2015 GENERAL ELECTION – some initial thoughts

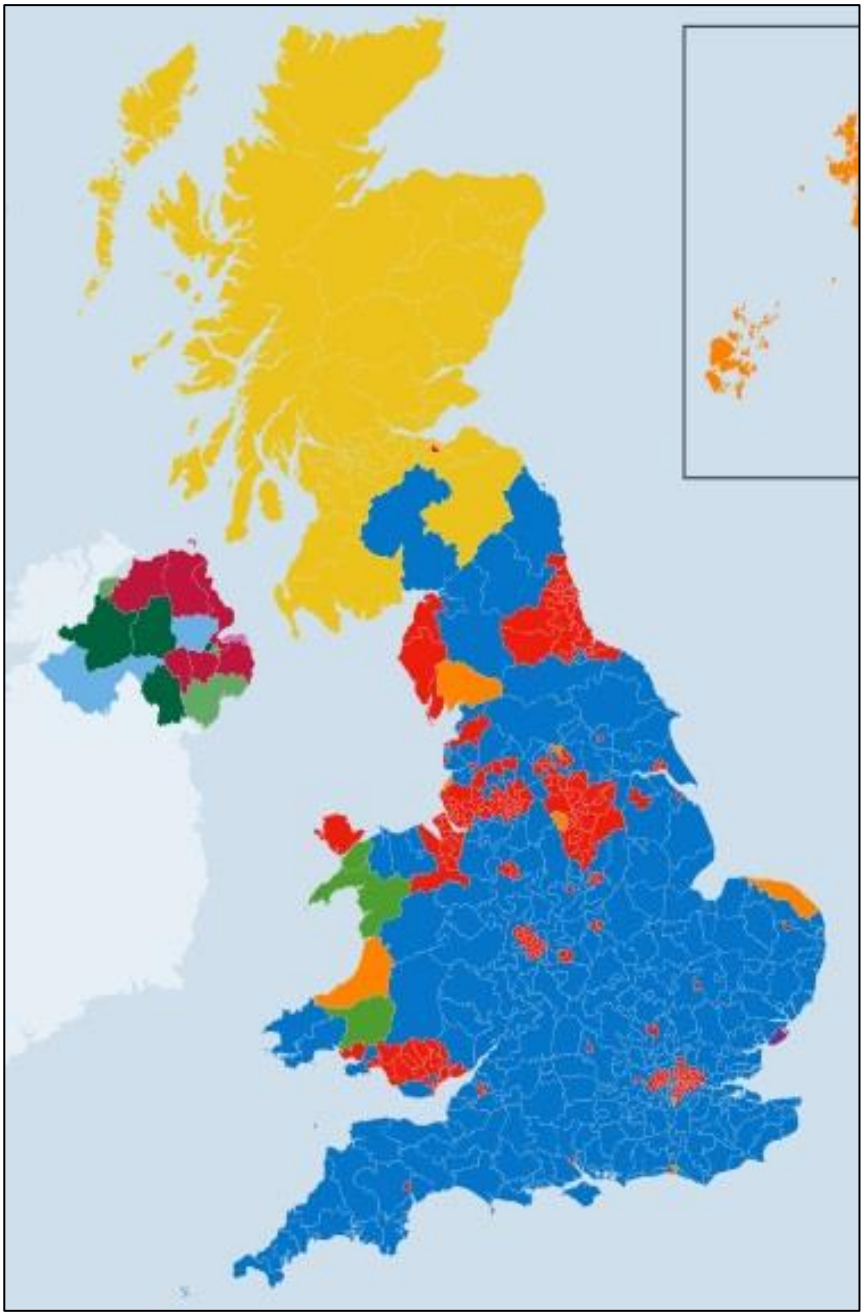
Key Results

Turnout = 66%

(source: BBC website)

UK results
after 650 of 650 seats

SORT BY	SEATS	GAIN	LOSS	+/-	VOTES	VOTE SHARE	+/-%
Conservative	331	35	11	+24	11,334,576	36.9	+0.8
Labour	232	22	48	-26	9,347,304	30.4	+1.5
Scottish National Party	56	50	0	+50	1,454,436	4.7	+3.1
Liberal Democrat	8	0	49	-49	2,415,862	7.9	-15.2
Democratic Unionist Party	8	1	1	0	184,260	0.6	0.0
Sinn Fein	4	0	1	-1	176,232	0.6	0.0
Plaid Cymru	3	0	0	0	181,704	0.6	0.0
Social Democratic & Labour Party	3	0	0	0	99,809	0.3	0.0
Ulster Unionist Party	2	2	0	+2	114,935	0.4	0.0
UKIP	1	1	0	+1	3,881,099	12.6	+9.5
Green Party	1	0	0	0	1,157,613	3.8	+2.8



