Popular questions on political parties are about their **purpose** within a democracy, how they operate, and what the main political parties believe in today. This is where it's important to know recent developments in national politics, because there have been important changes to the way parties are organised and to the views they put forward. Your textbook should have detailed information on this, but you'll have to keep an eye on the media or the parties' web sites to keep really up to date.

## Answering Examination Questions: Political Parties

### 'What are the key functions of political parties in a democracy?' (5 marks)

1. They help voters to make sense of politics.
2. They provide candidates for general, local, and European elections.
3. They enable people to participate in politics.
4. In the UK they are the basis for choosing a government and opposition.
5. They provide a focus for particular policies that can be put into place by the largest group in Parliament.

*Examiner's comment: In an examination you should never write in list form. The answer should be in good flowing English, and it would be an idea to provide one or two examples to expand some of the points. You might want to point out that the third point is an essential factor in a liberal democracy at election time, although membership of parties is decreasing significantly. You may want to expand on the fourth point by showing how the party with the majority of seats after a general election is asked by the monarch to form a government, and the second largest party will become the official opposition. This type of politics, which is known as adversarial, helps the first point by making it easier for voters to recognise differences between the parties. The question is worth five marks only and would be scored mainly for AO1, so don't take too much time when there are more marks to gain on the other two questions. The chances are that the examiner would only expect you to state two or three of them. In that case, be prepared to add a little explanation. In a liberal democracy, parties are about choice and participation for the electorate, at least at election time. Parties are also represented at local elections and in elections for the European Parliament, but there is nowhere near the same interest at those times. The usual turnout for local elections is 35-45%, and for the European elections is 30-35% (but at 24% in 1999, turnout in the UK had been the lowest of all the European Union states). Remember, however, that turnout varies in different parts of the country. These figures are only averages.*

Let's say that *political parties are groups of people with common interests who seek to put their policies into action by gaining political power.* Use your own reading to see if you can improve on that definition. We've already identified some ways in which parties help democracy. We have an adversarial system of politics in Parliament, which means that it is the role of the opposition parties to question, criticise and scrutinise the government. For a while after 1945, politics in Parliament was conducted more on **consensus** (agreement), at least about certain policies such as foreign affairs, education, and health. This began to break down during the 1960s, and during the governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) consensus ended. It has sometimes been said that a new consensus is emerging in UK politics, partly caused by the need for each party to address the same issues, such as environment and improved public services. Parties have moved towards more common ground in the centre to attract the votes (see below). They no longer represent distinct points of view, and indeed can seem to agree on many issues, such as the idea of choice in education. Whether this so-called consensus is long-term or real is open to doubt. You can read more about party systems later.

### 'Clear blue water'

There are special problems with recent developments in political parties. Not everyone agrees on what the two main parties stand for today, as they are both going through a significant period of change. You might hear the expression 'looking for clear blue water' from time to time, and this refers to the fact that the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have both moved towards the centre of the political spectrum (see below) and there doesn't always seem to be a lot of difference between them. Winning elections has become more important than maintaining ideologies and beliefs, and this might help to account for growing voter apathy. This move towards

the centre doesn't mean that there is necessarily a consensus between them, and the Conservatives have had to find policies that will provide some 'clear blue water' between them and the Labour Party in order for the electorate to distinguish them. Both parties have been accused of being 'popularist'. That means latching on to issues that are currently important to voters rather than having an overall ideology that they stick to. Do you think that's a good thing for democracy? It's certainly not always helpful to a politics student!

