

# Mandates, Manifestos and Coalitions

*UK Party Politics after 2010*

Thomas Quinn

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COALITIONS

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## **Mandates, Manifestos and Coalitions: UK Party Politics after 2010**

The UK general election of 2010 represented a watershed in post-war British politics. It was only the second of 18 general elections since 1945 to have resulted in a hung parliament. The previous one, in February 1974, lasted only eight months before another election was called by the ruling minority Labour government. In 2010, however, there was to be no minority government or a quick second election. Instead, Britain would have its first taste of coalition government since the 1930s. In a country that had grown used to single-party majority governments, the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition presented a challenge to existing assumptions about the relationship between voters and governments.

One of the most important assumptions in British politics since 1945 was that single-party majority governments were given mandates by voters in elections. That followed from the fact that governments were directly elected by voters, as there were no post-election coalition negotiations to intervene between voters' party choices and government formation. In particular, mandates were assumed to follow from governing parties' election manifestos, detailed policy documents drawn up by the parties themselves and put to the electorate in advance of elections. The winning party was then assumed to have a mandate to implement its manifesto in government.

The hung parliament and subsequent coalition government of 2010 called these assumptions into question. If no party enjoyed a parliamentary majority, what sense did it make to speak of mandates? What was the role of manifestos if no party possessed a majority to implement one in full? What was the democratic legitimacy of the comprehensive coalition agreement on policy goals negotiated by the coalition parties after the election, and which, unlike their respective manifestos, had never been put to the electorate? What is the relationship between manifestos and coalition agreements? Can mandates follow from coalition agreements? Ultimately, is it necessary to rethink the basic relationship between voters, parties and governments in the UK political system? This pamphlet addresses these questions.

### **Manifestos and Mandates**

To understand the power of the idea that manifestos represent mandates in British politics, it is necessary to understand the relationship between voters, parties and governments. After 1945, Britain's political system exemplified the classic features of the Westminster Model, or, majoritarian democracy. The latter was characterised by a high concentration of power in the executive, which was usually controlled by a single party with a parliamentary majority. The use of a plurality electoral system ensured that there were two main parties.<sup>1</sup>

It was widely assumed that elections were opportunities for voters to decide which of the two major parties, Labour or Conservative, would govern the country for the next four or five years. Although neither party managed to win an absolute majority of votes in this period, the plurality electoral system – known as 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) – usually 'manufactured' a parliamentary majority for one or other major party. The third party, the

Liberals (later the Liberal Democrats), were disadvantaged by an electoral system that rewarded geographically-concentrated support in large numbers of constituencies, something they did not possess.<sup>2</sup> Britain consequently acquired a two-party, or at most, a two-and-a-half-party system, with the two major parties alternating fairly frequently in government, at least until the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The predominant 'governing formula' was a single-party majority government. If the government performed well, it could look forward to re-election. If it failed in office, it could be removed by voters and replaced by its rival. Voters were therefore empowered to elect – and eject – the government. The latter in turn was directly accountable to voters.

Election manifestos play a crucial role in this theory of government. Manifestos can be traced back to Robert Peel's *Tamworth Manifesto* of 1834, in which he argued that confidence in government required electoral candidates to make 'frank and explicit declarations of principle'.<sup>4</sup> Nowadays, they are detailed policy documents drawn up by parties before elections. They normally cover a wide range of policy issues, such as economic policy, public services and foreign affairs. They are negotiated by different actors and groups within each party and offer the most official statement of a party's policy proposals. In the Westminster Model of democracy, manifestos are put to the electorate during an election and in theory, voters endorse one or other of the major parties' manifestos. The party that wins the election is thereby considered to enjoy a democratic *mandate* to implement its manifesto policies because they are assumed to have secured the imprimatur of democratic legitimacy. Not only does the government have the right to implement its policies; it also has an obligation to do so, as it was elected on the basis of its manifesto. By the time of the following election, voters can check whether the governing

party was true to its promises and either reward or punish it as they see fit. In this cycle, manifestos are transformed into mandates by the voters in one election, and retrospective accountability is ensured at the following election.<sup>5</sup>

Empirical evidence suggests that parties generally do implement their manifesto promises. Rose found that the Conservative government of Edward Heath in the 1970s implemented 90 percent of its manifesto pledges, while the following Labour government implemented 73 percent of its pledges. Meanwhile, Hofferbert and Budge's content analysis of post-war British manifestos demonstrated that the policy priorities in governing parties' manifestos largely reflected their public-spending priorities in office.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it is easy to think of situations in which important pledges promised in manifestos were not delivered, as with Labour's commitment to a referendum on electoral reform in 1997. Equally, big policy announcements might not have been mentioned at all in manifestos – again, New Labour in 1997 offers the example of Bank of England independence.

### **Can Manifestos Really Be Regarded as Mandates?**

The mandate theory of manifestos offers a clear-cut description of the lines of accountability running from governments to electors in the Westminster Model. However, the theory rests on a number of assumptions that are contentious. First, it is often noted that few voters actually bother to read manifestos, and that may undermine them as mandates. This criticism is somewhat unfair, as voters do not need to read manifestos to know what the parties' main pledges are. Most people did not read the Liberal Democrats' manifesto in 2010, but many would have known about their pledge on tuition fees. The principal pledges that parties make will be widely disseminated to voters through the news media.

A second, and stronger, criticism of manifestos as mandates in two-party or two-and-a-half-party systems is that single-party governments that claim the right to implement their manifestos may well have won parliamentary majorities but invariably do so on only a plurality of the vote – and sometimes not even that. In the UK, no post-war government has won 50 percent of the popular vote – except for the coalition government of 2010, where the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats won a *combined* vote of 59.1 percent. During the highpoint of the two-party system in the 1950s, the winning party won 48.3 percent of the vote on average, but that slipped to 41.7 percent in the 1970s, and to just 37.3 percent in the 2000s. The disproportional effects of the FPTP electoral system ensured that pluralities of votes were routinely transformed into solid majorities of seats. Indeed, the widening vote gap between the parties finishing first and second in elections from the 1980s onwards ensured that landslide victories became more common, with four of the five elections between 1983 and 2001 resulting in parliamentary majorities of over 100 seats for one party.<sup>7</sup> When a government wins a majority on less than 40 percent of the popular vote, questions of legitimacy will be raised. When Labour won a comfortable parliamentary majority on just 35.2 percent of the vote in 2005, it implied that almost two-thirds of the voting electorate had withheld their consent to the government's manifesto. Yet the Labour government still claimed a mandate to implement its manifesto because it enjoyed a parliamentary majority.

A third criticism of mandate theory concerns the sanctity of the pledges in the winning party's manifesto. First, most pledges are vague and ambiguous, promising such things as a well-managed economy. It is difficult to establish criteria by which such pledges can be judged. Content analyses of manifestos suggest that less than 1 percent of sentences in most manifestos consist of clearly-

defined pledges, normally in peripheral policy areas.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, it is unlikely that everyone who votes for a party supports all of its pledges. Yet, winning parties claim mandates to implement their entire manifestos. Just how problematical this issue can be for the mandate theory can be shown by the so-called ‘paradox of the platform’.

