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# From votes to seats in multi-party plurality electoral systems: Great Britain 2010-2020

By Ron Johnston, David Manley, Kelvyn Jones  
University of Bristol, UK  
and Charles Pattie  
University of Sheffield, UK

There is a growing realisation among political scientists and other psephologists that geography can be a very important element in both the conduct and the outcomes of elections. Too often national territories are treated – implicitly if not explicitly – as homogeneous blocks, with insufficient realisation that spatial variations can substantially undermine generalisations that assume national uniformity. We illustrate that case here using the example of the 2015 British general election, which was fought on a very heterogeneous geographical foundation, which had a major impact on the outcome, and which resulted in even greater heterogeneity prior to the next general election that of 2020?

In the 1950s, Great Britain had a two-party system: between them the Conservative and Labour parties won over 90 per cent of the votes cast, and virtually every seat.<sup>1</sup> By the 1970s this predominance in vote share had disappeared – the two parties now won only about 75 per cent of the votes; but they still gained the great majority of the seats. Forty years later, they dominated – but no more: in 2010 they won just under two-thirds of the votes and 89 per cent of the seats; and in 2015 the respective percentages were 69 and 89.

This major shift led Calvo and Rodden (2015) to characterise Britain as going from a two-party to a multi-party system, though implicitly characterising it as a three-party system, analysing the vote shares of only the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties to clarify the relationship between the territorial spread of each party's vote share and its seats:votes ratio (developing on Gudgin and Taylor's – 1979 – classic study). But by treating the country as a single unit they not only discount the strength of other parties in particular parts of Britain – notably the SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru (PC) in Wales – they also assume that all parts of the country are multi-party.

This is far from the case. As Johnston and Pattie (2011) showed, in the elections up to and including 2010, Britain may have had a three-party system nationally (as shown by the vote percentages in Table 1), but at the constituency scale – where the votes into seats translation occurs – it did not. Rather it had three two-party systems covering all but 45 of Great Britain's 632 constituencies in 2010. The largest component of the three comprised seats where the Conservative and Labour candidates occupied the first and second places, with the Liberal Democrat coming on average a distant third (Table 2); the next had the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the first two places, with Labour languishing well behind; and the third group was contested by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, with the Conservatives well behind in third place. Duverger's law (electing a single MP representative producing a two party contest) applied – but differentially in different areas and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, we discuss the situation in Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) only; the separate Northern Ireland party system is excluded.

constituency types: there were virtually no three-party marginal seats, where the third-placed party was within ten percentage points of the winner.

And then we had the 2015 election, characterised by five main features:

- Very little change in support for the two largest parties: their joint share of the votes cast was 65.1 per cent in 2010 and 68.9 per cent in 2015, with just a 0.4 per cent swing to Labour between the two contests;
- The Liberal Democrat vote collapsed from 23.6 to 8.1 per cent, and 49 of the 57 seats won in 2010 were lost;
- The SNP national vote share increased from 1.7 to 4.9 per cent (20.0 to 50.1 per cent in Scotland alone) and it won 56 of the 59 seats there, having won only six in 2010;
- UKIP won 12.9 per cent of the votes, compared to 3.2 per cent five years earlier, and became the third largest party in England, but gained just a single seat; and
- The Green Party increased its vote share from 1.0 to 3.8 per cent, but gained no further seats beyond the single constituency won in 2010.

Little changed at the core of the country's party system, therefore. The Conservatives and Labour both gained substantially in terms of number of MPs from the Liberal Democrat rout (27 and 12 seats respectively), but only 18 seats changed hands between the two: Labour won 10 from the Conservatives, but lost 8 to them. Labour also lost 40 seats to the SNP (the Liberal Democrats lost 10). But the changes at the system's 'periphery' (i.e. outwith the two largest parties) produced two major shifts in the overall nature of the country's electoral geography – shifts that both reflected and altered its 'three two-party systems' after the 2010 contest.

The first of those shifts was a consequence of the Liberal Democrat collapse. After the 2010 contest there were 286 seats where the Conservatives and Labour occupied the first two places and the Liberal Democrats on average came a poor third (Table 2); after 2015 there were 376 seats in that category – except that UKIP was as likely to come third as the Liberal Democrats (Table 3). As a corollary of those shifts, the number of seats with the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats occupying first and second places fell from 204 to 50 and the number with Labour and the Liberal Democrats there from 95 to just 11. Furthermore, instead of having four dominant 'two party systems' Great Britain now had six. There were 76 where the first two places were occupied by the Conservatives and UKIP, and 44 where UKIP came second and Labour came first: and in Scotland, whereas there were 30 constituencies where Labour and the SNP occupied the first two places in 2010, there were 42 in 2015.

And yet, despite this growing complexity of the party system and its geographies, there were only two three-way marginals. Each of the six contest types was a separate Duverger-outcome.

