

CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH PARTY POLITICS

THE 1945 GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WESTMINSTER PARTY SYSTEM

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The Evolution of British Party Competition

The evolution of British party politics can be divided into separate time periods when one or another pattern of interaction became dominant. Usually, the literature offers explanation after the 2nd world war because the British party system became truly established in these years. Before the Second World War, there was either some democratic deficit due to the non-universal suffrage (before 1918) or to the ongoing economic and military crisis (1930 economic crisis and the Second World War.) Hence, there is a general consensus that 1945 was the first modern general election which can be compared to any succeeding ones.

In the literature of party competition classification, there are two important authors whom the author wants to rely on. Paul Webb, a political scientist, uses quantitative data to measure and identify different time periods in the history of UK party competition.¹ He uses indices like ENEP/ENPP, or electoral volatility. Vermont Bogdanor, on the other hand, a historian, prefers historical sources for his findings.² He uses legal acts, political speeches and historical statements. Although they approach the same question from different point of views, there is some overlap between their findings. Both of these two scholars agree that the 1945-70 time period was the 'golden era' of two-party politics. It was characterised by two-party competition, no relevant third parties, single governments and tight electoral results. Later, however, almost all of these criteria were questioned and a certain pluralisation started in British politics. The difference between them appears in the evaluation of the post-1974 period. Whereas Webb (2000) thinks that the post-1974 pluralisation process is still going on,

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¹ Webb, Paul: *The Modern British Party System*. SAGE Publications, 2000.

² Bogdanor, Vernon: *The Constitution and the Party System in the Twentieth Century*. *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 57 (2004) No. 4, 717-733.



Bogdanor (2004) argues that the post-1974 ended in 1997 when a new era begun. He thinks that the constitutional changes and the devolution process launched by Tony Blair worth a completely new category. In this vein, Webb (2000) accepts the importance of the post-1997 devolution; nevertheless, he put it into a sub-category of the post-1974 period.

The most important conclusion of the two scholars is that; (a) the UK party competition has been going on an evolution since 1945, (b) this evolution means a pluralisation from two-party politics and (c) devolution enhances this process. In the followings, the present paper wants to understand 3 critically important general elections in the evolution of British party politics. The author starts with the 1945 general election and in another 2 papers, then continues with the 1974 and the 1997 general elections.

WEBB (2000: 4-15.)		BOGDANOR (2004: 724-733.)	
1945–1970	‘The era of classic two-party competition.’	1935–1970	The ‘heyday’ of two-party competition
1974–today	The ‘emergence of latent moderate pluralism.’	1974–1992	The ending of the two-party dominance
–		1997–today	Constitutional reform and devolution.

Table 1 Comparing Webb's and Bogdanor's classification

Introduction to the 1945 General Election

The 1945 general election is generally considered as one of the most important landmark in modern British party competition. This was the first election when Labour gained absolute majority in the House of Commons and became the second party beside the Conservatives. The two-party rivalry has become a major characteristic of British politics since then. *Lijphart*³ thought it so deterministic that he built up a theory about Westminster democracy which is eventually about the Conservative-Labour dichotomy. Due to the very important path-dependency that the 1945 general election generated, the overall outcomes of this crucial election can be felt even today.⁴

There are four reasons why the 1945 election should be treated as a critical juncture in the evolution of British party competition. Firstly, it was the first time in history when the Labour Party gained an absolute majority in the House of Commons (HoC). Previously, they had been able to win two general elections in 1924 and in 1929; however, these victories never lead to an absolute majority. So Labour previously was

³ Lijphart, Arend: *Patterns of Democracy*. Yale University Press, 2012.

⁴ Marsh, David – Johnston, Jim – Hay, Colin – Buller, Jim: *Postwar British Politics in Perspective*. Polity Press Cambridge, 1999.

always bound to minority or coalition governments. (HoC Briefing Paper 04951, 2015) Secondly, in 1945, Labour did not just get an absolute majority, but they did it in a *landslide* manner. They got 146 more seats than the second placed Conservatives and this gave them a comfortable governing majority. Such kind of victory often happened earlier in favour of the Conservatives, but never to any left-wing parties. Thirdly, the 1945 results introduced a completely new political rivalry in British politics: the *Conservative-Labour competition*. This dichotomy changed the whole traditional political scene. Before 1945, both Labour and the Liberals tried to become the second party behind the Conservatives which created either a three-party contest or most often a predominant party (the Conservatives) with two smaller ones (Labour and the Liberals).⁵ Now, it became clear that only Labour could be the opposition party against the Conservatives. So the Liberals eventually disappeared from the political scene – at least for a while. Fourthly, the 1945 election was not only very different from any previous results, but it was the starting point of a *long-term trend*, too. In the first half of the 20th century, it could have been difficult to identify an established party system in Britain because the high electoral volatilities of general elections made a very fluctuating party system pattern. Therefore the mid-war years were more about irregular changes than about a regular and long-term trend. This fundamentally changed after 1945 because the Conservative-Labour dichotomy became a stable and inflexible characteristic of British politics. Moreover, electoral volatility almost disappeared between the years of 1945 and 1970. This two-party logic has become an integral part of British politics and political culture, too. The 1945 general election created such a remarkable point of reference than any other general elections later in the 20th century determined itself in comparison with 1945. The 1974 general elections might have questioned the validity of the 1945 general election patterns (and two-partyism) or the 1997 general election might have confirmed the 1945 general election with a similar outcome, however, the point of reference always remained the same. Therefore the 1945 general election is crucial to understand the whole British political landscape in the 2nd half of the 20th century.