**Table 1: The Paradox of the Platform**

| Voter  | <i>Issues</i> |                 |                    | Voter's Choice     |
|--------|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|        | Economy       | Public services | Europe             |                    |
| 1      | Labour        | Labour          | Labour             | Labour             |
| 2      | Labour        | Labour          | Labour             | Labour             |
| 3      | Labour        | Conservative    | Conservative       | Conservative       |
| 4      | Conservative  | Labour          | Conservative       | Conservative       |
| 5      | Conservative  | Conservative    | Conservative       | Conservative       |
| Winner | Labour (3–2)  | Labour (3–2)    | Conservative (3–2) | Conservative (3–2) |

Note: Party labels in columns 2–4 indicate voters’ preferred parties on each policy issue. Voter votes for party s/he supports on most policy issues.

The paradox of the platform calls into question the whole notion of an electoral ‘mandate’, even for a party that wins an overall majority.<sup>9</sup> Assume there are five voters confronted with three policy areas – the economy, public services and Europe – and that each voter considers each policy area to be equally important. Further assume that there are two parties, Labour and Conservative, which offer distinctive policies on these areas and it is the task of the voters to determine which party is closest to them on each issue. Voters will vote for the party they are closest to on the most issues. Table 1 sets out the preferences of each

voter on each issue. Voters 1 and 2 prefer Labour on all three issues and vote for the party. Voter 5 prefers the Conservatives on all three issues. Voters 3 and 4 prefer the Conservatives on two issues and Labour on one, and so both vote for the Conservatives. Thus, the Conservatives win the election by three votes to two. However, it can be seen that on two of the three issues – the economy and public services – a majority of voters prefer Labour policies to Conservative ones. If each policy issue were put to a vote, Labour would enjoy a majority on two issues and the Conservatives on just one. Yet the Conservatives' victory in the election ensures that they can claim a mandate to implement their entire manifesto, i.e. Conservative policies on all three issues, not just on the ones that enjoy majority support.

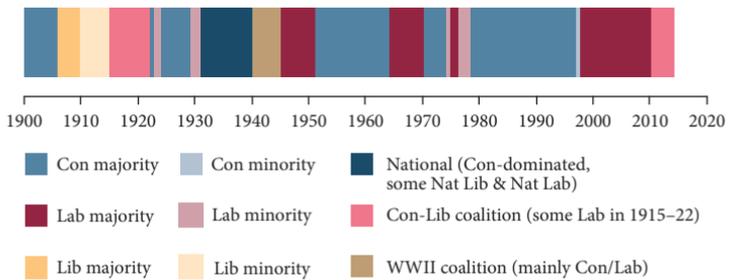
It is clear that there are problems with the mandate theory of government. These are compounded by evidence that suggests that most voters cast their votes less on the basis of manifesto pledges than on perceptions of overall party competence and evaluations of party leaders.<sup>10</sup> When governments are removed from office, it is more likely to be due to economic mismanagement (as in the 1970s) or a sense that the governing party is tired and it is time for a change (1990s and 2000s).

### **From Two-Partism to Multi-Partism**

The traditional mandate doctrine in Britain rested on the assumption that the country possessed a two-party system, with single-party majority governments and the fairly regular alternation in office of the two major parties. It is true that the UK in the post-war period has largely witnessed single-party majority governments, although that was not usually the case in the first part of the twentieth century, when minority or coalition governments were more common (see Figure 1). Fully 16 of

the 18 post-war elections have resulted in single-party majority governments, with one short-lived minority government in 1974 and the present coalition government since 2010. Despite that, increasing numbers of British voters have been prepared to cast their support for parties other than the big two, especially since the mid-1970s. In 2010, only 65 percent of voters supported the big two, a post-war low. However, FPTP ensured that these votes translated into 87 percent of parliamentary seats (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Governing Formulae in the UK since 1900**

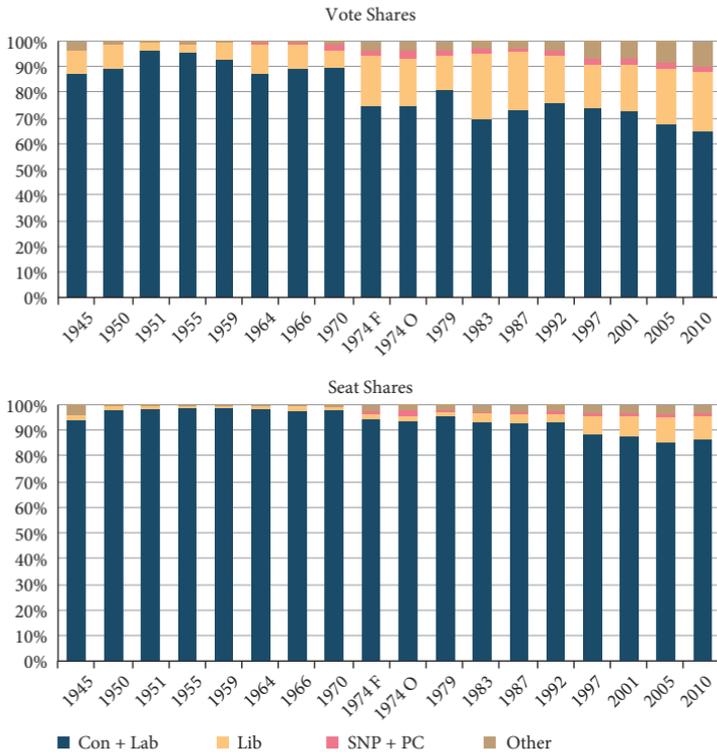


*Note:* Includes majority governments that became minority governments after later losses of seats through defections and by-elections.

Until recently, some observers continued to regard the UK party system as being of the two-party variety, largely because only two parties had realistic chances to enter government.<sup>11</sup> However, the 2010 general election severely undermined two-partism. The claim that only Labour or the Conservatives could enter office was contradicted by the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. It remains to be seen whether coalitions will be a temporary or more long-lasting feature of the new political landscape in Britain, but given the increasing vote shares won by minor and regional parties, there is unlikely to be a return to classic two-partism. Around 29 seats are won

by regional and minor parties, while the Liberal Democrats currently hold 57 seats. The latter will expect some losses at the next election but the party tends to do better defending seats it already holds. Somewhere between 60 and 80 seats are likely to continue being won by parties other than the big two, and that makes the probability of hung parliaments much greater.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 2: Declining Vote- and Seat Shares of Big Two UK Parties Since 1945**



A shift to a multi-party system in Britain would require a rethinking of the process of government formation. If hung parliaments became more frequent, coalition or minority governments would become more likely. That is already the norm in most European countries, and a voluminous academic literature has grown up to explain coalition and minority governments.<sup>13</sup> This rethink has only just begun in Britain, however, and it will involve reassessing such notions as mandates flowing from election manifestos.

