UNDERSTANDING
BRITISH
PARTY
POLITICS

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DRIVER

Understanding British Party Politics

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Introduction

The 2010 general election saw the façade of two-party politics crumble as the Liberal Democrats joined the Conservative Party in coalition government at Westminster. The new arrangements were quickly billed as a 'new politics' for Britain, breaking with one-party rule – and two-party bickering. Competition at the ballot box was giving way to something more collaborative in power. Reform of the voting system might make such politics a more permanent feature of British government, just as it is in many other parts of Europe.

Time will tell how new this politics is; and much depends on political parties adapting to the possibility of sharing power with each other. Certainly the chances of hung parliaments have increased as the traditional social alignments of two-party politics have shifted. Over the past thirty years or so, the slice of the electorate that has become less partisan in its politics has grown. Political parties have had to adapt to these less certain times. Having a core vote is important, but it is not enough. The 2010 general election was dominated by those who couldn't make up their minds who to support. Political parties have to make their pitch to these undecided voters.

In 2010, the Conservative Party did enough to end thirteen years in opposition. Since David Cameron became leader in 2005 (the fourth since the party's crushing loss to Labour in 1997), the Tories had reconnected to mainstream public opinion by moving back to the centre ground of British politics. The party had spent too long talking to itself and falling out with itself. Cameron's Conservatives talked about schools and hospitals – and much more besides – just as the electorate were. The shadow cast by radical Tory governments in the 1980s and 1990s ('Thatcherism') lifted, although memories of this period lie deep in the party and on parliamentary backbenches.

If the 2010 election marked the return of the Conservatives to government, the election also saw the Liberal Democrats move from being a party of protest at Westminster to becoming a party of power. (The paradox of the new politics was that both parties in the coalition had their roots in the 1830s and before.) While the Liberal Democrats had, on local authorities and in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, already become an important partner in government, at the national level Liberals last shared in power in peacetime in the 1930s; and last won an election in 1910. In the future, the Liberal Democrats are likely to get the chance of government more often,

but who they join in power, Labour or the Conservatives, goes to the heart of what kind of party they are.

The general election in 2010 also marked the end of Labour's great winning streak. The party had never before managed three election victories in a row. Back in the early 1990s, some analysts doubted whether Labour could ever win a general election again on its own. 'New Labour' not only proved to be a formidable vote-winning machine, but also reshaped centre left politics in Britain for a generation. By moving social democracy post-Thatcherism, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown brought Labour back in line with public opinion, even if only one of them proved capable of leading the country as prime minister.

The 2010 general election also saw the smaller parties in British party politics hold the ground they had won in recent years. Since the 1950s, the proportion of votes going to the two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, has fallen from well over 90 per cent to around two-thirds. The Liberals, then the Liberal Democrats, have been the great beneficiaries of this electoral shift. But in the 2000s, the slice of votes going to 'other' parties has increased to around 10 per cent. In 2010, the first Green Party candidate was elected to Westminster (the party had already won seats in the Scottish parliament, the London Assembly, the European parliament and local council chambers). On the right, while the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP) failed to win their target seats in 2010, both increased their share of the national vote. This followed the 2009 European elections in which UKIP came in second to the Tories, and the BNP won its first seats at Strasbourg. British politics has become more fragmented and ideologically stretched, and the smaller parties more focused on winning votes and gaining representation.

This shift to a more multi-party politics was given a boost by the devolution of government in 1998, although the revival of nationalist politics in Scotland and Wales dates back to the 1960s. Devolution created new political opportunities for the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru, as well as exposing a territorial dimension to British politics long overshadowed by the class character of post-war two-party politics. At the time of the 2010 general election, both the SNP and Plaid were in power in the devolved administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff. The SNP had sneaked past Labour in Scotland in elections in 2007 to form a minority government; Plaid joined Labour in another coalition running the principality. These elections confirmed the growing view in the study of politics that Britain had not one but multiple party systems: systems where different parties were in the running in different places. Party politics in Northern Ireland was often regarded as the exception to the class-based Conservative/Labour politics on the British mainland. Today, the political geography of the UK is far more complex.

The turnout in general elections has been a real cause for concern since it dipped below 60 per cent in 2001. Democracy, some thought, was in danger.

