

Polarised politics

The United Kingdom

The Tories became known as the Conservatives in the 1830s, they believed in preserving traditions, supported business and commerce, were in favour of tax cuts and a lesser intervention of government.

The Labour Party: it was born at the turn of the 20th century and became the main opposition party to the Conservatives. It is the party of the working class, promotes social services, education and health deemed to be the state's responsibility. It has always embarked on radical programmes of social and economic reform and laid the foundations of the welfare state.

The **Whigs** developed into the Liberal Party and formed an alliance with the Social Democratic Party in the 1980s to become the **Liberal Democrats**. They are in favour of further integration in the EU, more spending on education and multilateral foreign policy.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) was formed in 1934; it is a Scottish nationalist and social-democratic political party that came third in the 2015 general election.

The BNP (British National Party), a far-right political party, was formed in 1982, **UKIP** (the United Kingdom Independent Party) was formed in 1993.

The British party system has fragmented, especially since 1997 (the United Kingdom was then governed by one political party, in the 2010 general election, it was governed by ten).

Over the 110 years between 1885 and 1995, during only ten years did one party govern by a majority.

The **2010 general election** was a drift away from the two-party system when no party had the 326 seats required to have a majority. The Tories (320 seats) formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (57 seats). The hung parliament lasted until the 2015 general election in which the Tories won (by a landslide, 331 seats), beating the Labour Party (232 seats), the Liberal Democrats (8 seats) and the Scottish National Party (56 seats).

In January 2013, David Cameron had promised to hold a **referendum on E.U. membership**, it secured his victory at the general election of May 2015, yet, right after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, the Prime Minister announced that he would step down. Both the Conservatives and the Labour Party are bearing the brunt of the Leave vote. In July 2016, Theresa May was appointed Prime Minister, intent on "unifying the party after a divisive referendum".

The United States

For the founding fathers, political parties were viewed as factions, they designed a constitutional system meant to counter the influence of interest groups. However, parties emerged partly because organisations were needed to screen and nominate candidates for the numerous elections.

The Democratic Party, founded in 1828, promotes a centre-left and socially liberal policy based on a mixed economy (government intervention and regulation), social programmes, and equal opportunity.

The Republican Party or GOP (Grand Old Party), founded in 1854, relies on conservative ideas from a social viewpoint and on economic liberalism (markets self-regulation, little state intervention and low taxes).

Third parties have a long history in the United States. However, because of election rules and of the electorate's loyalty to one of the major parties, they seldom win federal elections.

When President Reagan was in office (1981-1989), parties had already become weaker for various reasons, among which party identification, ticket-splitting, candidate-centred politics and funding, and cross-partisan policy making.

The **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002** (aka the McCain-Feingold law) stamped out soft money. In 2010, a Supreme Court decision (**Citizens United v Federal Election Commission**) gave corporations and unions much of the same right to political speech as individuals have, thus removing virtually any restriction on corporate money in politics. The level of outside money increased 164 percent from 2004 to 2008 and then rose 135 percent from 2008 to 2012.