The notion of a manifesto-derived mandate becomes problematical when no party manages to win a parliamentary majority. If the resulting government were a minority administration, it would be at the mercy of other parties in parliament as it tried to implement its manifesto. A supply-and-confidence arrangement, whereby a deal is struck with another party over the passing of the budget and the provision of support in a confidence vote, would apply to a limited range of votes. All votes falling on issues outside of the arrangement would be subject to a case-by-case consideration by the opposition parties and may well necessitate compromise on the government's behalf. In the absence of a supply-and-confidence arrangement, a minority government would have even fewer opportunities to implement its manifesto pledges. For example, the minority SNP administration in Scotland from 2007–11 was unable to keep its promise to organise a referendum on Scottish independence because the three UK-wide unionist parties would not support such a proposal in the legislature.<sup>14</sup>

If a hung parliament resulted in a coalition government, the latter would, by definition, include more than one party. The entire notion of implementing manifesto pledges would run up against the fact that there would be more than one manifesto to choose from, and some of the pledges in one might conflict

with pledges in another. In these instances, it is increasingly common in advanced multi-party democracies for a detailed policy statement, or coalition agreement, to be drawn up by the participating parties. Coalition agreements solve the problem of which policies will be pursued by a coalition government. However, according to the traditional British mandate doctrine, they fall foul of a further problem, namely, that they have not received the direct endorsement of voters in a general election.

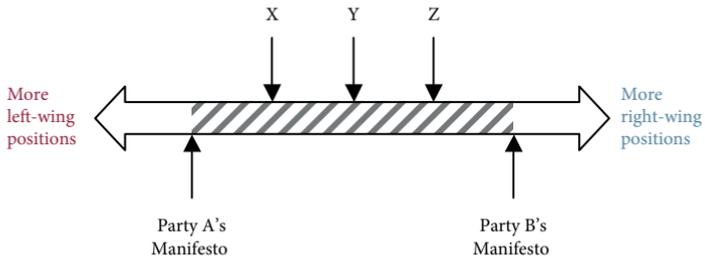
### **Coalitions and Government Policy**

The major concern with coalitions in the British context is whether they can be considered democratically legitimate. From the traditional British perspective, coalitions that are negotiated after elections may have questionable mandates. However, no post-war manifesto has enjoyed majority electoral support (even assuming that everyone who voted for a party supported its entire manifesto). Indeed, no party has won 45 percent of the vote since 1970. Labour won a parliamentary majority in 2005 on a lower share of the vote than the Conservatives achieved in 2010. In an era where the biggest party wins less than 40 percent of the vote, it is harder to make a case that electoral pluralities unproblematically translate into mandates to implement manifestos *en bloc*.

The more common European practice is for mandates to be considered in ways other than manifestos having been (loosely) endorsed by a plurality of voters. Manifestos can inform coalition negotiations and some manifesto policies from the different parties might end up in a joint coalition agreement. In general terms, the relationship between parties' rival manifestos and a coalition agreement seems clear enough. Following the practice of comparative political scientists in assigning a left-

right value to individual manifestos, the manifestos of the parties to a coalition can be positioned at different places on the left-right ideological continuum, as in Figure 3.<sup>15</sup> Party A's manifesto is at a more left-wing point while Party B's leans more to the right. These can be regarded as the parties' ideal policy positions. The shaded area between these points represents the range of possible compromise points. A coalition agreement at X is more favourable (because it is closer to) Party A, whereas an agreement at Z is more favourable to Party B. Point Y is equidistant between the two parties. This type of analysis was carried out on the 2010 UK coalition agreement and compared to the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos, with the conclusion that – on this narrow basis – the Liberal Democrats 'won' the coalition negotiations because the agreement was closer in left-right ideological space to their manifesto.<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 3: Potential Coalition Agreements**



Thinking of manifestos in this way moves us beyond the simple notion of mandates. Instead, manifestos become starting points for negotiations, with the relative bargaining power of the parties ultimately determining exactly where any coalition agreement ends up. A body of academic research has also shown that 'consensual' European democracies based on multi-partism tend to produce governments that set policies more in line with the

preferences of centre-ground voters than is typically the case in Westminster-style democracies based on single-party majority governments.<sup>17</sup> The reason is clear. Voters are dispersed across the ideological spectrum, although the distribution may be bell-shaped, with more voters concentrated in the centre-ground. Coalition governments will usually either include one explicitly centrist party (as with the Liberal Democrats in Britain) or will be a combination of a moderate and more radical party from one political flank. The effect of either type of coalition is to drag policy at least partly towards the centre-ground.

The major parties in a largely two-party system, in contrast, will be accustomed to governing alone with parliamentary majorities and may not feel as strong a need to move towards the centre-ground in government, even if they do so in an election campaign. It is a reason why Westminster-type systems can sometimes lead to large swings in public policy whenever there is a change in government. That tends to happen less dramatically in more consensual democracies where there are generally fewer opportunities to shift away from the centre-ground after an election, because of constraints imposed by coalition partners.

One of the claims made for two-party systems is that, by offering a clear choice of government, they also provide voters with the means to 'throw the rascals out' at an election.<sup>18</sup> For their critics, multi-party systems and coalition governments dilute that line of accountability. One of the implications of mandate theory is that manifestos and mandates always relate to *two* separate elections: the election at which a party wins power on its manifesto, and the following election, at which voters can retrospectively decide whether the government delivered on its previous manifesto pledges. However, this notion of an election as an *ex post* sanctioning mechanism also applies to parties in coalition governments. Sanctioning can relate to either policies

pursued or to the initial decision to form a coalition. It is true that a small coalition party could remain in office despite losing votes and seats – as may happen with the Liberal Democrats in 2015. However, given that coalition parties' shares of ministerial seats tend roughly to reflect their shares of the coalition's aggregate of parliamentary seats, a poor electoral performance for the Liberal Democrats would almost certainly result in a diminished presence in government, including in the cabinet.<sup>19</sup> If the coalition were with Labour, there would also be a shift in policy to the left. In short, even a partial alternation in government would have important consequences for policy and governmental presence.

### **Minority Governments**

Aside from coalitions, minority governments are a further possibility in the current British party system. Britain has experienced minority government before. There was a short-lived minority Labour government between the two elections of 1974. Labour also governed as a minority in 1924 and from 1929–31. Before that, the Liberals ran a minority government from 1910 until the formation of a wartime coalition in 1915. Like much that is considered to be new in the British party system, minority governments actually have a long history. More recently, the option of a minority Conservative government was contemplated in 2010 and has been mooted if the 2015 election results in another hung parliament.