In this febrile political atmosphere, British party politics was fragmenting and polarizing. The electorate was not simply avoiding the polling station, but turning in greater numbers to smaller parties all too happy to attack the mainstream parties for being elitist and out of touch. At a time when trust in politics has hit an all-time low, political parties are facing a crisis in confidence. Membership of the big parties has melted away, while support for pressure groups campaigning on issues such as human rights abuses or climate change has grown (though whether levels of activism are any higher is a moot point). At the same time, political parties have come to rely on hired professionals to win support among the growing number of independently minded voters. Political parties certainly still need members, but not in the number or in the way they once did.

While understanding how political parties have become much more aggressive, professionally driven organizations, concerns have been raised about their capacity to engage and mobilize an increasingly critical and disenchanted electorate. The public, rightly or wrongly, perceive politicians and their parties as unrepresentative, self-serving, more interested in spin than substance, and funded by rich donors out to advance their own positions of power. But there is a real danger, as this book will argue, that, in acknowledging the faults of contemporary political parties (faults the leadership of parties, in all fairness, have tried to address), we miss why democracy needs political parties.

Love them or loathe them, democratic government and politics rely on political parties to recruit political activists and politicians, run election campaigns, organize the business of government and act as representatives of the plurality of interests and viewpoints across society. Without them, we'd have to invent some other institutional device to perform these roles – unless, that is, you believe that politicians should be untutored and their recruitment one of chance (the view of the classical 'direct democrats' in the Athenian *polis* in ancient Greece). Political parties provide government with a stable and ultimately accountable platform to run the country for four to five years before an election is held again. Parties matter because, at election time, voters can make a judgement about which group they want to run the country – and that group (or groups, in a coalition government) then have to do it knowing that somewhere down the line the electorate will hold them to account.

As parties have become professionalized, no one would doubt their capacity to mount political campaigns and organize the business of government and opposition. But as the more voluntary side to their organizations has declined, political parties have in other respects become weaker, more dependent on rich donors (or the state, in other countries) for funding, and less able to play their role in promoting and supporting political activity in wider society. These are all activities crucial to the democratic health of the country. If these are absent, it is argued, citizens are less likely to get involved in politics, the

legitimacy of government is compromised, and democracy becomes prey to the power of special interest lobby groups.[1] In understanding how British political parties have changed, in part under the extraordinary pressure of social change that has reshaped political alignments, these issues remain for parties to address if confidence in British politics is to be restored.

The first two chapters of this book look at the background to the shifts in British party politics in recent decades. Chapter 1 examines the decline of two-party politics in the UK and the 'de-alignment' of politics and society that has driven the growth in multi-party politics. Chapter 2 assesses the implications of these changes in partisanship for how parties are organized and how they go about winning votes. The next three chapters focus on the three main parties in national politics. Chapter 3 looks at how the Conservative Party struggled with the legacy of Thatcherism in the 1990s and 2000s – and how David Cameron turned the Tories around to win the 2010 general election by a narrow margin. Chapter 4 considers how Labour tore itself apart in the 1980s, only to recover in the 1990s as 'New Labour' to win three elections in a row. Chapter 5 examines how the Liberal Democrats turned themselves from a party of protest into a party of power – and where this left them in the British party system. The rise of nationalist and far right politics is considered in chapter 6 – in particular, how UKIP and the BNP entered the mainstream of British party politics. Chapter 7 looks at why socialist parties on the far left of British politics have made such little impact, but the Green Party has become a more significant force at the ballot box. Chapter 8 examines the growth in nationalist politics in Scotland and Wales, not least as a result of devolution; and how political allegiances have been overturned on both sides of the community divide in Northern Ireland in recent years. The final chapter considers the dangers facing democratic politics and what political parties need to do to help to restore trust in British politics.
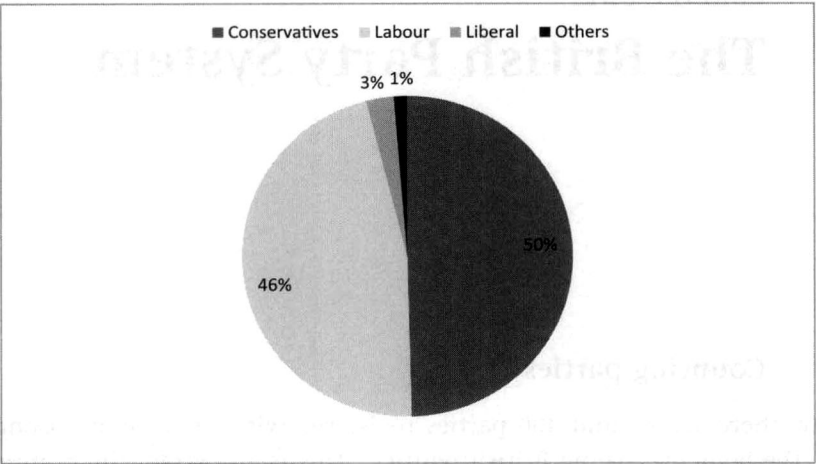
The British Party System

