# CHAPTER 5

# POLITICAL PARTIES

**1. Introduction: the party system**

This topic explores the organisation and funding of the political parties and briefly examines their beliefs and policies. In the UK it is widely regarded that there are two main political parties: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Throughout the 1950s to the 1970s the Conservative and Labour Parties came to dominate the British political landscape, leading some observers to claim that Britain had a ‘**two party system’**. Together they polled over 90% of the vote in the 1950s. The two party system was credited with providing strong and stable government. It also provided governments that were accountable based on competition at elections. However, from the late 1980s the Liberal Democrats enjoyed a growth in support, gaining 62 seats in 2005. Devolution, the use of new electoral systems in the regional assemblies, and the rise of new issues that cut across two-party lines (such as Britain’s membership of Europe) have all contributed to a changing political scene and the rise of smaller parties. Today, the picture is more confusing as UK politics becomes more ***fragmented***. Falling support for the Labour and Conservative Parties has been mirrored by a rise in support for smaller parties such as the SNP, UKIP and the Green Party.

**2. The Role of Political Parties**

In a democracy political parties fulfil the following functions:

* They challenge each other for political power, promoting their policies through manifestos at election time.
* They prepare for and provide alternative governments, serving as a source of opposition.
* They select political leaders who may become Prime Minister or members of the Cabinet.
* They help stimulate interest in and educate citizens about current affairs and political issues. They are a source of political knowledge and debate.
* They promote popular involvement in politics.
* They mobilise and recruit activists, offering a structure into which individuals can channel their interests.

***3. So what are political parties?***

Political parties are organisations which ***seek power***. They hope to form governments and to run the country. In order to do this they publish their policies in a ***manifesto*** during elections. Manifestos are booklets which present to voters a clear idea of what the parties stand for and help voters choose between them in the election.

**The Labour Party**

***What does the party stand for?***The Labour Party describes itself as a ***democratic socialist*** party. It was created in 1900 as a party of the working class, supported by the trade unions and seeking to tackle industrial poverty in Britain. It began its life outside parliament and so was an ***extraparliamentary*** party (unlike the Conservative Party, which began as a grouping of MPs within parliament).Its first leader was Keir Hardy, although it was not until 1923, under Ramsay MacDonald, that it first secured electoral success and was briefly in government. Traditionally the party supported a left-wing socialist agenda. This is exemplified best by Clement Attlee’s Labour government (1945-51) and by the party’s manifesto in opposition under Michael Foot in 1983.

The Attlee government introduced the NHS and the welfare system (providing healthcare to all that was free) and ***nationalising*** key industries (the ***‘commanding heights’*** of the economy) such as coal, steel. shipbuilding, gas, electricity. These policies arise from key socialist values of ***equality*** and ***common ownership.*** Socialists believe that competitive capitalism breeds greed, selfishness, and inequality. They believe that the inequality in society is unjust and based on privilege, and that key public services (health, education, welfare) should be free to all. Industry should be owned for the ***common good***, rather than for the profit of greedy capitalists. This idea was embodied in ***clause IV*** of the Labour Party’s constitution, written in 1918, which committed the party to common ownership or nationalisation. Attlee was the only Labour Prime Minister to implement clause IV.

The Labour Party’s 1983 manifesto called for the renationalisation of key industries (the Conservatives, particularly Margaret Thatcher, had ***privatised*** them); the restoration of trade union powers (Thatcher had stripped them of some of their powers); the abolition of the House of Lords (which they saw as a privileged elite); withdrawal from Europe (with they saw as a ‘capitalist club’) and unilateral nuclear disarmament (Britain disarming alone). This last point arises from a socialist belief in ***internationalism*** (the brotherhood of man) and the view that war is generated by capitalists to divide humankind and make profit.

After Michael Foot resigned in 1983, Neil Kinnock became party leader. He sought to weaken the left within the party, excluding the Trotskyist group Militant Tendency and reforming the union Block Vote (where all the union votes were cast based on the majority, 51%, of votes from individual union members). He and his successor, John Smith, engineered the introduction of one-member-one-vote (OMOV) to votes and elections within the party.

