

CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN THE EVOLUTION OF BRITISH PARTY POLITICS

THE 1997 GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WESTMINSTER PARTY SYSTEM

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Importance

The 1997 election was the last general election before devolution. The newly elected Labour Party soon started to deliver its political promise to devolve certain political powers to regional and local levels. This process culminated in the referenda and then the elections of the regional assemblies for Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and for London, too. So the 1997 election was the last general election without a multi-level political framework. After 1997, the UK general elections have been accompanied with other regional (Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and London) elections. Moreover, at EP elections since 1999, there has been PR electoral system instead of the previous majority system. So, in addition to the mixed regional electoral systems, the EP elections introduced a purely PR electoral system. Hence, the first-past-the-post general elections became only one type of election system beside many others in a multi-level polity.

The 1997 election was also a historic moment for Labour which gained a landslide victory. (Seyd, 1999; White & Chernatony, 2002) This result followed no less than 18 years of Conservative dominance. (Egedy, 1998) So, the pendulum swang from one extremity to the other. As later turned out to happen, Labour dominated the following decade until 2010. So the 1997 election was the starting point of a second predominant period like the 1979–97 Conservative period. This predominance was particularly shocking in 1997 when Labour received 63.43% of the total seats (almost two third majority – never seen before.)¹ This landslide victory also meant a record high electoral volatility: the 12.33% vote share change could have been compared only to the Feb 1974 election when it reached 14.43%. Just to make a reference, the mean electoral

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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. I used the .xls version for my own calculations. I 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.



volatility between 1945 and 1992 was only 6.06%, and it was 6.26% between Oct 1974 and 1992, too. So the 1997 election was a clear end of class politics and voting by class affiliation. By contrast, this was a competition where two catch-all parties ran for the median voter and tried to reach as many electors as they could.

The third importance of the 1997 election was the beginning of the neo-liberal economic consensus on the one hand, and the liberal value consensus on the other hand. (Heffernan, 2000; Jessop, 2003; Powell, 2000) Hence, the previously polarised UK party competition became the rivalry of two almost identical catch-all parties. The Labour under New Labour and the Conservatives under Big Society were almost the same in economic and social policies. (Jessop, 2015) This convergence and similarity was a perfect example for the Downsian theory of median voter competition. (Downs, 1957) Nevertheless, this (neo)-liberal consensus 'left behind' major parts of the society. In 2010, I argue, these left behind people re-acted to this two-party convergence when a hung parliament was formed. Nevertheless, the neo-liberal legacy of the 1997 election has been still dominating British politics. So the 1997 election meant an end for the polarisation of British politics and introduced instead, a period of two-party convergence.

Data

The 1997 election was about two opposing trends. On the one hand, because of the landslide victory of Labour, it was a major swing from the Right to the Left. The previous 18 years of Conservative dominance finished and a new Labour dominance started instead. So it was an evidence and justification about the survival and vitality of two-party politics. Eventually, British politics were about either Labour or the Conservatives. On the other hand, however, this landslide victory wasn't similar to any previous Tory victories in the 1980s. The reason why lays in the emergence of third parties from the beginning of the 1990s. (Schedler, 1996) In fact, Labour truly achieved a landslide victory; nevertheless, the electorate was increasingly more willing to vote for other parties than Labour and the Conservatives, too. Therefore, the two-party vote share didn't stop declining (in 1997 it was only 73.9%). Whereas the 1980s and the Conservative predominance was accompanied with declining ENEP² and the polarisation of British politics, the Labour victory of 1997 happened in the context of increasing ENEP and centripetal manifesto competition. So, even though the 18 years of Conservative dominance and the 13 years of Labour hegemony are often treated as

² 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
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the same, the rise of third party vote share and the increasing fragmentation of British politics make important differences.

	CON	LAB	LD	PC/ SNP	Other	Third parties	CON +LAB
1979	43.9%	36.9%	13.8%	2.0%	3.4%	19.3%	80.7%
1983	42.4%	27.6%	25.4%	1.5%	3.1%	30.0%	70.0%
1987	42.2%	30.8%	22.6%	1.7%	2.7%	26.9%	73.1%
1992	41.9%	34.4%	17.8%	2.3%	3.5%	23.7%	76.3%
1997	30.7%	43.2%	16.8%	2.5%	6.8%	26.1%	73.9%
2001	31.6%	40.7%	18.3%	1.8%	7.7%	27.7%	72.3%
2005	32.4%	35.2%	22.0%	2.2%	8.2%	32.5%	67.5%
2010	36.1%	29.0%	23.0%	2.2%	9.7%	35.0%	65.0%

Table 1 UK vote share (%) at general elections

As Table 2 shows, ENEP grew from 3.06 (1992) to 3.22 (1997) despite of the landslide Labour victory. In the following years, this trend continued under the 2nd and 3rd Blair governments (3.33 in 2001 and 3.59 in 2005.) This is in sharp contrast with Margaret Thatcher's and John Major's governments when ENEP gradually declined (3.46 in 1983, 3.33 in 1987 and 3.06 in 1992.)³ At the same time with the growth of ENEP (party system from votes), the index of ENPP (party system from seats) was pretty much the same or it even declined. Following the 1992 Conservative victory and the ENPP of 2.27, the 1997 election provided a decline to 2.13 and the 2001 election with 2.17 didn't have significant change. ENPP started to increase slightly from the 2005 general election when it reached 2.46 and continued in 2010 (2.57) and levelled in 2015 (2.54). So what we can see is an increase in ENEP and a stagnation or decline in ENPP during the Blair governments. By consequence it suggests that the British party competition (ENEP) and the British party system (ENPP) began to separate after the 1997 election.⁴ In other words, the landslide victory of the Blair governments became

³ I don't consider the 1979 to 1983 ENEP jump as a trend rather as a one-off historical moment when the Social Democrats left Labour. So, although ENEP rose from 2.87 (1979) to 3.46 (1983), in sum, this was part of a larger declining period which was further confirmed by the following 2 general elections (1987, 1992.)

