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BRITISH PARTY SYSTEM CHANGE. THE IMPACT OF CHANGING VOTERS, DEVOLUTION AND CABINET COALITION ON THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

The article describes the analysis of the modern British party system in the age of changes and transformations. In particular, it analyzes the changes in the electorate as well as the legal-institutional conditions which, in consequence, led to a shift in the balance of power between the political parties on the parliamentary level that occurred after the 2010 general election. Forming a coalition in the Parliament and the Cabinet marked the beginning of an ideologically and politically difficult rule of two parties which both politicians and voters alike had to learn. I argue that the above circumstances led to a certain “crisis” not only in the way administration is handled but also in the society’s political participation. Simultaneously, it relates to what I view as a change in the British party system. The present article largely focuses on the transformations within the British party system that occurred in the early 21st century, on the genesis of the processes which affects the transformations in the above system, as well as on the causes and effects of these phenomena.

Key words

British party system, coalition government, devolution, general elections, political participation

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1. Introduction

The British party system reflects the socio-political diversity of the British nation. The majority voting system and the systemic conditions leading to the demarcation into the ruling party and the opposing party meant that the British parliamentary system has been a two-party one from its very beginnings. In spite of there being only two, albeit relevant, parties capable of establishing a government, the House of Commons is comprised of representatives of other (mostly national) parties. Since the end of the 20th century, however, there has been a noticeable decrease in the support for the two main parties which led to a transformation on the parliamentary level that occurred after the 2010 general election. Forming a coalition in the Parliament and the Cabinet marked the beginning of an ideologically and politically difficult rule of two parties which both politicians and voters alike had to learn. I acknowledge that this has arguably led to a certain ambiguous “crisis” which can be interpreted as a breakthrough/change/collapse/turning point/stalemate or the beginning of something new. It does not only affect the way in which administration is handled (in a coalition Cabinet), but also the changes within the society’s political participation. At the same time, it relates to what I view as a change in the British party system.

The present article largely focuses on the transformations within the British party system that occurred in the early 21st century, on the genesis of the processes which affects the transformations in the above system, as well as the causes and effects of these phenomena. Thus, the following questions must be raised: To what extent changes in the electorate and in the territorial structure have eroded the electoral support of the two main parties? How to define the modern party system of the United Kingdom? In an attempt to answer the above questions, I propose the following hypotheses: the current party system on the Parliament level reflects the gradual changes in the voters’ electoral preferences that have been visible during the elections since the 1970s. Consequently, the British party system has undergone certain changes; the two-party model has been replaced by a two-and-a-half-party model due to the increasing relevance of the Liberal Democrats party.

In this article I will elucidate the genesis of the problem and describe the electorate as well as the its transformations since the 1970s. Secondly, considering the legal-institutional conditions, I will analyze the process of devolution which added new dimensions to political rivalry in the British system. The next element is the 2010 general election and its consequences: the coalition government and an increase in the political participation of citizens. At the end of the

article I will add a theoretical discussion of the British party system in order to describe the changes it has been undergoing as seen from the perspective of the party system typology.

