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# **The British general election of 2010 and the advent of coalition government \***

Patrick Dunleavy

In many respects the May 2010 general election in Britain seems to be one of those cases where an election is lost, yet without any clear winner emerging. Yet it was also a contest that led to a historic outcome, a further decline in support for the top two parties and the advent of the first peacetime coalition government in the UK since the 1920s. I begin by considering the shape of the basic results, and then look at how voting behaviour changed in response to changing party strategies. Section 3 examines the operation of the electoral system and the longer term significance of the 2010 election for long-run trends towards multi-partism in British politics. Section 4 examines the transition to a coalition government between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, lead by David Cameron and Nick Clegg, and the basic parliamentary arithmetic and electoral situation that it confronts. The final section considers the longer term potential for change in British politics that have opened up from the election and its aftermath, especially for another wave of constitutional reform.

## **1. The essential election outcomes**

The governing Labour party under PM Gordon Brown ended thirteen years in power on a low note, losing one in six of the votes they had gathered in the previous 2005 general

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election. Yet in the last two days of the campaign, the party rallied votes against the prospects of Conservative cuts in public expenditure, and succeeded in coming in a clear second. The party outperformed the final opinion polls by 2 per cent, suggesting a hardening of the Labour vote in the last hours of the campaign. In the last two days of the campaign a drama over public spending cuts and violent street protests in Greece played out on the UK's TV screens. Perhaps this helped to dramatize and underline Labour's argument that a Conservative government in charge of austerity measures would hurt many different groups. Or perhaps the push by some Labour ministers for progressive voters to vote tactically for them worked a little. Anyway Labour lost but succeeded in coming in a clear second, in limiting their vote loss to 6 per cent compared with 2005 and in holding many seats against the odds in their surrounding regions. Overall, the party did enough to live to fight another day. By late autumn 2010, now in opposition, Labour was back at level-pegging with the Conservatives in terms of opinion poll support.

The Conservatives became clearly the largest party in the 2010 election, thanks to the operations of Britain's famously unproportional voting system. Called plurality rule, this historic system features local competitions in 645 small districts, in each of which the winning party is whichever one gathers the most votes (that is, a plurality of votes, but not necessarily or now usually a majority). In the UK's modern multi-party conditions this system is highly erratic, but it normally ends up awarding the largest party a strong 'leader's bonus' of seats, as it did in 2010. Thus the Tories gained 48 per cent of seats in the Commons on the basis of winning just over 36 per cent of votes. Yet David Cameron's party actually increased their vote share by only 4 per cent compared with the Tories losing performance in 2005 (see Table 1). And despite their 'unearned' seats bonus, the Conservatives failed to win an overall majority in the House of Commons and had to negotiate a coalition deal to gain power. One of the party's right wing grandees (Lord Tebbit) noted acidly about David Cameron's leadership that given the recession and Gordon Brown's unpopularity as Prime Minister, the Tories should have been 15 per cent ahead of Labour: in fact they were 7 per cent ahead. This was not an impressive performance, despite the party's advances made in terms of winning seats. But the always centrist-sounding Cameron was insulated from criticisms from his right wing because of the haul of new MPs achieved, and the coalition government's strong public spending cuts.

**Table 1: The vote share results for the 2010 general election in Great Britain**

Great Britain share of the votes	% votes	Change in support (% points) since 2005	Compare 2005 % vote share	MPs in 2010	Other elected institutions where the party is represented
Conservative	36.9	+ 4	33	306	All institutions
Labour	29.6	- 6	36	258	All institutions
Liberal Democrats	23.5	+ 0.4	23	57	All institutions
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	3.2	+ 0.9	2.3	0	EP, GLA, LG
British National Party (BNP)	1.9	+ 1.2	0.7	0	EP, GLA, LG
Scottish National Party (SNP)	1.7	+ 0.1	1.6	6	EP, SP, LG
Greens	1.0	- 0.1	1.0	1	EP, GLA, LG
Plaid Cymru (Wales only)	0.6	- 0.1	0.7	3	EP, WNA, LG
Other parties/candidates	1.6	-0.1	1.7	0	-
Total	100%				

*Notes:* EP European Parliament; GLA Greater London Assembly; LG local government councillors; SP Scottish Parliament; WNA Welsh National Assembly.

This table excludes 17 MPs elected in Northern Ireland for a completely different set of parties, specific to that province. The parties winning seats there were the Democratic Unionists (8 MPs), Sinn Fein (5 MPs, who never take their seats), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (3 MPs), Alliance (1) and an independent MP.

Many overseas observers follow the bulk of the UK media in picturing British politics as some form of ‘two and a half’ party system. This at least half-heartedly acknowledges the presence of the UK’s longest-running third party, the Liberal Democrats, and of strong, nationalist fourth parties in Scotland and Wales. The chief justification for this characterization has been that throughout the post 1945 period the Conservatives and Labour have monopolized governing power between them, despite some periods of minority or near-minority (tiny Commons majority) government in the mid 1960s and later from 1974-79. Yet the 2010 election is chiefly significant as the point where this deceptive pattern finally broke apart and the Liberal Democrats became a formal partner in a

peacetime coalition government for the first time since the 1920s. The party can trace its heritage back to the heyday of a previous Tory-Liberal two party system, which dominated UK politics from the mid nineteenth century to 1922, and began to break up in acrimonious Liberal splits during the First World War. Fuelled by a merger with the Social Democratic Party (SDP), a Labour splinter party, during the 1980s, the Liberal Democrats' return to power was quite some comeback, and I discuss the coalition-forming process and its reverberations for future politics below.

Yet in specific electoral terms, measured by their vote shares won or their ability to elect MPs, 2010 was also something verging near to a disaster for the Liberal Democrats, made all the worse by the illusory signs of success that the party racked up during the campaign. Under their young and more right-wing leader, Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrats at times achieved apparent parity in opinion polls with the other two major parties. Yet in the final vote counts they fell back to a clear third place, lost seats to the resurgent Tories, gained only a compensating few MPs from Labour. And they completely failed in their hopes of 'breaking through' to second party status, standing still in terms of vote share. Clegg probably reaped a whirlwind that he himself sowed in some unguarded and hubristic moments during the campaign, when he declared that he could not work with Gordon Brown; insulted the PM as being 'desperate'; proclaimed a 'two-horse race' between the Liberal Democrats and Tories, with Labour 'out of it'; and so on. Rejecting Labour calls for tactical voting in the last two days before polling also now looks unwise in electoral terms (although it may have reflected Clegg's already-settled determination to work with Tories in a hung Parliament). 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.

Denying that the UK is a multi-party system, as the press, media and many political scientists still do, also ignores the existence of several other smaller parties in Figure 1, with significant and growing vote shares in some forms of election. It is true that Westminster's highly unproportional voting system means that most of the smaller parties have never won Commons seats, although in 2010 the Greens broke through this barrier for the first time. Yet the smaller parties all have substantial representation elsewhere, especially in the UK's many proportional elections (for the European Parliament, Scottish Parliament, Welsh National Assembly and Greater London Assembly) and in local councils.

In 2010 the top-performing smaller party was the UK Independence Party, which contested nearly 90 per cent of seats in Great Britain. Table 1 shows that it achieved the highest fourth party score ever in post-war British politics, but its average vote share fell slightly in its contested seats compared with 2005. UKIP's campaign was hampered by the members having elected as their party leader a highly obscure peer, who secured little publicity for the party and resigned a couple of months after the election. His chief claims to fame were admitting to a TV interviewer that he had not read his party's whole manifesto and was unfamiliar with its details, rather airily proposing draconian public spending cuts of 50 per cent, and launching his party's campaign by advising people to vote for other parties if they felt that they could better secure the UK's withdrawal from the Europe Union or limit immigration (UKIP's two central campaign issues). The anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner and generally far right British National Party fielded candidates in more than half of the seats (338) in Great Britain, covering nearly three times as many seats as it did in 2005. Its national vote share increased to 2 per cent, but its vote share per candidate fell back in the seats that it contested. Finally the Greens contested a similar number of seats as the BNP, and showed a similar increase in candidacies. But their national vote share fell back compared with 2005, to just over 1 per cent, and their average vote per contested seat almost halved. However, the Greens concentrated their campaigning resources in just two seats, and their party leader, Caroline Lucas, succeeded in winning one of them in Brighton, to give the party its first ever MP at Westminster. In Wales the nationalist Plaid Cymru saw its vote fall back, perhaps reflecting its being in coalition in the Welsh Assembly government with Labour. In Scotland the SNP, running a minority government in the Scottish Parliament, increased its vote share by 2 per cent but won no more seats against Labour in Scotland, who staged a specific resurgence there under the Scottish Gordon Brown.