Data

The 1945 general election was a landslide victory for Labour and a humiliating loss for the Conservatives.⁶ Labour got 47.7% of the votes which translated into 61.4% of the parliamentary seats. At the same time, the Conservatives got 39.7% of the votes and

⁵ See Skidelsky, Robert: *Politicians and the Slump: the Labour Government of 1929-1931*. London, Macmillan, 1967., Kinnear, Michael: *The Fall of Lloyd George: the Political Crisis of 1922*. Springer, 1973., Wrigley, Chris: *David Lloyd George and the British Labour Movement: Peace and War*. Harvester Press, 1976.

⁶ All UK electoral data in this paper are from Commons Briefing Paper (2017) No. CBP-7529 *UK Election Statistics: 1918-2017* which has both .pdf and .xls versions. The author used the .xls version for his own calculations, while he calculated the later used indices (ENEP, ENPP, Pedersen index) from this dataset. All Figures and Tables in the text are also calculated from these data.

32.8% of the seats. The Liberals became the third party with 9% of the votes and just 1.9% of the seats. If we compare this result with the previous 1935 general election, the difference is even more shocking. At that time, the Conservatives got 429 seats (69.76%), Labour had 154 seats (25.04%) and the Liberals got 21 seats (3.41%). In 1945, the Conservatives had 210 seats (32.81%), Labour had 393 (61.4%) and the Liberals had 12 (1.9%). So basically the Conservatives and the Liberals halved their parliamentary seat shares while Labour almost tripled it. Although the majority electoral system played a leverage role in Labour's landslide victory, nevertheless, the 1945 election result was the culmination of a long-term historic trend.

As one can see in Figure 1, the vote share for Labour had been kept rising since 1918. At the same time, the Liberals kept losing votes. The Conservatives had changing patterns but they usually grew. However, Figure 2 shows how disproportionally these results translated into parliamentary seat shares. The FPTP electoral system usually favoured very much the Conservatives and disfavoured either Labour, the Liberals or both. For instance in 1931, Labour got under 10% seat share whereas their vote share was above 30%. In 1935, they made slightly better results but they were still minor parties to the Conservatives. With this previous record, the 1945 election showed a skyrocketing Labour performance both in votes and particularly in seats. The Conservatives nevertheless became a minor party beside Labour, although they enjoyed a predominant position before the war.

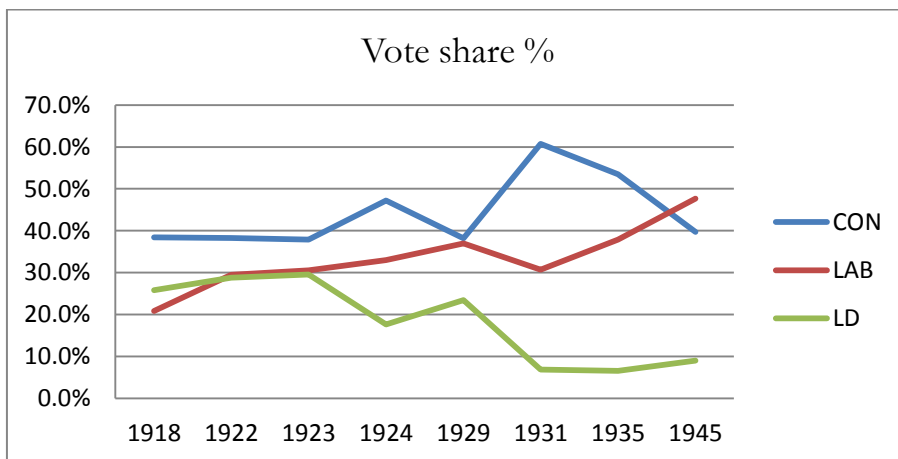


Figure 1 Vote share proportions in the party competition (1918-1945)