2. Electorate

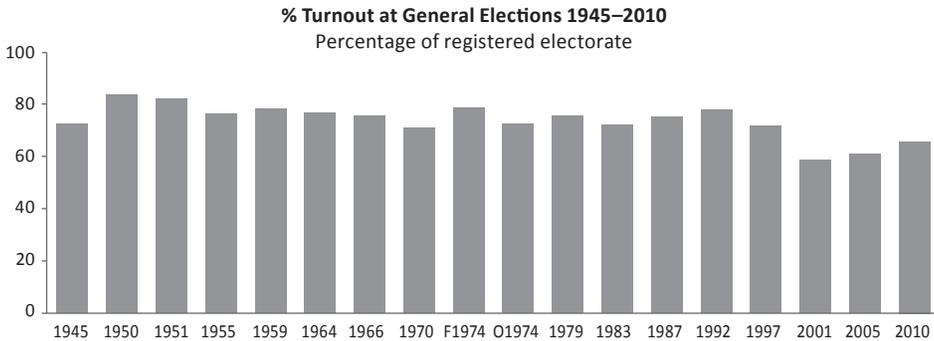
The electorate is a relevant factor which shapes the type of a given party system. In this context, an analysis of support for individual political parties and the turnout of voters is a crucial element of research. By studying the aggregation index¹, the value of which was gradually decreasing in the second half of the 20th century (as follows: 1945–1979 at 15.43; 1980–1990 at 13.23; 1991–2005 at 7.93), it can be stated that since the 1980s the support for the two main parties has been decreasing, which triggered a decentralization effect in the system (Antoszewski & Herbut, 2006, pp. 132–133). The genesis of this phenomenon should be sought in the 1970s when the first clear lack of the division into two major parties (i.e. the necessity to form a coalition government in the 1974) could be observed along with a decrease in their dominance and, in consequence, an increase in the importance of third parties. At the parliamentary level this was only confirmed in the year 2010. The fact that the two-party system did not weaken in the House of Commons for so long proves that the British party system has a clear institutional basis instead of a social one (Zuba, 2012, pp. 99–100). Thus, it may be expected that unlocking the institutional channels to strengthen the minor parties (i.e. the proportional electoral system to the EP since 1999 or the devolution process) will cause or hasten the transformation of the party system.

The cause and effect of the above is the weakening of the bond between politicians and voters. While until the end of the 1960s the British political parties could hold ca. 45% of the aligned electorate, currently the percentage of voters who declare their loyalty to a particular party is only at between 10 and 20 per cent and is continuously dwindling. This is certainly related to the abovementioned tendency, but it is also a result of the evolution of political parties. The process of departing from mass-based parties towards catch-all parties caused a decline in the membership of British political parties as well. Moreover, new social divisions appeared which were not based on class. Due to

¹ An index created by L. Mayer which measures the share of the largest party in comparison with the number of parties holding seats in the parliament. Higher index signifies a more stable and consistent party system (Mayer, 1980).

the decolonization process, the United Kingdom has merely become a European country thus beginning new, harsh social conflicts which rose on the grounds of separatism in Scotland, Wales and Ulster, racial struggles, as well as disputes concerning the United Kingdom's standpoint towards the European Union (Zięba, 1996). In consequence, the British society was split, thus creating the foundations for the developing electoral support for third parties and extending the dividing line beyond the conservatism vs. social democracy scale. Not only Liberal Democrats, but also many smaller parties like the British National Party, the Green Party or the UK Independence Party benefit from this situation. It is accompanied by a decreasing confidence in the ruling parties (39% in 1974, 16% in 2009). More and more often, voters wish to create representative democracy comprised of people who focus on the same issues. At the same time, they feel that modern politicians pay no attention to those issues that are important to Great Britain and refuse to cooperate towards common goals. Furthermore, voters also feel that politicians represent their sponsors instead of the electorate (Heath, 2011). The above assessment of political life severely impacts the number of British voters partaking in the elections.

The consequence of the fading bond between the voters on the one hand and politicians and political parties on the other is the continuously decreasing turnout which shapes a new balance of power in the Parliament. In turn, the citizens' increasing political activity after the election with a simultaneously decreasing confidence in the ruling party (or parties since 2010) is another interesting indicator of the above relation. As far as the first element is concerned, it needs to be noticed that nowadays fewer and fewer British people partake in the Elections to the House of Commons (see: Fig. 1). In 2005 the turnout of voters amounted to 61.5% and it was the second lowest score in post-World War II history. The two major parties gathered 67.5% of votes – the lowest post-war percentage in history. It is perhaps for this reason that before the 2010 election political parties concentrated not only on convincing people to cast votes on their own party, but also on encouraging citizens to take part in the election in the first place. Despite the effort, the turnout increased by just four points and amounted to 65.1%, the two major parties receiving 65.1% of votes (Heath, 2011). It is essential to note that the decline in turnout was largely observed among young adults (aged 18–24 years old) who later expressed their dissatisfaction with the government policies through various forms of protests.

Fig. 1. Turnout at general elections in 1945–2010

Source: <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN02633/turnout-social-indicators-page> (November 2, 2013).

