

Book Review: Political Parties in Britain

by blog admin

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*This introductory textbook examines the factors contributing to a political party's fortune and identity. Authors **Matt Cole** and **Helen Deighan** examine Britain's main political parties as well as 'peripheral' parties including the BNP and UKIP. **Eunice Goes** writes that **Political Parties in Britain** is a highly informative, accessible and up-to-date introductory text that should be included in all British politics reading lists.*



Political Parties in Britain. Matt Cole and Helen Deighan. Edinburgh University Press. July 2012.

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This book offers an accessible, informative, up-to-date introduction to British political parties and to the British party system to both Politics A-level students and university undergraduates. In their well-structured and well-written book Matt Cole and Helen Deighan examine the role of political parties in the British political system in 21st Century Britain and argue that despite the declining voters' turnout and party memberships, political parties are still the main vehicle whereby the interests of citizens can be represented.

Political Parties in Britain starts with an engaging theoretical overview of the role of political parties in British political life. In the introductory chapter, Cole and Deighan explain the different roles that political parties play in democratic societies, in particular in Britain, whilst at same time they draw our attention to the crisis of political parties expressed in declining party membership and funding problems. Drawing on a variety of literature on the subject the authors argue that these phenomena are "a reflection of changing lifestyles and increasingly sophisticated policy preferences among the public" (p.14). This is a classic "demand-side" explanation of declining party membership, but recent work by Colin Hay (*Why We Hate Politics*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) has drawn our attention to "supply-side" factors, namely, the marketisation of political parties, policy and ideological convergence, and rise of the cartel party, that complement the explanation of changing civic behaviour and political engagement. It would have been interesting to have read about how these "supply-side" factors as well as the communications strategies of the main three parties have transformed their ideologies, electoral strategies, and the profile of the "typical voter".



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The remaining parts of the book are divided in three sections devoted to the "major parties", "minor parties" (the Liberal-Democrats are controversially included in this section), and "peripheral parties". Each chapter offers an accessible broad overview of each political party that looks into history, ideology, popular support, main policies, funding, structure and organisation. The chapters are well-written and filled with interesting anecdotes. Each chapter is enriched with boxes with excerpts of quotes by politicians and journalists that help to illustrate in a lively manner a point made by the author. Undergraduate students will also appreciate the list of glossary terms, potential exam questions and recommended reading lists.

What is missing in the book is a greater analysis of how the parties relate to each other and influence and are influenced by their rivals. In the past 20 years, ideological convergence between the main political parties has affected electoral strategies, voting behaviour, in particular the (in)ability of parties (as the authors aptly put it) to enthuse voters to engage in party politics. For example, in the chapter about the Labour Party more could have been said about how Thatcherism informed the ideological transformation of the Labour Party. The chapter describes the policies that changed under Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair but does not draw any conclusions about the impact of Thatcherism on Labour's ideology. Moreover, the definition of social-democracy presented in a box (p. 32) comparing social democracy and democratic socialism is problematic. The authors define social democracy as "embracing neoliberal principles and reducing government intervention in the economy". However this is a contested definition as it is one which challenges in many respects social-democratic commitments.

By the same token the chapters on the Conservative Party and on the Liberal-Democrats do not analyse how the coalition is impacting on the ideology, policy approaches and electoral strategies of both parties. It is true that it is still early to write any definitive account on this issue, but there should be at least an explanation of the internal debates undergoing within the coalition parties. For instance, the book briefly discusses the ideological splits between old Gladstonian liberals and new Lloyd George liberals (p.153), but there is no account of how this split occurs in current Liberal Democratic internal politics and how this affects the electoral prospects of the party.

But these limitations should not obscure the interesting insights that this book brings to an undergraduate understanding of British party politics in the 21st century. The greatest value-added is the analysis it offers of the smaller and peripheral parties and their impact on Britain's multiparty politics. Typically, textbooks on British politics and political parties will devote just a few paragraphs to small and peripheral parties. By contrast, Cole and Deigham devoted four entire chapters to the smaller players of British political party life. Each chapter is rich with important facts about the different peripheral political parties, and makes a highly pertinent analysis of the impact of these parties in mainstream political life. For instance, the section dealing with Eurosceptic parties reminds us that "no more than six Conservative seats were lost because of a peripheral Eurosceptic" (p. 184). This fact is often overlooked in most media commentary on the impact of UKIP over Conservative Party's electoral fortunes. This section also makes a compelling and fitting typology of peripheral parties that distinguishes "tortoise" parties from "hare" parties (p. 213). According to this typology, tortoise parties (like the Greens and UKIP) are "slow but persistent in their progress", whereas hare parties (Respect, Referendum Party) experience "sudden and highly surges of energy, only to run out of steam or become distracted" (pp. 212-213).

The conclusion about the impact of peripheral parties in Britain's party system and party political life is equally pertinent. The authors aptly remind us that peripheral parties have begun "to edge towards taking real power, becoming the official Opposition on councils" as well as "influencing policy in other parties" (p.213) and that today they "look every bit as serious as the Liberals and the nationalists did two generations ago" (p. 214).

For these reasons, *Political Parties in Britain* is a highly informative, accessible and up-to-date introductory text that should be included in all British Politics reading lists.

Eunice Goes is associate professor at Richmond University's School of Arts, Communications and Social Sciences. She obtained her Ph.D in political science at LSE in 2002. Her research interests lie in political parties and ideologies. She is currently writing a book about the Labour Party under Ed Miliband to be published by Manchester University Press in 2015. [Read more reviews by Eunice.](#)