

CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH PARTY POLITICS

THE 1974 GENERAL ELECTIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE WESTMINSTER PARTY SYSTEM

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The 'heydays of two-partyism' ended in February 1974. This was the second time after 1929 (and the first case after the World War II) that a hung parliament was formed because none of the two major parties had enough seats to have an absolute majority. This result was mainly due to the strikingly good performance of the Liberal Party (14 seats)¹ and other minor parties like the nationalists in Scotland and Wales (9 seats.) However, the most important contributor for the hung parliament came from the equally bad performance of the two major parties (301 for Labour and 297 for the Conservatives). Therefore, the February 1974 election was not about the success of third parties but rather about the failure of both two major parties.

The February 1974 election meant a dividing line in the evolution of British party politics after the World War II. Firstly, as it was mentioned in the previous paragraph, a hung parliament was formed without any clear winner party or absolute majority. In the earlier two-party competition, there was one of the two major parties which gained absolute majority. Now, in 1974, they did not get enough support. Secondly, it was also the starting point in British politics what we have been calling since the *de-alignment* of the electorate. The UK voters started to detach from those mass-parties (Labour and the Conservatives) which they had previously thought that represented their social background and interests. Instead, the February 1974 election was characterized by a record high electoral volatility and a sudden swing from traditional parties to smaller ones. Previously, both the electoral volatility and the swing were much lower, stable and predictable. After the last traditional general election in 1970, this kind of new dynamics in British politics meant a completely new phenomenon.

Thirdly, the February 1974 election introduced some quite new political concerns. First of all, because of the king-maker position of the Liberals, coalition negotiations started. This generated the appearance of the Liberals as the third national party. Also

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¹ 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. The author 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.



because of the good performance of the nationalist parties (Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru), the question of regional autonomy and devolution appeared on the political agenda. And in the long term, election campaigns became more dominated by issues and valence politics rather than by traditional class affiliation. Altogether, it is fair to say that the first major step towards the pluralisation of British politics started in 1974.

Data

The special interest for the February 1974 election derives from its shocking difference from any other election. In 1970, during the closest previous general election, the results provided the best example for Westminster democracy. It can be easily say that all of *Lijphart's* criteria for a Westminster democracy¹ were fulfilled: the two major parties obtained together 89.4% of the votes and third parties were marginal (only 10.6%), the difference between the two parties was tight (46.4% for the Conservatives and 43% for Labour), and the first-past-the-post electoral system provided a strong majority and a single government (the Tories got 330 seats while only 316 seats were needed for the absolute majority). So the 1970 general election repeated the patterns of the previous 7 general elections after 1945.

Nevertheless, the February 1974 election provided almost a diametrically different outcome than the 1970 election. First, the two party vote share fell down to 75% from the previous 89.4%. Second, the winner party did not have enough seats for a single government (the Conservatives had only 297 seats whereas 318 were needed for an absolute majority). Only the third aspect, the tight race between the two major parties was accomplished (37.8% for the Conservatives and 37.2% for the Labour.) Therefore, in a Lijphartian sense, the two-party dominated Westminster system wrecked seriously at the February 1974 general election.

So 1974 meant a sudden and complete change in the patterns of UK party competition. Though de-alignment and the erosion of the two parties had already showed some signs (the Liberals had an upsurge since 1972 at by-elections, the SNP had better and better local election results in Scotland since 1968 and there was also an increase in the number of contestants during general elections in the whole UK,² it was unlikely that something completely strange would appear in British politics.

If we compare the February 1974 election with the previous 1970 election by using fragmentation indices³ and party system categorisation, it is obvious to see how much

¹ Lijphart, Arend: *Patterns of Democracy*. Yale University Press, 2012.

² Denver, David – Garnett, Mark: *British General Elections Since 1964: Diversity, Dealignment, and Disillusion*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2014.

³ ENEP and ENPP are party system fragmentation indices. They refer to how fragmented a

change has happened. In 1970, ENEP (party competition) was 2.46 and ENPP (party system)⁴ was 2.07 which resulted a two-and-a-half party competition and a two-party system. There was a very low volatility⁵ of votes following the 1966 election (just 6.02%) and the disproportional effect of the electoral system was also marginal (only 6.59 LSq which is quite healthy since every electoral system has some disproportional effect.) Nevertheless, in February 1974, all these indices showed a significant change: ENEP rose to 3.13 (to a moderate or limited multi-party system) while ENPP continued to remain 2.25 (a two-and-a half or a two-party system); disproportion jumped to 15.47 LSq (almost tripled) and volatility had a record high 14.43% level. These results together demonstrate one key fact: it was the first post-war election when the UK party competition and the Westminster party system significantly separated from each other. Both ENEP, the volatility and the disproportion indices attest that the traditional two-party system ceased to represent general UK voter preferences (at least for the time being).

Causes

The causes of the 1974 political crisis can be divided into two groups: i) there are those which were related to the political performance of major parties, and ii) there are those which happened independently from the decisions of the political actors.