## The Political Spectrum

This is a very simple (and rather old-fashioned) version of the **political spectrum**, which largely applied until the 1980s. Most voters, as we've seen, tended to support one of the two main parties, and very few strayed to the extremes of left or right. Workers saw Labour as their natural party, and the middle classes saw the Conservatives as theirs. From the 1970s voting became more volatile, and parties began to see that older ideas no longer guaranteed support from traditional followers. Things have changed since then. We'll summarise how the present situation has come about.
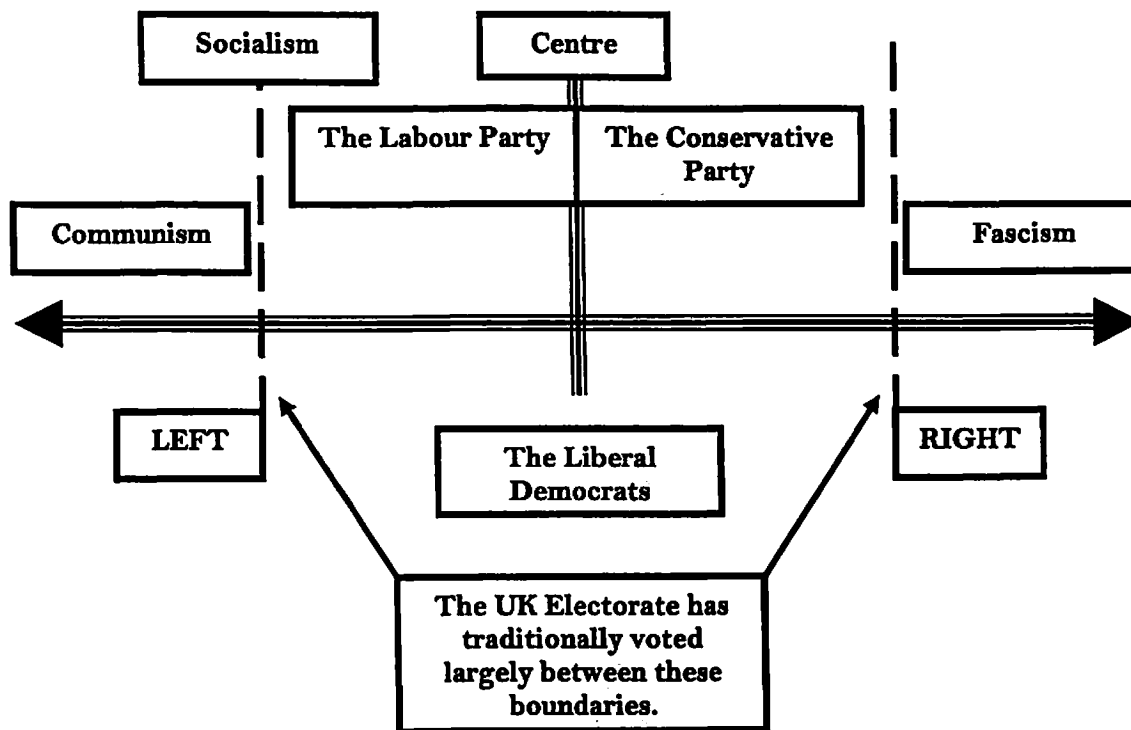