Further, the number of two-party marginal seats declined. Using one definition of a marginal seat – where the Conservative share of the (Conservative plus Labour) vote total was between 45 and 55 per cent – John Curtice (2015) shows that in 2015 the number was at its lowest since 1955 with just 74 seats where one of those parties could replace the other with a swing of less than five percentage points. Sixty years earlier, there were 166.

A corollary of fewer marginal seats is more safe ones, for all three of the parties with more than a handful of seats in the House of Commons. Of the SNP's 56, for example, 28 were won by margins of more than 20 percentage points and only six by less than ten.

The situation for the Conservatives and Labour is shown in Figures 1 and 2. In these, constituencies have been placed in six groups according to the 2015 result: the first three (on the left of the

horizontal axis) are those that are very safe for their main opponent (won by more than 20 percent of the vote), fairly safe (won by 10-19 points) or marginal (won by 0-9 points); the other three are the seats they won (by the same margins).

For both parties, the number of very safe seats (both lost and won) has increased, whereas the numbers in the other categories have declined. For the Conservatives (Figure 1), the 2015 result produced more than 400 very safe seats out of 632; for Labour (Figure 2) the number was slightly larger – although as the smaller of the two parties it had many more where it lost than where it won. Meanwhile the number of marginal seats fell: the Conservatives won 81 by less than ten percentage points in 2010, for example, but only 46 five years later: the comparable figures for Labour were 79 and 59.

So why has the British electoral map become so much more polarised? The main reason is the Liberal Democrat collapse, which was not fully matched by the UKIP surge. This is shown by the average percentages won by each party in each contest type in Tables 2 and 3. Thus Table 3 shows that in the 376 constituencies where the Conservatives and Labour occupied the first two places in 2015, the collapse of the third-placed party's average to just one-quarter of its 2010 percentage vote share was not matched by UKIP's rise; the latter party's vote quadrupled on average, but it was much further behind the front runners than the Liberal Democrats had been in 2010. Labour won 50 of those seats by more than 20 points in 2010, and 87 in 2015; the comparable figures for the Conservatives were 82 and 118.

The Liberal Democrats lost 47 seats by less than ten points in 2010, but only 7 in 2015. Many of them became safe for either the Conservatives or Labour as a consequence. In some the Liberal Democrats remained in second place, but much weaker than was the case in 2010, as the data in Table 2 suggest. In 2010, the Liberal Democrats averaged 31.5 per cent of the votes in the seats where they and the Conservatives occupied the first two places and Labour averaged 12.7 per cent. Five years later, their respective average shares in those 205 seats were 13.6 and 15.7. The Liberal Democrat share more than halved (and fell by more than three-quarters in the 150 seats where it no longer occupied second place), but there was no Labour surge as a consequence and UKIP's average share was almost exactly the same as the Liberal Democrats'. The result – more Conservative safe seats, even though the party's average vote share increased only slightly. And the same happened in the 94 seats contested by Labour and the Liberal Democrats in 2010.

UKIP's advance meant that in 2015 it became the second-placed party in 33 seats where the Conservatives and Labour occupied the first two places in 2010 – but it came a poor second on average (more than 20 percentage points behind the leading party), with the consequence again being more safe seats for the two largest parties (Table 2). In addition to the one seat won from the Conservatives, UKIP was runner-up in 120, but on average was a very poorly-placed there (Table 3): UKIP came within 10 percentage points of the winning party in only four seats, and within 10-20 points in a further 22.

So Britain has become a more complexly divided country between different pairs of political parties, and also a more polarised country. Its two largest parties, plus the largest party in Scotland, are well-entrenched in their heartlands, with large numbers of very safe seats that should remain theirs at the next general election (due in 2020), and a very few that might change hands. Because the Conservatives now have a majority in the House of Commons (and 98 seats more than their main opponent) and few of their seats are vulnerable to a swing of 5 percentage points to Labour, even with such a swing they are likely to remain the largest party there.

Two things could change that, however, one less likely than the other. The first is that not only will there be a redistribution of constituency boundaries before 2020 but the number of MPs will be reduced from 650 to 600, with all seats having electorates within +/-5 per cent of the national average (previously there was no limit: the Boundary Commissions were merely required to make constituency electorates as 'equal as practicable', given other guidelines).<sup>2</sup> This is likely to advantage the Conservatives over Labour – a conclusion reached on the basis of an aborted attempt to undertake that exercise before the 2015 election (Johnston, 2015). The new electoral map, with many more areas very safe for one party, will undoubtedly enhance that situation; a new electoral geography is unlikely to emerge.

The other, more likely, change is that support for the parties will be as volatile between 2015 and 2020 as it was in the previous five years. On the 'periphery' the Liberal Democrat decline could be partly reversed and the SNP and UKIP advances turned back; if they can change by that much in one five-year period, why can't they again? Much will depend on the outcome of the 2017 European Union referendum and on the cohesion of the Labour party under its new leadership. Yet another new electoral geography is possible in 2020.