Actor-related Causes

- ❖ Economic incompetence and post-war consensus: as it was mentioned earlier, the 1945-74 period was characterised by a two-party competition and a two-party system. The congruence between party competition and party system was assured by class politics; two parties represented two classes. Moreover, there was a consensus among the two major parties about the beneficial effects of welfare

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: *Prof. Michael Gallagher's* website at Trinity College Dublin. Available at https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/ElSystems/Docts/effno.php.

⁴ The author considers the UK *party system* as the party system inside Westminster and the House of Commons. However, talking 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, 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.

⁵ 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.

economics. This consensus was called post-war consensus. The two factors together (congruence and consensus) generated a centripetal competition in which both parties wanted to deliver pretty much the same goals with only one difference; how to do it.

- ❖ From the early 1970s, however, welfare economics became a burden on the two major parties. The economic turmoil of the 1970s could not have been resolved by traditional Keynesian economic measures. Since the post-war consensus meant a path dependency for both Labour and the Conservatives, one could have experienced that neither parties could have found solutions to the growing economic concerns like high inflation, falling productivity, high unemployment and trade union strikes. Labour was considered to be politically incompetent because they could not deliver their economic promises about full employment, wage stability and stable relations with trade unions. The Conservatives, on the other hand, were considered to be politically incompetent because they couldn't tear with the 'socialist' post-war consensus.⁶ In this context, there was a growing perception in the electorate that the two traditional parties could not handle the ongoing economic problems. There were regular disruptions in the sectors of electricity, docks, railway and coal mines because of trade union strikes. It aggravated the everyday life for many.⁷
- ❖ The incompetence of the two major parties caused a general disillusionment among the British electorate. This feeling contributed to an already existing phenomenon which was called de-alignment. De-alignment meant that class relations between voters and their respective parties became less strong over time. De-alignment and incompetence together caused the record high electoral volatility in February 1974. De-alignment made possible that voters listen to their individual preferences rather than their party affiliation. Incompetence catalysed this process. A large segment of the electorate hence was looking for a third party (an alternative for both Labour and the Conservatives.)
- ❖ Obviously, the only party which could have been appear as a third party were the Liberals. They had contestants at almost all UK constituencies and they had a history. Nevertheless, in Scotland and Wales the nationalist parties also managed to appear as a potential third party. For them, the incompetence of the British governments was also interpreted as the incompetence of the central government. They argued that much of the economic difficulties are caused by the wrong economic policies in London. (This was partly true because the welfare state was rather centralised and most of the services and economic planning was carried out nationally and not regionally.) The Liberal Party hence appeared as the third party

⁶ Ball, Stuart – Seldon, Anthony: *The Heath Government 1970-74: A Reappraisal*. Taylor & Francis. 2014.

⁷ Denver-Garnett: *op. cit.* 47.

on the national scene while SNP and PC did so on the regional level.

- ❖ Immigration policy and Enoch Powell: the political incompetence wasn't only fuelled by the economic concerns. From the 1960s, immigration to Britain rose rapidly. Enoch Powell, a Conservative politician called attention to the negative consequences of immigration in a speech in 1968.⁸ In his 'Rivers of Blood' speech he warned that the cultural homogeneity of the country was at stake with the ongoing immigration pace. His remarks were unanimously rejected by both Labour and the Conservative Party, however, a large part of the electorate agreed with him according to the opinion polls.⁹ Hence, Enoch Powell challenged the post-war consensus over immigration, too. The oil crisis questioned the welfare consensus while Enoch Powell challenged the immigration consensus. The centripetal two-party competition was challenged both economically and politically.
- ❖ Ulster crisis: in Northern Ireland, following the 1968 student movement, the Irish minority started to demand civic liberty and more freedom. In 1972, during one of such protest in Londonderry, the UK authorities killed 13 protesters on Bloody Sunday. As a reaction, the IRA conducted military operations from 1972. Prior to the 1974 elections, the Ulster Unionist Party broke its traditional alliance with the Conservative Party. There was a feeling that UK governments lost control over the Ulster crisis, too.

Non-actor Related Causes

- ❖ There are some other causes which happened independently from the incumbent governments. These are mainly international developments but there are some domestic events as well.¹⁰
- ❖ The 1973 Oil crisis: it had a major impact on Britain. Although it touched every Western countries, Britain was particularly negatively affected by high inflation, heavy industry decline and trade union unrest. For Britain, the 1973 oil crisis intensified the already existing economic decline since the 1960s. The post-war 'economic miracles of Europe' (West Germany and France) suffered much less than Britain after the 1973 oil crisis. The British economy hence ultimately became

⁸ Telegraph: Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>.

⁹ Taylor, Adam: In 1968, a British politician warned immigration would lead to violence. Now some say he was right. *The Washington Post Online*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/24/in-1968-a-british-politician-warned-immigration-would-lead-to-violence-now-some-say-he-was-right/?utm_term=.563a26f5b2a3.