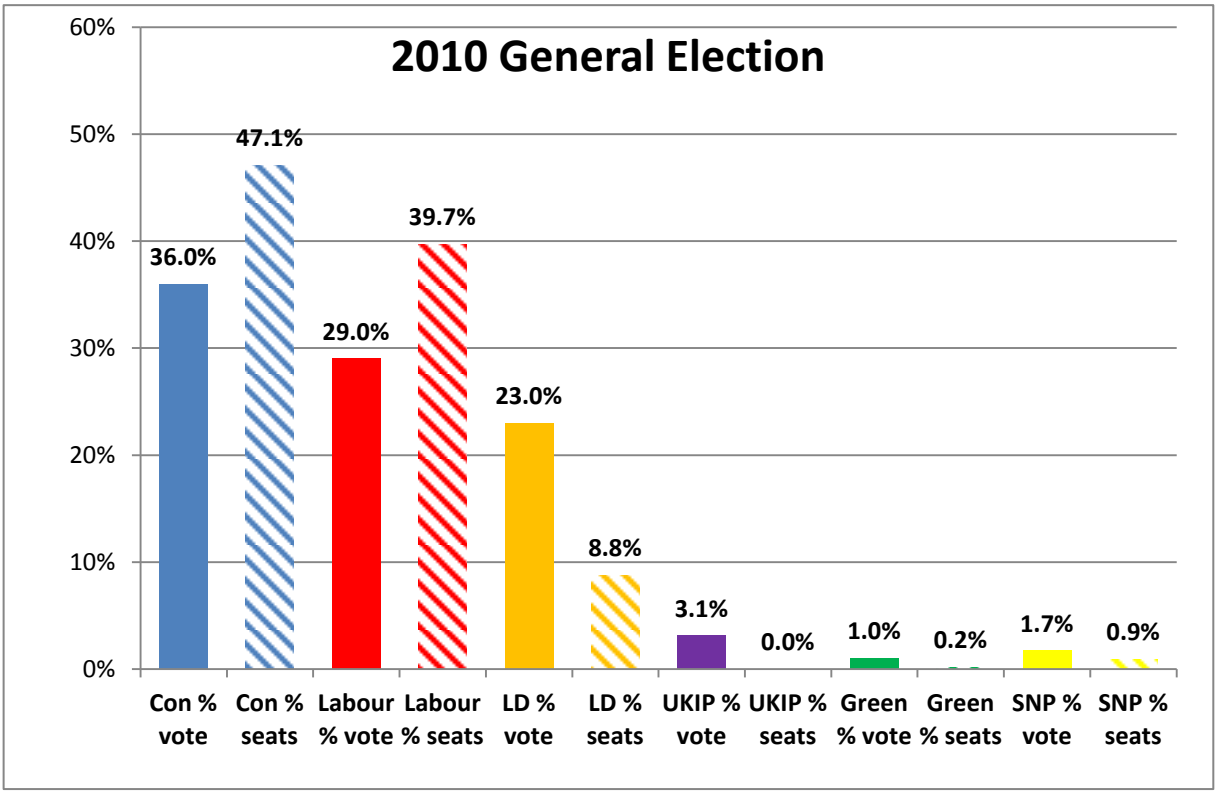
Given **opinion polls** consistently had Conservatives and Labour tied on 33-34% throughout the campaign, the result was a surprise. Most forecasters had expected the Tories to be the largest party, but with a ceiling of about 190 seats. The **Exit Poll** did show the Conservatives well ahead of Labour, on about 316 seats – this was initially disbelieved but proved to be a 15-seat underestimate. The various polling companies have now gone away for a long think about what went wrong.

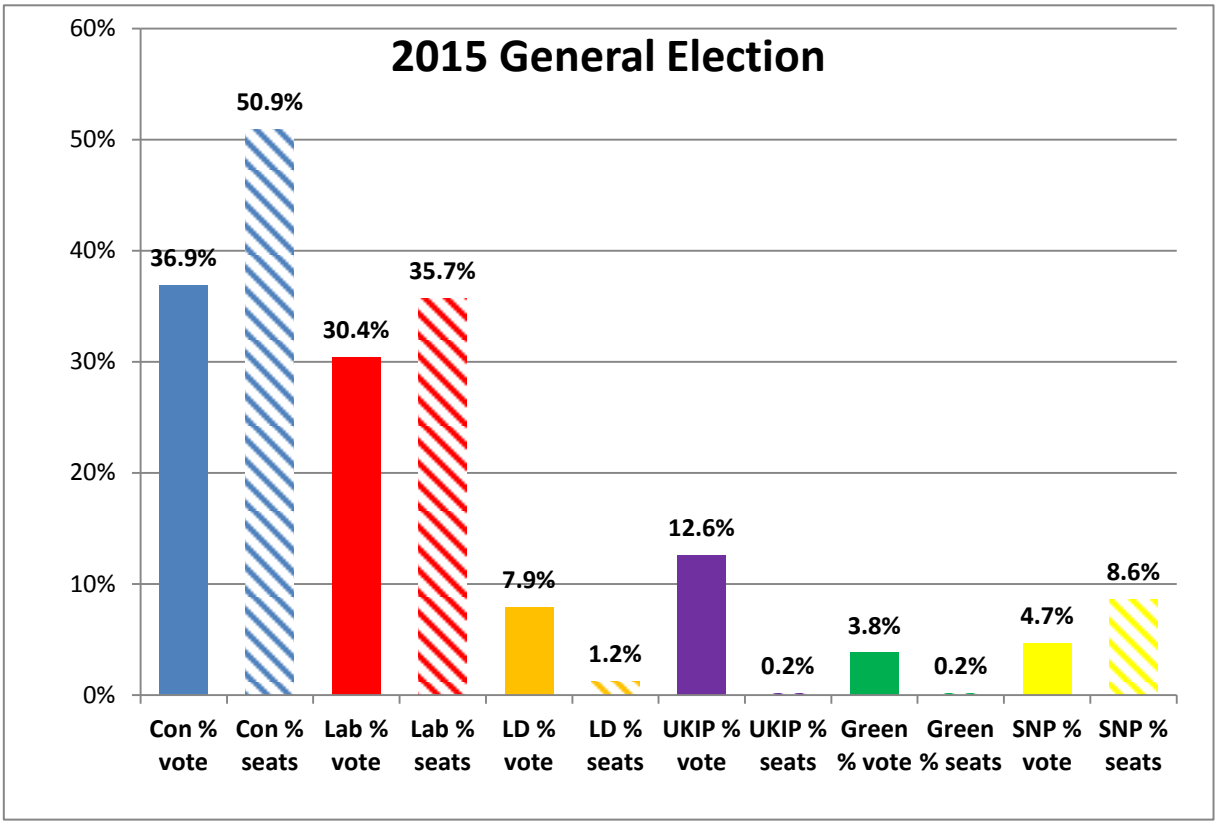
The result allowed David Cameron to remain Prime Minister, but this time at the head of a **single-party majority Conservative government** – the first since May 1997. The Conservatives have an **official majority of 12 seats** – on the basis that 326 is needed for a majority. Given that Sinn Fein's 4 MPs don't take their seats however, 324 seats is really the target, their actual majority is 16.

