

# Hung parliaments

What are parties' options if a general election returns no clear winner?



---

## About this report

Despite the experiences of the 2010–15 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition and the 2017 Conservative–DUP confidence and supply agreement, understanding of hung parliaments among the UK’s main national political parties is poor, and formal rules and conventions are lacking. This report looks at the options parties have in the event that a general election returns no clear winner.

 [@instituteforgov](https://twitter.com/instituteforgov)

[www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk)

---

# Contents

Introduction	4
Multi-party and minority governments	5
Approaching a deal	12
Forming a government	15
Conclusion	22
References	23
About the author	25

---

# Introduction

In the 20th century, the UK's first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system typically delivered majority governments. The unambiguous mandate afforded such governments has, proponents of the model say, allowed those governments to deliver a clear policy programme.\* However, this argument appears to have been weakened by the experience of more recent electoral cycles: two of the four general elections since 2010 returned hung parliaments, and the other two, though being majority wins, failed to deliver the 'strong and stable' government FPTP is supposed to provide.

The official opposition, Keir Starmer's Labour Party, has enjoyed a sustained poll lead for much of the past 12 months. However, with the election campaign not yet started and possibly the best part of a year still to go, it remains possible that the 2024 general election will see no party win an outright majority. In that scenario, forming a government – in the UK a complex process for which the opposition and civil service will already be preparing – will become even more complicated.

In the absence of a single-party majority, there is significant flexibility for parties in how they approach forming a government. There is only one hard rule: whatever government is formed must have the "ability to command the confidence of the House of Commons".<sup>1</sup> However, despite the UK's comparatively recent experience of both coalition and minority governments, Westminster lacks institutional memory of minority and multi-party governance. There are valuable lessons to learn from both 2010 and 2017, from other countries and other parts of the UK; since devolution, Scotland and Wales have both had different types of non-majority governments. This paper seeks to identify those lessons.

Across the different options available to parties, there is one core trade-off: between the degree of stability a party is seeking and the level of compromise it is willing to make. Formal power-sharing, based on an agreed programme and structures, can give the largest governing party more certainty that its policy agenda will be delivered, but requires that agenda to be agreed with others – it will either include policies it has not campaigned for, or exclude policies for which it has. A looser agreement, or indeed governing as a minority, might mean a government does not need to make immediate compromises on its policy agenda, but will instead require it to continually build informal coalitions to secure each element of its programme.

This paper will examine some of the trade-offs that parties may need to make, what elements a deal can include, and the considerations that might affect what deal is most appealing or viable for parties – but begins by setting out the existing rules and conventions for government formation after an election with an unclear outcome.

---

\* Many disagree and push for a move to another voting system. For more on electoral reform see Sargeant J and Pannell J, *Electoral Reform and the Constitution*, Institute for Government and Bennett Institute, 2023, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution)

---

# Multi-party and minority governments

## **Coalition and minority governments are historically rare in Westminster but have become more common**

There are two scenarios under which multi-party or minority governments have been formed in the UK. Either no party wins a majority in a general election, or a party with a majority loses it over the course of a parliament. With the 2019 parliament drawing to a close, this paper will focus on the former situation, although some of the lessons we identify will apply to the latter.

In the 20 general elections since the Second World War, all held under first-past-the-post (FPTP), 17 have resulted in a single party winning a majority of seats in parliament. Between 1945 and 2010 there was just one instance of a minority government being formed immediately after an election, and a few cases of governments winning small majorities they later lost over the course of the parliament due to resignations or by-elections.\*

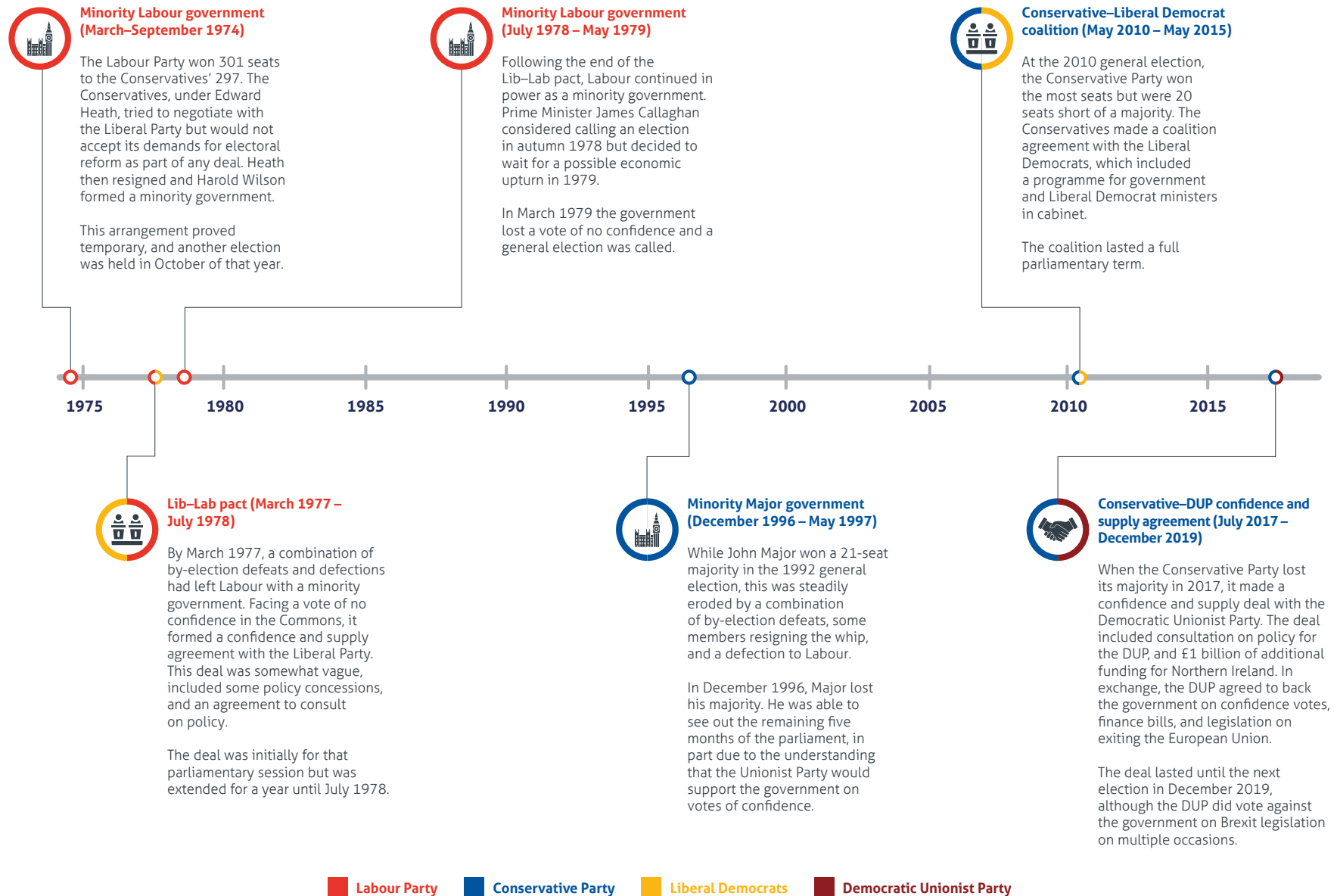
However, as the 21st century has progressed the reliability of FPTP elections to return majority governments has wavered. Between 2010 and 2019, two of the four general elections failed to deliver a majority government, resulting in the 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition and the 2017 Conservative–DUP confidence and supply agreement.

