

ELECTIONWATCH UNITED KINGDOM



United Kingdom Post-Election Watch: May 2010 Parliamentary Elections

The May 6, 2010, general elections ushered in significant change in the government in the United Kingdom. As most polls had predicted, voters handed no party a majority of seats and thus gave the country a hung parliament, the first time since 1974 that no single party could form a government without a coalition partner or partners. After almost a week of discussions and negotiations among all the parties, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats announced that they had reached agreement to form the first coalition government, and the first with Liberal participation, since World War Two. New Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservatives) and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrats) outlined their joint plans for this new Liberal-Conservative government; the result of what Cameron labeled a "historic and seismic shift" in the UK's political landscape. Reflecting the two great - and perhaps competing - demands seemingly placed on the new government by the voters, Clegg promised a "radical, reforming government" that would also deliver "reassurance and stability at a time of great uncertainty." Although coalition governments in the UK are not the norm in recent times, the last time there was a period of coalition government, it lasted a full 14 years (from 1931-1945), throughout a period of economic, political, and international crisis.

The elections that forced these two former rival parties into coalition were notable for the mixed messages they sent to most of the major players on the political scene. Observers looking for a clear and coherent demand from the electorate for one philosophical orientation or another to dominate the UK's new government were disappointed. Indeed, although the Labour Party emerged the clearest loser in the balloting, the distribution of seats in the new parliament made it possible for outgoing Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown to make one final play for a "progressive" coalition government of Labour, Liberal Democrats, and other parties that could have cobbled together the seats necessary for a slim majority. The breakdown of talks between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the middle of the week after the election cemented the decision of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats to proceed forward together. With the failure of talks on a "progressive" alternative, the way was clear for David Cameron to become the first Conservative prime minister since Labour's Tony Blair sent John Major into the opposition in 1997.

The Liberal-Conservative coalition has shown itself to be united in its early days on the financial and economic challenges facing the country, and it has already launched a program of budget measures designed to save approximately \$8 billion. Broad agreement was also reached on tax issues, with the new tax code slated to give a break on the first £10,000 of income for all taxpayers. In a political system dogged by voter disenchantment with "traditional" leaders and parties, Cameron and Clegg have also been united in presenting their new government as leading change. In Cameron's words, "...we are not just announcing a new government and new ministers. We are announcing a new politics." Crucially, the coalition has agreed on a number of systemic changes, even though these do not go

anywhere near the original demands of the Liberal Democrats for reform. The two parties have committed to a five-year term for parliament (and scheduled elections on May 7, 2015), but the coalition agreement does allow for parliament to be dissolved if 55 percent of members agree. Both sides have agreed to a referendum on the introduction of the alternative vote system for future general elections (with the Tories already committed to campaign against the proposed change), as well as on new rules on lobbying and limits on campaign financing - no doubt a popular proposal in the wake of the previous parliament's expenses scandal. By the end of the year, legislation also will be introduced calling for a wholly or partially elected House of Lords with single, fixed terms for members to be elected by proportional representation. It will be up to the public to decide whether these most radical reforms in the British political system in generations can stem the negative tide in public opinion toward politics and politicians that gave the UK its new hung parliament.

For elections dominated by calls for change and characterized by voter frustration, a close analysis of the constituency-by-constituency results across the country shows a remarkable degree of continuity. When all the results were counted (turnout was 65.1 percent, up 3.7 percentage points compared to the last general election in 2005), the Conservative Party had taken a total of 306 seats out of a total of 650 - 20 seats short of a majority. This gain of 108 seats was the largest for the Tories since the elections of 1931, and a clear point of accomplishment for Cameron, who had worked hard to resurrect a party that had lost three general elections in a row.

In many constituencies across the country, there were important Tory wins, and a very large number of Labour candidates holding cabinet level positions went down to defeat. The Conservatives dominated the results in constituencies across England, where they had an overall pick-up of 92 seats, and did relatively well in traditionally Labour-dominated Wales, where they picked up five seats, more than doubling their previous result. On the other hand, they were almost completely closed out of Scotland; here the party continued to pay the price for what most Scots still perceive as disproportionate economic pain caused them by the governments of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. It is surely one of the most frustrating outcomes of these elections for the Tories, however, that the party took 36.1 percent of the national vote - slightly more than did Labour in 2005 - and garnered only 306 seats in parliament. With 35.3 percent in 2005, Labour took 356 seats and a solid majority, because constituency boundaries across the country tend to gather more Labour votes into more "safe" seats. Overall, the best growth for the Conservatives took place in constituencies it had already won in 2005.

Measured by percentage of the vote received, Labour's 29 percent result was its second-worst in a general election since 1918, and missed being the worst by only 1.4 percent. Only Michael Foot's drubbing by Prime Minister Thatcher in her reelection bid in 1983 has been worse. There were bright spots for Labour in specific constituencies around the country (and in the local council elections held the same day, as described below). In Barking, East London, Labour actually increased its share of the vote in a seat targeted by British National Party Leader Nick Griffin. Education Secretary Ed Balls, who is a contender for the leadership of the party after the departure of Gordon Brown, managed to fend off a Tory push to take his seat by 1,101 votes. In Ashfield, a morning television news reporter successfully defended the Labour seat held by former Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, despite a 17.2 percent swing to the Liberal Democrats.