The other shocks were the **SNP winning 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland** – Con, Lab and Lib Dem have 1 each – with 50% of the Scottish vote, and the **collapse of the Lib Dem vote** resulting in their losing 49 seats across Great Britain. **UKIP** quadrupled their vote but **failed to break through**, holding only 1 of the 2 seats that defecting Tories had given them in 2014 by-elections. **The Greens** held their seat in Brighton but failed to gain any of their target seats despite their best General Election performance in terms of votes.

ELECTORAL SYSTEMS

The Single Member Simple Plurality system came out of the 2015 General Election looking rather better than it had after 2010, although arguments about its disproportionality and unfairness are still clearly valid. The graphs below show the seats to votes comparison for both elections, and I'll review the arguments on the next page:





PRO Single Member Simple Plurality

Constituency link – more MPs with an actual majority of the vote from their electorate:

2015: 317 MPs now have 50% of vote or better = 49%

This is significantly up on 2010, when only 217 MPs had a constituency majority – 33%

and in 2010, of the 433 MPs with only a plurality of the vote, 112 had less than 40% - whereas in 2015, of the 333 MPs with only a plurality, only 50 have less than 40% of the vote in their constituency.

Part of the explanation for this change is probably due to the many first-time MPs newly elected in 2010 (227 a post-war record) being up for re-election in 2015. Now familiar to their constituents, and with a record of service to boast of, they benefited from a small incumbency-bonus in 2015 (may 1500 votes in some places?) and so increased their majorities. John Glen in Salisbury would be a good example of this, increasing his vote from a plurality of 49.5% in 2010 to a majority of 55% in 2015. However, incumbency clearly failed to protect Lib Dems and Scottish Labour MPs from the savage swing against them.

Strong, stable government – SMSP delivered single-party government again.

SMSP gave its usual winner's bonus to the leading party, giving them a majority of seats in the Commons on a plurality of the vote. This makes the 2010 result look like a blip and so this argument in defence of the system looks more credible. Given that Labour won 55% of seats to form a stable government in 2005 with only 35% of the vote, 2015 compares favourably.

One reason for this was the collapse of the third party in England, with UKIP failing to break through in terms of seats.

The Conservatives will also be pleased to see Labour benefiting less from bias in the voting system than in recent elections – Labour received a big-party bonus of 5% more seats than votes, compared to 11% in 2010 and 20% when they won in 2005. It isn't clear why this Labour bias has unwound, but it probably relates to their collapse in Scotland, as well as some relatively narrow losses in Con-Lab marginals.

Voter Choice – clear ideological and policy choices were offered to the electorate again.

After some elections when the parties were relatively close together ideologically (from Blair's reorientation of the Labour Party in the mid-1990s), SMSP delivered the clear voter choice between big opposing parties that its adherents have traditionally pointed to. Analysts suggest that there was more ideological distance between the Conservatives and Labour than at any election since 1983, while the SNP in Scotland (with Plaid Cymru in Wales and the Greens in England) offered a clear anti-austerity alternative, and UKIP a populist and anti-EU platform.

Turnout and Competitive Races – turnout rose to 66% across the UK and more seats saw competitive races.

The SNP surge, the Lib Dems' collapsing support and UKIP's rise (as well as the Greens) made this a less predictable election even than 2010 – with fewer seats seen as safe than at any time since 1997. This meant more people's vote was likely to count and perhaps incentivised turnout, as well as possibly reducing tactical voting.

Squeezing out Extremists – extremist parties won no British seats

Neither the BNP (bankrupt and infighting) or Respect won a seat, winning only a few thousand votes. (N.B. Compare to the BNP winning 2 European Parliament seats under List in 2009).

Diversity – SMSP delivered the most socially diverse parliament in UK History.

See the Parliament section below for analysis, but in 2015 there were 191 female MPs, 43 ethnic minority MPs and 32 openly gay MPs. This suggests party moves for more diverse candidate selection are working, and that nothing drastic (e.g. switching to a multi-member system like STV, or imposing all-women short-lists on all parties) needs to be done as the current trends are so positive.

CON Single Member Simple Plurality

Disproportionality – the voting system is clearly unfair still

Despite a slightly less disproportional result than sometimes, SMSP is clearly unfair – the Conservatives have a parliamentary majority with less than 37% of the vote share.