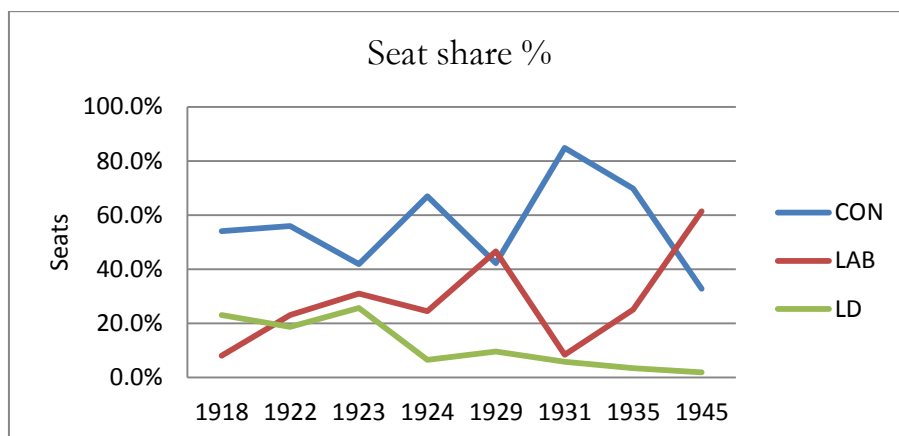


Figure 2 Seat share proportions in the party system (1918-1945)

This sudden change, however, froze after 1945. Instead of further electoral volatility, the two major parties conserved their dominance in British politics. So even though FPTP (first past the post) is usually considered as the source of two-party competition (*Duverger's law*)⁷, in fact, the very same electoral system could result fundamentally different outcomes before 1945. Therefore, the author reckons instead that the two-party politics was sustained by social changes. This is particularly true if we compare the *effective number of electoral parties* (ENEP)⁸ with the *effective number of parliamentary parties* (ENPP) before and after 1945.

	ENPP	ENEP	Diff
1918	2.68	3.57	25.08%
1922	2.49	3.16	21.12%
1923	2.95	3.08	4.12%
1924	1.95	2.75	29.32%
1929	2.46	2.96	16.78%
1931	1.37	2.14	35.95%
1935	1.82	2.30	21.21%
1945	2.06	2.53	18.92%
1950	2.08	2.45	15.10%
1951	2.05	2.13	3.69%

⁷ Duverger's law says that countries using the first past the post electoral system will necessarily end up with a two-party system.

⁸ ENEP and ENPP are party system fragmentation indices. They refer to how fragmented a party system is. ENEP is calculated by using electoral vote shares whilst ENPP is done so by parliamentary seat shares. For instance, if ENEP = 3.5, it means that there are three and a half equal sized parties in a given party system. If it is 2.0, we are talking about a two-party system. For more information please visit: Prof. Michael Gallagher's website at Trinity College Dublin. Available at https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael/gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/effno.php. Downloaded: 2 November 2017.

1955	2.03	2.16	6.30%
1959	1.99	2.28	12.74%
1964	2.06	2.53	18.75%
1966	2.02	2.42	16.75%
1970	2.07	2.46	16.07%
1974	2.25	3.13	28.10%
1974	2.25	3.15	28.48%
1979	2.15	2.87	24.98%
1983	2.09	3.11	32.78%
1987	2.17	3.07	29.38%
1992	2.27	3.05	25.77%
1997	2.12	3.18	33.28%
2001	2.17	3.28	33.94%
2005	2.46	3.52	30.04%
2010	2.58	3.61	28.61%
2015	2.53	3.63	30.23%

Table 2 ENEP and ENPP values (1918-1945)

As it can be seen in Table 2, both ENPP and ENEP values were very unpredictable between 1918 and 1945. ENPP was sometimes over and sometimes under 2.00 which suggest that in the House of Commons there was either a two-and-a-half (sometimes three) party system or a predominant party system with one giant party (the Conservatives.) At the same time, the UK party competition (ENEP)⁹ kept being above 2.00 which suggest a multi-party competition outside of Westminster. Therefore, the logical consequence is that the differences between ENPP and ENEP values were sometimes relatively high. (See third column in Table 2.) For example, in 1931, this difference reached 35.95% because ENEP was 2.14 and ENPP only 1.37. It can be interpreted that a predominant party system co-existed with two-(and-a-half) party competition. In other words, the House of Commons didn't represent well the ongoing party competition in the British society (as it was the case after 1974, too.) However, from 1945, ENEP started to decrease and ENPP began to stabilize around 2.00. This convergence resulted the decline of ENEP-ENPP difference, too. For instance, in 1951 and in 1955, ENPP was respectively 2.05 and 2.08 and ENEP was 2.13 and 2.16. The differences were just 3.69% and 6.30% during these two elections. This means that the post-1945 elections had a trend towards two-partyism both in the party system and in

⁹ The author considers the UK *party system* as the party system inside Westminster and the House of Commons. However, when he talks about *party competition* it is a wider concept than Westminster politics and every contesting parties make part of it (not just those which manage to surpass the electoral threshold.) Therefore, the author thinks ENPP and ENEP can measure both these two concepts. ENPP is calculated from parliamentary seats (so it can measure the party system) and ENEP is calculated from electoral votes (so it can measure party competition.) Due to the high electoral threshold in the House of Commons, ENEP should be always higher than ENPP.

the party competition. Thus the post-1945 period was indeed the 'heyday' of two-party politics.