In the 1980s the old manufacturing working class in Britain began to decline. This was the core vote of the old Labour Party (what the psepholosist, Ivor Crewe, called ‘the old working class’). Recognising this, Tony Blair set about reforming and rebranding the party when he became leader in 1994. In order for it to become electable again, given that the working class was shrinking, he understood that the party needed to appeal to the middle class (C1s and C2s), the so-called ***middle England***. Renaming the party New Labour, the policies it pursued were arguably more ***social democrat***, than democratic socialist. The party’s ideology had changed. Blair abandoned Labour’s commitment to common ownership, or nationalisation, believing it was unpopular with the voters. He re-wrote ***clause IV,*** removing any reference to common ownership. The party now promoted a mixed economy, with private sector involvement in the public sector (***the Third Way)***. The private sector was seen as more efficient than the public sector, so in order to improve the efficiency of, for example, the NHS, private sector managers were brought in to help reorganise the service. Inequality was also considered acceptable, as long as by allowing the rich to become wealthy, the poorer members of society also benefited (for example, by wealthy entrepreneurs – business people – opening new forms and creating jobs).

Blair also undertook organisational reforms of the party. He reorganised the way in which the party made policy, introducing a 2-year cycle and thereby reducing the power of the annual conference. In the 1970s, the ‘conference was king’ in terms of deciding policy. Under Blair, however, the party adopted a 2-year policy making cycle, with the National Policy Forum appointing policy commissions that make proposals which are then formalised in the National Executive Committee (NEC) before being passed to the party conference for final approval. These new arrangements helped to avid the bitter arguments and ill-conceived policies (leading to ‘ideological disjuncture) that characterised the old-style conferences, such as that in 1983. Blair’s reforms of the Labour Party worked. It went on to win an unprecedented three elections.

**Party Conferences**

Part conferences are annual events, held in September and October, which hear speeches on major policy initiatives and which traditionally vote to ratify conference proposals. They involve members of the Parliamentary party as well as **grass-roots members** (ordinary members) and **activists** (volunteers involved in running the party at constituency level). Constituencies choose delegates to attend the conference. Historically, the Conservative Party conference has been stages manages, reducing the risk of public arguments over policy, and the Labour Party conference involved more open debate (and disagreement) on policy issues. However, more recently all three main parties choose to manage their conferences. Key note speeches by the party leaders at the end of the conference usually receive a standing ovation. The occasion is seen as a morale-booster for party members.

Gordon Brown sought to continue the New Labour ‘experiment’, but he was an unlucky leader who faced a global economic crisis. He awkwardness in front of the cameras did him no favours and he lost the election in 2010, leading to a leadership contest which Ed Miliband won (with the support of the trade unions).

Since Labour lost the 2010 election it has been searching for a new broadly left-wing ideological direction. Its problem in becoming a **‘*catch all’*** centre ground party is that other mainstream parties (the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats) have been chasing the same voters, leading to a lack of distinctiveness in the parties policies.

***Leadership elections:***

These elections use the AV voting system. In this system voters rank the candidates in order of preference. If no candidate wins 50% on the vote on the first ballot, the candidate with the least number of votes is eliminated and their second preferences votes are redistributed amongst the other candidates. This process is repeated until one candidate receives over 50% of the vote.

Those eligible to vote in Labour leadership under the ‘one member one vote’ (omov) scheme include:

* Members of the Parliamentary party and MEPs
* Ordinary members of the Labour Party (those who have paid by subscription)
* Affiliated members (Trade Union members who are affiliated to the Labour Party)
* Associate Members (those who have paid a £3 subscription to support the party).

To stand candidates require the nomination of 15% of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP - currently 35 MPs). If there is no vacancy (in other words, if a challenge to the existing leadership is mounted) then nominations require 20% of the PLP. The 2015 election was triggered by the resignation of Ed Miliband after the party’s electoral defeat. There were four contenders in 2015: Liz Kendal, on the Blairite wing of the party; Yvette Cooper and Andy Burnham, were centre ground candidates, and Jeremy Corbyn on the left of the party. Corbyn, an outsider at the start of the contest, attracted significant media attention (‘Corbynmania’) as someone who presented a very alternative set of policies (though some accused him of returning to unelectable old Labour policies).