3. Devolution

The devolution bills passed in the United Kingdom at the end of the 20th century added new dimensions to political rivalry. In order to answer the individual country's aspirations towards greater autonomy, national parliaments were formed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In this case, devolution meant that power was devolved, rather than transferred, as in the case of federations (Bogdanor, 2001, p. 3). As a result of this reform, new political and legal institutions had to be created, as well as a compensatory voting system and regional coalition governments had to be created. The voting system used for regional elections combined the elements of the majority system and the proportional system, thus preventing the dominance of one party in the assembly (Kaczorowska, 2007).

Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik (2012, p. 32) notices that, as far as regional rivalries are concerned, modern party systems studied on a central level are defined differently. This may mean that two separate party systems emerge within a single political system, or, as Bardi & Mair (2008, pp. 147–166) point out, a multidimensional party system is generated. Thus, it would be more appropriate to acknowledge party systems as multidimensional phenomena within which at least a couple of plains of internal diversity can be observed. The horizontal plain appears when a political system is being decentralized and rivalries not only emerge on separate plains, but may concern the same as well as different parties (Sobolewska-Myślik, 2012, pp. 32–35).

The Scotland Act (1998) established the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Executive. At the same time, a mixed-member electoral system to the Scottish Parliament was established, in which the elector casts two votes – the first vote is for a local constituency candidate, and the second one is for the regional list. Scotland is divided into 73 constituencies and each constituency elects one Member of Scottish Parliament (MSP). They are elected by first past the post system as the elector's first vote. The second vote is used to elect 56 additional members. Scotland is divided into 8 parliamentary regions and each region elects 7 regional MSPs. In the second vote the voter votes for a party rather than a candidate. The parties are then allocated a number of additional members to make the overall result more proportional (The Electoral System for the Scottish Parliament). The regional list system constitutes a corrective measure to the percentages of votes acquired by moderately supported parties, i.e. those parties that do not have enough support to win in single-member constituencies. As a result of such an electoral system, a government model comes into existence which departs from the Westminster model. After the Scottish 1999 and 2003 nation elections a coalition government was formed by the Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats, whereas in 2007 and 2011 the Scottish National Party gathered enough support to form a single-party government.

The National Assembly for Wales (established in The Wales Act, 1998) comprises 60 member elected by the use of a mixed-member electoral system. The first vote is for a local constituency Member. A Member is elected for each of the 40 constituencies in Wales by the first past the post system. The second vote is to elect a regional Member. Regional Members are elected by a form of proportional representation known as the Additional Member System, and voters vote for a political party. Each party must supply a list of candidates for the Additional Member seats in rank order. Wales has five electoral regions, and four Members are elected to serve each region (How the Assembly is elected). In 1999, similarly to Scotland, a coalition government was formed by the Welsh Labour Party and the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Later, the Welsh Labour Party asserted its dominance in this system, forming a single-party government in the years 2003 and 2011, as well as a coalition with Plaid Cymru in 2007. Thus, Wales established a moderately multi-party system with one dominant party.

Northern Ireland established the Northern Ireland Assembly in the Good Friday Agreement (Northern Ireland Act, 1998). The assembly comprises 108 members elected in proportional representation general elections based on the STV (*Single Transferable Vote*) system. Six members are chosen from each of the 18 constituencies. In the first stage of counting the votes, first preference votes

are counted and a quota is calculated. The quota is the minimum number of votes a candidate must have to be elected. Any candidate with a number of first preference votes equal to or higher than the quota is elected (Northern Ireland Assembly). During the subsequent elections, Northern Ireland formed an extremely multi-party system between: Ulster Unionist Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party, Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, The Alliance Party, UK Unionist Party, United Unionist Assembly Party, Progressive Unionist Party, and Northern Ireland Women's Coalition.