Causes

Labour's landslide victory in 1945 was caused by several factors. In the following, the present paper tries to collect them in a non-exclusive way.

- ❖ *Paul Adelman* quotes *Paul Addison's* book 'The Road to 1945' which states that the year of 1940 had a particularly important role in Labour's success.¹⁰ In 1940, there were two important events: the *Dunkirk crisis* which symbolised the complete failure of appeasement politics which was delivered by *Neville Chamberlain's* Conservative government and it was also the first year when a *wartime economic plan* was accepted. Both these two events supported Labour's popularity.
- ❖ *Paul Adelman* adds that it was also very important to have a 'reconstruction plan' after the 2nd world war. In this vein, the Conservatives had very poor initiatives since they were more preoccupied with ongoing military acts. At the same time, Labour had already started to elaborate new reconstruction policies for the end of the war. This was supported by the *Beverage Report* in 1942 (although *William Beveridge* was personally a Liberal politician), the *White Paper* in 1944, the *Employment Policy* in 1944 and the *Butler Education Act* in 1944. At the same time, *Winston Churchill* was only concerned about international politics.
- ❖ During the 10 years of Coalition government (1935-45), Labour gained some reputation as a party in *governmental office*.¹¹ Previously, their lack of office record was a major handicap *vis-à-vis* the Conservatives. They were often considered as a sectional party which represented only a small proportion of the entire British nation. However, during the Coalition years, they showed how well they could perform in office (particularly in home affairs) and they acted as a responsible party.¹²
- ❖ *McCallum* and *Readman* add (1964: 267) that *Labour's monopoly on the left* was also a key factor in their 1945 electoral victory; there were no other significant party beside Labour.¹³ Both the Liberals and other smaller parties (like the Communist Party or the Common Wealth) became extremely marginal at the end of the 2nd World War.
- ❖ Although Churchill was personally the most popular politician in Britain at the end of the 2nd world war, his party remained much behind his personal reputation. *Harold Macmillan* writes in his memories that '*it was not Churchill who lost the 1945*

¹⁰ Adelman, Paul: *The British General Election, 1945*. Retrieved from <http://www.historytoday.com/paul-adelman/british-general-election-1945>. 2001.

¹¹ See Adelman: *op. cit.*

¹² Roberts, Martin: *Britain, 1846-1964: The Challenge of Change*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹³ See *McCallum, Ronald Buchanan – Readman, Alison: The British General Election of 1945*. London : Frank Cass, 1964. p.267.

*election; it was the ghost of Neville Chamberlain.*¹⁴ Churchill could not get rid of his party's previous negative record.

- ❖ McCallum and Readman (1964) also say that during the collation years, there was an *electoral truce* among the Conservatives, the Labour Party and the Liberals. In exchange for their loyalty in the coalition government, they promised not to nominate candidates against each other at constituency by-elections where an incumbent MP was re-running. This electoral truce was interpreted by the Conservatives as a *political truce* as well. It meant that in addition to the by-election deal, they also stopped party mobilisation. They only re-launched their party machine in Feb 1945 a couple of months before the 1945 general election. (The last general mobilisation had been in 1935, at the last general election!) At the same time, Labour didn't stop constituency life and party mobilisation. So during the 1945 election campaign Labour enjoyed a comparative advantage 'on the ground.'
- ❖ Expanding *secondary education* is considered another comparative advantage for Labour.¹⁵ The new generation had a much vivid awareness of their rights and duties in the society. So they appreciated more detailed policy proposals in which Labour had a clear win. The *Let Us Face the Future* manifesto in 1945 promised social services, public ownership and equality for all. This was appreciated by the new and more educated generation.
- ❖ *Alun Wyburn-Powell* says that *Lloyd George's* memory had also a negative effect on Churchill's personal reputation as a future peacetime prime minister.¹⁶ Although both two politicians were war heroes in their times, Lloyd George became a weak and inadequate prime minister after the World War I. The negative experiences about his career also negatively affected Churchill's future chances.
- ❖ During the war, the military service mixed all social classes which facilitated the exchange of ideas and opinions. This crosscut of class cleavages lead to a high electoral volatility in 1945.
- ❖ The British people wanted to finally end the World War II. In this sense, the change in government would have meant a symbolical rupture with the past, too. Although Churchill was the most popular politician in the country, his name forged with belligerence and war. The vast majority of the electorate could only remember to the Conservatives as a party under which they experienced anxiety, austerity and humiliation.¹⁷ The British electorate became a bit tired out after the 10 years of continuous Conservative rule. At the same time, Labour concentrated on post-war issues and the reconstruction plan. So there was a clear cut between Churchill's militaristic charisma on the one hand, and Labour's practical and detailed economic plans, on the other hand. In this context, Churchill represented the past and

¹⁴ Ibid. 268.

¹⁵ Ibid. 269.

¹⁶ Wyburn-Powell, Alun: How Winston Churchill Lost the 1945 Election. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/how-winston-churchill-lost-the-1945-election-36411>. 2015.

