

Hung Parliament scenarios factoring in more Liberal Democrat MPs

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The Liberal Democrat surge puts us into new territory in forecasting how the 2010 Parliament will look. However, things work out from now on, it seems much less likely that David Cameron can command an overall Commons majority. His best outcome may now be a 'shallow hung Parliament', with the Tories as the largest party but no majority for legislation – which might lead to a second general election as early as May 2011.

Instead, the odds have dramatically shortened on a "deeply hung" Parliament. And here the analysis is not as simple as you might think. A great deal depends on two key thresholds:

1. Which of the Conservatives or Labour has the most MPs – this is key for which has the moral right to be the first to try and form a government.
2. Whether Gordon Brown has to leave Downing Street because he cannot realistically stay on as PM, or whether he could in principle try for a coalition government.

If Brown just does sufficiently well that Labour plus Liberal Democrat MPs *could* form a majority government between them, then as the incumbent PM he legitimately can try to form a coalition government, or to govern as a minority government with Liberal Democrat agreement. He only needs to resign if this bid fails.

Brown's case is made stronger here by the fact that Labour has done a lot of preparation for a coalition and has a lot to offer the Liberal Democrats, whereas David Cameron has done nothing to prepare for a hung Parliament. But if the Tories have most MPs, this puts Nick Clegg in a difficult situation, especially since the Tories will almost certainly have more votes in the electorate than Labour.

Suppose the Liberal Democrats get 77 MPs

To see how these possibilities work out, I consider a pretty conservative estimate of the consequences of the current polls, which assumes that the Liberal Democrat surge dies away a good deal by polling day (perhaps getting 25-27 per cent support in the final vote) but that they still do well enough to get another 15 MPs.

The pie chart below shows what this means for the two main parties. There are 650 MPs in total, but 18 of these are for Northern Ireland (a completely different party system) and I assume that 15 will be won by the Nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales and a scattering of independents. With 77 Liberal Democrats that means that the combined 3rd, 4th, 5th and smaller parties would have 110 MPs between them.

That leaves only 540 seats for Labour and the Tories to split between them, and the Table below shows how their changing balance of seats would usher in different hung Parliament scenarios. Once the Tories fall into a zone with 280 to 318 MPs, then we are into a "shallow hung Parliament" where the Tories would be the largest party, and Labour and the Liberal Democrats could *not* form a majority coalition government.

Once Tory MPs drop below

281 seats then a Lab-LibDem coalition could begin to govern with a majority, and once Labour reaches 260 MPs such a government would be able to survive confidence votes. When Labour gets to 270 MPs (highly likely on this scenario) then Gordon Brown would have an unchallenged right to stay in Downing Street and to either form a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats (which could have a full four year term) or soldier on as a minority government (which would be very difficult indeed)

Now suppose the Liberal Democrats do brilliantly and get 93 MPs

If the Liberal Democrat surge does not die away but continues on at full force until polling day, they will still find it surprisingly hard to win MPs – because the electoral geography works against their relatively even spread of support across the country.

Suppose however that Clegg’s wave can somehow break this problem – which might happen, since many bets are now off. A realistic top ambition would then be for the Liberal Democrats to get 93 MPs – improving their current tally of 63 MPs by winning another 30 new constituencies. Again the pie chart below shows that this would further reduce the number of MPs that the Conservatives and Labour could share between them – to just 524 seats.

The Table below now shows that only “deeply hung” Parliament scenarios are now foreseeable. In theory Cameron could still lead a minority government, but the Conservatives would need to gain more than 90 seats from Labour to do so – a very hard to achieve objective with Liberal Democrat support riding high, unless the Labour vote should collapse in some way not seen so far. Even for Cameron to be clearly the largest party might be difficult, because Labour should still win many more MPs per million votes than the Tories will.

