Party factions in the UK

**Party faction:** An organised group of politicians or supporters who share a political viewpoint, set of ideas or loyalty to an individual or group. Factions compete with others for power and influence within a political party.

Before there were political parties in the UK there were factions. These were much looser groupings than modern parties, and lacked the level of discipline, unity, structure and organisation that they have today. Political parties developed as the vote was extended to the masses in the nineteenth century and there was a growing need to campaign to win votes from the new electorate. Political parties today are tightly organised and try to appear unified, however within all parties there are still groupings of politicians and/or party members — in other words factions.

**What are party factions for?**

Within parties there will always be a range of ideas about the direction the party should be going in and the ideas it should be following. This is the case even in small parties. There are also ambitious individuals within all parties, and factions may group around them, hoping that these individuals will gain influence. There are several examples of this below.

Factions may be focused on controlling the party machinery and administration in addition to pushing their ideas forward. They are important and useful for parties as they can help establish a sense of unity. Even if you don’t agree with all that your party is doing, within the party you can be part of a smaller grouping of like-minded individuals. This will help you to feel that your voice is heard and stop you from leaving or losing interest and commitment. They can also help parties come up with new ideas and solve problems.

**Do they help or hinder political parties?**

Factions compete for power within parties. This can sometimes be quite brutal and damaging. In 1981 four senior MPs split from Labour to form the Social Democratic Party, arguing that the party had become too left wing. Another example is John Major, prime minister from 1991 to 1994, who was seriously weakened by factional fighting within the Conservative Party over its attitude towards the European Union (sounds familiar!).

Factions fluctuate in influence depending on party leadership, organising ability, public opinion and external events. They also come in a range of guises including think tanks, pressure groups or loose groupings of MPs. Finally, factions don’t just represent the views of politicians, they can also represent the views of ordinary voters. Momentum is a good example of this. It is often linked to certain think tanks (organisations that carry out research on economic or political issues and provide advice and ideas) or pressure groups.

**Examples of factions**

There are some useful UK examples here, but there are also many more and remember that their influence fluctuates, so these examples will soon become dated.

**Labour**

Since Jeremy Corbyn was elected in 2016 there have been huge changes in Labour Party factions. The factions tend to be based around a left–right split in the party.

**Momentum:** A new grassroots left-wing organisation that wants ordinary members to have much more influence over the party. Cheerleaders for Corbyn and organise in his defence. This group is subject to continued scrutiny about its possible links to long established hard-left groups. <http://www.peoplesmomentum.com/>

**Labour First:** Strongly in opposition to Corbyn and seen as representing the right of the party. Claims to exist to represent ‘moderate party members’. <https://labourfirst.wordpress.com/about/>

**Progress:**  Represents New Labour ideas and is part of Labour’s right wing. This group was once very influential, but now seriously side-lined due to Corbyn’s success. <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/>

**Compass:**  Set up in 2003 in opposition to Blair by Neil Lawson, this group could now be described as critical friends of Corbyn. <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/>

**Conservative**

In recent years factions have often been focused on Britain’s relationship with the EU.

**Tory Reform Group:** Established in 1975, this group describes itself as One Nation Tories and is seen as on the left of the party. It was opposed to Brexit. <https://www.trg.org.uk/>

**Conservative Voice:** Aims to represent the grassroots of the party including party members and local councillors, it describes itself as ‘centre-right’. <https://www.conservativevoice.co.uk/>

**The Bruges Group:** A right-wing think tank which strongly supports Brexit. <http://www.brugesgroup.com/>

**ResPublica:** Created by Philip Blond. Described as the ‘Red Tories’, they reject the Thatcherite individualist approach and call for more state intervention and focus on the common good. <http://www.respublica.org.uk/>

**Bright Blue:** Newcomers continuing Cameron style social liberalism with a concern for the environment. <http://www.brightblue.org.uk/>

**European Reform Group:** Been around since Britain joined the EU. Key group that helped force the referendum on EU membership on David Cameron in 2015. Back in the news post-Brexit referendum, Theresa’s ‘victory’ in 2017 and Rees-Mogg becoming its chairman in January 2018 (leading to that 60 named letter to Theresa in February ’18, threatening her leadership if there is a ‘soft’ Brexit!).

**Liberal Democrat**

Factions here have been based around whether the party should be closer to Labour and support a wide range of welfare interventionist measures, or return to a more classical liberal free-market approach. Several leading MPs, including Nick Clegg and current leader Vince Cable, published *The Orange Book* in 2004 arguing for a return to economic liberalism rather than government intervention. This viewpoint was opposed by those such as Simon Hughes who favour more of a ‘tax and spend’ approach.

**Other factions**

Factions used to be a serious problem in the SNP, but the party now appears to be very unified. However, there is a faction that supports a gradual approach to independence and another supporting a more radical approach.

The Green Party includes both *deep* and *shallow* greens as well as those who are very much on the left of politics and others who think the party should try to stay in the middle ground, like other European Green Parties.

The factions within UKIP have recently been highlighted with the party’s attempts to find a new leader. The party is now very divided, with a more moderate wing concerned that radical right-wing anti-Muslim factions might come to take the leadership.

**Activity**

Complete table with the following headings for each political party. You could also use this to examine factions in US politics.

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| **Name of faction** | **Key individuals** | **Political aims and/or beliefs** | **How influential now? Score out of 10** |
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