

2010 ELECTION ANALYSIS – Nobody has won in terms of votes, but the last-minute momentum was to Labour

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After a night and morning of great uncertainty about who has won what seats, the UK's results are now known. [Patrick Dunleavy](#) analyses what they mean for the next UK government.

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Last night's election showed Labour losing one in six of their 2005 vote share but outperforming the opinion polls in the last hours of the campaign to live to fight another day. The Conservatives have increased their vote share by 4 per cent in five years. The Liberal Democrats have completely failed in their hopes of 'breaking through' to second party status, and have stood still in terms of vote share.

Great Britain share of the votes	% votes	Change in support (% points) since 2005	Compare 2005 % vote share
Conservative	36.9	+ 4	33
Labour	29.6	- 6	36
Liberal Democrats	23.5	+ 0.4	23
UK Independence Party	3.1	+ 0.9	2.3
British National Party	1.9	+ 1.2	0.7
SNP (Scotland Only)	1.7	+ 0.1	1.6
Greens	1.0	- 0.1	1.0
Plaid Cymru (Wales only)	0.6	- 0.1	0.7

What do the results mean for each of the main parties?

Conservatives - yesterday Lord Tebbit was accurately quoted as saying that given the recession and Gordon Brown's unpopularity as PM, the Tories should have been 15% ahead of Labour.

In fact they are 7 per cent ahead, and since 2005, over 4 years, they have grown their support by just 4%.

This is not an impressive performance, despite the party's advances made in terms of winning seats. But Cameron will be safe from criticisms from the right because of the haul of new MPs.

Labour – support is down by 6 per cent, but the party has outperformed the final opinion polls by 2 per cent, suggesting a big hardening of the Labour vote in the last hours of the election. Perhaps the Labour appeals for tactical voting worked. Or perhaps the Greek drama being played out on TV screens over the last two days helped dramatize and underline Labour's push that a Conservative government in charge of austerity measures would hurt many different groups.

Liberal Democrats – their vote share is essentially unchanged on the 2005 total. Nick Clegg has reaped the whirlwind that he probably sowed in some unguarded and hubristic moments during the campaign, when he declared he could not work with Gordon Brown, insulted the PM as being 'desperate', proclaimed a 'two-horse race' between the Lib Dems and Tories, with Labour 'out of it' and so on. Rejecting Labour calls for tactical voting in the last two days before polling now looks unwise. Tactical voting is a quid pro quo deal – with no quid, the Liberal Democrats lost out to a Tory-Labour squeeze in many seats that they might otherwise have won or kept.

PROSPECTS FOR COALITION GOVERNMENT

However, Clegg could still snatch an important change in the Liberal Democrats' future status and experience of government – so long as he goes into negotiations with the other two parties in a more nuanced way. He must now show that the Liberal Democrats are a serious party of government, able to take responsibility in difficult times. If they turn nervously away for fear of taking office now, the party's fortunes may well be wrecked for a generation. The need to push through big changes in state spending, cut public borrowing and get out of the recession could provide the Liberal Democrats with a perfect rationale for insisting on the UK's first peacetime coalition government since the 1920s.

From Labour – the Liberal Democrats might well demand (and get)

- a formal coalition deal for at least two years, including 7 Cabinet ministers out of 23, perhaps with Clegg himself going to the Foreign Office, Huhne to the Home Office and Cable to be Chief Secretary;
- legislation for a fixed four-year Parliament – so everyone knows the date of the next general election in advance;
- a Labour commitment to introduce AV straightaway and to support the Jenkins Commission's voting reform plan (called 'AV Plus') in a referendum; and
- a wide-ranging process of joint policy-development between the two parties on all aspects of policy.

From the Conservatives - the Liberal Democrats cannot afford an open-ended commitment to prop up the Conservatives in office.

- Most European party leaders in the Liberal Democrats' position would say that Clegg should resist *any* approach from Cameron for support that does not involve a formal coalition deal of at least two years, and Liberal Democrat ministers in the Cabinet – maybe 5 out of 23 would be a realistic number. Otherwise, the Tories would have the whip-hand on many, detailed issues and complete control of the UK's strong executive action capabilities.
- Any arrangement 'for supply' that leaves David Cameron in government alone and able to call the next election at a date of his own choosing could be a sword of Damocles hanging over the Liberal Democrats' head.

HOW LONG COULD DIFFERENT GOVERNMENT OUTCOMES LAST?

There are three possible outcomes, in decreasing likelihood of their occurring:

- Cameron minority government: expect a new election in October 2010 or May 2011.
- Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition – should last at least two years, because constitutional change takes time. Gordon Brown has offered legislation to create fixed four-year terms, which might imply a government that last until 2014.
- Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition – without PR being included, it's hard to see this lasting longer than May 2011.