Gordon Brown himself increased his majority in his home constituency in Scotland, and

Labour even took the (slightly redrawn) constituency of Gillian Duffy, who was infamously called "bigoted" by Brown on tape during the campaign when he thought his microphone had been turned off. Still, the kind of color-coded maps common in the U.S. show Labour's red today strong only in Scotland (where Labour's percentage of the vote actually increased by 2.5 points) and major urban and industrial areas; England in this election turned largely Tory blue and Wales shows similar tendencies.

In the local council elections that were held across England (and parts of Scotland and Wales) on the same day as the general elections, Labour bucked its downward trend at the national level and achieved a net gain of 15 councils and more than 400 members of council overall. Of these, the gains were most notable in London, where Labour took control of eight councils previously held by the Tories. Labour also took control of Liverpool, previously run by the Liberal Democrats.

With the resignation of Brown as party leader, Labour now turns inward to elect a new leader to try to pick up the pieces and make the party competitive in the next general elections. Nominations are open until June 9, and so far six candidates have announced their intention to run: Member of Parliament Diane Abbott, former Education Secretary Ed Balls, former Health Secretary Andy Burnham, Member of Parliament John McDonnell, former Foreign Secretary David Miliband, and former Energy Secretary Ed Miliband. Leadership contenders have to be nominated by 12.5 percent of the Parliamentary Labour Party, which following the general election means 33 parliamentarians. Labour parliamentarians, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), party members and members of affiliated organizations (such as trade unions), are then entitled to vote in the leadership election. Balloting will take place from August 16-September 22, and the new leader's name will be announced at the party's conference in Manchester on September 25.

For the Liberal Democrats, the ironies in these elections were great. On the one hand, they managed to break into the national political debate in a way they hadn't in generations with Nick Clegg's acclaimed performance in the first of the three televised leaders' debates. With the momentum from this debate, many believed the party could be competitive with the two major parties not only in percentage of the overall vote, but also in the real numbers of seats won. In the end, the debate-driven bubble burst (London Lord Mayor Boris Johnson of the Conservatives blamed "the fickleness of the mob"), and the party lost a net of five seats compared to its result in 2005. The party's hopes for gains in Wales, Scotland, and Southwest England all went unfulfilled, and in the BBC's list of the Liberal Democrats' top 30 target seats, the party managed to switch only three. Still, given the inability of the Tories to win an outright majority, the weakened Liberal Democrats found themselves kingmakers in David Cameron's emerging kingdom. In return for their agreement to enter the coalition, the Liberal Democrats exacted a total of 20 positions in the Cameron cabinet, of which five are ministers. This, again, after losing almost a 10th of their seats.

The UK's new parliament includes a number of rising stars who may well emerge as the next generation of leaders in their parties and on the national level. For the Tories, one of these is Zac Goldsmith (son of the late anti-European Union-integration leader Sir James Goldsmith), who unseated former Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament Susan Kramer, and is now the third generation in his family to serve in elected politics. Others include Jo Johnson, younger brother of the lord mayor of London, who won almost 60 percent in his first race and held his constituency for the Tories; Nick Bowles, former director of the right-of-center Policy Exchange think tank; and Priti Patel, one of the ethnic minority candidates

Cameron has encouraged and supported.

All of these new Tory members are 45 or younger. On the Labour side, there were some highlights for the future even on a bad day. Chuka Umunna, who comes from Nigerian and English background, held the Streatham seat for Labour with a narrow majority and is on the rise in the party; he's called Britain's Obama by some. Also in the mix is Rachel Reeves, whose short but impressive resume includes time at the World Bank and the UK embassy in Washington. She won the seat for Leeds West on her third attempt to win a seat in Westminster. For Labour, both Umunna and Reeves are only 31 years old. Overall the incoming parliament has a total of 121 freshmen members; there are 13 more women (141) and 11 more blacks and Asians (26) than in the outgoing parliament. And the new members are younger on average than their predecessors, with 115 of the total 650 members younger than 39 years of age; almost half (314) are younger than 49 years old.

The UK today - like the rest of Europe and other parts of the world - faces its most significant economic and fiscal crisis since the Great Depression. It is, perhaps, not surprising that the country's voters have forced a coalition government to address the major challenges facing the nation. With the Liberal-Conservative coalition now firmly in control of the agenda outlined in Queen Elizabeth's speech, it seems there will be a focus on bringing the UK's financial house into order and on various reforms to improve political accountability. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have also found common cause on stopping the country's national ID card process and a range of other civil-liberties issues, as well as on tightening limits on non-European Union immigration. They have also agreed that the UK will not join, or take steps toward joining, the Eurozone in this parliament and not transfer any further powers to the European Union without a referendum, while supporting the further expansion of the Union. At first glance, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats may not have had much in common, but the first steps of the new coalition suggest that they may have found enough common ground to give the United Kingdom what all parties have agreed that it needs: stable, dependable government for a full parliamentary period.

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