

Benjamin Martill

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Over the threshold: the politics of foreign policy in majoritarian parliamentary systems—the case of Britain

Benjamin Martill

London School of Economics

Abstract

Executive autonomy influences the ability of states to make credible commitments, utilise their domestic resources, and deter adversaries. In majoritarian parliamentary regimes it is often assumed that executive autonomy is derived from the possession of a substantial parliamentary majority, since this affords the government a ‘buffer’ in the legislature. Yet this understanding fails to account for the value of seats above the majority threshold for foreign policy, where the executive is constrained by internal dissent more than the non-passage of legislation. This article challenges the assumption of a linear relationship between seat share and executive autonomy through a theoretical re-examination of the politics of foreign policy in majoritarian parliamentary systems. It argues that possession of a significant majority can actually undermine the executive’s foreign policy autonomy, since it increases the degree of intra-party factionalism without introducing corresponding benefits in the legislature. The argument is illustrated empirically through an examination of the politics of British foreign policy at three decisive elections (1950, 1955, and 1966) in the early Cold War period.

Keywords

Britain; foreign policy; parliaments; executive autonomy; majoritarianism

Introduction

It is well known that in majoritarian parliamentary systems, such as the United Kingdom, the government's ability to pursue its favoured course of action depends in part upon the size of its majority in the legislature (e.g. Bennister 2008, 344-345; Heffernan 2005, 69; Strong 2015, 610). The greater the number of seats the government possesses over and above the majority needed to govern, the more leeway the government has in determining the policy agenda, since support from the entirety of the governing party is not necessary for the passage of legislation. Thus, the larger the government's parliamentary majority, the more able it is to withstand defections from the party line. Governments in this situation possess greater autonomy, since they are less dependent on the support of their backbenchers, and therefore less susceptible to threats from legislators to withdraw their support if their preferences are not taken into account.

So intuitive is the claim that strong parliamentary majorities increase the executive's freedom of manoeuvre that it has filtered, rather unquestioningly, into our understanding of the politics of *foreign* policymaking. Insofar as legislative seat share is included as a variable in studies of foreign policymaking, it is assumed (without exception) that the government's room for manoeuvre in the international domain is a function, in part, of the size of its parliamentary majority (Auerswald 1999; Elman 2000; Hagan 1990; Koch & Sullivan 2010; Palmer *et al.* 2004; Volgy & Schwarz 1991). The belief that a large parliamentary majority is beneficial for the government's conduct of foreign policy is also reflected in the public discourse and political commentary surrounding general elections, with sizable majorities held to confer greater freedom on the government to pursue its favoured foreign policy course.

This common claim, however, has been subjected to surprisingly little theoretical scrutiny. Indeed, remarkably little has been written about the implications of strong majorities for executive autonomy in the field of foreign policy. This is somewhat surprising, since foreign policymaking differs from other policy areas in two key respects, both of which have implications for the value of seats above the majority threshold. First, the role of the legislature in the foreign policy process is, in almost all systems, diminished relative to other policy domains, with the government maintaining considerable prerogative power. Second, since the implementation of foreign policy leaves substantial room for the actions of other states, governments are particularly sensitive to rhetorical opposition from within their party, since this can undermine their credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of other actors.

As such, it is far from clear that the relationship between majority size and executive autonomy, as conventionally understood, can be transposed uncritically into the domain of foreign affairs. In light of these doubts about the value of strong majorities in foreign policy, this article subjects the relationship between legislative seat share and executive autonomy in this domain to theoretical and empirical scrutiny. It begins by charting the distinctiveness of foreign policymaking as a field of political activity before discussing the effects of gaining additional seats above the majority threshold on executive autonomy. It argues that the belief that large parliamentary majorities enable the executive increased autonomy in foreign policy is a myth, since obtaining a sizable majority leads to an increase in (damaging) backbench activism which is not offset – in the foreign policy field – by any corresponding benefits from the increased legislative ‘buffer’. This is illustrated empirically through a discussion of the changing politics of foreign policy accompanying three British general elections at

which the governing party's majority was subject to precipitous change (1950, 1955, and 1966).

Seat Share and Executive Autonomy in the United Kingdom

The autonomy of the executive vis-à-vis domestic groupings is a key variable in explaining the success of a government's foreign policy, since the interests of the state – on behalf of which executive activity is undertaken – and of the various sub-groups which act within the state are seldom coterminous (Putnam 1988, 434). Whether a government intends to deploy military forces, conclude a trade agreement, alter the quality or extent of its relationships, or commit to abide by particular rules or norms, its success will depend on its ability to coherently marshal resources and credibly demonstrate its resolve to other actors (e.g. Glaser 2010, 94-95; Schweller 2006, 49-50; Snyder 1991; Stein 1993). Divergent interests to those of the government may come from, for example, bureaucratic agencies (Allison 1971; Halperin 1974), civil society organisations and national lobbies (Mearsheimer & Walt 2006), economic interest groups (Milner 1997; Milner & Tingley 2011; Moravcsik 1993), devolved regions (Fordham 2002; Trubowitz 1998), and constituencies of public opinion (Holsti 1996; Sobel 2001).

Sub-state interests are mediated through national party systems and through the state's constitutional system. Political parties assume an important role in interest articulation since they are directly – and constitutionally – part of the political 'game', with a formal role in government formation and in the legislative process, and as a result they provide a channel through which the interests of other enter into the political system. Political parties also hold their own, bespoke partisan interests in both seeking

re-election and seeing their own worldview become manifest in policy (Vassallo & Wilcox 2006). Hence, the autonomy of the executive from political parties (governing or opposition) is a crucial factor in explaining the foreign policy behaviour of democratic states (Bueno de Mesquita 2002; Rathbun 2004; Rathbun 2012; Schultz 1998; Trubowitz 2011).

In majoritarian parliamentary systems like the United Kingdom – characterised by the use of the Single Member District Plurality (SMDP) electoral system, the existence of a small number of broad ‘brokerage’ parties, and the tendency for single-party majority governments (Lijphart 1999, 10-14) – it is often assumed the principal determinant of executive autonomy from partisan interests comes from the possession of a large parliamentary majority. The more seats the government holds above the majority threshold, it is claimed, the greater its ability to withstand defections from individual legislators, and the less beholden it will be to sub-state interests that conflict with its preferred foreign policy orientation. Much discussion of the ‘Brexit election’ of 8 June 2017, moreover, regarded Theresa May’s decision to call a snap election as reflecting her desire to head off potential backbench opposition by increasing the slight majority (of 12) she had inherited from her predecessor, David Cameron (e.g. Bale 2017).

