

How Do You Report A Hung Parliament?

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The likelihood of a hung parliament raises all sorts of interesting procedural issues for journalists – especially the BBC and other Public Service Broadcasters. How do you report impartially and proportionately and how do you avoid getting bogged down in procedural detail? And how will our partisan press respond?

Generally, governments are given the dominant position in news coverage and allowed to dictate terms and set agendas because they have the popular mandate. New governments also tend to get a honeymoon period where the media allow them to set out their stall and give them the benefit of the doubt.

But once it is sorted out a minority administration raises the question of just how to report fairly. Whether it is a formal coalition, a pact or simply an ad hoc arrangement will make a subtle difference to start with. Let's assume it's a LibCon deal for now.

Take Nick Clegg. He got fewer seats than Labour but he may end up as a kind of deputy Prime Minister. So does he speak on behalf of the Government and do you weight his significance more highly than the official Opposition?

Take the individual parties. Around a few of the key issues, especially electoral reform, they are deeply split within themselves. So does each discussion have to represent a Government view, a coalition partner view, the Opposition view and then Tory, Labour and Lib Dem backbench dissenters?

Of course, impartiality is not just about numbers. It's not about counting up seconds or minutes of screen time or apportioning column inches according to a scientific formula. It is about reflecting the dynamics of a story. As the BBC College of Journalism's Kevin Marsh says:

"You have to judge the axes of any debate/question/ issue and ensure that you have sought out significant voices along those axes, duly weighing them"

The BBC has some experience of this reporting 'hung' parliaments in Scotland and Wales.

What will make this even more complicated is if there is a sense that we are heading for an election in the next 12 months and even in the autumn. In effect we will then be in a pre-election period. This doesn't have precise rules for PSBs but there is general agreement that you should be more careful.

This sounds like nit-picking. Indeed, generally I am not the sort of person who worries too much about this kind of thing. I tend to think that strict impartiality regulation can suppress good journalism. But we are in uncharted waters here and there is a danger that the media gets sucked into a kind of group-think.

Look at how that Lib Dem surge was reported during the election campaign. It shows how tough it is to rely on judgement alone when trying to balance significance. It looked like a surge. The polls said it was a surge. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy that changed the way the debate was reported. Suddenly Clegg got more than a mention, more than parity. He got the spotlight. The 2nd and 3rd TV debates reinforced the Lib Dems and Change as the main narrative of the campaign rather than, say, the economy. And then on polling day the Lib Dem vote disappeared. I think the media should have been much more sceptical about who was surging to the Lib Dems and why. If it wasn't for the relative Tory failure and the hung parliament we would no longer be speaking of Mr Clegg except in terms of who was going to replace him as Lib Dem leader.

There are no easy answers. I am reminded of the latter stages of John Major's administration in the mid-90s when the backbench Tory Eurosceptics were given equal billing to the Conservative Government. They were holding the Major administration to ransom even though they were a relatively tiny group led by mavericks such as Bill Cash. The BBC is usually accused of being Europhile but this small group of highly ideological people ('bastards' as Major referred to them) were given oodles of coverage by the BBC and so they dictated the terms of the debate.

History might say that the journalists were right to get so excited about the Eurosceptics because :

- a) they did effectively destroy Major's administration
- b) they were much more representative of public opinion than the House of Commons
- c) they were the story, the new element that was changing things.

It reminds us that journalism is an art not a science and may well have to adapt to these new circumstances.

Another factor is how the right-wing press reacts. The Mail, Telegraph and Sun are manically anti-collaboration and somewhat anti-Cameron. They are going to feel very frustrated at a Tory-lite administration and may well attempt to discredit collaborative politics. Will that distort the PSB's agenda too?

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1. [Every key 'Westminster model' country now has a hung Parliament, following Australia's 'dead heat' election](#)
2. [Can You Report Tactical Voting In A Balanced Way?](#)
3. [Why 'hung' parliaments and coalitions are normal in western Europe](#)
4. [The distribution of power across parties in parliament](#)