By definition, minority governments do not enjoy parliamentary majorities and so they must think of other means of securing the passage of their legislation. One approach is to adopt supply-and-confidence arrangements, whereby parties that are not formally part of the government offer support on the budget and in confidence votes, usually in return for certain policy

concessions. There is a difference between an executive coalition, i.e. a governmental coalition, and a legislative coalition, whereby the latter involves parties that may support the government on a supply-and-confidence basis, as well as on an issue-by-issue basis while remaining outside of the government.<sup>20</sup>

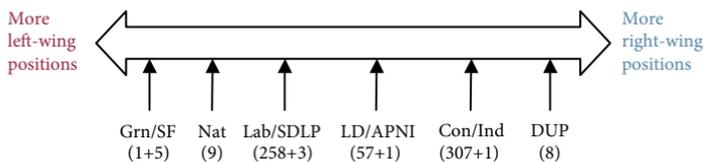
It might be thought that minority governments are more prone to collapse than coalitions because they lack majorities in parliament. In fact, the most important consideration in determining the stability of minority governments is whether they enjoy the support of the *median legislator*. The median legislator is the MP who would have equal numbers of MPs either side of her if all MPs were aligned on a left-right ideological scale. If MPs and parties vote purely on a left-right basis, any majority will require the support of the median legislator (together with all other MPs to her left or all MPs to her right). If all MPs in a party are assumed to occupy the same ideological position, and the parties are ranked from most left-wing to most right-wing, the party that controls the median legislator enjoys considerable leverage. An empirical analysis of European coalitions between 1945 and 1987 found that fully 80 percent either contained, or were supported by, the party with the median legislator, attesting to its importance.<sup>21</sup>

This idea of the median legislator has important consequences for the UK. The fact that most of the small nationalist, unionist and minor parties tend to be fairly evenly divided between left and right (with a small advantage for the left), it is likely that the Liberal Democrats will usually control the median legislator in a hung parliament in Britain. The only exceptions are likely to be when either the Conservatives or Labour fall just short of an absolute majority, in which case, one or other might control the median legislator and be able to form a majority with small nationalist or unionist parties. Failing that, the Liberal

Democrats will be, if not king-makers – they might be able to provide a majority to only one of the major parties – then at least arbiters of how long a minority government could last.

Figure 4 roughly ranks the UK parliamentary parties on a left-right basis, and provides the numbers of seats each won in the 2010 general election. (Some parties are assumed to occupy the same position, while the Speaker is credited to the Conservative total.) The median legislator (out of a total of 650) is the 326th MP counting in from either the left or the right, and that MP is a Liberal Democrat. Any Conservative minority administration in 2010 would have needed legislative support from the Liberal Democrats; hence the early talk of a supply-and-confidence arrangement. In a future hung parliament, unless the Conservatives won about 320 seats (and assuming UKIP remains a negligible parliamentary force), they would not be able to rely on Northern Irish unionists for a legislative majority. Instead, a minority Tory government would be at the mercy of the Liberal Democrats, who could join with parties to their left to defeat the government whenever they wished, in the absence of a supply-and-confidence agreement. A minority government would have to cobble together parliamentary majorities on an issue-by-issue basis, and end up implementing policies that were acceptable to the Liberal Democrats to forestall a confidence vote.

**Figure 4: Left-Right Ordering of UK Parties after 2010 General Election**



## **Multi-Party Politics in the UK and Beyond**

The growth of the Liberal Democrats and the rise of minor and regionalist parties make hung parliaments more likely than in the past, but FPTP limits the extent to which a fully multi-party system can become entrenched in the UK. In particular, it will be very difficult – though not impossible – for new or minor parties to grow quickly and establish significant parliamentary representation in a way that is possible under PR. UKIP may detach votes from the major parties, especially the Conservatives, but they will struggle to convert their higher recent support in the polls into parliamentary seats. Therefore, if hung parliaments do become more common, then the Liberal Democrats are likely to be needed either as a coalition partner or as the provider of supply-and-confidence support.

One of the comparative lessons of party systems in advanced democracies is that it is relatively rare to find two major parties routinely competing for the parliamentary support of a third party. Perhaps the best example was that of the German Free Democrats (FDP) until the 1980s. Until that time, the centre-right Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU), the centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) and the liberal FDP won a combined share of about 95 percent of votes at each election, with the FDP usually taking less than 10 percent on average. The country's PR electoral system normally made coalition government necessary and the FDP were able to form coalitions with both major parties. From 1961 to 1966, the FDP governed as the junior party to the CDU/CSU, before a grand coalition of the major parties took over for three years. But from 1969 to 1998, the FDP was in government permanently, first with the SPD from 1969–82, and then from 1982–98 with the Christian Democrats. The party switched its support in 1982 in advance of a federal election the following

year.<sup>22</sup> The FDP increasingly adopted an economically liberal stance and became seen as the CDU/CSU's 'natural' ally, especially as the Greens emerged in the 1980s as an alternative force on the left and a potential (later, actual) coalition partner for the SPD. Thus, the position of the FDP in West Germany in the 1960s until the 1980s was similar in some ways to that of the British Liberal Democrats at present. However, strategic flexibility proved to be temporary for the FDP, as it became firmly moored on the centre-right.

It is difficult to find many similar recent cases elsewhere in advanced democracies. In Austria, grand coalitions between the Social Democrats (SPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) tend to be the norm. The third party in the system, the (initially liberal) Freedom Party (FPÖ), joined a coalition with the SPÖ in 1983, but that administration ended three years later after the FPÖ shifted sharply to the right under its new leader, Jörg Haider. A stridently right-wing FPÖ formed a controversial coalition with the ÖVP from 2000–05 and is no longer considered a suitable coalition partner for the SPÖ.

In Sweden, the party system was long dominated by the Social Democrats (SAP), but more recently has alternated SAP minority governments and centre-right coalitions led by the Moderate Party. In Denmark, governments tend to be coalitions based on the centre-left (Social Democrats and small left-wing allies) or the centre-right (Liberals and conservative allies). In the 1980s and 1990s, the Centre Democrats and the Christian People's Party both entered coalitions of first the right and later the left, but both parties were very small, rarely winning more than 5 percent of the vote.<sup>23</sup> In the Netherlands, the liberal VVD used to form coalition governments with the centre-right Christian Democrats but more recently has formed coalitions with the Labour Party. However, Dutch party politics has many differences

from the UK, not least that it was based on consociationalism and the 'pillarisation' of society along religious-socialist-liberal lines. As those divisions have weakened, the VVD as a secular-middle class party has grown.<sup>24</sup> VVD is also currently the largest party in the Dutch parliament, weakening comparisons with Britain.

Two comparisons from outside Europe are of interest. Like the UK, Canada uses FPTP, but has undergone a significant party-system change in recent decades. Previously, the system was based around competition between the Progressive Conservatives and the centre-left Liberal Party, with the much smaller New Democrats (NDP) further to the left. Governments tended to be single-party majority affairs for one or other of the major parties, usually the Liberals until the 1980s. The implosion of the Progressive Conservatives in the 1990s changed the system, with the right splintering and the secessionist Bloc Québécois winning large numbers of seats in the French-speaking province of Quebec. As the right began to recover, Liberal dominance gave way to a series of minority governments of Liberals and then Conservatives, although the latter won the most recent election in 2011 with an overall parliamentary majority. There is no centrist party in Canada willing to look to either left or right to form coalitions.<sup>25</sup>

New Zealand had, until the 1990s, a FPTP electoral system and a Westminster-type political and party system similar to the UK's. Labour and the centre-right National Party almost completely dominated the legislature. All post-war governments until 1996 were single-party majority administrations. However, New Zealand abandoned FPTP and adopted PR in time for the 1996 election, since when no party has won an outright majority. The first government after the change was a coalition between National and the populist New Zealand First Party, but after

that, administrations alternated between Labour-led coalitions (with left-wing allies) and National minority governments enjoying supply-and-confidence support from centre-right and Maori parties.<sup>26</sup> No party has yet alternated its support between Labour-led and National-led coalitions, although a small centrist-Christian party, United Future, has given supply-and-confidence support to both.