⁴ I consider the UK *party system* as the party system inside Westminster and the House of Commons. However, when I talk 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, I think 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.

less and less responsive to general trends in the British electorate. The 1997-2010 period is therefore a time of gradual unresponsiveness between the British party system and the party competition.

	LSq	ENEP	ENPP
1979	11.58	2.87	2.15
1983	17.45	3.46	2.09
1987	14.95	3.33	2.17
1992	13.55	3.06	2.27
1997	16.51	3.22	2.13
2001	17.76	3.33	2.17
2005	16.73	3.59	2.46
2010	15.1	3.71	2.57

Table 2 ENEP/ENPP in the UK

Table 2 ENEP /ENPP in the UK demonstrates this separation. It is easy to recognise how ENEP declined until 1992 and then increased after 1997 until today. By contrast, ENPP has been pretty much the same (always under 2.6.) As a result, the difference between ENEP and ENPP has been growing since 1997.

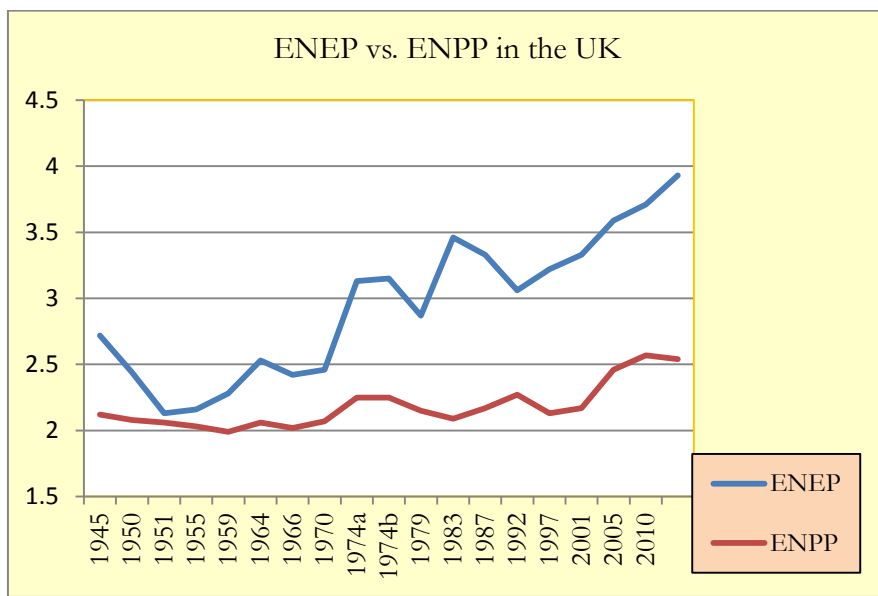


Figure 1 ENEP and ENPP in the UK (1945-2015)

Causes

Labour's landslide victory in 1997 was caused by a similar phenomenon like in 1945. In 1945 there was a negative Conservative Party which represented the past and a positive Labour Party which promised the future. This intensive antagonism caused a landslide victory for Labour both in 1945 and in 1997. However, the detailed causes behind the 1997 election somewhat differs from those in 1945. In the followings, I observe in two groups the causes; against the Conservatives, on one hand, and for Labour, on the other hand. I start with the Conservatives.

Negative Conservative Image

The negative image about the Conservatives was fostered by further two sub-causes: economic incompetence (valence politics) and internal party divisions. The *economic incompetence* was in sharp contrast with any previous Conservative records. The Tories under Margaret Thatcher gained much reputation for being the party of economic governance. They managed to restructure the UK economy, balance the books and produce an enduring economic growth. Nevertheless, this reputation gradually disappeared after 1992 and economic expertise became rather a weakness instead. The first economic shock which undermined the Conservatives' reputation occurred on 'Black Wednesday' (16th Sep 1992) when a coordinated speculation against the British pound dramatically devaluated the currency. The British pound's exchange rate for other European currencies declined so much that the British government had to withdraw the pound from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). This was a monetary cooperation between the UK and the EU which had been passionately recommended by John Major as the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1989. (Major, 2013) After Black Wednesday, however, it was the very same John Major who had to leave the ERM. In addition to this loss of prestige, the British government delivered some rather ineffective and very expensive measures to deal with the crisis. That's why the 1992 ERM crisis can't be compared to the 1973 oil crisis. In 1973, the oil crisis was an external shock which spilled over British domestic politics through high inflation, unemployment and trade union unrest. It was an external crisis which had wide scope of consequences and affected the whole world. Nevertheless, in 1992, the ERM crisis was both external and internal (because the shock came from outside but the wrong internal decisions were made inside), it had a limited scope of effect (only on the financial sector) and it affected only Britain. So theoretically the 1992 ERM crisis could have been much better treated than the 1973 oil crisis. This difference further underlines the economic incompetence of the John Major government.