**The Conservative Party**

***What does the party stand for?***

The Conservative Party was formed in the mid-nineteenth century, emerging from the old ***‘Tory’*** party, and for much of the twentieth century it was seen as the ‘party of government’, being in government far more than any other party. Conservatism is a right-wing political ideology which has, at its heart, a core belief that radical, revolutionary change in society is dangerous. This belief arose from witnessing the terror that was created in France in the late eighteenth century as a result of the French Revolution. Instead, Conservatives believe in gradual change. Those institutions which have survived for generations and stood the test of time must have a value and purpose (otherwise they would not have survived) and should be preserved, or ***conserved***. This doesn’t mean that they should not change: in fact, they need to change and adapt in order to continue to be relevant and survive (Edmund Burke, the founding father of Conservatism said that institutions should ***‘change to conserve’***). An example would be the House of Lords, which has survived for generations, but has changed and evolved (as evident in the 1911 and 1949 Parliament Act, the Salisbury Convention, the 1999 Lords reform, and the 2005 Constitutional Reform Act).

From the 1850s until the 1970s the dominant form of Conservatism was One Nation Conservatism. Central to this belief is the idea that the most privileged in society should care for those less well off (***noblesse oblige***). Conservatives traditionally hold that there are those who are ‘born to rule’, but they should rule in the interests of society as a whole (one nation). This approach allowed for a period of ***consensus*** (broad agreement with Labour) from the 1950s until the mid-1970s. The Conservatives accepted, rather than dismantled, the NHS and the welfare state and retained many of the nationalised industries.

However, this view of Conservatism was overturned by Margaret Thatcher in the 1970s. She rejected One Nation Conservatism in favour of ***neoliberalism.*** This was a belief in privatisation and the free market; so she set about selling off the nationalised industries. Thatcher was also a ***social authoritarian,*** believing in a strong government which should set the moral tone of the country. She battled against the permissiveness of the 1960s. She also sought to curb trade union powers, taking on the striking miners. Her cuts in government spending led to increasing unemployment and caused deep resentment in some urban communities.

Between the Thatcher years, which ended in 1990, and Cameron’s leadership, four leaders struggled with a disunited party. John Major faced a party divided between the Europhiles (those who favoured greater involvement in Europe) and the Eurosceptics (those who favoured less involvement with Europe). In 1997 the young William Hague became party leader, but he struggled to find a suitable ideological direction for the party after their heavy defeat to New Labour in the general election. He sought to modernise the party organisation and democratise the party’s policy-making process with his ‘Fresh Future’ initiative. Even so, the bodies he created (the National Conservative Convention and the Conservative Policy Forum) were little more than advisory. In 2001 Iain Duncan Smith became leader, but he was regarded as weak (the ‘quiet man’ of British politics) and his poor performance at the dispatch box cost him his leadership. Michael Howard was leader between 2003 and 2006, but ran a lacklustre campaign in 2005.

From 2006 David Cameron has tried to distance the party from the unpopular Thatcherite image. Describing himself as a ‘modern compassionate conservative’ he has tried to steer the party away from the right-wing policies of Thatcher towards the centre ground, prompting suggestions that there is a new post-Thatcher consensus in British politics. He has been socially liberal on issues such as same sex marriage and pursued policies on improving public services (particularly the NHS and education). Nonetheless, the party has introduced public sector cuts and a programme of ***austerity*** (strict economic control). This, Conservatives have argued, arises not from an ideological predisposition towards such cuts, but from another Conservative core value: ***pragmatism*** (a practical response to the circumstances of the time rather than a policy driven by ideological belief). Tackling Britain’s deficit, they argue, has required such cuts, painful and difficult though they are.

Since winning a majority in the 2015 general election, the party has sought to position itself as the party of ‘ordinary working people’. It has promised to establish a living wage (rather than a minimum wage) by 2020 and to further reform the welfare system to encourage people back into work. It’s leader, David Cameron, had said he is likely to step down from leading the party before the next election and the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, is the frontrunner to replace him.