¹⁰ Denver-Garnett: *op. cit.* 46-52.

the 'sick man of Europe.'¹¹ The economic incompetence of successive UK governments was partly caused by this external (and structural) cause, too.

- ❖ Centralised welfare state: the other given that any post-war British government inherited was the highly centralised UK state. In fact, the welfare consensus created a need for central planning and regulations. This centralisation was indifferent to any regional differences (like in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland or London.) The unanimous welfare service state blocked any UK governments to initiate regional differentiation. Hence, the central governments inherited a kind of bureaucratic rigidity and unresponsiveness.
- ❖ EEC membership: the UK joined the European Economic Community in 1973 (in the same year of the oil crisis). The country became part of the customs union which limited their trade relations with third countries. It had particularly negative consequences for the trade links with other Commonwealth countries. (e.g. New Zealand and the dairy industry.) However, it was difficult to disseminate the negative consequences of the EEC membership from that of the parallel oil crisis. Therefore, the EEC membership as a constraint for the British economy was often confused with the wider economic world trends (e.g. the decline of heavy industry.)
- ❖ Scottish oil discovery: in 1970, British Petroleum found large oil fields in the North Sea at the Scottish shores.¹² After 1973, the North Sea oil became very competitive because of the soaring oil prices. This fuelled the need for Scottish regional self-governance.
- ❖ Constituency boundary change: in 1974, the review of constituency boundaries created 5 additional MP seats in Westminster (from 630 to 635.) This could have an important effect in a tight race (as it happened in February and October 1974. The Labour government had only a 3 MP seat majority after the October 1974 election.)

In sum, the February 1974 political crisis was caused both by the incompetence of the two major parties and by other external factors. The 1973 oil crisis certainly contributed to the incompetence of the two parties. However, the economic difficulties showed already their signs from the 1960s much before the oil crisis. The most important reason behind this incompetence was the post-war consensus over welfare economics. This centripetal party competition was accompanied with other unresponsiveness about regional differences (Scotland and Wales) and about immigration. As a result, voters looked for alternatives for the main two parties.

¹¹ Kavanagh, Dennis: Thatcherism and the End of the Post-War Consensus. BBC online.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/modern/thatcherism_01.shtml.

¹² BBC: Large Oil Field Found in North Sea.
http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/october/19/newsid_3769000/3769639.stm.

Aftermath

Short Term Impact – Instability (1974-79)

The February 1974 election resulted the shortest parliamentary cycle in modern British history; only 224 days.¹³ It was obviously very likely that the minority Labour government can't fulfil the whole parliamentary cycle. So the minority Labour government kept looking at opinion polls and chose October 1974 to hold another general election to get an absolute majority. Eventually, they managed to get a wafer thin majority (with only 3 MPs) at the October 1974 election: Labour increased its support from 37.2% to 39.3%, the Conservatives declined from 37.8% to 35.7% and the Liberals also declined from 19.3% to 18.3%. This meant 18 additional MPs for Labour (from 301 to 319), 20 less MPs for the Conservatives (from 297 to 277) and 1 MP loss for the Liberals (from 14 to 13). However, the overall result was pretty much the same as in February 1974.¹⁴

Political instability became part of British politics after the October 1974 election. The 3 MPs seat majority soon evaporated because of by-election losses and defections. From 1976, the Labour government became hence a minority government again.¹⁵ They could have only fulfilled their mandate with the external support of third parties in the House of Commons. The Liberals signed a pact with them in 1976 which secured external support for Labour without a coalition agreement. This was occasionally complemented by the support of other (mainly SNP) MPs. However, the 1976-79 period seemed to be a return to the February 1974 election which generated a minority Labour government with coalition talks and instability.

Long Term Impact – Pluralisation

The interpretation of the 1974 political crisis became problematic after 1979. In 1979, the Conservative Party won a stable majority and they started a 18 year-long predominant cycle. The 1979-97 period was characterised by a gradual return to two-party politics (declining ENPP in Westminster) and a polarised centrifugal competition

¹³ Butler, David – Kavanagh, Dennis: *British General Election of October, 1974*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. 1975. 330-356.

¹⁴ There was a very small constituency swing in comparison with the February 1974 election. Only 28 seats (out of 635) changed their party affiliation. The turnout in October 1974 (72.8%) was 6% under the February 1974 results (78.8%). In opposition with the Liberals, the nationalist parties could maintain and increase their support. Particularly, SNP increased from 21.9% to 30.4% in Scotland. PC, despite of their identical vote share to their February 1974 electoral result, could not send any MPs to Westminster. See Butler-Kavanagh: *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Bell, Patrick: *The Labour Party in Opposition, 1970-1974*. Routledge. 2004.

between the two major parties.¹⁶ From this perspective, the 1974 crisis and its immediate aftermath until 1979 proved to be rather *temporary*. In 1992, for instance, one could have evaluated that Britain usually had two-party politics (between 1945-74 and 1979-92) and the short instability after 1974 was only minor irregularity. Nevertheless, this paper argues that the pluralisation process never stopped after 1974. It might have become less apparent and more covered; however, it did not completely disappear. The author hereby lists the following arguments to prove that a long term pluralisation has been indeed going on since 1974.