## **2. How voting behaviour responded to party strategies**

The analysis of mass political behaviour in the UK has not changed markedly in recent decades. Most analysts have recognized a long-run 'dealignment' process in which there is a weakening of the traditional (two-party heyday) links between the non-manual people owning their own homes voting Conservative, and manual workers and social renters voting Labour. A rearguard group of analysts argue that occupational class is still the most important sociological influence on how British voters are aligned (Evans, 2000), but

realignment-denial has suffered from increasing strain as the voting patterns across occupational classes have clearly become more similar. Table 2a shows that this trend acquired particular force in 2010. The ‘top’ three occupational classes had near identical patterns of support for the Conservatives and Labour, with the proportion of voters in skilled manual worker (C2) households voting Labour falling from 40 to 29 per cent between 2005 and 2010. Splitting by class and gender suggests that this decline was in fact concentrated amongst C2 women, and that unskilled men also abandoned Labour somewhat more – but otherwise the changes across occupational classes were surprisingly uniform. Table 2b shows how the odds ratios for voting Conservative rather than Labour changed from 2005 to 2010, comparing the top three occupational classes with the DE group. The numbers for the two non-manual classes fell markedly, meaning that the difference between ‘middle class’

**Table 2: Occupational class and voting behaviour in the 2010 general election**

*(a) Per cent of each occupational class voting for main parties*

	<b>Conservative</b>	<b>Labour</b>	<b>Liberal Democrat</b>	<b>Other parties</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Occupational class</b>					
Upper non-manual (AB)	39	26	29	7	100%
Routine non-manual (C1)	39	28	24	9	100%
Skilled manual (C2)	37	29	22	12	100%
Unskilled manual/ not working (DE)	31	40	17	12	100%

Source: Ipsos MORI (2010) ‘How Britain Voted 2010’. <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613>

*(b) Odds ratios for voting Conservative rather than Labour, compared with the unskilled (DE) group*

	<b>2010</b>	<b>2005</b>
Upper non-manual (AB)	1.94	2.54
Routine non-manual (C1)	1.80	2.22
Skilled manual (C2)	1.65	1.58

and 'working class' groups clearly reduced in 2010. Checking other potential bases for alignment in individual voting data from surveys shows no other marked changes in the sociological or demographic influences on voting.

However, looking at voting patterns across constituencies (called 'aggregate data analysis') offers additional insights, with the recession clearly having most impact on the government's defeat:

'Labour particularly lost ground in seats where there were both many working class voters and there had been a large increase in unemployment; in these circumstances the drop in Labour's vote was as much as 9.4 [per cent] points' (Fisher et al, 2010, p.6).

These authors also show that Labour's support stood up far better in seats with large proportions of public sector workers, but was 4 per cent lower in constituencies with little public employment. This is a big difference from 2005 when no such effect was visible, and Fisher et al conclude that 'a new political gap seems to have opened up in Britain's electoral geography' (p.7). Voters' fears about the more vigorous public spending cuts promised by the Conservative largely explain both this effect and the hardening of Labour support in the last few days of the campaign.

Turning to the political issues dividing the parties, the British Election Study (BES) undertook extensive polling during the campaign period and found that economic issues completely predominated with voters, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and recession xxx). Three fifths of BES respondents rated an economic issue most important, composed of 41 per cent citing 'the economy' as the key issue plus a further 11 per cent citing 'government debt' (a strong Conservative theme in the campaign) and 7 per cent unemployment. The second-ranked issue was immigration (chosen as most important by one in six voters). Clearly the primacy of economic issues created difficulties for Labour as the incumbent government, because voters especially blamed Gordon Brown for the economic crisis – he had been at the helm economically at the Treasury for ten years until 2007, and PM since then. Yet the premier was also seen by many voters as competent economically and the Conservative rival team as flawed, so this was less damaging than might have been expected.

Immigration was a much more toxic issue for the government, with many working class people resentful of the influxes of immigrants into housing stress areas of major cities and some smaller towns like Slough, and of increased competition for low-paid jobs. Ministers were seen as unresponsive to these concerns, although the government had



tightened immigration rules somewhat and could not restrict EU workers' inward migration. The issues flared into huge prominence when a Labour-supporting voter taxed Gordon Brown with it, and the PM was heard calling her a 'bigoted woman' as he drove away in his car with a broadcaster's radio microphone still switched on and transmitting. This gaffe late in the campaign put the right-wing press into a frenzy of denunciation, demoralized the Labour campaign, put Brown on the defensive (he had to apologize in a humiliating way), and seemed to crystallize ministers' indifference to what their working class voters were saying. But the affair seemed to change relatively few voters' minds about how they eventually voted.

Labour's biggest issue, the National Health Service, on which the party had lavished billions of pounds of extra public spending, was rated top by only one voter in twelve, partly because David Cameron succeeded in making credible the Tories' pledge to exempt NHS spending from looming public expenditure cutbacks. Other issues, such as the war in Afghanistan, terrorism and environmental concerns were rated unimportant by many voters and played little role in the campaign. Having withdrawn British troops from Iraq, the Brown government did successfully attract back some more votes for Labour amongst Muslim voters in major cities, support which the party lost under Tony Blair in 2005.

Many British political scientists traditionally invoked the controversial concept of 'party identification' (constructed from survey responses about 'feeling closer' to one party or another) in order to explain voters' alignments. Yet the BES study in 2010 found absolutely no change at all in the distribution of these responses compared with 2005, so presumably this mysterious construct played no part in the big electoral changes between the two contests. More recently this line of analysis has been changed into an emphasis upon 'valence issues', including voters' perceptions of efficacy and ratings of leadership or 'performance politics' (Clarke et al, 2009). The 2010 general election provides a perfect setting for evaluating the significance of such factors, since for the first time in the UK it was marked by three televised leadership debates between the top three party leaders, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg.

These debates attracted saturation media attention before, during and after each occasion, and they were seen by large proportions of voters (three fifths for the first, half for the last, and two fifths for the middle one, which covered foreign policy and defence issues of less interest to most voters). Seven out of ten voters thought that Nick Clegg won the first debate, sparking a huge increase in Liberal Democrat support, with many polls

putting them around 30 per cent support for the next two weeks. But the party's support fell back a little after that, as the right wing press conducted their own highly biased version of 'due diligence' on its liberal policies on immigration. David Cameron was seen as winning the last leader's debate by around half of voters. Gordon Brown was seen as coming last in all three debates, but did not do disastrously badly in any of them, contrary to his general media persona.

