The End of Duopoly?
The British Party System in Transformation

Klaus Detterbeck and Klaus Stolz

For decades, British politics centered around competition between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. Electoral alignment was stable, based on a rather robust class cleavage under which the two parties successfully channelled basically all significant political demands (Rose and McAllister 1983). As a role model for a perfect two-party system, both parties absorbed the overwhelming majority of votes. Third parties were little more than side notices. On average, the duopoly aggregated 91 per cent of the votes and 98 per cent of the seats in the general elections between 1945 and 1970 (Norton 1994: 110). Each of the elections in this period produced single-majority governments, though some narrow victories in 1950 and 1964 prompted early elections shortly after the original polls. Labour and Conservatives alternated in office while sharing the broad post-war consensus around Keynesianism and the development of a comprehensive welfare state (Webb 2004: 20-21).

Since the 1970s, the British two-party system has come under enormous pressure. A series of new social and political challenges, ranging from economic decline and the problems of the welfare state to the rise of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, undermined the electorate's trust in both major parties. While ideological polarization increased with the advent of Thatcherism, the number of loyal voters shrank considerably during that period (Webb 2004: 23). Looking at general elections between 1974 and 2005, the average vote share of the duopoly fell to 74 per cent. To quite some extent, Labour and the Conservatives have thus lost their capacity to integrate (nearly) all voters into their two camps.

Although the two-party system has been eroding at the electoral level for quite some time, the majoritarian electoral system ("first past the post") had preserved the parliamentary dominance of the two major parties in Britain. In the set of elections we just looked at, from 1974 to 2005, the duopoly still held 92 per cent of all seats. Given the unbroken logic of bi-partism at Westminster, single-party governments remained the norm. The long period of Conservative majorities (1979-1998) gave way to three successive victories by the Labour Party (1998-2010).

The pattern was finally broken by the General Election of 2010, when a hung parliament led to the formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition – the first formal coalition government in Britain since WWII. Also for the first time, Conservatives and Labour commanded less than two thirds of the vote. The General Election of 2015, though, seems to have brought the British party system back on track. After all, the vote share of the Labour/Conservative duopoly has increased again slightly to 67.2 per

cent and the Conservatives were able to form another one-party majority government. In the snap elections of 2017, the duopoly arguably bounced back even stronger. The two parties assembled 82 per cent of the votes and 89 per cent of the seats. However, the results of 2015 and 2017 also provide ample evidence that the coalition interval was more than a mere historical accident and that the British party system is indeed being substantially transformed.

A continuing *fragmentation* of the party system is best expressed by the increased number of "third" parties with significant electoral support and/or parliamentary representation. In 2015, the Liberal Democrats, the major "third" party in Britain since 1922, lost its position to the Scottish National Party in terms of seats and to UKIP in terms of vote share while also being challenged by a strengthened Green Party. Together these developments have pushed the effective number of parties in the United Kingdom to a record high. In 2017, despite the increased vote share of the duopoly no clear parliamentary majority emerged from the polls. The Conservative Party had to form a minority government supported by the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party from the outside.

The rise of UKIP, which gained only one MP but 120 second places (!) and 12.6 per cent of the vote, and the tremendous success of the SNP in Scotland in the 2015 elections also signalled a profound *polarization* of the party system. Challenging the two major parties on the traditional socio-economic dimension from right and left respectively, they also introduced quite radical constitutional options (exit from the EU and the break-up of Britain) into the mainstream political debate. The 2017 elections which took place under the shadow of the Brexit decision saw a breakdown of the UKIP vote. This may imply that the decision to leave the EU has put the debate to rest. However, given the strong cleavages among the electorate on what to expect from Brexit, it seems likely that polarization on the European issue will remain. Surveys show that if voters were forced to choose between limiting EU migration and future access to the European single market, the dividing line between the Leave and the Remain camp is indeed very strong (Curtice 2017). In a similar vein, the Scottish vote – dashing SNP hopes and strengthening the Tories – indicated that the question of Scottish independence has strong potential to divide supporters and opponents in the years to come. Finally, Labour's (successful) leftist campaign has re-opened political debates on more traditional social and economic policies, including taxation and welfare spending.