Apart from Black Wednesday, the Conservative government delivered a couple of other wrong decisions which suggested incompetence. (I used Butler and Kavanagh (1997) for this paragraph.)

- ❖ They increased some taxes (eg. VAT) which they previously said not to do so during the 1992 election campaign.
- ❖ In 1996, the ‘mad cow’ disease erupted. Although it happened independently from the government (like the ERM crisis), John Major couldn’t handle it effectively. The UK farmers suffered very much from banning them out of the EU market.
- ❖ The flagship of Conservative economic policy has also gone wrong. Privatisation seemed to lose control in various sectors (eg. British Rail, mining industry, water supply), nevertheless, the services often became worse than before under public companies. (Parker, 2009) The ‘fat cat’ CEOs of these privatised companies (who got extremely high salaries) and the ‘revolving door’ effect (when former politicians continued their career at the privatized companies) questioned the legitimacy and the efficiency of privatization.
- ❖ The Northern Irish sectarian conflict gained a new momentum under Major. The IRA carried out terrorist attacks in mainland England, too. On 9th Feb 1996, they exploded a bomb at Canary Wharf (London) and on 15th June 1996, there was another detonation in Manchester. Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union threatened to supply the political conflict with endless amount of new weapon. However, in the House of Commons, the Major government couldn’t be totally impartial on the question because they needed the external support of the Ulster Unionist Party without whom the absolute majority would have been wrecked.

The second sub-cause beside the political incompetence was the *internal division* inside the Conservative Party. The campaign was already somewhat unimpressive. (Whiteley, 1997) In addition, further divisions were fuelled by personal scandals and political conflicts.

- ❖ The personal scandals seemed to overwhelm the Conservative Party. There were 9 ministers who had to resign for different scandals during this period. There were scandals for sexual misbehaviour and for corruption, as well. It was in sharp contrast with John Major’s ‘Back to Basics’ program which suggested a return to moral politics in 1993. The ‘sleaze’ which surrounded the Conservative Party provoked much irritation inside the British society.
- ❖ The other reason for internal division came from Major’s weak leading charisma and the ongoing EU negotiations in parallel. There were harsh debates and rebels because of the European issue inside the Conservative Party. Much of the frustration was caused by the Maastricht Treaty, the ban on British beef export (mad cow disease) and the ongoing negotiation about the single currency which wasn’t explicitly rejected by Major. The European issue became so important that even a party was formed to hold a referendum about the UK’s EU membership. James Goldsmith and his Referendum Party threatened to further divide conservative politicians and steal votes from the party during the next general election.

Positive Labour Image

At the same time, the Labour Party showed the opposite image, a very positive and competent party. (White & Chernatony, 2002) There are two sub-causes behind it which should be treated as one phenomenon: New Labour and Tony Blair. Although the Labour Party's reform had already begun in the 1980s, New Labour was eventually Tony Blair's idea. (Butler and Kavanagh, 1997: 64) Therefore, it is not possible to think of New Labour without Tony Blair and *vice versa*. The two sub-causes hence generate one single cause. In the followings, I briefly sum up what New Labour was about.

- ❖ From the mid-1980s, Neil Kinnock and John Smith started to reform the Labour Party and distance themselves from the left wing (Old Labour.) (Kinnock, 1994) It was enforced by contextual changes: (1) Thatcher's economic policies fundamentally transformed the British society from a social welfare state into an individualistic entrepreneurial society. Hence, the traditionally strong trade union movement lost ground and it endangered Labour's long-term performance. (2) The collapse of the Soviet Union ultimately brought a verdict over the capitalist-socialist debate; socialist economic policies lost ground. After 1990, there were very few people inside the Labour Party who still believed in the viability of the socialist economy.
- ❖ New Labour instead offered a completely new approach to economic policies. They kept much of Thatcher's economic policies (privatisation, fight against inflation, individual working rights instead of trade union rights, supporting free market and entrepreneurship, monetarism.) However, they also brought some new political issues from the left (like the NHS, education and environment.)
- ❖ At the same time, Tony Blair wanted to demonstrate that he indeed wanted to continue Thatcher's legacy. The symbol of this commitment was the abolishment of Clause IV in the Labour Party's constitution. (Wring, 1998) This prescribed nationalisation and public ownership. In 1995, Clause IV was cancelled and it marked a historical end of 80 year long party legacy (adopted in 1918.) (Riddell, 1997) This step, together with the monetarist shadow chancellor (Gordon Brown), showed that the Labour Party's old problem with 'tax and spend' policy was over. They offered instead economic responsibility and competence.
- ❖ Labour finally gave up its affiliation with the working class and became a 'party for all the people.' Previously Labour had been often considered as a *class based party* for their close relationship with the working class. New Labour became instead a catch-all party which wanted to get support based on political issues and not on class affiliation.
- ❖ Labour's party organisation was democratised. The trade unions lost their 'block votes' at the National Executive Conferences. Instead, the one member one vote procedure was accepted. This step further marginalised the trade union influence inside the Labour Party. Nevertheless, this democratisation process became

somewhat elitist because the party elite (the Parliamentary Labour Party) became the most important initiator inside the party. (M. Russell, 2005)

