

'The need to win elections for the mainstream parties has resulted in parties becoming ideologically similar in the UK.' Analyse and evaluate this statement.

In the past, Labour was typically perceived a socialist party with a vested interest in the working class, and the Conservatives were often thought to have been concerned with helping only the richest in society. However, the increasing pressure to win elections and get into power has led to a number of similarities being drawn between the two parties. Though they are not ideologically identical in many respects, it would seem that Labour and the Conservatives are now more similar than ever before.

One area in which the two parties are now arguably very similar is social issues. Whilst prime minister, David Cameron tried to promote his 'compassionate Conservatism' in an attempt to discredit the 'Nasty Party' image that had previously been attributed to the Tories. In 2013, he passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act which allowed for the first same-sex marriage to take place in March 2014. This clearly went against the very traditional Conservative view of marriage, with many believing it is the core institution whereby society reproduces and passes knowledge on to its children. It was an evident step away from previous Conservative prime ministers such as Thatcher, considering that she banned the promotion of homosexuality in schools with Section 28. By contrast, same-sex relationships are something that the Labour would arguably always favour due to strong emphasis the party places on equal rights for all. During Blair's premiership, he introduced a number of preliminary steps that were vital in the development of LGBT rights. For instance, he extended adoption rights to LGBT couples and created civil partnerships. Therefore, it would seem that the two parties have indeed become ideologically similar as the Conservatives now share in the Labour Party's desire for equal rights a tolerance. It is also very likely that this Conservative policy was driven by the hope that it would boost their appeal among the youth who are perhaps more aware of issues such as sexuality than the traditional older Conservative voters, and also more likely to vote Labour in elections (e.g. 67% of the 18-24 vote in the 2017 election). Thus, this change in stance on social issues certainly seems to have been motivated by the need to win elections.

Furthermore, the two parties now seem very similar with their approaches to the economy and public spending. In his 2019, Boris Johnson announced plans for extensive public spending. This included an extra £20.5 billion funding for the NHS by 2024, and a £3.5 billion Towns Fund which would be allocated to 100 towns to improve their local economies. After his electoral success, Boris also acknowledged those voters in the North who had "lent their vote" and he reassured them that he would repay their trust. For the North and the Midlands alone, he promised an exclusive £80 billion fund to help these areas improve their infrastructure. This commitment to public spending (particularly in the North) was something that wasn't seen during David Cameron's austerity programme, and it most definitely wasn't seen during Thatcher's reign as she cut public spending by £1 billion during her first few years as prime minister. This clearly marks a step away from the past principles of the Conservative Party. Moreover, the Labour Party has always favoured such economic intervention, and their public spending plans from the 2019 election were even more extreme. Corbyn and McDonnell pledged an extra £26 billion in funding to the NHS by 2024,

and a remarkable £400 billion National Transformation fund that was to be spent on developing infrastructure in the UK. This implies that the parties are more ideologically similar as they have both demonstrated their commitment to public spending – especially in more economically deprived areas – and this was something that the Conservatives did not usually do. The big spending plans can most definitely be perceived as an attempt to make the party more electable in the North and the Midlands given that these areas would generally consist of staunch Labour voters (e.g. in 2017, the Conservatives only won 37% of the vote in the North). Nonetheless, one point of economic divergence for the two parties is their approach to nationalisation. Whereas the Conservatives maintain that privatisation is important, Corbyn's 2019 manifesto was full of plans to bring several industries (e.g. rail, mail, water and energy) back into the private sector. Therefore, it appears that the need to win elections has resulted in the parties becoming similar in terms of the economy, but certainly not identical.

However, the issues of welfare and taxation have recently seemed to be the growing ideological distinction between the two parties. As leader of the Labour Party, Corbyn was persistent with his rhetoric and party slogan of "For the many, not the few", asserting the fundamental importance of wealth redistribution. In Labour's 2019 manifesto, there were plans to tax the top 5% of earners more and to introduce a new 50% rate on income over £125,000. Various welfare reforms also included scrapping the Universal Credit system, increasing the Carers' Allowance and increasing statutory maternity pay. In comparison, Boris Johnson stated that he would not increase the top rate of income tax, and he also pledged to raise the higher rate of income tax threshold from £50,000 to £80,000. He also stuck by the Universal Credit scheme that many criticised for its ineffectiveness as a welfare system. This would imply that the parties have not become ideologically similar as welfare and taxation both remain as a clear point of difference between the two. Evidently, Labour has a strong commitment to wealth redistribution through high taxation, and the Conservatives seem content to keep taxes lower and not replace their supposedly ineffective welfare scheme. Despite this, Tony Blair was adamant that the party wouldn't raise taxes to fund public spending, and he was publicly opposed to the 50p rate of income tax, with his proposed 'Third Way' economic policy aiming to attract middle class voters. This is no longer the case for the Labour Party, and the considerable shift towards the left the party has taken under Corbyn shows that their policy isn't driven by the need to attract a wider range of voters across the class spectrum.

In conclusion, the two parties are undeniably similar in ideology now. If one was to draw a comparison between Thatcher's Conservative Party and Callaghan or Foot's 'Old Labour', the divide between the two would be chasmic in comparison to the parties today. There does still remain a strong difference in terms of welfare and taxation, and Labour's commitment to nationalisation is not shared by the Conservatives. However, this more liberal approach taken by the Tories on social issues would certainly imply that the parties are in fact more similar than before. In addition to this, such extensive public spending plans and economic intervention demonstrates that the parties' ideologies are far more resembling of each other in certain areas. Without doubt, this growth in similarities has been motivated by the need to win elections. The changing social policies intend to appeal to those who perceive the Conservatives as more backward-looking, and the public spending plans will be attractive to those in the North and the Midlands who previously felt

neglected by Conservative governments. Thus, an appropriate assessment would be that the two parties are by no means ideologically identical, but they are indeed far more similar than they have been in previous years.