

United Kingdom

Contents

Introduction	1
Elections	1
14 December 1918	1
5 November 1922	2
6 December 1923	2
29 October 1924	2
30 May 1929	3
27 October 1931	3
14 November 1935	3
Parties	4
Conservative Party	4
Labour Party	5
Liberal Party	5

Introduction

While Britain's political institutions had evolved gradually over centuries, the interwar era saw a rapid expansion of suffrage and a fundamental shift in party competition. In the aftermath of World War I, the expansion of suffrage reshaped the party system. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act extended suffrage to all male citizens older than 21, and to women householders (or wives of householders) older than 30 (Caramani, 2017). Women voting age was lowered to 21 in 1928 (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010). Once dominated by the *Conservatives* and *Liberals*, British politics now saw the rapid ascent of the *Labour Party*, which represented the interests of trade unions and working-class voters. Two main cleavages shaped interwar politics: a deepening capital-labor cleavage, especially apparent amid economic turmoil and rising unemployment, and enduring center-periphery conflicts, most acutely manifested in Ireland's struggle for independence. In the early 1920s, the United Kingdom lost most of its Irish territories. The Irish Civil War (1922–1923) led to the partition of Ireland, with the establishment of the Irish Free State. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom retained control over the northeastern region of Ulster. Despite experiencing potentially destabilising crises such as the Irish Civil War, the General Strike of 1926, and the Great Depression, the British political system managed to face these situations peacefully (Cornell, Møller and Skaaning, 2017).

Elections

Between 1918 and 1939, 7 elections were held in the United Kingdom, employing a single-member district plurality system (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010).

14 December 1918

After the signing of the Armistice ending World War I, elections were called for December 14. For the first time, most working-class men could vote thanks to the significant extension of suffrage introduced earlier that year. This election was characterized by an unusual electoral pact between the parties supporting Lloyd George's coalition govern-

ment, namely a minority of the Liberals and the Conservatives. However, a group of liberals loyal to former PM and official leader Asquith did not take part in the coalition. Coalition candidates received a formal endorsement from Lloyd George expressed in the form of a letter or coupon. For this reason, the 1918 election is often called the “Coupon election”. The election was won by the coalition by a large margin, thus allowing David Lloyd George to remain Prime Minister. The original Liberal party experienced a major loss, obtaining only 5% of the seats. The Labour Party significantly increased their votes compared to the previous election (and, to a lower extent, their seats).

5 November 1922

In October 1922, at the Carlton Club meeting, the *Conservative Party* faction opposed to continuing the coalition government prevailed, leading to the end of the Lloyd George cabinet. At the 1922 election, the *Conservatives* and Lloyd George’s *Liberals* run independently. The *Conservatives*, led by Bonar Law, obtained a majority of seats. The election marks the start of the decline of the *Liberals* (Powell, 2004), with its two factions jointly obtaining fewer seats than the *Labour Party*, which emerged as the main competitor of the *Conservatives*. In May 1923 Bonar Law retired due to illness, and Stanley Baldwin succeeded him as both party leader and PM.

6 December 1923

Trying to find legitimization in the polls, Baldwin called early elections after a few months as PM. However, this move did not pay off: the *Conservatives* lost votes and a majority in parliament, despite remaining the largest party. Being in a pivotal position, Asquith’s *Liberal Party* decided to support a minority *Labour* government, led by *Labour* leader Ramsay MacDonald.

29 October 1924

In October 1924, following the government’s decision to drop the case against a Communist newspaper, a motion of no confidence was voted by the *Liberals* and the *Conserva-*

tives. The election led to a landslide victory for the *Conservatives*, who obtained control of parliament. The *Liberals* continued their decline and won only 6% of seats.

30 May 1929

Approaching the end of the term, the *Conservative* PM Stanley Baldwin called an election for May 1929. The election resulted in a hung parliament with the *Labour Party* holding a plurality of the seats and the *Conservatives* losing 152 seats. The *Liberals* regained some of the votes they had lost in the 1924 election. The *Liberals* opted not to form a coalition with the *Conservatives* and Ramsay MacDonald was appointed for the second time Prime Minister in a minority *Labour* government. Struggling to face the consequences of the Great Recession, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald formed a National Government in August 1931, drawing on *Conservative* and *Liberal* support. The *Labour Party* opposed the new National Government and expelled MacDonald from the party.

27 October 1931

The forces supporting the National Government decided to call for early elections and run together with a unified platform. The result was a landslide victory for the National Government, with the *Conservatives* emerging as the dominant force in Parliament. *Labour* – now split between MacDonald’s *National Labour* faction and the official party – suffered an unprecedented defeat, losing 235 out of 287 seats. The *Liberals* also divided between the supporters of the coalition and those remaining in opposition (led by Lloyd George). Although MacDonald kept his office as prime minister, the *Conservatives* played the role of the dominant party within the coalition. With Ramsay MacDonald’s health failing, the leadership of the National Government passed to Stanley Baldwin in June 1935.