- ❖ New Labour and Tony Blair finished the debate over Europe inside the party, and they accepted a pro-European policy. (Daniels, 1998) So the new European cleavage was born between a Eurosceptic Right and a Pro-EU Left. Previously, the two parties stood on the opposite sides.
- ❖ Devolution and local governance became an important element of left politics. New Labour planned to give momentum for devolution. Although the 1970s had already showed certain attempts for devolution in Scotland and Wales, the Conservative years (1979-1997) marginalised devolution and favoured unitary state instead. The 1997 Labour victory hence brought back devolution on the political agenda.
- ❖ Strong party line: in parallel with Blair's attempts to marginalise the oligopoly of trade unions inside the Labour Party, the party has become very centralised. It meant that the main beneficiary of the trade union retreat has become the party leadership and not the party on the ground. This sort of centralisation was present at cabinet meetings as well. The ministers often got pre-decided policies by the party leadership. Hence, personal party member initiatives suffered to certain extent.
- ❖ New communication methods. White & Chernatony (2002) write that the party communication was centralised in the Milbank Tower (run by Peter Mandelson). The constituencies reacted to the Conservatives in accordance with the national party line. (The Excalibur software helped in it.) The tabloid newspapers turned friendly with Labour thanks to Alastair Campbell's intermediation. The political communication was based on the latest techniques: focus groups, opinion polls, market research and commercial advertisement.
- ❖ New Labour couldn't have been trustworthily delivered with the old faces of the 1980s. Tony Blair's personality in this vein played an undoubtedly crucial role. He wasn't involved in the internal Labour fights of the 1970s and 80s. Moreover, he showed the sort of leadership and charisma which lacked from the Labour Party during the Thatcher years. Now, it seemed that Labour had a energetic leader whereas the Conservatives had a weak leader in John Major. In addition, Blair's fame was supported by other new young left politicians like Gordon Brown and Peter Mandelson. The 1997 victory was due to a perfect team-work rather than to Blair's lonely efforts.
- ❖ Andrew Hindmoor (2004) argues that New Labour meant a completely innovative approach to conventional British party competition. The bottom-line of his argument is the following; New Labour was a successful attempt for moving the Left to the political centre by building up a new *moderate* party image. Hence, Labour managed to introduce itself to the electorate as a centre party between the Conservative Party and the Old Labour. Hindmoor (2004) says that Downs's theory about fixed voter preferences and infinite political space should

be questioned. New Labour didn't merely move to the centre (to the median voter's position) but also made the electorate believe that Labour had indeed moved to the median-voter's position. Thus, New Labour managed to re-construct the political space and '*transport*' the median-voter to the Left. In other words, it wasn't Labour which changed its political position but it was the electorate which changed their preferences.

In sum New Labour was about economic policy, party organisational reform, new campaign techniques and Tony Blair's personal charisma. It successfully ended the Labour Party's heavy dependence on trade unions and the working class votes. However, the new catch-all party program left behind many Old Left supporters. In the short term, this policy generated a landslide victory, however, in the long term, I argue, it fostered anti-establishment sentiment on the left and inside the whole British society.

Aftermath

The 1997 general election had a controversial aftermath. On the one hand, it was a return to classic two-party politics with a Labour landslide. During the following general elections this perception was further confirmed because Labour won again in 2001 and in 2005, too. Some scholars even compared the 13 years of Labour dominance (from 1997 to 2010) to the 18 years long Conservative dominance (from 1979 to 1997). They argued that British politics was still two-party, however, it became more predominant. (Geddes & Tonge, 2002) Nevertheless, third parties were still considered irrelevant during this period. On the other hand, however, the pluralisation process which started in 1974 didn't stop. Although the UK party system in Westminster was dominated by two-party politics, there have been a growing number of new parties and contestants in the party competition. So there was a two-party system on the surface, however, the multi-party competition continued to be ever more fragmented underneath. In the followings, I want to show both the signs of a two-party system and that of a multi-party competition.

Signs of a two-party system

ENPP decline

The signs of a return to two-party system could have been perceived at the House of Commons. The party system fragmentation index (ENPP) hit a very low level in 1997 (2.13) which could have been only compared to the post-war period (1945-74.) (See Table 3.) This index slightly started to rise to 2.17 in the 2001 general election. Nevertheless, this figure was still very low. This index could suggest that British party politics was indeed dominated by two big parties in the House of Commons. So British politics still remained about the Conservative-Labour dichotomy on the surface.

