

Topic 8 - Elections

Introduction

Much of what has been discussed so far, i.e. the relative weakness of Parliament vis-à-vis a strong Executive, is only fully understood if it is examined in light of the British electoral system. General elections in the UK, held at least every five years, adopt a very simple system for voting. However, despite this simplicity and despite some benefits, the electoral system creates a number of unexpected and unwelcome repercussions.

1. First Past The Post

A **general election** is the name given to the parliamentary election when voters from every part of the UK elect the 650 MPs who will take their seats in the House of Commons. To understand this system it is important to remember that the 650 MPs are elected in 650 separate **constituencies**, the urban neighbourhoods or rural areas into which the country is divided up. Therefore on the day of a general election it is as if there were not one single nationwide election, but 650 separate local ones. Remembering that the voting takes place at the constituency level and not the national level is the first key to understanding the effects of the voting system.

General elections are held under an extremely simple system known as **First Past The Post**. This sporting metaphor, borrowed from the world of horse-racing, indicates the nature of the election, which is in the form of a contest where the MP must come first in order to win. It is also known sometimes as a “winner takes all” style of election. It can also be described in more technical vocabulary as a **uninominal, one-round simple majority system**, “uninominal” because voters in a constituency choose a single candidate to be their MP (rather than a more complicated system involving lists, preferences or party groups),

“one-round” because there is never a second round of voting, and “simple majority” because the candidate only needs to have a higher number of votes than his rivals to win (there are no minimum scores necessary and no minimum **turnout** necessary – see later).

If we take the results from a random constituency we see that the results are easy to interpret:

Constituency : Finchley & Golders Green, 2005
(www.guardian.co.uk)

Name	Party	Votes	%	+/- %
Rudi Vis	Labour	17,487	40.5	-5.8
Andrew Mennear	Conservative	16,746	38.8	+1.0
Sue Garden	Liberal Democrat	7,282	16.9	+4.8
Noel Lynch	Green	1,136	2.6	-0.6
Jeremy Jacobs	UK Independence Party	453	1.0	+0.2
George Weiss	Vote for Yourself Rainbow Dream Ticket	110	0.3	+0.3
Majority		741	1.7	
Turnout		43,214	61.9	+4.6

The candidate presented by the Labour Party, Rudi Vis, has obtained the largest number of votes thus takes a seat in the House of Commons as the MP for the constituency of Finchley & Golders Green. The advantages of FPTP are that it presents voters with a clear and simple choice and that the MP will go to Parliament to represent a constituency, thus keeping a strong local tie between the people and their representatives. However, a number of drawbacks immediately become obvious.

2. FPTP in the constituency

Remember, it is important to focus on what happens in individual constituencies in order to understand FPTP.

If we look at the figures for the Finchley constituency we can notice that despite his winning score (a relatively strong 40.5%) Rudi Vis MP does not enjoy the support of the majority of voters in Finchley, since over half (59.5%) actually voted for other parties rather than his own. This is a very common occurrence and means that most of the MPs in the House of Commons (2/3 in the 2005 election) are elected without having a local majority. This poses a question of the legitimacy of individual MPs to act in the name of their constituents.

Secondly, we can ask ourselves about the voters who voted for the candidates from the other parties. Although this group of people represented almost 60% of the electorate in Finchley, in return for their vote they have received nothing. Because they picked a losing candidate, their vote counts for nothing: e.g. the 38.8% of local electors who voted Conservative will have no Conservative representation in Parliament. A party in second or third place may have the support of a good many voters, but they will win no political power in that constituency as FPTP is, as we said, a “winner takes all” system. Thus we talk of the “**wasted votes**” of losing candidates engendered by FPTP.

Thirdly, we can imagine the dissuasive effects of such a system and the **tactical voting** that it will encourage. If local voters concerned with environmental issues are tempted to vote for, say, the Green Party they will be aware of opinion polls and previous election results (e.g. Green Party in Finchley 3.2% in 2001) which indicate the potential score of their party in this election. On the day of the election potential Green Party voters will be confronted with the realisation that their party cannot possibly come first in the constituency, and therefore can never gain any political power. Thus voting for a party destined to fail may seem a pointless act: we can say that **FPTP does not favour smaller parties**. This can tend to

lower turnout as a whole as the potential voters of smaller parties simply decide not to vote at all, or they may vote not for the party they wish to win, but against the party they wish to see lose. For example, potential Green voters may instead vote for the Conservatives to try and make Labour lose their seat, or may support Labour to make sure they maintain their seat against the Conservatives.

Because winning the election depends on coming first in the largest number of constituencies across the country, FPTP encourages the domination of two large, national parties: the Conservatives and Labour. This is the fundamental reason for Britain's **two-party system**. The party which traditionally loses the most in this system is the third most popular party, the **Liberal Democrats**, who often enjoy a good deal of national support but whose support is spread around the country and who often come second or third in constituencies (for which, of course, they win nothing).

3. FPTP: seats and votes

What we have begun to see is that FPTP creates a distorting effect as we go from the percentage of votes cast in the country to the percentage of seats won in Parliament. We shall now study this in more detail.

If we study the following fictitious example following we can understand how this distortion comes into effect. Imagine three constituencies, named A, B and C in a general election with the following results:

example 1

	A	B	C	% vote	% seats
Labour	40%	50%	30%	40%	100%
Conservative	30%	35%	25%	30%	0%
Lib Dem	20%	11%	20%	17%	0%

(other parties
not shown)

We see that the Labour party has managed to secure 100% of the available seats (3 out of 3) with an average of 40%, while the 30% of the Conservatives has achieved nothing as they have not come first in any of the three constituencies. The chief distortion of FPTP works in this way to **over-represent the winning party**.