***Leadership elections:***

Leadership elections in the Conservative Party can be triggered either when the current leader resigns or when there is a vote of no confidence in the leader from the Parliamentary Party (MPs). To trigger a confidence vote, 15% of the Parliamentary party must petition the Chair of the 1922 Committee. If only one candidate stands, as happened with Michael Howard in 2003, they are elected unopposed. If two candidates stand, all party members (those who have paid a subscription to join the Conservative party) are balloted. If more than two candidates stand, a series of ballots is taken among the Parliamentary party until the number of candidates is reduced to two (each round eliminating the candidate with the lowest number of votes). This then moves to a ballot of all party members.

**The 1922 Committee** is a powerful Conservative backbench committee which was established in 1922. The committee meets weekly when Parliament is in session and it allows backbench MPs to discuss Conservative policy and strategy based on their views and the views of their constituents.

The 2005 election saw four candidates stand: Kenneth Clarke (a Europhile on the left of the party); David Cameron (who has described himself as a ‘compassionate conservative’); David Davis (a champion of citizens’ rights against a big state); and Liam Fox on the right of the party. David Cameron won and set about detoxifying the party brand (changing the party image to a more positive one). For decades the party had been associated with harsh Thatchertite policies in the minds of the voters. Cameron tried to establish a more caring image for the party, calling himself ‘the heir to Blair’.

**The Liberal Democrats**

***What does the party stand for?***

The Liberal Democrats were formed in 1988 by the merger of the Liberal Party with the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The SDP was a breakaway party from the Labour Party, established in 1981 by a group of moderate Labour MPs who were dismayed by Labour’s leftward drift under Michael Foot. The Liberal Party had a longer history, having been created in the mid-nineteenth century. It believed in ***liberty*** (hence ‘liberalism’) from overbearing government. Central to Liberal beliefs were individualism, limited government, separation of powers and government by the consent of the people (through elections). Early, classical liberals emphasised ***free trade.***

The Liberal Democrats originally positioned themselves as ***equidistant*** (of equal distance) between the two main parties. But as Labour and the Conservatives turned towards the centre ground at the turn of the 21st century, the party, under Charles Kennedy, moved to the left of Labour. It voted against the war in Iraq and against Labour proposals for extending detention without trial and the introduction of ID cards. Kennedy’s leadership saw the party gain its most seats: 22% of the vote and 62 seats in 2005 and 23% of the vote and 57 seats in 2010.

In 2004 group of Liberal Democrat MPs, including Nick Clegg, published *The Orange Book.* This proposed a return to classical liberal values, including free trade. Under Clegg’s leadership the party returned to the centre ground, enabling it to form a coalition government with the Conservatives in 2010. However, voters gave a strong verdict on the party’s involvement in a Conservative-led coalition. In 2015 the party’s share of the vote plummeted to 8% returning just 8 MPs.

The new leader, Tim Farron, is likely to steer the party towards the left of the centre ground in order to position itself against the Conservative government.

***Leadership elections:***

The Liberal Democrats leadership elections use the alternative vote system (so are similar to the process in the Labour Party). Candidates wishing to stand need to secure the nomination of at least 10% of MPs (currently just one MP) and 200 hundred members in total from across 20 Local Parties (constituencies).

After the resignation of Nick Clegg, in 2015, only two candidates stood. Tim Farron, who won, (on the left of the party) and Norman Lamb (who was more associated with the right of the party and defended the party’s record in coalition).

**4. How are parties organised?**

Like other parties, **the Labour party** has local, regional and national levels. It comprises affiliated organisations (such as the trade unions and various socialist societies, like the Co-operative movement), Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). Administrative decisions are taken by the National Executive Committee (NEC), which includes representatives of all three groupings and which oversees the management of the national party. The trade unions used to wield significant influence on the NEC, but since the Blair years their influence has waned. Policy decisions are proposed by the National Policy Forum, but have to be ratified by the party conferences, held in Blackpool.

**The Conservative Party** is centrally managed from ‘Central Office’ in London, but its Constituency Associations have a degree of local autonomy. The Conservative leader’s influence over the party has always been stronger than in other parties. The ultimate organisational decision-making body of the party is the Party Board, which is drawn from all sections of the party. Policies are initially proposed by the Conservative Policy Forum. The party conference, held in Brighton, ratifies party policy and is highly ***stage-managed***.

