

It remains to be seen whether Parliament is cut out for coalition

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*The long periods between 1945 and 1970, and 1979 to 2010 proved that the British political system is adept at producing stable one-party Government. Now though, this looks set to change, with long-term polling trends suggest that coalition could become the rule, rather than the exception. While the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has shown itself to be robust at 'elite' level, it is beginning to fray in parliament as the 2015 election draws closer. While [Chris Gilson](#) has taken a more recent look at how the current Coalition might end, **Stuart Wilks-Heeg**, **Andrew Blick**, and **Stephen Crone** examined Parliament's ability to effectively create and support stable Governments in the 2012 Democratic Audit of the UK.*



(Credit: Financial Times, CC by 2.0)

In the 2002 Democratic Audit report, the UK's two-party system was described as 'formidably effective in forming and sustaining governments in office', pointing to only two brief periods of instability in the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. Indeed, in light of wider evidence of executive dominance, we previously took the view that the UK system was in many ways 'too effective' at forming single-party governments. From 1979 onwards, electoral landslides became commonplace on vote shares of 43 per cent or below. Until recently, powerful, single-party governments, opposed by a clear majority of the electorate, and with limited accountability to parliament had appeared to become the norm.

As the table below shows, of the eight elections fought from October 1974 to 2005, four resulted in government majorities of 100 or more (the Conservative landslides of 1983 and 1987; and the Labour landslides of 1997 and 2001). Only one election in this period resulted in a majority of less than 40 (the Conservative Party's fourth-term victory in 1992). The average government majority from October 1974 to 2005 was 90 and the average length of parliaments in this period was 4 years 5 months.

By contrast, only one election from 1945-70 – the Labour landslide of 1945 – resulted in a three digit government majority (although the Conservatives did gain a 99 seat majority in 1959). During this period, four elections resulted in majorities of less than 40, with the single digit majorities of 1950 and 1964 prompting fresh elections to be called within two years. In this period of clear two-party dominance, the average government majority was 58 and the average length of a parliament was 3 years 6 months.

Table 2.2b: The length of post-war parliaments

<i>Date of General Election</i>	<i>Size of majority</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Length of Parliament</i>
Thursday 4 July 1945	147	Labour	4 years 4 months
Thursday 23 February 1950	6	Labour	1 year 8 months
Thursday 25 October 1951	16	Conservative	3 years 7 months
Thursday 26 May 1955	59	Conservative	4 years 4 months
Thursday 8 October 1959	99	Conservative	5 years
Thursday 15 October 1964	5	Labour	1 year 5 months
Thursday 31 March 1966	97	Labour	4 years 3 months
Thursday 18 June 1970	31	Conservative	3 years 8 months
Thursday 28 February 1974	None	Labour (minority)	7 months
Thursday 10 October 1974	4	Labour	4 years 7 months
Thursday 3 May 1979	44	Conservative	4 years 1 month
Thursday 8 June 1983	144	Conservative	4 years
Thursday 11 June 1987	101	Conservative	4 years 10 months
Thursday 9 April 1992	21	Conservative	5 years 1 month
Thursday 1 May 1997	178	Labour	4 years 1 month
Thursday 7 June 2001	166	Labour	3 years 11 months
Thursday 5 May 2005	65	Labour	5 years
Thursday 6 May 2010	None	Conservative-Liberal Democrat (coalition)	---
Average, 1945-70	58	4 Labour; 4 Conservative	3 years, 6 months
Average, Oct 1974 -2005	90	4 Labour; 4 Conservative	4 years, 5 months

Trends in voting patterns in recent decades, and the failure of any party to achieve an overall majority at the 2010 general election, clearly point to the possibility that the dynamics of government formation and durability will change again. The formation in 2010 of the first UK peace-time coalition in over sixty years therefore presents a significant test of how effective the changing UK party system will prove to be in forming and sustaining governments, should single party majorities become as rare as they were in the 1920s.

The experience of the coalition to date has shown it to be remarkably robust at elite level, yet the greater test will be whether support for the coalition can be sustained in parliament and at grassroots level in the two parties. While our concerns about an over-dominant executive remain, there are certainly signs that parliament has become more assertive in the context of coalition government. Overall, we would regard these as healthy developments, but clearly it is early days for coalition government in the UK. If the UK political system fails to adapt to coalition government, the exceptionally 'strong and stable' governments characteristic of the period from 1979-2005 may clearly come to represent something of an aberration, and a tendency towards governmental instability, typified by the period from 1922-31, may become more evident.

Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Andrew Blick, and Stephen Crone are the authors of the 2012 Democratic Audit report.