

Sept. 11, Comparative Politics: British Political and Electoral Systems

Farrell, ch. 2, selections: SMP in the UK

- Recap of **Single-Member Plurality (SMP)** system
 - Used in the USA, UK, Canada, and India (and a range of British ex-colonies)
 - § Replaced by a mixed system in New Zealand and List PR in South Africa
 - Not selected by any newly emerging democracies
- Reasons for use: simplicity, stability, constituency representation ('principal-agent')
- **SMP in UK practice**
 - DM=1 (659 single-member constituencies each electing one MP)
 - § Nota bene – the larger the DM, the more proportional the results
 - Election contests are between candidates, not between parties
 - Ballot Structure (BS) is categorical, not ordinal
 - § Examine difference between Figure 2.1 and 2.2.
 - Electoral formula (EF) = plurality election
 - § Distortions: SMP works best in a truly two-party system ("cube rule")
 - Examine table 2.1 (Election of Sir Russell Johnston in Inverness)
 - Liberal Democrat's consistent underrepresentation
 - Vote-seat difference of 21.9 per cent in one case
- SMP in US practice: why no call for reform?
 - voter/elite indifference
 - "almost perfectly two-party" system
- Other Plurality Systems (not on midterm)
 - Block voting, limited vote, cumulative vote

ICP, ch. 2, sections 3/4: UK State Institutions and Political Parties

- The (so-called) 'unwritten constitution'
- The **Westminster model** of govt.
 - **parliamentary sovereignty**
 - § can make or overturn any law (no checks by executive/ judiciary)
 - § how is the UK judiciary different from that of the USA?
 - § **fusion of powers**: legislature and executive are part of the same body
 - § somewhat changed by European Communities Act of 1972
 - acquiesced to authority of European Court of Justice (ECJ)
 - **cabinet government**
 - **unitary state** (as opposed to Federal state – i.e., no 10th Amendment)
 - § some devolution under Blair to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland

The Executive

- **Cabinet Government** ('10 Downing Street')– policymaking power rests with the cabinet
- approximately two dozen ministers selected by PM
 - Key offices: Foreign Office, Home Office, chancellor of the exchequer

- British constitutional tradition *requires* overlapping membership between Parliament and the cabinet. (contrast to France)
- Convention of Collective Responsibility
 - The only check on the executive other than a vote of no confidence in the HoC
 - Somewhat ignored by both Thatcher and Blair, who both preferred closed-door sessions with cabinet loyalists
 - § Blair also implemented a range of ‘special units’, like the Social Exclusion Unit, the Women’s Unit, and others, effectively bypassing much of the cabinet
- Whitehall, the civil service, and quangos

The Legislature

- Less powerful than in the past; it tends to consent to legislation proposed by the cabinet
- Less likely to create standstills than the US system – requires no cross-party voting
- **Legislative process:** read/approved by HoC, read by HoL, assent by Crown
- **House of Commons:** 646 seats as of 2005 (will be 650 in next election)
 - Passes laws (three ‘readings’)
 - Authorizes taxation
 - Reviews government policy
- **House of Lords:** roughly 700 members (variable) – mainly a chamber for revision
 - Hereditary peers
 - Life peers
 - Law lords
 - Bishops and archbishops

The Party System

- Either Labour or Conservative (‘Tories’) in control since David Lloyd George (1916-22)
- In addition to the Labour, Conservative, and Lib Dem parties, the UK has a number of national parties representing Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish interests, respectively.
- **Labour Party:** founded by trade union and socialist groups – not in power until 1945. Has gradually transformed from a class-based party with strong pacifist inclinations to a moderate left-of-center pragmatist party
- **Conservative Party:** history traces back to the Tory part of 1678; identified primarily with the social/economic elite (“upper-class leadership and a lower-class following”). Divided over the role of the EU in the UK. Led by David Cameron since 2005, who is trying to modernize the party to appeal a range of issues more commonly associated with New Labour.
- **Liberal Democrats:** A governing party before 1920, now the centrist third-party. Had 52 seats in parliament in 2001, but has suffered under weak and troubled leadership. Currently led by the charismatic Nick Clegg, a former Member of the European Parliament (MEP), with a primary focus on civil liberties, the environment, and libertarian concerns.