i) Birth of the 'two-and-a-half' party system. The Liberal Party can certainly date its second come-back to British politics (the first one was in the early 20th century) from the 1974 general elections.¹⁷ Moreover, the successful electoral performance was not just a temporary upsurge. They kept their electoral support always over 15% vote share since February 1974. As Table 1 confirms, there is a significant difference between the Liberal vote share from 1945 to 1970 (with a mean 7.06%) and the 1974-2010 interval (with a mean 19.73%). So the Liberals suddenly became the half party in a two-and-a-half party system after 1974 and they managed to keep this position. (They only lose this influence in 2015 when they experienced a catastrophic electoral defeat.) The importance of the Liberal Party hence determined British politics for the next 31 years.¹⁸ They had an impact on both the Westminster party system (MP seats) and the UK party competition (electoral votes). In the first case, they sometimes became king-makers in the House of Commons (like in 1976 and in 2010) and in the second case, they stole votes from the major parties at the constituency level hence indirectly manipulating the rivalry of the two major parties. The sudden rise of the Liberals in 1974 and their later electoral stability shows some similarity with the electoral success of the Labour Party in 1945. Nevertheless, while in 1945, Labour's success was due to a process of electoral alignment (the working class found the Labour Party), in 1974 and later, the Liberal success was fuelled by the opposing trend: de-alignment and protest voting against the two major parties. Therefore, the Liberal's rise and stability has become the symptom of a long term trend in British politics. I argue that one of the most important evidence for the pluralisation of UK party competition is the continuous electoral success of the Liberal Party.

¹⁶ Heath, Anthony: *Understanding Political Change: the British Voter, 1964-1987*. Pergamon Press, 1991., Jackson, Ben – Saunders, Roberts: *Making Thatcher's Britain*. Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁷ Lemieux, Peter: Political Issues and Liberal Support in the February 1974, British General Election. *Political Studies*, Vol. 25 (1977) No. 3, 323-342., McCallum, Ronald Buchanan: *The British General Elections 1945-92: The British General Election of October 1974*, Macmillan. 1999.

¹⁸ Russell, Andrew et al.: The Anatomy of Liberal Support in Britain, 1974–1997. *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, Vol. 4 (2002) No. 1, 49-74.

| | | VOTE SHARE % | SEATS | SEAT SHARE % |
|------|-----|--------------|-------|--------------|
| 1945 | | 9.0% | 12 | 1.88% |
| 1950 | | 9.1% | 9 | 1.44% |
| 1951 | | 2.6% | 6 | 0.96% |
| 1955 | | 2.7% | 6 | 0.95% |
| 1959 | | 5.9% | 6 | 0.95% |
| 1964 | | 11.2% | 9 | 1.43% |
| 1966 | | 8.5% | 12 | 1.90% |
| 1970 | | 7.5% | 6 | 0.95% |
| 1974 | Feb | 19.3% | 14 | 2.20% |
| 1974 | Oct | 18.3% | 13 | 2.05% |
| 1979 | | 13.8% | 11 | 1.73% |
| 1983 | | 25.4% | 23 | 3.54% |
| 1987 | | 22.6% | 22 | 3.38% |
| 1992 | | 17.8% | 20 | 3.07% |
| 1997 | | 16.8% | 46 | 6.98% |
| 2001 | | 18.3% | 52 | 7.89% |
| 2005 | | 22.0% | 62 | 9.60% |
| 2010 | | 23.0% | 57 | 8.77% |
| 2015 | | 7.9% | 8 | 1.23% |

Table 1 The Liberal party's results at general elections (1945-2015)

ii) *Disproportional general elections.* The rise of the Liberal Party as the third party had an additional effect on British politics. The February 1974 election demonstrated how disproportional the first-past-the-post electoral system was for the third party. Although the Liberals got 19.3% vote share in February 1974 and 18.3% vote share in October 1974, this was only enough for 14 and 13 MP seats respectively (out of 635). So the 19.3% vote share worth 2.2% seat share in February 1974 and the 18.3% vote share worth 2.1% seat share in October 1974. This underrepresentation has also become a long term pattern of British politics. The Liberals, as the third party at general elections, had always disproportional representations in the House of Commons. This generated a further political debate about the undemocratic nature of the FPTP electoral system. It is hence not surprising that the Liberals have been keeping electoral system change on the agenda.

iii) *Nationalist parties and devolution.* Beside the Liberal Party, the other important contributors to the pluralisation of British politics were nationalist parties. The Scottish National Party had a breakthrough both at the February and October 1974 general elections. They got 21.9% and 30.4% vote share in Scotland. Plaid Cymru also did well in Wales with their 10.8% vote share at both two elections. However, in opposition to the Liberal Party, the nationalist parties could not keep their electoral support and influence in the 1980s. The SNP only got 17.3% in 1979, 11.8% in 1983 and 14.0% in 1987. The next time when they achieved a similar result to their 1974 performance occurred in 1992 with 21.5% vote share in Scotland. After 1992, they stabilised their

electoral vote share around 20% (ie. 1997 (22.1%), 2001 (20.1%), 2005 (17.7%), 2010 (19.9%).) In 2015, however, they experienced a landslide victory in Scotland with 50% vote share.