	LSq	ENEP	ENPP
1945	11.62	2.72	2.12
1950	6.91	2.44	2.08
1951	2.61	2.13	2.06
1955	4.13	2.16	2.03
1959	7.3	2.28	1.99
1964	8.88	2.53	2.06
1966	8.44	2.42	2.02
1970	6.59	2.46	2.07
1974a	15.47	3.13	2.25
1974b	14.96	3.15	2.25
1979	11.58	2.87	2.15
1983	17.45	3.46	2.09
1987	14.95	3.33	2.17
1992	13.55	3.06	2.27
1997	16.51	3.22	2.13
2001	17.76	3.33	2.17
2005	16.73	3.59	2.46
2010	15.1	3.71	2.57
2015*		3.93	2.54

Table 3 ENEP, ENPP and LSq values in the UK (1945-2015)

Centripetal competition

The other reason why two-party politics seemed to continue was caused by the very same electoral dynamics in comparison with the post-war era. The two major parties continued a centripetal manifesto competition for the median voter. (See Figure 2)

It meant that both two parties wanted to achieve similar political goals. The only difference was the tool how they should be achieved. Between 1945 and 1974, this centripetal competition meant that the common political goal was making a welfare economic state. So there was a consensus about welfare economics. Later in 1997, however, the common political goal was about an absolutely different economic policy; it was about neoliberalism. Hence, the post-1997 two-party competition has similar centripetal dynamics like the post-1945 period. However, the nature of this centripetal competition was diametrically the opposite. Whereas the post 1945 consensus wanted more state intervention in the economy, the post 1997 wanted instead less regulations and more liberalism in the economy.

The ideological difference is only one characteristic which distinguish the post 1945 centripetal competition from the post 1997 one. The other difference comes from the changing society behind it. The 1945-74 period can be truly seen as a centripetal

competition about welfare economics. However, this period also coincided with a period of strong class affiliation. It means that voters often identified themselves primarily with their parties and their political preferences were just secondary. This strong party alignment gradually changed from the mid-1960s but it was very strong till then. From the 1980s, the previous mass parties were replaced by loose catch all parties. These parties didn't stick to one particular class in the society. They focused on issues instead which could cross-cut the different classes and appeal more votes than the previous mass parties. So the post 1997 period coincided with a very different sociological background than the post 1945 period. The post 1997 period was about a rivalry between two catch all parties but not about two mass parties. This difference is crucial because the centripetal competition in these two periods were different both in the ideological (previous paragraph) and sociological (this paragraph) context.

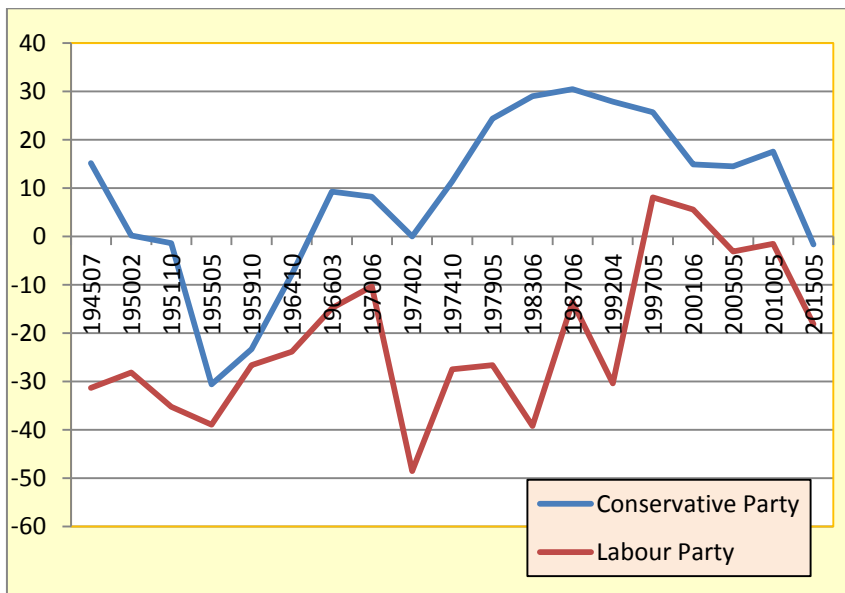


Figure 2 Left/Right manifesto positions in the UK at general elections (1945-2015)⁵

So the post 1997 centripetal competition was superficially similar to the post 1945 period. This might have made an illusion that two party politics returned. The 1997 Labour landslide victory could have been easily compared to the 1945 Labour landslide. However, as I mentioned before, the centripetal competition existed in very different contexts during the two different times. After 1945, the centripetal competition revolved around welfare economics between two mass parties. However, after 1997, the centripetal competition revolved around neoliberal economics between two catch all parties.

⁵ Positive values stand for Right manifesto positions and negative values stand for Left manifesto positions. If the two curves diverge from each other, the manifestos become polarized. If the two curves converge, the manifestos become consensual. Data from Comparative Manifesto Project (2017, May 22). Retrieved from <https://manifestoproject.wzb.eu/>

Signs of a multi-party competition

Disproportional general elections

The illusion that two-partyism still covers the UK party competition was largely due to the first-past-the-post electoral system. This electoral system was also in use during the 1945-74 period, however, at that time because of the strong alignment of the electorate with the two major parties didn't impose any democratic deficit or legitimacy concern. After 1974 and the gradual pluralisation of British politics, there have been increasing concerns with the fairness of the electoral system. The third parties suffered a lot from the majority electoral system and the entry barriers were extremely high for them. Then in 1997 when Labour got a landslide victory and a return to two-party politics was on the horizon in Westminster, the electoral system became extremely disproportional. Table 3

Table 3 in the LSq column it is obvious that the general elections after 1997 were accompanied with a record high electoral *disproportion*. The 16.51 value in 1997, the 17.76 value in 2001 and the 16.73 value in 2005 couldn't be compared to the 6.91 in 1950, the 7.3 in 1959 or the 8.44 in 1966. This meant that two-partyism which was suggested by the similar ENPP values and the centripetal competition wasn't as legitimate after 1997 as it was during 1945-74. The lack of two-party legitimacy is a major difference between the two times. In other words, the post-1997 two-partyism was only possible because the FPTP electoral system supported larger parties, otherwise, there wouldn't have been two-party dominance and Labour landslide.