A final tendency that seems to have accelerated over the last few elections is the growing *geographic divergence* of voting behavior in Britain and thus the differentiation of a single British party system into distinct subsystems. This might best be seen in the electoral split between England and Scotland, yet can also be recognized in the profound differences between electoral results within England (North, East, London etc.). With

some slight exaggeration, one may say that there were different election campaigns fought on different issues in England, Scotland and Wales, not to speak of Northern Ireland.

In this volume, we want to take stock of these complex transformation processes at work, put them into historical and comparative context and explore their various repercussions.

This book project had its origin in a conference held by the German Association for the Study of British History and Politics on 29-30 April 2016 in Mülheim/Ruhr, Germany. At the conference, German and British scholars discussed the results of the general election of 2015 and its significance for the future of British politics and the British party system. Most of the chapters in our volume derive directly from papers given at this conference. Other contributions were commissioned in order to fill some obvious gaps in the structure of the book. A couple of unforeseeable events, though, gave rise to rather more redrafts and revisions than are customary in our trade. The first of these events was the Brexit referendum with its rather unexpected result in June 2016. Obviously, a game changer of such a magnitude would have to be included in any analysis that did not want to be outdated before it is even published. Then, just when most of the revised contributions had come in, Theresa May decided it was time to call another UK general election, plunging us into a dilemma: As many manuscripts are closely focussed on the 2015 election, to ask for another "revision" based on the 2017 results would have pushed the patience of our authors to their limits. To disregard the new developments, on the other hand, could have been seen as negligent. In the event, we decided to go for a third way. The authors were granted the opportunity to supplement their original article (focussed on 2015) with a postscript that put their previous analysis into perspective. This structure not only brings our discussion of the transformation of the British party system up-to-date, it also shows how well many of the arguments have stood the test of time.

In the structure of this volume we depict the transformations of the British party system from a number of different perspectives. After the general introduction provided in this first chapter we start our investigation pursuing a comparative approach. Two chapters will trace recent developments within European party systems and European party organisations locating the British case within this historical and institutional context. The next two contributions are meant to carve out some major challenges and challengers to the duopoly of Labour and the Conservatives. In the third pair of articles the perspective is reversed. Now the focus is on the two main British parties and their strategic choices and dilemmas facing these challenges. The last section finally draws on the territorial dimension of British elections and the British party system, pointing to ongoing processes of electoral and party system divergence.

Kicking off the debate, *Alex Voss* and *Danny Michelsen* compare factors for party system change in Great Britain and Western Europe. Working

from an extensive empirical database that the authors have put together, they study levels of electoral volatility, party system fragmentation and polarization. Is Westminster following patterns that developed earlier in other European democracies (as a "late bloomer") or is it a special case? The authors come up with some very interesting findings. Voting patterns in the UK are characterized by a steady growth in average volatility over time. Voss and Michelsen claim that the British case actually fits this general narrative of European political history much better than most of the other countries. With respect to party system fragmentation, the UK seems to be catching up to European levels in the increase of the effective number of electoral parties. The picture is different, however, when looking at parliamentary representation, due to the well-known effect of the electoral system. The authors then draw on data from the party manifesto project when discussing polarization. They hardly find a clear Western European trend in the evolution of ideological distances between parties. However, for a majority of cases, including the UK, policy convergence seems to describe the development better than polarization. The authors add a new perspective on this when discussing the Brexit referendum. According to their data, party affiliation has offered relatively few cues for voters in their decision on remaining or leaving the EU, given the long-standing internal conflicts on this issue within both major parties. Voss and Michelsen conclude that the British case is a curious one, which can only partly be understood by calling it either a laggard or a special case.