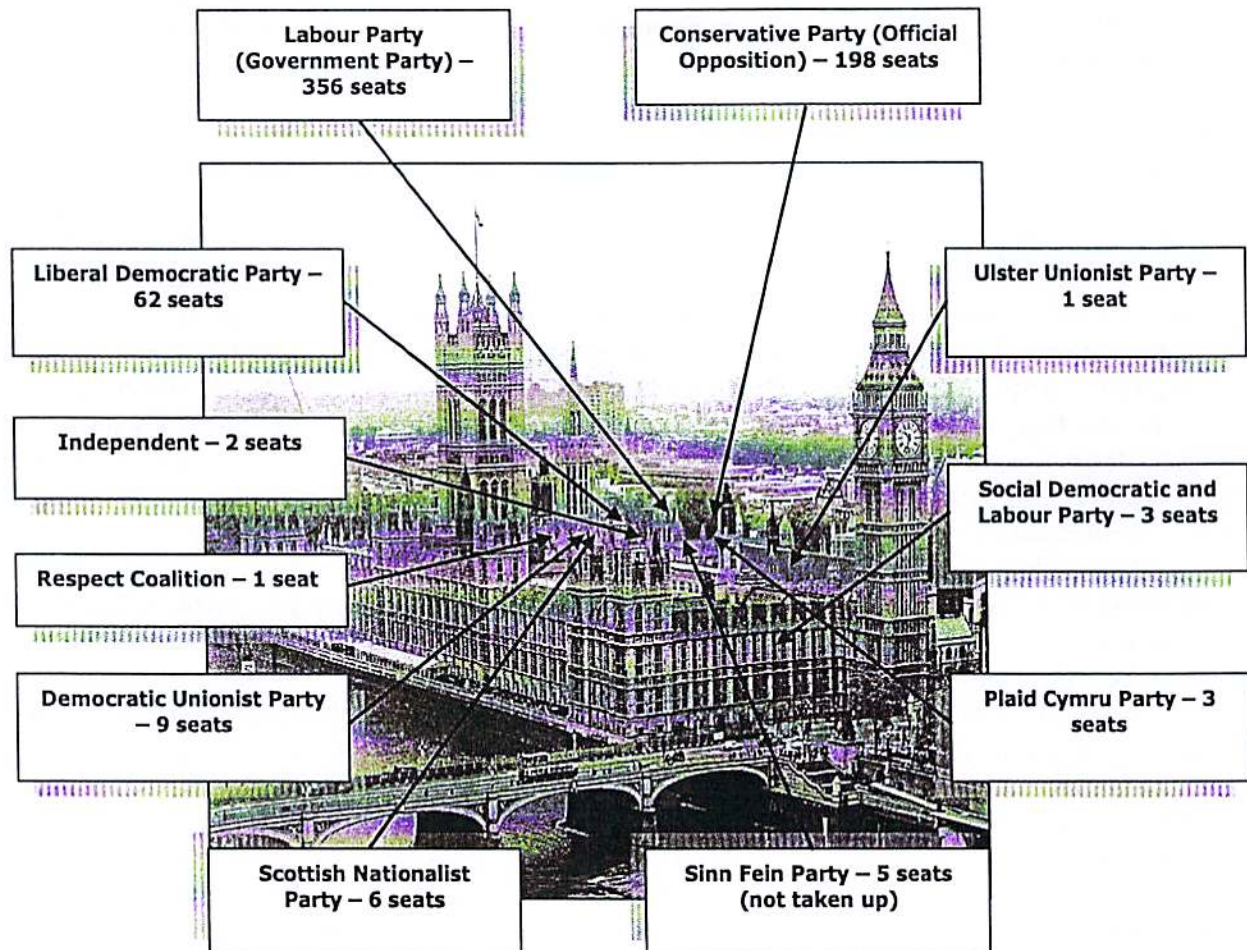## The main characteristics of the party system in the UK

The study of party systems has already been mentioned when we discussed voting methods, but we'll say something about it here as well. Parties fight elections at a variety of levels in the United Kingdom but, with short-lived exceptions, just two major parties have contested to form a national government. Since the 1930s this has been the Conservative and Labour Parties, and the years since 1945 saw the Conservative Party dominating the situation with Labour Governments enjoying just twenty-six years in power by 2007. At one point, the UK appeared to have a dominant party system under the Conservatives, who enjoyed nearly eighteen years of uninterrupted government from 1979.

Some would argue, as we've seen, that the system is a two-party system, with government changing hands between them from time to time, while others point to a two-and-a-half or three-party system since the 1970s, when the third largest national party, now the Liberal Democrats, has exercised enough influence to be considered crucial (for example in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly). Another way of looking at it is that the UK has a multi-party system, especially on the day of the election when a large number of parties contest most of the seats across the UK. It is possible to question the last two suggestions on a national level in that simple plurality voting has always prevented smaller parties from forming a government, even though governments have sometimes had to rely on the smaller parties to win votes in the Commons, as did the Labour Governments in the 1970s, and Major's Conservative administration after 1992. We'll repeat the fact that in 2005 the two major parties still held 554 seats out of a total of 646 and no third party showed any likelihood of affecting the balance in any important way.

Do you remember why the idea of a dominant party system is also suspect? No government has won more than 50% of the votes since the 1930s, and voting support for the two main parties is usually closer than the victory in seats would indicate. What is likely to happen is that the natural cycles of two main parties exchanging places as governments may simply slow down. The 2005 election did see a third term for Labour, but it was still expected that this time in power would at some point come to an end.

## The party system today – is it changing?

Parties in the UK are also represented in local elections, the European Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, Scottish Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Greater London Assembly.

