

# Political Parties

Use the accompanying handout and other resources where directed to carry out the following exercises (A-D):

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## A: What is a political party?

- Produce a spider diagram to illustrate the key points about political parties.

## B: The functions of political parties

Answer the following questions:

1. How do parties make it simpler for voters to choose between them?
2. Name four ways in which parties may encourage political participation
3. Why are parties the main avenues of advancement for people with political ambitions?
4. Explain why parties are crucial in (i) government formation, (ii) effective leadership and lawmaking in the House of Commons
5. What is a vote of no-confidence?
6. List three ways in which parties might 'inform the electorate'.

## C: Political parties and democracy

- Construct a table which has two columns: (1) "Political parties promote the democratic process" and (2) "Political parties do not promote the democratic process".

## D: adversarial and consensus politics

- Define these two terms with examples.
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Resources: Edexcel student Unit guide handout  
Textbook pages: 142-148 and others!  
Internet research

## Additional reading (LRC)

McNaughton, M, *Success in Politics* pp98-105

## Extension work:

- Research into the areas in which The Conservative and Labour Parties were highly adversarial, in terms of policies, in the 1980's
- Get hold of recent Labour, Liberal and Conservative manifestos
- What was the "Lib-Lab Pact" in the mid to late 1970's?
- Find a picture of the House of Commons, on the floor of the House, in the middle, there are two parallel lines; how far apart are they?

1. Parties make it simpler by publicising policies and being separate. They try to interact with people.
2.
  - e-Petitions
  - referendums
  - elections
  - encouraging argument on policies/actions
  - ...
3. If you join a group you get carried along with its principles and values and thoughts, some say, whereas if you go it alone you have less chance of making it—you would get lost and—as a lone wolf—not be listened to [as much].
4. (a) Parties are crucial in government formation because, in order to form a strong, representative government, a lot of people have to assemble and take on ministerial roles, and if people with the same views were not united, they would not know who to trust, not knowing if anyone else supports their views openly, and arguments would break out and so decisions would not be made quickly, effectively, or potentially at all.  
  
(b) Parties are crucial for effective leadership and law-making because, if the government was not united in its views, it would be difficult to make laws, and so it could not be said to be legitimate or accountable.
5. A vote of no confidence can be called by any MP if they do not think that the government is doing well, or they do not have confidence in the government. It acts as a safety valve.
6.
  - media
  - speeches
  - manifestos
  - Question Time
  - posters
  - party conferences
  - ...

## Adversary, adversarial and consensus politics in the UK

Item 1

### Adversary Politics

actually having differences of opinion

Term coined by S. E. Finer in his edited book *Adversary Politics and Electoral Reform* (1975) for the British parliamentary system, which he characterized as 'a stand-up fight between two adversaries for the favour of the lookers-on'. He argued that the Labour and Conservative parties had become locked into sterile confrontation of extremisms, which might be broken by electoral reform, to which he was a recent convert. Supporters of the adversary politics hypothesis point to the debasement of parliamentary debate and Question Time; opponents variously argue that the adversaries were not adversarial on everything (for instance, in their common opposition to electoral reform) and that adversary politics was a temporary pathology.

study of illness  
so, a temporary illness

Item 2

automatic questioning and opposing  
**Adversarial Politics** takes place when one party (usually not in Government) takes the opposite (or at least a different) opinion to that of the other (usually the Government) even when they may personally agree with what the Government is trying to do.

Those opposed to adversarial politics believe that politicians should state what they actually think rather than following the 'party line'. They consider adversarial

politics to be cynical and intolerant, with 'winning' the driving principle versus attempting to establish the truth. Politicians

captivated by the 'struggle' for 'victory' corrupt the ideals that brought them into politics in the first place.

Adversarial politics is often blamed for turning the electorate away from politics and their right to participate in the democratic process of their country through voting at elections. In UK, many

losing of own opinions.

voters consider 'prime minister's question time', a weekly ritual involving the prime minister and the leader of Her Majesty's opposition confronting each other in Parliament, to be a sad and embarrassing relic from the past. This only feeds their sense of apathy and disillusionment with politics.

