

Even if the Liberal Democrats vote to oust the Conservatives before 2015 a new general election is still unlikely

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Up until this parliament, the date of parliamentary elections could be set by the Prime Minister of the day; now as part of the coalition agreement, election dates are set for every 5 years. In spite of this new rule, [Mark Pack](#) looks at the ways that we might see an election before 2015, and finds that given the current electoral math and polling, such an outcome is unlikely.



There used to be an odd omission in the generally accepted electoral ethics of British politics. Let the Prime Minister unilaterally pick who can vote in an election? Absurd. Let the Prime Minister personally appoint all the returning officers? Never. Let the Prime Minister unilaterally relocate polling stations to suit his or her interests? Of course not.

But let the Prime Minister unilaterally pick the date of the general election just to suit his or her own election prospects? Of course, no problem – that is the British way. Or rather, that was the British way. Courtesy of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011 the idea that one person or party can unilaterally fix an election's date just to maximise their own chance of winning is no more.

Fixing the date of the next general election (and future ones) outside the control of the Prime Minister was a central part of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition agreement because it was a way of guaranteeing the five-year deal. Otherwise the risk for the smaller party is that at any point the larger one can suddenly pull the rug out from under an agreement and call an election. No doubt it helped sweeten the pill for Conservatives that Gordon Brown had recently come under fire for dallying with different election dates, making fixed-term elections look rather more attractive to some Conservatives. Restricting the powers of politicians is always more appealing to politicians when it is the other side they imagine being restricted.

The 'fixed' part of the new rules is pretty fixed, but not [completely set fast in legislative Araldite](#). As with fixed-term rules for other legislatures (including Scotland's) there are caveats for cases where there is either wide cross-party agreement or no one can form a government.

Caveat number one is that the House of Commons can vote for an early election – but the number of votes 'for' must be equal to or greater than two thirds of the number of seats in the House (including vacant seats). That means 217 votes are guaranteed to block an early election. Both [Labour and the Tories have more than 217 votes](#), so an early election under this caveat can only happen if both major parties agree. Forget the idea that Cameron might face a politically bountiful time and try to cut and run for an early election – if the timing is good for the Conservatives, it would be bad for Labour, meaning Labour could and would block it.

However, there is a second caveat: an early election also happens if the House of Commons passes a vote of no confidence in the government (by a simple majority) and then fails within fourteen days to pass a motion of confidence in a new government.

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Superficially, the sounds rather more plausible, at least at first. There is no overall Conservative majority, so at some point the ranks of [rebellious Liberal Democrats](#) could swell and join with others to vote through a no confidence motion. But however plausible or not that is, what happens next?

We only get an early election if no one else manages to form a government. Can you imagine a scenario in which the Liberal Democrats decide both to oust Cameron and block Labour from power, either by voting against Labour or by abstaining? Perhaps if the Liberal Democrats were running away in poll position in the opinion polls. But even as a Liberal Democrat member of over twenty years standing, I'll happily bet that we won't be in that situation for a good while (the loyalist in me adds, "yet!").

This leaves just one option that results in an early general election: Lib Dems vote to oust the Tories and vote for Labour in a confidence motion, but the minor party and other MPs gang up in sufficient numbers to join with the Conservatives and overcome the combined Labour/Lib Dem vote. This would cause a general election – but what is in it for those minor party MPs? The threat of doing so gives them a great negotiating position from which to extract concessions from Labour, but it is a negotiating power that is lost the moment the threat is exercised – and can easily be counter-productive. A parliament with a simple one party majority, which of course could happen after an early election, would give minor parties even less leverage.

The very simple version of all this: even if you think it likely, possible or just about conceivable that the Liberal Democrats would at some point vote to oust the Conservatives from power ahead of 2015, it isn't a general election that would result.

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