The claim is moreover, backed up by the existing theoretical literature on the effects of seat share and foreign policymaking. Hagan (1990, 83), for instance, suggests that regimes with a small legislative majority “must in the short term worry about defections from their own parties” and Elman (2000, 103) argues that: “Provided that the executive has a wide margin of support in the legislature, it can enact foreign policies without worrying about legislative censure”. Volgy & Schwarz (1991, 625), in their assessment of foreign policy restructuring in parliamentary systems, argue that

“restructuring is more likely to occur when a solid majority exists behind the leadership in the legislature”. Palmer *et al.* (2004, 9) similarly claim that governments with a higher proportion of parliamentary seats are more likely to become involved in interstate disputes, as the constraints on their actions will be diminished. Auerswald (1999, 492) and Koch & Sullivan (2010, 619-620) have also established a link between a large parliamentary majority and the increased likelihood of the use of force.

Yet, in spite of the popularity of the idea that executive autonomy increases alongside the government’s parliamentary majority, and the frequency with which the claim is voiced by scholars and commentators, relatively little in the way of theoretical or empirical evidence has been offered to substantiate the claim. Perhaps more troubling still is that an examination of the politics of British foreign policymaking – its history, its processes and procedures – suggests the claim must face up to a number of empirical and theoretical problems in spite of its seemingly intuitive logic.

Empirically, a cursory glance at the history of British foreign policymaking in the post-war period suggests that large majorities have not helped – and have often hindered – the foreign policy agendas of British prime ministers. Clement Attlee’s Bevanite critics vehemently opposed his position in the emerging Cold War, until the 1950 general election, when Labour’s slight majority forced them to back down (Gordon 1969, 204). Anthony Eden struggled to keep his party on-side Europe and Egypt policies, after his substantial general election victory in 1955, but before the Suez Crisis of 1956 (Onslow 1997, 188). Harold Wilson experienced the greatest opposition to his foreign policy after his landslide victory in the 1966 general election, not before (Vickers 2011, 72), and Wilson’s slight majorities in his subsequent administrations in the 1970s served to quell significant opposition from the

backbenches (Pimlott 1992, 401). In more recent times, John Major was able to force significant support out of recalcitrant Eurosceptic backbenchers with a slim majority in the 1990s (Huber 1996, 269), while Tony Blair's (second) landslide victory in the 2001 general election did nothing to prevent the significant intra-party discord over the Iraq war from which the Labour party is still recovering (BBC 2003).

These empirical problems are compounded by intriguing theoretical anomalies regarding the idea of a linear relationship between seat share and executive autonomy in the foreign policy domain. To begin with, it is not clear why governments should value additional seats above the majority threshold in a policy domain where legislation is required so infrequently. Although recent years have witnessed an expansion in parliament's role in the foreign policy process, especially with regards the decision to go to war (Strong 2015), the prime minister takes the vast majority of foreign policy decisions using their prerogative powers. Moreover, existing theoretical accounts of seat share are incomplete insofar as they fail to factor in some of the trade-offs associated with obtaining a greater number of seats, particularly when it comes to the effects on party factions. Not only are large majorities often accompanied by increased ideological heterogeneity, they also offer greater protection to backbenchers who speak out against the government line. These trade-offs are noted in much of the Comparative Politics literature on seat share, but largely absent from the literature on foreign policy.

Part of the reason why existing accounts of seat share and autonomy are incomplete is the dearth of theoretical work on majoritarian regimes from a foreign policy perspective. Indeed few studies have explicitly set out to theorise majoritarian regimes since Waltz's (1967) pioneering comparison of British and American foreign

policymaking.¹ Most research on executive autonomy has focused instead on presidential and proportional parliamentary systems. In presidential systems, for example, studies have examined the effects of divided government and presidential control of Congress (Lohmann & O'Halloran 1994; Milner & Rosendorff 1997; Sherman 2002) as well as the shifting balance of power between the executive and the legislature (Franck & Weisband 1979; Kriner 2010; Lindsay 1992; Peterson 1994). In proportional parliamentary systems, in contrast, scholars have examined, *inter alia*, the effects of ideological fractionalisation within the governing coalition (Clare 2010, 970), the extent to which the governing coalition divides the non-governing opposition (Oktay 2014, 878), the unity of both junior and senior coalition partners (Kaarbo 1996, 512), the number of seats held by each party in the coalition (Palmer *et al.* 2004), and the credibility of threats by one or more parties to depart from the government (Kaarbo 2012, 233-234).

This is not surprising, given that a majority of European party systems are of the proportional parliamentary kind, and the world's pre-eminent global power – the United States – represents the presidential model. Given that these countries are overrepresented in the discipline, we should expect some bias towards these systems. And yet the neglect of majoritarian systems is problematic for a number of reasons. For one thing, the dynamics of majoritarian parliamentary systems differ qualitatively from other systems, in ways likely to have significant consequences for executive autonomy. The ubiquity of single-party government in majoritarian systems means that factors other than intra-coalition bargaining are important in accounting for executive autonomy. Party factionalism and intra-party politics, both have more significant consequences in majoritarian systems, for instance. Seat share, too, matters

¹ Elman (2000) is a rare exception, although as I have noted above, her work also buys into the assumption that executive autonomy increases in line with legislative seat share.

in different ways in majoritarian systems, since it is not determined by the outcome of coalition negotiations, and since it constitutes the primary variable distinguishing different governments from one another.

Moreover, majoritarian systems – or systems with majoritarian-like characteristics – are more common in the international system than one would assume from the relative absence of theoretical work on the politics of foreign policy in majoritarian states. Among systems categorised as majoritarian or majoritarian-federal are a number of Commonwealth countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, India and New Zealand (Lijphart 1989, 35). Other countries identified as belonging to this type include Ireland, Austria, Greece and Spain (Anderson & Guillory 1997, 71). Moreover, although the absolute number of majoritarian regimes is lower than the number of proportional systems, the foreign policies of the former group of countries often prove more consequential for the course of global politics than the latter. The foreign policies of Britain, Canada, and Australia, for example, as ‘middle powers’ in the international system, matter more than those of Belgium, Austria and the Netherlands.

The lack of sustained theoretical attention to the distinct determinants of executive autonomy in majoritarian systems has resulted in an underspecified, and I would argue, inadequate, understanding of this relationship between legislative seat share and executive autonomy. Because existing works fail to capture the interaction between seat share and intra-party politics, and fail to account for the specificity of foreign policy as a field of executive action, they erroneously endorse the contention that possession of a greater number of seats in the legislature increases the autonomy of the government. To understand why this prevailing view is largely incorrect, and to develop a comprehensive understand of the relationship between seat share and

executive autonomy, the next section examines the politics of foreign policy in majoritarian parliamentary systems.