The reasons for SNP's *rise* and decline are ambiguous. *Newman* says that the reasons for SNP's rise prior to the 1974 elections are threesome: (1) it was a combination of wider general de-alignment from the two major parties, (2) a lack of appropriate answers to growing economic problems in Scotland and (3) the SNP's cross-class political appeal as an ethnoregional party.¹⁹ The economic problems of the 1960s and 1970s had particularly hit Scotland for the centralised welfare state. Therefore, the British economic failure was interpreted as an English failure which undermined the Scottish prosperity. In addition, major oil fields were found in the North Sea in 1970.

The causes for SNP's *decline* are threesome, too: (1) the failure of the 1979 Scottish referendum on devolution, (2) internal party disunity and (3) the SNP's ideological move to the Left. The failure of the referendum caused the evanescence of the independence issue which was the central message for SNP.²⁰ The party in the House of Commons and after the failed referendum experienced major splits which undermined party unity. And finally, the internal divisions ended up by the strengthening of the left wing inside the party. This move to the left automatically lose the ideologically right voters.

The Welsh Plaid Cymru (PC) experienced similar rise and decline in the 1970s and 1980s like the SNP. However, PC's rise started one election before already in 1970. They got 11.5% vote share in 1970, 10.7% in February 1974, 10.8% in October 1974. They turned to PC which provided 'decentralist socialism.' In opposition to the SNP's cross-cleavage appeal, PC had a leftist ideology which limited their electoral appeal to only de-aligned Labour voters. Hence they never managed to gain so much vote share like SNP did. In the 1980s and 90s, PC fell back to 7-8%. For both SNP and PC, the sudden rise in popularity was caused by de-alignment from major parties and a perceived incompetence locally. In response to this sudden rise and Labour's decline in these regions, *Wilson's* Labour government put devolution on the agenda. However, the failed two referenda in Scotland and Wales lead to a contra-productive effect: the issue of devolution disappeared and nationalist parties lose ground. Devolution remained a marginal issue until the 1990s.

The author still considers that the 1974 election had long term effects on nationalist parties and devolution. Although, devolution was taken off the agenda for a while, the nationalist parties never declined under their 1966 electoral result. (Figure 1.) In the 1980s, perhaps the nationalist parties did not do so well like in 1974, nevertheless, they never collapsed. The SNP's worst electoral performance was in 1983 (11.8%) and the

¹⁹ Newman, Saul: The Rise and Decline of the Scottish National Party: Ethnic Politics in a Post-industrial Environment. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 15 (1992) No. 1, 1-35.

²⁰ See, Newman: *op. cit.*

PC's occurred in 1987 (7.3%). Nevertheless these results were still much higher than their previous post-war electoral support. Between 1945 and 1970, SNP had a mean 2.76% vote share and between 1945 and 1966, PC had a mean 2.91%. This mean value was 19.66% for SNP between February 1974 and 2010 and 10.16% for PC during the same time. So the pluralisation process kept going on regionally even if the 1980s meant a temporary setback.

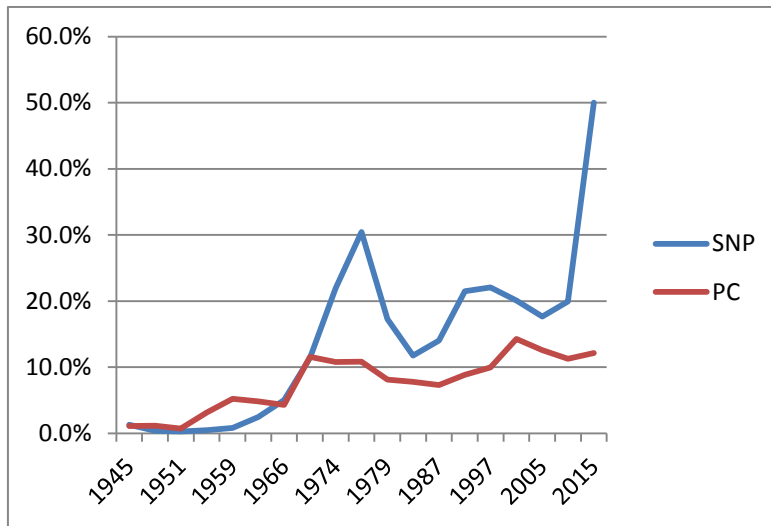


Figure 1 SNP vote share in Scotland and PC vote share in Wales (1945-2015)

iv) EP elections. Since 1979, the UK has been holding EP elections every five years. Between 1979 and 1994, these elections were held under FPTP electoral system while after 1999 the PR party list system was introduced. Obviously, the 1999 PR electoral system change had important consequences for the pluralisation of party politics in the UK. However, the 1979 FPTP electoral system also had some pluralising effects. Apart from the two major parties, the Lib Dems and the Greens did well at EP election between 1979 and 1994. The Lib Dems usually performed worse at EP elections than at general elections with the same FPTP system. The Green Party, however, could successfully use the EP election in 1989 to make a breakthrough: they got 15% at the 1989 EP election. Since then, the Greens never have been so successful at any elections. The EP elections confirmed the already ongoing national trend (the two-and-a-half party politics).

