

ELECTIONWATCH UNITED KINGDOM



United Kingdom Pre-Election Watch: May 2010 Parliamentary Elections

Nearing the end of its third term in government, Britain's Labour Party has now governed the United Kingdom for the longest unbroken period ever in the party's history. Wresting power from Prime Minister John Major and the Conservative Party in the general election in 1997, Tony Blair's "New Labour" went on to win the subsequent elections in 2002 and 2005, only to see its popularity drop significantly following the UK's engagement in the Iraq war. Blair resigned in 2007, handing the office of prime minister over to then Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, who has served since that time as prime minister. Brown was expected to take advantage of a small honeymoon in the polls to call early elections and consolidate Labour's position, but declining public support soon forced him to hold off setting an election date until the last possible moment. At the beginning of April 2010, Brown officially announced that the general election (and local elections) would be held on May 6.

The main challenger to the current government is the Conservative Party (the Tories), which has struggled to find a leader capable of returning the party to power since the 1997 defeat. Current Leader David Cameron is the fourth, and so far the most successful, in a succession of contenders. He was elected to lead the Conservatives in 2005 and has successfully modernized and reformed the party's public image, enabling him to lead a strong bid for a Tory majority in this year's election. Having invested heavily in winning a series of by-elections around the country and thereby demonstrating that the Tories can win, Cameron's challenge remains a large one: to form a Conservative majority in the House of Commons, the party needs to pick up 116 seats it currently does not hold, some of which it lost in 2005 by margins of 10 percent or more (although using somewhat different boundaries).

Apart from the two major parties, the UK's constituency-based, first-past-the-post electoral system has usually left third parties with limited powers on the national level - at least until this year. In the outgoing parliament, the strongest of these parties was the Liberal Democrats, which had 62 members out of 650. There are also two strong regional parties (Plaid Cymru in Wales and the Scottish National Party in Scotland) and several parties that hold only one seat by virtue of their localized strength in a single constituency. The party system of Northern Ireland is different than that of the rest of the UK for historical reasons. Four regional parties from Northern Ireland are represented in parliament at Westminster; they cooperate with the major parties according to their ideological and policy affinities.

This general election is being conducted in the wake of an extensive financial scandal surrounding misuse of benefits by members of parliament that has produced an electorate that is angry, frustrated, and increasingly volatile. A number of parliamentarians across the political spectrum were involved in the scandal, but the two main parties suffered the most, and the entire incident left the public disappointed by the obvious economic improprieties of politicians at precisely the same time most Britons were suffering the consequences of the

global economic crisis. As a consequence, the electorate began to look for alternatives to the establishment parties, which created an opening for the Liberal Democrats, less affected by the expenses scandal. Coupled with the surprisingly strong performance of Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg in the first of the leaders' debates, the "pox-on-all-your-houses" sentiment among the public has allowed the Liberal Democrats to run competitively on a national basis.

Polls

Following the steady drop-off in public support for Labour and the efforts of David Cameron to reshape the Conservative Party, forecasts indicated a relatively easy win for the Tories until the end of 2009. Though the Conservatives enjoyed wide popularity and polls predicted a significant victory, the Tories were unable to force Brown to call an early election (but did score points against him for what they said was his inability to make a decision about doing so). Gradually, the expenses scandal and a slow but apparent recovery from the economic crises began to chip away at the Conservative Party's lead. By the beginning of 2010, the possibility of a hung parliament - that is, a parliament in which no party holds a majority by itself - began to be widely discussed. This would require the winner (Brown or Cameron) to form a coalition government with the help of another party - most probably the Liberal Democrats. As more political leaders and analysts began openly to contemplate the possibility of a hung parliament, the popularity of the Liberal Democrats grew.

A major turning point in this process occurred in the first of a series of three televised leaders' debates among Brown, Cameron, and Clegg on April 15. In this debate - the first ever of its type in British politics - Clegg managed to capitalize on the "throw-the-bums-out" mood of the electorate. As the leader of the smaller third party with nothing to lose and armed with a few well-placed jabs - "the more Gordon and David attack each other, the more they sound exactly the same" - Clegg delivered a game-changing performance that impressed the television audience and catapulted the Liberal Democrats to the top of the polls with Labour and the Tories. The two dominant parties were forced to redesign their strategies and deal with the Clegg phenomenon, each having now to attack and defend on two fronts.

Although the second debate, which focused on foreign policy, brought a more even performance among the three participants, the Liberal Democrats held onto second place in the polls, likely further increasing the chance of a hung parliament emerging from the election. During the debate, Conservative Leader Cameron for the first time admitted this possibility and addressed the potential need for a political arrangement involving the Liberal Democrats.

The third debate in the series focused on economic issues, and took place just a day after a significant gaffe by Brown, who was caught on microphone calling a voter with whom he had just chatted "bigoted." Although the debate did not deliver any knock-out blows to anyone, it seemed clear that Cameron had improved his performance in each of the three encounters, and that he emerged strong from this discussion to enter the last week of the campaign. Most analysts suggested that the Clegg phenomenon that burst onto the scene in the first debate may have begun to play itself out.