Factional Politics in Majoritarian Systems

Politics in majoritarian parliamentary systems is characterised by the use of the SMDP electoral system, the primary consequence of which is the emergence of a small number of broad-based ‘brokerage’ parties, comprised of multiple factions each articulating their own distinct set of preferences and ideological worldview. Electoral systems requiring parties to gain a plurality of votes within each constituency diminish the number of viable parties by diminishing the votes-to-seats ratio of smaller parties that seldom meet the plurality threshold (Duverger 1964; Taagepera & Grofman 1985, 342). In majoritarian systems, single-party government is the norm, and coalitions are comparatively rare. Proportional systems, in contrast, often feature a greater number of smaller parties because the disproportionality between votes and seats is far lower (Gallagher 1991; Lijphart 1990, 484), making coalition government the norm and increasing the ideological homogeneity of the parties (Cox 1990, 927).

The most important concern of parties, in majoritarian systems, is to meet the ‘majority threshold’ of legislative seats that enables them to form a government. As such, they articulate programmes based on the common denominators of a range of citizen beliefs up to the point at which they feel confident enough they will reach the threshold of a legislative majority. There is a trade-off here between ideological heterogeneity and the probability of passing the threshold; as the diversity of constituencies represented in policy commitments increases, so too do the chances of passing the legislative threshold and the difficulty of implementing the policy agenda

once in government. This trade-off also takes place within a sparse informational environment; the votes gained from representing diverse ideological constituencies are not known until *after* the election, but the trade-off between heterogeneity and electoral success must be made *before*, introducing considerable uncertainty. In proportional systems, in contrast, government formation often occurs after the election has taken place and after the number of seats each party could potentially bring to the coalition has been established, making the identification of a minimal winning (connected) coalitions relatively straightforward.

Beyond the majority threshold, however, the value of additional seats in the legislature changes, since these are technically ‘surplus’ to the government’s majority. There are, to be sure, advantages to be had from possessing additional seats above the majority threshold. Surplus seats provide a ‘buffer’ above the majority threshold that diminishes the *consequences* of intra-party rebellions against the government. The more seats a government possesses in the legislature, the greater the number of individual legislator defections it can withstand. This is important not only for the government’s ability to implement its legislative agenda, but also – in cases where the legislature’s confidence in the executive is at stake – for government survival. Possessing a significant number of seats above the threshold can also afford parties greater ‘presence’ in the minds of the electorate and increases voters’ confidence that they will win future elections (Hagan 1990, 83). Moreover, additional seats may prove beneficial for the bureaucratic resources of the party, the distribution of which is often calculated on the basis of the number of seats held (Katz & Mair 1995, 18).

But there are also disadvantages to holding a significant number of surplus seats, since the cohesion of the governing party decreases as seat share increases (Volden & Bergman 2006, 83). Strong majorities are likely to be accompanied by significant

ideological heterogeneity within the governing party, since significant victories are often won by obtaining support from broader coalitions of domestic constituencies than other parties. Moreover, the possession of a strong majority also makes the occurrence of dissent from intra-party factions more likely, since they decrease the costs associated with backbench legislators opposing the party line. When the government holds a slim majority, defections carry a strong risk of governmental collapse and the subsequent loss of related privileges for the individual legislator (Diermeier & Feddersen 1998, 611; Owens 2003, 13). If the government has a large majority, however, transgressions from the party line become far less costly, affording backbench legislators a greater incentive to oppose the government (Bräuninger & Debus 2009, 810). To put it another way, a substantial parliamentary majority leads to an increase in both the degree of factionalism present in the governing party and in the occurrence of dissent from the backbenches.

Factional dissent is problematic for governments for several reasons. First, dissent damages the reputation and credibility of the government. Criticism from the opposition is to be expected in parliamentary governance, but when it arises from the actions of members of the governing party or coalition it sends a strong message to voters about the absence of agreement and control within (or between) the governing parties. Second, dissent alters the discursive environment within which policies are articulated, placing items on the agenda that differ from the government's position. As Owens (2009, 16) has argued, "much legislative activity involves non-decision-making...keeping issues that entail considerable political risks off the legislative agenda". Third, dissent weakens the ties between governing parties and factions. As Boucek (2009, 473) argues, "polarized party opinion create[s] splitting pressures and loosen[s] intra-party ties as factions become opposed rather than simply separate".

This also entails the subsequent risk that new or stronger ties will be forged between the factions and the political opposition (Owens 2003, 16).

The negative effects of increased legislative majorities, moreover, are especially likely to be felt in the domain of foreign policy, for two reasons. To begin with, the positive effects of surplus seats are largely absent in the foreign policy domain, where the presence of significant executive prerogatives results in a far lesser proportion of external affairs issues reaching the floor of the legislature than is the case in other domains of policy. Moreover, the nature of foreign policy itself, and the relative importance of the ‘performative’ aspects of governmental action – signalling resolve, alignment, and credibility, for instance – reinforces the marginalisation of the legislature (Buzan *et al.* 1998; Davies & McDaniel 1994:57; Mattern 2005). Thus, the damaging effects of intra-party dissent are magnified in the foreign policy domain, while many of the potential benefits of a sizable majority, such as the increased legislative buffer, count for relatively little owing to the absence of a significant role for the legislature.

Understanding the benefits, and deficits, of surplus seats in majoritarian systems, and the likely effects in the foreign policy field, would suggest that the assumption of a linear relationship between a government’s legislative majority and its autonomy in foreign affairs paints a somewhat inaccurate picture. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that autonomy is actually undermined by the possession of a significant majority.

The Case of Early-Cold War British Foreign Policy

In the remainder of this article I consider the empirical validity of this argument by examining the conduct of the British foreign policy during the early Cold War period

(1945 to 1969). In particular, I demonstrate the effects of changes in legislative seat share on intra-party dissent at three elections (February 1950, May 1955, and March 1966) at which the government’s majority changed condition, from ‘strong’ to ‘weak’, or *vice versa*. I use a simple binary classification where majorities of under thirty seats are considered ‘weak’, based on Harold Wilson’s personal assessment of the optimal number of seats required to keep MPs ‘in check’ (Ziegler 1993, 248).² In each case I demonstrate how changes in the government’s seat share accompanying parliamentary elections undermined the freedom of the executive to pursue its favoured foreign policy agenda by empowering fringe elements within each party.

Party	Election	Majority	Classification
Labour	5 July 1945	145	Strong
Labour	23 February 1950	6	Weak
Conservative	25 October 1951	16	Weak
Conservative	26 May 1955	60	Strong
Conservative	8 October 1959	100	Strong
Labour	15 October 1964	4	Weak
Labour	31 March 1966	96	Strong

Figure 1: British governments and their legislative majorities in the early Cold War (1945-1969)

² As Figure 2 demonstrates it matters little to the classification scheme if we reduce this threshold. The only potentially borderline case is the majority of 16 held by the Conservatives after the 1951 election, and in this case it is clear that the government was concerned about the slightness of its majority (Ramsden 1995, 261).