| | 1979 | 1984 | 1989 | 1994 | 1999 |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Conservative</i> | 51% | 41% | 35% | 28% | 36% |
| <i>Labour</i> | 33% | 37% | 40% | 44% | 28% |
| <i>Liberal Democrat</i> | 13% | 19% | 6% | 17% | 13% |
| <i>UKIP</i> | | | | 1% | 7% |
| <i>Scottish National</i> | 2% | 2% | 3% | 3% | 2% |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|----|-----|----|----|
| <i>Plaid Cymru</i> | 1% | 1% | 1% | 1% | 3% |
| <i>Green</i> | 0% | 1% | 15% | 3% | 6% |
| <i>BNP</i> | | | | | 1% |
| <i>Other</i> | 1% | 0% | 1% | 3% | 5% |

Table 2 Vote share in Great Britain (without Northern Ireland) at EP elections (1979-1999)

v) *Referenda*. The UK held the first nationwide referendum in 1975 about the EEC membership.²¹ This referendum was followed later by other regional ones in Scotland and Wales in 1979. Since then, there have been two other national ones (in 2011 about AV vote and in 2016 about EU membership) and several others regional ones (in 1997 about Scottish and Welsh devolution, in 1998 about devolution in London and in Northern Ireland, in 2014 about Scottish independence). Moreover, there have been 58 additional mayoral referenda at local councils in England between 2001 and May 2016. So, it is fair to say that the first referendum in 1975 was followed by the *proliferation* of referenda in the following decades.²² Given the fact that referendum brings political decision outside Westminster, it further enhanced the gap between party system and party competition. In this sense, referenda indirectly affected the pluralisation of British politics by turning attention to extra-parliamentary politics (party competition.) Therefore, the author argues, referenda since 1974 have had effect on the pluralisation process, too.

vi) *Issue politics, polarisation and electoral instability*. The 1974 elections had major consequences for the long term patterns of British party competition. As argued before, the 1945-74 period was characterised by class politics and strong party identification. This period suddenly changed in 1974 with a record high electoral volatility. Although in 1979, there was a superficial return to traditional two party politics, the old class politics and post-war consensus never came back again.²³

Instead of cleavage politics, there has been a trend towards *issue politics* since 1974. It means that social interests are less important than individual voter preferences. Moreover, this issue politics coincided with growing differences between Labour and Conservative manifestos.²⁴

²¹ Baimbridge, Mark: *The 1975 Referendum on Europe – Volume 1: Reflections of the Participants*. Imprint Academic. 2016., Baimbridge, Mark et al.: *The 1975 Referendum on Europe – Volume 2: Current Analysis and Lessons for the Future*. Imprint Academic. 2016., Butler, David – Kitinger, Uwe: *The 1975 Referendum*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

²² Putschli, Bernadett: *The Referendum in British Politics: Experiences and Controversies Since the 1970s*. Omniscryptum GmbH & Company Kg., 2007.

²³ Evans, Geoffrey – Tilley, James: How Parties Shape Class Politics: Explaining the Decline of the Class Basis of Party Support. *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42 (2012) No. 1, 137-161.

²⁴ Kavanagh, Dennis: *Thatcherism and British Politics: the End of Consensus?* Oxford University Press, USA. 1990.

Labour wanted to reform the welfare state in its current form while *Margaret Thatcher* wanted to break down the post-war consensus. Hence, the policy distance between Labour and the Conservatives became serious after 1979. This phenomenon meant the polarisation of British politics. (Figure 2.) This centrifugal competition lasted until the end of the 1980s when Labour gradually gave up its strong links with trade unions. After 1992, the rivalry between the Conservatives and Labour became, however, centripetal because *Tony Blair* accepted much of Margaret Thatcher's neoliberal economic measures. Hence, the polarisation of the 1980s was followed by a consensus of free market and neo-liberalism after 1997. In the long term, hence, the 1974 general elections caused a centrifugal competition and it only became centripetal in the late 1990s. However, this centripetal competition was very different from the post-war consensus of welfare politics: it was the opposite consensus with neo-liberal economic politics.