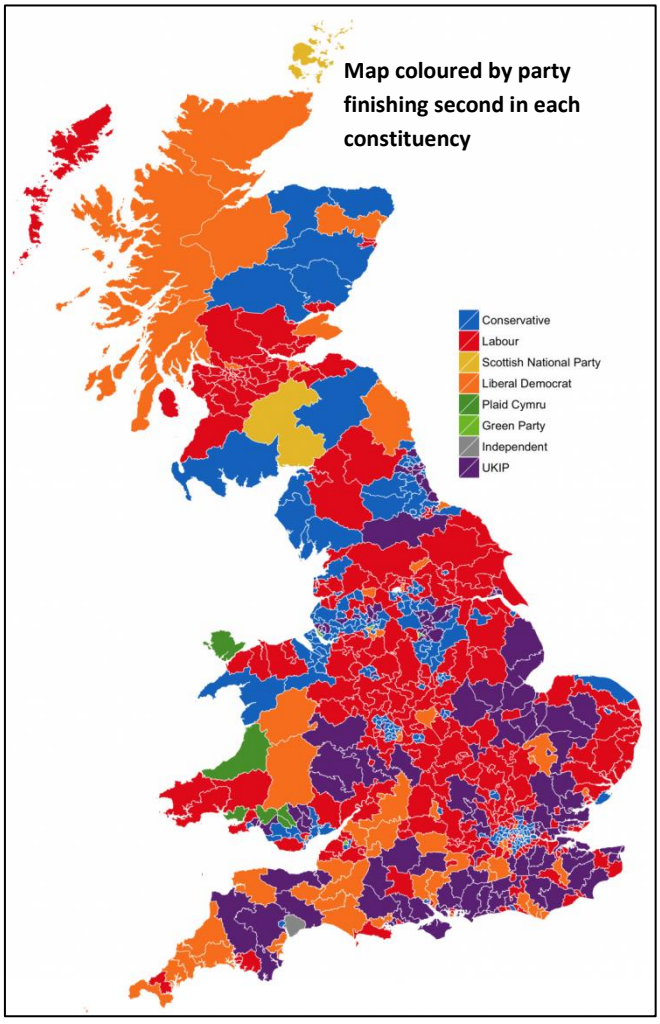
Third and Minor parties particularly suffer

UKIP are right to complain that it is grossly unfair for their nearly 4 Million voters to be represented by only 1 MP in Westminster. Lib Dems and Greens are also heavily under-represented.

In Scotland the SNP does well because a party with only 5% of the UK vote concentrates its support regionally. The dominance in Scotland of the SNP means that parties with substantial support are very under-represented – Labour's 24% of Scottish voters now have only 1 MP, as do the 15% who voted Conservative or the 7.5% who supported the Lib Dems.

Constituency Mandates – most MPs still poorly represent their voters

Because SMSP is a plurality system, 51% of MPs still don't have a majority of support in their own constituency. 50 MPs have less than 40% support – and the MP for Belfast South stands out as winning with only 25% of the vote share in a 5-way race - http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics/constituencies/N06000003



Safe Seats & Electoral deserts – many constituencies are still uncompetitive at election time

SMSP ensures many seats are not competitive – in 525 constituencies the winner was 10% or more of the vote ahead of their nearest rival, so seats can be considered safe even if they are only won with a plurality. This number is up from 2010 when 452 seats were won by a 10%+ margin – probably because 2010 saw a lot of new MPs who in 2015 benefitted from an incumbency bonus (e.g. John Glen).

This means huge swathes of the UK are only represented by one party – electoral deserts. The article below analyses this, including the map to the right, which colours constituencies by the party which came *second* and shows much more diversity than the map of winners on p1.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/10/what-the-runners-up-tell-us-about-britains-election/

Turnout still bad

Safe seats and electoral deserts create a sense among citizens that their votes are probably worth little, and so

disincentivises turnout. Even in the least predictable election since 1992, turnout was still only 66% - and given that the move from household to individual voter registration may have resulted in 800 000 people (mostly mobile young ones like students) falling off the electoral roll (so the number voting is divided by a smaller electorate number, flattering turnout), this could be seen as *worse* than in 2010.

Government Formation Issues - Will single-party government be stable anyway?

Although supporters of SMSP will rejoice that it has produced single-party government again, they may live to regret it given how small the Conservative majority actually is. As Philip Cowley argues (see weblink in Parliament section on p7) David Cameron may have great difficulty with Tory rebels destabilising his government and dragging it to the right, especially around EU issues. Meg Russell's article also points out that the government may face much more opposition in the Lords, where the Lib Dems have c100 peers who will now regularly side with Labour and some cross-benchers against them.

In time, the kind of **stable coalition government** that the UK had from 2010-15, and which switching to PR could produce, may look more attractive – giving a combined mandate to implement controversial policies such as austerity, devo-max and EVEL, and with the more extreme impulses of each side reined back by the need to compromise.

REFERENDUMS

e.g.s of likely referendums in the new Parliament:

Cameron has promised an **EU In-Out referendum** after renegotiation by the end of 2017. The talk now is of trying to get a quick deal in Europe (which may be impossible) and holding it in 2016. This would be a good example of a referendum that attempts to settle a nationally-divisive issue, as well as one which has been called partly because the governing party is itself divided on the issue (perhaps a third of Tory backbenchers are likely to campaign for an out vote, regardless of the terms their leader achieves in EU negotiations).

A referendum is also promised in **Wales**, following the Silk Review in the last Parliament, on giving the Welsh Assembly additional powers, largely financial ones to match Scotland. This is also likely in the first couple of years of the Parliament.

Scotland? – Sturgeon has said that the SNP sweeping 2015 result is not a trigger for another independence referendum, and that it will only be right to have one when circumstances change. Given the Conservative Westminster government's priorities, this could include the outcome of the EU referendum as Scotland and Wales are much more pro-EU than England – Sturgeon has been demanding that an In-Out referendum would have to achieve majorities in each of the nations of the UK to be valid. Changes to the Human Rights Act and moves on English Votes for English Laws could also be argued by the SNP to justify another independence vote, especially if they also win big in the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections.

