

A drift away from majoritarianism: constitutional reform and the Coalition Government of 2010-2015

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Constitutional matters have dominated contemporary British politics for some time, and as Brexit develops, look set to continue to do so. Here, [Felicity Matthews](#) draws on recent [co-authored research](#) to explore what influence the Coalition government of 2010-2015 had on British constitutional arrangements.



Electoral reform; #indeyref; devo-max; EVEL; elected mayors; Northern Powerhouse; Brexit; #indeyref2: it is no understatement to say that in recent months, matters of the constitution have dominated the landscape. Whereas constitutional reform had been derided as '[a topic for anoraks](#)', issues are now hotly debated amongst the politicians and the public alike. Yet, as the EU referendum clearly demonstrated, discourse has often been light on facts, privileging polemic over reason. It therefore falls to political scientists to dig beneath the rhetoric to provide evidence-based judgements about unfolding events.

The metaphor of a 'journey' is perhaps too frequently used, but in the context of the UK's constitution it remains apt. Our [recently published research](#) provides a systematic evaluation of an important staging post – the 2010-15 Coalition Government – focusing on the factors that led to a hung parliament and the constitutional changes that occurred thereafter. In doing so, our research contextualises the changes wrought during in this period, tracing the roots of the challenges that emerged and looking ahead to their ongoing consequences.

The 2010-15 period is important for two key reasons. Firstly, under Labour, a myriad of constitutional reforms was unleashed in quick succession. Yet the constitutional journey on which Labour embarked in 1997 lacked both a roadmap and a final destination, and was pithily described by the late Anthony King as '[a mess](#)' of '[disconnected bits and pieces](#)'. The implementation of reforms that devolved power at the periphery, whilst leaving the core relatively untouched, created a range of constitutional pressures that any incoming government would be required to manage. Indeed, the very failure of the electoral rules in 2010 to manufacture a single-party majority was widely regarded as symptomatic the Westminster model's increasing unworkability. Secondly, whilst the 2010 election offered a 'window of opportunity' for a new government to instil a much-needed degree of constitutional coherency, the Coalition brought together two parties with radically divergent constitutional philosophies; and the tensions that stemmed from this were laid bare during the 2010-15 parliament.

In order to locate the 2010-15 parliament within the wider context of the UK's democratic evolution, our research applies a refined version of Lijphart's renowned analytical framework developed in '[Patterns of Democracy](#)'. In essence, Lijphart's framework seeks to locate democracies on a continuum that stretches from 'majoritarian' to 'consensus', and does so by focusing on 10 variables organised along two dimensions. The 'executive-parties' dimension focuses on the balance of power between government and the legislature; and the 'federal-unitary' dimension focuses on the dispersal of power across the state. Whilst the impact of Lijphart's ideas cannot be overstated, several of the framework's proxies have limitations, which are magnified when the framework is scaled-down to a single case. To overcome this, we developed a number of analytical refinements to enable the framework to more effectively travel between temporal scales.

Our analysis demonstrates that during the 2010-15 parliament, the UK moved further away from its caricature as an adversarial power-hoarding polity, as power became more diffuse and the executive more constrained. Yet the extent of change was not uniform, and many promises were limited in execution. Of those reforms pursued, several failed to capture the public imagination, such as electoral reform and the introduction of directly elected mayors; fell victim to inter-party politicking, such as the *House of Lords Reform Bill 2012*; or were diluted in execution, such as the commitment to implement the Wright Commission's recommendations in full. At the same time, the Coalition was constrained by external forces. This was most vividly illustrated by the way in which SNP's outright majority in Holyrood rendered an independence referendum unavoidable, which in turn acted as

a catalyst for a commitment to 'devo-max' and its attendant implications. Moreover, the legacy of some of Labour's previous reforms was revealed, as reflected in an emboldened House of Lords and an increasingly juridified legislative culture.

As this suggests, many of the changes that did occur owed as much to accident as to design and it is clear ['biggest shake-up of democracy since 1832'](#) promised by then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in 2010 did not happen. Like their Labour predecessors, the Coalition failed to offer a coherent vision of the democracy it sought to achieve. Governing in partnerships entails compromise and with the two parties holding fundamentally opposed constitutional philosophies, it was unsurprising that the *Programme for Government* was heavy on rhetoric but moderate in scope.

Moreover, the 2010-15 parliament revealed the way in which the realpolitik of coalition management exacerbated these pre-existing tensions. The Coalition's approach to the constitution was marked by an absence of any underlying logic that explained how the institutions and procedures of Westminster would operate, and of any sensitivity to the inter-related nature of the UK's constitutional framework. Throughout the Coalition's five years in office, the British constitution thus appeared to unintentionally drift away from the pattern of democracy associated with Westminster majoritarianism.

When set against this backdrop, the current parliament constitutes a watershed moment in terms of the tenability of the UK's constitutional architecture. It barely needs saying that constitutional issues dominate the current agenda, or that the unfolding implications of Brexit will have a profound effect upon all aspects of the UK's constitutional settlement. Yet, even without the challenges posed by Brexit, there are significant constitutional tensions that require urgent attention. In particular, the emergence of multi-party competition has starkly underlined the dysfunctionalities of the UK's electoral system.

The 2015 general election saw UKIP emerge as the third most popular party, but receive just one MP for its 12.7 per cent share of the vote. In contrast, despite receiving only 4.7 per cent of the vote nationwide, the geographically concentrated strength of the SNP saw the party being returned as the third largest party in the House with 56 seats. The increasing gulf between votes and seats means that Westminster democracy is failing against its own majoritarian terms, as governments represent a declining minority of voters. Political expediency has [encouraged successive governments](#) to steer clear of electoral reform, but whilst this is politically rational in the short-term, the growing disparity between votes and seats has the long-term implications for the legitimacy of the system.

The burgeoning body of research on the [crisis of democracy](#) underlines a clear relationship between democratic change and public trust in political institutions. Yet within the UK, the ongoing drift away from majoritarianism has not closed the gap between the governors and the governed; and swathes of society such as the young and the poor have become increasingly disengaged from traditional mechanisms of representative politics. Set against this wider context, the challenge for the current Government is to not only address constitutional incoherency that has previously burgeoned, but to do so in a way that reconnects the disenfranchised within a more deliberative political process.

Note: This blog draws on recent co-authored research published in [British Politics](#).

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