What happens in individual constituencies may change the overall results in the election without modifying the overall share of the vote. Compare example 1 with the following table where we simply swap the Conservative result in B and C.

example 2

	A	B	C	% vote	% seats
Labour	40%	50%	30%	40%	66%
Conservative	30%	25%	35%	30%	33%
Lib Dem	20%	11%	20%	17%	0%

(other parties
not shown)

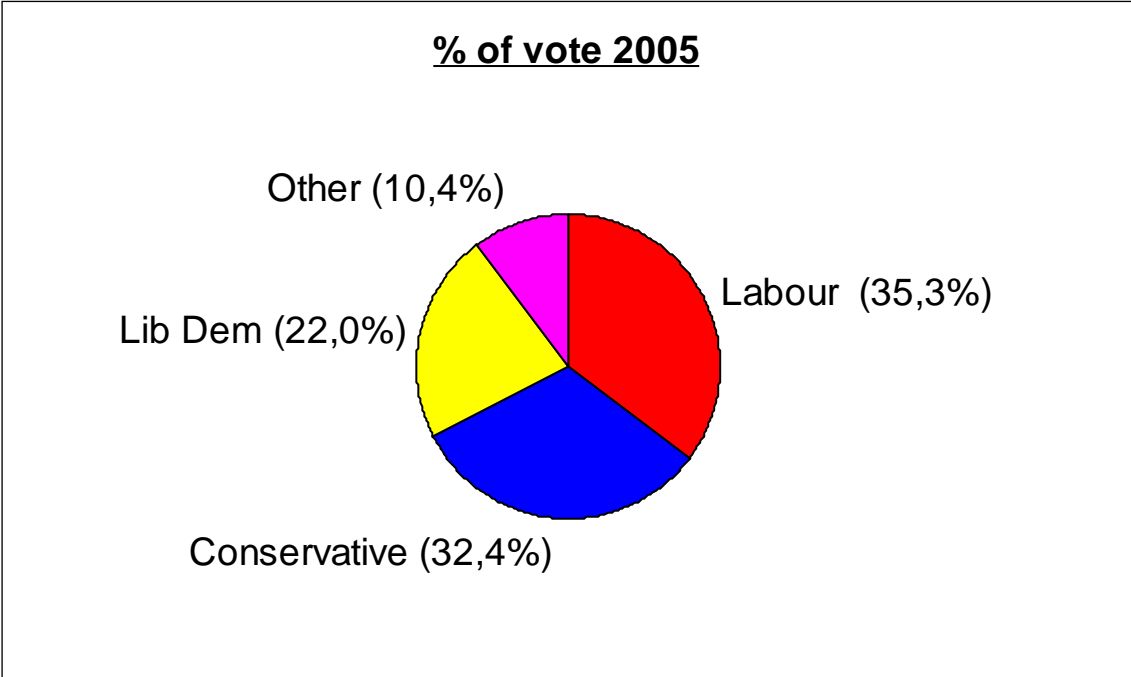
In this example, the Labour Party and the Conservative Party maintain exactly the same average vote, but because of what has happened in two individual constituencies, the Conservatives have now won one constituency (C). The Labour Party remains over-represented, with two-thirds of the available seats for under half of the actual votes. The

distortion again works to the advantage of the largest party, and is particularly harmful to the smallest party.

This form of distortion from votes to seats can be seen in UK election results, with the Liberal Democrats, the third party in UK politics, tending to lose out the most. Despite scoring a national average of 22% in 2005 the Liberal Democrats only won 9.6% of the seats in Parliament, because their candidates only came *first* in 9.6% of the constituencies in the country. To show how badly they can lose out in this system, we can quote the figures from the 1983 general election, when the Alliance Party (the predecessors of the Lib-Dems) scored 25% of the vote and won 3% of the seats, while Labour scored 27% of the vote and won 32% of the seats. This highlights the fact that there is **no direct correlation between the national average of votes in an election and the number of seats won.**