Counting parties

Today, there are around 400 parties registered with the Electoral Commission, the body overseeing British politics.[1] This is an extraordinary number – and in most cases, there is very little to them. But how do we count which parties are important in British politics? And how can we measure the changes that are taking place in the British party system?
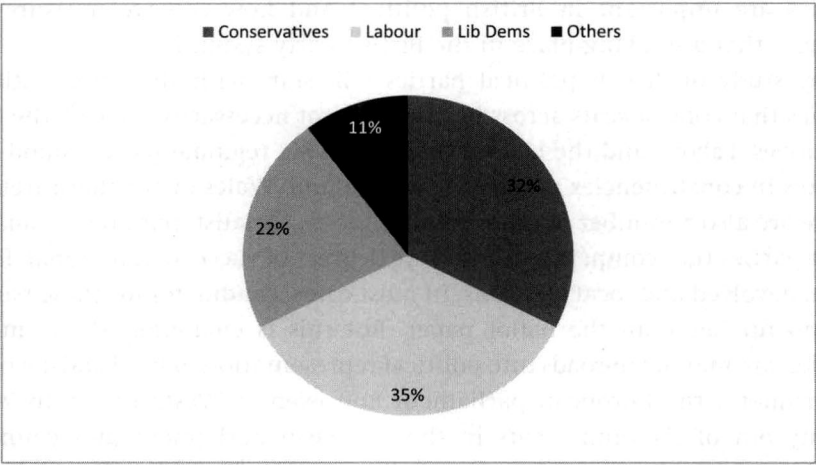
Any study of British political parties will start with the three national parties that contest seats across Britain (but not necessarily the UK): the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Six regional parties stand candidates in constituencies exclusively in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. There are also a number of other smaller green, socialist, nationalist, and far right parties that compete, with varying degrees of success, in national, European, devolved and local elections. In most cases, candidates for these parties get no further than the ballot paper. But this is changing. These 'minor parties' are making in-roads into political representation in local and devolved government, the European parliament and even at Westminster. In 2009, twenty out of sixty-nine seats in the European parliament (not counting Northern Ireland) were taken by smaller parties. The following year, the Green Party won a seat in the general election.

Inevitably, the study of politics and political parties is full of numbers. At the very least, democracy generates votes that have to be counted. There is one set of numbers that offers an insight into these changes taking place in Britain's party system. These numbers concern the proportion of voters across half a century that support one or other of the two main parties in British politics: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Figure 1.1 shows the results of the 1955 and 2005 general elections. In the 1950s, it is clear that well over 95 per cent of votes went to Labour or Conservative candidates in what were high-turnout elections. The number of votes for other parties was tiny by comparison. Most people, as is clear in figure 1.1, voted for one or other of these two parties.

Looking back at this period, Labour and the Conservatives dominated national elections and political representation in the Westminster parliament: the vast majority of MPs were members of one or other of these two

■ Conservatives ▨ Labour ▨ Liberal ■ Others

3% 1%

50%

46%

a General election result 1955

■ Conservatives ▨ Labour ▨ Lib Dems ■ Others

11%

32%

22%

35%

b General election result 2005

Figure 1.1 *British general election results, 1955, 2005*

parties. Support for these two parties was also relatively evenly balanced. This meant that Labour and the Conservatives took turns, if not equally, in government. Despite the strong record of the Conservatives in the 1950s, there was a reasonable expectation that each party had a chance of winning power: the opposition was a government in waiting. No one party, then, was 'predominant'. Between 1945 and 1970, Labour and the Conservatives alternated in government three times across seven elections. Despite the head-to-head nature of Westminster politics, however, Labour and the Conservatives were not separated by a wide ideological and policy divide. Both parties shared in a broad post-war consensus, even if they often disagreed on some of the

details of policy. For the Labour and Conservative parties this made good electoral sense. Political competition drew both parties towards the ideological centre ground to maximize their share of the vote. All this cemented a view that Britain was a model of two-party politics, a party system distinguishable from that in other democratic countries where multiple parties competed for political power.