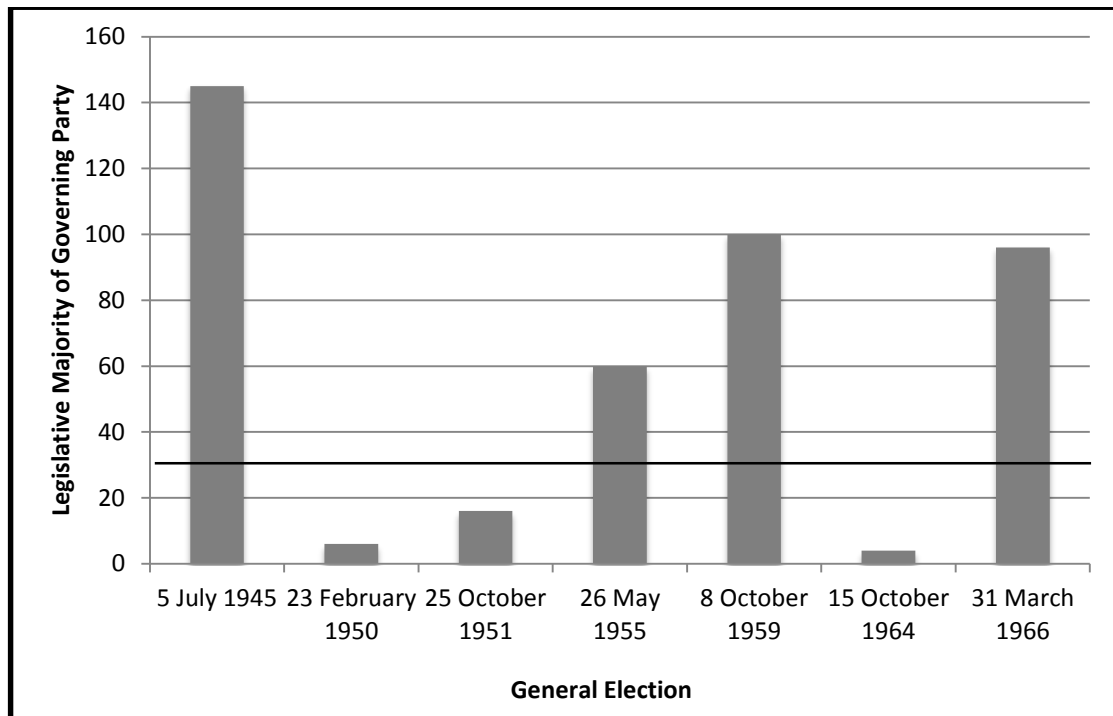


Figure 2: Scale of legislative majorities following general elections (1945-1969). The bold black line illustrates the cut-off point for classifying majorities as weak or strong.

There are three reasons why this case offers an effective test of the theory elaborated above. Firstly, there existed within both the Labour and Conservative parties a significant degree of factionalism during the period in question, which was marked by ideological conflict both within and between the parties over Britain's relationship with the US.³ Indeed, intra-party debates concerned questions of foreign policy more than they did domestic issues. Secondly, the period witnessed frequent elections at which the governing party did not change, allowing for an examination of the changing politics of foreign policy as a result of changes in seat share. Out of the six general elections held during the period, only two (1951 and 1964) resulted in a change in governing party. Thirdly, the continuity of the overarching structure of the

³ To avoid the charge of selecting on the dependent variable, it should be noted that factionalism is a necessary condition for dissent, but does not guarantee its occurrence. As I shall argue, it is changes in the governing party's seat share that determine variation in the level of dissent, not the existence of factionalism *per se*.

Cold War during this period acts as a methodological stabiliser, holding the relative power and preferences of the major international actors relatively constant and helping therefore to control for potentially confounding structural explanations.

The Attlee Government, the 'Bevanites', and the 1950 Election

The immediate post-war general election in Britain, held on 5 July 1945, rewarded the Labour party with a strong majority of 145 seats in parliament, sufficient for party leader Clement Attlee to form the first ever majority Labour government. Despite Churchill's status as national figurehead the Conservative party failed to capitalise on the post-war mood; the end of conflict brought euphoria and national prestige, for sure, but it also created significant demand for the public provision of housing and healthcare, and for strong state involvement in reviving the national economy. The Attlee government promised to implement all these welfare commitments, and more, and followed an ambitious programme of social and economic reform during the late 1940s.

It was also during the tenure of the Attlee government that the nature of Britain's post-war relationships would be set. Of these, few were more important than the Anglo-American 'special relationship', strengthened by the war but now confronted by the markedly different structural surroundings that had emerged by 1945. Strategic and economic global leadership was now in the hands of the Americans, not the Europeans. Moreover, the magnitude of Soviet power in Central and Eastern Europe complicated the Labour party's relationship with America; in a party divided between socialists and liberals, the emergence of superpower conflict around these ideals forced many in the party to choose where their allegiances lay.

The principal divide within the Labour ranks concerned questions of Cold War strategy. The party right, on the whole, supported the unfolding US strategy of ‘containment’, with its emphasis on collective deterrent strength, the institutionalisation of the West, and an anti-communist alignment. In terms of Cold War strategy, the Labour right sought to maintain a strong Atlantic orientation in British foreign policy. They viewed the Soviet Union as a totalitarian threat to peace while noting the “egalitarian qualities and potential” of the US variant of liberalism (Black 2001, 36). They argued in favour of an institutionally dense international order, a strong Western deterrent to defend against the Soviet threat, moves towards greater European integration, and a pragmatic retreat from Britain’s colonial territories.

Those on the party left, in contrast, supported a more positive engagement with the Soviet Union and an increased scepticism towards the capitalist militarism promoted by United States. They aimed for “complete impartiality and dissociation from all strategic manoeuvres of the USA and USSR”, which, given the density of Anglo-American ties, required effort be made to “disentangle ourselves from USA economic domination, because, as long as we are so entangled, we cannot pursue an independent political policy” (Woolf 1947, 17). The neutral, or quasi-neutral, stance would allow Britain to mediate between the superpowers in order to bring about the decline of the two-bloc system, whilst maintaining distance from the creeping influence of the US – “the Citadel of world capitalism” (Gordon 1969, 34). Many on the left urged a neutral British foreign policy as the only way of promoting peace between the superpowers, noting “we cannot do this if we ourselves have taken sides either in a Communist *bloc* or in an anti-Bolshevik axis. To those on the left, the US was just as threatening as the USSR.