The establishment of national parliaments and, along with them, a new level of political rivalry (based on different national, legal and institutional conditions) caused the need to create new functional mechanisms as well as organizational structures within the present political parties. The Labour Party experienced the most territorial intraparty conflict but fairly rapidly achieved a new balance between British and Scottish/Welsh party interests. The Conservative Party struggled after its 1997 UK election defeat and failed to adapt to multilevel politics with any consistency. The Liberal Democrats experienced the smoothest adjustment, largely on account of their own federal party constitution (Hopkin & Bradbury, 2006, p. 135). The devolution reforms constituted a challenge for one of the world's oldest systems. Against the background of the long-used simple plurality electoral system for the UK parliament, devolution also involved the innovation of additional member systems, although on different bases.

4. 2010 general election and the coalition government

The formation of the hung parliament as a result of the 2010 general election was a historic event. Admittedly, such a contingency was forecast in the polls, yet did not necessarily mean that they would be reflected in the election results. The reasons for that were twofold. Firstly, the British electoral system, like any other majority system, causes a substantial disproportion in converting the votes to seats. Secondly, hung parliament forecasts appeared twice at the end of the 20th century, but neither of them proved correct in the election results.

In response to the pre-election polls, Nick Clegg, the leader of Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems) announced the possibility of entering into cooperation with the Conservative Party, which, up until that moment, had been impossible due to far too large differences between the parties' political platforms. Since the beginning of the British parliament both factions (known as Whigs and Tories at that time) stood in opposition to one another. Notwithstanding the fact that throughout the centuries both formations have undergone a number of changes

in their structure and platforms, the rift between them has remained unaffected. On the contrary, since Liberal Democrats became left-wing liberals, the platform compatibility with the Conservatives has been virtually non-existent. By stating that “whichever party gets the most votes and the most seats has the first right to seek to govern”. Clegg opened the way to a conservative-liberal coalition. It had no ideological foundation, however, as it was only dictated by both sides’ pragmatism. The Conservatives feared losing power to which they came to after 13 years and the Liberal Democrats did not want to waste the opportunity to be part of the government and realize at least a portion of their own platform.

The relevance of Liberal Democrats rose substantially in the above elections. They were the only party capable of forming a coalition as evident from the number of seats acquired by the individual parties: 306 The Conservative Party, 258 Labour Party, 57 Liberal Democrats out of a total of 650 seats in the House of Commons), as well as being the only ones who could potentially use political blackmail (without a coalition, the minority conservative government would surely collapse). The socio-political situation in 2010 was a novelty not only in the political sphere, because it generated a completely new balance of power (the relevance of three political parties, and a two-and-a-half party system on the parliamentary level), but also in the social sphere, as it encouraged new attitudes among citizens. Among the political factors it is worth noting the 2010 general election resulted in the formation of a coalition – an atypical model in the Westminster system. What is more, the coalition comprised two parties that had no previous history of cooperation, i.e. the descendants of two historically opposing factions: Whigs and Tories. There were difficulties in combining the two different political platforms, which caused a social backlash about those parts of the program which were not realized. The Liberal Democrats’ electors believed that the party would bring the promised “change” – the slogan of the party’s campaign – but in return they got legislative proposals that contradicted the electoral platform.

A few months after the formation of the coalition government, its political program was confronted with the society’s expectations. Students protested on the streets of London and many other British cities in response to the government’s plans to raise the tuition fees. The commencement of the legislative procedure met with a wave of criticism directed especially at the Lib Dems, who always opposed the idea of raising the fee, but accepted it when being part of the coalition. What is more, it was young adults, the strongest Lib Dems electorate, that the party arguably assailed by accepting the above project. Student protests began in November 2010 and lasted until January 2011. The protesters

were joined by secondary school students, trade union representatives, as well as academics. Because of the demonstrations, Cameron's government decided on a compromise in the form of a new method of calculating the income threshold at which graduates are required to pay their loans, as well as concessions for part-time students. Students still continued their demonstrations on the day of the vote, however, with banners depicting Nick Clegg and the caption *liar* (20 tysięcy studentów na ulicach...). During the vote Liberal Democrats failed to achieve unanimity and it proved to be the first political test for the coalition (the bill was accepted with a 323 to 302 votes ratio, where 21 Lib Dems and 6 Conservatives were against it).