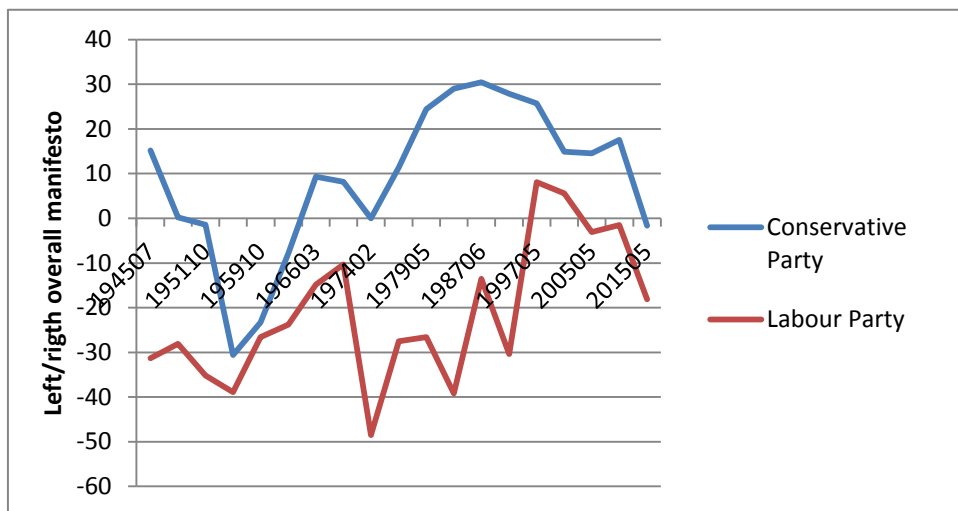


Figure 2 Left/Right manifesto positions at UK general elections (CMP data)²⁵

Dealignment which meant a change from cleavage politics to issue politics was accompanied by electoral instability.²⁶ After 1974, the overall level of UK electoral volatility raised from the post-war 4.71% to 8.02% between 1974 and 2015. The biggest difference, however, was not in the degree of mean volatility but its sudden unpredictable changes. After 1974, it was common that high electoral volatility was followed by very low levels and later by very high levels again. (Figure 3.). So, electoral instability has become also part of British politics since 1974.

²⁵ CMP (Comparative Manifesto Project) is an online project aiming to code and compare individual party electoral manifestos over time and countries.

<https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/>.

²⁶ Lemieux: *op. cit.* 323-342.

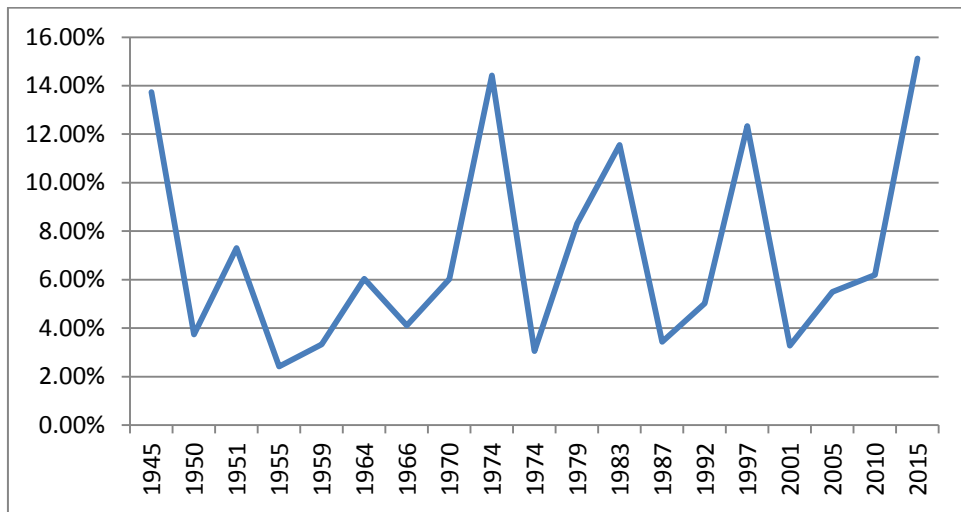


Figure 3 Electoral volatility in the UK at general elections

The incongruence between party system and party competition has kept growing since 1974. When Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 with a stable majority, it seemed there was a return to classic two-party politics. Between 1979 and 1992, ENEP certainly showed temporary decline. In 1979, it dropped significantly from 3.15 (October 1974) to 2.87. In 1983, there was a rise because of the splits inside the Labour Party (the Social Democrats left the party), nevertheless, during 1987 and 1992, ENEP continued declining. (Figure 4.) It could have been truly interpreted that the pluralisation process was reversed. However, in 1997, ENEP grew again and has kept doing so [3.22 (1997), (3.33 (2001), 3.59 (2005), 3.71 (2010), 3.93 (2015)]. So from today's perspective, the 1979-92 period can be indeed seen as a temporary return to two-party politics. In the long term, pluralisation was confirmed.

