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Article title: Introduction: Single Party Government in a Fragmented System

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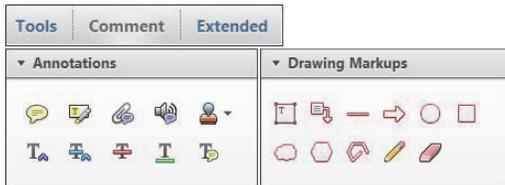
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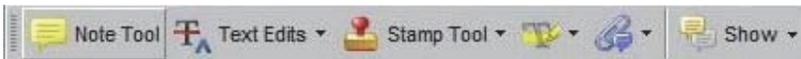
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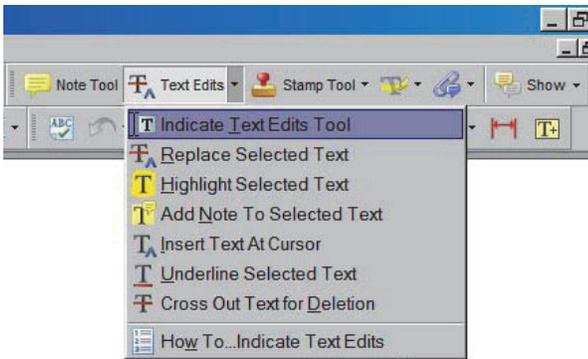
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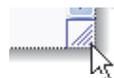


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Introduction: Single Party Government in a Fragmented System

The 2015 general election was, electors were told throughout the campaign, too close to call. The opinion polls all pointed to a contest that had the Conservatives and Labour almost inseparable. The BBC's eve of election poll of polls captured the uncertainty with the Conservatives on 34%, Labour on 33%, UKIP on 12%, the Liberal Democrats on 8% and the SNP expected to do very well in Scotland, winning almost all the Scottish seats. One thing was apparently clear: no party would get the 326 seats needed for a majority in the House of Commons. A hung Parliament would, as in 2010, be the outcome with party leaders and their emissaries then meeting in secret to work out the terms of a coalition deal or some other way of sustaining a government. The wider point was that Britain's socially and geographically fragmented political system seemed no longer capable of producing single party majority government. A telling image that captured this fragmentation had been provided in the supposed showpiece event of the campaign, the televised leaders' debate that saw seven party leaders from England, Scotland and Wales go head-to-head as a powerful representation of this new era of multi-party politics.

The opinion polls had powerful effects on the campaign and on some of the key assumptions informing election debate. David Cameron for the Conservatives and Ed Miliband for Labour claimed that their aim was single party majority government, but their manifestos were often reported as though they were mere bargaining chips as much as they were statements of governing intent. The real issue, or so it was reported, was trying to figure out the 'red lines', the issues on which the parties would not budge in any future negotiation. Perhaps then it did not really matter that the Conservatives were claiming that they'd cut the welfare budget by 12 billion while finding another 8 billion to fund the NHS? These kinds of claims might not actually come to pass once a coalition deal or some kind of support agreement had been sorted out. Although expected to do very badly, Nick Clegg's Liberal

Democrats were swift to position themselves once again as potential coalition partners for either of the two main UK parties, with Clegg, confident an incumbency effect would preserve many of his MPs, even offering to provide a heart for the Conservatives and a brain for Labour.

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Meanwhile in Scotland, another key indicator of the fragmentation of the UK political system was that the SNP, emboldened and greatly strengthened by the closeness of the 2014 independence referendum, was expected to make massive gains and potentially hold the balance of power in Westminster. The SNP leader, Nicola Sturgeon, claimed that her party could put Ed Miliband into government on an anti-austerity ticket and exclude the Conservatives. Horrified by this prospect, the *Daily Mail* asked if Sturgeon was the most dangerous woman in Britain.

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The narrative created by opinion polls reinforced the idea that what mattered was the distribution of seats in a hung parliament and the deal that would then be hammered out on the composition of the next government. At times, it appeared that fascination as to who might be shading a neck-and-neck race (in the separate Scottish contest the size of the walkover was more important) was threatening to overshadow policy debates. Yet potentially this was one of the most important elections of all. It was one which might ultimately contribute to the recasting of Britain's future in the EU, whilst the future of the United—or disunited—Kingdom was also at stake.

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Yet a singular sample of voters, the exit poll, caused a bonfire of much of the previous 'informed' commentary. 'Very carefully calculated, not necessarily on the nail' as the BBC's election night presenter, David Dimbleby, put it, the exit poll had the Conservatives as the largest party (not a major surprise) but only just short of the seats needed to form a majority government (a very major surprise to many).