One aspect they strongly emphasize is the importance of intra-party factors for the examination of party systems. *Klaus Detterbeck* takes up this point in his contribution when comparing party organizational adaptation to party system change. The chapter takes the cartel party thesis as theoretical starting point. The thesis holds that parties have become more vulnerable as an effect of weaker linkages to civil society but have strategically employed their privileged position in state institutions to secure organizational survival. By analyzing recent comparative work, Detterbeck asks whether party adaptation, seen through the lens of the cartel thesis, has actually saved parties from the threats of vulnerability. Three core elements of the cartel thesis are studied: the cartelization of privileges, the depoliticization of policy spaces and the ascendancy of the party in public office. The empirical data shows a complex picture. Public subsidies to parties have helped to overcome organizational weaknesses, often not excluding but rather strengthening newcomer parties. In the British case, cartel tendencies have been comparatively weak. Still, consensus on the rules of the political game between the mainstream parties has helped to restrict party competition for quite some time. Depoliticization is discussed by the author with a view to the (still open) "do parties matter" debate. The rise of populism adds another twist to the debate on the narrowing of policy spaces. The author then looks at party

primaries as an increasingly important element of the internal decision-making of parties. The empirical analysis shows that primaries are most often introduced and also work more competitively when parties find themselves in difficult times. In his conclusion, Detterbeck argues that adaptive strategies are not likely to reduce the vulnerability of parties.

After these comparative analyses, *Alistair Clark's* contribution is the first to extensively plunge into the many peculiarities of the UK party system. Discussing major electoral, political and regulatory changes as well as the impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum, he disentangles short-term from long-term developments, informal from formal rules and, last but not least, lasting from cursory phenomena. One thing that seems clear to him is that electoral fragmentation and volatility are here to stay. However, the political development depicted with the most lasting effect on the UK party system is neither the LibDems short-lived ascent to government (2010-2015) nor the (rather limited) capacity of UKIP and the SNP to increase their parliamentary representation at Westminster. Instead, it is Labour's election of a radical left-winger as their new leader in 2015 that may determine their electoral fate (and thus the development of the UK party system) for years to come. A largely unnoticed set of changes has come from the increasing number of bodies regulating political competition in the UK, such as the Electoral Commission, Boundary Commissions and the broadcast regulator OfCom, whose recent rulings seemed to favour the Conservatives. Thus, even though Brexit bears the potential of intra-party conflict for the Conservatives, Clark could envisage a period of Conservative predominance that would be inconsistent with the tradetional two-party system yet not completely new to British politics. The picture post-2017 does not look so favourable for the party. British party politics seems at a critical juncture as a result of the main parties' difficulties and divisions over Brexit.

Complementing Clark's broad-brushed tour d'horizon, *Tim Niendorf's* contribution studies one challenger to the British duopoly in more detail: UKIP. Drawing on conceptual frameworks from Harmel/Janda, Caramani and Meguid, he evaluates UKIP's location on a major (mainstream, catch-all) – minor (newcomer, niche party) party continuum and its potential to challenge the duopolistic nature of the British party system. On a programmatic level he points at UKIP's successful strategy to claim issue ownership on Europe and the broadening of its policy scope with the adoption of a radical anti-immigration stance, yet he doubts that the electorate is aware of any of its other policy proposals. In electoral terms its appeal to a Europhobic petty bourgeoisie as well as to a socially conservative working class and its rather homogenous national reach out (at least in England and Wales) yielded not only spectacular vote share gains (eg. the EP election of 2013 and the GE of 2015) but also a rather solid core vote. However, heavily penalised by the FPTP electoral system, there seems to be little room for improving their rather unsatisfactory

parliamentary presence. This rather pessimistic outlook is further supported by the organisational weakness of the party and its tendency for internal ideological strife. Taken together, Niendorf thus acknowledges the tremendous inroads UKIP has made into the traditional electorate of the Conservative/Labour duopoly yet dismisses any claims that they could break the mould of British politics. UKIP's disastrous results at the 2017 election have clearly shown the accuracy of this analysis.