Calvo and Rodden (2015) have made an important contribution to the extension of Gudgin and Taylor's classic analysis of the votes-to-seats translation in plurality systems. But their analysis of the three-party situation that characterised Great Britain, to a greater-or-lesser extent, from the 1974 to 2010 elections ignored the operation of the Duverger effect then. Basically much of Great Britain split into three, unequal parts in each of which only two of the three parties was likely to win seats. (A fourth, substantial part emerged in Scotland with the growth of the SNP.) In each of those parts, as Johnston and Pattie (2011) reported, the usual patterns of disproportionality and bias emerged in the translation of votes into seats. And then, in 2015, Britain truly went multi-party and the country was split into six different segments: two different parties dominated in each of those groups of constituencies, with the others merely also-rans. And the way this has fallen out – notably with the reduction of the number of marginal seats and increase in those that are very safe – has strongly favoured the Conservative party, making it much harder for them to fail to be the largest party again at the 2020 general election. In this, as in some many other electoral situations, geography matters – deeply.

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<sup>2</sup> The government changed the rules for constituency redistributions in 2011, and 600 new constituencies were supposed to be in place in time for the 2015 general election (Johnston and Pattie, 2012). That redistribution was halted by Parliament in 2013, however, and the first redistribution under the new rules will begin in 2016, producing 600 new constituencies in time for the 2020 election.

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Table 1. Votes (percentage of the total cast) and seats won at recent general elections in Great Britain

	Con	Lab	LibDem	UKIP	Green	SNP
1997						
Votes (%)						
Seats						
2001						
Votes (%)						
Seats						
2005						
Votes (%)						
Seats						
2010						
Votes (%)	37.3	30.0	23.8	3.2	1.0	1.7
Seats	307	258	57	0	1	6
2015						
Votes (%)	37.7	31.2	8.1	12.9	3.8	4.9
Seats	330	232	8	1	1	56

Table 2. The mean percentage of the votes cast for each party at recent British general elections in seats categorised by their contest type after the 2010 general election (each contest type is characterised by the two parties that occupied first and second places in every constituency)

Contest Type 2010	Mean 2015 Vote Percentage					
	Con	Lab	LibDem	UKIP	Green	SNP
<b>Conservative:Labour (N=286)</b>						
2010	36.4	37.5	16.8	3.1	0.8	-
2015						
All	37.0	39.1	3.5	14.8	2.9	-
<b>UKIP Second to</b>						
Conservative (N=12)	48.4	19.5	3.0	25.9	2.6	-
Labour (N=21)	18.6	50.7	2.6	23.5	2.0	-
<b>Conservative:Liberal Democrat (N=205)</b>						
2010	48.1	12.7	31.5	4.0	1.0	-
2015						
All	50.8	15.7	13.6	13.7	4.5	-
LD Second (N=49)	44.8	11.2	26.2	10.6	4.4	-
Lab Second (N=86)	52.6	20.2	9.1	13.1	4.3	-
UKIP Second (N=64)	54.9	13.6	8.3	17.1	4.9	-
<b>Labour:Liberal Democrat (N=94)</b>						
2010	16.5	44.4	28.8	2.2	1.4	-
2015						
All	16.3	50.2	9.9	11.0	5.5	-
LD Second (N=12)	11.2	33.2	29.7	7.4	3.2	-
Con Second (N=48)	19.6	54.3	7.3	10.5	6.7	-
UKIP Second (N=23)	13.9	56.5	5.3	17.8	3.0	-
<b>Labour:SNP (N=30)</b>						
2010	10.5	53.0	10.8	0.6	0.5	22.8
2015	9.9	30.4	2.0	1.4	0.8	54.8



Table 3. The mean percentage of the votes cast for each party in 2010 and 2015 in seats categorised by their contest type after the 2015 general election (each contest type is characterised by the two parties that occupied first and second places in every constituency)

Contest Type 2015	Mean Vote Percentage					
	Con	Lab	LibDem	UKIP	Green	SNP
Conservative:Labour (N=376)						
2010	37.5	33.5	20.6	3.1	1.0	-
2015	39.4	37.1	5.2	13.3	3.8	-
Conservative:Liberal Democrat (N=50)						
2010	42.1	7.7	44.4	3.4	0.7	-
2015	45.5	10.9	26.9	11.3	4.3	-
Labour:Liberal Democrat (N=11)						
2010	19.9	29.4	43.2	1.8	1.6	-
2015	13.5	41.8	30.2	9.0	4.5	-
Conservative:UKIP (N=77)						
2010	52.8	13.8	24.7	4.9	0.9	-
2015	53.6	14.5	7.4	18.8	4.5	-
Labour:UKIP (N=44)						
2010	18.2	49.1	18.6	3.5	0.2	-
2015	16.2	53.7	4.0	20.5	2.5	-
Labour:SNP (N=42)						
2010	12.9	50.5	13.9	0.5	0.8	20.0
2015	12.0	30.2	2.3	1.4	1.4	52.2