**Labour Party (Government Party) – 356 seats**

**Conservative Party (Official Opposition) – 198 seats**

**Liberal Democratic Party – 62 seats**

**Ulster Unionist Party – 1 seat**

**Independent – 2 seats**

**Social Democratic and Labour Party – 3 seats**

**Respect Coalition – 1 seat**

**Democratic Unionist Party – 9 seats**

**Plaid Cymru Party – 3 seats**

**Scottish Nationalist Party – 6 seats**

**Sinn Fein Party – 5 seats (not taken up)**

## A multiparty system?

We've also seen the arguments that because of these new voting methods we are experiencing a more multi-party approach to voting in the UK, at least in certain types of elections. We may not yet be at a multi-party system in General and Local elections, but the pressure is growing on governments to reform the voting system to allow smaller parties the political power that their growing support seems to demand. In 2005 Professor Dunleavy claimed that the move to proportional representation in General Elections was becoming 'inevitable', partly because the UK was rapidly moving towards a multi-party system at different levels, and that this would lead to public pressure on governments to change to a voting system that would better reflect the support that these smaller parties were getting. It would not be true to say that the UK was in all respects a multi-party system yet, but the introduction of alternative voting systems since 1997 has certainly encouraged support for alternative parties such as UKIP, the Green Party, and even more extreme parties such as the BNP. Party politics are not based so much on ideologies now as on more practical vote-winning policies such as providing efficient public services and controlling immigration. The move to the centre of the three main parties has also encouraged other smaller parties to stand on more particular issues, such as the SNP, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, and the Respect Party, and these are becoming surprisingly successful where elections have moved from FPTP, as we've already seen.

democracy ⟵ what is the debate in terms of politics?

*'How effective are political parties in promoting political participation?'* (25 marks)

'Political participation can be achieved in a number of ways, and political parties can play a major part in that process. In the first place, parties will encourage individuals to participate by putting forward candidates to stand for them in elections at various levels. This in turn implies an invitation to the electorate to participate in politics by voting in those elections. Sometimes, parties can do this very successfully, as traditionally happened in General Elections, or in the devolution elections. Smaller parties can also successfully encourage this type of participation, as did the UK Independence Party in the European Elections of 1999 and 2004, the Respect Coalition Party in 2005, and the Scottish Nationalist Party in 2007. ✓

Political parties will also encourage that participation by representing the electorate at various levels, most importantly in the Westminster Parliament, but also in local, regional, and European elections. If voters feel themselves to be genuinely represented, then greater participation is likely in elections, and the turnout will be higher. Political participation will also be encouraged through party activity through the recruitment of members. In the run up to the 1997 General Election, the New Labour Party increased its membership significantly, and in certain circumstances smaller parties will find themselves with growing membership, as did the Scottish Nationalist Party during the 1980s and the United Kingdom Independence Party towards the end of the 1990s. Members of political parties can participate in many ways, including canvassing, distributing leaflets, and raising funds. The Labour Party also encouraged participation by introducing many more referendums on a range of issues, such as devolution, local mayors, and regional government in England. This type of direct democracy has often led to healthier turnouts when required and further participation has been encouraged by the widespread use of public consultation on a wide range of issues. ✓

There are limits to the success of this promotion of public participation. Turnout for elections in the UK has shown recent signs of decreasing. General Elections in particular have proved disappointing, with a turnout of just 59.4% in 2001, and barely 2% above that in 2005. At less than 30%, the turnout for the 1999 European elections was the lowest in Europe, and turnout for local elections in England and Wales have long been noted for poor voter participation, averaging about 30%. Membership of political parties has decreased significantly, despite the recruitment drive of the Labour Party in 1997. By 2005, the Conservative Party had less than 300,000 members, and the Labour Party was down to less than 200,000. About 25% of the UK population is said to be 'politically inactive'. Representation by parties is also limited, given the use of FPTP in local elections in England and Wales, and there are relatively few MPs who are women or who come from ethnic minorities. A public poll of 2005 showed that 60% of those interviewed at the start of the election campaign were already disillusioned with the arguments. Many more of the electorate, especially younger voters, will prefer to join pressure groups than political parties. Political parties therefore only enjoy a very limited success in the promotion of political participation.'

*Examiner's comment: A fairly detailed answer that requires not only factual knowledge and understanding, but also some element of judgement as to which side of the argument is the stronger. You'll only get high marks if you can provide this. Here, 'to what extent' gives you the chance to show both sides of the argument, and to decide whether parties do really promote political participation.*

Statistics

Point/Example

Examples