In recent years the Conservative Party has put key issues to the vote of ordinary party members. This form of referendum is intended to increase internal party democracy. **The Liberal Democrats** have a more ***federal structure*** than the other parties, which highly distinctive organisations in England, Scotland and Wales.

**In all parties,** ordinary members (known as ***grass-root members***) who have paid their subscriptions can join their constituency party. Many members are simply ***‘cheque book members’*** who pay a membership, but do not actively participate. Party ***activists*** are those who get involved more actively in supporting the party, volunteering to help campaign and raise funds for the party. Party members have a say in the election of parliamentary candidates and in leadership elections; some may even represent their constituency at the annual party conference.

Increasingly ***party conferences*** have become less of a decision-making meeting and are ***stage managed.*** Agendas are set centrally and dissent by delegates is discouraged. This is because conferences are held under the glare of the media cameras and parties do not wish to appear to be divided or indecisive.Even the Labour Party, traditionally more of a grass roots organisation, now exercises a large degree of central control over its party conferences. For example, in 2005 an 82 year old party activist, Walter Woolfgang, was roughly ejected from the conference for appearing to criticise the Labour government’s involvement in the war in Iraq. The press coverage led to embarrassment within the party and he was subsequently given a seat on the party’s NEC. The Liberal Democrats hold the most open and democratic debates at their conferences.

**Other parties**

Britain has recently seen the rise of other parties such as UKIP, the Green Party and the SNP. This is an indication of the fragmentation of UK politics. What do these other parties stand for?

Briefly **UKIP** is the United Kingdom Independence Party. It stands for a populist, broadly right wing agenda (although the renationalisation of the railways is hardly right wing). Its principal aim is withdrawal of the UK from the EU (the so called *‘Brexit’*, or British exit), but it has developed a wider policy framework which includes limiting immigration, support for the armed forces, and the restoration of grammar schools. Its leader is Nigel Farage and it has one MP, Douglas Carswell (MP for Clacton). In the 2015 election it polled 12.5% of the vote.

**The Green Party** emerged from the Green Movement of the 1960s. It is concerned with environmental issues, but is an anti-austerity, left of centre party. It supports public transport and public services. Its leader is Natalie Bennet and it has one MP, Caroline Lucas (MP for Brighton Pavillions). In the 2015 election it polled 3.8% of the vote.

**The SNP** (Scottish National Party) is an anti-austerity, left of centre party which seeks to promote Scottish interests and, ultimately, Scottish independence from the rest of the UK. It wants to increase the range of devolved powers to Scotland and to remove the Trident nuclear submarine base from its waters at Loch Long. It supports the NHS in Scotland and the welfare state and believes that the Scottish economy, bolstered by North Sea oil, could thrive independently. It is the majority party in the Scottish Parliament and has 56 MPs in Westminster. In the 2015 election it polled 4.7% of the vote.

**Plaid Cymru** (‘Wales Forever’) is more of a traditional nationalist party which seeks to preserve the Welsh language and culture. It is less strong in promoting independence than its Welsh counterpart. It’s leader is Leanne Woods and in the 2015 election it polled 0.6% of the vote, returning 3 MPs to Westminster.

**The BNP** is a far right Political Party which has never won a seat in the Westminster Parliamen. It does have a number of local councillors and in 2009 it won 2 seats in the European Parliament (losing one in 2012 and the other in 2014). Its leader is Adam Walker. It’s support had declined in recent years, possibly because of the rise if the more moderate UKIP. In the 2015 general election it polled less than 0.1% of the vote.

**Respect** is a left wing party which is mistakenly represented by some as a single issue party, campaigning against the war in Iraq. Between 2005 it won the London constituency of Bethnal Green & Bow. George Galloway became its only MP. He lost the seat in 2010, but was re-elect to parliament as the Respect MP for Bradford West in a by-election in 2012. In the general election of 2015 the Respect party gained no seats and less than 0.1% of the vote.

**5. The role of Minor Parties**

Minor parties serve four important functions in British Politics.

