

Why aren't UK politics as polarised as the Americans? Are we just too British?

Introduction

Both the UK and American political systems are multi-party systems but in America two parties have been dominant since the Declaration of Independence of 1776 and the Constitution of 1789 form the foundations of the United States federal government.

The founders had seen vicious fighting among political interests in Europe, and fearing that greed-driven competition for the presidency would divide the new American government into factions they wanted to avoid this in their new nation. The framers of the Constitution were, also, very concerned about not creating crippling dissension within their political system and setup a political system with the aim to prevent their concerns.

Some of the Contrast

America has a “**written constitution**” that is difficult to alter:

- There has been no successful amendment of the US Constitution - except for one technical measure - since 1971.

The UK has “**no written constitution**” but for practical purposes:

- The British Constitution – are various Acts of Parliament
- Can be changed by a simple majority in the legislature.
- For instance, the Coalition Government introduced fixed parliamentary terms for the House for Commons by passing the necessary legislation.

In the United States, because of the strict “**separation of the powers**”:

- Nobody can be a member of more than one of the three arms of the of government Executive, Legislative and Judiciary at the same time
 - No Cabinet member is allowed to be a member of the Congress (upper house)
 - Members of the Supreme Court (judiciary) are nominated by one of the other arms of government the President (executive)
 - Approved by another arm of government the Senate (legislature)
- Members of both houses Congress and Senate are elected.

In UK every Government Minister must be a member of one of the two Houses of Parliament:

- If he or she is not already in the Parliament
 - He or she is made a peer (member of the House of Lords).
- In the UK, almost all members of the upper chamber of the legislature (the House of Lords)
 - Are effectively chosen by the political party leaders in the lower chamber of the legislature (the House of Commons).

In US in both the House of Representatives (Congress) and the Senate,

- The party with the majority in that House chairs all “**committees**”
- The committees have considerable power.

In the two chambers of the British legislature “**committee**” chairs:

- Are allocated between the different parties,

- Roughly in proportion to the size of the party in the House
- The committees are much less powerful than in the US Congress.

The United States is a republic with an elected “**head of state**”, the President. The United Kingdom is a monarchy with the “**head of state**” being a hereditary member of the royal family (although he or she has no real power but only a ceremonial role).

The USA is a presidential system, with the apex of power in a **President**:

- Elected indirectly through an Electoral College
- Has a fixed term of 4 years
- The president party may not have a majority in either House.

The UK is a parliamentary system, with the **Prime Minister** holding office and power:

- As long as he or she commands a majority of votes in the House of Commons.

In US, the “**Supreme Court**” is an intensely political institution:

- The members are nominated by the President on a partisan basis
- The decisions are often highly political and highly controversial.

In UK the **Supreme Court** is not appointed on a political basis

- Like all British courts, avoids making decisions, with a bias towards politicians and Parliament.

Political Parties

In the USA:

- The Republicans are the Right of Centre party
- The Democrats are the Left of Centre party.

In the UK:

- The Conservatives are the Right of Centre party
- The Labour is the Left of Centre party.

However, the 'centre' in American politics is markedly to the Right of the 'centre' to British or most of European politics.

In US politics:

- The two main political parties are loose coalitions with individual candidates or Congressmen adopting varying positions on many issues.

In British politics:

- All political parties have much tighter rein on the policies promoted by candidates and the voting by elected representatives.
- In the House of Commons, each week a 'whip' is issued, which sets out how the Member of Parliament should vote on each major issue before the legislature that week.
- Voting against the party has no effect when the party in power has a large majority.

Religion:

In the States the politicians express their religious views:

- Virtually every political speech seems to mention God
- Especially in the final call "God bless America"
- U.S. Catholic bishops overwhelmingly approved the drafting of a "teaching document" that many of them hope will rebuke Catholic politicians, including President Joe Biden, for receiving Communion despite their support for abortion rights.

In Britain no politician

- Mentions God
- None would think of inviting Him to show a special preference for his or her nation state.

Social issues

In the US, politicians frequently refer to their position on social issues like abortion and homosexuality.

A British politician would think it unnecessary and inappropriate to talk about such issues unless asked.

Aspirations

In the US, politicians constantly talk about the problems and the aspirations of the middle class:

- Most citizens perceive themselves as middle-class or aspiring to be so
- The working class is seen as the poor

In the UK, politicians tend to talk more about the needs of the working class:

- The majority of the population perceiving themselves as working class
- The middle-class is seen as a comfortable minority

In both countries they mean something similar but the language is different because the perceptions are different.

Culture

US culture appears to be deeply divided has been described as culture wars Christian “orthodoxy” versus “progressive”:

- Those who believe there are absolute moral truths
- Those who place moral authority in individual judgment

They clash on issues of:

- Creation, school prayer, abortion, homosexuality, feminism, multiculturalism, popular culture, university curricula

The population is increasingly polarized as a result

UK culture is not homogenous but the Christian beliefs are not polarised into the same extremes as in the US.

Legislation

US Federal and state legislation can differ the most notable is:

- Capital punishment
 - Only some states have the death penalty.

Bibliography

Political Parties - Library of Congress at:

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Culture Wars and Warring about Culture