…and an e.g. showing the weaknesses of referendums

George Osborne's post-election promise to give more powers to City-Regions like Greater Manchester, with **directly elected mayors**, goes against the 2012 Referendum results - http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32726171 showing governments can ignore them (Parliamentary sovereignty) if they don't like the result

PARLIAMENT

Social Representation issues – in terms of gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation, the new Parliament will be significantly more diverse and representative of the wider UK population than previously. However, politics has in the past few decades become very much a graduate profession - 90% of MPs went to university, and over ¼ of those attended Oxbridge. 32% of the new Commons attended independent schools, down from 35% in 2010, but high compared to c7% of the wider population.

43 (or 41? – estimate vary) **Ethnic Minority** MPs (6.6%), up from 27 (4.1%) and 13 in 2005 (2%) – compare to c13% of the UK population.

- all 27 BME MPs in the 2010 parliament stood again: 1 Con lost & 1 Scottish Lab lost

> 16 newly elected non-white MPs: 8 for Labour, 7 for the Conservatives and the first non-white SNP MP to represent the party at Westminster.
> http://www.britishfuture.org/articles/class-of-2015-most-diverse-parliament/
>
> http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/diversity-is-the-only-victory-for-progressives-today-10236706.html#

191 **female** MPs , up from 148 in 2010 (29% up from 22%) - http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32601280

> 102 seats had no female candidates. A further 123 seats only had female candidates fielded by parties with absolutely no chance of winning (e.g. Salisbury, where the only female candidate out of six standing was the Green).

http://commonslibraryblog.com/2015/05/09/general-election-2015-women-mps-and-candidates/#more-2004

20 year old SNP MP beat Douglas Alexander – youngest since 1660s - Mhairi Black, the 20-year-old politics student who beat Labour heavyweight Douglas Alexander to take the seat at Paisley and East Renfrewshire.

Gay MPs – The House of Commons now appears to have the most out gay MPs of any legislature in the world. At least 32 were elected in 2015 (4.9% of the Commons), up from 26 in 2010.

http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection/2015/04/page/2/

http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/05/uk-broke-its-own-record-lgbt-representation-last-week

http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2015/05/08/does-the-uk-now-have-the-most-lgbt-elected-mps-in-the-world/

Education - http://www.suttontrust.com/researcharchive/parliamentary-privilege-the-mps-2015/

http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Parliamentary-Privilege-The-MPs-2015.pdf

Executive Dominance? There may be trouble ahead…

Philip Cowley on likely Con rebellions in HoC - http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/general-election-2015/politics-blog/11596824/How-much-trouble-will-the-Tory-rebels-cause-David-Cameron.html

Mark D'Arcy of the BBC has a different perspective - http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-32727341

Meg Russell on likely problems in the HoL - http://constitution-unit.com/2015/05/11/camerons-parliamentary-challenge-2-managing-the-lords/

UK CONSTITUTION

Must read for the exam! - The UCL Constitution Unit on the Constitutional issues and agenda for the new Parliament - http://constitution-unit.com/2015/05/09/the-new-governments-constitutional-reform-agenda-and-its-challenges/

VOTING BEHAVIOUR – Rational Choice Theories

Broadly the election confirmed arguments that in a dealigned era the electorate is very volatile – seen esp in the collapse of the Lib Dem vote across the UK, the triumph of the SNP and the collapse of Labour in Scotland, and the rise of UKIP and the Greens. This article summarises dealignment well - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection/voter-dealignment-disillusion-and-the-implications-for-the-may-2015-election/

Various versions **of rational choice theory** could be used to explain the result – all emphasising essentially **short-term decisions** by voters, uninfluenced by past partisan attachments. So the following may all have been influential:

- Party **policies** (e.g. on austerity, welfare, EU referendum – significant in different ways in England and Scotland) – but the NHS appears not to have had as much salience as Labour Labour wanted whereas those who felt more austerity was needed massively favoured the Conservatives. On valence issues (where the parties broadly agree on what they wish to achieve) like economic management, dealing with immigration, job creation, etc. the Conservatives seem to have been more trusted than Labour.

7. What are the three most important issues for the country as a whole / for you and your family?

	% naming in top three – "Britain as a whole"	ALL	Voted Con	Voted Lab	Voted LD	Voted UKIP	Voted Green	Voted SNP
1	Improving the NHS	55	39	76	58	44	57	62
2	Getting the economy growing and creating jobs	51	61	50	58	27	43	61
3	Controlling immigration	41	47	28	24	87	13	18
4	Improving schools	13	7	19	19	4	21	16
5	Reforming welfare to cut benefit dependency	20	31	12	19	20	10	12
6	Cutting the deficit and the debt	30	52	15	37	23	14	15
7	Dealing with crime	6	5	7	6	8	4	4
8	Protecting the environment	9	3	9	13	3	53	12
9	Defending Britain's interests in Europe	18	23	8	14	37	5	8
10	Tackling the cost of living crisis	25	13	41	24	14	31	38
11	Something else	12	5	14	13	13	24	25

10. Thinking about the state of Britain's economy and the amount the government spends and borrows, which of these statements comes closest to your view, even if you don't completely agree with any of them?

