

Political Parties in Britain

A political party is a group of people united by shared political preferences and a general ideological identity that is organized for the purpose of winning government power, by electoral or other means. In other words, **a political party is an organization that seeks to attain political power within a government by participating in electoral campaigns. Parties often espouse a certain ideology, but may also represent a coalition among disparate interests.**

Political parties should be distinguished from pressure/interest groups. Essentially a political party will have policies to cover all general areas of public life, whereas a pressure/interest group will seek to influence one specific policy area, for example environmental issues.

For a long time, British parliamentary democracy was dominated by the two-party system, with two main parties forming the government and the official Opposition. Historically, these two parties were the **Tories** (now the Conservative Party) and the **Whigs** (now the Liberal Democrats). In the 18th century the Tory Party experienced its ups and downs. In the 19th century it picked up and became known as the Conservative Party (the word “conservative” first came into use in the 1830s). After becoming associated with repression of popular discontent in the early 19th century.

Whigs were traditionally in opposition to the Tory Party. Initially they controlled the government, but later developed into the minority party until 1830. During the next few years, the Whigs became known as the Liberal Party. The term “Liberal Party” was first used officially in the late 19th century, though it was used colloquially for decades beforehand.

The Liberals and Conservatives dominated the political scene until the 1920s, when the Liberal Party declined in popularity and suffered a long stream of resignations. It was replaced as the main anti-Tory opposition party by the newly **emerging Labour Party, which represented an alliance between the labour movement, organized trade unions and various socialist societies.**

1The Conservative Party : is the party of the Right, identified with the idea of economic freedom and until Margaret Thatcher’s coming to power in 1979 with the idea of resistance to change. It has successfully portrayed itself as the party of patriotism. As in the 19th century, it appeals to a ‘property-owning democracy’, and as a result its support tends to lie with the

wealthier classes, receiving much money from major business and financial institutions. It gives emphasis to the importance of law and order, and the maintenance of strong armed forces to protect British interests.

The fundamental principles of the Conservative Party can be summarized as follows:

- ❖ individuals have an absolute right to liberty
- ❖ ownership is the strongest foundation of individual freedom, opportunity and independence
- ❖ The role of government is to strengthen individual liberty and choice
- ❖ in economic affairs the Government should establish a climate in which enterprise can flourish.

Labour is preeminently the party of social justice, though its emphasis is less on equality than on the achievement of well-being and opportunity for all members of society. It tends to give the collective well-being of society slightly more importance than individual freedom. It was once committed to public ownership of major industries, and to economic planning. It now favours an entrepreneurial but socially aware economy.

The Fundamental Principles of the Labour Party are :

- ❖ the Labour Party seeks to achieve a dynamic economy serving the public interest
- ❖ a just society, which judges its strength by the condition of the weak as much as the strong
- ❖ an open democracy, in which government is held to account by the people
- ❖ a healthy environment, which has to be protected, enhanced and held in trust for future generations.

The Liberal Democratic Party seeks to attract the votes of the middle ground between Labour and the Conservatives, but has also tended to attract opponents of the Conservatives, dominant in the south of England, and opponents of the Labour Party, dominant in the north. It is the party keenest on constitutional and electoral reform. It also prides itself on being less tied to either capitalist or union interests, and being free to offer more radical policies

Key Terms :**Two-party system**

A two-party system is a system in which two major political parties dominate voting in nearly all elections at every level of government and the majority of elected offices are members of one of the two major parties. Under a two-party system, one party typically holds a majority in the legislature and is usually referred to as the majority party while the other is the minority party.