Other social groups have also opposed the government's money-saving scheme. One hundred and fifty thousand people protested in the streets of London as early as March 2011 against the government's proposals (similar rallies took place in Glasgow and Belfast as well) (Brytyjczycy nie chcą oszczędzać...). These demonstrations were crucial inasmuch as they overlapped with the campaign before the electoral reform referendum and before the elections to national parliaments. Similar demonstrations also took place in autumn 2012 and spring 2013 (the unemployed against the budget cuts policy, anti-immigration demonstrations, protests against bedroom tax).

For the Liberal Democrats there was one key condition for entering the coalition government, i.e. they wanted an electoral reform which could give them a chance to consolidate their political status. The government prepared a referendum bill concerning the electoral reform that would introduce an electoral system based on the alternative vote (AV) system which would substitute the first past the post (FPP)² formula. The vote took place on 5th May 2011 and was the second nation-wide referendum in history. The majority of the voters (67.9%) rejected the new electoral system project (the turnout was at 42.2%) (UK-wide referendum...). Although one of the potential reasons behind this particular outcome of the referendum was a strong sense of tradition among the British citizens (in this context, political tradition, which causes that a majority electoral system plays a key role in creating a polarized political scene), the importance of political factors should be considered as well. The voters' decision was arguably

² In relative majority systems winners can seldom count on the support of the majority of the electorate (or voters for that matter), as the only thing that matters is the best result in a given constituency. In 2005 only 219 MPs (about 1/3 of all MPs) won by receiving more than 50% votes in their constituencies.

affected by the way both coalition parties had run their campaigns before the referendum. Both sides – one “for” and the second “against” the electoral reform – were expressly critical of each other. David Cameron and his party wanted to maintain the existing relative majority system, which they were criticized for by their coalition partners. Moreover, some voters were disappointed by the fragmentary nature of the changes. Lastly, the result of the referendum showed the voters’ assessment of Lib Dems’ place in the coalition and its attitude towards realizing their own political platform (accusations regarding the drastic money-saving plan and the change of attitude towards students’ tuition fees).

The referendum, the elections (held on the same day) to the national Parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as local elections in some parts of England ended up in Lib Dems’ defeat. Nick Clegg stated that the result was a “bitter blow” for all those people who like him believed in the need for political reform (AV referendum: No vote a bitter blow, says Clegg). After these events, the leader of Liberal Democrats reminded that “it was a coalition of necessity, not of conviction, and that it was right when considering the country’s interest” (AV referendum...). Therefore, contrary to forecasts of many commentators foreshadowing a rapid fall of something that was against the British tradition and customs, the coalition survived its first year. During a meeting with the voters in Stratford, the coalition partners admitted that the difficulties in their rule were due to the country coming out from an economic crisis, but declared that they would strive to rule co-operatively until the end of their term. The declaration was strengthened non-verbally, as the body language of both Cameron and Clegg expressed solidarity and unity: both leaders “stood side by side, motionless, listening intently, underlining seriousness by occasionally tilting their head to one side, and fiddling with their fingers in an uncannily similar fashion” (Collett, 2011).

5. Party system nowadays

In comparison to other countries, the United Kingdom has a unique party system largely dictated by its atypical political and legal system. Due to the lack of formal constitution, the British political parties’ systemic status is regulated by both civil law norms as well as constitutional conventions. Some of its features do not result only from legal provisions, but are an effect of a centuries-old tradition and norms and rules resulting from political practice. With reference to political parties the British legal system provides, among others, for the following:

a two-party system, a majority voting system, the responsibility of the monarch to appoint the winning party's leader as Prime Minister following the election to the House of Commons, parliamentary responsibility of the Cabinet and the government, as well as the sovereignty of the Parliament.

Any description of the British party system should be based on existing classifications used in political science. According to the criteria used in quality-based typologies (La Palombara & Weiner, 1966; Smith, 1980), the party system of the United Kingdom should be defined as a competitive one, although with some limitations resulting from the majority voting system. It is due to these limitations that, for example, a party with 23% support receives just under 9% of seats in the Parliament (vote results for Liberal Democrats in the 2010 election to the House of Commons). This confirms a high level of disproportion between votes cast on a given party and the actual number of seats that it acquired. In this situation, the Gallagher index amounts to 85, which means that the result of the vote is being deformed, which, in turn, causes smaller parties to be under-represented.