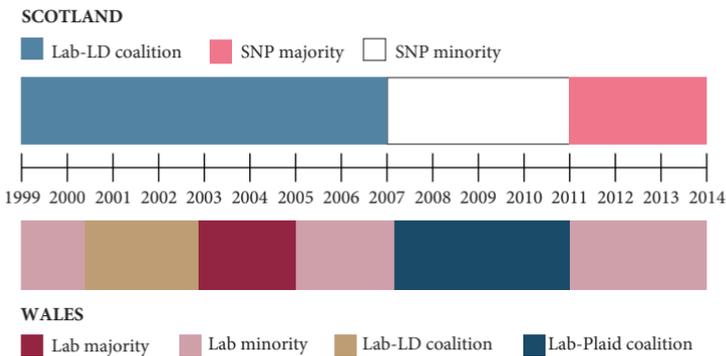
What emerges from this brief survey is how few points of reference there are for British politics post-2010. The German FDP from the 1960s to the 1980s appears to offer the closest parallel although that proved to be only a phase before the FDP's shift to the free-market right. On the whole, patterns of coalitions have tended to be fairly predictable in most countries and based largely along left bloc-right bloc divisions. On the other hand, some radical-right parties have either entered government, such as the FPÖ in Austria and the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands in 2002–03, or provided parliamentary support to minority administrations, as with the Danish People's Party from 2001–11.

### *Multi-Party Politics and Devolution*

One further set of comparators that could provide lessons for the UK is, of course, that of the devolved Celtic regions. The Scottish parliament and Welsh assembly are both elected under a system of proportional representation. That has not prevented periods of single-party majority government in each nation, although these have, thus far, been the exceptions rather than the rule. For eight years, Scotland was governed by a Labour-Liberal Democrat majority coalition, followed by four years of minority SNP rule. The latter included a cooperation agreement with the Scottish Green Party, that fell short of a supply-and-confidence arrangement.<sup>27</sup> In 2011, the SNP won a majority, against most

observers' expectations. Meanwhile, Welsh politics in the era of devolution has been dominated by Labour, although only for two years did the party enjoy a slim overall majority (because the chair of the assembly was drawn from an opposition party). Other than that, fifteen years of devolution have provided over six years of minority Labour rule, two-and-a-half years of Labour-Lib Dem coalition, and four years of Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition (Figure 5). Meanwhile, Northern Ireland is governed by a power-sharing grand coalition of parties representing both nationalists and unionists.

**Figure 5: Governing Formulae in Scotland and Wales**



Scotland's Labour-Liberal Democrat coalitions offered a foretaste of coalition politics in the UK. Two coalition agreements spelt out in some detail the joint policy programme of the coalition. The most contentious issue – as in the UK in 2010 – concerned university tuition fees, which the Liberal Democrats had pledged to abolish in their 1999 Scottish parliamentary election manifesto. The coalition agreement promised to establish an independent inquiry into tuition fees in Scotland and it eventually argued for a reformed system in which upfront tuition fees, which

prevailed at the time, would be replaced by a system in which the government paid the fees upfront but students paid back some of the money when they were earning enough. The proposals were adopted in modified form by the Scottish executive and neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats suffered consequent political damage.

One of the lessons of Celtic devolution is that Labour-Liberal Democrat coalitions can work smoothly, unsurprisingly given the parties' ideological proximity. The same was true of the Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition in 2007. It is in these circumstances that consensual politics can work. It indicates that the UK Liberal Democrats will face questions over whether they are to remain true to the centre-left identity the party adopted on its formation in 1988, or whether it seeks coalitions with the Conservatives, and risks alienating some supporters.

### **Coalition Agreements and Manifestos**

The analysis thus far has looked at manifestos and coalitions fairly abstractly, although important lessons have emerged for the UK. The remainder of this pamphlet looks at the nature of coalition agreements, the pledges they contain and their relationship to manifestos.

Coalition agreements are the negotiated policy deals between parties in coalition governments. Their functions are 'to contain conflict within the coalition and to coordinate government policy'.<sup>28</sup> By providing an authoritative statement of government policy, they make it costly – although not impossible – for any coalition partner to renege on deals. Hence, coalition agreements help to facilitate governmental stability. It is perhaps a major reason why they have become increasingly common in the post-1945 period: Müller and Strøm show that, whereas in the 1940s,

one third of European coalition governments were based on written policy agreements, by the 1990s it was 80 percent.<sup>29</sup>

Coalition agreements serve three purposes: managing preference diversity, reducing uncertainty and minimising opportunistic behaviour.<sup>30</sup> First, they provide a means of dealing with the inevitable divergence of policy preferences among the coalition partners. Instead of fighting battles over each and every policy issue as it emerges, coalition agreements enable the partners to set out the agreed contours of policy. Some type of outline will provide guidance as to the future direction of policy. The necessity of such an outline becomes greater as the policy preferences of the coalition partners diverge: two parties that are ideologically close will typically agree on most issues, whereas those that are more ideologically distinct may not find it so easy to reach common ground naturally. In these latter cases, it may be more important to agree at the outset of the coalition government what its general line on policy will be. Agreements may also provide mechanisms for 'agreeing to disagree', listing certain policy areas where one party can vote against the other, for example.

Secondly, coalition agreements can reduce uncertainty over policy by providing a public declaration at the outset of the government about what its policy will be. In this sense, they serve a similar function to manifestos in party systems where one party tends to win an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. They also reduce uncertainty among the coalition partners, with more formalised agreements representing attempts to develop more complete contracts.<sup>31</sup> However, not every issue can be anticipated, as events arise without warning or it is not always clear what is the best path to take (for instance, the direction of policy may be dependent on returning to economic growth after a recession, but it is not known when growth will return).

Coalition agreements can prioritise some policy areas over others.

Thirdly, coalition agreements help to reduce opportunism among the coalition partners. There may be a temptation on the part of one coalition partner to frustrate the policy goals of the other. That is especially likely if one party's goals are primarily targeted in the first couple of years of office while the other party's are mainly in the last few years in office: the first party may achieve its goals and then renege on parts of the agreement. Coalition agreements can attempt to make opportunism more costly and difficult. For example, they might provide means for each party to monitor the other's behaviour in government by posting ministers from both parties in key departments.<sup>32</sup>

Coalition governance can thus involve both *ex ante* and *ex post* governance mechanisms. A comprehensive policy agreement is the most notable example of the first. 'Watchdog' ministers from each party in ministries controlled by the other party are the clearest example of the second. There has been a significant increase in recent decades in the prevalence of European coalition governments utilising both types of mechanism and a sharp fall (almost to zero) of those using no governance mechanism at all.<sup>33</sup>

The UK coalition agreement of 2010 fits with these trends. Both *ex ante* and *ex post* governance mechanisms were deployed: a comprehensive policy agreement, procedural rules and 'watchdog' ministers. The coalition agreement was comprehensive in its content. At 14,000 words long, it was also in line with the norm for such agreements in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway, although significantly greater than the German average of about 6,000 words.<sup>34</sup> In a document that was supplementary to the policy agreement, the coalition partners agreed on rules governing the allocation of ministerial posts, with the party

balance at the coalition's formation being retained throughout its period in office.<sup>35</sup> Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, would be consulted over ministerial reshuffles and have the right to nominate Liberal Democrat candidates for posts. In addition, Liberal Democrat junior ministers would sit in 13 of the 15 departments headed by a Conservative cabinet minister, while the three departments headed by Liberal Democrats would have Conservative junior ministers.

