What are the arguments for and against introducing state funding for political parties in the United Kingdom?

British politics has always been dominated by the richest parties, as these are the parties that can promote their profile most efficiently and contest elections most successfully. This has resulted in our two-party system, controlled by the two wealthiest parties – Labour and the Conservatives. The argument to introduce state funding of parties has been advocated by many, who see it as the only way to truly allow the free contesting of elections by the maximum number of parties possible, rather than the traditional few.

The argument for state funding says that it would have several benefits for British politics. It would reduce parties’ dependence on vested interests, releasing them from their obligations based purely on keeping the party from bankruptcy, and instead helping to make the party more responsive to the electorate, upon whom the party will be more reliant. For example, the Conservative Party is heavily reliant on donations from businesses, forcing them to be influenced by the will of the business executives. Under state funding, the Party would instead have to respond to the will of the people, who would give money through tax, rather than businesses who give their money through donations. This would hopefully increase the democratic responsiveness of parties, making them parties subject to the nation as a whole, rather than to a powerful, rich minority.

A major argument in favour of state funding is that it would help to break the political dominance of Labour and the Tories. They are seen by some to have an ‘unfair’ advantage over all other political parties, simply due to their historical dominance over the Commons and current wealth. If all parties, in particular the major ones, were state funded, more parties would emerge with a better chance of contesting and winning seats previously safe under Labour and the Conservatives. There would be many more local parties in Parliament, as more people could start up their own parties without the worry of having to find the money for it. Some people would not want their money to go to extremist parties such as the BNP, but it is arguable that these parties would be marginalised, as many tax payers would refuse to allow their money to go to them and challenge them in courts.

Parties would not have to waist time, and money, on fund raising. It is thought that this would make them more efficient at doing their jobs, and allow them to spend more time formulating policy to appeal to the greatest number of people for the benefit of the country.

However, there is a large argument against state funding. Most importantly, state funding of political parties seems to go against the fundamentals of democracy. The freedom of people to choose what to do with their money is absolutely vital to our liberty. Many people would have a large problem in giving their hard-earned money to certain parties.

Despite it being claimed that state funding would bring political parties into society, the exact opposite might happen. If parties know that they are getting a steady income from the state, they may be less responsive to the needs of the public, as they will not have to rely on them (as directly) for money. Their need for financial support helps ensure that parties keep responsive to their need for electoral support – elections aren’t just won through money.
There are also many other problems concerning state funding. How is the amount of money that goes to different parties decided? Must every tax payer donate to every political party? It is arguable that state funding would increase corruption, with many parties continuing to take bribes, which could be illegal. There would be widespread discontent within parties about the money being received. Of course, it would also mean even more tax, a further burden on the public as the recession starts to take hold on the country.

Therefore, in my opinion, state funding would not be beneficial for the United Kingdom. At a fundamental level, it goes against our democratic traditions and there would be widespread anger at its implementation. Channelling large sums of money from taxpayers to political parties has proven even less successful than enacting additional laws in enforcing honesty and integrity. Political parties in Italy, for instance, receive large amounts in state subsidy, but no one would claim that this stops Italian politicians from using highly dubious, if not downright dishonest, methods to increase the funds at their own, or their parties’, disposal.