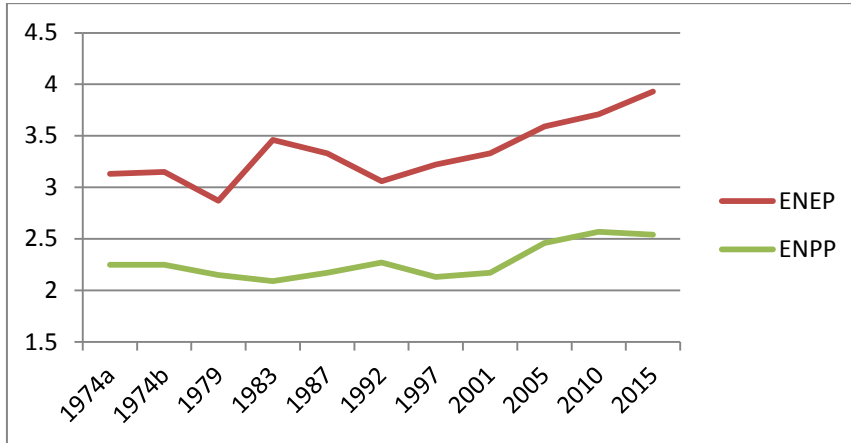


Figure 4 ENEP and ENPP in the UK (1974 February – 2015)

Comparing 1974 with 2010

In 2010, similarly to 1974, a hung parliament was elected because none of the two major parties had an absolute majority. The Conservatives had 306 seats and Labour had 258 out of the total 650. The 326 seats for an absolute majority could have been secured only if the winner Conservative Party either formed a coalition government with the Lib Dems (by obtaining their 57 extra seats) or they could rely on the Lib Dem support from outside without any formal coalition agreement (similarly to the 1976-78 Lib Lab pact.) This time, however, the *David Cameron*-led Conservative Party chose the formal coalition agreement which provided the first coalition government since 1929.

The Lib Dems therefore had a king-maker position in 2010 like in 1974. The coalition negotiations in 2010 were also similar to the 1974 negotiations: one of the key liberal demands was *electoral reform*. This demand was later fulfilled by holding a referendum in 2011 on AV vote.

The question of devolution also appeared on the political agenda. In 2014, the SNP hold a referendum on independence. And the question of EU membership also became part of the political debate because David Cameron announced an in-out referendum in 2013 if he were re-elected in 2015.²⁷ In 1974, the Labour Party similarly committed itself to hold a referendum about the EEC membership in 1975.

Enoch Powell's maverick personality was repeated by *Nigel Farage* who also campaigned against mass-immigration (from the EU and not from the Commonwealth countries as it was the case for Powell). Farage could play an important role in 'stealing

²⁷ Copsy, Nathaniel – Houghton, Tim: Farewell Britannia? 'Issue Capture' and the Politics of David Cameron's 2013 EU Referendum Pledge. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 52 (2014) No. 1, 74-89.

votes' from the Conservatives since his UKIP party got 3.1% vote share. Similarly, Powell also stole votes in his marginal constituency.

| | 1974– | 2010– |
|--|---|--|
| <i>Liberals' king-making position</i> | Coalition talks with the Conservatives and later Lib Lab pact | Coalition agreement with the Lib Dems |
| <i>Penetration of the EU topic into domestic affairs</i> | 1975 EEC referendum From 1979 EP elections | 2016 EU referendum 2014 EP victory by UKIP |
| <i>Introducing the immigration issue into British politics</i> | Enoch Powell | Nigel Farage |
| <i>The proliferation of referenda</i> | 1975 (EEC), 1979 (Scotland), 1979 (Wales) | 2011 (AV), 2014 (Scotland), 2016 (EU) |
| <i>Demands for an electoral reform</i> | PR EP elections and SV general elections | AV general election, elected House of Lords |
| <i>Liberal retreat</i> | In 1979 (13.8% after previous 18.3%) | In 2015 (7.9% after previous 23.0%) |

Table 3 Comparing the 1974 and 2010 general elections

Conclusion

As the 1945 general election, the February 1974 election proved to be a critical juncture in the evolution of British politics. Whereas the 1945 election was a critical juncture which established a long term path dependency of two-party politics, the 1974 election created a path dependency of pluralisation. It is not controversial that the legacy of the 1945 election could co-exist with the opposing trend of the 1974 elections. The author argues that the two parallel and opposing path dependencies generated a growing incongruence between party system and party competition.

The first-past-the-post majority electoral system favoured large parties for keeping their parliamentary dominance while electoral vote shares showed an increasing popularity for third parties. The incongruence between parliamentary seat share and electoral vote share did not become a major concern for a while. However, the growing incongruence eventually led to electoral complaints about fair representation, democratic deficit and electoral system reform. This phenomenon became particularly relevant after 2010 when a chain of anomalies happened in British politics (the 2010 coalition government, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the 2014 UKIP EP victory, the 2016 so-called Brexit Referendum or the 2017 snap election.) These anomalies can be seen as the fulfilment of the high incongruence between party system and party competition. Therefore the 1974 elections introduced a long term phenomenon (called pluralisation) which undermined traditional two-party politics started in 1945.