### **Party Manifestos and the UK Coalition Agreement of 2010**

The UK coalition agreement offers some pointers to the relationship between party manifestos and government policy if the UK continues to see hung parliaments in the future.<sup>36</sup> The agreement emerged shortly after the coalition government took office in May 2010. It covered 31 policy areas, including business, Europe, immigration, the NHS and political reform. The agreement declared that the most important issue was a deficit-reduction plan, with all spending commitments contingent on moves towards stabilisation of the public finances. The agreement contained a mix of declarations and pledges, most of which could be traced back to one or other of the coalition parties' manifestos, or which occasionally represented a compromise. There was a preference for adopting particular pledges over splitting the difference between the parties, as the agreement itself stated:

*In every part of this agreement, we have gone further than simply adopting those policies where we previously overlapped. We have found that a combination of our parties' best ideas and attitudes has produced a programme for government that is more radical and comprehensive than our individual manifestos.<sup>37</sup>*

Some issues were left unresolved, subject to review or subject to agreements to disagree. For example, there would be a review on control orders for terrorist suspects, while on nuclear energy, a Liberal Democrat spokesman would be permitted to speak out in parliament against new-build nuclear power stations but the party's MPs would be allowed to abstain only. On what would become a highly contentious issue, the coalition partners would await the report of the Browne review of higher-education funding but the Liberal Democrats would be permitted to abstain in a parliamentary vote to increase tuition fees. That fell short of the party's previous pledge to vote against any such move.<sup>38</sup> In the event, the coalition rejected the Browne Report's recommendation to remove the ceiling on tuition fees but proposed an increase to £9,000 per year. Most Liberal Democrat MPs subsequently voted in favour of the increase.

Of immediate interest here is the relationship between the coalition agreement and the coalition partners' election manifestos. One approach is to go through the coalition partners' respective manifestos and identify all of the policies that also appear in the coalition agreement. That of itself would not necessarily indicate which policies were considered the most important. A well-established academic approach associated with Manifesto Research on Political Representation (MARPOR), a European research project that codes election manifestos, is to determine the *saliency* of policy areas by calculating the proportion of quasi-sentences devoted to a standard set of policy areas. This approach encounters fewer methodological problems than examining *confrontational* positions on issues: if parties take opposite sides on an issue, the party that is on the 'popular' side of public opinion is likely to devote much more space to it than a party that is on the 'wrong' side of public opinion. Indeed, the latter may say little at all. Thus, the value attached to policy

areas can be gauged by the space that parties devote to them in their manifestos.<sup>39</sup>

**Table 2: Saliency of Top Ten Policy Areas in UK Manifestos and Coalition Agreement (2010)**

| Policy Area                                   | Coalition Agreement |      | Conservative Manifesto |     | Lib-Dem Manifesto |     |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------|------|------------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
|                                               | Rank                | %    | Rank                   | %   | Rank              | %   |
| Govt & administrative efficiency              | 1                   | 10.3 | 2                      | 8.7 | 6                 | 5.5 |
| Welfare state expansion                       | 2                   | 6.8  | =5                     | 5.2 | 11                | 3.7 |
| Market regulation                             | =3                  | 5.4  | =19                    | 1.8 | 13                | 3.1 |
| Non-economic demographic groups               | =3                  | 5.4  | 4                      | 5.4 | 5                 | 6.3 |
| Technology & infrastructure                   | =5                  | 5.2  | 8                      | 5.0 | 2                 | 7.5 |
| Environmental protection: positive references | =5                  | 5.2  | =5                     | 5.2 | 3                 | 7.4 |
| Law & order: positive references              | 7                   | 5.1  | 3                      | 5.7 | 10                | 3.8 |
| Internationalism: positive references         | =8                  | 4.1  | 9                      | 4.7 | 8                 | 5.0 |
| Federalism                                    | =8                  | 4.1  | =5                     | 5.2 | 9                 | 4.1 |
| Incentives                                    | 10                  | 3.8  | 12                     | 3.3 | =14               | 2.7 |
| Economic orthodoxy                            | 14                  | 3.0  | 10                     | 3.9 | 7                 | 5.3 |

| Policy Area         | Coalition Agreement |     | Conservative Manifesto |      | Lib-Dem Manifesto |      |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----|------------------------|------|-------------------|------|
|                     | Rank                | %   | Rank                   | %    | Rank              | %    |
| Education expansion | 15                  | 2.7 | 14                     | 2.7  | 4                 | 6.4  |
| Political authority | =24                 | 1.6 | 1                      | 12.1 | 1                 | 10.2 |

Sources: Andrea Volkens, Pola Lehmann, Nicolas Merz, Sven Regel, Annika Werner, with Onawa Promise Laceywell and Henrike Schulze, *The Manifesto Data Collection. Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR)*. Berlin: Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), 2013; Judith Bara (Queen Mary, University of London).

Note: Table shows percentage of quasi-sentences in manifestos and coalition agreement devoted to policy areas, and rank-ordering of areas. Policy areas based on MARPOR categories.

Table 2 presents the top ten general policy areas (using MARPOR's standard categories) by saliency (as percentage of quasi-sentences in whole document) in the coalition agreement and in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos. It can be seen that eight of the coalition agreement's top ten policy areas are also in the top ten in the Tory manifesto, while seven are in the Liberal Democrats' top ten. Only one – market regulation – is in the coalition agreement's top ten but not in either of the coalition partners' top ten. There are a few discrepancies that merit comment. First, the category described as 'political authority' was ranked first in both parties' election manifestos, taking up over 10 percent of each. However, this area ranks only twenty-fourth in the coalition agreement. The reason is that this category invariably covers lots of criticisms of the incumbent government, its authority and competence. These tend to loom large in opposition parties' election manifestos, where parties seek to undermine electoral support for their opponents, but there is much less need for them in coalition agreements, where

electoral considerations are less pressing and there is a stronger focus on policy. Second, 'market regulation' is ranked joint-third in the coalition agreement, but is not in either coalition party's manifesto top ten. It covered the coalition's plans for regulating business and banking. A third partial discrepancy relates to 'governmental and administrative efficiency', which is ranked first in the coalition agreement and takes up a higher proportion (10.3 percent) of that document than in either parties' manifestos. This policy area covered the coalition's constitutional reforms, and these ideas were fleshed out in more detail, and combined Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifesto proposals. In the case of the coalition agreement's promised referendum on AV, there was no antecedent policy in either party's manifesto. Overall, however, there was considerable crossover between the coalition parties' manifestos and the coalition agreement, at least as measured by the saliency of policy areas.