Growing ENEP/ENPP difference at the national level

The growing multi-partyism behind the artificial two-partyism is justified by the continuously rising ENEP values despite of the ENPP decline after 1997. The 1997 Labour landslide victory couldn't stop the pluralisation trend in the party competition which started in 1974. (See Table 3) This logically means that if ENPP declines and at the same time the ENEP rises than the differences between them will increase. This was exactly true for 1997 and 2001 elections, however, in 2005 (due to the good performance of the Liberal Democrats) the ENPP kept pace with the ENEP rise. This doesn't mean, nevertheless, that the differences declined; they either grew or stagnated after 1997. So, the significant difference between the two-party system, on the one hand, and the multi-party competition, on the other hand, became obvious at the national level after 1997. This *incongruence* was further enhanced by the ongoing devolution process which created new multi-party competitions/party systems at the regional levels, too.

Multi-party politics at the regional level

The 1997 general election brought an additional incentive for multi-party competition. The newly formed *devolved assemblies* permitted to elect their members with mixed and

more proportional electoral systems than FPTP. (R. Deacon, 2012) This multi-level polity immediately opened a way for regional multi-party politics.

Table 3 shows how much these devolved party systems differ from the Westminster party system. There have been 5 devolved elections since 1997 in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and London. What we can see is that, in average, Wales has the lowest ENPP (3.07) and Northern Ireland has the highest (4.54.) However, the four devolved assemblies have together a 3.52 mean value which suggests that in each devolved party systems there are 3 and a half equally sized parties. Over time, the ENPP had a declining trend from 3.77 to 3.33. It means that after the formation of the new devolved assemblies, the party systems consolidated and converged to a lower number of parties. It is particularly true in Northern Ireland where the first election had a record high 5.37 ENPP figure and it declined to 4.32 in 2016. Other party systems in Wales and Scotland are much more stable in this vein. The bottom-line, however, is that devolved party systems provided significantly higher ENPP values than the party system in the House of Commons.

Table 4 ENPP in devolved assemblies demonstrates that the average ENPP value in Westminster (2.37) is much lower than the average devolved value (3.52) at the time. Whereas in Westminster there is still a two-and-a-half party system, in the devolved assemblies, there are different types of multi-party systems (usually three-and-a-half systems). It can be either moderate (like in Wales or London) or extreme (like in Northern Ireland.) Nevertheless, the incongruence between national and regional party systems is significant. Devolution hence further opened up the way for the pluralisation of British politics. First it started at the devolved level because the mixed electoral systems helped smaller regional parties to perform better. Second, this sort of pluralisation at the regional level spilled over to the national level, as well. The surprise victory of the SNP party in Scotland in 2015 had a major pluralising impact on the House of Commons itself. However, the SNP's way to Westminster can't be imagine without the consequent Scottish Parliament victories started in 2007. Similarly, the 2017 snap election resulted with a king maker position for the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) from Northern Ireland. Although there is no formal coalition between the Conservatives and the DUP, their cooperation suggests that British politics is not about single majority governments like before. Third parties play an increasingly important role in this process. Recently, due to the collapse of the Liberal Democrats in 2015, these third parties are not national but rather devolved ones. The SNP's and DUP's success and the Lib Dem's failure show that the pluralisation process in the House of Commons is dominated by devolved parties (SNP, DUP) instead of national ones (UKIP, Greens, Lib Dems).

ENPP	1 st election	2 nd election	3 rd election	4 th election	5 th election	Mean
<i>Wales</i>	3.03	3.00	3.33	2.90	3.11	3.07
<i>Scotland</i>	3.34	4.17	3.41	2.61	2.99	3.30
<i>NI</i>	5.37	4.54	4.30	4.16	4.32	4.54
<i>London</i>	3.34	3.83	3.14	2.68	2.88	3.18
<i>Mean</i>	3.77	3.89	3.55	3.09	3.33	3.52

Table 4 ENPP in devolved assemblies⁶

1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	Mean
2.13	2.17	2.46	2.57	2.54	2.37

Table 5 ENPP in Westminster

Multi-party politics at the European level

The third sign of the pluralisation process can be seen at the *European level*. Between 1979 and 1999, the UK elected their members of the European Parliament (MEPs) by using the first-past-the post (FPTP) electoral system. (Leonard & Mortimore, 2005) So it was the same kind of electoral system like at the general elections. Nevertheless, since the UK was the last EU member state with such majority electoral system, the EU obliged the UK to change this electoral system for a proportional (PR) one. In 1999, Tony Blair's government accepted to change to electoral system. The UK has been using hence a PR electoral system since then. Although this electoral system change wasn't the result of the 1997 Labour victory and it eventually should have happened under any future administrations, the new EP elections fit perfectly into the wider pluralisation process which has been going on since 1997.