---

\* Coalitions and other governing arrangements were more common before 1945, though these were all formed in response to national emergencies such as the First and Second World Wars and the Great Depression.



Figure 1 **Timeline of minority governments, coalitions and other agreements in the UK, 1974 to present**



Source: Institute for Government analysis.

---

## Formal rules for government formation after hung parliaments are limited

The UK does not have well defined rules for what happens after an unclear election result – a consequence of the assumption that FPTP will deliver parliamentary majorities.<sup>2</sup> This lack of clarity means UK political parties are given considerable leeway when forming governing agreements when a vote does not return a clear majority.

This process usually happens more by convention than according to what limited defined rules there are. These are set out in *The Cabinet Manual*, which notes that convention dictates an incumbent prime minister stays in position and is entitled to remain in post until parliament reconvenes after an election – to see if their government can command confidence – but is expected to resign if it does not and there is a “clear alternative” leader able to form a government.<sup>3</sup>

The prime minister can resign themselves, or on behalf of the entire government. In this case the monarch will invite the person “who appears most likely to be able to command the confidence of the House” to form a new government.<sup>4</sup> The monarch, as a non-partisan figure, has historically made this invitation on the recommendation of the incumbent prime minister. But *The Cabinet Manual* states that “the government” remains in place unless the prime minister resigns on its behalf; there is no clearly stated convention for what happens if just the prime minister resigns. In this case the convention on whose advice the monarch should take for who to invite to form a government is not clear.

Other than an expectation that the monarch be kept informed of general developments, there are no clear rules or conventions that dictate how negotiations between parties should be conducted. There are no rules, for example, that smaller parties should negotiate with the largest party first, nor are there set expectations over what type of deal can be agreed, or even about what threshold any negotiations should reach before a government can be formed. This was illustrated in 2010, when Gordon Brown resigned as prime minister when it became clear that he could not form a government, of any make-up, with a majority. He did this in part to try to see if a deal between the Liberal Democrats and Labour was possible without him as leader, but it was Conservative leader David Cameron who was invited, on Brown’s advice to the Queen, to form a government after agreeing the terms of a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

As noted, forming and maintaining a government is reliant on holding the confidence of the House of Commons. The first vote to affirm this is usually on the first King’s Speech of a parliament, but votes on the budget (that is, a finance bill) and other matters the government defines as such can also test confidence. These are de facto confidence votes,<sup>\*</sup> so the Commons voting down either would see the government fall.

---

\* A prime minister can declare any vote a confidence vote, more on which later.

---

Other countries – including in the UK, Scotland – take a far more formal approach to government formation. This often involves a vote being held at the beginning of a parliament in which members vote for a candidate to lead the house (in Scotland, the first minister). The Institute for Government has called for such confirmation votes to be introduced in the UK parliament.<sup>5</sup>

### **A party that falls short of a majority has various options**

Failing to win a majority does not rule out a party forming a government. Provided no other party has won a majority either, there may be several routes to forming a government.

As outlined above, the rules on forming a government do not set out how any agreement should function, and so there is no single way of doing a deal, even for specific models like formal coalitions. Westminster's limited experience of minority or multi-party government means that there may be a temptation to draw on the deals used in the past. Even when a type of agreement has been used in the past, such as the 2010–15 coalition, this does not mean that a future coalition would – or should – work in the same way.

Broadly, there are four options for a party without a majority: minority government, a confidence and supply agreement, a co-operation agreement, and a formal coalition. A single party can govern as a minority, but there is technically no limit to how many could form a government in the other arrangements. In Europe it is not uncommon for as many as five parties to form coalitions, though due to the predominance of the two 'main' parties this is far less likely in the UK.