If Labour can stem its losses to less than 87, Gordon Brown would lead the largest

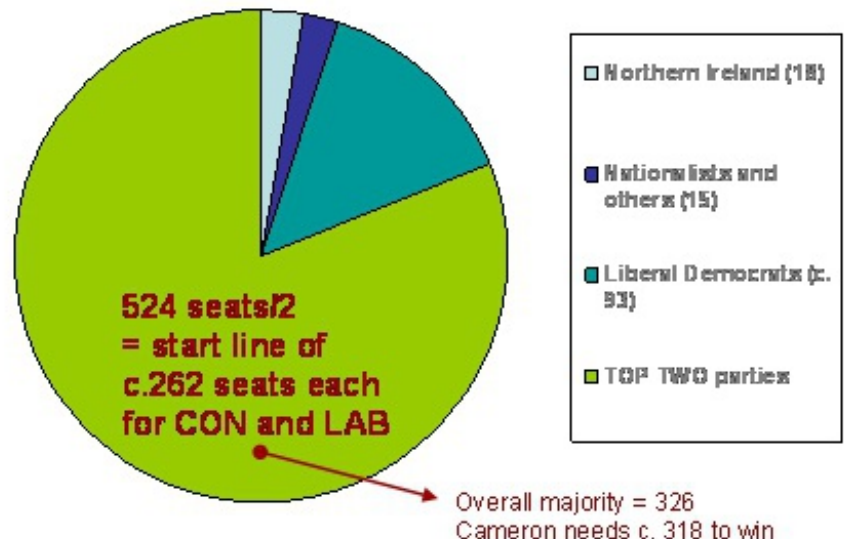


COMMONS OUTCOMES with 77 LIB DEM MPs

Party	Number of MPs	Prediction
CON LAB	318 or more 222 or less	"Shallow" hung Parliament – a Cameron 4 year majority government with Unionist support still feasible, but it may founder sooner on by-election losses
CON LAB	291 to 317 223 to 249	"Deeply hung" Parliament for the rest of the table - Cameron PM in minority government, with a second election in May 2011 unless he negotiates a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. <i>Note: A Lab-LibDem coalition has no majority</i>
CON LAB	281 to 290 250 to 259	Cons still largest party, but a Lab-Lib coalition could have a narrow majority. They could need Nationalist support to win confidence votes
CON LAB	271 to 281 259 to 269	Cons still largest party, but a Lab-Lib coalition would have a clear majority. Brown would seek to stay as PM, posing a dilemma for Clegg
CON LAB	270 or less 270 or more	Labour largest party so Lab-Lib coalition govt, possibly for a full 4 year term. Brown must remain PM

ADJUSTED 2005 START POINT: LAB 349; CON 210; LIB DEM 62; OTHERS 29

THE 2010 HOUSE OF COMMONS WITH 93 LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MPs (up 30)



party in this House of Commons and would need to negotiate a coalition with the newly numerous Liberal Democrats, and would have a strong incentive to do so in order to avoid the risks and perils of a minority government. In which case the many commentators who have written him off and pronounced the death of 'new Labour' may suddenly need to revise their views, and constitutional reform in the UK would be back on the agenda with a bang.

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES with 93 LIB DEM MPs

Party	Number of MPs	Prediction – all outcomes are "deeply hung"
CONS LAB	291 or more 233 or less	Cameron PM in minority government, with a second election in May 2011 unless he negotiates a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. <i>Note: A Lab-LibDem coalition has no majority</i>
CONS LAB	263 to 290 234 to 261	Cons still largest party, so Cameron minority government likely. But a Lab-Lib coalition could have a narrow majority. They would need Nationalist support to win confidence votes.
CONS LAB	263 to 290 234 to 261	Cons still largest party, but a Lab-Lib coalition could have a narrow majority. Brown would seek to stay as PM, posing a dilemma for Clegg
CONS LAB	262 or less 262 or more	Labour largest party so Lab-Lib coalition govt, possibly for a full 4 year term. Brown must remain PM

ADJUSTED 2005 START POINT: LAB 349; CON 210; LIB DEM 62; OTHERS 29