
The main purpose of this essay is to talk about party systems in the United States and the United Kingdom. This essay is going to give a general introduction of party systems first, then address the US and UK party systems from several aspects respectively, finally compare and contrast these two party systems. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn which is that the system in UK is a strictly disciplined multi-party system while the one in US is less disciplined and a distinct two-party system.

Party system is the interaction between different parties. Parties operate within party systems and are affected by different party systems.¹ There are three types of party systems, the first one is the dominant party system, where there is only a single party in a country and it always operates in government, such as Japan. A two-party system is the one where two parties always compete against each other for power and the US is a good example of this system type. The last type is the multi-party system, which is very popular in the Europe, with competition from more than two parties.²

As mentioned in the paragraph above, US has a two-party system. Republican and Democratic parties are the two main parties, which have been competing with each other since the middle of the nineteenth century for the divarication on ideologies. The Republican Party is relatively more conservative, both economically and socially. Republicans are anti-welfare, anti-government intervention, and also on social side, anti-gun control anti-abortion. On the other hand, the Democratic Party is much more liberal, the introduction of “New Deal” by Roosevelt is the best example.

¹ Rod Hague, Martin Harrop and Shaun Breslin, Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction-4th edition (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 1998) 137.

² Hague, Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction-4th edition, 139.

Moreover, as opposed to the Republican Party, the Democratic Party is becoming social liberal as well, pro-abortion, pro-gun control and so on.³

The US party systems have several characteristics that distinguish it from other party systems. Firstly, there is a lack of mass party membership in the US. As a study from Indiana, even those who have official jobs are not all active on party's behalf, including ten percent of totally inactive officials.⁴ Moreover, those who are active within the party are often without status. The lack of formal membership leads to a lack of control on entering party activities and less income to support the party activities. Secondly, the party power in the US system is quite decentralized. National parties have little control on election, as there are different laws, citizens with different culture-religious orientations in different counties, and local government interventions as well, national parties cannot attract people to vote for the candidates they promoted. Thirdly, US party system is quite weak disciplined. Because of lacking control over selection, local parties cannot discipline elected representatives, which lead to the inefficiency of national parties in the end.⁵ In addition, on one side, candidates more stand for themselves rather than for parties, as not many people care about which party he is from, instead, voters vote for candidate that they like or believe; on other side, as the decentralization of the system, elections are so voter-dominated, national party organizations have no means to discipline efficiently, either. As a result of the membership lack, decentralized power and weak discipline,

³ Dean Mcsweeney and John Zvesper, American political parties: the formation, decline and reform of the American party system (London : Routledge, 1991) 35-36.

⁴ Mcsweeney, American political parties, 112.

⁵ Mcsweeney, American political parties, 130.

the American party system has become quite powerless. However, recently, the party organizations are trying to be more discipline than before, which may change the condition of this distinct but weak two-party system in the future.

The inter-party competition in the US party system is mainly on power contest, however, though as said in the previous paragraphs that there are noticeable differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, with time goes by, they are both trying to attract the rest of population by meeting their needs, even differed with their ideology sometimes. For example, Reagan and Bush had put out policies on tax break for big businesses; on the Democrats side, they have put more effort on making social programmes legal.⁶ Therefore, over time, the two parties have gone closer rather than apart.

Though British government is famous for the competition between the Conservative and Labor party, there is actually a multi-party system there. The biggest challenger of those two main parties is the Liberal Democrats. Moreover, the Scottish Nationalist Party and Wales Plaid Cymru are also competitors of the two main parties in specific areas.⁷ Two party dominance is not so compete in UK, as both the two major parties are attracting smaller percentages of voters. Moreover, in many places in southeast and southwest, the primary choice is between Conservative and the Liberal Democratic, while in some places in the North, competition are mainly on Labor and Liberal Democratic.⁸

⁶ Edited by Ralph Young, Chris Binns, Martin Burch, Douglas Jaenicke and Michael Moran, Introducing Government (Manchester University Press, 1993). 196.

⁷ Ralph Young, Introducing Government, 89.

⁸ Douglas Jaenicke and Michael Moran, Introduction to Comparative Politics STUDY SHEETS, 22.