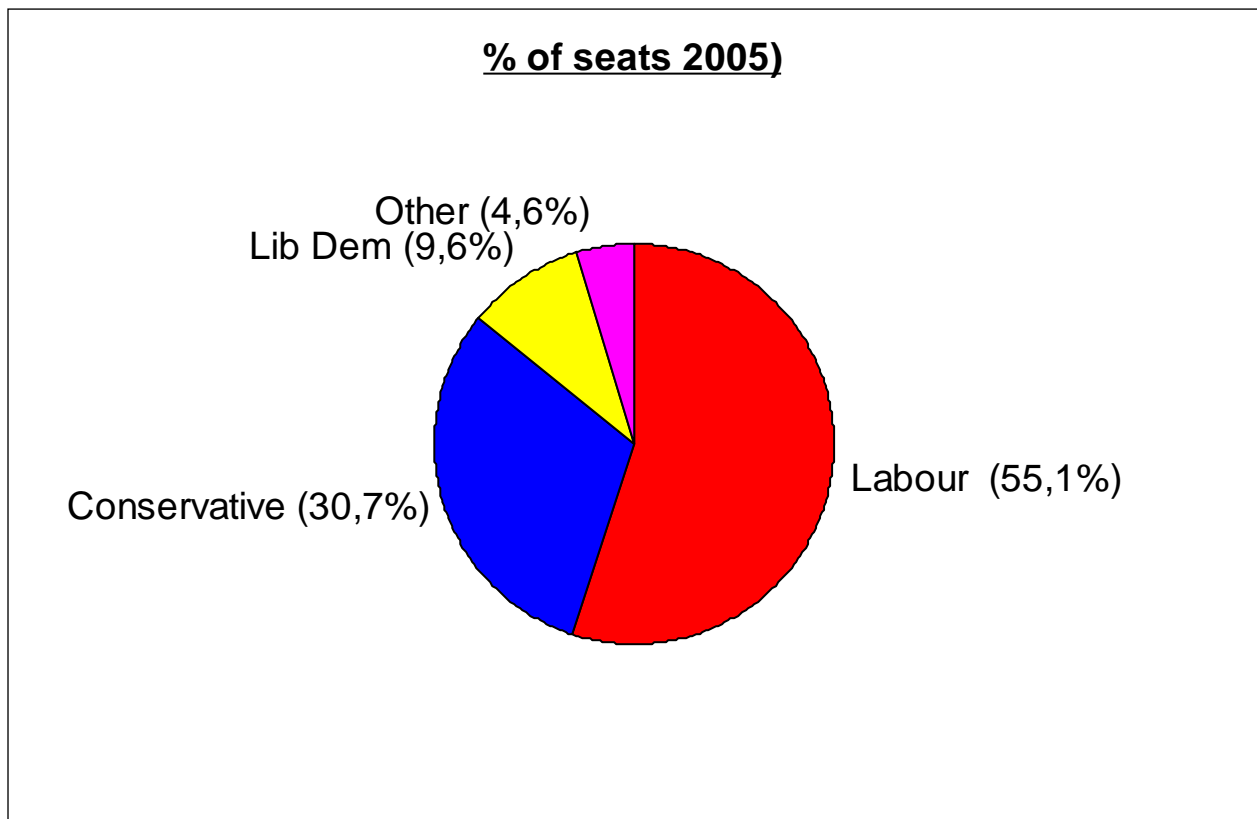
If we imagine the same thing over 650 constituencies, we see how the FPTP system influences the composition of the UK Parliament today:

UK general election results 2005



The first pie chart shows the average vote scored by the major parties, but this merely indicates a national average and is less important than what happens in individual

constituencies. The second pie chart (below) shows the percentage of seats won in the Commons. Although only around 3% separated Labour and the Conservatives in the election,



Labour managed to come first in 55% of the country's constituencies and therefore secured 55% of the seats in Parliament. The Conservatives have slightly fewer seats than they could have wished to secure and the political representation of the Liberal Democrats is around half of what their public support might have led us to expect. This discrepancy between votes and seats is quite simply the nature of any electoral system which is not based on **proportional representation (PR)**. The debate has arisen in recent years as to the fairness of such a system, and has led to the introduction of some forms of PR in the UK.

4. Experimentation with PR

Advocates of proportional representation systems affirm that they quite simply offer a superior system (i.e. fairer, more democratic) of organising elections in that such a system attributes political power based on popular support. Under PR, for example, the second pie

chart of seats in Parliament would much more closely reflect the pie chart showing how people actually voted. A PR voting system, it is claimed, might also help to solve some of the drawbacks of FPTP, namely by encouraging smaller parties (with greater plurality allowing a wider representation of views and political beliefs and thus ending the two-party system) and improving voter turnout by allowing voters to feel that “**every vote counts**”. This would mean the end of tactical voting too: the prospective Green Party voter in the 2005 election would no longer turn to one of the big parties, since 5% of national support could actually mean 5% of the seats in Parliament.

The detractors of PR note that it cannot maintain the close constituency link currently enjoyed between an MP and his local constituents: since it would be necessary to divide up seats according to the percentage of votes cast, it would become necessary to attribute seats based on larger national or regional areas (you cannot cut an MP in half because he only scored 50% of the votes in his constituency!). Another important drawback is this: if the House of Commons really did end up looking like the first pie chart (thus faithfully transforming a party’s political support into actual political power) then we would be left with a **Hung Parliament**, i.e. a Parliament where no party had an absolute majority. Although this would better reflect voters’ wishes, it would also mean the inevitable forming of a **coalition Government**. Because of the need for delicate compromises and fragile alliances in such coalitions, they are often associated with political instability (e.g. post-war Italy which suffered from frequent changes of Government under its PR system). Supporters of FPTP over PR claim that despite its imperfections, it provides the winning party with a clear parliamentary majority and thus allows strong government.

After becoming disenchanted with FPTP during its 18 years of electoral defeats in the 1980s and 1990s, the Labour Party had, before its huge 1997 election victory, envisaged the possibility of an alliance with the Liberal Democrats. To appease the Lib Dems, who are long-

standing advocates of electoral reform, Labour had promised to launch an inquiry into the British electoral system. Once in power it indeed set up an **Electoral Reform Commission**, led by a Lord Jenkins, to study FPTP and to propose possible improvements to general elections. The commission in particular looked at ways to mix the best of FPTP (strong majority, local representation) while giving better representation of smaller parties through proportional representation. After the creation of a coalition government in 2010, the Lib Dems similarly used their position in the government to have the question of electoral reform put to the population by means of a referendum. This referendum, held in May 2011, put the following question to UK voters:

'At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?'

The system being proposed (Alternative Vote) asks voters to rank candidates by order of preference : 1, 2, 3 etc. . If a candidate has more than 50% of “1” votes he is elected directly, but if if no candidate has more than 50% of “1” votes then the candidate with the lowest number of “1” votes is eliminated. The votes for this candidate are then redistributed to the number “2” on the ballot papers. This process continues until a candidate has more than 50% of the vote.

