After 2005 and the choice of a young more centrist leader, the Conservatives have emerged as more united in pursuit of power.

Labour is much more tied to its ideology. This is in large part due to the institutional structure of the party and the support base it gives to internally competing groups. The Labour Party was founded at the beginning of this century when various socialist groups came together with the trade unions. The latter provided support and an organisational base: the socialists provided activists and a constituency organisation. The two groups had somewhat different objectives and tactics, though of course both concurred in their ultimate aim of securing equality and advancement for the less privileged. The trade unions, however, had more immediate and pragmatic objectives: to secure their own power and position in industry, to extend immediate welfare benefits and in general to use pragmatic concessions and bargaining to secure immediate concrete gains for the working class. The socialist elements, strong in constituency associations, were keen to promote a radical reorganisation of society along egalitarian lines. Both sides could concur on the creation of the welfare state and nationalisation in the late 1940s but diverged in the 1960s over such matters as school conception and union privileges.

In recognition of the trade unions' financial support their leadership was given a predominant role in the party conference, the main policy-making body of the Labour Party, through the 'bloc vote'. Each union delegation cast the votes of all its members paying party subscriptions as a unified whole in favour of, or against, proposed policies. These votes overwhelmed those of constituency delegations. Generally, over the post-war period, the unions' votes helped to secure the election of a relatively pragmatic parliamentary leadership which could generally count on their support against the more radical left of the party.

By the end of the 1960s, however, several large unions had elected a more radical leadership which increasingly diverged from the party leader. The New Left of the party gained in power and proposed more distinctively left-wing policies. In turn this provoked an internal split and secession of centrist leaders to form the Social Democratic Party (1981), which was later absorbed by the Liberal Democrats. The split damaged Labour's electoral base and more than anything else was responsible for Labour's weakness in the 1980s and early 1990s. A centrist leadership regained control after the crushing electoral defeat of 1983. Under Tony Blair it promoted a much more pragmatic policy stance which took over many elements of Thatcherism and gained the party the sobriquet of 'New Labour'. This is unlikely to change under the new leader Gordon Brown.

The Liberal Democratic Party emerged from the fusion, in 1988, of the Social Democrats and the Liberals, one of the traditional parties which had been gradually squeezed out of power by Labour and Conservatives in the inter-war period. The Liberals predominated in the new party, and it is their core values which give it its distinctive ideological tinge – above all, concern with individual freedom. As we have seen, support for individual freedom could lead, as in the Conservative Party, to support for radical free-market measures and lack of concern for social security and welfare. This is what characterises many free-enterprise liberal parties on the Continent. In the case of the British Liberals, like their Scandinavian counterparts,

concern for freedom led to support for welfare on the grounds that political freedom is impossible without some level of economic and social security for all. More direct preoccupations have been their opposition to censorship, advocacy of a written and limited constitution, and civil liberties – particularly in the context of repressive measures against Muslim terrorists. The Liberal Democrats have always been firm on regional devolution, on environmental protection and on extending the ownership of industry to the workforce, with workers having the same rights as management. They have also been the most consistently favourable of the parties to full integration with the European Union. And of course they have supported reform of the electoral system towards full proportional representation – both because it gives greater freedom of individual choice and because they are the party most penalised by the existing arrangements.

Liberal Democrat policies do not fit well into classic left–right divisions, which accounts for the Liberal Democrats’ largely centrist position in regard to these. Of all the parties they are the most committed to the extension of political rights and to electoral reform – which would, given their central ideological position, make them the determining factor in choosing a Conservative or Labour partner in a coalition government. As it is, the existing electoral system shuts them out from effective policy-making and debate.

Whatever its idiosyncrasies, Britain fits quite well into the standard model of European party systems, with a well-organised left opposed to a well-organised right, and a significant centrist party competing at electoral if not at parliamentary level. Ireland is quite different. Its system of parties has long been regarded as the most distinctive in the world, even taking Canada and the United States into account.

The peculiarity of the Irish system has been to have two parties competing for power which are almost identical ideologically. As we noted above, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael originated in the civil war between those not prepared to accept independence for the south and west of Ireland without the North (Fianna Fáil) and those who had signed the treaty accepting partition (Fine Gael) and who formed the first governments of the Irish Free State. The latter won the civil war but lost subsequent elections to Fianna Fáil, seeing their basic vote shrink to around 30 per cent of voters while that of Fianna Fáil oscillated near 50 per cent. The main difference between the parties stemmed from their history and the personal and clientelist networks it had caused them to build up. These networks were particularly important given the small size of the country (under 3 million population), its agrarian and rural basis, and the highly personal nature of political relations. There was an incipient socio-economic cleavage between the parties, Fianna Fáil being stronger among the small subsistence farmers of the west and among the small-town bourgeoisie, and Fine Gael representing the large farmers of the east and what big business there was in Dublin. With this support base Fianna Fáil has been more nationalistic, severing all remaining political links with Britain by 1949. Fine Gael has always been more cautious on the nationalist issue, favouring negotiations with Britain, the major customer of its core supporters on the east coast.