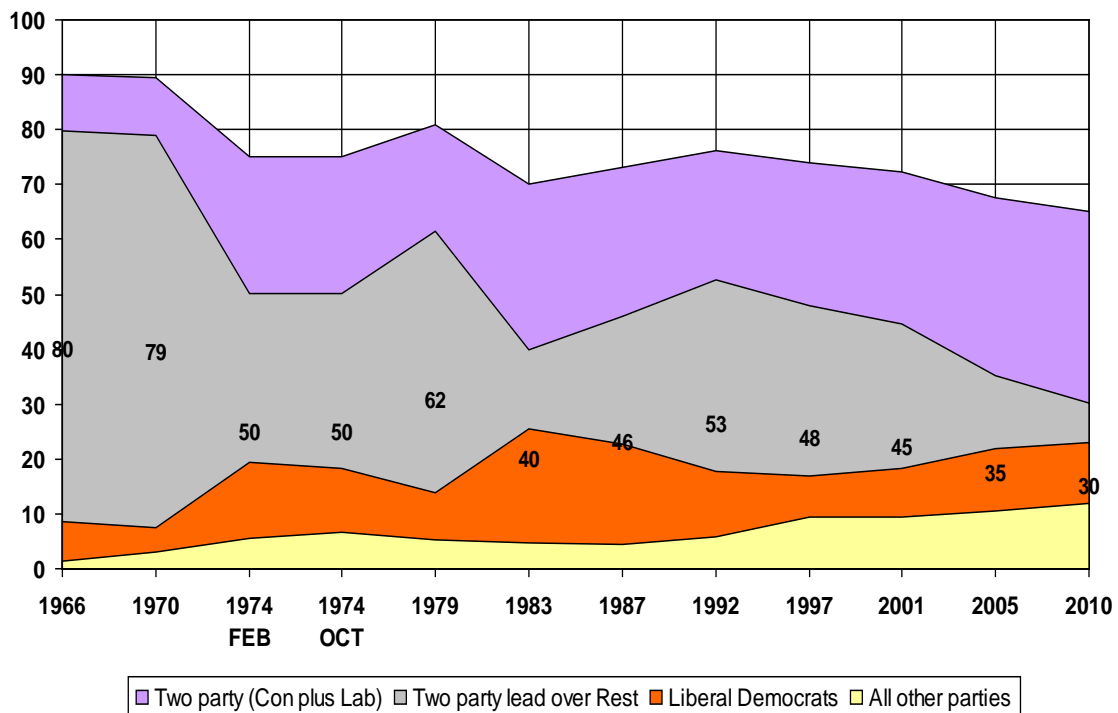
And in the end, the debates' influence on actual votes proved to be highly ephemeral. The Clegg/Liberal Democrat campaign bubble burst with no visible trace of any impact on the party's pre-campaign levels of support, although it may have helped them to survive even more of a Conservative-Labour squeeze effect (evidenced under previous unpopular Labour administrations). Cameron did not seem able to win over more voters than he had before, nor to convince those doubting the Tories' competence to give him the benefit of the doubt. So the evidence seems to be that 'valence' issues made apparent differences at the campaign level, but not enough to influence how voters cast their ballots against their evaluations of what the parties' programmes (especially on the economy) meant for their interests.

### **3. The electoral system and the UK's transition to multi-party politics**

As late as 1970, nine out of ten voters across the whole of the UK supported one of the top two parties (the Conservatives or Labour), and the salience of voting for any other party was low. As early as the February 1974 election this situation changed rapidly, with two-party support falling to three quarters of voters, as Figure 1 demonstrates. Since 1992 a slower but steadier further decline of the top two parties' combined support has brought it in 2010 to less than two thirds of all voters (65 per cent). As early as the two 1974 elections, the Liberals alone gained almost a fifth of votes, and in 1983 in alliance with the Social Democrats nearly a quarter, a high water mark which they have sometimes come close to again, but which they have yet to improve upon. Meanwhile the total support for smaller fourth, fifth and subsequent parties started off at less than 2 per cent of the UK totals in 1970 (some of it in Northern Ireland), but ended the sequence in 2010 at 12 per cent. It is worth emphasizing how much of a transition in voting behaviour this was by calculating the two-party lead over all other parties, which the numbers in Figure 1 show started off at 80 per cent but has now fallen to 30 per cent, especially steeply and consistently in the period since 1992.

Another way of capturing this transition is to compute the ‘effective number of parties’ (ENP) score. This measure has some considerable problems of interpretation (Dunleavy and Boucek, 2003), but it is simple to calculate and widely known. Figure 2 shows the ENP scores for all major elections in Great Britain since 1992, with the red bars being plurality rule general elections for the House of Commons. The green bars are various forms of proportional representation (PR), used in the UK for several other kinds of

**Figure 1: Trends in the vote shares for the top two parties and for smaller parties, 1970 to 2010**



Note: The numbers in grey area here show the combined Conservative and Labour per cent support, minus the combined support for the Liberal Democrats and all other parties, that is the ‘two party lead over the Rest’.

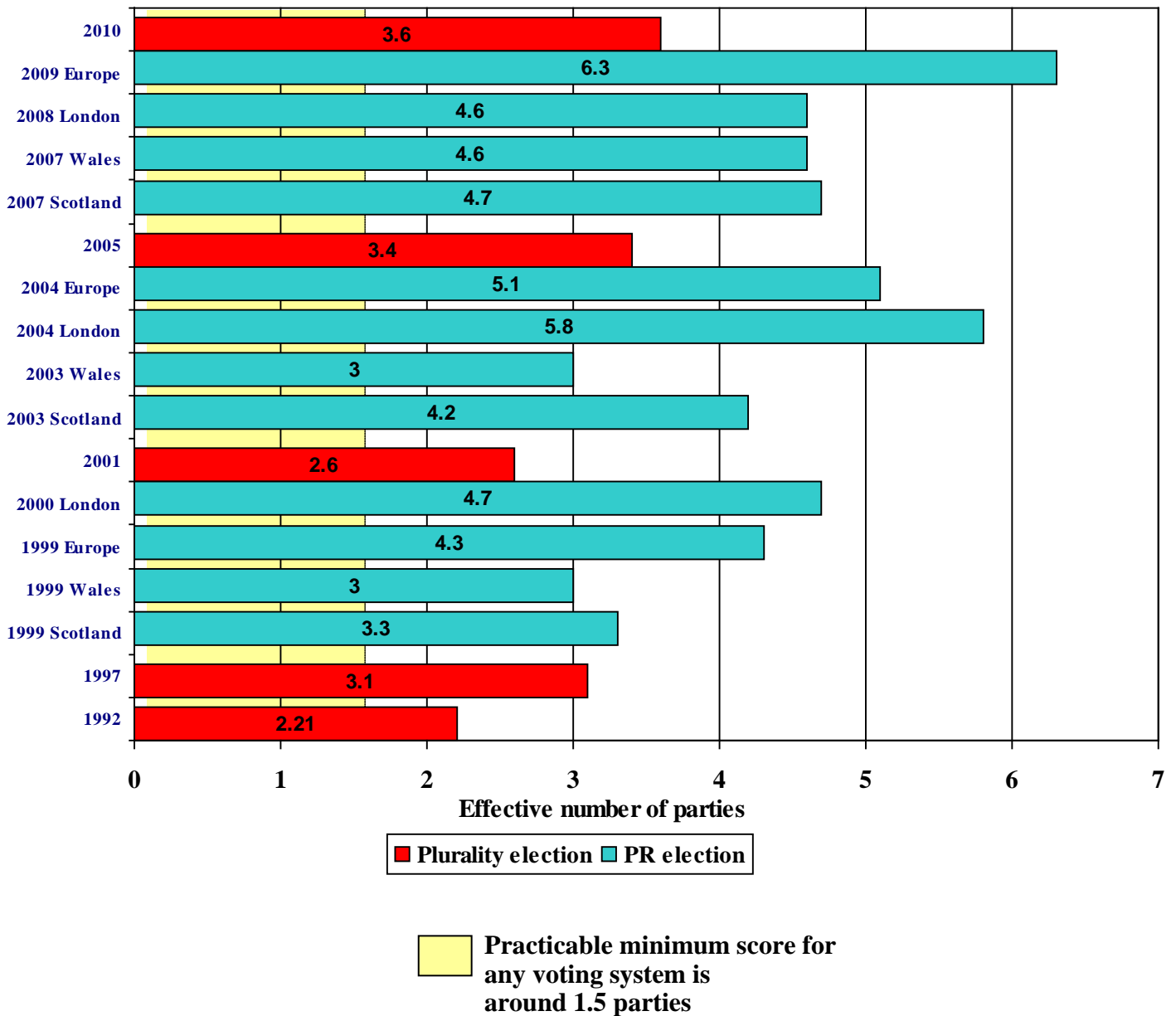
elections, including voting for MEPs to sit in the European Parliament (using a list PR system since 1999) and for the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh National Assembly and the Greater London Assembly (all using British variants of the ‘additional member system’ (or AMS)) (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2001). It can be seen that all the general election ENP scores are always much smaller than those for PR elections. This is chiefly because voters know that in general elections the scales are stacked towards the bigger parties winning seats and the smaller parties being ineffective. This bias is still there in Britain’s PR

electoral systems, but it is much less obvious and severe, so encouraging voters to support a wider range of parties more in line with their views.

