

# The Two-Party System

## The stranglehold on political elections

Most people, young or old, growing up and living in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom will have scant recollections of fringe political parties winning elections. Most people will have vivid memories of either one of the two mainstream parties locking out the front row government and opposition benches: Democratic and Republican in the United States and Conservative and Labour in the United Kingdom.

The Democratic Party traces its origins back to 1828, when Martin van Buren formed a coalition of Jeffersonian Republicans in support of Andrew Jackson's run for office. The Republican Party, founded in 1854, is a follow-up to the disbanded Whig Party. So too was the Whig Party present in the United Kingdom in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sir Robert Walpole, its first Prime Minister in the modern sense, in 1721, was a Whig. The Tory Party, founded in 1678, had had to wait a lengthy eighty six years before it would usher in its first duly elected Prime Minister, in 1764. The party was dissolved in 1834, after it transmogrified into the newly created Conservative Party as part of a merger with two more parties—the Liberal Unionist Party and National Liberal Party. The Labour Party, founded in 1900, got its first taste of power in 1924, with Ramsay MacDonald serving as Prime Minister. Since 1922, the Palace of Westminster has not been controlled by any party other than Conservative or Labour.

Solely having two parties dominating the political landscape is nothing revolutionary. The Democratic-Republican Party, founded by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, won seven elections on the trot, from 1800 to 1828, whereas the party it stood against, the Federalist Party, had won nothing since John Adams in 1796, but was nonetheless the only credible opposition in the fray. In the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister's office exchanged hands between Whig and Tory for two centuries spanning the reigns of King George I to Queen Victoria.

Political science covers the phenomenon of the two-party system as a research theme. At the heart of the study lies the political spectrum—a system of classifying different political positions upon one or more geometric axes—with the socialist/liberal side to the left, the moderate/centrist side in the middle, and the capitalist/conservative side to the right. The left wing/right wing classification derives from the seating positions in the post-revolutionary French parliament of 1789-1799, with the old order advocating a restoration of the monarchy sitting on the right side, and the commoners advocating a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor sitting on the left side. Thus did the right come to be defined as standing for traditional conservative values and the left for progressive social reform and civil liberties. A broad definition of the aforementioned camps is to call them centre-left and centre-right, and to classify them as 'mainstream'. At the extreme edges of the spectrum lie the far-left and the far-right, whose politics are at polar opposites of one another, but, both intrinsically militant and ideologically charged. On one side, we find anti-capitalist, anti-fascist ideals, whereas on the other side, we find ideals espousing ultra-nationalism and fascism. Liberalism can, at times, be classified as either left wing (social liberalism) or right wing (economic liberalism) depending on context; just as progressivism can overlap between left wing/right wing, e.g. overthrowing dictatorships for democracies by means of force (neoconservatism).