¹⁷ See McCollum-Readman: *op. cit.* 268.

Labour did the future.

- ❖ Labour intentionally appealed for a classless appeal. They were very inclusive and acted like a catch-all party. *Clement Attlee* said in the run-up to the 1945 election; “fifty years ago the Labour party might with some justice have been called a class party, representing almost exclusively the wage earners.” (...) “It is still based on organised Labour but has steadily become more and more inclusive.... the Labour Party is, in fact, the one Party which most nearly reflects in its representation and composition all the main streams which flow into the great river of our national life.”¹⁸
- ❖ Labour had successfully achieved party unity by *suppressing the popular front* (idealists, social revolutionaries, moralists inside the party). Instead the Labour leadership adopted a pragmatist and catch-all strategy which reached out for everyone. Attlee compared this process with the British characteristics of “*the triumph of reasonableness and practicality over doctrinaire impossibilism.*”¹⁹

In sum, the paper argues, the most important cause for Labour’s victory laid in three things: i) the misery of the war which was mostly associated with the Conservatives, ii) the promise of a new world which Labour offered instead and iii) the bad shape of the Conservative Party organisation because Churchill cared much more about international politics than about domestic politics. Putting these three factors together lead to the 1945 Labour landslide. However, it is another question how they could keep their support in the following decades. Next, the paper will try to find out this question.

Aftermath

The 1945 election had two interwoven impacts for the following 30 years (or even more). First, it established an era of left wing politics in Britain where the two major parties revolved around the very same electoral policies: Keynesian economics and the need for welfare state. Since the two parties had a consensus over these policies, this time was characterised by a centripetal political competition where major parties offered very similar manifestos with only some slight differences.²⁰ Second, the 1945 election established the two-party competition by rising Labour to a dominant position on the left. As *Gary McCulloch* notes, Labour became “the only cock on the dunghill”.²¹ The Conservatives represented the middle class and the entrepreneurs while Labour represented the working class and the employees. These two phenomena (the post-war consensus and two-party competition) mutually reinforced each other.

¹⁸ McCulloch, Gary: Labour, the Left, and the British General Election of 1945. *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 24 (1985), No. 4, 475.

¹⁹ Ibid. 488.

²⁰ See Lowe, Rodney: The Second World War, Consensus, and the Foundation of the Welfare State. *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 1 (1990) No. 2, 152–182.

²¹ See McCulloch: *op. cit.* 469.

Post-war consensus

The phenomenon of post-war consensus is usually, although not always, accepted in the academic literature. *Timothy Heppel* collects the arguments for and against the theory of a post-war consensus.²² He says that the advocates for a post-war consensus agree that both Labour and the Conservatives respected each other's governmental records and they didn't try to reverse the other's achievements. Since the era was started in 1945 with Clement Attlee's Labour government, it had to be the Conservative Party which respected their left predecessor's achievements. Hence, a kind of left wing politics was carried out by both two parties after the 2nd World War. The policies which both two parties accepted were usually the followings according to Heppel;

- ❖ Full employment
- ❖ Public ownership
- ❖ Keynesian interventionist economic policy (demand stimulation)
- ❖ Corporative negotiations with trade unions
- ❖ National Healthcare System (NHS)
- ❖ Strongly support for North-Atlantic military alliance (NATO, nuclear weapon, British presence in West Germany)
- ❖ Withdrawal from the British Empire (India, Pakistan, Africa).²³

Heppel also collects arguments against the post-war consensus. These are less numerous, nevertheless, he says;

- ❖ There were plenty of issues which divided the two sides (private education, crime and punishment and relations with the European Economic Community.)
- ❖ The whole categorisation and interpretation of the post-war era was elaborated after *Margaret Thatcher's* neoconservative policies. Therefore, talking about a post-war consensus has been always somewhat *retrospective* which tried to understand historical events from the hindsight. Establishing the concept of a welfare consensus was often a neoliberal narrative which wanted to break with the past.²⁴

Eventually, putting together the two opposing arguments, it is fair to say that a post-war consensus *did exist*. The best evidence for this argument is *nationalisation* which had been begun by the Labour governments and maintained by the Conservatives. The Conservatives didn't try to privatise these public companies for decades. Change only happened when Margaret Thatcher came into power in 1979. So there was certain consensus after the World War II that public ownership can be beneficial for the country and it wasn't reversed by the Conservatives for quite a long time. In addition, the policies of full employment and of concerted actions with trade unions were also

²² Heppell, Timothy: *The Theory of Post-War Consensus*. Retrieved from <http://www.britpolitics.co.uk/academic-articles-all/-theory-post-war-consensus-dr-timothy-heppell-leeds-university>. 2015.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

shared by both sides. Thus the author argues that a post war consensus existed at least in economic terms. This consensus could not have happened without the Labour victory in 1945 which set the whole political scene for such a path dependency. One major aftermath of the 1945 general election is therefore the birth of a post-war consensus.