Now look at the result of the 2005 general election in figure 1.1. The number of voters supporting Labour or the Conservatives has fallen dramatically – down to 67.6 per cent. In 2010, this figure dropped further to around 65 per cent. While these two parties still account for a majority of votes cast, there are a significant number of votes going to other parties, in particular the Liberal Democrats whose 6.8 million votes in 2010 was just 1.8 million behind Labour.

So, what has happened? And what models can we use to understand these changing patterns of party politics in the UK?
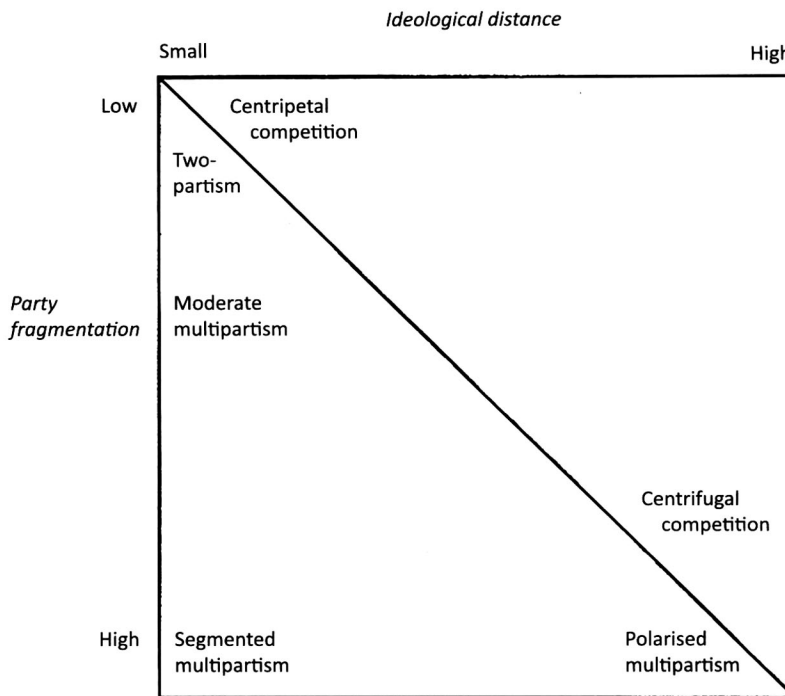
Party systems

A party system is a recurring pattern of relationships between political parties.[2] Instead of elections producing quite different results over time – say, most of the votes going to two parties at one election and spread more thinly across three or four parties at the next poll – voting patterns are reasonably stable. Moreover, these stable patterns tend to vary from country to country. The United Kingdom and the United States have traditionally been thought of as two-party systems: that is, ones where two parties dominate in both elections and government. By contrast, most countries across Europe are multi-party systems: that is, systems where at least three or four parties are in the political running and where election results produce multi-party parliaments and government by coalitions of parties.

So, what are the features of party systems that help to distinguish between different types? Giovanni Sartori, an Italian political scientist, identified in the 1970s two key dimensions of a party system:[3]

1. The number of parties in parliament (the 'relevant' parties)
2. The ideological differences between parties.

According to Sartori, the number of parties is an indicator of the degree of *fragmentation* in a party system: the more parties there are, the more fragmented the party system is. The ideological distance between parties on a left–right scale measures the *polarization* of a political system (see figure 1.2).

How does a party count as 'relevant'? According to Sartori, a relevant party must have participated in government or be a potential coalition partner or have 'blackmail' potential – by which he meant that it could influence government even if it wasn't part of it. In post-war Italy, for example, the Communist Party was a powerful player in national politics, but was regarded as

Ideological distance

Small   High

	Small	High
Low	Centripetal competition Two-partism	
Party fragmentation	Moderate multipartism	Centrifugal competition
High	Segmented multipartism	Polarised multipartism

Source: Sartori, Parties and Party Systems, *fig. 36, p.260.*

Figure 1.2 *Sartori's simplified model of party systems*

beyond the ideological pale for any role in government dominated by the centre right Christian Democrats.

These two measures or indicators of a party system, the number of parties and the ideological difference between parties, form the basis for two basic types of party systems: the two-party system and the multi-party system.

