

CRS Insights

The United Kingdom Election

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Current Government and 2010 Election Result

The United Kingdom's (UK) general election takes place May 7, 2015. The [previous election](#), in 2010, resulted in a "hung Parliament," as no party won a majority of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. The Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, won the most seats with 307. After winning the three prior elections, the Labour Party finished second with 258 seats.

The Conservatives subsequently formed a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, led by Nick Clegg, who finished third with 57 seats. David Cameron became prime minister, and Nick Clegg became deputy prime minister. Ed Miliband replaced Gordon Brown as leader of the Labour Party.

The coalition's signature initiative has been a far-reaching austerity program aiming to reduce the country's budget deficit. The deficit has decreased while economic growth has improved, but austerity has heightened social tensions and caused friction between the coalition partners. The parties have also disagreed over other issues, including the UK's policies toward the European Union (EU).

2015 Election Overview

The 2015 election appears likely to result in a second consecutive hung Parliament. A [recent poll](#) shows the Conservative Party with 35% support and the Labour Party with 34%. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) had 12% and the Liberal Democrats 9%.

In the UK electoral system, nationwide vote percentage does not equate to a proportional number of seats in Parliament. With exceptions, the system has historically delivered single-party majorities, prioritizing stability over proportional representation. The fragmentation seen in 2010 is expected to increase in 2015, but the system continues to favor the large parties overall.

Speculation about the outcome of the 2015 election revolves around a number of observations:

- [Projections](#) indicate that the Conservative Party and the Labour Party will each win between 260 and 300 seats, well short of a parliamentary majority. In this case, both parties would begin exploring potential coalition or partnership arrangements with the smaller parties. Such talks could last several weeks.
- The party that wins the most seats does not necessarily have the right to form the government. Constitutionally, the leader able to "command the confidence of the House of Commons" becomes prime minister.
- The Queen's Speech opening the new parliamentary session with the government's proposed program serves as an immediate vote of confidence. The crucial threshold for approval of the speech, which is scheduled for May 27, is 323 votes.
- The incumbent prime minister remains in office until it is clear who commands the confidence of Parliament. If neither side concedes defeat, the incumbent would therefore be entitled to present his Queen's Speech first.
- A minority government could take office under a "confidence and supply" agreement with smaller parties. In return for the government adopting elements of their program, smaller parties would agree to back the government or abstain on votes of no confidence and the budget while reserving the right to vote against it on other items.

Trends related to the smaller parties may also play a key role in the outcome:

- The Liberal Democrats are expected to suffer a considerable drop in support, potentially losing over 30 of the 57 seats won by the party in 2010.
- The Scottish National Party (SNP) is expected to make large gains, surging from the six seats it currently holds to more than 45. The SNP led the "Yes" campaign for Scottish independence that was defeated in a September 2014 referendum.
- Labour Party leader Ed Miliband has ruled out a formal coalition with the SNP, although a "looser" Labour-SNP partnership appears to remain a possibility.
- The UK Independence Party, a populist party opposed to immigration and British membership in the EU, has gained support by drawing away disaffected Conservative voters and capitalizing on anti-establishment sentiments. UKIP notably took first place in the UK's May 2014 elections for the European Parliament.
- UKIP is projected to win the third-highest percentage of the nationwide vote, but only one or two parliamentary seats. UKIP's priorities have been central themes of the election, however, with a March [poll](#) finding immigration to be voters' top priority.

The UK and the EU

The 2015 election could have important consequences for the UK's membership in the EU. If reelected, Prime Minister Cameron intends to negotiate a "new settlement" with the EU and put the UK's continued membership to an "in-or-out" national referendum by 2017. The referendum campaign and possibility of a so-called "Brexit" would become central preoccupations of British and EU politics, and the outcome would be difficult to predict: an April [poll](#) indicated 40% would vote to stay in the EU and 39% to leave, with a significant group of undecided voters.

The U.S.-UK Relationship

Many U.S. officials and Members of Congress view the UK as the United States' closest ally. The two countries share a strong political partnership, a unique defense and intelligence relationship, and similar economic views. Analysts believe that close cooperation will continue for the foreseeable future in areas such as counterterrorism, economic issues, and the future of NATO, as well as numerous global and regional security challenges. Nevertheless, some observers have suggested that the U.S.-UK relationship is losing relevance due to changing U.S. priorities and shifting global dynamics. U.S. officials have expressed alarm about cuts to UK defense spending and reductions in the size and capabilities of the British military. U.S. officials have also been concerned about uncertainty over the future size and composition of the UK's nuclear weapons arsenal.

Some U.S. observers have questioned whether growing political fragmentation in the UK could affect the partnership. A minority government, for example, could raise questions about the UK's ability to adopt and implement policies or legislation considered by U.S. officials to be in the common interest. Administration officials have also conveyed concerns that a UK break from the EU would reduce U.S. influence in Europe, weaken the EU's position on free trade, and make the EU a less reliable partner on security issues.