Despite the initial intention on behalf of many to pursue Anglo-Soviet and Anglo-American cooperation simultaneously in the immediate postwar years, the emerging realities of the Cold War had convinced a majority of the party by 1947 that Britain's best hope for security lay with the Americans, not the Russians (Gordon 1969, 105). One of the strongest drivers pushing Britain in this direction was Ernest Bevin, foreign secretary and 'realist'; Bevin worked hard to convince the US of the need to maintain a presence in Europe in order to deter potential Soviet aggression. The Attlee government presided over a number of significant events that reinforced the Anglo-American relationship, including the beginning of the Marshall Plan in 1947 and the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949. It was also under the Attlee government that the decision was taken to begin production of an independent British nuclear deterrent (Callaghan 2007, 165).

While dissent on the left came from a minority of the party, however, it was a sufficiently strong and vocal minority to disrupt the government's foreign policy agenda. The left engaged in repeated protests over the course pursued by Attlee and Bevin throughout the late 1940s; in 1946 more than fifty backbench MPs tabled an amendment to the King's Speech denouncing British involvement in America's antagonistic Cold War strategy (Callaghan 2007, 169). Meanwhile, resolutions opposing the government's foreign policy arrived continually at the party headquarters from the constituency parties. Criticism in the House of Commons, moreover, came more frequently from the government's backbenchers than it did from those of the official Conservative opposition (Vickers 2003, 169-170).

Although the influence of the *Keep Left* campaign had waned by the end of the 1940s, the supporters of Aneurin Bevan had, by this point, become the latest manifestation of the Labour left's voice in foreign affairs. The Bevanites pushed for a more 'socialist'

Cold War strategy, advocating reduced dependence on the US, the ‘restraining’ of US aggression and the need to mediate between the two superpowers. Though they accepted the USSR was a flawed state, they drew inspiration from the Soviet model, arguing it needed both time and peace to develop into a true socialist utopia (Callaghan 2001, 68). The Bevanite ‘manifesto’ noted that the postwar period would ideally see “Britain holding the balance between the two great power blocs in the world, withstanding the policies of each where necessary, mediating between them, or at least not tipping the balance too strongly on one side or the other” (Bevan *et al.* 1951, 8-11).

One of the reasons such blatant challenges to the government’s authority could be launched was the party’s strong position in the legislature. With an overall majority of 145, the cost to individual MPs of making their views on foreign policy clear were relatively minimal. Backbench MPs believed their own preferences “ought to be publicly aired, however much [they] differed from the government’s own views, because their opposition could not possibly jeopardise Labour’s hold on office” (Gordon 1969, 201). The result, therefore, of the ‘huge majority’ was to “dilute discipline within the PLP on the floor of the Commons” (Gordon 1969, 201). Moreover, the strong majority not only contributed to greater levels of heterogeneity within the grouping of Labour MPs themselves, but also increased the expectations from the backbenches that the government would be free to pursue a truly socialist course in foreign policy (Vickers 2003, 169).

The decision calculus of the backbenchers on the left was altered by the February 1950 general election, at which Labour’s legislative seat share declined precipitously, turning a majority of 145 into one of only six. Whilst in the domestic arena the slim majority forced the government to abandon its more ambitious (and therefore

contentious) legislative proposals – for fear of the bills failing to pass – the situation was different in foreign affairs. Whilst the Bevanite rebels and heirs to the *Keep Left* movement still constituted a significant base of intra-party opposition, criticism of the government from this grouping declined in the aftermath of the election. Dissent decreased, as Gordon (1969, 204) notes, because:

The party's overall majority by then had shrunk drastically to a mere five seats, and opposition from the backbenches might have seriously jeopardised the government's hold on office; therefore...Bevan, Harold Wilson and John Freeman...promised they would remain loyal to the party line in the House of Commons...Obviously, dissenters were well aware of the need to proceed with caution if the circumstances [of] governing required it.

In consequence, the government's possession of a 'wafer thin' majority after the 1950 election actually reinforced the government's ability to keep its left wing in check (Crowcroft & Theakston 2013, 69).

Although the final years of the Attlee government have become associated with the factional strife between the Gaitskellites on the right and the Bevanites of the left (Fitzsimmons 1953, 144), intra-party opposition did not restart in earnest until the outbreak of the Korean War in June, five months after the general election. The conflict, pitting the US and its allies against the communist North Korean forces, undermined Labour unity in two respects. First, it represented another arena for critics and opponents of 'Atlanticism' to do battle. Dissent from constituency parties criticising the Anglo-American relationship doubled in the period (Callaghan 2007, 186). In January 1951 the US introduced a UN resolution condemning communist China as the aggressor: Gaitskell and the Labour right supported the motion, Bevan

and the left opposed it. Second, the conflict precipitated the emergence of a ‘guns versus butter’ trade-off between Labour’s interventionist policies at home and its involvement in costly overseas conflicts. Bevan’s resignation from Cabinet, in April 1951, was a response to Gaitskell’s decision as Chancellor to introduce prescription charges into the NHS to contribute to the financing of the war.

Thus, although 1951 was indeed a tumultuous year as far as Labour unity was concerned, this owed more to the effects of exogenous international crises than the effects of the February 1950 election, the results of which served to dampen the dissent of the Bevanites. Moreover, although the onset of the Korean War brought to the fore several trade-offs that roused the Bevanites, it was not until after Labour’s defeat that the grouping of leftist MPs organised itself into an organisationally independent ‘faction’ within the party. Even with the conflict raging, Labour’s precarious position in parliament was sufficient to stave off outright rebellion, lest the government fall sooner than already expected (Gordon 1969, 246). In the end, Labour lost the election of 1951, in part because of the antagonism between the Bevanites and the Gaitskellites, in part because of broader concern on behalf of the public at the lack of new ideas coming from the party (Crowcroft & Theakston 2013, 70).

Conservative Governments, the Suez Group, and the 1955 Election

The re-election of the Conservatives in 1951 under Winston Churchill resulted in little initial change in Britain’s Cold War orientation. One of Churchill’s only stated foreign policy changes was to improve the quality of Anglo-American relations, and in this regard the period can only be viewed as one of failure. That Churchill was unable to achieve the desired improvement in the ‘special relationship’ owed much

to the strategic imbalance between both partners, given that an Anglo-American condominium was simply not a realistic prospect for post-war Britain. Yet it was also a consequence of the views of foreign affairs held within the Conservative party, many of which were openly hostile to the idea of Britain becoming dependent on the US power. As with the Labour party, the breadth of the Conservative party's ideological commitments translated into a marked heterogeneity of positions on foreign affairs, and the relative strength of these contending factions would determine the ability of successive Conservative prime ministers to promote Anglo-American cooperation.