The Campaign and Its Major Themes

The country's economic situation has dominated the campaign; Labour argues for increasing government spending to support economic growth - which is ran at 0.2 percent in the last quarter. The Conservatives, on the contrary, want to reduce spending by £6 billion. Labour's campaign and most of Brown's public appearances have criticized the planned Conservative spending cuts as risky and dangerous, a threat to economic recovery and growth, and likely causing layoffs in education and health care.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Alistair Darling outlined the main features of the Labour platform when he introduced the government's budget to parliament on March 24. The most important proposals included an increase in social insurance payments, cancellation of income tax deductions for higher income brackets, and an increase in the inheritance tax, as well as in consumption taxes levied on alcohol and gas. Young families would be encouraged to buy their first house via real-estate tax relief. A new Labour government would further invest in universities and alternative energy sources. The government would guarantee a job to the young unemployed should they fail to obtain a job in a six-month period. Labour's election manifesto sums up the party's approach: "A Future Fair for All."

The Conservatives have focused mostly on the expenditure side of the budget, arguing that the UK's gaping deficit is the main threat to economic recovery and proposing cuts in all spheres except for health care, where they are categorical about "backing the National Health Service," and foreign aid. They propose to invest in job creation by cutting corporate tax rates, abolishing taxes on the first ten jobs created by new businesses, and promoting green employment. Highlighting their commitment to families, the party would create a joint tax filing mechanism to benefit married couples, freeze council taxes, raise the basic state pension, and increase the inheritance tax threshold to £1,000,000 (compared to the current £325,000).

The Liberal Democrats, apart from various budget cuts, have proposed an increase in the minimal taxable income to £10,000 (from the current £6,475). They would also introduce a special property tax for estates with a value exceeding £2,000,000, as well as special subsidies for schools educating children from the poorest families. In defense and foreign affairs, the party has now famously called for a "review" of plans to produce a follow-on to the UK's Trident nuclear weapons system, labeling it a remnant of the Cold War.

Reform of the electoral system has been another widely discussed campaign topic, again conditioned by the public's sense that parliament has somehow gotten out of control and needs to be reined in. The Liberal Democrats have long championed a reform along the lines of the system used in the Republic of Ireland, which is based on the single transferable vote. For Labour, Brown has proposed a system based on the "alternative vote," which, he says, would need to be sanctioned by referendum following this general election. The Conservatives have conditioned their support for any electoral system reform on a complete redrawing of the current constituency map. In addition, the Liberal Democrats, reacting to the recent expenses scandal, have also proposed introducing a recall procedure in case of serious misconduct by a sitting member of parliament. Pressure for some reform of the current system is almost certain to lead a future government toward change; the question is really only one of how much and how fast. Should a Labour-Liberal Democrat majority emerge, the tendency would be toward more significant and faster change. And should the Liberal Democrats place second on a national basis, but fall far short in the number of seats they take in parliament, public demand for a "fairer" system is likely to be immense.

Negative campaigning has been vibrant throughout the campaign, consistent with British and American conventions. Labour has consistently attempted to portray the Conservatives as a party not yet ready to govern, in general, and challenged David Cameron's competence to govern, in particular. With the rise of Clegg and the Liberal Democrats, Labour has taken a two-pronged approach against Cameron and Clegg, summarized by Brown in the second leaders' debate: "David, you're a risk to the economy, and Nick, you're a risk to our security." The Conservatives, on the contrary, make use of Labour's economic proposals for attacks on Brown, pointing out that the national debt has doubled under Labour rule. Clegg and the Liberal Democrats again and again make the argument for "change" - a call that seems to find particularly strong response in today's electorate.

Expected Results and Implications

The election result remains highly unpredictable. Most national polls, on average, continue to show the Conservatives in the lead with approximately 33 percent, the Liberal Democrats in second place with approximately 30 percent, and Labour in third place with approximately 28 percent. But the first-past-the-post system can produce a wide array of results, even if all three major parties take roughly the same percentage of the national vote. As in an American presidential election, in which winning the popular vote does not necessarily equate to winning the Electoral College, the party that wins the most votes nationwide in the UK may well not win the largest number of seats in parliament; to fully understand the various possible outcomes of the election, it is necessary to examine data from each of the 650 constituencies.

When it appeared that the race would take the traditional Labour vs. Conservative track, analysts generally agreed that Cameron and the Tories would need to reach 40 percent nationwide and hold a lead of ten points over Labour to win the constituencies necessary to yield a majority in the Commons. This was predicated on models that show Labour benefitting disproportionately from support concentrated in certain constituencies. Now that there appears to be a three-way race, those original projections no longer apply, and it might be the case that a smaller Tory lead might, in fact, yield a majority over the second-place Liberal Democrats, because that party's support is spread more evenly across constituencies. In short, a higher number of Liberal Democrat votes does not necessarily yield as many actual seats in parliament as would the same number of Labour votes. As in the United States, it all comes down to the ability of the parties to deliver victory not on a nationwide basis, but in each of the constituencies in which they are standing.

If a hung parliament were to emerge from the election, it would certainly not be the first time. Four elections in the 20th century produced such a result (1910, 1923, 1929, and 1974). Each time a new election soon followed; in 1974, the follow-on election took place in only eight months. This scenario is more probable in case of a Conservative victory without a majority, owing to the presumably more difficult path to agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in forming a government. In the case of a Labour victory, long-term Liberal Democrat support for a Labour minority government is generally seen as a more viable option.

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