14 November 1935

Seeking a fresh mandate, Baldwin called an election for 14 November 1935. Although the National Government – largely dominated by the *Conservatives* – lost votes compared to the previous election, it retained a comfortable majority. The *Labour Party*,

led by Clement Attlee, made a noticeable recovery from its severe losses in 1931, while MacDonald's *National Labour* only won 8 seats. The *Liberals* continued to struggle with divisions and dwindling support. Baldwin remained PM until 1937, when he was replaced by Neville Chamberlain.

Parties

The British party system underwent profound structural changes in the early 20th century (Bartle, Allen and Quinn, 2024). The expansion of suffrage, which enfranchised working-class voters and women for the first time, played a key role in reshaping electoral dynamics (Powell, 2004). This shift not only broadened the electorate but also altered the political landscape, contributing to a major realignment of party competition. One of the most significant transformations was the decline of the *Liberal Party* and the rise of the *Labour Party* as the principal opposition to the *Conservatives* in the aftermath of World War I (Oaten and Kerr, 2020). This transition marked the beginning of a two-party system centered around class-based political divisions, fundamentally redefining British politics for the decades to come.

Conservative Party

The *Conservative Party* emerged in the 1830s as the heir of the Tories after the suffrage extension introduced by the Britain's Reform Bill (Webb and Norton, 2025). Since then, at the core of its platform the *Conservative Party* has placed the promotion of private property and the protection of traditional cultural values. Under Disraeli's leadership (1874–1880), the party managed to draw support not only from landowners but also from business elites and middle-class voters. Emerging from World War I as the strongest party within the wartime coalition, the *Conservatives* benefited from the decline of the *Liberal Party* and dominated British politics in the interwar years. Except for two short *Labour* minority governments, the *Conservatives* stayed in government since 1915 to 1945.

Original Name	Conservative Party
Other Names	
Abbreviation	
Factions	

Labour Party

The *Labour Party* emerged in the early 20th century as a response to working-class frustration with the Liberal Party's inability to fully represent their interests. Initially formed as the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 by the Trades Union Congress and the Independent Labour Party, it officially became the *Labour Party* in 1906. Before World War I, *Labour* operated through an informal electoral agreement with the *Liberals*, ensuring minimal competition between the two parties. After the war, *Labour* rapidly grew, benefiting from the decline of the *Liberal Party* and the 1918 Representation of the People Act. The party embraced a socialist platform committed to public ownership of industry, progressive taxation, social welfare expansion, and workers' rights (Webb, 2025). By the 1922 election, *Labour* had surpassed the Liberals as the main opposition to the *Conservatives*. *Labour* first entered government in 1924 under Ramsay MacDonald, forming a short-lived minority government that collapsed amid accusations of communist sympathies. The Labour Party regained power in 1929 under MacDonald but soon faced severe challenges due to the Great Depression. In 1931, MacDonald controversially joined the Conservatives and Liberals in a National Government, leaving *Labour* divided and electorally crushed, with its parliamentary seats reduced from 288 to just 52.

Original Name	Labour Party
Other Names	
Abbreviation	
Factions	

Liberal Party

Until 1918, the *Liberal Party* was one of Britain's two dominant major forces, advocating for parliamentary supremacy, individual liberty, and social reform. Originally formed as an alliance of Whigs and Radicals, the party became a cohesive political party under

William Gladstone (1868–1894), holding office for a total of 12 years during his leadership. World War I proved to be a turning point for *Liberals*’ fate. In 1915, H. H. Asquith, the *Liberal* Prime Minister, formed a national coalition government with the *Conservatives* and *Labour* to manage the war effort. This coalition government, however, deepened internal divisions within the party. The crisis culminated in 1918 when David Lloyd George, who had replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in 1916, led a breakaway faction known as the *Coalition Liberals*. Lloyd George’s wing formed an electoral alliance with the Conservatives, while Asquith’s *Liberals* remained an independent but weakened force. The split proved disastrous for the party. The *Labour Party*, benefiting from the expanding working-class electorate, soon replaced the *Liberals* as the primary opposition to the *Conservatives*.

Original Name	Liberal Party
Other Names	
Abbreviation	
Factions	

References

- Bartle, John, Nicholas Allen and Thomas Quinn. 2024. The United Kingdom Party System. In *Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform*, ed. Thomas Poguntke and Wilhelm Hofmeister. Online edition ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Caramani, Daniele. 2017. *Elections in Western Europe 1815–1996*. Springer.
- Cornell, Agnes, Jørgen Møller and Svend-Erik Skaaning. 2017. “The Real Lessons of the Interwar Years.” *Journal of Democracy* 28(3):14–28.
- Nohlen, Dieter and Philip Stöver. 2010. *Elections in Europe*. Nomos.
- Oaten, A. and P. Kerr. 2020. Political Parties in Britain. In *The Routledge Handbook of British Politics and Society*. Routledge International Handbooks London: Routledge pp. 68–81.
- Powell, David. 2004. *British Politics, 1910-1935: The Crisis of the Party System*. London: Routledge.
- Webb, P. David. 2025. “Labour Party.”. Accessed: 2025-01-30.
URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Labour-Party-political-party>
- Webb, P. and Lord Louth Norton. 2025. “Conservative Party.”. Accessed: 2025-01-30.
URL: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Conservative-Party-political-party-United-Kingdom>