Two-party competition

The second impact after 1945 was the institutionalisation of *two-party competition*. This idea is supported by two indices: the low electoral volatility and the low ENEP/ENPP differences. First, there is the *electoral volatility*²⁵ which was record low during this period. As Figure 3 demonstrates, the electoral volatility started with a record high level in 1945 (13.73%) which suddenly dropped to 3.73% for the next election and kept remaining under 8.00% until the Feb 1974 general election when it jumped up again to a record high level (14.43%). It means that there was a one-off huge electoral realignment from 1935 to 1945 which manifested in a record high electoral volatility. However, the existing patterns of interaction which were established in 1945 remained for the next 7 general elections.

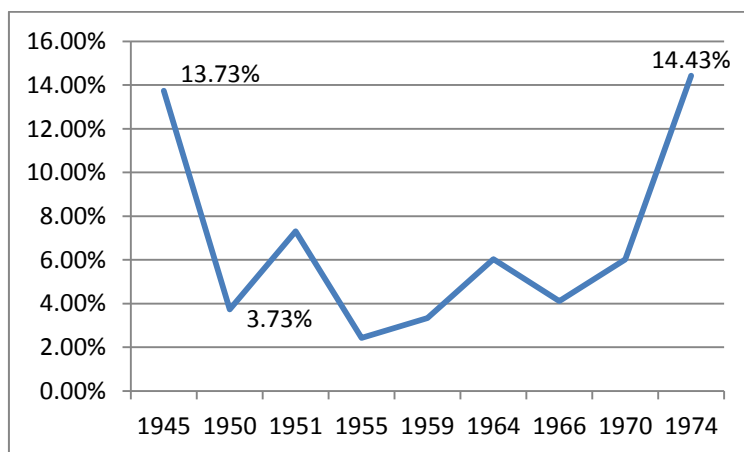


Figure 3 Electoral volatility (Pedersen Index) (1945 - Feb 1974)

Before 1945, there was a growing political demand for working-class representation; nevertheless, it didn't pair with a single political representation (a Labour party.) Instead, the working class was dispersed among three separate parties: Labour, the Liberals and the Conservatives.²⁶ So, before the 2nd world war, although the political demand was there for a working class representation, there wasn't a political supply for

²⁵ Electoral volatility is calculated by using the Pedersen Index. This formula measures the aggregate vote share differences of individual parties from one election to the next one divided by two.

²⁶ Cole, George Douglas Howard: *Short History of the British Working Class Movement: 1900-1937*. Psychology Press. 2001. Vol. 3.

it (a single party.) The record high electoral volatility hence meant that in 1945 these voters suddenly managed to find their party and changed loyalty in favour of the Labour. This loyalty for the Labour became so important that further volatility did not even happen in the following elections. So there was a one-off giant reorientation among the British electorate which focalized later. This brings further evidence for the fact that the labour class found their party in Labour in 1945. The low electoral volatility by contrast illustrates that class based politics started to dominate British politics.

Butler and Stokes give pivotal importance for the *parental political affiliation* in this process.²⁷ They argue that the children of working class families became Labour voters which favoured the Labour Party in the long term. I argue, there was not any general election between 1935 and 1945, so the manifestation of this additional support was shocking and fast in 1945. This is a bit similar to the 1918 universal suffrage when the Labour party advanced significantly. At that time, however, it was due to a constitutional change, whereas in 1945 it was rather due to social change. This long term historic trend is certainly one important element for the high electoral volatility in 1945.

The other element of this high electoral volatility was the relevant electoral switch from the Conservatives to Labour. As the author argued before Labour acted as a catch-all party in 1945. They successfully reached out to the whole society and to the non-working voters as well. In this sense, the record high volatility was caused by both class based politics (the inflow of working class votes) and issue politics (the inflow of non-working class people who favoured leftist campaign promises like free education or healthcare.) Later during the following elections, although much of the non-worker support flow back to the Conservatives, the working class support remained there. Therefore, the high electoral volatility in 1945 was not followed by other high electoral volatilities, and the stability of working class support balanced Labour's support. From 1950, a two-party/two-class competition was eventually institutionalised and only a small proportion of the electorate switched preferences (hence a record low electoral volatility).²⁸

After 1974, however, there was an opposing trend going on which ended the two party competition. In February 1974, there was again a record high electoral volatility (14.43%) similarly to 1945. This time however, it was a major shock to two-partyism because much of the electorate stopped supporting its class based parties. Instead, third parties gained significant support. The author argues that in 1974, in opposition to 1945, there was a *political supply* for the classes (Labour for the working class and the Conservatives for the middle class), however, the *political demand* started to shrink. This

²⁷ See Butler, David – Stokes, Donald: The Rise of the Class Alignment. In: *Political Change in Britain*. Springer. 1971. 111-134.