The differences between PR and plurality rule elections can be seen vividly in the year 2009-10. In the June 2009 European Parliament elections the PR system plus a surge of support for UKIP and the BNP (repeating almost exactly a 2004 surge) pushed the ENP score for Great Britain as a whole to 6.3 parties, while only eleven months later at the general election the effective number of parties fell to only 3.6. Yet the May 2010 result is a long way from the plurality rule starting position in Figure 2, with the Westminster ENP scores going from 2.2 in 1992, to 3.1 and 2.6 in 1997 and 2001, and then to 3.4 in 2005. Some political scientists dismiss the green bars in Figure 2 as data only from lower turnout, 'second order elections' of lesser importance. But there is no substantive basis for such a value-laden attitude, and the green-bar elections have key implications for party performance in general elections, as 2005 rather strongly demonstrates. Another way of looking at this is that the electoral system 'reduced' the number of parties by 31 per cent when moving from the electorate's vote shares, to the parties' seats shares in the Commons.

In addition to suppressing voting for smaller parties that are highly unlikely to win seats, the plurality rule electoral system of course takes the excluded parties' seat share nationally and awards it to others, normally to either the Conservatives or Labour. Whichever of the two is ahead characteristically gets a large 'leaders' bonus' in terms of winning seats that they are not entitled to in terms of their national vote shares. Figure 3 shows the combined effect of these processes in distorting the House of Commons away from the breakdown of voters' preferences countrywide. I show here the 'deviation from proportionality' (DV) score, which can be construed as the proportion of all MPs whose party is not justified in holding these seats in terms of the party's national vote share. In 2010 Figure 3 shows that the DV score reached 23 per cent. This is a very high number indeed, for example, it is more than three times greater than the DV score for plurality rule in the USA, which is typically only around 7 per cent. Figure 3 also shows that all DV scores are much greater in general election than in the UK's PR elections – where in the latest round of elections in Scotland, Europe and London DV scores were half or less than those in general elections. (This is not true of Wales, where there are too few 'top up' members to make the additional members system for the Welsh National Assembly

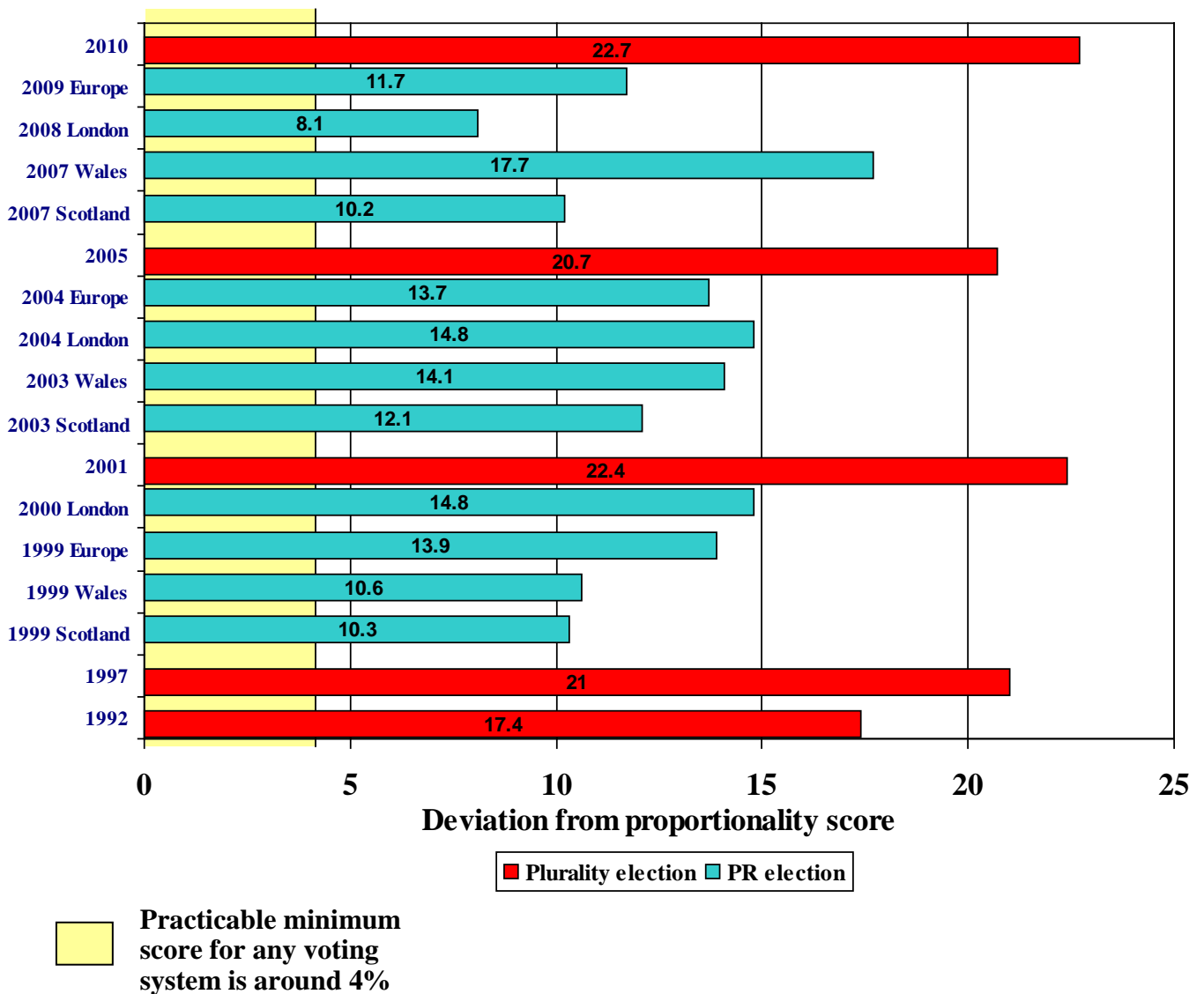
**Figure 2: The effective number of parties in terms of votes at major elections in Great Britain, 1992 to 2010**



elections work proportionately there. This feature was designed in by the Labour government in the devolution settlement, in a bid to artificially maintain its historic party hegemony there).

Advocates of electoral reform (and that included all parties at the 2010 general election, except the Conservatives) generally argue that having a high deviation from