One of the responses to the limitations of such a voting system may be the decreasing support for the two strongest parties, which has been observed in the British Parliament since the end of the 20th century. Antoszewski (2004, p. 52, 61) interprets this as a sign that voters are "tired" of rivalry between two parties, and thus support for third parties increases. It causes a reaction within the political parties – their platforms are being shifted towards the center. The platforms of individual parties are getting closer to each other, promoting a centripetal attitude. Research carried out by the Siaroff company confirms that in the 1990 the United Kingdom suffered a moderate religious conflict and a high socioeconomic conflict, whereas the division of attitudes towards foreign affairs was also moderate (Antoszewski, 2000, pp. 21–22). The last typology indicates the existence of a balanced system in which a constitutionally acknowledged opposition (Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition or the so called Shadow Cabinet) provides a counterweight to the ruling party.

Quantitative systemizations make use of a crucial typology created by Jean Blondel (1990, pp. 302–310), who used two variables, namely the number of parties and their size to differentiate two-party, two-and-a-half-party systems, multi-party systems dominated by one specific party, as well as multi-party systems without any dominating party. However, Ryszard Herbut (2006, pp. 118–119) remarked that the way how political parties are counted is vital to such classifications. By assessing the size of parties based on their electoral support,

Herbut distinguished two types of parties – large and small, where a given party's size influences its importance in the interparty relations and connections³. Many small parties exist in the United Kingdom – both on the parliamentary, as well as the electoral level. The latter parties often acquire seats in national parliaments, e.g. the Scottish National Party which has 6 seats in the House of Commons (2013), but it has a majority in the Scottish Parliament thus possibly having a tangible influence on politics and the composition of the Cabinet⁴.

Another indicator that measures a given party's importance in the system is the effective number of parties index (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979) which counts the relative size of a party expressed by the ratio of seats that it has in the Parliament. Using this index, Lijphart (1984) divided party systems according to the following rules. If two parties each have 50% of seats in the Parliament, the effective number of parties amounts to 2.0 and the system is a two-party system. If one party acquires 70% seats and another 30%, the index is at 1.7 and one party has dominated the political scene. With a ratio of 45–40–15, for example, the effective number of parties (ENP) equals 2.6 and the system is a two-and-a-half-party system. In a multi-party system with one dominating party (ratio 45–20–15–10–10) the number is 3.5; and in the case of there being no dominating party (25–25–2–15–10) it amounts to 4.5.

In the United Kingdom between 1945 and 1990 the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) amounted to 2.1; whereas the effective number of electoral parties (ENEP) equaled 2.6. This means that the British parliament

³ Large parties will be a crucial element of the system, but smaller parties do not have to be. Such parties only exist on the electoral level (they do not have any seats in the Parliament, as they have not received enough support) or on the parliamentary level, but their influence on the country's politics is minute, thus they act as opposition. Sometimes these are parties that do not partake in coalition bids, but act as critical observers or manage to become part of the Cabinet and thus may have some influence on certain elements of the government's program. Thus, there is no universal rule that would definitively measure the power of small political parties; their political status is a sum of many factors that are characteristic to a concrete party or political system.

⁴ According to M. Duverger, the two-party system leads to a situation in which several parties may exist in a given country, but only as long as they act as pairs of rivals in each constituency. In those areas where parties cannot compete in elections to the House of Commons, they can still compensate this situation in local elections. Consequently, smaller parties may exist in national parliaments (on a subnational level), as they can receive stronger support in some areas. They can either be autonomous or regional parties, despite being present on the central level (Duverger, 1965).

experienced a division of power between two major parties (which signified the existence of a two-party system). However, the election results show a third party's participation and a shift towards a two-and-a-half-party system. This situation started changing in the 1990s. The ENPP rating of 2.2 in the years 1992–2001 signified a minor increase of other parties' acquisition of seats in the Parliament. Further weakening of the two-and-a-half-party system commenced in the years to come: in 2005 the ENPP for the House of Commons amounted to 2.46; whereas in 2010 – 2.57, which almost perfectly fits the definition of the two-and-a-half-party system (on the electoral level it was 3.59 and 3.71 respectively) (Gallagher, 2014, p. 37).