Moderate Conservatives, those on the party left, generally endorsed a position similar to that of the Labour right wing. They supported the contours of Britain's Cold War stance developed under Bevin's watch and argued in favour of a strong Anglo-American relationship as the best means for providing security against the Soviet Union. They also believed in the importance of international law and the need for supra-national regulation of the states-system; "shar[ing] a respect for the rule of law and diplomacy, together with a respect for observance of the Charter of the UN [and] an acceptance of the necessity of the American alliance" (Onslow 1997, 126). Moreover, as *laissez faire* liberals, they also supported moves towards freer trade and European integration, both of which also found greater support on the Labour right than on the fringes of either party.

The traditional, right wing of the Conservative party, in contrast, opposed the idea of the international as an interdependent, governable realm, advocating instead a "return to traditional methods of great-power diplomacy". Julian Amery, the poster-child for the Conservative right, argued Britain's "position – power political as well as geographical – is one of being between Russia and America, or if you prefer to think

ideologically, between Totalitarian Socialism and Liberal Capitalism” (Onslow 1997, 119-121). Concomitant with their embrace of *Realpolitik* as a basis for foreign policy, right wing Conservatives emphasised the importance of ‘balancing’, believing engagement with both superpowers should be determined by the need to off-set the power of each, rather than by considerations of regime-type or values. Traditional conservatives also diverged from the moderates on the left of the party in their attitudes towards international law and forms of transnational governance, the right viewing both as weak and illegitimate.

Thus, although outwardly cohesive, Conservative MPs were divided by several philosophical differences with important implications for their foreign policy priorities. They held different views not only of the nature of the international, but also the role of the state, the strength of the international community, and the legitimacy and effectiveness of international authority. Furthermore, these different visions of the international had consequences for the positions that party members would take on a variety of foreign policy issues; the Conservative left were generally more supportive of GATT, ‘Atlanticism’, European integration, colonial withdrawal and a strong anti-communist strategy than the right, although there existed a sizable contingent of Europeanists who supported the ideal out of a desire to balance US power rather than to further regulate the conduct of intra-European affairs.

As Churchill’s ‘peacetime’ ministry held a majority of only 16 seats, however, the opportunities for the competing Conservative factions to protest the direction of government policy were rather limited. Indeed, party discipline from 1951 to 1955 – when Churchill resigned – was remarkably strong. This was not for want of issues on which to rebel, moreover; the early 1950s witnessed debates on the nature and scope of European integration (through the ECSC and EDC proposals) as decolonisation

continued apace and Britain maintained its anti-Soviet, pro-American, Cold War stance. On each of these foreign policy issues the party right disagreed with the government stance, yet on each it remained essentially quiescent. Looming large in the minds of party members were the effects of dissent for such a weak government. At one point Harold Macmillan “even considered resigning over Europe, but was dissuaded by consideration of the effect it could have on a Government with so small a majority” (Ramsden 1995, 261).

Despite the salience of the decolonisation question in the early 1950s, particularly with regards the Middle East, dissent here too was minimal in these early years. The Suez Group, formed from the right of the party in 1952 in response to the British decision to withdraw from the Suez Canal Zone, did not act in a manner that threatened the survival of the government. In this there was a significant difference between the 1951-55 period, marked by a slight majority and the perceived need to toe the party line and the post-1955 period characterised by the government’s strong majority and the lessening of electoral concerns (Ramsden 1995, 265). Only a single consequential rebellion by the Suez Group took place between 1952 and 1955 – the rebellion of twenty-eight MPs over the treaty negotiating the terms of British withdrawal – and this could only occur because the Labour party abstained, rather than opposed, the treaty itself. The action was also strongly criticised by the party’s backbench ‘1922 Committee’ for the risk it presented the government (Ramsden 1995, 264).

The divide in Conservative party views became evident after the resignation of Churchill on 5 April 1955 and his replacement by Anthony Eden as party leader and prime minister the following day. Whilst Churchill’s replacement did not, in itself, herald an ideological change as such, it did result in the holding of new elections that

would alter the balance of power between the various factions in the party. The general election of 26 May 1955 affirmed Eden's leadership and afforded him a strong mandate to govern, increasing the Conservative majority from 16 to 58 seats (Butler 1955, 154). But it also emboldened the various party factions to press their case for new directions in foreign policy with greater vehemence. Prominent members of the government bemoaned the increased majority and worried about its potential for inciting disquiet amongst the ranks, Chief Whip Buchan-Hepburn commenting as the results become known: "I wish the papers would stop calling 60 a comfortable majority. I think that it will be the reverse" (Ramsden 1995, 302).

By the end of the summer, the Suez Group had stepped up its campaign against the government's Middle East policy. Although their actions were precipitated by the news of Czechoslovak arms sales to Egypt, this was only the most proximate cause of their increased activism, as Onslow (1997, 188) notes, claiming:

The Suez Group's reluctant support [for the government] became dependent upon Egypt's continued 'good behaviour'. These MPs wanted a more Conservative foreign policy generally and felt their government's increased majority after the general election in May 1955 (60) gave the backbenchers greater room for maneuver.

The Suez Group's attempts to shift British policy closer to its own position were graduated, beginning with 'official' complaints to party whips and the foreign affairs committees before working outside parliament to shift public opinion, primarily through letter-writing and 'whispering' campaigns (Onslow 1997, 193-210). Even prior to the Suez Crisis, from which their influence is perhaps best remembered, the activities of the group had contributed to a significant downturn in the government's fortunes. By early 1956 Eden's popularity had plummeted (from an approval rating

of 70 in 1955 to 40 in 1956) and several elements of the party had entered open rebellion (Ramsden 1995, 293).

The activities of the Suez Group gained prominence during the Suez Crisis of late 1956 which followed Egyptian President Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal. The party right, including the Suez Group argued for a strong response to the crisis, believing it necessary to demonstrate British resolve and to maintain its hold on its overseas territories (Verbeek 2003, 75). This was especially necessary, they thought, given American efforts to undermine Britain's presence in the Middle East. Moderate Conservatives, in contrast, criticised Eden's resort to force as unjustified and illegal. They also issued strong reservations as to the damage to Anglo-American relations that would likely occur and, when this proved accurate, worked to persuade the government to re-build transatlantic bridges. Keeping the two wings of the Conservative party 'on side', in particular, was a delicate balancing act. The Chief Whip, Edward Heath, for example, describes how his "task was to reassure the right of the party that it was necessary to continue with diplomatic action, but that a military solution was not excluded...At the same time I had to reassure the left that the diplomatic effort was genuine and not just a holding operation while the military got ready" (Heath 1998, 167).