It is very interesting because it shows how spectacularly both ENPP and ENEP separated from each other after the first PR elections were held at EP elections in 1999. The last FPTP election in 1994 produced 1.69 ENPP and 3.29 ENEP. However, the first PR election in 1999 produced 3.12 ENPP and 4.26 ENEP. This significant change brought an end to a long-term pattern of British EP elections. Previously between 1979 and 1994, ENPP had always been under 2.0 which meant that only two major parties controlled the EP from Britain. However, the 1999 EP election showed a sudden jump

⁶ Table 4 only uses ENPP because ENEP can be difficultly calculated. Since there are usually two votes at every devolved election (one for a constituency and one for a party list) the fragmentation index derived from votes is more problematic because adding together all the votes would mean that one person votes twice. The ENPP, however, is the same for every devolved assembly because they are calculated from seat share not votes. Due to the mixed electoral systems in the devolved assemblies, the difference between ENEP and ENPP should be much lower than at the national level. Therefore, I argue, it is fair to use only the ENPP values at the devolved level.

to 3.12 (from 1.69) which was caused by the good performance of the third parties (Lib Dems, SNP, PC, Ukip and the Greens) due to the proportional electoral system. After 1999, this trend continued and went above 4.0 which means that 4 equally sized parties are present in the EP from Britain. Again, it was just two in 1994 and it became four after 1999. So there are two extra parties in the European Parliament from Britain due to the electoral system change.

	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014
<i>ENEP</i>	2.61	2.96	3.25	3.29	4.26	5.52	5.99	4.74
<i>ENPP</i>	1.56	1.99	1.99	1.69	3.12	4.06	4.34	3.62

Table 6 ENEP and ENPP at EP elections in the UK

The new PR electoral system also answered a couple of questions. First, it confirmed by electoral data at the national level that UK politics have become multi-party over time. It is the only evidence for pluralisation at the same level (national UK level) and in the same question (EP elections.) All the other evidences for this electoral system change are either derived from other levels (devolution) or different questions (Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish etc). The EP election is the only national election which can show what would happen for Britain if an electoral system change occurs in the UK. Second, it also proved that the FPTP electoral system suppresses the pluralisation process and creates instead an artificial two-party system. Third, the FPTP electoral system doesn't only artificially lower the ENPP (party system) but the ENEP (party competition), too. The ENEP which should be (more) independent from the electoral system grew together with the ENPP after 1999. It made explicit the already know psychological effect that majority electoral system biases the electorate's preferences and force them to abandon smaller parties in favour of bigger ones. Fourth, the EP elections together with the devolved elections proved that the introduction of a new mixed or PR electoral system produce a short term rapid rise in ENEP and ENPP which likely goes down after a couple of years. This implies that a stable majority electoral system is followed by a short period of contingency if the PR system is introduced. However, this contingent situation will likely temper down to a lower level after a couple of elections (which is still higher than the original level.) The New Zealand electoral system change in 1993 also supports this idea. There were a couple of electoral years after 1993 when ENEP was particularly high, however, later it moderated to a lower level and stabilised. (See Table 7)

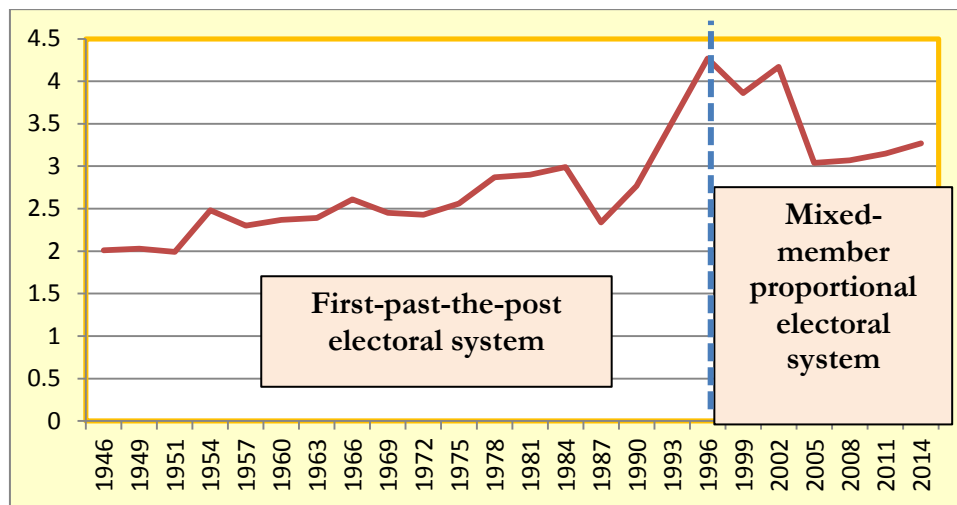


Table 7 ENEP in New Zealand between 1946–2014⁷

More referenda

Finally, after the 1997 general election, *referenda* became widely common in the UK. Previously there had been just 1 national referendum (EEC membership in 1975) and three regional referendums (Northern Irish sovereignty in 1973, Scottish and Welsh devolutions in 1979). After a period of relative silence about referendums during the 1979–97 Conservative governments, the Labour party re-introduced direct democracy in 1997. It doesn't mean that the previous governments didn't bring up referendum as a legitimate political tool (eg. John Major's pledge to hold a referendum) however, eventually it never materialised. Tony Blair's devolution policy however materialised referenda at the regional level. Therefore, between 1997 and 2010, there were 5 new regional⁸ referenda about devolution. This was complemented by 39 local mayoral referendums which wanted to elect city mayors directly by the electorate and not indirectly by local councils. (More details: Commons Briefing papers SN05000, 2016)