### **Minority government**

Minority governments without an agreement are formed by a single party without a majority in the House of Commons. The government will still need to have the confidence of the House, and so will rely on other parties voting with it on key matters of confidence.

As well as outright confidence votes a minority government will by definition also need the support of other parties to pass any of its legislative agenda, and so must work with the opposition on a vote-by-vote basis. This means the stability of these agreements can vary greatly, depending on the composition of parliament. This will be easier for the government in a fragmented parliament: if the opposition parties are divided and unlikely to work together on many policy issues, it is easier for a minority government to survive and pass at least some of its legislative agenda, bill by bill. Conversely, a parliament in which opposition parties are more closely aligned is more likely to be able to bring down a minority government by acting together to frustrate its legislative agenda.



---

### **Confidence and supply**

A confidence and supply agreement is an arrangement between political parties that guarantees support for the government in key votes of confidence as well as budget and financial votes (supply). Beyond this, there can be a great deal of variation in the content of a confidence and supply agreement. Such an agreement could include details on policy, mechanisms for co-operation, information sharing and dispute resolution.

### **Coalition**

A coalition is a formal agreement between two or more parties to form a joint government. MPs from both parties are included in cabinet, and MPs from both parties are whipped to vote in the same way. Such an agreement is usually set for the duration of a parliament, although it is possible to include review clauses so that parties can assess their position in the government, and update if needed, at interim points. Review clauses have been used regularly in Ireland, where coalitions are more common than in the UK.<sup>6</sup>

### **Co-operation**

A co-operation agreement is a slightly less clearly defined option, and unlike the above is wholly without precedent in Westminster. It can sit somewhere between a more formalised coalition and the less politically binding confidence and supply agreement. It generally, although not always, includes support on votes of confidence, and often entails an agreement to collaborate on certain areas of policy while the smaller party remains in opposition on other areas. At the time of writing, both the Scottish and Welsh governments are engaged in co-operation agreements (see Box 1).

---

## **Box 1: Co-operation agreements in the UK's devolved governments**

### *The 2021 SNP–Scottish Greens co-operation agreement at Holyrood*

After two months of negotiation following the 2021 Scottish parliamentary elections, the SNP and Scottish Greens signed the Blue House Agreement to collaborate on environmental and constitutional issues, among other things. As the smaller party the Greens have two ministers as part of this agreement – the first time the party has ever had any ministers in the Scottish government – who are outside cabinet but attend meetings twice a year.

### *The 2021 Welsh Labour–Plaid Cymru co-operation agreement in the Senedd*

In 2021 Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru entered into a co-operation agreement in the Senedd. The agreement covers 46 policy areas and is set to run until December 2024.

The agreement puts Plaid legally outside of the executive, but designates it two members who are “adjacent to and vote with” the government on agreed areas of co-operation, and the party also has consultation rights on areas included in the agreement. Plaid also receives two special advisers to help with policy and budgeting, among other areas. The deal does not include any ministerial positions for Plaid, and the remainder of its MSs remain in opposition. The agreement is supported by a unit in the civil service.

Recently, when giving evidence to a Senedd committee, the outgoing first minister Mark Drakeford had a positive assessment of the bespoke arrangement. He observed that the designated Plaid MSs and the government had been able to work together well and resolve difficult issues.<sup>7</sup> However, despite successful co-operation on some matters, including the independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales, Plaid Cymru has stated that it will not renew the deal past 2024.

Table 1 **Types of agreement**

	Minority government	Confidence and supply	Co-operation agreement	Coalition government
	<i>General stability</i> →			
<b>A formal agreement to co-operate</b>	No formal agreement, although there may be an informal understanding that the party forming government will be supported by other parties for the first King's Speech or votes of confidence early on in the term.	Formal agreement to set out the terms of deal.	Formal agreement to set out the terms of deal.	Formal agreement to set out the terms of deal.
<b>Support on confidence votes</b>	No agreed support on confidence votes.	Agreement will include commitment that smaller party or parties votes with governing party or abstains on confidence votes.	Often includes support on confidence votes, but some past agreements such as the SNP/Greens agreement in 2007 did not.	As a joint government all parties vote together on confidence votes.
<b>Information sharing on policy</b>	No additional information shared, beyond that normally shared with parliament.	Often included, at least for relevant policies. Not necessary but improves co-ordination and relationships.	Often included, at least for relevant policies. Not necessary but improves co-ordination and relationships.	Information is shared as all parties are a single government.
<b>Support on key policy priorities</b>	No pre-agreed support on policy priorities, but could be agreed in an ad-hoc way.	Often included if there are particular priority areas for the governing party it wants support in passing new laws.	Often included if there are particular priority areas for the governing party it wants support in passing new laws.	All parties set out a joint policy agenda.
<b>Ministerial positions for both parties</b>	Not included.	Rarely included, but some precedent in New Zealand.	Ministerial positions in specific policy areas for the smaller party or parties can be included, although likely outside cabinet.	Includes ministerial positions for all parties, and collective ministerial responsibility.
<b>Time limitation and review</b>	No agreement and therefore no time limitation.	Rarely included. It is possible to include a time limitation and/or review period, however reduces the stability offered to the governing party.	Rarely included. It is possible to include a time limitation and/or review period, however reduces the stability offered to the governing party.	Set for the duration of a parliament.
<b>Shared policy agenda</b>	No sharing of policy agenda, although need to work with other parties to pass legislation.	While there may be support for certain policy priorities, a shared agenda is not included.	Some specific policy areas may be included as part of a joint agenda, but this is much more limited than a coalition.	All parties set out a joint policy agenda.