* They promote causes largely ignored by the other parties. For example, the Green Party has pursued environmental issues more than any of the mainstream parties.
* They act as a channel for protest votes (a vote against an mainstream party, particularly the party in government, because they are no longer in favour).
* They air grievances not taken up by the mainstream parties. For example the SNP and Plaid Cymru take up grievances on behalf of Scotland and Wales.
* At times they can affect the outcome of elections. For example, in 2010 the Liberal Democrats entered into collation government with the Conservative Party; and in 2015 the SNP won most of the seats in Scotland, denying Labour of 40 of its seats in Westminster.

**6. Candidate selection**

Ordinary members of all parties now have a role in the selection of candidates for general elections. However, central party organisations exercise some influence of the local selection of candidates.

In the Labour Party candidates have to seek nomination in order to stand. The central party screens candidates to avoid those who are ‘unrepresentative’ (in the past the trade unions and left-wing militants have attempted to dominate the party at local level). Tony Blair tried to increase the representation of women in amongst Labour MPs by creating all-women shortlists for parliamentary candidates in some constituencies. The 1992 general election saw only 60 women MPs elected. Blair’s initiative helped double this number to 120. Among these were 101 women Labour MPs who became dubbed ‘Blair’s Babes’ by the media. The Labour party continues to use some women-only shortlists.

In the Conservative Party, Central Office provides a list of approved candidates. This does not stop Constituency Associations considering candidates not on the list. All candidates are interviewed by a selection panel established by the Constituency Associations. David Cameron has introduced priority lists (the A list) in an attempt to increase the representation of women and ethnic minorities among Conservative candidates. This initiative placed candidates in more ‘winnable’ seats (although there were no guarantees of success). Constituency Associations are now required to include women on their shortlists.

**7. Membership of political parties:**

The membership of most mainstream political parties has been in decline. In 1953 the Conservative Party has 2.8 million members, and the Labour Party 1 million members. In January 2015 the Conservatives had about 149,000 members and the Labour Party 190,000 members (although the inclusion of the popular left-wing anti-austerity candidate, Jeremy Corbyn, in the Labour leadership contest in 2015, saw membership increase by 79,000, to almost 300,000, and an additional 145,00 ‘registered supporters’). The Liberal Democrats, who claimed 100,000 members in the 1990s, had 44,000 members in January 2015. This rose to 60,000 members after the 2015 general election.

Bucking the trend in January 2015 the SNP had 93,000 members and was growing and UKIP 42,000 members and was also growing. This is evidence of growing **fragmentation** within British politics.

**8. Financing Political Parties**

All parties rely on membership subscriptions (fees) for funding, along with donations from wealthy benefactors. The Conservative Party finds more sympathy, and therefore more funding, from rich business leaders.

However, the Labour Party is also funded by wealthy entrepreneurs. Tim Sainsbury, now Lord Sainsbury (Chairman of Sainsbury’s), has donated funds to the Labour Party. Donations such as these opened the party, under Blair, to criticism. Rich benefactors who donated significant sums appeared to be gaining peerages as a reward (although this practice was not confined to the Labour Party). In 2006 several nominations for peerages were rejected by the House of Lords Appointments Commission. The allegation that peerages were being offered in exchange for large party donations was investigated by the Metropolitan Police, although ultimately no charges were brought. Press coverage named this the **‘cash for honours’** scandal. In another financial scandal, in 1997 Bernie Eccleston, the Formula 1 boss, donated £1 million to the Labour Party. Among the party’s policies was the banning of cigarette advertising from all sporting events. Cigarette companies were huge sponsors of Formula 1 racing, so Eccleston used his influence, based on his generous donation to the Labour Party, to have Formula 1 exempted from the ban. When it became public knowledge it left party leaders embarrassed.

Traditionally the Labour Party has secured a significant share of its funding from trade unions. However, since Blair weakened the influence of the trade unions within the party, less money is now provided from this source.

