At first glance, the 2015 General Election heralded a return to normality. According to its advocates, the single-member plurality electoral system enables the electorate to choose directly between alternative governments by ensuring that whichever party comes first in votes secures an overall majority in seats, even though it may have won much less than half the vote.¹ For most of the post-war period that is precisely how it has operated. Now, after a hiatus in 2010, when no one party won an overall majority and the partisan colour of the government was determined by post-election coalition negotiations,² one party, the Conservatives, was returned with an overall majority despite winning just 37% of the UK-wide vote. Indeed, the party secured a majority even though, at 6.6 percentage points, its lead in votes over the Labour Party (in Great Britain) was 0.6 of a point less than it had been five years previously. The system can apparently be relied upon after all to reward the winning party with enough of a ‘bonus’ in seats to ensure that it wins an overall Commons majority.

However, a closer look at the result suggests in many respects the electoral system did not deliver what its advocates often claim as its merits. For a start, although the Conservatives won an overall majority, it was by historical standards a small one—just 12 seats—and certainly not one that can be guaranteed to withstand the potentially chilly winds of by-election losses and defections to which all governments tend to be subject. The party’s majority is small even though the 6.6-point lead enjoyed by the Conservatives is larger than that secured by Tony Blair in 2005 and Edward

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Heath in 1970. Yet those two administrations enjoyed overall majorities of 66 and 31 respectively. The Tories’ lead in votes is larger too than those enjoyed by the Conservatives in 1955 and 1959, yet those administrations also had more substantial parliamentary majorities of 59 and 99.

Meanwhile, apart from delivering a winner’s bonus, another key feature of the way in which single-member plurality is meant to ensure elections are a choice between two alternative governments is by severely limiting the representation of third parties in the House of Commons. Yet, despite a collapse in support for what had hitherto been Britain’s principal third party, the Liberal Democrats, for the third time in a row more than 80 MPs were elected from parties other than Conservative or Labour. The new Parliament will be as fractured as its immediate predecessors.

Evidently the way in which the single-member plurality system worked in 2015 merits closer examination. This chapter assesses, first of all, how the system treated the two largest parties, the Conservatives and Labour, and explains why the majority it gave the Conservatives was so small. It then examines the way in which the system treated the smaller parties. Finally, the chapter considers the implications of what happened in 2015—and what might have happened if an alternative, more proportional system had been in place—for the debate about electoral reform.

1. Conservatives and Labour

The degree to which the single-member plurality system rewards the winner of an election with a bonus in seats depends on two analytically separable aspects of the way in which it rewards the votes cast for the two largest parties. The first is the degree to which the system exaggerates the lead in votes of the largest party over its principal rival, but does so in a manner that is independent of whichever party is the winner. The second is whether it treats one of the two largest parties more favourably than the other. The system may fail to deliver the winner a large majority either because it does not exaggerate the lead of any party to any significant degree, or because it treats the winning party less favourably than its principal competitor.

The presence or absence of both features depends on the way in which support for the two largest parties is distributed across constituencies. The system will only provide the winner with a substantial bonus if a relatively large number of seats are

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highly competitive (or ‘marginal’) between the two parties.\textsuperscript{5} In those circumstances, seats readily change hands from one party to another, thereby making it likely that even a party with quite a small lead in votes will enjoy a substantial lead in seats. If, however, there are relatively few such seats, then a party might need a big lead in votes before it secures a majority of seats.

Meanwhile, the system will only treat the two largest parties equally if two conditions hold (or at least counterbalance each other).\textsuperscript{6} First, the seats won by one party should on average contain just as many voters as those won by its principal opponents. If that condition does not hold, and a party is more successful in constituencies that have fewer voters, that party is likely to win more seats for any given share of the overall national vote. Second, one party’s vote should not be geographically more efficiently distributed than that of its opponent. A party’s vote is efficiently distributed if it wins a relatively large number of seats with small majorities and, conversely, loses relatively few seats narrowly. Efficiency also includes not registering high levels of votes in constituencies that are won by a third party.

Table 2.1 presents a variety of statistics that help us assess the ability of the single-member plurality system to exaggerate the voting lead of the largest party over the second party irrespective of which party has come first. On the right-hand side, the table reports two statistics that summarise how the division of the votes cast for Conservative and Labour alone (or the two-party vote) is distributed across constituencies. The first is the standard deviation; the bigger the number the more the two-party vote varies from one constituency to another. The second is the kurtosis, which provides an indication of whether there is a relatively large or small number of constituencies in which the two-party vote is relatively evenly divided. The more negative the number the fewer such constituencies there are.

On the left-hand side, two statistics bring out the implications of these two measures. These statistics are the number and the proportion of seats that can be considered marginal between Labour and the Conservatives. Marginal seats are defined here as those in which the Conservative share of the two-party vote would be between 45 and 55% if, as a result of a uniform shift of votes across all constituencies, the two parties were to enjoy exactly the same share of the vote across the country as a whole. They are in other words the seats that would be most competitive between the two


largest parties in the event of a very close overall outcome. Inevitably, the fewer such
seats there are, the less of a winner’s bonus the electoral system is likely to generate.