²⁸ Goldthorpe, John – Lockwood, David: Affluence and the British class structure. *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 11 (1963) No. 2, 133-163.

generated a demand for third parties and a collapse of two-party competition. So only the period between 1945 and 1974 served in its pure form the two-party competition. Before 1945, there was a *demand* without a *supply* whereas after 1974, there was a *supply* with a less powerful *demand*. The balance between *supply* and *demand* was only secured during the 1945-74 period.

The second index which supports the idea of two-party competition is the difference between ENEP and ENPP. In fact, the British electorate should have been satisfied with the political representation (the supply side) because the differences between ENEP and ENPP remained relatively low. Before and after the 1945-74 period, there was a much larger difference between ENEP and ENPP. (See Figure 4.) This was moreover the only time in modern British history when the party system was congruent with the party competition. The balance between ENEP and ENPP suggests that the two-party competition enjoyed quite strong legitimacy in the society.

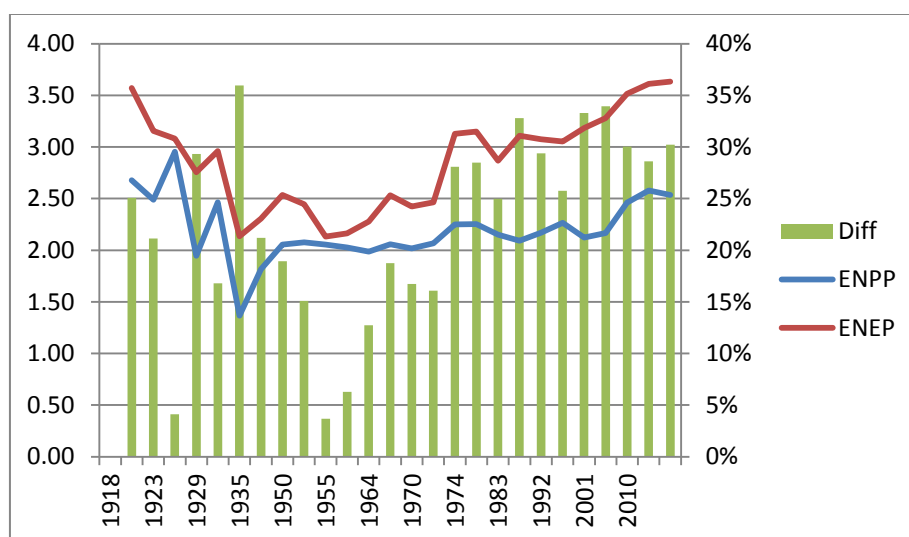


Figure 4 ENPP and ENEP difference (1918-2015)

To understand why the two-party competition enjoyed such a legitimacy during the 1945-74 period, the paper uses Paul Webb's explanation²⁹ who offers three factors: party identification, political socialization and majority electoral system. *Party identification* states that most people in the 1950s and 1960s felt aligned to a particular political party (be it the Conservatives or Labour.) The strength of this attachment was so important that it even overwrite individual voter preferences. To put it bluntly, voters thought what their parties wanted them to thought. The strong party identification was a major element of class politics. Second, as Webb continues, *political socialization* happened in families, neighbourhoods and workplaces. Due to the relatively limited social mobility, individuals stuck inside the same social group 'from the cradle to the grave.' Hence, it wasn't precisely

²⁹ Webb: *op. cit.* 44.

individuals who voted at general elections but instead families, friends, neighbours or workplaces. The individual preference which derived from personal experiences was only complementary but not primary. Third, as Webb argues, the political choices were refrained by the first-past-the-post *electoral system* because voters did not want to waste their votes for small parties. They only voted for the two major parties with a chance to win. This obviously imposed a high entry barrier for third parties. In sum, these three factors caused together the institutionalisation of two-party politics. The electoral competition during this time was very tight because always a couple of undecided (not aligned) voters switched preferences. Most of the electorate kept loyal to their parties and a marginal few voters decided the outcome.³⁰

In sum, the 1945-74 period can be characterised as a post-war consensus and two-party competition. This centripetal competition was based on class cleavage where only a handful of people decided the outcome of a given general election. However, the period enjoyed high legitimacy because no third parties appeared, electoral volatility was low, turnout was high and the party system was congruent with the party competition. This idealistic picture stopped in 1974.

Comparing 1945 with 1997

The paper found great many similarities between the 1945 and the 1997 two Labour landslide victories. Although there are certainly plenty of differences, I find it more interesting to focus on the similarities. In both cases, the landslide victories came from the weakness of the Conservative Party, the dominance of Labour on the left, the party's internal unity and their very promising campaign manifesto. Each of these four factors was needed in both cases to win with a landslide. These factors cannot be separated from each other. Instead, there is a significant synergy and reinforcing effect among them. For instance, the Conservatives' weakness suggests incompetence which is further enhanced by Labour's promising competence (at least based on the campaign manifestos.) Internal unity always meant that the Labour leadership cut back the hard left wing and hence proposed a moderate party profile. This was both the case in 1945 and in 1997. This party unity facilitated both showing a competence to the electorate and dealing with other rival parties on the left. In 1945, the main rivals were the Liberals and in 1997 the Liberal Democrats. In both cases, party unity secured the dominance of Labour on the left. Finally, since the party manifestos were very promising, the electorate could feel both in 1945 and in 1997 that they can change politics. These four factors pulled into the same direction at these two general elections. In the following Table 3, the author compares the 1945 and 1997 in more details.