In the US, huge fundraising for presidential elections increasingly results in campaigns focused on personalities versus honest debate, and trading insults versus addressing substantive issues.

The more adversarial politics becomes, the greater the erosion of voter engagement and threat to the democratic process.

Item 3

yah-boo politics

plural noun

Definition:

**crudely adversarial politics:** politics in which parties automatically and unthinkingly criticize and reject any idea put forward by an opposing party, regardless of its merits

general agreement on mixed politics:  
private and public ownership.

#### Item 4

Butskellism' is the (moderately satirical) term used in British politics to refer to the political consensus formed in the 1950s and associated with the exercise of office as Chancellor of the Exchequer by Rab Butler of the Conservative Party and Hugh Gaitskell of the Labour Party. The term was inspired by a leading article in The Economist which dramatised the claimed convergence by referring to a fictitious Mr Butskell.

World War II left the United Kingdom with an appetite for a broader distribution of wealth and a strengthening of social security, while a natural conservatism held fast to a belief in individual initiative and private property. The practical resolution of this tension in politics by the two Chancellors was a Keynesian mixed economy with moderate state intervention to promote social goals, particularly in education and health. The consensus dominated British politics until the economic crises of the 1970s which led to the end of the Golden Age of Capitalism and the rise of monetarist economics. The Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher institutionalised a greater emphasis on a free market approach to government.

However, the idea of Butskellism has been challenged as a myth, with claims that there was in fact a sustained argument over the use of physical controls, monetary policy and direct taxation.

A similar term 'Blatcherism' was coined to describe the supposed convergence of policies of the administrations of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair.

#### Item 5

consensus politics ~~keynesian~~ keynesian economics — tax and spend

Phrase used to describe the practice of government in Britain between 1945 and 1979. The phenomenon was observed by political scientists and media commentators; Britain's two major political parties, the Conservative Party and Labour Party, were in agreement, or consensus, over certain basic government policies in the decades after World War II. The introduction of fundamental changes in government responsibility, such as the welfare state, the national health service (NHS), and widespread nationalization of industry, were effectively unchallenged by either party.

The consensus lasted throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, but started to break down in the 1970s. Following the oil price rises of the early 1970s, the new economic experience of 'stagflation', where high inflation was combined with high unemployment, caused many in the Conservative Party to challenge the accepted orthodoxy of Keynesian economics — that a fall in national income and rising unemployment should be countered by increased government expenditure to stimulate the economy. There was increasing

divergence of economic opinion between the two parties, ending the consensus of the previous decades. By the time of the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 on a strongly free-market monetarist platform (aiming to curb inflation by controlling the UK's money supply, cut government spending, and privatize industry; see monetarism), consensus had become an unpopular word in many parts of the political establishment.

Consensus politics worked in the era after World War II for a number of reasons. The overwhelming election of the Labour government under Clement Attlee demonstrated clearly that the British people wanted a new type of government and economy, with much more state intervention and protection. For the Conservative Party to go against this would have been political suicide. Ideas such as nationalization and a welfare state matched the ethos of the times — the collective spirit created by World War II — and both parties accepted and supported this concept. The inefficiency of large industries such as the railways and coalmining before 1939 weakened the argument that they would be more efficient in private ownership. People believed that the state could do a better job. The successful reduction in unemployment after 1945, and the economic success that accompanied it, appeared to show that consensus was beneficial. In his campaign for the general election of 1959 Conservative leader Harold Macmillan felt justified in using the phrase: 'You've never had it so good.' However, with the oil price problems of 1973 and subsequent 'stagflation', consensus politics were considered by many to be no longer appropriate to Britain's needs.

Consensus was never a universally accepted concept, and its existence has been challenged by a number of political theoreticians in recent years. However, the term usefully sums up the relative lack of political disagreement and policy change that occurred in the UK between 1945 and the 1970s.

#### Questions

1. Using items 1-3 what is the difference between adversary and adversarial politics?
2. Using items 1-3 what problems arise from a confrontational style of politics?
3. Using items 4 and 5 Describe the key feature of consensus politics
4. How would you characterise the politics of the UK today?