Neither party was anxious to get closely involved in the Northern imbroglio, however. The factions of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) want to overthrow established authority in the South as well as in the North, so governments of all parties

Table 2.5 Left–right placement of parties in Ireland

*Party names:*

SF: We Ourselves (Sinn Féin)

LB: Labour

FG: Party of the Gael (Fine Gael)

FF: Heroes of Destiny (Fianna Fáil)

PD: Progressive Democrats

Source: As for Table 2.4.

have interned their members and cautiously co-operated with British forces. With the Northern settlement nationalism has faded as an issue. Both parties are enthusiastically pro-European, partly to distance themselves from the British and partly in recognition of the economic benefits and direct subsidies membership of the European Union brings – notably the Irish economic boom from the 1970s.

In terms of left–right policies Fine Gael was originally at the right of the policy spectrum while Fianna Fáil, in keeping with its populist appeal, stretched over a wide range of the spectrum from centre-right to centre-left. In seeking to counter Fianna Fáil's near-majority position among electors, however, Fine Gael exploited its rival's refusal to go into coalition even when it lacked a Dáil (parliamentary) majority, and formed coalition governments with small agrarian-populist parties and Labour in the 1950s, and with Labour from the 1970s to 1990s. As a result – and perhaps even in anticipation – its policies moved leftward in these decades.

This rendered the major Irish parties less distinguishable than ever. The general thrust of their policies on the economy and society in a traditionally Catholic country is best described as Christian Democrat, and they certainly pay great attention to the Social Encyclicals of the late nineteenth century and to current papal announcements on these topics. Abortion is effectively banned and divorce was legalised only in 1995.

Socially, however, there has been great change in the Republic over the last twenty years. Church attendance has dropped off and the authoritative position of the Catholic hierarchy has been repeatedly challenged, not least through appeals to the European Court. This has fostered hostility towards the EU among traditionalist as well as left-wing sectors. Secular parties such as Labour, the Progressive Democrats and Sinn Féin have found growing electoral support, with increasing fragmentation of the party system and moves towards coalition governments. It may be, therefore, that we shall see a more normal European pattern emerging in Ireland, with the emergence of distinct left, centre and right blocs.

One other peculiarity of Irish politics is the role played by popular referendums, which occur quite frequently on important issues and are actively contested by the parties. The vote of 2001 rejecting the treaty expanding the EU was a recent example of this. Britain, like Ireland, has had a nationwide referendum on membership

of the European Community (1975), and Scottish and Welsh electors voted on regional devolution in 1979 and 1997. Such popular consultations are only held, however, at the political convenience of governments and are not mandated by the constitution.

PARLIAMENT

The working British constitution (as opposed to its numerous ceremonial accretions, Bagehot 1867) is ruthlessly simple: a government supported by the majority party in the House of Commons can do anything. There is no written document to limit its scope. The government inherits all the powers of an undefined royal prerogative. The legal doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty ensures that government legislation cannot normally be challenged directly in the courts (for the one exception, see below).

There are of course practical limits to the powers a majority government can exercise: the trade unions are less powerful than they used to be, owing to Thatcherite legislation and high unemployment, but they and other interest groups can still thwart particular policies when they feel strongly enough. More important, central government has no direct field administration in most domains and is thus dependent on other bodies – often politically opposed to it – to implement its policies. This often renders them more symbolic than real.

Despite such practical limitations, the absence of legal and constitutional restraints does put British governments among the most powerful in Europe. Irish governments inherited the tradition of strong authoritative rule from Britain. Within their limits they have the same freedom of action when supported by a Dáil majority. However, their limits are more strictly drawn, both by a written constitution – which does therefore permit legal challenges – and by the entrenched position of one of the most traditional and strongest Catholic Churches in Europe. No government would consciously risk a confrontation with the Church, and when the two have blundered into conflict, usually on social issues, the government has generally lost. In recent times governments have also lost referendums on important moral and European issues.

The strength of government *vis-à-vis* parliament and other bodies favours in Britain, and to a lesser extent in Ireland, the idea of the party mandate. This is the constitutional doctrine that the electoral programme of the party given the majority of parliamentary seats has been endorsed by the electorate, and that the government is entitled – indeed, required – to put its programme into action while in power. This widely held point of view severely downgrades the importance of Parliament, as it gives the government direct popular authority. It is true that such authority is conferred by obtaining a majority of seats in the House of Commons. But thereafter the leadership of the majority party can go ahead on its own and feels entitled to the compliance of Parliament in enacting its programme. Similarly the rank and file of the majority party are charged only with providing loyal voting support. Withdrawing such support or persistently criticising government is flouting the popular will.