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'Quite remarkable this exit poll' were Dimbleby's words, as he reported the finding of interviews at polling stations with more than 20,000 actual voters that the Conservatives would have 316 seats, Labour 239, the SNP 58, the Liberal Democrats 10 and UKIP 2. Former Liberal Democrat party leader, Lord Ashdown, responded by saying that he would eat his hat if the exit poll turned out to be anywhere near an accurate projection of Liberal Democrat performance. It understated the catastrophe engulfing Ashdown's party, reduced from 57 to eight seats, the lowest figure since 1970. The exit poll understated Conservative gains, as they secured 336 seats while Labour languished on a final tally of 232. UKIP held on to Douglas Carswell's Clacton seat, but lost the Rochester and Strood seat won by another Conservative defector, Mark Reckless, at a November 2014 by-election. Party leader Nigel Farage failed in his eighth attempt to secure a seat in the House of Commons, this time in Thanet South. UKIP's paltry one seat represented a very poor return given the party's impressive 3.9 million votes, a 12.6% share. The most dramatic events occurred in Scotland, where the SNP almost swept the

board, winning 56 of 59 seats, up from a mere six at the 2010 general election. In sharp contrast to UKIP's fortunes, it took only 25,000 votes to elect an SNP MP. By the morning of May 8th both Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg, rather than working out the terms of a coalition deal, had resigned as party leaders. Nigel Farage resigned, as he said he would if he lost in Thanet South, but then swiftly un-resigned.

The election result confounded the expectations of almost all pollsters and most pundits. The dominant narrative was created by opinion polls that pointed to a hung parliament, which in turn reflected the effects of a socially and geographically fragmented political system. The underlying diagnosis is correct. Socially, the ties that bind people to the main UK parties—the two party, Conservative versus Labour, system of years gone by—are becoming ever weaker. Even the distorting effects of Britain's non-proportional voting system were seen as insufficient to deliver single party majority government. Geographically, the four nations of the UK experience very different election contests with differing constellations of parties. Even within England, there are big differences between the south and north with the Conservatives becoming a party of southern England and Labour retreating into its northern heartlands.

Given such trends, how could one party ever hope to govern alone again? This begs the obvious question of how in 2015 this fragmented political system actually delivered single party majority government with the Conservatives governing alone for the first time since 1997. Analyses of the 2010 result suggested that fragmentation could mean that hung parliaments with minority or coalition governments would be the standard future outcome.

Perhaps this affirms the wisdom of Danish Nobel prize-winning physicist Nils Bohr when he remarked that prediction is very difficult, especially about the future. Yet, if anything, developments after 2010 seemed to confirm rather than challenge the effects of this underlying diagnosis about the impacts of social and geographical fragmentation on future hung parliaments. The rise of UKIP, which more than quadrupled its vote between 2010 and 2015, was a threat to Conservative and Labour support in England. Labour was also outflanked in Scotland on the anti-austerity left by the SNP. The Conservatives were seen as socially privileged bastions of the southern English shires. Indeed, criticism of Cameron's 2015 campaign performance was that he was simply too posh to roll up his sleeves and make the case for conservatism and the Conservatives. Perhaps stung by this criticism, roll up his sleeves is literally what he did.

The underlying assumption was that fragmentation worked in one direction, which was away from single party majority government. The 2015 general election demonstrated otherwise. Fragmentation combined with the effects of a non-proportional electoral system delivered single party majority government. The Conservatives received 37% of the total vote but profited from Labour's failure

125 to make major inroads in England and its wipe-out in Scotland. Labour saw its
share of the vote increase marginally in England, but not by anywhere near
enough to win enough key seats or to offset its Scottish losses. The oft-cited joke
used to be that there were more pandas in Edinburgh zoo than there were Conser-
vative MPs in Scotland. The 2015 general election result meant that the same
130 applied to Labour in Scotland too as only one MP clung on to his Westminster
seat in the face of what London Mayor ~~Boris Johnson~~ and new MP for Uxbridge, re-
ferred to as 'Ajockalypse Now'. Misery was heaped upon misery for the Liberal
Democrats as they all lost all their Scottish seats, including those of ex-leader
Charles Kennedy and ex-Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander.

135 While for many the return of single party government was a shock, the Conser-
vative majority was only 12. The last time the Conservatives had won an election
was in ~~1992~~ when John Major secured 42.2% of the vote and a 21 seat majority.
This was soon whittled down by by-election defeats while Major's government suffer-
ed the corrosive effects of ratification of the Maastricht Treaty as the European
issue ate away at the party and contributed to its landslide defeat at the 1997
140 general election. It is easy to deploy this historical analogy and predict toil and
trouble ahead for David Cameron as this Parliament too, or at least its beginning,
is likely to be dominated by a referendum on Britain's EU membership. Yet the
context is now very different; not least because Labour is considerably weaker
than it was in 1992 with the decimation of its support in what were once its Scottish
145 heartlands and a mountain to climb in England if it too were to aspire to form a
single party government.

This collection explores the consequences for British electoral politics and the
British political system of social and geographical fragmentation. The results and
their implications are explored and assessed as too are the strategies of the main
150 parties as well as the representativeness of the British political system and how
the campaign was mediated. The importance of the economy to political fortunes
is dissected, whilst there is wider consideration of the extent of engagement of elec-
tors, in an election in which there was only a very modest rise in turnout. Modern
election analysis requires explorations of the distinctive campaigns and outcomes
155 in different parts of the Kingdom and we duly devote significant space to Scotland
(in particular) along with Wales and Northern Ireland. We also explore a series of
key issues that were central to the campaign and will be fundamentally important
components of debate in the years to come, such as the economy, immigration and
British relations with the EU. We show how the 2015 general election delivered a
160 surprising result, but what it also delivered was single party government which
has been the standard mode of government in Britain for the most of the last
century. A surprising outcome was, in another sense, a very familiar one.