*Greater concessions for larger parties* ↓

Never included
 Rarely included
 Often included
 Always included

---

# Approaching a deal

Following an election resulting in no overall majority, a party seeking to form a government will have to make decisions in three key areas. First, whether or not it will seek to make a deal with another party; second, which party or parties it will seek to make a deal with; and finally, what a deal will include. At the same time, the smaller parties will be making their own assessments as to whether to do a deal, and what type of agreement they want to pursue.

Regardless of the type of deal, there are trade-offs that the larger party will have to make. Fundamentally, the objective in forming a government is to be able to govern effectively and pass a legislative agenda – so these trade-offs will largely concern how many concessions the party is willing to make to smaller parties in return for the stability of the government that they form. In general, the more concessions, the greater the level of stability afforded. The route taken to achieve this will be affected by a range of factors, including the outcome on election night.

## 1. Is a deal necessary to govern?

A party that is short of a majority may decide to try to govern alone, without any agreement with other parties. Even when a party forms a minority government without an agreement, maintaining the confidence of the House and its ability to pass legislation relies on co-operating with other parties. In this narrow sense, a hung parliament delivers multi-party government even if a single-party government continues.<sup>8</sup> The decision about whether to seek a deal is one that will fall to the leader of the party.

There are three primary considerations they will be weighing up in making that choice. The first is the scale of the gap between them and a majority. Cobbling together the necessary votes for legislation and confidence matters is much easier if a party needs five votes, rather than 50. The state of the opposition parties matters, too – a divided opposition makes it easier to govern with a minority.

This happened in the 2016 Welsh assembly elections, in which Labour won 29 seats, just two short of a majority. Labour chose to form a minority coalition with the single Liberal Democrat AM, Kirsty Williams. This decision was in part due to the opposition being split between Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives and UKIP – which all had markedly different political positions and secured 12, 11 and 7 seats respectively.

The second consideration is the position of the leader themselves. A hung parliament can be a moment of political risk for the leader of a party, particularly if they had been expected to secure an outright majority. A deal with another party – and the parliamentary security that comes with it – can have a stabilising effect. It can dampen speculation about the personal position of the leader. Theresa May failed to secure an outright majority in 2017, having had a convincing poll lead heading into the election, and as a result her position as leader of the Conservative Party and prime minister suddenly looked in doubt.

---

The deal she quickly brokered with the Democratic Unionist Party allowed her to argue she had the numbers and the mandate to continue – and as a result she was able to continue in the role for a further two years, albeit greatly weakened.

The third consideration is more outward facing – that is, the signal that the party or leader wants to send to the country, including the business community and financial markets. Governing without any agreement with other parties, with the inherent instability this brings, may cause adverse reactions from investors and the markets. The risk of a failed confidence vote and a further election would increase the uncertainty and influence the standing of the UK as an investment prospect. Most parties want to show they can create a stable environment to facilitate growth and investment – a deal is often the clearest route to that.

There are other priorities that can be presented as more credible with a stable deal. For May, Brexit was the central priority for her premiership – in negotiations she needed to be able to show the EU that, if a deal was struck, she would be able to get the necessary support for it in the House of Commons and be able to implement it. That made a deal even more important.

## **2. Which party (or parties) to approach?**

If a party is able to pursue a deal and decides to do so, then the next consideration is who to approach. Smaller parties must decide if they are willing to play ball.

Again, it is numbers that matter most. The first number to consider is how many parties are needed for a deal. The UK's history is of deals between two parties, but multi-party agreements are common internationally. A two-party deal is easier to manage but the size of the majority any deal will generate also matters. While a two-party deal might be the most attractive, if it returns only a very slim working majority then a party leader might want to consider a multi-party deal.

The next key consideration is the shared policy agenda and political alignment between the parties. The 2010 coalition was possible because the Liberal Democrats were prepared to sign up to the Conservatives' austerity agenda – and in return the Conservatives, albeit after much consideration, were prepared to offer the Liberal Democrats something on electoral reform.

Reaching a deal is not just about the ability to agree policy concessions in the heat of negotiations, however, but the personalities involved. Trust between key figures, and the working relationship between the two parties and their leaders, will also be important. Even if parties are able to reach agreement on a list of policy priorities based on their manifestos, they also need to be confident that agreement can be reached on the inevitable range of reactive policies that emerge during a parliament – from domestic to foreign policy.

---

The fourth consideration in the UK context is the need to balance the implications of devolution – with the SNP, Alba, Plaid Cymru, DUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP, and Alliance all currently representing parts of the UK. More specifically to Northern Ireland there is the important role of the UK government as guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement. Indeed, this led to some controversy over the 2017 Conservative–DUP confidence and supply agreement, which critics saw as bringing into question the government’s ability to act with the necessary impartiality about Northern Ireland – and was the main reason that the Conservatives did not enter a more formal coalition with the DUP.<sup>9</sup>

But that deal, which included £1 billion in funding for Northern Ireland, was also controversial with the Scottish and Welsh governments,<sup>10</sup> who saw it as favouring one part of the UK at their expense. This was in large part because the money provided to Northern Ireland was not subject to the Barnett formula – the mechanism that ensures the funding given to devolved governments is a percentage of UK government spend for England.<sup>11</sup>

The added complexity of bringing smaller national parties into negotiations makes it more likely they are only ever part of a deal short of a formal coalition. For example, a coalition deal with Plaid Cymru or the SNP would also raise constitutional questions, given many areas of central government policy affect only England. And while it is highly unlikely a politician from one of these parties would take an England-only portfolio, collective responsibility under a coalition would mean defending England-only policies as part of a UK government. More fundamentally, a party in Northern Ireland could not be a part of government without raising more specific constitutional questions about the operation of the Good Friday Agreement.