The proliferation of referenda hence became a new pattern of British politics. The monopoly of parliamentary sovereignty was questioned by these referenda. It became a legitimate political tool in both two parties' repertoire (eg. Blair promised two referenda, one on the Euro and one on the European Constitutional Treaty, while Cameron pledged one on the Lisbon Treaty.) Whereas the devolved assemblies questioned the sovereignty of Westminster from 'below', the EP from 'above', the referenda did it from 'sideways'. Soon after 1997, the Westminster party system had to deal with pluralisation pressures from all around. The previously latent incongruence

⁷ Data from Gallagher (2015)

⁸ Greater London Authority referendum (1998), North East England devolution referendum (2004), Northern Ireland Belfast Agreement referendum (1998), Scottish devolution referendum (1997), Welsh devolution referendum (1997)

between the Westminster party system and the British party competition became explicit and widely recognizable hence.

Comparing 1997 with 1974

For the first blink, there is little common between the 1974 and 1997 elections. In 1974, there was a hung parliament and the pluralisation of UK politics began. Nevertheless, in 1997, there was an opposing trend: a landslide Labour victory happened and there was a return to two-partyism at least at the national level. The interesting thing is, however, that despite of the opposing phenomena, there is some similarity as well. If I consider the 1945, 1974, 1997 as 'critical junctures', I also assume that a path-dependency followed each one of them. Although the critical juncture means that the former path-dependency is altered, there still remains some relevance of every former path-dependency. This is the case with the 1997 election and the path dependencies before and after them.

On the one hand, the 1997 critical juncture imposed a wide range of change in the patterns of UK party politics (for instance, a landslide Labour victory instead of weak minority governments, economic prosperity instead of the 1973 oil crisis and the decline of ENPP instead of increase.) On the other hand, however, there is continuity in the pluralisation process particularly at the regional and European levels. After 1974 similarly to 1997, the question of devolution appeared on the political agenda. The nationalist parties (SNP, PC, DUP, UUP, SDLP, SF) also enjoyed growing popularity during these times. Both 1974 and 1997 were followed by major changes in the UK-EU relations: in 1973, the UK joined the European Economic Community whereas in 1993, they became part of the single market (Maastricht Treaty.) Later, the European integration penetrated into domestic politics in both 1979 and in 1999: in 1979, the UK first sent MEPs to the European Parliament which became the first regular alternative national arena beside Westminster, and in 1999, the EP elections became PR which stood in sharp contrast with the Westminster FPTP elections.

The 1997 period is, therefore both a rupture with the 1974 heritage and the continuation of it. This dual characteristic of the 1997 election makes substantive difference vis-à-vis the 1945 election. If the 1997 election had reproduced the 1945 patterns than the 1974 election would have been indeed a minor pluralist setback in British politics. Nevertheless, it wasn't the case and the path-dependency of 1974 has proved to be lasting. It demonstrates that the evolution of UK party competition has a long-term trend in pluralisation. The critical junctures of 1974 and 1997 had both additional roles in this process. In 1997, despite of the return to the 1945 results in certain way, the pluralisation process which started in 1974 continued.

	POST-1974	POST-1997
	<i>Similarities</i>	
<i>Devolution referenda</i>	1979 Scotland, Wales	Scotland, Wales, London, NI
<i>EP elections</i>	1979 FPTP introduction	1999 PR introduction
<i>European relations</i>	After joining the EEC (1973)	After Maastricht (1993)
	<i>Differences</i>	
	Labour minority in Feb 1974 and after 1976	Labour landslide
	1973 oil crisis and stagflation	Economic prosperity
	Pluralisation in party competition and in party system	Pluralisation of party competition and a return to two-partyism

Table 8 Comparing the post-1974 and the post-1997 periods

Conclusion

The 1997 general election meant both a return to the post-1945 period and a continuation of the post-1974 period. In this sense, it had a controversial impact on the evolution of UK party politics. On one hand, the two-party path dependency in Westminster was confirmed. This meant a superficial return to the post-1945 era. On the other hand, the multi-party path dependency at national, regional and European level was also confirmed. This meant the continuation of the 1974 pluralisation process. This *contradiction* is the most important impact that the post-1997 provided. The differences between the Westminster party system and the UK party competition hence started to increase.

This paper didn't want to involve current developments in British politics. However, one can see that after 2010, there is a rising popularity of anti-establishment sentiment in Britain. Although it is a worldwide phenomenon nowadays, Britain seems to be affected outstandingly. There are plenty of proofs for anti-elitist voting patterns; eg. the decreasing combined Labour-Conservative vote share, rising third party vote share, vote on the Scottish independence and vote on Brexit. I think that this anti-establishment sentiment can be understood if we take a look at the 1997 election. This election contributed to a contradiction between a superficial two party politics and a latent multi-party competition. This contradiction supports the idea of anti-establishment; the two parties can't represent electorate's multiparty preferences. Therefore, understanding the 1997 election result is crucial to understand current developments in British politics as well.

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