In a two-party system, politics is dominated by two large parties competing for power – and this competition is regarded as 'centripetal'. This means that both parties are pulled to the centre of politics ideologically by the need to maximize the number of votes the party attracts: moving away from the centre alienates too many potential voters. By contrast, in multi-party political systems, there is a greater chance of 'centrifugal' competition. That is, parties are drawn to particular groups of voters and to aiming political campaigns at a relatively narrow segment of the political marketplace. The resulting polarization of politics can be extreme. In the past, Germany in the 1920s (the Weimar republic) and France in the 1950s (the Fourth Republic) were characterized by a high degree of ideological polarization and party fragmentation – and both became by-words for political instability. Sartori contrasts these examples of extreme or 'polarised pluralism' with cases of 'moderate

pluralism' in which we see a combination of multi-party politics and limited ideological polarization. Contemporary examples include Germany and Spain. In countries such as France, Italy and the Netherlands, there is a greater degree of ideological polarizationand party fragmentation.

Some multi-party states have a dominant party. In such dominant or pre-dominant party systems, there is multi-party competition, but one party predominates in winning elections and forming governments over a number of decades. Sweden and Italy were examples of predominant party systems in the post-war period. In Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party ruled the country from 1955 to 2009 apart from a brief eleven-month period out of office in 1993–4. By contrast, other multi-party systems have no dominant party. France has in the past fallen into this category. However, the success in national elections of the main centre right party – the Union for a Popular Movement under Nicolas Sarkozy – in the 2000s, and the relative weakness of the main centre left party – the socialists – signalled that the French party system might be changing.

In between the two-party and multi-party systems is the two and a half party system, where a small 'half' party is a potential coalition party for both main parties. The Free Democrats have traditionally played this role in German, and before that West German, politics. Following the result of the 2010 general election, the Liberal Democrats look set to play this role more often in British politics, just as the old Liberal Party just about did in the 1970s and as the Lib Dems have done from time to time in the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales since 1998.

A simple way of illustrating a party system is a bar chart showing the number of votes and seats won for each party in an election as a proportion of the total seats available. The charts in figure 1.3 give examples of each of the model party systems (the results are taken from elections around 1970 before substantial changes to party systems in Europe kicked in). The visual impression is striking. In predominant and two-party systems, most of the votes cast and seats won are taken by one or two parties. By contrast, in a more multi-party system, the distribution of votes and seats is more widely spread. In a two and a half party system, in this case West Germany *circa* 1969, we see a potential coalition partner in a smaller party, the Free Democrats. The other smaller party, the Christian Social Union, it should be noted, is the sister party of one of the two leading parties – the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) – in Bavaria, and so its votes and seats should be added to those of the CDU.

Political science has taken the analysis of party systems a step further using a mathematical formula known as the effective number of parties (ENP).[4] The formula can be applied to both the number of votes parties win in elections and the number of seats. The objective of the formula is to come up with a figure that corresponds to the number of political parties that are 'effectively' competing in a particular party system. Simply put, the effective number of
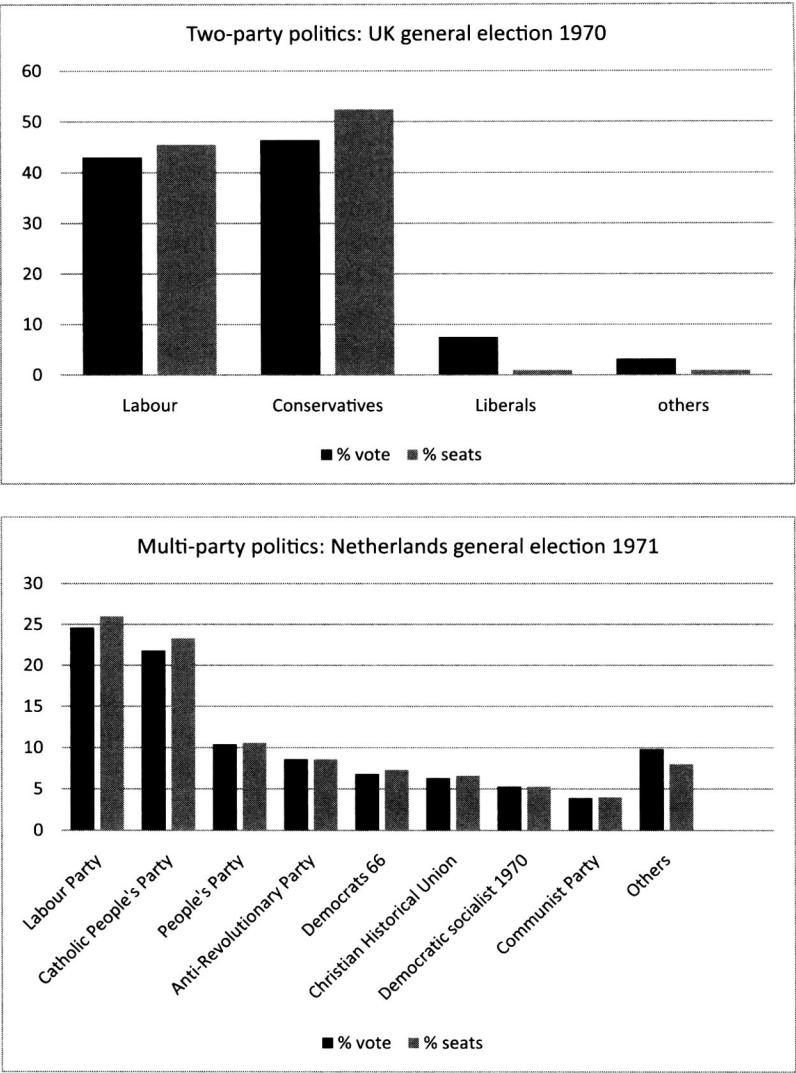
Figure 1.3   *Pary systems in four states*