Some parties will be bound in some way by their membership. The Liberal Democrats have rules that members must be given the opportunity to vote on any coalition deal. In these instances, party leaders will also have to consider what the membership will be willing to accept, and which parties they would be willing to accept a deal with, while putting together plans for a deal. It can also strengthen the negotiating position of the smaller party, with the desires of the membership acting as red lines when making a deal.

### **3. Designing the deal**

When coming to an agreement there will be various factors to agree on, from political choices such as policy and portfolios, to structural ones such as establishing information sharing and dispute resolution mechanisms. These will be particular to the circumstances and context of the election in question, and the parties involved. This means that rather than seeking an off-the-shelf deal, whether looking to 2010 or 2017, parties should consider the range of choices outlined below to build an agreement that best suits their specific circumstances and exploits the wide scope for different approaches in the UK system. The next section will look in detail at these options.



---

# Forming a government

## The agreement document

If two or more parties do come to a deal, it would be expected that there will be an accompanying public document. While not a legal requirement, it is important not just for recording the deal that has been agreed but to signal to the public and party members the nature of the deal and guide the civil service in how to serve the government and if or how to support any other party. This was done for the coalition agreement in 2010, as well as for the 2017 Conservative–DUP confidence and supply agreement. The specific choices that could be included in such a deal are outlined below, but the level of detail included in the agreement itself is an important choice.

A longer agreement containing these details will provide greater certainty for the parties involved and clarity for both the parties and civil servants on policy priorities for the parliament. However, it can also leave a government with little flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

But while a shorter agreement will allow for more flexible governance, this may in itself be a stumbling block – particularly if the working relationship between the two parties begins to break down, requiring near constant negotiation about individual issues. Longer agreements might also better signal to the public, businesses and civil society what the combined priorities of the government are.

For smaller parties, the original deal might prove to be the moment of greatest leverage – so they might seek greater specificity in order to secure concessions that are priorities for them, their MPs and their members and voters.

Where there is less trust between the parties, or greater uncertainty, there may be a temptation to have a much longer agreement. For example, electoral reform in New Zealand returned its first coalition government in 1996, between National and New Zealand First. This was a surprise to many voters, and the two parties had very distinct policies. The programme for government was more than 70 pages long – far bigger than the 2010 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition agreement (five pages) and still double the later ‘programme for government’ (36 pages).

However, this agreement remains New Zealand’s only coalition to have collapsed, after disputes over portfolios and policy led to New Zealand First walking out on the deal. Until 2023 no agreement, whether coalition, co-operation or confidence and supply, had exceeded 12 pages,\* and certainly the consensus among parties in New Zealand has been that shorter agreements that set out clear principles and priorities are preferable.

---

\* This trend was bucked by the most recent agreement between National, NZ First and ACT, which includes a much higher number of policy agreements.

---

## Policy

The key decision to be made when forming a government is over policy. What is the larger party willing to compromise over or agree on with other parties to form a government, and how much detail should be agreed on these policies? Public agreements on policy can be detrimental to both larger and smaller parties who can be seen to have abandoned some of the issues they were elected on. Unlike in Ireland, where parties familiar with forming coalitions usually make formal pre-election pacts or signal policy congruence,<sup>13</sup> in the UK parties are more accustomed to highlighting policy differences during a campaign, potentially making compromise harder after an election.

Single-party governments rarely pass every piece of legislation in their manifestos, but these changes happen over the course of a parliament, as circumstances change. By contrast, policy compromises for a coalition, confidence and supply or co-operation agreement tend to be revealed at the start, with the election campaign fresh in voters' minds, creating a greater impression of promises being abandoned. As set out in a previous Institute paper *One Year On: The first year of coalition government*:

**"British voters are accustomed to treating pre-election commitments as a definitive guide to what the party would do in government, rather than as bargaining positions, which is what they become in a hung parliament context".<sup>14</sup>**

This makes compromises on policy politically risky, as politicians can be seen to have broken election promises.

With a less extensive confidence and supply or co-operation agreement, there is no obligation to agree on any policy areas, beyond budgets (that is, for confidence and supply.) However, where there is some agreement between parties it may be beneficial to agree on some areas of policy: this can give the senior party greater confidence of a working majority on certain pieces of legislation, at least initially, and allows the smaller party to point to some 'wins' for its support of the government. For example, the 2017 Conservative–DUP agreement included agreements to collaborate on legislation on exiting the EU, on national security, and on policy supporting the army reserve forces in Northern Ireland.

A coalition requires more extensive policy agreement. While negotiations will always require compromises, these difficulties can be superseded by a political will to enter an agreement and form a government. In 2010 the Liberal Democrats dropped their commitment to not raising VAT, while the Conservatives similarly dropped some commitments, such as plans to replace the Human Rights Act with a new Bill of Rights.<sup>15</sup> Both parties were able to agree on various other policies, including scrapping Labour's plans for ID cards and cancelling the third runway at Heathrow.