**Figure 3: Deviation from proportionality scores at major elections in Great Britain, 1992 to 2010**

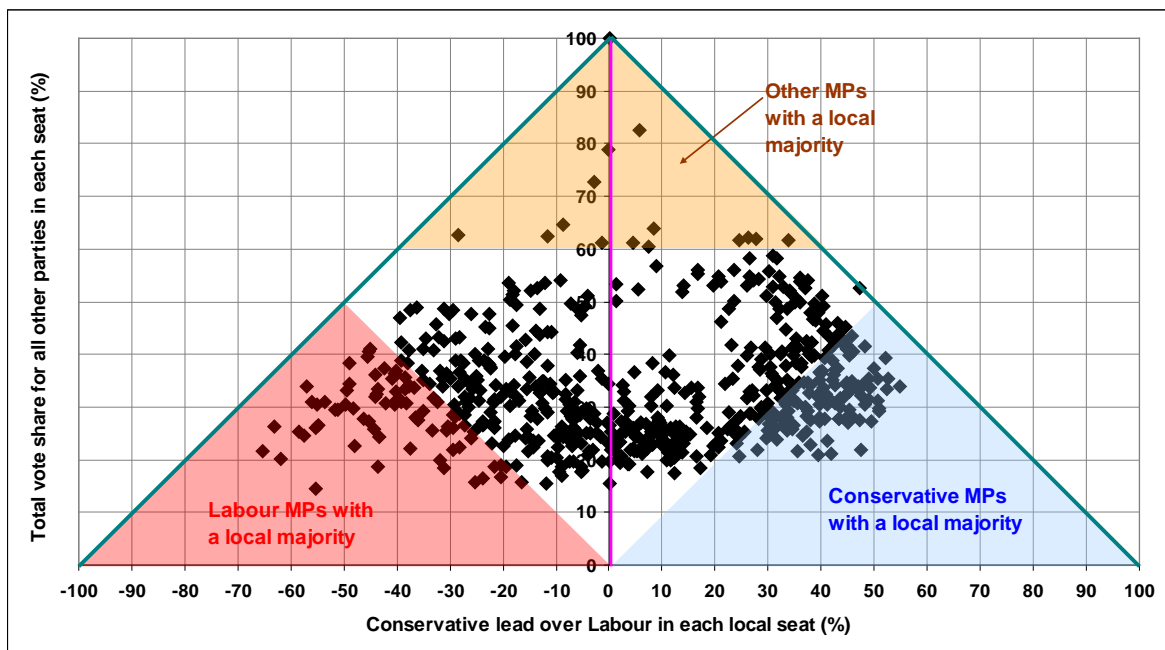


proportionality is bad for electoral legitimacy, because voters know that their preferences are chewed up and served back to them only in a distorted fashion by the plurality rule voting system. Defenders of the status quo argue that plurality rule has two key virtues: it forms a strong link between a majority of local opinion and their MP; and nationally it produces ‘clear’ electoral outcomes where a ‘swing of the pendulum’ allows voters to choose between two credible single-party governments that give clear and unambiguous lines of electoral accountability. I look at the 2010 outcome of a hung Parliament and a coalition government in the next section, but turn here to the arguments about strong links between MPs and their constituencies.

Figure 4 shows all the constituency outcomes in the 2010 general election, with each black blob representing a single constituency outcome. The bottom axis shows the Conservative vote share minus the Labour vote share in each local area. So the further from the centre a constituency is to the right, the greater the Tory lead. And the more a constituency is on the left of the centre-line, the more solidly Labour it is. The vertical axis here shows the combined share of votes going to all other parties, which we have seen in 2010 included the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, the BNP, the Greens, the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, and all other candidates. All feasible outcomes must lie inside the overall double-triangle shape outlined in the green borders here. There cannot be any outcomes outside this overall area.

The shaded blue and pink triangles inside the overall feasible space in Figure 4 allow us to see immediately what proportion of MPs are from the top two parties and draw on local majority support in their constituencies. Every black blob in the blue-shaded area is a Tory MP with local majority backing, and similarly Labour MPs with local majority support fall inside the pink-shaded triangle. (The orange shaded area is only a rough guess at indicating the zone where Liberal Democrats, or the nationalists in Scotland and Wales, have some chance of enjoying majority support. It is set higher at a 60 per cent ‘other’ vote

**Figure 4: The constituency outcomes in the 2010 general election, in Great Britain**



to allow for the fact that the ‘other’ vote splits across several parties). The constituencies where MPs lacked majority support are the black blobs on a white background – there are only a few tens of constituencies, out of 650 seats in all.

Two-party contests completely disappeared in Britain in the 2005 general election, and in 2010 there were also very few constituencies with only three parties contesting the seat. Figure 4 shows that right across the country support for parties other than the Conservatives and Labour is rarely less than a fifth of total votes, with exceptions occurring in only a few handfuls of seats. As a result the whole set of black blobs showing constituency outcomes is located pretty much in the middle of the triangle, and a long way from the bottom axis – where Duverger’s famous ‘law’ says that a plurality rule system should be. Instead, across the whole bottom third of the feasible area there are only a scattering of seats with total ‘other party’ votes below 20 per cent. Although the core band of seats is a long way up the chart, though, it still shows a marked Conservative versus Labour patterning – albeit at highish levels of voting for third, fourth and subsequent parties.

Above all the advent of a hung Parliament and the coalition government reflects the fact that the Liberal Democrats, SNP, Plaid Cymru and other parties now regularly win around 90 constituencies out of the 628 in Great Britain. This is shown mainly by the ‘curling over’ of seats on the sides of the distribution and extending in an upper swathe across the middle of the diagram. Where the total ‘other party’ vote is above 33 per cent, many seats are still won by the Conservatives or Labour, because remember that the ‘other’ vote is split across several different parties. But the higher up on the chart that blobs occur, generally the less likely these seats are to be held by one of the top two parties.

To get an idea of how much change the 2010 results represents, suppose we flip back to the 1955 general election, a low point for Liberal party support and the heyday of the two-party Conservative-Labour system, shown in Figure 5 below. It is immediately apparent that it looks nothing like the 2010 result. In the vast majority of the 1955 constituencies there were no other candidates except the Conservatives and Labour. Hence in all those hundreds and hundreds of seats the outcome lies on the bottom axis itself – where seat after seat lies piled on top of each other, so many that the chart cannot possibly show them all. There were just 110 seats where the demoralized Liberals still put up candidates in 1955, and a few others. Here the votes for ‘other parties’ vote still held up - these are the scatter of blobs above the bottom axis, mostly concentrated in Conservative



areas. However, even in these cases almost all the Conservative and Labour MPs were elected in local areas where they enjoyed local majority support, so that even these seats mostly fell inside the pink or blue shaded triangles in Figure 5. Only around 40 seats are located against the white background signifying that the MP elected there did not have local majority support. The contrast between Figures 4 and 5 shows how far the argument that the British voting system secures local accountability has degenerated, chiefly under the contemporary pressures of rising multi-partism amongst voters.

A final aspect of how the modern British system works in practice is the creation of what the 1999 Jenkins Commission on voting reform called ‘electoral deserts’ for the top two parties at the regional level, an effect shown in Figure 6. The same diagram discussed above is used to show four contrasting regional political systems. In the top row, the south-east region reverted sharply to the Conservatives in 2010, so that Labour lost all but a handful the seats that it had held there since 1997 (Diamond and Radice, 2010). In the north-west, however, Labour MPs fought tenaciously and the party hung on to the bulk of its seats. In the bottom row of Figure 6, the Scottish system was orientated as a battle between Labour and the SNP (or the Liberal Democrats in some specific areas), while the Conservative party had little impact still. In Wales, however, Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives are all contenders in the middle, north and southern suburban areas, with Labour holding its south Wales valley and industrial bastions.