Voters in the 2011 referendum rejected the proposal : 68% NO 32% YES

One of the key problems was the voters found AV complicated and difficult to understand contrary to FPTP.

Nevertheless, some other voting systems are now already in use for the Scottish and Welsh devolved institutions. In Scotland for example, there is the **Additional Member System**, whereby Scots cast two votes: one for a constituency MSP (Member of the Scottish Parliament) using FPTP (73 MSPs elected in this way) and one for a regional party list based on PR (56 MSPs: 8 constituencies with 7 seats each). It should be noted that since the introduction of an element of PR, many more parties have enjoyed political representation but

also that every election in Scotland and Wales has resulted in a hung parliament and a coalition government.

Other PR systems are also used, e.g. a **regional list system** for elections to the European Parliament (record low turnout in 1999 however) or **Single Transferable Vote** (a system involving quotas and rankings) in all Northern Ireland elections and Scottish local authority elections (from 2007). It seems that with the notable exception of general elections, FPTP has begun to be abandoned in the UK. We can reasonably wonder when the House of Commons will be elected using a different system. What is certain is that changing to a different electoral system would greatly alter the balance of power between Parliament and Government.

Topic 9 – Social Class and Education

Introduction

The question of education is treated with that of social class because of the interlinking of the two phenomena. For example, the UK has traditionally been considered a country where there remains a strong sense of social class: a class-based society where the population could easily be divided into the working class, the middle class and the upper class. The educational opportunities which the different categories of the population could profit from were an element in perpetuating the reality of distinct social classes by limiting social mobility. It is certain that attempts in the twentieth century to expand educational opportunities went some way to removing some of the class barriers that existed. We shall see, however, that social class remains a significant factor in some of the UK's key institutions.

1. Education and Opportunity

In 1990, Conservative Prime Minister **John Major** promised to attempt to make the UK "a genuinely **classless society**". His vision, as a rightwing politician, was certainly not one of bland uniformity or extreme egalitarianism where the State would attempt to minimise all social differences to promote a sort of forced equality. Rather, his comments were to do with offering equality of opportunity, in order to ensure that the social conditions of a youngster's parents would not be the determinant factor in his own future success or failure. This was made explicit by Major in 1996: "My job is not to say to people: 'Here you are, here is what you want on a plate.' My job is to provide the ladders and then say – work out your goal and aim for it. That is what I meant by the classless society: opportunity for everyone."

With such a view we see that education can play a key role, since our possibility of having status and a good salary depends on the sort of occupation we have, which in turns depends on our university and secondary education. To study whether the UK truly has become the classless society that Major talked about it will be necessary to study whether the UK offers quality education for all.

2. The State Sector

Currently, **state schools** educate the overwhelming majority of British pupils (over 90%), with school compulsory between the ages of 5 to 16. An important education reform took place in the immediate post-war period with the extension of free and compulsory secondary education for all (initially up to the age of 15 - **Education Act 1944**). This Act maintained a **tripartite system** of schools, however, where pupils' educational ability was assessed at the age of eleven (**11 plus exam**). The most able pupils were then educated at **Grammar Schools** where they would prepare the exams that would allow them to continue on to higher education (i.e. university). These selective schools within the state sector were associated with academic success, high status and good job prospects. Pupils who had not done well at the age of eleven were sent either to **secondary modern** schools or, less commonly, to **technical schools**. The latter were not geared up to academic study and thus pupils were instead prepared for their early entrance into working life in some less prestigious position. The criticism of this tripartite system was that it perpetuated Britain's class system, since the grammar schools were dominated by the middle classes, while the secondary modern schools were generally made up of mainly working class children. Since the children who did well at age eleven tended to be from more comfortable home environments, the education system was not helping social mobility: it was merely confirming the divisions that already existed.

In the 1960s the Labour Government attempted to favour **comprehensive schools** as opposed to selective grammar schools. Rather than select pupils based on the 11-plus exam, comprehensives would take all pupils from an area, regardless of academic ability. This policy of open admission aimed at a more egalitarian approach, meaning that all pupils could, hopefully, benefit from quality education and the prospects afforded by passing exams and later university. Social class and early ability would be less determinant a factor, it was hoped.

From the 1970s on, the Conservatives rejected this move towards a system based on comprehensives, and insisted on maintaining grammar schools when desired by local communities. In order to promote choice, excellence and the private provision of education, they also continued to favour the continued existence of independent schools (see later). When Tony Blair (Labour) was elected in 1997 he promised to improve the state education system, where standards had seriously declined under the Conservatives due to a lack of state funding, but his approach has been to move away from the comprehensives. Blair favours choice for parents, no longer sees the State as the sole provider of solutions and wants schools to have a distinctive identity, rather than the “one-size-fits-all” approach associated with the comprehensives. Rather than providing opportunity for all, comprehensives have increasingly been criticised by some as merely providing mediocrity for all. The perception of poor standards in some state comprehensive schools, particularly in poorer areas, has resulted in stories of parents moving house to more affluent areas to benefit from the better state schools there. Alternatively, other middle class parents have been avoiding comprehensive schools by attempting to get their children into faith schools, or by making enormous financial sacrifices in order to pay for a private education. A vicious cycle ensues: the resulting loss of students from more comfortable backgrounds means that state comprehensives represent a greater concentration of low-achieving students, which in turn encourages more middle class parents to avoid them.