%	ALL	Voted Con	Voted Lab	Voted LD	Voted UKIP	Voted Green	Voted SNP
The national economy is not yet fully fixed, so we will need to continue with austerity and cuts in government spending over the next five years	46	84	17	45	46	19	11
While a period of austerity was needed to fix the national economy, we don't need another five years of cuts in government spending	30	14	43	39	34	26	36
Austerity and cuts in government spending were never really needed to fix the national economy, it was just an excuse to cut public services	24	2	40	16	20	55	53

- Retrospective voting – were the Conservatives simply rewarded for a growing economy and falling unemployment? (But why then were the Lib Dems hammered? Why wasn't Labour's message about the recovery not reaching ordinary people's wallets more salient? And why weren't critiques of continuing high deficits more effective?)

- Party **image** – trust issues seem to have been important: Were Labour still blamed for the 2008 crash and economic slump? Should they have done more to apologise? Were the Conservatives more trusted to take a harder line in promoting British (English?) interests

6. Here are some reasons people have given for deciding on the party they ended up voting for. Which three were the most important in your decision?

% naming in top three reasons	ALL	Voted Con	Voted Lab	Voted LD	Voted UKIP	Voted Green	Voted SNP
I have ALWAYS VOTED for that party	22	24	33	17	4	7	23
I trusted the MOTIVES AND VALUES of that party more than those of other parties	75	71	75	71	81	89	91
I preferred the PROMISES made by the party I voted for more than the promises of the other parties	62	49	65	51	83	81	76
I thought the LEADER of the party I chose would make the BEST PRIME MINISTER	45	71	39	19	38	13	17
I thought the senior members of the party I chose would make a MORE COMPETENT GOVERNMENT	33	46	26	30	21	22	38
I voted tactically to STOP ANOTHER PARTY from winning	19	12	22	34	20	19	12
I voted for who I thought was the BEST CANDIDATE LOCALLY regardless of their party	25	18	25	43	22	32	28

within the EU and also UK than Labour? Were the Lib Dems damned by their tuition fees U-turn in 2010, and by the compromises required by Coalition more generally? Was dissatisfaction with the mainstream political process, and a search for an alternative politics behind the rise in votes for SNP, UKIP and Greens in different places?

- **Leadership** perceptions – clearly important in this election, and linking strongly to party image. This clearly favoured the Conservatives – of the 83% of voters with a view, David Cameron led Ed Miliband on "Best Prime Minister" 60% to 40%. Was this reinforced by the Media? Although Ed Miliband's personal ratings did improve over the campaign, perhaps his image was too fixed years in advance.

- the **National Campaign** – Traditionally the actual General Election campaigns are not felt to make a big difference to the result, with little changing in the polls over several weeks. With a Fixed Term parliament and known election date, campaigning had clearly started months before May 7th 2015, and so it was no surprise when the polls failed to move in the six weeks of the "short campaign". At the beginning of May, Labour was felt to have had a good

campaign, with Miliband outperforming expectations – although Nicola Sturgeon of the SNP was the real star of the campaign, and especially the televised debates. The Conservatives were criticised for being too negative and for rushing out a number of policy promises (right to buy for social housing tenants, an Act to prevent tax rises) in what was seen to be a panicky way.

And then the results came out! The Cons significantly outperformed the polls and won an unexpected majority. Was there a late swing in response to Tory warnings about not risking the recovery with Labour, and about the dangers of a Labour minority government being pushed around by the SNP? This table from Lord Ashcroft suggests the campaign really did make a difference, with half of all voters only deciding who to vote for in the month of the campaign period – and a third in the first week of May.

When did you finally decide which party to vote for?

%	ALL	Voted Con	Voted Lab	Voted LD	Voted UKIP	Voted Green	Voted SNP
On polling day	11	8	11	15	12	18	5
In the last few days	12	9	13	20	10	15	4
In the last week	10	9	9	16	9	12	4
In the last month	18	17	17	19	18	26	12
Since the beginning of the year	13	12	10	7	23	13	20
Longer ago than a year	11	9	10	7	19	8	22
I've always known how I would end up voting	26	35	31	15	9	9	32

- The **Local Campaign –** in 2010 some evidence suggested that vigorous local campaigning, with targeting of key voting groups with particular messages, door knocking by committed activists, etc. could make a difference in marginal seats, and that the Conservatives were at a relative disadvantage in this area compared to Labour and the Lib Dems, despite their financial advantage at a national level.

As 2015 approached the Lib Dems hoped that their well dug-in incumbent MPs could survive the expected national swing against the party by running vigorous hyper-local campaigns, and so save perhaps 30 seats even if the party's vote share slumped below 10%. Not only did this not happen, although constituency polling also found that Labour's local campaigning (organised by former Obama 2012 ground-campaign manager Arnie Graf) was more effective than the Tories' in contacting voters, this apparently failed to help Labour as the results came in.

- the **Media** – As in 2010, the Media were largely supportive of the Conservatives (e.g. Sun, Mail, Telegraph), with only the (lower circulation) Mirror and Guardian among the national press clearly declaring for Labour. The picture was muddied by the Scottish Sun declaring for the SNP, while it's English sister paper again backed the Conservatives, by the Express

becoming the first national paper to endorse UKIP for a General Election, and by some papers preferring a continued Con-Lib Dem Coalition (The Times and The Independent).

As usual it is not clear in these endorsements made any difference to the result, but front pages attacking the rival party and its leader may have had an effect, either over the campaign period or by defining Ed Miliband negatively in the years running up to the vote. This LSE article thinks the right-wing media have too much influence - http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/generalelection/is-it-the-daily-hate-co-wot-won-it/

Read more

The Pollster and Tory supporter Lord Ashcroft focuses on essentially rational choice explanations for the 2015 result in this speech, drawing on data from a 12000-sample poll of actual voters.