**Figure 5: The constituency outcomes in the 1955 general election, in Great Britain**

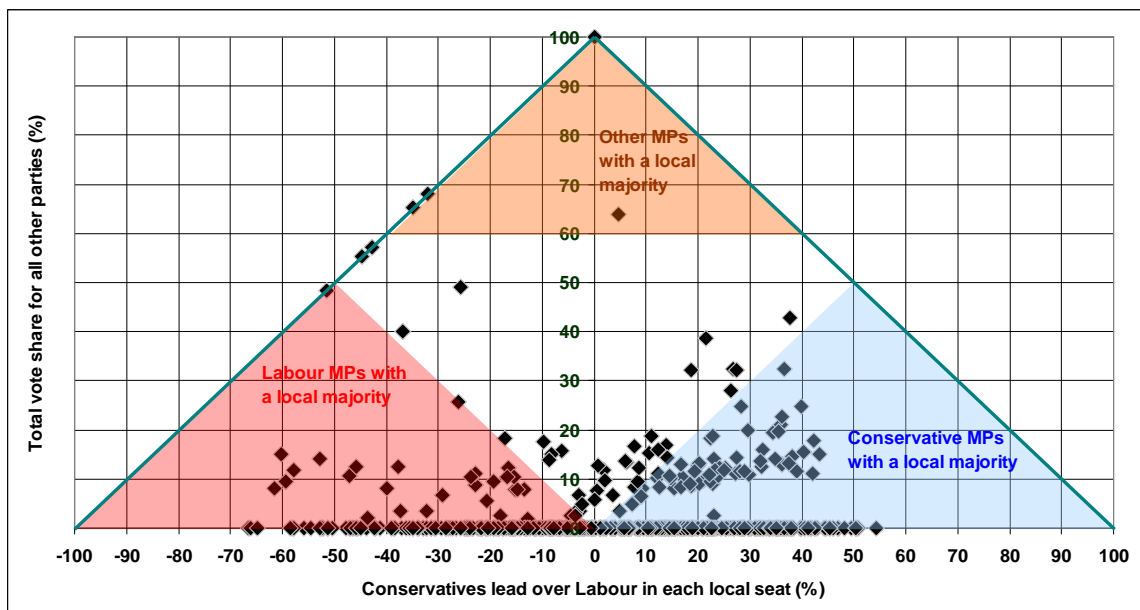
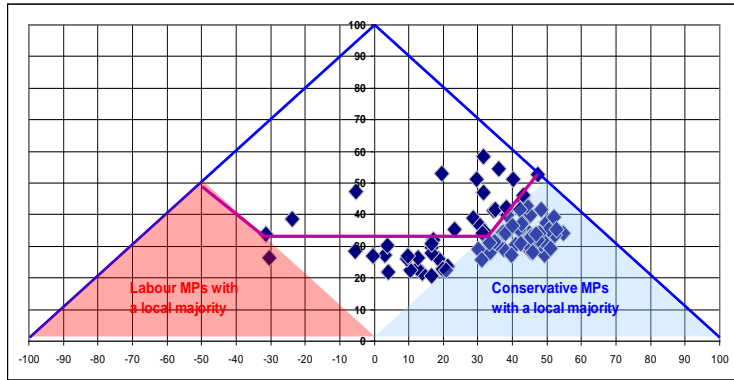
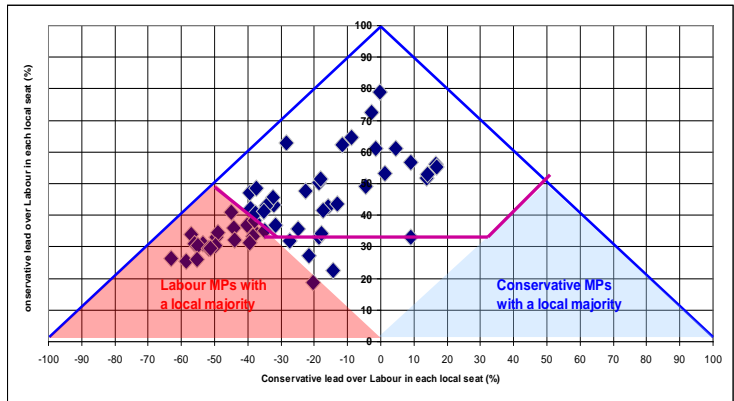
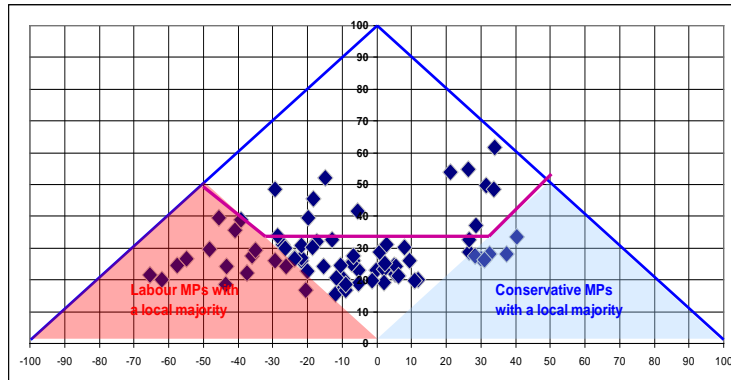


Figure 6: The patterns of constituency outcomes across four different regions in 2010

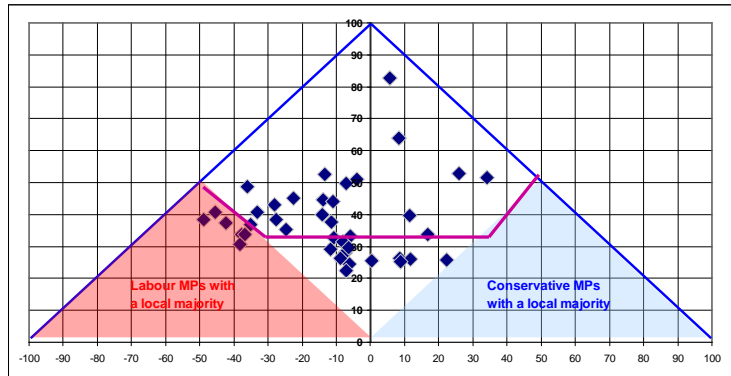
South-east



North-west



Scotland



Wales

### 3. After the election, the advent of coalition government

The last solid argument of plurality rule defenders has generally been that the system produces clear outcomes, so that the alleged ‘complexities’, ‘delays’, ‘deals’ and ‘bargaining in ‘smoke-filled rooms’ associated with European-style coalition government formation can be avoided. Yet in 2010 with 641 MPs (excluding the 5 Sinn Fein MPs who never take their seats, and so do not vote), the election result was a hung Parliament. Here Table 3 shows that there were only six possible results in terms of forming a government:

**Table 3: Feasible governments that could have formed in May 2010**

Possible government	Parties involved (number of MPs)	Overall seats (majority)
1. Two-way coalition government with a majority	Conservatives (306) + Liberal Democrats (57)	363 (majority: 85)
2. Two-way coalition government with no majority	Labour (258) + Liberal Democrats (57)	315 (short by 6 seats)
3. Single-party minority government	Conservatives only (306)	306 (short by 17 seats)
3. Multi-way coalition government with bare majority	Labour (258) + Liberal Democrats (57) + SNP (6) + Plaid Cymru (3) + SDLP (3)	327 (majority: 13)
5. Two-way minority government	Conservatives + Democratic Unionists (8)	314 (short by 9 seats)

Here the only possible governments that were actually subject to serious negotiation were the top three, because they all involved only one or two parties being in government, with minority government (option 3) being what would happen if negotiations failed (the ‘reversionary’ position). The possibility of larger, multi-way coalitions was generally discounted by the leaders of all the three major parties, because a complex government relying on multiple parties for support could quickly collapse. In addition, the parties from Great Britain were very wary of becoming dependent upon any of the Northern Ireland parties for support – given the history of sectarian-influenced politics in that province. Amongst options 1, 2 and 3 a Tory minority government was possible (this is what happened in February 1974, and again in 1977-79). But it would almost certainly have meant another general election within a year or at most two, a timing that the PM would not necessarily be able to control. It was also an unattractive basis for dealing with the public spending cutbacks made necessary by the UK’s ballooning budget deficit and huge borrowing to counteract the financial crisis and subsequent recession.

For David Cameron's Conservatives, a coalition deal with the Liberal Democrats seemed to offer the prospect of a five-year government with a secure majority. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats had effectively only a choice of joining the same majority coalition or of forming a minority government with Labour, requiring that Gordon Brown resign and a new Labour leader be elected. Even then a Lab-Lib government would have had no majority and would have had to negotiate every piece of its legislation with nationalist MPs and some Northern Ireland MPs to secure its passage. Since Nick Clegg was himself temperamentally on the right wing of the Liberal Democrats (with many free market as well as social liberal values), and since he had openly disparaged a failing Gordon Brown in the election campaign, it was predictable from early on in the negotiations that he would accept David Cameron's offer and reject Labour's.

Political scientists have also developed a way of estimating what share of power each party has in this situation in terms of its comprehensive coalitional potential (or C-score for short). (If you're already an expert, I am using here a 'power' index called the 'normalized Banzhaf score', on which see Taylor, 1995, Ch.4). Essentially this approach looks at every conceivable way in which a majority coalition could come about, and then works out how many times each party's joining or leaving is critical for retaining a majority. For each party their C-score is given by number of times they are vital to winning, divided by the total number of possible coalitions. Thus we get a share of all 'power as coalitional potential' that goes to each party.

