

What has been the impact of membership of the EU on UK political parties?

Since the European Union was established in 1957 as the European Economic Community (EEC), the impact of the UK's membership has had a large impact on political parties in Britain. It can be argued that it has had more of a negative effect as the issue of EU membership has proved to be a contentious and a divisive topic between the major political parties. So much so that at times the subject it has been kept off the agenda of the main parties as to not heighten party conflict. The issue has also caused the formation of new parties as a sign of protest against EU membership. However EU membership has also had a positive impact on UK political parties as it has at times lead to a consensus between opposing parties and has also strengthened the unity within parties.

The first main impact of the UK's membership of the EU has been the conflict it has caused within parties. Whilst the Liberal Democrats are the most pro-European and united on the issue, both the Labour and Conservative party have suffered internal schisms since the 1980s. The labour party suffered internal conflicts between the more moderate members and those members that were to the far left of the party. The socialist wing of the party was apprehensive of Europe as they believed it was too moderate. It was their belief that Europe did not tackle issues of social justice, and were not willing to co-operate with other Europe partners on this. The disagreement arose with the moderates accepting that the EU was inevitable.

In 1997 there was another potential split within the party with the leadership promising a referendum on EU entry but not for several years. Further conflict within the party is the opposing views of the two leading figures of the Labour party; Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. Blair had a more pro-European stance but was constantly thwarted by Brown because of a proposed deal that Blair would resign if Brown agreed to join the Euro. It can be said that the Conservative party suffered the worse of the conflict within any party. Since the 1980s they were dogged with open rebellions and schisms which created factions within the party. In 1988, Margaret Thatcher's dramatic "Bruges speech" against the idea of Jacques Delors' "European super state" rallied the nationalist right wing of the party and spawned an anti-European faction. The famous *Sun* headline "Up yours Delors" seemed to illustrate this. During the 90s the split widened further with Cabinet ministers barely able to maintain collective Cabinet responsibility on the issue. Pro-Europeans like Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke and anti-Europeans like Michael Portillo and Jonathan Aitken stretched the rules of Cabinet to their very limit. The situation was so bad in 1995 that the integrity of the Cabinet and the party was in jeopardy. So, it is evident that the issue of EU membership can be a very divisive one and can cause huge conflict within parties.

The issue of Europe has also at various times caused the formation of new political parties in the UK. The most common reason for this has been because

members have become disillusioned with their party's stance on EU membership. In 1981 four members from the Labour party nicknamed the "Gang of Four"; Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams left to form a new Social Democratic Party (SDP). They felt that Labour was becoming too left wing and joined the Liberal Party (SDLP) for the 1983 and 1988 elections. Another party to be set up was the Referendum Party. It was the name of a series of single-issue parties in the United Kingdom that called for a referendum on aspects of the UK's relationship with the European Union. Formed by Sir James Goldsmith the party polled well in the 1997 election with over 800,000 votes taking a number of Conservative seats in the process. The other major party to be formed over the issue of Europe is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). Founded in 1993 by Alan Sked the principal aim of the Party was to withdraw the UK from the European Union. Many party members were from the anti-European wing of the Conservative Party who firmly believed in the free market and traditional Conservative values.

However the issue of the EU has not solely had a destructive impact on the political parties. On a number of occasions the issue of Europe has united the parties internally and strengthened the traditional adversarial party system with a clear division between the parties. In 1971 it was decided that Labour would oppose Heath's government in the motion accepting the principle of EC membership. Although there were still clear divisions in the party going into the 1974 election, there was also a real election contest going on between the Labour and Conservative party. This was not the only time it occurred, as in 1990 the Labour Party had a change of direction. After its third successive election defeat the party changed so much so that at the beginning of the 1990s it could be described as "the more European of the two major parties". The whole party enthusiastically endorsed the direction taken by Jacques Delors and the Commission. The party was united once again as this was so in line with their thinking. This was mirrored by the Conservative party who reverted back to being anti-Europe. Therefore not only was the unity strengthened within both of the major parties but also a greater conflict was created leading to the traditional adversarial party system.

Furthermore, at certain times, even during periods of internal schisms, the issue has even seen parties working together in a more consensus manner. At this moment in time both political parties seem to have a mutual understanding on the issue of Europe. They both understand that it is in Britain's interests to stay in Europe. One can also say that since the departure of Tony Blair who was an advocate of Britain joining the Euro, both Gordon Brown and David Cameron do not seem too keen on joining it as it is still debatable how economically beneficial it will be.

So, in conclusion, one can see that the impact of membership of the EU on political parties has been great. There have been positive factors but also more negative ones. It can be argued that these negative factors have had a greater

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and more destructive impact like enlarging internal schisms and opposing party conflict. Therefore it is evident that the impact of EU membership has had a more negative effect overall.