Because of this growing dissatisfaction with comprehensives under the Blair Government, we now see a bewildering array of different types of schools proposed by the state. As well as the traditional **faith schools** (e.g. Catholic or Church of England) which are financed by the state but retain a religious ethos and can select pupils on religious criteria, we now find **academy schools** (failing schools taken over by a business, entrepreneur, church or other group who pays £2m in order to take over the running of the school. The school in effect becomes a quasi-autonomous private school within the state sector, but is not allowed to charge fees or select more than 10% of its pupils); **trust schools** (successful schools which decide to come out from local authority control in order to have greater autonomy – budget, recruitment etc.); **specialist schools** (schools that have focused on an area of excellence they wish to promote, e.g. music, business or languages – again they can select 10% of pupils).

In all state schools, the main educational content is established at a national level by the Government (the **national curriculum**), which decides on a core of subjects that all pupils must take. Exams are sat at the age of 16 (GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education) and then at 18 (GCE A-Levels, most commonly known simply as “A-Levels”). Those hoping to go to university must ensure at least three good A-Level passes since access to university courses will be determined by the number of passes and the grades achieved. The number of university entrants has traditionally been lower than in France, but this has greatly increased over the last thirty years in accordance with Government policy to widen access to higher education (see later).

3. Independent schools

Around 7% of the population go to **independent schools**, which can also be called **private schools**, or, confusingly, **public schools**. The key feature of such schools is that, since they are outside the state sector, they propose a **fee-paying education**. As such, one

determinant factor in the composition of their pupils is the ability to pay what are often very expensive fees. This is particularly true for the 200 or so exclusive schools which belong to the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Convention. This list includes well-known names such as **Eton, Harrow** or **Fettes College**, where Tony Blair was educated. Fees in such schools run into tens of thousands of euros a year (e.g. schooling at Eton costs around €33,000 per annum). These schools, although only responsible for educating a small minority of British children, have marked the cultural and social identity of the British.

A public school education was traditionally characterised by a number of distinctive features. They tended to be **single-sex, boarding schools** (unlike in the state sector) where boys (or girls) were educated away from the influence of their parents whom the children would see only infrequently during term-time. There has been the development of more mixed schools and “day pupils” (as opposed to boarders) in recent years, however. Public schools are also associated with strict uniforms; firm discipline (i.e. corporal punishment was common until the 1980s); strong loyalty to the school; competition – particularly in terms of team sports – between the different “houses” into which pupils are divided; and a strong sense of hierarchy between age groups. They have often been regarded as elitist schools where the country's socio-economic elite prepare their children to take up positions of responsibility in society. Eton College describes boarding in particular as “an opportunity for exercising responsibility and *leadership* in a community” (my italics). In addition to the high fees, entrance to such schools is very competitive and highly selective, although a small number of bursaries may be provided by the school to grant access to less wealthy pupils that have shown outstanding ability. After leaving school there often remains a strong sense of cohesion and mutual aid amongst the “old boys” or those who wear “the old school tie”, i.e. the former pupils of a particular public school.

4. Universities

Although pupils from independent schools only represent 7% of the population, they make up almost half of the students found in the UK's top two universities, **Oxford** and **Cambridge**. These old, respected institutions (12th – 13th century) have retained their elite reputation (until the 1820s they were the *only* universities in England) and an **Oxbridge** education, considered a mark of academic excellence, will usually generate very favourable job prospects. The over-representation of independently educated pupils may simply reflect the privileged education such pupils have received. But, given that such universities interview prospective students before admission, there have been some claims, particularly since the late 1990s, that Oxford and Cambridge may discriminate against intelligent state school pupils. Indeed, the domination of public schools may reflect that academic excellence is only one criteria that is regarded and that elements of social class (accent, family background, manners etc.) are also be taken into consideration. The two universities have since said that they will assess their admissions policy and make more of an effort to widen the social origin of their students.

Oxbridge graduates (very often following a public school education as we have seen) still dominate certain areas of public life: in the early 21st century 69% of judges had been to public school, 73% to Oxbridge. 98% of hereditary peers had been to public school. Around 2/3 of Conservative MPs had been to public school, with 60% of those with a degree educated at Oxbridge. All university educated Prime Ministers since 1945 had been to Oxford. Key Establishment figures such as senior civil servants, diplomats and army officers are largely found to have been through the public school and obtained an Oxbridge degree. If such functions of power, wealth and status are still dominated by the 7% of the population who have had the financial means to pay for a public school education, this does not suggest the existence of a truly classless society with equality of opportunity for all.

Although access to university education was widened in the second half of the 20th century, with the creation of **student grants** and free **tuition fees**, recent figures show that the numbers of less well-off working class and middle class students may again be dropping. The Conservatives in the 1980s began to replace the system of grants with **student loans** which the student would pay back at a low rate of interest once he had graduated. Tony Blair's Labour Government then abolished the system of free fees and introduced fees of £1000 in 1998. In 2006, this figure increased to a maximum of £3000 a year for English university students, although very poor students should receive some financial help from the Government and their university to help them meet these costs. (The situation is slightly different in Scotland and Wales.)

Topic 10 - The Media

Introduction

It is important to be aware of the role of the media in the UK, since a country's television channels and newspapers help define and reflect national tastes and attitudes and thus help give the population a sense of national identity and culture. This class aims to give a succinct overview to both the press and broadcast media. It should become apparent that the picture is a very contrasting one, since the UK is home to some of the best and worst media in the world. If the UK is often praised for the diversity and quality of its journalism and TV productions, it is also prone to excess and abuse as the desire for profit increases populist content, driving down the standards of journalism and broadcasting. We should also be aware of the strong political role that some media, in particular newspapers, can play.