### **Policy Pledges in Manifestos and Coalition Agreements**

Policy pledges in manifestos may be viewed differently in single-party majority settings on the one hand, and coalitional or minority-government settings on the other. In the case of the former, according to the mandate doctrine, pledges are promises that the winning party has a mandate to enact. In the latter case, by contrast, pledges represent starting points for negotiations and they may be watered-down or jettisoned altogether. The parties themselves may have a priority ranking of their pledges, with some regarded as more important than others. That may lead parties in coalition negotiations to prioritise some pledges or to signal that some are non-negotiable whereas others are 'tradable'.

These characteristics of manifestos-as-bargaining-chips were evident during the 2010 UK coalition negotiations. The Liberal

Democrats' manifesto was based on four broad priorities to deliver 'fairness': fair taxes, a fair chance for every child, a fair – and green – future, and a fair deal by cleaning up politics. Each area had policy pledges attached to it, the most important of which were: raising the threshold for paying income tax to £10,000 p.a.; a 'pupil premium' that would entail £2.5 billion being spent on helping struggling pupils; the creation of a low-carbon economy and green jobs; and political reform, including an elected House of Lords, recall elections for MPs, fixed-term parliaments, and a PR voting system.<sup>40</sup> The income-tax pledge was included in the coalition agreement, as was reference to the pupil premium, although no money was mentioned. The agreement also advocated a low-carbon economy, with some means of achieving it. The section on political reform included pledges to bring forward legislation for recall elections and fixed-term parliaments, as well as proposals for a wholly or largely elected upper chamber. The agreement promised a referendum on electoral reform but not for PR. Instead, the referendum would be on the majoritarian Alternative Vote (AV) system, which had not been mentioned in either party's manifesto. There was an acknowledgement that the parties might take different sides in the referendum campaign. Overall, one of the Liberal Democrats' coalition negotiators estimated that his party achieved 75–80 percent of what it wanted on its four priority areas.<sup>41</sup>

The Conservatives' stance during the negotiations seemed to be more concerned with defending 'red lines'.<sup>42</sup> These were issues on which compromise was limited or non-existent. The four 'red lines' mentioned by the Conservatives were: immediate action to reduce the government's budget deficit; maintaining 'strong' military defences – seen as a response to the Liberal Democrat manifesto pledge to reject a like-for-like replacement for the Trident nuclear-weapons system; no 'softening' of immigration

laws – again, a reaction to the Liberal Democrats’ call for a partial amnesty for illegal immigrants; and no further transfers of sovereignty to EU institutions without a prior referendum. All of these positions were spelt out in detail in the Conservatives’ manifesto and all were in the coalition agreement.

A number of observations emerge from this outline of the negotiations. The Liberal Democrats were more concerned to secure progress on their four priority areas while being prepared to compromise, or even concede, on other issues. The latter included immigration, defence and even tuition fees, all of which emerged as salient issues during the election campaign but none of which were among the Liberal Democrats’ four priorities. In organising their manifesto as they did, the Liberal Democrats signalled what their priorities were likely to be in coalition negotiations. In contrast, the Conservatives’ ‘red lines’ emerged after the election but before the negotiations. The Conservative leader, David Cameron, in making his ‘big, open and comprehensive offer to the Liberal Democrats’ after the election, framed his message in terms of ‘helping them implement key planks of their election manifesto’.<sup>43</sup> That may have partly implied that the Conservatives saw the negotiation process as one in which they, as the larger party, could expect to get their way on most issues, with some compromises but also areas that were non-negotiable. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats as the junior partner could look forward to policy implementation in areas that did not infringe Tory red lines.

It is possible that in future, British parties, aware of the possibility of a hung parliament, might explicitly or implicitly sort their manifesto policies into priorities, red lines and tradable pledges. Doing so would require parties to think carefully about what they were and were not prepared to compromise on. Tradable pledges are unlikely to be flagged up as such but may be left out

of the list of priority pledges, as with the Liberal Democrats on immigration and defence. However, there is a danger for parties in adopting this approach. Signalling that certain policies are tradable may weaken the pledges a party makes in that area, which in turn could call into question its commitment to them in the eyes of voters and activists. Parties would also need to take care that any red-line policies they set out were unlikely to conflict with the red lines of potential coalition partners. If they did, then either a coalition would become less likely, or one party would have to concede on a red line.

The experience of the current UK coalition government is that policy pledges in coalition agreements come to be seen by the participants in the same way that they would previously have regarded manifesto pledges. Indeed, they trump manifesto pledges because they are the basis for the stability of the government. That raises some interesting questions. For example, to what extent are pledges in coalition agreements legitimate if they were not also in one of the coalition partners' manifestos? The promise of a referendum on AV was an essential element of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition agreement but not in either party's manifesto. The coalition agreement also contained a pledge to ensure that rape defendants would be promised anonymity, and again, it was not present in either the Conservative or Liberal Democrat manifestos.

Both of these pledges were introduced after the election and therefore had not been put to the electorate, calling into question their democratic legitimacy. Such policy formulation happens all the time in government, but rarely so soon after the election. They could be seen to indicate something important about coalition governments and their manifestos. In the case of the AV referendum, an additional policy pledge was required to 'seal the deal' between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats,

and was the price of ensuring the formation of the coalition and the stability that it promised. Moreover, it might be seen more as a tweaking of a Liberal Democrat pledge in order to meet the Conservatives half way (the Tory manifesto reaffirmed the party's support for first-past-the-post). The pledge on rape defendants was more unusual and something of a surprise. Although it was not in the Liberal Democrats' manifesto, it had been party policy since 2006. As it was, the pledge on rape defendants was dropped two months after the coalition took office but it did point towards the possibility that coalition agreements can circumvent the democratic process. On the other hand, single-party majority governments can just as easily – and just as quickly – introduce new policies that were not approved by the electorate. Within days of coming to power in 1997, the New Labour government announced operational independence for the Bank of England over the setting of interest rates, a policy not included in Labour's manifesto.

The relationship between manifesto pledges and coalition-agreement pledges is thus not a simple one. Some pledges in coalition agreements may have seemingly emerged from nowhere. Others may be split-the-difference compromises that were not formally in any manifesto but which have a relationship to manifesto pledges, such as the AV referendum. Other pledges in coalition agreements may have a much closer connection to manifesto pledges; indeed, they may echo or even replicate one or other party's pledges. The UK coalition agreement of 2010 offered both parties 'wins' on certain policies high on their list of priorities, even if that meant 'losses' for the other party on issues of lower salience. That was evident in the case of Tory 'wins' on defence and immigration, while the Liberal Democrats secured wins on fixed-term parliaments, for example.

One difference between coalition agreements and manifestos is that pledges in the former may come unstuck if one or other party to the agreement reneges on its promises. The Conservative manifesto contained a promise to oversee the redrawing of parliamentary constituency boundaries to ensure 'fair votes' (the prevailing system advantaged Labour). Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat manifesto pledged the party to support a fully-elected House of Lords (the Tory manifesto backed a 'mainly-elected' upper chamber). The coalition agreement promised either a fully- or mainly-elected House of Lords and separately, a redrawing of constituency boundaries. In the event, Tory backbench opposition scuppered House of Lords reform and in retaliation, the Liberal Democrats announced that they would not support changes to constituency boundaries. This dispute illustrated how coalition agreements require the good faith of the parties implementing them. Reneging on one part of an agreement may lead to tit-for-tat retaliation on other parts.