Ashcroft Speech on results - http://lordashcroftpolls.com/2015/05/reflections-on-the-election-polls-and-creating-a-conservative-party-people-need-not-be-shy-about-supporting/

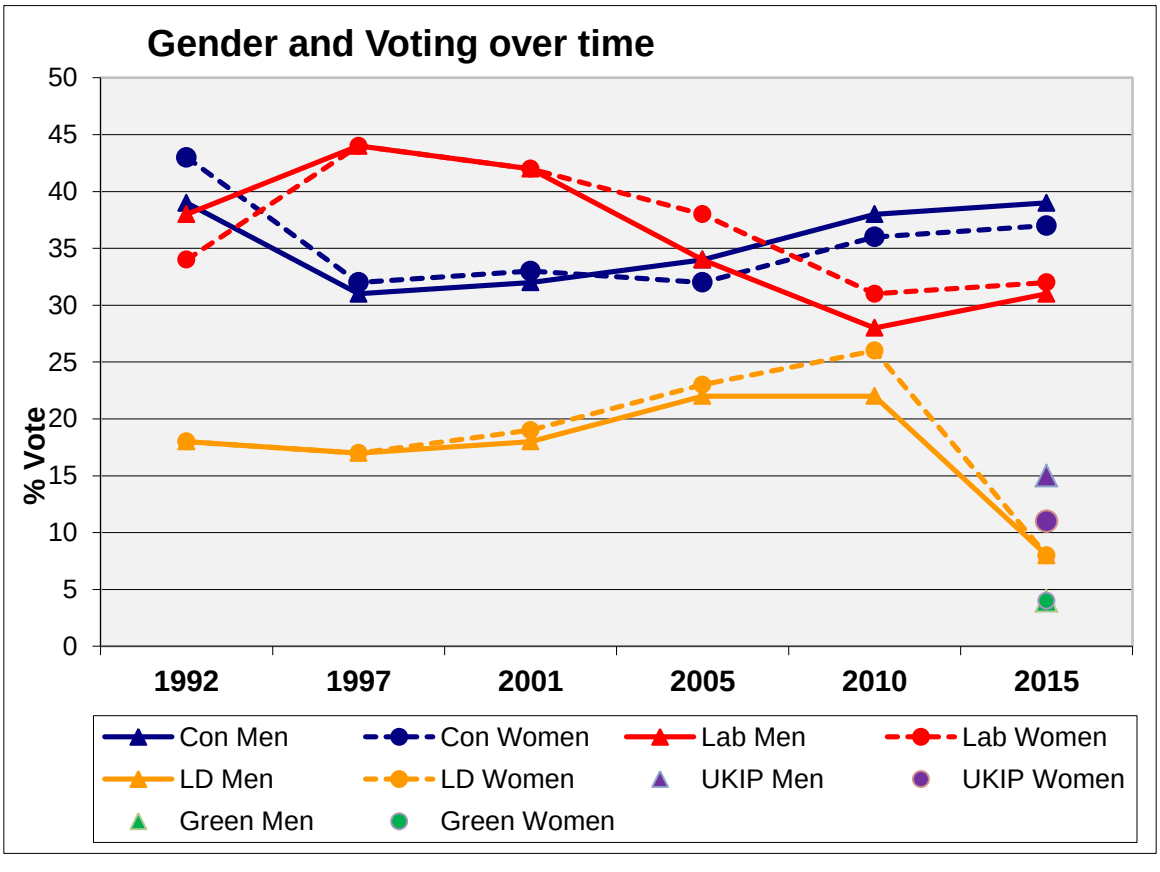
Ashcroft summary info - http://www.conservativehome.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/LORD-ASHCROFT-POLLS-Post-vote-poll-summary1.pdf

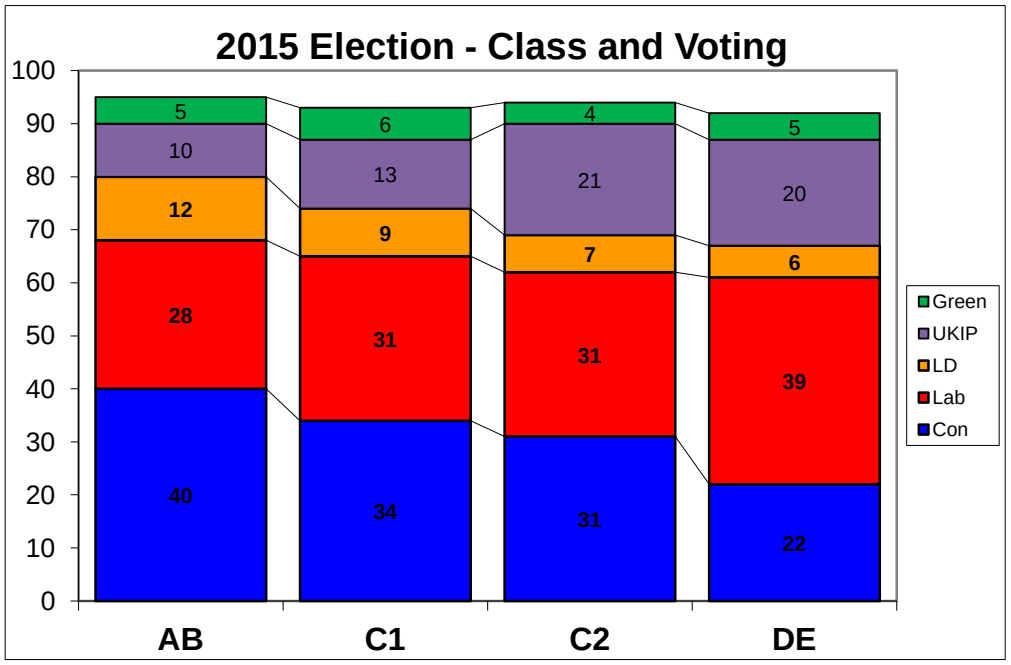
VOTING BEHAVIOUR – Social Structures

However, the provisional data suggests some **continued alignment** in UK voting, with long-term **structural explanations** to do with Age, Class and Ethnicity indicating that at least a large minority of voters have a strong partisan attachment to a particular party which they will vote for in almost all circumstances (and Ashcroft's graph on when voters decided, above, shows that 26% of voters always knew who they would vote for – and this may be a significant under-estimate). The graphs below illustrate this:

N.B. All 2015 data provisional and GB only

See also https://www.ipsos-mori.com/election2015/interactive.aspx for an interactive chart to investigate the impact of Class, Age and Gender on voting over time.




2015 Election - Class and Voting
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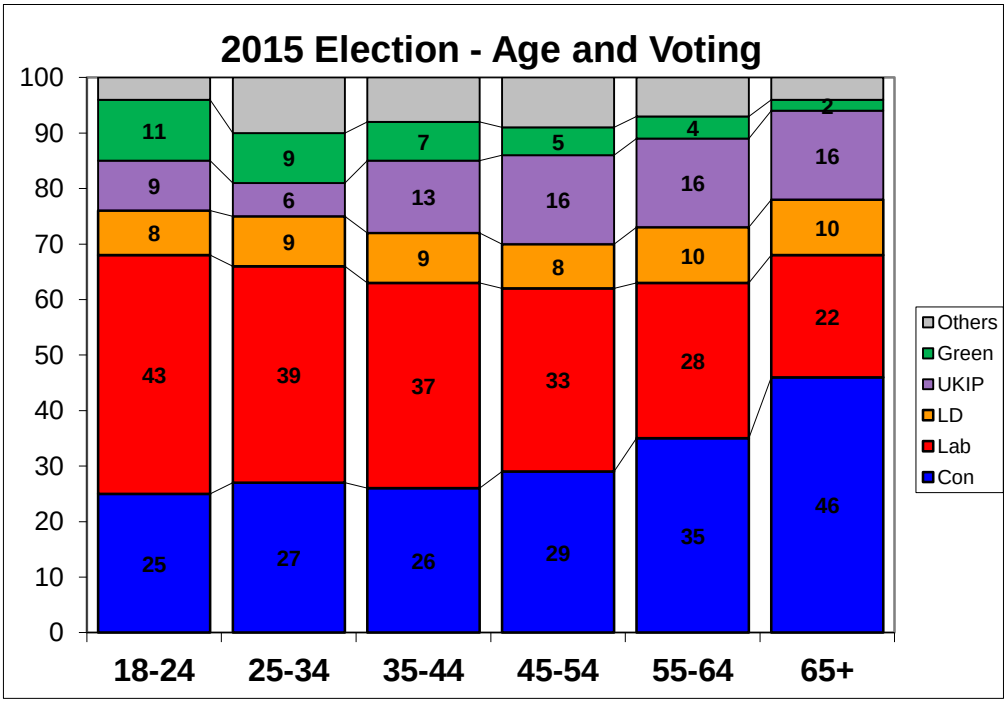
2015 Election - Age and Voting
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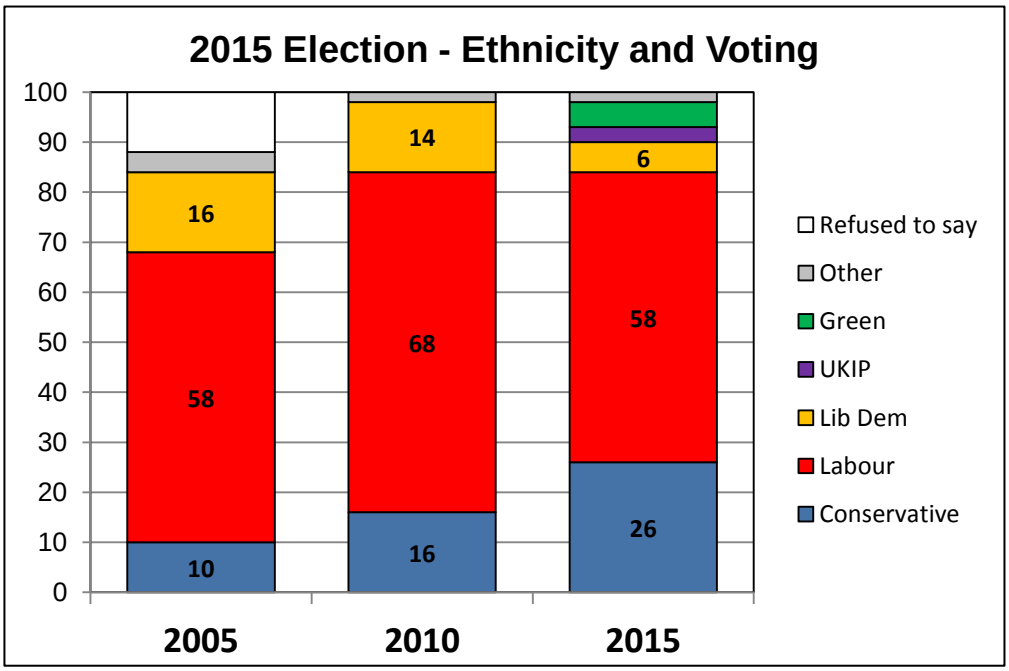
2015 Election - Ethnicity and Voting
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