parties is the fraction of votes or seats parties win in an election. The higher the value of the effective number of parties, the more multi-party a system is. For a two-party system, a score close to 2 would be expected. Where there are two parties running neck and neck plus another significant party in the mix – the two and half party system – the score will be around 2.5. Above this number, there are multi-party systems, some with predominant parties and others with no dominant party. ENP data for the UK, West Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden for the elections illustrated in the bar charts are summarized in figure 1.4.
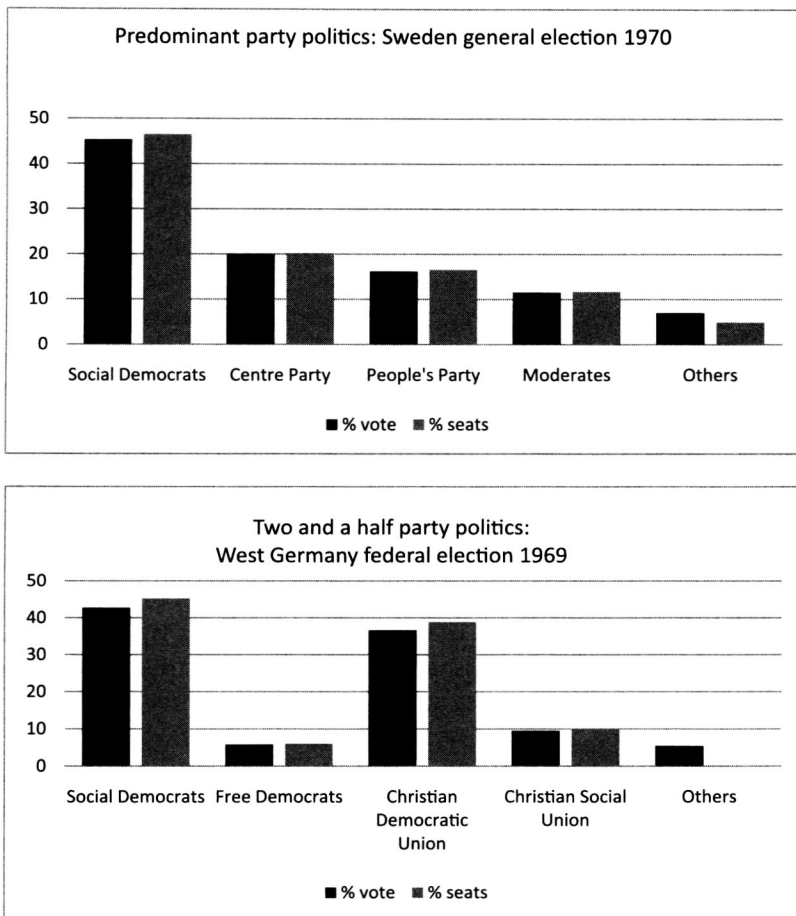
Predominant party politics: Sweden general election 1970

Two and a half party politics:
West Germany federal election 1969

Figure 1.3   *(Continued)*

	ENP votes	ENP seats
United Kingdom (1970)	2.46	2.07
Netherlands (1971)	7.09	6.4
Sweden (1970)	3.48	3.32
West Germany (1969)	3.03	2.71

*Source: ENP scores online: www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/michael_gallagher/
ElSystems/Docts/ElectionIndices.pdf; see also M. Gallagher and Paul Mitchell (eds.),*
The Politics of Electoral Systems *(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).*

Figure 1.4 *Effective number of parties in four states* circa *1970*