1. Broadcast Media

Today the UK has five main free terrestrial TV channels, two of which are state-owned and carry no advertising (BBC1, BBC2) and three independent channels which depend on the revenues generated by (frequent) advertising to survive (ITV, Channel 4, Five). In order to briefly present the styles and content of each of the main channels, we shall look at them in chronological order. The UK was one of the first countries in the world to develop a national broadcast network with a state-run radio network which began as early as the 1920s, and television broadcasts which started in 1936 (see later for the history of the British Broadcasting Corporation). But TV ownership was extremely limited and it is often said that television did not really take off in the UK until the live broadcast of the current Queen's coronation in 1953. Although the UK has a long history of national broadcasting, regional variations of most of the main channels also exist to propose a different content tailored to the

English regions, Scotland, Wales etc. Today the most watched TV channels are the following terrestrial (non-satellite) channels:

BBC1: Created in 1936 as the BBC Television Service, before the advent of mass TV viewing, this channel today shows a broad range of programming (see below). While it essentially focuses on popular, mainstream shows, it also carries a number of documentaries or more cultural shows, as well as popular programmes which analyse current affairs such as [Newsnight](#) or [Question Time](#).

ITV: (1955) With BBC1, this is one of the most watched channels. It again shows mainly popular, mass-appeal programmes such as soap operas, quizzes, talent shows such as [Britain's Got Talent](#) and drama series, but broadcasts rather fewer “serious” programmes than BBC1 despite occasional documentaries.

BBC2: Created in 1964 with a more specialised remit, BBC2 has, from the beginning, had a distinctive identity. Its shows tend to be more cultural and “highbrow” with its specialisation on more intellectual arts and drama attracting a smaller, niche audience. It is also the home of some of the UK’s most innovative comedy shows (e.g. [Monty Python’s Flying Circus](#), [The Office](#)) and many of these began on BBC2 before moving to BBC1 once they had proved successful. In recent years the cultural content of BBC2 has tended to diminish somewhat.

Channel 4: Created in 1982 to bring greater diversity to independent television, Channel 4 contains a very mixed schedule which has included adaptations of classical literature, late night discussion, youth-oriented shows or less well-known sports such as American football. It again appeals to a more specialised audience although often attracts large audiences for its

broadcast of reality TV shows such as Big Brother or [Made in Chelsea](#), cult US comedy and drama (Lost, Desperate Housewives, etc.) Channel 4 has also been an important cinema producer and many popular British films of the last twenty years have been financed in part by Channel 4 (e.g. Four Weddings and a Funeral, Trainspotting).

Five: The most recent of the big channels has not garnered a reputation for quality since its creation in 1997. Its schedule is mainly filled with low-cost “entertainment” programming: imported reality TV shows, B-movies, populist documentaries, repeats of US daytime shows etc.

Since the advent of satellite TV in the 1980s the number of potential channels has exploded, although the five channels cited remain the most watched. In addition to the terrestrial channels, the most popular satellite broadcaster is **BSkyB**, part of Rupert Murdoch’s News International media conglomerate (see later) which offers a number of themed channels – Sky news, Sky 1, Sky Movies, Sky Sports etc. The BBC has also benefited from new digital technology to launch a large number of more specialised channels which are available through cable, satellite or digital terrestrial. Thus the BBC now also offers BBC3 (entertainment aimed at young adults), BBC4 (intellectual and cultural shows which have taken over the “highbrow” niche once occupied by BBC2), BBC News24 (round-the-clock news), [BBC Parliament](#) (live coverage of Parliament), Children’s BBC (for older children) and Cbeebies (for pre-school children).

As well as the inevitable imports of US shows, the British are fond of watching soaps and drama series that take place in the UK. Two of the most enduringly popular shows are the soap operas (soaps) [Eastenders](#) (BBC1) and [Coronation Street](#). These shows share certain similarities: they both focus on the everyday lives and troubles of very ordinary people:

Eastenders is set in a working-class neighbourhood in London, while Coronation St is set in the north of England. Both are extremely long-running: Eastenders started in 1985, and Coronation Street, the world's longest-running TV show, has been running continuously since 1960. The British also enjoy sport, comedy, shows on gardening and the home, shows on buying and selling property, quiz shows, cooking programmes with "celebrity chefs", makeover shows (where a contestant must change an aspect of their life – appearance, home, children's behaviour, diet etc), reality TV, police and historical drama, and contestant-based talent shows. Daytime television features many discussion programmes where members of the audience are invited to share their experiences. In general, evening programmes are often much shorter than in France (under 1 hour) allowing greater variety over a night's viewing. Television advertising is much more frequent than in France however, with regular ad breaks cutting into films and programmes : a 42-minute episode of Lost is broadcast in a one-hour slot, meaning that almost 1/3 of the broadcast time is taken up with ads and trailers. Thus one of the clear advantages of the BBC is the absence of advertising compared to the independent channels.

2. The BBC

Set up in 1922 as the British Broadcasting *Company*, the **British Broadcasting Corporation** (the name and status changed in 1927) initially enjoyed a monopoly for all radio and, later, television broadcasts. Its objectives have been ambitious, since its remit is to "**inform, educate and entertain**" in that order. It has traditionally insisted on high standards and still explicitly incorporates a cultural "public service" dimension with a remit to promote culture, learning, citizenship and creativity that goes beyond simple entertainment. Sometimes affectionately called "Auntie" or "the Beeb", the BBC can be thought of as a key British institution in the way that it helps to give the various populations across the UK a common

sense of identity. In the words of John Simpson, a BBC correspondent: "Without the BBC, we would be a less united kingdom. It has given us shared notions of who we are, what we are concerned with, what we find funny" (quoted in *The Essential Anatomy of Britain*, Anthony Sampson).