There is also opportunity in policy negotiations to present concessions gained as important 'wins' to party supporters. In 2010 both parties were also able to come away with a flagship policy to highlight as a victory to their supporters. For the Conservatives this was a rapid deficit reduction plan, and for the Liberal Democrats it was a plan for a referendum on electoral reform.<sup>16</sup>

---

Regardless of the amount of policy agreed, there is a question of detail. While a party may feel a need to agree policy with as much specificity as possible to make sure the other partner is tied into the agreement, this can cause problems down the line. By including specific policies in the agreement, a prospective government can tie itself into commitments that prove difficult once in office, practically or politically – the 2010 coalition programme for government’s commitment to introduce 200 ‘open primaries’, later dropped, is an example of this.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, too little specificity and agreed policy can become unenforceable. The agreement reached between the Conservatives and DUP in 2017 on Brexit was high-level – it just stated that the DUP would vote with the government on matters relating to Brexit. But there was no substance to what the desired Brexit outcome was (nor could there be at that point) and the deal ended up breaking down over disagreements on both policy and approach.

To avoid being tied into unworkable policy, when agreeing policy, parties should try to strike a balance, keeping their commitments broad enough that they can be firmed up once in government and with the support of the civil service.

### **Portfolios and responsibility**

Ministerial positions may also be discussed in negotiations. For the larger party, offering up ministerial roles to another party will reduce its influence over departments and require more robust decision making structures with the junior coalition party. It can also lead to internal party management problems, if MPs who were expecting government roles – and may have been preparing for those roles in the shadow cabinet – lose out to MPs from another party. Sharing ministerial roles can bring more stability for government, with pre-agreed portfolios leading to less ministerial churn, as was the case between 2010 and 2015.<sup>18</sup>

But for the smaller party securing ministerial roles might be a priority in negotiations. Government portfolios offer greater influence over what the government does, and securing junior ministerial positions in a department can enable a smaller party to play a ‘watchdog function’, allowing those ministers to monitor policy direction and departmental activities for their party leadership. That is not to say that government positions are not without risk for smaller parties: a greater number of positions over a range of portfolios can result in them being seen as indistinguishable from the senior governing party, which sets the majority of the agenda.

Any agreement requires thought from the parties on how to manage collective responsibility. During the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, there was an assumption that collective responsibility would function in much the same way as under single-party government. This was true much of the time, but there was a need for parties to agree to disagree on certain divisive issues such as the campaign for AV electoral reform.<sup>19</sup>

---

The traditional formulation in Westminster is that coalition agreements will include ministerial positions, but other agreements will not. However, there is no rule against offering ministerial portfolios to smaller parties in other forms of agreement and there could be benefits to offering non-cabinet ministerial portfolios for the smaller party outside of a formal coalition, which can offer a middle ground between joint cabinet government and the smaller party being entirely outside it. There is scope for this in a co-operation agreement, and even within a confidence and supply, as seen in New Zealand in 2005 (see Box 2). The portfolios will have implications for collective responsibility and how far the parties in an agreement can distinguish their responsibilities and achievements from each other.

For ministers outside cabinet, collective responsibility has been managed in different ways. The SNP–Greens agreement in Scotland allows for two Greens ministers in government. Their portfolios are in areas of particular interest to the party, with one minister for green skills, circular economy and biodiversity, and one for zero carbon buildings, active travel and tenants’ rights. They are invited to attend cabinet twice a year and are bound by collective responsibility except for matters explicitly excluded from the deal such as on fee-paying schools or Nato membership.<sup>20</sup> The rest of the Scottish Greens MSPs are not bound by collective responsibility. When negotiating to form a government, portfolios can be offered as part of negotiations without having to enter full coalition.

### **Box 2: The 2005 New Zealand Labour–NZ First confidence and supply agreement**

Unlike most other nations, New Zealand’s confidence and supply agreements have at times included ministerial positions outside of cabinet. In 2005, the deal between Labour and NZ First included the role of foreign minister for NZ First leader Winston Peters.

At the time such a high-level position for a party that was not in government was unprecedented in New Zealand. The position was outside of cabinet, so Peters was only bound by collective responsibility in areas of his portfolio. This novel approach was made possible in part by New Zealand’s flexible constitutional arrangements and permissive rules for government formation.<sup>21</sup>

While unusual, the model proved effective enough to be repeated by other parties. After the subsequent election, the National Party agreed ministerial positions for three parties who were all in confidence and supply agreements. This included the usually cabinet level position of minister of consumer affairs for the ACT party.

---

## Information sharing and dispute resolution

Agreements about information sharing and mechanisms for consultation are important under every type of deal. This can be established formally with the civil service, but also more informally between parties.

In theory, if both parties are in government, then ministers in the same department should have access to the same papers. This is especially important for the smaller parties, who have a role beyond their departmental portfolio to manage their party's interests within the department. In practice, during the 2010 coalition, the information and support provided to Liberal Democrat ministers varied greatly depending on the culture of the department and personality of the secretary of state.<sup>22</sup> Information sharing and access to officials should be better defined by parties when negotiating future coalitions.

In other cases parties will need to agree on what principles will guide their information sharing. If the agreement means that a party is 'outside' government, it will not automatically be allowed access to government documents – any more than backbenchers of the governing party are. Under such an agreement – where the senior party is not obliged to share information and plans with the junior party, and the junior party is not required to back the government on *all* votes – good information sharing principles can be mutually beneficial. Trust between the parties is key to making sure that any deal does not fall apart, and so a principle of 'good faith and no surprises' (a term used in agreements in New Zealand, Ireland and Canada) between the parties can help to ensure that disputes can be managed ahead of time privately, rather than playing out in the press or the chamber, undermining the stability of the government.

