

# The Conservatives' arguments against electoral reform

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*With Nick Clegg signalling that in a hung Parliament he would want to back the leading party in terms of votes, so far clearly the Conservatives, the Tories' resolute refusal to contemplate any electoral reform for the Commons has become a major stumbling bloc for any Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Clegg has warned Cameron that his fixed opposition will be a 'strategic mistake'. [Françoise Boucek](#) reviews Cameron's arguments.*



David Cameron's detailed arguments to listeners during his recent Radio 4 'Election Call' programme provide an interesting insight into the Conservative's public thoughts on electoral reform (as opposed presumably to an unvoiced private self-interest). He defends his rejection of a proportional representation system on the ground that it breaks MPs' constituency links and generates 'lots and lots' of unstable hung parliaments, with attendant undemocratic 'horse-trading' between parties and so on.

On these arguments, it seems curious that British politicians including supporters of electoral reform (like the Liberal Democrats) almost never discuss mixed-member electoral systems as used Scotland, Wales and London, as well as in Germany and in many new and old democracies. New Zealand was once regarded as 'a paragon of Westminster majoritarian democracy' but switched in 1996 to just such a system.

The political scientists Matthew Shugart and Martin Wattenberg famously argued in 2001 that mixed-member electoral systems involving some seats elected in local contests, and other 'top-up' seats allocated to give a proportional outcome) may become the electoral reform of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They provide the best of both worlds: they generate two-bloc (not two-party) nationally oriented party systems, without reducing minor parties to insignificance. Simultaneously they preserve MPs' constituency links and local accountability, an objective always considered important in Britain.



David Cameron from Conservativeparty Flickr group

Concerning Cameron's stigmatization of 'hung' parliaments, it is clear now that the term is a [recent misnomer](#) and some advocates (such as the SNP's Alex Salmond) are always careful to call them instead 'balanced Parliaments'. Such parliaments should not be confused with coalition governments, which are neither unstable nor ineffective, as demonstrated in many competitive democracies in Europe and elsewhere. Coalition governments are widespread, stable (often lasting the full length of a parliamentary term) and are marked by moderate (instead of adversarial) politics.

In Britain, politicians get away with using such loose language and 'confuser' arguments because voters have no peacetime experience of coalition government, except for the weak Lib-Lab Pact of the late 1970s. Under this arrangement a minority Labour government enjoyed the legislative support of Liberal MPs, mainly passively through their abstention. Government in these circumstances, with very low levels of trust on both sides, ended up being quite a laborious process (no pun intended).

Coalition governments would undeniably be the likely result if Britain was to ditch its current plurality rule electoral system. However, a coalition outcome should not be equated with horse-trading and shady politics as Cameron suggests. In many European multi-party democracies the parties that go into election campaigns parties with similar views often make formal electoral alliances, supported by written documents outlining the alliance's position on particular issues and policies. This process is all completely transparent for voters. And, if elected, these multiparty coalitions work together in government and within legislatures to transform their electoral pledges into government legislation.

In France where a majoritarian run-off system is used for presidential and legislative elections, inter-party alliance formation tends to formalize between the first and second rounds of elections, which the front-runners in each constituency usually fights the seat on behalf of the coalition. In both cases voters know

clearly what outcomes their votes will bring before they cast their ballots.

I cannot see any reason why a mixed-member electoral system (similar to that in Scotland) would not work also at national level in Westminster. After all, Germany has used such a system since the end of the Second World War and nobody could accuse Germany of being an unstable democracy. As a matter of fact, the German party system is very similar to the British party system in its electoral composition. There are two large national parties (the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats) flanked by minority parties on each side of the political spectrum (but with a 5% official threshold of parliamentary representation as a safeguard against extremist parties winning representation). In Germany a small Liberal party in the middle (the Free Democrats) generates centripetal party competition and helps produce moderate national politics for citizens, but it is certainly not always in government.