The BBC is free from advertising, and therefore from commercial pressures, as it is paid for by every TV viewer in the UK in the form of a **licence fee**, which currently stands at around £145 a year (180 euros). The BBC has the status of a **Public Corporation**, which means that it is a state-owned entity, but not state-run. It is therefore free from government interference in terms of content – in no way is it a mouthpiece of the state. On the contrary, it has a strong reputation for editorial independence even though the governing body of the network, the BBC Trust, is appointed by the Queen on the recommendation of Government ministers. In fact, during the Iraq war, the BBC often adopted a rather hostile position to the Government's foreign policy decisions, to the extent that the Government began to criticise the BBC for its supposed anti-government bias.

Recent criticisms of the BBC have focused on falling standards of journalistic integrity (e.g. the [David Kelly affair](#) where a weapons expert interviewed by a BBC journalist was misquoted over the question of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and later killed himself); the revelation that popular BBC presenter Jimmy Savile was a serial sex offender and the way the BBC initially covered the story; the high pay awarded to top presenters; the unfairness of the TV market where a subsidised BBC has an unfair commercial advantage over independent stations; the general "dumbing down" of its content as increasing numbers of populist shows with lower standards are broadcast to achieve mass appeal. The BBC has, nevertheless, to achieve a delicate balance of programming: it is meant to retain its distinctive "public service" role to produce high quality television programmes while still achieving high viewing figures. At the same time it has to produce shows which people want to watch, but without simply

duplicating the popular shows which the independent TV channels broadcast. In the wake of the financial crisis, the BBC also has to face dramatic cuts in its budget.

3. The Press

A free press is traditionally seen as an important element of a democracy. Voters need newspapers to inform them of current affairs in order that they should be able to make rational political choices based on their understanding and judgement. In addition, the press is expected to play a key role in a democracy by exposing the true activities of the Government: its policies, strategies, spending etc. In this way, the press was described in the 19th century as “the **Fourth Estate**”, i.e. an important opposition force. We shall see that although the UK are avid newspaper readers, this optimistic image of the beneficial role of the press must be contrasted with the actual role played by some of the biggest-selling newspapers in the UK.

UK newspapers are generally classified into two types : tabloids and broadsheets, a terminology derived from the size of the publications.

The **tabloids** are small-format newspapers, which target a mass audience and typically focus on rather frivolous stories featuring celebrity gossip, sport and sleaze. They make great use of short, shock headlines and extensively use photographic images and graphic elements. They enjoy printing shocking revelations of sexual impropriety (high-profile marital infidelity, one-night stands, perversion), but do so by adopting a tone of criticism and condemnation. At the same time, some tabloids such as **The Daily Mirror**, **Daily Star** or **The Sun** continue to devote their first inside page to a large photograph of a topless model (“Page Three girl”). The more middle-class tabloids such as the **Daily Express** or **Daily Mail** adopt a more respectable image which appeals to their mainly Conservative “Middle England”

readership. Fierce competition has resulted in very low prices (e.g. In 2006 The Sun cut its price to just 10p in some regions (15 centimes) in response to a drop in price of the Daily Mirror), while frequent offers and free gifts (CDs, DVDs, vouchers for airline tickets etc.) attest to the aggressive marketing techniques constantly in use.

The **broadsheets**, on the other hand, are the traditional large format newspapers which have the reputation of being the quality press. Papers such as **The Times**, **The Guardian**, **The Daily Telegraph**, **The Independent** focus more on serious journalism: current affairs, comment and analysis, global issues. Consequently their circulations are lower, although they have changed their strategies in recent years in an attempt to attract more readers. They too have witnessed a price war (initiated by the Times in the 1990s) : currently The Times costs £1. In 2004, in an attempt to gain more younger readers, many of the traditional broadsheets began to adopt a smaller format, bringing them down to a similar size to the tabloids. This decision, which leads to shorter news articles and a higher concentration of photographs per page, and which was accompanied by more focus on “lowbrow” subjects, has been criticised by some as symptomatic of a general decline in newspaper quality as even broadsheets like the once respected Times go “downmarket” in an attempt to stop declining circulation figures.

UK citizens buy more newspapers than the French: while the biggest selling French daily is a regional paper (*Ouest France*) sells 800,000 copies a day, the biggest-selling UK daily (**The Sun**) sells around 3 million with the Daily Mail selling over 2m and the Daily Mirror selling more than 1 million copies. The more serious quality newspapers such as the **The Times** (400,000 copies) or **The Daily Telegraph** (600,000 copies) sell more copies than the equivalent in France (*Le Monde* – around 350,000 copies). UK papers tend to be national dailies, based in London, and most of the big papers have Sunday sister editions (e.g. The Sun

and The Sun on Sunday; The Times and The Sunday Times). Local papers exist but generally have very small circulations.

The UK newspaper industry was traditionally based in **Fleet Street** in central London and to this day the name is used to represent the UK press and journalism in general. However, in 1986 News International (publisher of The Sun, The Times, The News of the World etc.) controversially abandoned Fleet Street with its out-dated, labour-intensive printing techniques and restrictive Union practices for cheaper, modern premises in the London Docklands area. When print workers went on strike against the change in working practices, 6,000 employees were sacked by News International, a move which led to a year-long campaign of bitter demonstrations against the Wapping plant with its more flexible working conditions, automated presses and weaker union presence. This campaign of industrial action known as the **Wapping Dispute** ended in failure for the print unions. Following this dispute, all UK newspapers had left Fleet Street for more modern premises by 1988.