Historically the Conservative Party has been able to draw on more funds that the Labour Party, because of more donations from wealthy business people (companies now have to declare how much they donate to political parties). Clearly this seems unfair. Funds are needed for:

* Maintain party headquarters and paying staff (including research work and producing pamphlets and publicity materials).
* Campaigning (there is a legal limit on constituency campaigning of about £6000.
* Local constituency parties
* An emergency contingency fund (for major repairs to party buildings, for example)

The inequality in funding has led some observers to suggest that political parties should be state funded. Opposition parties can draw on parliamentary funds to support research activities (the government has an entire civil service to support them!). The funds set aside by parliament to support political research by the opposition parties is known as **Short money**. It amounts to about £17 million.

***Arguments for the state funding of political parties:***

* State funding would help reduce party reliance on individual backers, and therefore avoid any criticism of undue influence or corruption.
* Party activity is central to the workings of democracy and parties would be better able to engage in educating the public and competing for power.
* There would be no unfair disadvantage to Labour.
* Party issues over funding are made worse by an increase in the use of referendums in the UK. Parties need to fund campaigns during referendums.

***Arguments against the state funding of political parties:***

* There is nothing wrong with the current system. In a democracy individuals and corporations should be able to fund parties. It happens in the USA on a vast scale.
* There is disillusionment with politicians. Why should a disillusioned public be expected to fund parties?
* Politics is a voluntary activity and citizens should not be made to pay for it through taxation.
* Would all parties be entitled to funding? Would the BNP of the National Front be eligible to draw from public funds? The funding of extreme parties would be unpalatable to many.

**9. Who has power within the parties?**

***Ordinary members***

In reality ordinary members have little influence over policy. Falling membership has heightened this issue: constituency parties are less important than they once were. In the Conservative party members’ views are surveyed on some new policies; and in all parties members have a vote in leadership elections and can play a role in candidate selection. Some MPs might listen carefully to their constituency members in deciding how to vote on an issue, but, again in reality, the Whips have most influence in determining how MPs vote. Occasionally members might have an opportunity to attend party conferences and to vote on policies, but even these events are now largely stage managed. The introduction of policy forums in all parties has strengthened the leaders hand in formulating policy.

***Party financiers***

Some observers would argue that those who fund the parties call the shots on policies. Evidence of this might be the undue influence of Bernie Ecclestone in securing an exemption to the ban on cigarette advertising under Blair’s leadership of Labour or the influence which trade unions have traditionally had on Labour. Similarly, the Conservatives have been influenced by tobacco and brewing companies in the past. However, limitations on campaign funding set by the Electoral Commission have arguably weakened the influence of party financiers.

**Parliamentary Parties**

Before the latter half of the 20th century the parties liked to present a united front in parliament, but the decline of party unity has led to the increasing importance of party factions in influencing policy. This is evident in Thatcher’s removal from office in 1990 and Blair’s departure in 2007. Groupings of backbench MPs, like the 1922 Committee in the Conservative Party, can wield influence. In the 2010-2015 coalition years Conservative MPs blocked attempts by the David Cameron to introduce a Bill to reform the House of Lords.

**Party Leaders**

Increasingly over the last 50 years power has become more concentrated in the hands of the party leaders. The public profiles of party leaders in an age of 24/7 news media has enhanced this power. Some see a trend towards more ‘presidential’ style leaders (see Chapter 8). Leaders often set the policy agenda and tone of the party. Cameron successfully rebranded the Conservative Party from 2006; as Blair had done for the Labour Party. However, leaders do not have absolute power. Weak leaders or leaders who lead a party to electoral defeat are often speedily removed, as was the case with Iain Duncan-Smith in 2003 and Ed Miliband in 2015.

**10. The Parties in Europe**

The European Parliament has 71 MEPs. Each member state has a number of MEPs based on population size. Germany, the largest state, has 96; the UK has 73; Malta has 6. MEPs sit in political groups in the European Parliament based, loosely, on ideological affiliation. The largest grouping is the European People’s Party (EPP) (221 MEPs) is a centre right grouping; there is a Conservatives and Reformist Group (to which the ***UK Conservatives*** belong) (72); and a Socialists and Democrat Group (190) to which the ***UK Labour Party*** belongs. ***The Liberal Democrats*** are members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (70). ***UKIP*** helped to form a small political grouping: the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group (45).