We can use this approach to analyse the distribution of power in the House of Commons before and after the formation of the coalition government. The 'before' situation is shown in Table 4 below. The fourth column here shows that although the Tories had over 47 per cent of MPs, they actually had only 37 per cent of the overall coalitional potential. It also shows that although Labour had five times as many MPs as the Liberal Democrats, on this basis the two parties' coalitional power was *exactly* the same, at just under a quarter each. The smaller parties all had smaller C-scores, but these were in each case several times bigger than their shares of MPs. The fifth column in Table 4 shows the party's total coalitional potential share divided by the number of its MPs, to give the average 'power' weight of each MP. It can be seen that this is lower for Labour. (In fact the second largest bloc almost invariably comes off worst on C-scores). This measure also

**Table 4: Before the coalition – the coalitional potential and power scores for all parties in the House of Commons with separate Conservative and Liberal Democrats**

Party	MPs	Resource weight: % of all (voting) MPs	C-score: % share of coalitional potential score (normalized Banzhaf index)	C-score per MP ratio	P-score: % share of power	P-score per MP ratio
Conservative	307	47.6	36.7	0.77	42.1	0.89
Labour	258	40.0	22.0	0.55	31.0	0.78
Liberal Democrat	57	8.8	22.0	2.49	15.4	1.75
Democratic Unionist Party (NI)	8	1.2	7.3	5.92	4.3	3.46
Scottish National Party	6	0.9	5.5	5.92	3.2	3.46
Plaid Cymru	3	0.5	1.8	3.95	1.2	2.47
Social Democratic & Labour Party (NI)	3	0.5	1.8	3.95	1.2	2.47
Green	1	0.2	0.9	5.92	0.5	3.46
Alliance Party (NI)	1	0.2	0.9	5.92	0.5	3.46
Others	1	0.2	0.9	5.92	0.5	3.46
Total	645	100 %	100 %		100 %	

Note: With separate Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, there are a total of ten blocs in this situation.

suggests that before the coalitional deal was done the Liberal Democrats MPs were individually each three times more influential over the coalitional outcome than were the Tory MPs.

Of course, a great many critics in political science argue that comprehensive coalitional potential scores are not good indicators of a broader concept of political power. C-scores are completely situational and locked into the present – they do not take any account of the past or future of the parties making deals. And small changes in the numbers of blocs (e.g. some backbench dissenters from any of the main parties) can make exaggerated differences to C-scores. Above all coalitional potential scores do not work very well in predicting what will happen empirically. In Table 4, Labour and the Liberal Democrats are assigned the same C-score – so if a Lab-Lib cabinet were to form this seems

to predict that it would include equal numbers of ministers for both parties, which of course would greatly overstate Liberal Democrat influence. Empirically we might have expected that in a minority government coalition between the two parties Labour would get the large majority of cabinet seats and the Liberal Democrats a minority (perhaps 5 or 6 posts out of a cabinet of 23).

To cope with such problems the last two columns in Table 4 (shaded yellow) show an extended conception of parties' power scores (the P-score), introduced here for the first time. This is essentially an average of each party's C-score *plus* their resource weight (in this case their percentage share of all MPs). The logic of this measure is twofold. First, resources are built up over time. A party's representation in Parliament, for instance, is normally added to or lost only partly at any given general election. And the party's influence with the media, public opinion, the government apparatus and interest groups reflect how many seats it holds now (which bears on how much it can influence legislation) - but also how much the party might hold in the future, given its historical record and the prospects at the next general election. So averaging coalitional potential in the present with parties' resources in Parliament (i.e. their percentage shares of all MPs) gives a much better guide to real, empirical power.

A second reason to prefer P scores is that the C-score assigns all power to a majority government as soon as it has 51 per cent of MPs, and zero power to the opposition, which is clearly completely unrealistic. By contrast, the reformulated power in the last two columns of Table 4 score only gives a 'total power to the government' reading if the top party controls all seats in the Commons. So long as the opposition parties have MPs, in the P\_score they also have a share of power – and this share is greater the closer the opposition is to matching the government lobbies. Again the P-score is far better than just looking at comprehensive coalitional potential, because parties' resource weights reflect their longer-term power, while the coalitional potential index taken on its own is very immediate and short-term.

Looking at the 'before' coalition situation in Table 4, the P (real power) score shows that again the Tories fell short of a winning position, but it places the Labour party as having twice as much power in the hung Parliament as the Liberal Democrats. It also marks down the influence of the smaller parties compared to the C score. However, in terms of P-score per MP they still do well, as do the Liberal Democrats at the expense of the two largest parties' MPs. These power readings are also still the ones that will apply on issues

handled via free votes during the 2010-15 Parliament, especially certain issues that were exempted from the coalition agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

To see what changes occur after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is formed, Table 5 recalculates the C-scores and P-scores on the basis that these two parties now operate as a single bloc in the House of Commons. Power and influence scores are highly sensitive to blocs coalescing with each other, and hence to reductions in the total number of blocs that are competing with each other. So when the largest and the third-largest blocs (i.e. the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats) coalesce into one bloc for most voting purposes, thus reducing the total number of blocs to nine, we can expect to see big changes. And in this ‘after coalition’ picture, everything has indeed changed in a dramatic way.

The comprehensive coalition potential scores now assigns all power completely to the coalition government with a score of 100 per cent, and gives zero per cent to all the opposition parties, making not the slightest differentiation between them. Essentially, the score is just saying ‘I give up’ at this point, because the combined Conservative and Liberal Democrats MPs do not need to coalesce with anyone else in order to win. But my revised power score keeps on working fine here, because we can still average the coalitional potential of a winning bloc and its resource weight. (We can in principle average it in many different, weighted ways: but for simplicity here I assume that we just take the mean of the two scores). On this basis, the Cameron-Clegg government has more than three quarters of the total power in Parliament, with Labour a long way behind on a fifth, and the small parties sharing less than 2 per cent of power between them.

When the coalition first formed, many media commentators waxed lyrical about the disruptive potential of an ‘awkward squad’ of MPs on the Conservative right. But in ideological terms the Tory right are highly unlikely to vote with the opposition Labour party on many issues, so that the most Tory dissidents can do is to abstain. The maths of the situation show that a massive 84 out of the 307 Tory MPs will need to abstain before the government could lose a single Commons vote – which seems highly unlikely to happen. And even at this stage, the government would be the largest actor, and its power score

**Table 5: After the coalition – the coalitional potential and power scores for all parties in the House of Commons with the Conservative and Liberal Democrats treated as a single bloc**

Party	MPs	Resource weight: % of all (voting) MPs	C-score: % share of coalitional potential score (normalized Banzhaf index)	C-score per MP ratio	P-score: % share of power	P-score per MP ratio
Conservative-Liberal Democrat government	364	56.4	100	1.77	78.2	1.39
Labour	258	40.0	0	0	20.0	0.50
Democratic Unionist Party (NI)	8	1.2	0	0	0.6	0.50
Scottish National Party	6	0.9	0	0	0.5	0.50
Plaid Cymru	3	0.5	0	0	0.2	0.50
Social Democratic & Labour Party (NI)	3	0.5	0	0	0.2	0.50
Green	1	0.2	0	0	0.1	0.50
Alliance Party (NI)	1	0.2	0	0	0.1	0.50
Others	1	0.2	0	0	0.1	0.50
Total	645	100%	100%		100%	

would not be dented greatly. Not until the government faced 100 abstainers would its power score fall below half.

We can use the same approach to assess the possibilities of rebellion from MPs on the left of the Liberal Democrats, who may feel pressured by party members anguished by the loss of the party’s centre-left credentials, and be unconvinced of the need for the massive public spending cuts that quickly became coalition policy. These dissenters could easily vote with Labour in ideological terms, thereby swelling the opposition ranks as well as depleting government support. But it would require 42 of them before the government would be at all imperilled – that is, nearly three quarters of the Liberal Democrats MPs before losing any vote. Finally the government can probably rely on the eight votes of the Democratic Unionist Party from Northern Ireland most of the time, so that its insulation from defeat is even greater than I have allowed above.