There needs to be another way for the party in government to share information. There are no clear rules on how this might work; however, it could be formalised, with routes and structures including regular meetings to share information about upcoming policy, legislation or other important material. The 2017 confidence and supply agreement between the DUP and Conservatives, for example, included a 'co-ordination committee' for the parties to co-operate on areas covered by the deal.

Clear mechanisms for how a deal is managed day-to-day are also important for ensuring stable government, and these should be agreed for information sharing, co-working and dispute resolution as part of any deal, regardless of what type of deal is agreed. As Mark Drakeford recently observed:

**“You have to have two strands in an agreement: you have to have a policy agreement [...] but you have to have an explicit document that sets out the working arrangements that underpin that.”<sup>23</sup>**

---

Good mechanisms are key to facilitating strong working arrangements between parties, but trust between parties and key personalities will also have a major impact on how well parties co-operate in coalition. For example, the good working relationships between David Cameron, George Osborne, Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander, whose meetings became known as ‘the Quad’, were more important to managing the coalition and disputes than the more formal ‘coalition committee’ initially established as part of the coalition agreement but very rarely used.<sup>24,25</sup>

### **Time limitation and review**

Confidence and supply and co-operation agreements can also be time-limited. This may appeal to parties (in particular the smaller parties) who do not want to commit to a full parliamentary term. They can offer a chance for renewal of a deal, but in so doing limit the stability of the government to the extent that the larger party should avoid these time limitations as far as possible.

The 1977 ‘Lib–Lab pact’ (effectively a confidence and supply agreement) lasted 18 months and was set to expire at the end of each parliamentary session. It was extended once, for a further 12 months, before coming to an end.\* The renewal of the deal after six months led to some new, albeit loose, government commitments on areas such as devolution and direct elections to the European parliament.<sup>26</sup>

However, a review agreement can greatly undermine the stability of the government and lead to uncertainty over whether the government would be able to maintain confidence beyond the stated time horizon. The senior party should always seek an agreement for a full parliamentary term, but this may involve certain guarantees for the smaller party, including that an early election will not be called.

### **Considerations for the civil service**

Decisions around forming a government require parties to have – or be provided with – good knowledge of government structures, and advice on policy included in any agreement. Parties may be inclined to draw on the limited UK precedent when designing a deal, but doing so would exclude many of the options outlined in this paper that could be more appropriate.

While an incumbent government will have civil service support for proposed policies and advice on how to make co-ordination mechanisms work, this is not necessarily true of opposition parties seeking to form a government. Currently, *The Cabinet Manual* states simply that the civil service support of negotiations “may only be organised by the Cabinet Secretary with the authorisation of the prime minister”.<sup>27</sup>

---

\* This was agreed during a parliamentary term, with Labour facing the risk of a vote of no confidence, rather than after a hung parliament.



---

But while parties may prefer not to involve the civil service in the political trade-offs of negotiations, as was the case in 2010, advice on mechanisms and options for deals would help create a solid foundation for productive talks. The civil service should be made available to support negotiations from an early stage, be prepared to provide advice on constitutional principles, and act as a source of knowledge on the different options available for parties.

It must also ready itself for the potential outcome of the parties' talks. As Nick Clegg observed of civil service support in forming the coalition in 2010, they "were prepared for the negotiations to form a coalition... But they were woefully under prepared for what it actually meant to try and create two streams of authority at the top of government."<sup>28</sup> As part of negotiations the civil service should provide advice to parties on the administrative implications of any arrangements, as well as policies agreed.

---

## Conclusion

Politics in the UK has been marked by instability and turmoil in recent years – as two hung parliaments in four elections since 2010 attest. While the current polls suggest a strong likelihood of a majority Labour government being returned at the upcoming general election, all the UK’s main political parties should be prepared for a less expected outcome. However, unlike their counterparts in other countries – and in the devolved nations of the UK – they are not well supported in doing this. The lack of experience with minority and multi-party government at Westminster should not limit the options explored in the case of a hung parliament, in 2024 or in future elections.

Fundamentally, effective government should be the objective in any arrangements decided on after a hung parliament. A basic level of stability is needed to ensure the government can last and pass its agenda – not just on finance bills and budgets, which a government must be able to pass to stay in office, but also on day-to-day legislative business. In the context of the upcoming election, coming as it does in a period of fiscal pressures, struggling public services and a cost of living crisis at home and geopolitical instability abroad, such stability will be especially important.

A party may feel that parliamentary arithmetic necessitates only minimal support from other parties to do this, and that a basic confidence and supply or co-operation agreement may be adequate to govern effectively. Or it may decide greater concessions would be required to achieve this and look into entering a formal coalition. But as this paper has shown, these are not the only options, nor does Westminster’s recent but limited experience of both – the 2010 coalition and 2017 confidence and supply agreement – provide off-the-shelf models for either. Ultimately, the right arrangements for governing without a majority will depend on the context of the election and the trade-offs parties are prepared to make.

As the next election approaches both larger and smaller parties should begin to think about those trade-offs – as well as what their red lines and key asks will be in any potential negotiations. Not doing so risks being blindsided by an unexpected result, and forming a government that is ineffective, unstable or even collapses through the parliament. At the conclusion of half a decade of political instability at the heart of the UK government this would be a major misstep and leave the country in an even weaker state. We hope the options put forward in this paper can be of help in avoiding this fate.