Political constraints impinged upon Eden's freedom of action and helped determine the path chosen during key moments of decision and the course of events must be understood within the context of the shifting pattern of influence enjoyed by each of these domestic groupings. For example, the immediate escalation of the crisis, the desire for a 'humiliating' solution that placed the Canal under international control and denied Egypt the dues from users, as well as the final decision to deploy force, can be traced in part to the pressure applied on the government by members of the

right wing Suez Group. On the other hand, the decision to take the matter to the UN was the product of concerted and unified opposition from moderate Conservative and the Labour and Liberal parties, while the acceptance of the ceasefire and moves to re-establish stronger Anglo-American ties in the wake of the crisis were heavily influenced by the activities of the Anti-Suez Group.

The Wilson Government, the Labour Left, and the 1966 Election

The general election of 15 October 1964 returned Labour to power after thirteen long years in opposition. The party had gone through three different leaders during that time. The most recent of these individuals, Harold Wilson, was now prime minister, buoyed by a parliamentary majority of only four seats. Although Wilson had a reputation as a left-winger (Heppell 2010, 152), he was also a consummate pragmatist, and, for many, opportunist, adept at appeasing the party left whilst following the general policy outlines set by the more mainstream party right (Bale 1999, 120). Wilson, as a result, attempted to chart a conventional, centrist course in foreign policy during the 1960s. In spite of his manifesto commitments he insisted on maintaining Britain's independent nuclear deterrent and sought to build a strong relationship with the Johnson administration in the US (Vickers 2006, 139).

Although the Bevanite rebellion that afflicted the leadership tenures of both Attlee and Gaitskell had been dormant since the early 1960s (when Bevan had declined to support the cause of unilateral nuclear disarmament), the traditional left-right division in foreign policy beliefs continued to characterize intra-party division. The party left – including many members from the party's trade union wing – opposed the closeness of Anglo-American ties, supported greater engagement with the Soviet

Union, fought against European integration and economic openness, and advocated for nuclear disarmament. The party right, in contrast, supported an Atlanticist and anti-communist orientation for Britain, endorsed moves towards European integration and free trade, and advocated the possession of sufficient nuclear and non-nuclear armaments to deter the Soviet threat.

The ideological division within the party would be kept at the forefront of party conflict during the 1960s owing to the presence of several key issues on the immediate agenda: the Vietnam War, the British withdrawal from East of Suez, and initial moves towards détente. Yet the government's small majority made the management of the divide easy during the first two years of the Wilson governments. "From 1964 to 1966" Shaw (2006, 45) notes, "party managers could plausibly invoke a tiny majority to justify the retention of old methods [of discipline]". Moreover, the National Executive Committee (NEC), for its part, was sufficiently conscious of the need to maintain the government in power during these years that it actively committed against any actions which would 'undermine or embarrass it' (Minkin 1978, 293). As a result, the first few years of Wilson's tenure were marked by the relative absence of intra-party strife over the conduct of foreign policy.

On Vietnam, in particular, Wilson's compromise position – offering rhetorical support but stopping short of any military commitment – appeared to represent a stable political compromise. Whilst prudence alone cautioned against a significant military deployment in South East Asia, the refusal to send even the desired symbolic contingent – that, moreover, the US had agreed to underwrite financially (Parr 2006, 108) – owed more to political pragmatism than strategic necessity. Johnson desired a 'symbolic' British military presence in Vietnam, however minimal the contribution, and Wilson worried about jeopardizing US military and financial

commitments to Britain. The party left, on the other hand, opposed the war: Had troops been deployed, the party would have entered 'open rebellion' (Jones 1997, 149). Wilson's Vietnam policy was "the cause of more anger amongst [his] usual supporters than any other issue" (Phythian 2007, 59), and Wilson's political survival would be directly threatened if he sent troops to help the Americans (Vickers 2008, 49).

In defence spending, too, there was no significant challenge to the government's position during the period 1964 to 1966. Wilson announced his intention to initiate a review of defence spending in December 1964 and the Secretary of Defence, Denis Healey presented the completed review to the Commons on 22 February 1966. The review recommended cuts of over 30% to Britain's defence expenditures, but although the anti-militarist left was disappointed Wilson did not offer "a more far-reaching review that abandoned Britain's residual imperial role" (Vickers 2011, 74-75) they nevertheless supported the government's line. Nor was there significant pressure from the backbenchers for an active policy of mediation between the US and USSR such as would emerge after the 1966 election; although Wilson engaged in several visits to the Soviet Union during the period, it was only in 1967 that he began his public – and somewhat dramatic – intervention on the world stage with the aim of resolving the superpower tension over Vietnam.

The general election of March 1966 marked an important turning point for the Wilson government. Fresh elections had been expected sooner rather than later once it became clear how small the government's legislative majority would in fact be. The result, when it came, was a success: Labour was returned with an increased majority of 96 seats, dwarfing the margin of four seats they had held since 1964. Whilst Wilson was pleased with the scale of Labour's popular appeal, however, he

was concerned from the outset that the large majority would result in diminished party discipline. Wilson personally had favoured a margin of 25-35 seats to “keep MPs in line”. A strong majority, like that eventually obtained, “ensured that the government would be unlikely to fall even if the backbenchers stepped out of line and thus gave potential rebels more scope for making mischief” (Ziegler 1993, 249). Wilson’s biographer, Pimlott (1992, 401) echoes this concern:

[The] large majority made PLP discipline much harder to maintain, Keeping the Party in line had hitherto been relatively easy because of the likely consequences of even a small revolt. Now that the excuse for ministerial caution had gone, criticism from rank-and-file Members became less muted...MPs knew that they could rebel without endangering the Government.

The consequences of Labour’s strong performance in the election, predicted by Wilson himself, was that the conduct of foreign policy became more problematic. The difficulties that lay ahead were predicted too by Minister for Housing Richard Crossman, who claimed on 3 April 1966: “those Labour MPs who...weren’t allowed to speak or influence anything, will be seething with life and vitality and energy, and a desire to take an active part in policymaking” (Crossman 1975, 492). After the 1966 election the relationship between the party in the parliament and the party in the country began to break down, as did cooperation between the parliamentary leadership and the NEC. Much of the antagonism concerned questions of international relations. In the year or so following the general election there were three significant rebellions on foreign policy; over Vietnam in July 1966, over defence spending in March 1967, and over the European Economic Community in May 1967 (Shaw 2006, 48).

Wilson's compromise on the Vietnam War in particular became more difficult to manage. In May 1966, two months after the general election, Wilson – under pressure from leftist MPs to respond negatively to the US bombing of Hanoi – publicly admonished the Johnson administration for the first time (Colman 2003, 138). In both 1966 and 1967, the broader party formally rejected the government's Vietnam policy at the respective Labour conferences, a feat not previously achieved by the party fringe. Johnson himself was well Wilson's stance on Vietnam was not entirely of his own making, and criticised the attitudes of the Labour backbenchers for precluding British involvement in the conflict (Phythian 2007, 66). Yet he castigated Wilson repeatedly for refusing to share 'responsibility' for the conflict (Colman 2003, 140).