In other words, the Cameron-Clegg coalition looks remarkably strong in Parliamentary power terms. And in the period since its formation to the time of writing it has proved remarkably cohesive and coherent in its various stances, with Conservative and Liberal Democrat ministers working well together. At this point, it seems certain to go whatever distance the two leaders and two sets of Cabinet ministers want it to go, busting many paradigms in our thinking about British politics. Indeed it seems that single-party government is not at all needed for cohesive government, but that it is rather the product of a particular elite political culture, one that the Liberal Democrats' MPs share as much as the elites running the Conservative and Labour parties. The formal agreement between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats says that the government will last a full Parliamentary term of five years - and ministers will probably need that long to make the austerity cuts, weather unpopular times, and come out on the other side. This suggests that the next UK general election will be either May 2014 or May 2015 - unless the coalition unravels in some spectacular fashion through internal splits before then.

The Labour party tried hard to form coalition number 2 in Table 3 with the Liberal Democrats. But having been rejected, Labour moved swiftly to reconstruct its leadership. Gordon Brown announced his retirement as party leader almost as soon as the election results were clear, triggering a leadership election which Ed Miliband narrowly won over his older and more experienced brother, David Miliband. Under its new leader, Labour may have to prepare for a long and frustrating opposition. If the coalition is still in being, a 2014 or 2015 election under anything less than a fully proportional electoral system (that is, under first past the post or the alternative vote (AV)) could easily spell a new electoral disaster for Labour, suggesting that the party needs to adjust its mindset to begin to compete effectively.

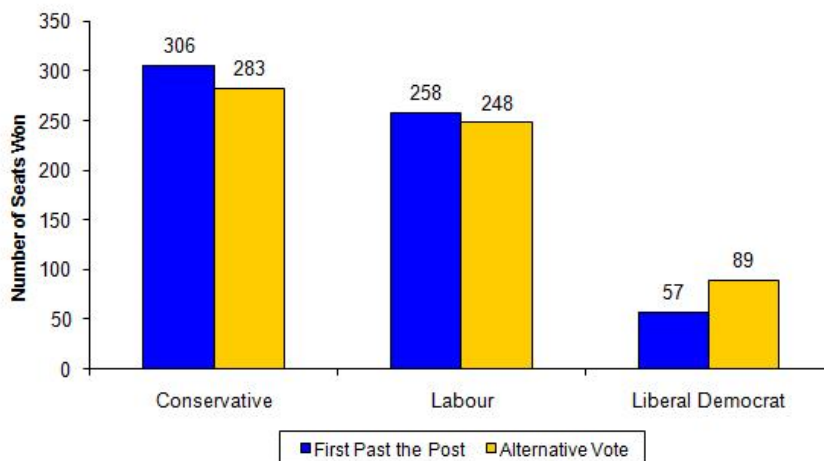
#### **4. Longer term changes and voting reform**

Three central elements of the coalition agreement between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives concerned constitutional reform. The parties first agreed to hold a referendum in May 2011 on changing the voting system at Westminster to the alternative vote (AV) system as used in Australia. This compromise proposal (also proposed by Labour in its 2010 manifesto) would keep the UK's local constituencies but allow voters in each area to number their preferences across parties in order (1, 2, 3 etc), instead of just marking an X for their top preference (Travers et al, 2010). All the first (top) preferences

that voters have given are counted, as now. If any candidate gets majority support (i.e. 50% +1), they immediately win the seat. If not, the candidate who has the fewest first preference votes is knocked out of the contest, and we look at the second preferences of this party's voters, redistributing these votes to the remaining candidates in the race, in line with these voters' number 2 choice. This process of knocking out the least popular candidate and redistributing their voters' choices as voters intended continues until one candidate gets 50 per cent. In the USA this system is called 'instant run-off' and this is a good summary of what AV does – it delivers a run-off election when no one gets an outright majority on first preference votes.

Looking back to Figure 4 above, it should be clear that AV will make a clear difference in the more than two thirds of constituencies shown against a white background, where in 2010 the winning MP lacked local majority support. Figure 7 shows how the BES study team estimate that voting outcomes would have changed, based on their large survey. The AV system would have given the Liberal Democrats 32 more seats, two thirds coming from the Tories and one third from Labour, creating a considerably more proportional distribution of seats in Parliament. However, this effect would not necessarily apply in other circumstances. Equally detailed studies of AV's impact on the 1992 and 1997 general

**Figure 7: How the Alternative Vote would have worked at the 2010 general election**



Source: BES 2009-10, at <http://bes.utdallas.edu/2009/images/graphs/1a.jpg>

election results, show that at this time the Liberal Democrats would have gained 15 to 20 more seats. But in 1997, when Labour was in the ascendant, Blair's party would also have benefited, creating an even greater under-representation of Tory MPs than in fact occurred in that year. In other words, the impact of AV is rather volatile, depending on the fine distribution of opinion. For example, in a 2014 or 2015 election if the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are still in coalition or have any kind of electoral pact, then AV could be very damaging for Labour.

Whether the alternative vote will be accepted by voters in the 2011 referendum still seems highly uncertain at the time of writing. The Conservatives agreed to holding the referendum only, but are free to campaign strongly against any change, and they are overwhelmingly likely to do so. Many 'old style' Labour MPs will join the Tories in opposing any changes in Westminster voting at all. The remaining Labour elements may be tempted not to campaign too strongly or uniformly for any change, in the hope that if the referendum is lost this will increase the strain between the two coalition parties. And for the Liberal Democrat activists, AV is anyway only a pale shadow of the PR system that they have long campaigned for, which is the single transferable vote (STV) system already used in Northern Ireland and in Scottish local government.

The second key constitutional reform element of the coalition agreement concerned changing how Westminster seats are allocated across the country. The Conservatives wrote into the coalition agreement that the House of Commons must be reduced in size to 600 MPs, and that these seats must be rigorously designed so as to have the same average size, plus or minus 5 per cent. Constituency redrawing must occur every five years in response to population changes and the previous long-winded boundary review inquiries are to be abolished. These changes will not be easily implementable (Baston, 2011; Johnston, 2011). They will clearly tend to reduce Labour's advantage in recent elections, and the party accordingly opposed the bitterly the changes, especially in the House of Lords where a filibuster almost prevented the law passing in time for a referendum take place in May 2011. However, some analyses suggest that it is in fact the Liberal Democrats who may lose most seats from the changes, because reducing seats numbers is disruptive for their MPs holding 'isolated' seats (Baston, 2010).

The third constitutional element of the coalition agreement was reform of the House of Lords to make it a wholly or mainly elected chamber, the Conservatives favouring only 80 per cent elected members and the Liberal Democrats tending towards universal election.

The government will outline proposals for changes in early 2011, and they are likely to include using a proportional representation voting system of some kind, opening up new opportunities for the Liberal Democrats and smaller parties to perhaps win enhanced representation at Westminster. What yet remains uncertain is whether there is any realistic prospect of the government giving sufficient priority to Lords reform to enact these changes before the end of its term in office. Before the general election David Cameron described Lords reform as 'third term priority', i.e. a long way down his list of priorities.

### **Conclusions**

Whatever the outcomes of the AV referendum and Lords reform, it seems likely that Britain will continue to develop electorally towards essentially a European-style multi-party system. The Tories and Liberal Democrats hope to weather the political storm anticipated around public spending reductions and emerge in 2014 with a renascent economy and a case for re-election. By autumn 2010 the Liberal Democrats were already suffering a crisis of support, with only around half their general election support in some opinion polls, locking them ever more tightly into depending upon the coalition, whilst the Conservatives were so far little affected. In mid-term elections at least, it is likely that momentum will swing towards Labour for a time as the spending cuts bite. But other smaller parties are also likely to revive if economic conditions worsen, especially the far-right UKIP and BNP, while the Greens political presence might also grow.

The lasting impact of the 2010 election is likely to be that it made explicit in governmental terms a series of trends towards greater political diversity which I hope to have shown are deep-rooted in the British society and polity. A great deal now depends on whether the coalition's hopes for an extended co-operation in government can be sustained, and on whether this co-operation lasts up to and into the next general election.

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