In the first article focusing on the (former) duopolists, *Tim Bale* examines harmony and disharmony inside the Conservative Party. He argues that the level of internal policy disagreement appears to be too limited to threaten the Tories' governing role. In outlining this argument, the chapter discusses the repercussions of the soft and hard variants of Brexit for party unity, intra-party arguments around issues of the wider foreign and defense policy, struggles over the future of the NHS and the welfare state more generally as well as the question of a return to selective grammar schools in education policy. These lines of division are there and they are serious for the Conservatives, but, as Bale points out, the areas of agreement seem strong enough to balance this out. The willingness, even if with gritted teeth, by the small band of Tory Europhiles to make Brexit work and to keep the British union alive is important in this respect. The party also closes ranks in its support for the special relationship with the US, the Trident nuclear deterrent and a series of other foreign policy issues in which they see Britain's position in the world threatened by a leftist Labour opposition under Jeremy Corbyn. In a similar vein, fighting back Corbyn's idea for domestic politics works as glue for uniting the Conservatives in defending limited public spending, labour market regulation and taxation. The author also sees consensus on some mild form of cultural modernization with respect to gender and racial equality or same-sex marriage, which is not agitating the right flank of the party and its electorate too much. Other policy challenges such as housing, elderly care and the low level of economic productivity may well prove very problematic for the party but so far have not led to open divisions. In the end, Bale concludes that much will depend on Theresa May's leadership qualities and her ability to keep the party and its electorate together.

The chapter by *Uwe Jun* discusses the development of the Labour Party since its return to the opposition benches. The author points out that disputes between supporters of the New Labour legacy and a more traditional social-democratic approach which already surrounded the election of Ed Miliband in 2010 paved the way for Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters. The electoral defeat in 2015 added to this. Jun names the low economic competence voters assigned to Labour, the low popularity of Miliband as challenger to PM David Cameron, and the failure to deliver a coherent strategic message in party competition as central factors here. Corbyn stepped in after Miliband resigned, taking advantage of the new

rules for the party primary in choosing the party leader. Jun stresses the importance of Momentum, a left-wing grassroots movement, which also helped Corbyn to survive the deselection process in 2016. The increase in new, leftist members secured him a clear victory over his critics in the parliamentary party and beyond. In a next step, the chapter seeks to trace the programmatic evolution of Labour under Corbyn. The author finds quite a number of similarities to left-wing populism in other European countries. Among these are claims to defend the social rights of the people against the economic rapaciousness of the elite and a strong appeal to egalitarianism and anti-austerity politics. Jun concludes that the break with the policy of New Labour has set the party on a path in which winning elections is secondary to changing political discourses in the name of social transformation.

In our last section we emphasise the territorial dimension of British politics. In his longitudinal study on the UK's path to multipartism (1900-2015) *Philip Dieckmann* takes issue with "Duverger's law" which stipulates that countries with single-member district plurality systems (e.g. first-past-the-post systems) tend to produce bipartite party systems. Focussing on the results on the constituency level, he shows regional electoral divergence to be a major blind spot in Duverger's theory. Contrary to Duverger's reasoning and despite direct mechanical constraints and the consequential detrimental psychological effects, small parties have considerably increased both their vote share and their number of parliamentary seats in the UK since the 1970s, with a further dramatic acceleration of intra-district party competition since 1997. While the two major parties still dominate the parliamentary arena, they have increasingly been defeated by different minor parties in different regions and constituencies. A major cause for this deviation is seen in the regionalisation and localisation of both party strategies and voter behaviour. It is thus the increasing significance of territory that discloses the limits of Duverger's law. Dieckmann in his chapter takes great pains to visualize these developments by means of Nagayama triangles and figures charting the changing "effective number of parties" (ENP) – according to Laakso and Taagepera – on the constituency level.

In the final contribution to this volume *Klaus Stolz* asks what the 2015 election can tell us about the existence and the future of Britain as a nation and a state. His analysis is thus based on an intermediate level of aggregation, that of the constituent nations of the UK: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Juxtaposing the antithetic discourses of "endism" and "fifth nation", he argues that the extreme level of electoral divergence between the UK's constituent parts exhibited at the 2015 election questions the very idea of Britain as a fifth nation and poses serious problems for the unity of the British state. Empirical evidence for this argument comes from a number of observations: the territorial polarization of electoral campaigns, the territorial differentiation of a

formerly British party system, the increasing significance of nationalist parties in Scotland and Northern Ireland and the (subsequent) Englishing of the two major unionist parties, Labour and the Conservatives, tendencies that have weakened yet are still to be seen at the 2017 election. Taken together, these developments make it difficult to see how UK general elections can still reflect or generate "primordial unionism", a non-instrumental attachment and loyalty to the UK that some scholars see as the essential glue of the British nation. Devoid of such ideological cohesion, the survival of the post-Brexit British state may well depend on its perceived instrumental utility in all its constituent nations.

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