³⁰ Ibid.

	1945	1997
Landslide victory	47.7% votes and 61.4% seats for Labour	43.2% votes and 63.43% seats for Labour
Tiring out of the Conservatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Conservative predominance between 1918 and 1945. ❖ Austerity, anxiety and social challenges ❖ Conservative incompetence (Neville Chamberlain and the appeasement) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 18 years of Conservatives governments ❖ Conflicting social transformation ("Thatcher's famous bag on the table") ❖ Conservative incompetence (Major's 1992 ERM crisis, the 'sleaze' inside the party, privatisation went too far (railways))
A very promising Labour appeal (issue politics)	Let Us Face the Future – 1945 manifesto <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Social services (NHS, education, in work benefit, full employment etc.) 	New Life For Britain – 1997 manifesto <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Social-democratic program ❖ Devolution
Classless appeal	National party (good wartime record, patriotic behaviour during the war despite of their international agenda - pragmatism)	Neoconservative consensus (withdrawal of clause IV, supporting globalisation and the financial services)
Need for change	Ultimately getting rid of the war Very positive Labour post-war issues	Getting rid of the 'nasty party' Very positive Blair image
Internal party unity (Defeating the popular movement – moving to elitism)	The popular front (radicals, idealists, revolutionaries) were taken over by the Leadership (pragmatists.) "Transport House" over "Theoretical Tom and Defeatist Dick and Half-Hearted Harry." ³¹	Abolishing block voting (trade union influence)
Left hegemony (Defeating other left parties)	The Liberals became 3rd party beside other smaller contestants (e.g. Common Wealth, Communist Party) who all were marginalised	Liberal Democrats lose ground, left nationalist parties (PC, SNP) were marginal

³¹ Labour's victory in 1945 seemed to confirm the strength and wisdom of its attitudes and to discredit dissenters. *Dalton* wasted little time in pointing out the sagacity of the Labour leadership and deriding its critics: "may I be allowed for a moment to recall that in the years gone by there were faint hearts in the Labour Party- Theoretical Tom and Defeatist Dick and Half-Hearted Harry-who doubted whether we could ever win through as an independent Party, fighting alone.... But the wisdom of Transport House prevailed over all this." See McCulloch: *op. cit.* 487-488.

Table 3 Comparing the 1945 and 1997 general elections

The big difference however lays in a superficial similarity. Both the post-1945 and the post-1997 period had centripetal dynamics. After 1945, the Conservatives and Labour had a consensus over *welfare economics* whereas after 1997, these parties had a consensus over the *neoliberal economics*. However, although the 1945-74 centripetal competition was very legitimate and supported by the electorate, the 1997-2010 period was less legitimate and lead to an anti-establishment sentiment. The 1945-74 period was legitimate because the turnout at general elections was high (70-85%), and party system was congruent with party competition. (ENEP-ENPP difference was very low.) Nevertheless, between 1997-2010, the turnout was record low (around 60%) and party system was increasingly incongruent with party competition. Therefore, the centripetal competition was supported by the electorate after the World War II, however, it was not after 1997. It was instead rather superficial.

The two centripetal competitions are different not only for the legitimacy behind them but also for their *content*. The 1945-74 period was a *class based* centripetal competition between two mass parties with aligned voters. Nevertheless, after 1997, there was an *issue based* centripetal competition between two catch-all parties. In the first case, it was a competition about class interests, whereas in the second case, it was a competition about individual preferences. The two different centripetal competitions were also very different in campaign techniques (personalisation, political marketing and media). Whilst this was not crucial during the 1945 election, it might have been pivotal during the 1997 election.

Conclusion

The 1945 general election created the most important path dependency in modern British politics; the Conservative-Labour two-party competition. As we have seen, neither before 1945, nor later in the 20th century, two-partyism was as strong as in the 1950s and 1960s. We still often think that British politics has been always about the dichotomy of the Conservatives and Labour. However, it wasn't true. It was just true for a short period between 1945 and 1974. But the mere fact that we have a feeling that British politics was always about two-partyism supports the idea that 1945 created a lasting path dependency at least in minds.

The reason for this very strong path dependency originates from the *institutionalisation* of the post-war party competition. It was the time when party competition and party system perfectly overlapped each other. Therefore, the party system managed to conserve the patterns of the 1945 party competition. Later, however, when gradual change started to happen in the party competition, the fossilized party system resisted. Any change should have been interpreted as a response to this point of departure. The high congruence of the post-1945 period generated high legitimacy and high institutionalisation.