Wilson's peace initiative of 1967 also owed much to the increased pressure from the party left. Indeed, pressure from the Labour backbenches exerted a stronger force than international considerations in Wilson's mind (White 1992, 112). By 1966, noted Foreign Secretary George Brown (1972, 136), the government was "under tremendous pressure" to find a new initiative for peace. Wilson, realising the political capital to be reaped from a diplomatic solution to the East-West conflict, set out accordingly to mediate between the US and the Soviet Union (Barnaby 1969, Hughes 2003). In the end, the 'Sunflower' initiative ended in failure, owing largely to the US refusal to countenance an end to the bombing campaign prior to receiving guarantees from the Soviet Union that weapons would not filter through into North Vietnam. In fact, all that Wilson managed to achieve from the initiative was to irritate the US (Colman 2004, 121).

Economic pressures were important during this period too, especially given the continued and costly presence of British forces in bases outside of Europe. A series of strikes in dockyards and on the railways in mid-1967 placed significant pressure on

the pound, forcing the government to devalue the currency in November that year, from a parity of \$2.80 to \$2.40 (Pimlott 1992, 481-482). The resulting squeeze on the government's finances led to retrenchment in defence spending and the decision to withdraw British forces from 'East of Suez' by January 1968. But there were ideological factors pushing the government in this direction, too. The party left disapproved of the 'remnants of empire' that the bases represented and complained the money spent on their upkeep could instead be used to fund education and welfare programmes (Fielding 1999, 638). From 1966 onwards the party-at-large pushed more assertively for Wilson to reaffirm his commitment to Labour's domestic agenda and to abandon both Britain's East of Suez commitments and its weighty presence in NATO (Boyle 2003, 43). The shifting balance of power within the cabinet – away from the 'Great Britain addicts' – had by 1968 further entrenched the expediency with which the government sought to do away with its legacy of bases in Asia (Dumbrell 2006, 84).

Conclusion and Epilogue

This article has demonstrated that in majoritarian systems, contrary to popular wisdom, the possession of a strong parliamentary majority by governments undermines executive autonomy in foreign policy. A substantial legislative majority increases the incidence and extent of backbench activism by lessening the risks to individual legislators that their actions will bring about the collapse of the government and the associated benefits of belonging to the governing party. When the executive possesses only a slight majority, in contrast, individual legislators have a far greater incentive to toe the party line. The argument was demonstrated empirically through

examination of three British general elections in the early Cold War period and their effects on the incidence of factionalism in foreign policy. In each case intra-party dissent was most prevalent, and most costly for the government, when the government possessed a strong majority.

There is evidence that the pattern held throughout the remainder of the Cold War, from the 1970s onwards. In the late 1970s, for example, Henry Kissinger ascribed the state of strong relations between the Wilson/Callaghan governments and the Ford administration to the slimness of Labour's parliamentary majority, noting: "They [Labour] are better right now, but over the long pull the Conservatives are better. If Labour gets a hefty majority, we will have more trouble. He'll have a wild left wing".⁴ The narrowness of the parliamentary majorities under both Wilson and Callaghan meant that the government's relatively centrist commitments (support for Atlanticism, continued EEC membership, moderation in defence cuts) were not challenged in any significant way by the Labour left, which remained largely quiescent during the period. Whilst the Labour left certainly made their voices heard on foreign policy matters, they did not actively seek to undercut the government's position to the extent that previous party rebellions had in the 1950s and 1960s.

After the Cold War, too, there is evidence that the size of a government's legislative majority affects its ability to control party factionalism on foreign affairs issues. John Major's slight parliamentary majority helped contain backbench opposition to his European policy as the Maastricht Treaty was being negotiated. Only by tying the parliamentary vote on the Treaty to a vote of confidence in the government was Major able to credibly threaten backbenchers with the risk of governmental collapse and bring them into line with the government's European policy (Huber 1996). Tony Blair

⁴ Minutes of meeting between Ford, Kissinger and Scowcroft, 14 August 1974, Gerald Ford Papers

attempted a similar move in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, on which he faced significant opposition from within his own party, yet was largely unsuccessful at garnering support from the left of the party. At the time Blair's government possessed an 'unassailable' majority of 167 seats in the legislature (Norris 2001, 565), meaning dissent from the governmental line (of which Blair's liberal internationalism and centrist economic policy ensured would be in abundance) came with little consequence. Whilst Blair placed the decision before parliament as, effectively, a vote of confidence, in March 2003, an unprecedented number of Labour backbenchers (140) voted against the government, and Blair failed in bringing the left wing of the party 'on-side' (Strong 2015, 610).

And what of the hypothesised relationship between seat share and autonomy in more recent years? From 2010 to 2015 the Conservative and Liberal Democrats governed together in a rare example of a British coalition under prime minister David Cameron, making the (thorny) relationship between the two parties as important as that between the various factions of the Conservative party. Eurosceptic backbenchers in the Conservative party sought to pressure Cameron to hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, but this was not supported by the Europhile Liberal Democrats, leading Cameron to promise a referendum should the Conservatives win a majority in the 2015 general election. Cameron's subsequent gain of a (slight) majority of eight seats (BBC 2015) failed to quell Eurosceptic dissent from the backbenches and his inability to head off opposition to Europe from within his own party ultimately contributed to the Leave vote in the referendum on 23 June 2016. Cameron's difficulties with his backbenchers were compounded by three things: the rise of UKIP as an electoral force threatening Conservative MPs in marginal constituencies, the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party in 2015

and the subsequent splintering of that party, and the offer of the referendum already being on the table by the time the Conservatives gained their majority. All three factors increased the incentives, and opportunities, for Conservative Eurosceptics to rebel.

British politics has, in recent years, become more complex. The break-down of the traditional left-right model and the rise of smaller single-interest and regional parties have contributed to the weakening of the two-party system, with consequences for the balance of power between the government and its backbenchers in the legislature. It is unlikely, however, that the specific conditions which have characterised British politics since 2010 will continue indefinitely, since – as Duverger (1964) reminds us – political systems tend towards equilibrium. Already it has become clear that Brexit has defeated UKIP as a political force, while the emergence of a new cleavage around support for the EU (explicitly) and globalization (implicitly) offers fertile ground for a reconstruction of the political left, whether by Labour, the Liberal Democrats, or a progressive alliance. Whatever the future holds in store for British politics – and it is impossible to say for certain precisely what this will be – it is clear that the possession of a large parliamentary majority will continue to cause headaches for governments of all persuasions as they try to maintain party unity in the face of international challenges.

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