The competitions among the three major parties are based on three aspects: ideologies, policy programmes and power sharing. The conservatives are associated with business community and “middle class”, while the Labor Party is associated with trade unions and the mainly “working class”. The fundamental principles of the Conservative Party are concluded by Anthony Quinton as several nouns: traditionalism, organicism, skepticism and defense of property rights.⁹ The ideology of labor party, on the other hand, is described by Robert Owen as ethical and scientific socialism.¹⁰ In the middle ground, the Liberals believe in a society where individuals can participate in decision making which shaped his or her own life.¹¹ The policy differences are not so clear, but the Conservatives are more keen on free market while the Labor Party more interested in government control. Moreover, Labor Party is more enthusiastic about welfare than Conservative Party.¹² Nevertheless, there is no clear distinguish among the policies of the three parties, a voter preference analysis in the policy areas of welfare, morality and racialism proof the conclusion. The results showed that the disagreement was not along party lines but more within parties, or only split one party with the other two.¹³ The Conservative Party has been the most successful party by far in winning elections, but Labor party has been doing better since 1980s. However, both the two parties are suffering from losing voters, while the Liberal Democratic Party is becoming more popular

⁹ Stephen Ingle, The British Party System-3rd edition, (London, 2000), 28-31

¹⁰ Stephen, The British Party System, 104.

¹¹ Stephen, The British Party System, 180.

¹² Douglas Jaenicke and Michael Moran, Introduction to Comparative Politics STUDY SHEETS, 21.

¹³ Ralph Young, Introducing Government, 93-94

nowadays with increasing voters.¹⁴

The characteristics of British party system are quite notable on mass membership, centralized power and strict disciplines. UK political parties have members, parties are seen as a social organization by many party members. For Conservative Party, the main members were originally middle aged to old people, and completely middle-class, however now these characteristics have almost disappeared.¹⁵ For Labor Party, it was initially older men without much formal education who form the party, however, an increasing number of young well-educated activists have joined since the 1970s.¹⁶ The Liberal Democrats are the most highly educated of any group of party activists, also the Liberal Democrats are very much the party of the “public sector middle class”.¹⁷ The UK political parties are quite centralized with national party organizations control local party organizations completely and efficiently. Candidates were selected by different parties and they compete for their own parties, the competition is more among parties, such as ideologies and policies, rather than individual charm. On the other hand, voters are voting for different parties with different orientations on more left or right from the center. The election in UK is conducted by party organizations rather than voters, mainly because there are a large number of visible party members and the party discipline is strict.

By compare and contrast the party systems in the UK and US, which have been drawn out respectively in the paragraphs above, it is clear to find several similarities

¹⁴ Ralph Young, Introducing Government, 89-90

¹⁵ Stephen, The British Party System, 92.

¹⁶ Stephen, The British Party System, 164.

¹⁷ Stephen, The British Party System, 196.

and differences. Firstly, there are both two major parties in the party systems, however, the US system is a distinct two-party system, where voters mainly choose between the Republican and Democratic Party; the UK system is more towards a multi-party system, with a middle party of Liberal Democratic in spite of the Conservative and Labor Party. Secondly, the ideology differences are both on conservative (Republican and Conservative) and liberal (Democratic and Labor), nevertheless, in the US system, the difference is clearly focused on economic and social areas though the distance between two parties is becoming less; in the UK system, there is no clear areas where ideologies lie in, but the differences are never going to be weakened, on the contrary the distance between two ideologies even create space for the Liberal Democratic Party. Finally, the UK system is much stronger disciplined and power centralized than the US one, with larger membership, more complete control on candidates selection and more efficiently election conduct.

In conclusion, the US party system is a typical example of two-party system with some characteristics like a lack of mass membership and decentralized power, which both result from and strengthen its loose organization. The UK party system represents the type of multi-party system with three main competing parties, however it is very strictly disciplined with centralized and strong power, based on a mass membership. The two party systems are shaped by different historical background, and both of them are keeping changing to fit different time as well.

Bibliography:

1. Dean Mcsweeney and John Zvesper, American political parties : the formation, decline and reform of the American party system (London : Routledge, 1991)
2. Douglas Jaenicke and Michael Moran, Introduction to Comparative Politics
STUDY SHEETS
3. Edited by Ralph Young, Chris Binns, Martin Burch, Douglas Jaenicke and Michael Moran, Introducing Government (Manchester University Press, 1993).
4. Rod Hague, Martin Harrop and Shaun Breslin, Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction-4th edition (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
5. Stephen Ingle, The British Party System-3rd edition, (London, 2000)