---

# References

- 1 Cabinet Office, *The Cabinet Manual*, HM Government, 2011, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79d5d7e5274a18ba50f2b6/cabinet-manual.pdf>
- 2 Sargeant J, Pannell J, McKee R and others, *Electoral Reform and the Constitution: What might a different voting system mean for the UK?*, Institute for Government and Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 12 July 2023, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution)
- 3 Cabinet Office, *The Cabinet Manual*, HM Government, 2011, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79d5d7e5274a18ba50f2b6/cabinet-manual.pdf>.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Paun A, *Westminster in an age of minorities: How to form and sustain a government after another hung parliament*, Institute for Government, 2015, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/westminster-age-minorities](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/westminster-age-minorities)
- 6 Seyd B, *Coalition Government in Britain: Lessons from overseas*, The Constitution Unit, 2002, p. 77, [www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/84.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/sites/constitution-unit/files/84.pdf)
- 7 Welsh parliament, Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister, 8 December 2023, <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/13573#A83858>
- 8 Haddon C, Hazell R and Paun A, *Making minority government work: Hung parliaments and the challenges for Westminster and Whitehall*, Institute for Government, The Constitution Unit, 2009, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/making-minority-government-work](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/making-minority-government-work)
- 9 Institute for Government interview.
- 10 Scottish government, 'UK Government/DUP deal', 19 July 2017, accessed 27 January 2024, [www.gov.scot/news/uk-governmentdup-deal](http://www.gov.scot/news/uk-governmentdup-deal)
- 11 Cabinet Office, 'UK Government financial support for Northern Ireland', 26 June 2017, accessed 27 January 2024, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8227a940f0b62305b92c62/UK\\_Govt\\_\\_financial\\_support\\_for\\_Northern\\_Ireland.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a8227a940f0b62305b92c62/UK_Govt__financial_support_for_Northern_Ireland.pdf)
- 12 Paun A, *Westminster in an age of minorities: How to form and sustain a government after another hung parliament*, Institute for Government, 2015, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/westminster-age-minorities](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/westminster-age-minorities)
- 13 Sargeant J, Pannell J, McKee R and others, *Electoral Reform and the Constitution: What might a different voting system mean for the UK?*, Institute for Government and Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 12 July 2023, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution)
- 14 Paun A, *One Year On: The first year of coalition government*, Institute for Government, 2011, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/one-year](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/one-year)
- 15 Grice A and Morris N, 'Tories are urged to 'get used to' compromise as coalition unveils policies', *The Independent*, 21 May 2010, [www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tories-are-urged-to-get-used-to-compromise-as-coalition-unveils-policies-1978874.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tories-are-urged-to-get-used-to-compromise-as-coalition-unveils-policies-1978874.html)
- 16 Paun A, 'Governing in coalition: What lessons have been learnt since May 2011 about how to govern in coalition?', in *One Year On: The first year of coalition government*, Institute for Government, 2011, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/one-year](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/one-year)
- 17 Pickard J, 'Coalition keeps, and breaks, promises', *Financial Times*, 13 May 2011, [www.ft.com/content/40548c8a-7d8b-11e0-b418-00144feabdc0](http://www.ft.com/content/40548c8a-7d8b-11e0-b418-00144feabdc0)
- 18 Sargeant J, Pannell J, McKee R and others, *Electoral Reform and the Constitution: What might a different voting system mean for the UK?*, Institute for Government and Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 12 July 2023, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/electoral-reform-and-constitution)
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Scottish government, 'Cooperation Agreement between the Scottish Government and the Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group', 1 September 2021.
- 21 Boston J, 'Government formation in New Zealand under MMP: Theory and practice', *Political Science*, 2011, vol. 63, no. 1, p. 103.

- 
- 22 Paun A and Munro R, 'Year Five: Whitehall and the parties in the final year of coalition', Institute for Government, 2015, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/year-five-whitehall-and-parties-final-year-coalition](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/year-five-whitehall-and-parties-final-year-coalition)
  - 23 Welsh parliament, Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister, 8 December 2023, <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/13573#A83858>
  - 24 Interview transcript, Nick Clegg, 19 April 2018, Ministers Reflect archive, Institute for Government, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/nick-clegg-ministers-reflect.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/nick-clegg-ministers-reflect.pdf)
  - 25 Harvey N, *After the Rose Garden: Harsh lessons for the smaller coalition party about how to be seen and heard in government*, Institute for Government, 2015, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/after-rose-garden](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/report/after-rose-garden)
  - 26 Kirkup J, 'The parliamentary agreement between the Labour Party and the Liberal Party 1977–1978, 'The Lib–Lab Pact'', PhD thesis, Cardiff University, 2012.
  - 27 Cabinet Office, *The Cabinet Manual*, HM Government, 2011, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a79d5d7e5274a18ba50f2b6/cabinet-manual.pdf>
  - 28 Interview transcript, Nick Clegg, 19 April 2018, Ministers Reflect archive, Institute for Government, [www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/nick-clegg-ministers-reflect.pdf](http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/nick-clegg-ministers-reflect.pdf)

---

## About the author

### **Jack Pannell**

Jack is a researcher who worked on the Review of the UK Constitution. He previously worked on the Institute's research on ministers. Before joining the Institute, he worked at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs in Washington DC. He completed a master's in Latin American studies in 2020.

**The Institute for Government is the leading think tank working to make government more effective.**

We provide rigorous research and analysis, topical commentary and public events to explore the key challenges facing government.

We offer a space for discussion and fresh thinking, to help senior politicians and civil servants think differently and bring about change.



-  [instituteforgovernment.org.uk](https://instituteforgovernment.org.uk)
-  [enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@instituteforgovernment.org.uk)
-  +44 (0) 20 7747 0400
-  @instituteforgov

**Institute for Government, 2 Carlton Gardens  
London SW1Y 5AA, United Kingdom**