4. Politics and the press

The UK press tends to be dominated by rightwing newspapers and as such, has tended to favour Conservative Governments. Only a small number of newspapers go against this trend (The Daily Mirror and The Guardian have a left-of-centre bias, while The Independent aims at a politically neutral stance). The degree of partisan opinion in UK newspapers can be surprising to foreign observers as it seems to go against the standards of journalistic objectivity and neutrality promoted elsewhere. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of The Sun, the biggest selling newspaper in the UK.

If on average around three people read each copy of The Sun, it is estimated as having a readership of around 7 million people today and in the 1980s it was said to be read by around 25% of the population. Since 1969 it has been owned by the multimillionaire Australian media tycoon Rupert Murdoch as part of his News International publishing empire. News International owns The News of the World, The Times, The Sunday Times, as well as the UK's most popular satellite TV network, BSkyB Television. Murdoch's media empire also includes 20th Century Fox (e.g. The Simpsons, Fox News), The New York Post, Harper-Collins publishing and countless Australian newspapers. There have often been allegations that Murdoch uses his personal wealth and media power to influence politics in the USA, Australia and the UK to further his neo-liberal agenda. It can be noted that Murdoch was befriended by Margaret Thatcher, thus helping her party secure four consecutive election victories (1979, 1983, 1987, 1992) by strongly and overtly attempting to influence voters. The front page headline on the day of the 1979 election was: "Vote for Maggie – to give you a better Britain". On the day of the 1992 general election, with Labour in the lead in opinion polls, The Sun's headline read: "If Kinnock [the Labour leader] wins will the last person to leave Britain please turn off the lights."

Despite being the leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair too developed a personal relationship with Rupert Murdoch, which coincided with The Sun changing its traditional political affiliation for the 1997 election. Rather than supporting the Conservatives in this election, The Sun declared "The Sun Backs Blair". This support may well have influenced the skilled manual workers who dominate The Sun's readership and also form the largest category of the electorate, for Blair went on to enjoy a landslide victory. After deciding no longer to back Labour under Gordon Brown, The Sun promoted David Cameron in the 2010 election with the headline "OUR ONLY HOPE".

Without wishing to state that The Sun or Rupert Murdoch have the power to dictate who will be the next Prime Minister of the UK, it is clear that their influence plays a strong role in British politics. It is certainly very difficult for a party to win a general election without the backing of The Sun. When this is added to the often reactionary (particularly anti-French, anti-European, anti-immigration) right-wing sentiment displayed in tabloids like The Sun, their influence in a democracy becomes more problematic. Rather than the image of a noble institution informing readers with facts and helping them make intelligent political choices, such newspapers have gained the reputation as “the gutter press”. Their populism and love of scandal is a consequence of the fact that they are motivated less by a desire to reveal the truth, than their desire to sell ever more newspapers. Such an attitude can never be politically neutral as it often involves replacing complex analysis and rational debate with prejudice and ideologically-motivated stereotypes.

While the tabloid press in general has often displayed low standards of journalism, such as paying people who have been affected by crime, tragedy or sexual misconduct for stories (“**chequebook journalism**”) a number of more specific concerns have come to light in recent years. Scandals about the illegal, intrusive activities of journalists have tarnished the reputation of the press further, led to particular criticism about the closeness between Prime Minister David Cameron and News International, and highlighted corrupt practices within the Metropolitan Police with some officers taking payments to divulge information. This led to a public inquiry to investigate the culture, practices and ethics of the UK press known as the **Leveson Inquiry**.

The Leveson Inquiry was set up following the discovery that a number of public figures, celebrities and members of the public had had their mobile phones illegally hacked into by journalists and private investigators working for News International’s *News of the World*. One key incident which prompted the public inquiry involved the mobile phone of a

13-year-old schoolgirl, Milly Dowler, who was abducted and murdered in 2002. When she went missing her voicemail messages were illegally accessed by News of the World journalists while police and family were still searching for her, thus hampering the police investigation and giving her family false hope that she was still alive.

Despite the phone hacking scandal already affecting the News of the World, in 2010 David Cameron chose as his Communications Director the former editor of this newspaper, Andy Coulson, until the latter was forced to resign in 2011 over the issue of phone hacking. Coulson, along with News International CEO Rebekah Brooks, were both later arrested and charged as part of the criminal investigation into phone-hacking. In the face of the public outcry, News International closed down the News of the World in July 2011. It can be noted that Rebekah Brooks happens to be a close personal friend of Prime Minister David Cameron and also socialised with former Labour Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

When the Leveson Inquiry submitted its findings in November 2012 it proposed a new regulatory body to oversee the newspaper industry, with the introduction of a new law to force newspapers to comply. While this is intended to better protect members of the public against intrusive journalism, newspapers and Prime Minister David Cameron have spoken out against the dangers of introducing state regulation of the press and limiting freedom of expression.

In conclusion, recent years have shown that the UK's once-held reputation for being the home of quality journalism and broadcasting has been severely damaged. Repeated scandals have raised doubts about the standards and ethics of journalists, including criticisms about institutional failings of the BBC as well as the unhealthy domination enjoyed by News International and the practices of tabloid journalists who often bribed officials and used other illegal methods in their commercial drive to find and publish sensationalist stories. While

freedom of the press is a vital principle of a functioning democracy, it also seems clear that a purely self-regulated industry has failed and that perhaps tougher statutory control is needed.