### *Claiming Credit...*

When a party governs alone, it is clear who should take credit and blame for policy decisions. But when two parties govern together, it is not quite so easy, as each party may act strategically to claim credit for itself and to shift blame elsewhere. The issue of the personal allowance (the amount of income people can earn before paying tax) offers an interesting example of the linkage of manifesto and coalition-agreement commitments, and deciding where credit lies. The Liberal Democrats' manifesto pledged to increase the personal allowance to £10,000 in time for the 2011/12 financial year. It was part of the party's offer to help the lowest paid, who would benefit most from the policy. There was no pledge on the personal allowance in the Conservative manifesto. The coalition agreement itself stated that, '[w]e will further increase the

personal allowance to £10,000, making real terms steps each year towards meeting this as a longer term policy objective.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the coalition agreement adopted the Liberal Democrats' position but as an aspiration. As it was, the £10,000 personal allowance came into force in 2014/15, and in the 2014 budget it was increased further to £10,500. However, both coalition parties claimed credit for the policy, leading Nick Clegg to accuse the Conservatives of having a 'brass neck'.<sup>45</sup> An opinion poll found that 45 percent of respondents credited the Liberal Democrats with the policy, but 33 percent attributed it to the Conservatives.<sup>46</sup>

This event raises the question of whether both coalition partners are entitled to claim credit for policies. In this instance, it was a Liberal Democrat manifesto pledge, but the fact that it appeared in the coalition agreement entitles the Conservatives to claim some 'ownership' of the policy too. Without Conservative support, the policy would never have been included in the agreement nor implemented by the government. On the other hand, it was one of the major priority pledges of the Liberal Democrats, and if they could not claim this policy, then what could they claim as their own? A coalition agreement implies joint-ownership of all policies (unless specified otherwise, such as with agreements to disagree), but most of those policies would have some lineage from one or other manifesto.

### *...And Trying to Avoid Blame*

The other side of the coin is that parties will seek to avoid blame for policies that are unpopular. That might be because a policy was proposed by the other coalition party, or perhaps that it was a compromise that neither had initially suggested in its final form. In these instances, coalition can be an alibi for a party seeking to avoid blame. Perhaps the most controversial

moment in the existence of the current coalition government came with the large increase in university tuition fees. It was controversial because the Liberal Democrat manifesto of 2010 pledged to abolish tuition fees. On this basis, the party won significant levels of support from students and the policy became a defining part of the modern Liberal Democrats' left-leaning political identity. The previous Labour government had established an independent committee chaired by Lord Browne, the former chairman of BP, to look into the question of university funding, and Browne was due to report back five months after the general election. The expectation was that he would recommend an increase in the ceiling on tuition fees. In the event, Browne recommended removing the cap entirely.

The Browne report left the Liberal Democrats facing a dilemma. In anticipation of the raising of the cap, the coalition agreement gave Liberal Democrat MPs the right to abstain, but not vote against, in any vote to increase fees. In practice, there were problems with this position. Rather than accepting the recommendation to remove the cap, the coalition government brought forward legislation that would treble the current level of the cap to £9,000 p.a. The problem for the Liberal Democrats was that the legislation was introduced by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, with the Secretary of State being Vince Cable. It would have been odd for a minister to abstain on legislation that he himself had proposed to parliament. Ultimately, most Liberal Democrat MPs voted to increase the cap and the bill was passed. When questioned on the Liberal Democrats' abandonment of their manifesto pledge to abolish tuition fees, Cable insisted:

*We didn't break a promise. We made a commitment in our manifesto, we didn't win the election. We then entered into a coalition agreement, and it's the coalition agreement that is binding upon us and which I'm trying to honour.<sup>2,47</sup>*

In this instance, it is the coalition agreement that has been defined as 'binding', whereas the manifesto has not, and therefore the Liberal Democrats are not fully culpable. To some, this issue illustrates the perils of coalition government and the weakness of manifestos in a multi-party setting. However, it is important to draw the correct lessons. The pledge was that of the third party, which would never have had any real prospect of governing alone. All Liberal Democrat manifesto pledges are constantly no more than bargaining chips, but that is not always true of Labour or Conservative pledges, as these could be implemented if either won an overall majority.

## **Conclusion**

If Britain has indeed entered a new era of hung parliaments, it will deliver the final blow to the Westminster Model of majoritarian democracy. The idea of manifestos as mandates, an idea that took hold in the post-war period, becomes undermined. In fact, mandate theory already suffers from important defects but it continued to exert a strong hold over the minds of politicians and pundits. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition agreement showed in full relief the limitations of mandate theory in a coalition.

The coalition agreement was an historic document. It offered a template of what future agreements might look like. Whether coalitional politics retains support in Britain is another matter. An Ipsos-MORI poll in January 2014 indicated that 65 percent of respondents thought that a hung parliament after the 2015 election would be bad for the country, with only 26 percent thinking it would be a good thing.<sup>48</sup> There is also opposition in the two main parties. The *Daily Telegraph* reported that David Cameron was considering ruling out his party's participation in

a coalition government after the 2015 election and opting for a minority government if it fell short of a majority.<sup>49</sup> That prompted the leader of Labour's largest affiliated trade union to urge Ed Miliband to rule out a coalition in the event of another hung parliament in 2015, again preferring a minority government.<sup>50</sup> In response, Nick Clegg rejected the idea of minority government as preposterous, representing as it did the 'last gasp' of tribal politics. He also indicated his opposition to a supply-and-confidence arrangement as an alternative to a full coalition.<sup>51</sup>

The politicians will have to play whatever hand the voters deal them, and despite their seeming disapproval of coalitions, the electorate may well deliver another hung parliament. For most of the four years after the 2010 election, neither major party was above 40 percent in the polls. Vote shares continue to fragment, with the rise of the minor parties. In the end, politicians may have to adapt to the onset of genuinely multi-party politics, with the minority and coalition governments that normally entails.

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# Mandates, Manifestos and Coalitions

*UK Party Politics after 2010*

Thomas Quinn

One of the most important assumptions in British politics since 1945 has been the existence of single-party, majority governments deriving their mandates from voters. The hung parliament and subsequent coalition government of 2010 therefore raised some difficult questions about the operation of the democratic system. If no party enjoyed a parliamentary majority, what sense did it make to speak of mandates? What was the role of manifestos if no party possessed a majority to implement one in full? What was the democratic legitimacy of the comprehensive coalition agreement on policy goals negotiated by the coalition parties after the election? What is the relationship between manifestos and coalition agreements? Can mandates follow from coalition agreements? Ultimately, is it necessary to rethink the basic relationship between voters, parties and governments in the UK political system? This pamphlet addresses these questions.

Thomas Quinn is Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Essex. His research focuses on British party politics, and he has published on party leadership elections, modernisation in the Labour and Conservative parties, the UK coalition agreement of 2010, and the UK party system.



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