all social groups. Lacking access to the perks of office, no other party could challenge its hegemony.

But authoritarian rule during Indira Gandhi’s State of Emergency (1975–77) cost Congress dear. The party suffered its first defeat at a national election in 1977 and has received less than 30 per cent of the vote at every election since 1996. It remains the largest party, and the lead party in a minority coalition, but its glory days are gone.

Two-party systems

A two-party system is as it says: two major parties of comparable size compete for electoral support, providing the framework for political competition. The other parties exert little, if any, influence on the formation and policies of governments. Neither major party dominates by itself but, in combination, they form the pillars of a strong party system.

Rather like dominant parties, the two-party format is rare – and becoming rarer. The United States is the surest example. Although American parties may lack the stable social foundations of their West European counterparts, a two-party system has been a constant feature of American history. The Republicans and Democrats have dominated electoral politics since 1860, assisted by the high hurdle that plurality elections set for minor parties. In particular, winning a presidential election is a political mountain which can only be climbed by major parties capable of assembling a broad national coalition.

Legal regulation provides additional reinforcement. The country’s regulators view parties as utilities performing the collective service of selecting candidates for public office. This perspective encourages sympathetic oversight of the major parties; minor parties, unable to present winning candidates, even confront difficulties in placing their party on the ballot (Lowenstein, 2006). So, the position of the Republicans and Democrats is heavily entrenched. In the country of the free market, the two leading parties form a powerful cartel which is strengthened by judicial policy.

Unusually, too, America’s major parties have revived, rather than weakened, since the 1980s, offering further ballast for the two-party system. National party organizations have gathered new impetus as fund-raisers; ideological differences have sharpened between the parties, while diminishing within them; and party voting has intensified in Congress, and even in the electorate. No longer can books be published with such titles as The Party’s Over (Broder, 1972). Instead, as Stonecash (2010a, p. 3) proclaims, ‘partisanship is on the rise!’

Note that the trends here may well be specific to the USA, partly reflecting a decline in what were once exceptional levels of ideological diversity within each major party. A revival of parties, and a resulting deepening of two-party systems, is unlikely elsewhere (Adams et al., 2012).

Apart from the USA, Britain is often presented as an emblem of the two-party pattern. However, its contemporary politics barely pass the two-party test. Certainly, the Conservative and Labour parties regularly alternate in office, offering clear accountability to the electorate. However, third parties have gained ground; far more so, indeed, than in the United States. In 2010, the centre Liberal Democrats won 57 seats in a parliament of 650 members, forming a coalition with the Conservatives after no party won an overall majority. The Liberal Democrats have also progressed in local government and in the new