The above data shows that in our times the constitutional two-party rule is undergoing crucial modifications. The rules for using this kind of typology are ceasing to be valid, as more than two parties have a chance of forming a government and there is duality in social conflicts. The base of the party system, however, still draws strongly from tradition and the voting system rules have remained unchanged. In spite of that, Stephen Ingle points out that the British party system has not met the criteria of a two-party system for many years (Ingle, 2008, pp. 18–19). According to Giovanni Sartori's definition, in a two-party system the two parties must be in position to compete for the absolute majority of seats. However, considering the fact that a number of seats acquired by the two main parties come from the so-called "secure constituencies", Ingle deemed this criterion as only partially met, as there is no competition in some constituencies. The second criterion that is not met in the British system requires one party to win a workable majority, (comprising twenty seats more than its combined opponents). In the 20th century one fourth of parliamentary majorities did not meet this requirement. Moreover, most commentators regarded John Major's majority of twenty-one in 1992 as insufficient, and in 2005 Tony Blair's government, with majority of sixty-six, had great difficulty in putting key pieces of its legislation onto the statute book. The third criterion is the willingness of a party with a majority of seats to govern alone, has been met. Ingle rejected the fourth criterion, i.e. the regular rotation of power between the major parties, as he concluded that both the Liberals and the Labour Party held power for much shorter periods than the Conservatives and almost always secured smaller parliamentary majorities. The last statement is debatable, as the Conservatives have only a couple of years' lead in holding power (amounting to more or less one term in the Parliament), and, as mentioned above, after periods of long-lasting domination of one party, the second party would rule for several terms as well.

6. Conclusion

The gradual departure from previous social divisions and in consequence from the two-party system on the electoral level that started in the 1970s in the United Kingdom ended in the acceptance of a two-and-a-half-party system on the Parliament level in the year 2010. The decreasing support for the two major parties has been progressively institutionalized by political and electoral changes on lower levels. Institutional and legal changes that occurred at the turn of the 20th century, such as the devolution bills or the change of voting system to the European Parliament, added new dimensions to political rivalry, based on different rules than the first past the post system used during elections to the House of Commons. Electors are able to distinguish the strength of their votes in individual voting systems and diversify their support depending on which particular system is used in a given election. This is why seats in the European Parliament as well as national parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are acquired by different parties or coalitions than in the Westminster parliament.

When assessing the British party system one should consider the fact that it displays certain features of a two-and-a-half-party system, not only indicated by the effective number of parliamentary parties but also confirmed by social divisions. The existence of three strong parties on the electoral level – which was not reflected by the previous balance of power in the House of Commons (two-party system with a hegemonic tendency; Conservatives 1979–1997, Labour Party 1997–2010) – was acknowledged in the 2010 general election. The change was so substantial (the necessity of forming a coalition) that it led to a “crisis” which in turn caused another reaction among the electorate. Those who had not participated in political activity before took to the streets and demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the coalition’s politics. Uncertainty and the gradual loss of trust in the elites created completely new attitudes among citizens.

The change of the British party system (and in a broader sense also the political system) is also visible in new areas of political discourse, such as the discussion of the position of monarchy, the House of Lords reforms, as well as reforms of territorial structure of the United Kingdom. The devolution process that started at the turn of the 20th century is getting more dynamic – previously unimportant political parties are gaining more and more support. At the same time new socio-political divisions appear (Scotland, the European Union)⁵; diverse social

⁵ The British party system is characterized by clear socio-political divisions. In such a system political rivalry is based on platform, ideological and personal differences,

classes are becoming politically active (the increase of political activity indicates the search for alternatives to existing political players and is, at the same time, a complete novelty in British Westminster-type politics). Although these tendencies signal a lack of support for the ruling parties, they also imply that the party system will continue to change, despite the loss of support for Liberal Democrats, i.e. the party that commenced the abovementioned change by agreeing to form a coalition government.

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