The division of the two-party vote has long varied to a greater extent from one
constituency to another than it did in the 1950s and 1960s. The kurtosis measure
has also been more negative than it was during those decades. As a result, there
have been fewer marginal seats. This decline was the result of a well-documented
long-term drift towards Labour in the northern and more urban half of the
country and a countervailing swing to the Conservatives in the southern and
more rural half, a pattern that was only partially reversed in the wake of New
Labour’s electoral success.\(^7\) However, it appears that the incidence of marginal
seats has fallen once more and is now as low as it has ever been. Just 74 seats fall
within our definition, lower than ever before, though as a proportion of all those
seats won by either the Conservatives or Labour, the position now is much the

\(^7\) Curtice, J. (2009) ‘Neither Representative Nor Accountable: First Past the Post in Britain’. In Grofman,

Table 2.1 Changing distribution of the two-party vote, 1955–2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Standard deviation</th>
<th>Kurtosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>−0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>−0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>−0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>−0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>−0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 (Feb)</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>−0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 (Oct)</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>−0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>−0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>−1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>−1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>−1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>−0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>−0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>−0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>−1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>−1.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginal seat: Seat where Conservative share of two-party vote (overall Conservative share of two-party vote – 50%) lies within the range 45–55%.
Two-party vote: Votes cast for Conservative and Labour combined.
Table based only on seats won by Conservative or Labour at that election and contested by both parties.

\[^2\] Britain Votes 2015
same as it was in 1983. Meanwhile, although the standard deviation of the two-party vote is little changed from 2010, the kurtosis is now at an all-time low.

This fall in the number of marginal seats reflects the fact that once again Britain delivered a less than uniform judgement on the merits of the two largest parties. Within England and Wales at least, Conservative support held up rather better in constituencies with relatively low levels of unemployment, perhaps because these were places that are more likely to have felt the fruits of the economic recovery. In any event, such places are disproportionately ones where the Conservatives were relatively strong in the first place. As a result, the Conservative share of the two-party vote fell, on average, by just 0.9 of a point in seats in England and Wales that the party won in 2010, but by 2.4 points in seats that Labour won last time around. If the country begins to pull in two different directions, then inevitably there will be fewer places where the outcome is reasonably balanced between the principal alternatives.

Still, this fall in the number of marginal seats makes it more rather than less surprising that the Conservatives should have managed to win an overall majority, however small. To understand why they were able to do so, we need to look at the second aspect of the way in which the electoral system treated the two largest parties, that is whether it treated one party more favourably than another. To help us ascertain what might have happened on that front, Table 2.2 reports two more statistics that summarise how the division of the two-party vote varied across constituencies. The first is the difference between the average share of the two-party vote won by the Conservatives across all 632 seats in Great Britain and the overall share of the two-party vote won by the Conservatives across Britain as a whole. These two figures will diverge if one of the parties tends to perform better in constituencies where fewer people voted. In particular, if there tend to be more voters in constituencies where the Conservatives do relatively well, the mean share of the vote won by the Conservatives will be lower than the party’s overall share.

The second measure is the difference between the median share of the two-party vote won by the Conservatives and the mean vote the party won across all 632 seats. The median is simply the share of the two-party vote that divides constituencies into two equal groups, with one half comprising those constituencies where the Conservative Party won more than the median vote and in the other where it won less. If a party’s vote is efficiently distributed, its median vote will be higher

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8In 1983, 606 seats were won by Conservative or Labour compared with 563 in 2015.

than its mean vote; if a party wins seats with relatively small majorities, this will tend to depress its mean vote while making little or no difference to its median level of support.

Table 2.2 reveals that the first potential source of bias has long tended to favour the Labour Party. For much of the post-war period, Britain’s population has tended to move out of (predominantly Labour voting) urban areas (and the northern half of the country) into (more Conservative inclined) suburban and rural areas (in the southern half). Although the boundary commissions regularly redraw constituency boundaries in order to reflect that demographic change, inevitably they are always somewhat behind.10 Meanwhile, Scotland and (especially) Wales, both

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areas where the Conservatives generally perform less well, also tend to be over-represented relative to their share of the UK electorate. Thus throughout the last 50 years, the mean Conservative share of the two-party vote has tended to be below the overall share, but that after persistently widening the gap has narrowed each time the constituency boundaries have been redrawn.

The Conservatives had hoped that the parliamentary constituency boundaries would be redrawn once again before the 2015 election, and that this time the process would be speedier (and thus more up to date) as well as be conducted according to rules that would end the over-representation of Scotland and Wales. In this, however, their hopes were dashed when their coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, voted with Labour to postpone the review (which by that time was already in progress) following the obstruction by Tory backbenchers of coalition proposals for reform of the House of Lords.11

In fact, the drift out of Britain’s urban centres (and especially London) has become less marked in recent years.12 Nevertheless, the difference between the average electorate in seats won by Labour (in 2015) and that in constituencies bagged by the Conservatives did grow from 3500 at the time of the 2010 election to 3850 now. However, differences between constituencies in the number of registered voters are not the only disparity that can bring about bias on account of differences in the sizes of constituencies; the phenomenon can also arise because of differences in the level of turnout. As at other recent elections, the turnout in constituencies won by Labour was lower than in those claimed by the Conservatives. However, the gap was a little less wide than it had been five years previously. This time, at 68.6%, the average turnout in seats won by the Conservatives was 6.8 points higher than the equivalent figure for constituencies won by Labour (61.8%). The equivalent gap in 2010 was 7.3 points. The net effect of these two countervailing trends was that, in 2015, around 7400 more votes were cast in the average constituency won by the Conservatives than in that won by Labour, the same difference as in 2010.

But if the difference in the average number of votes cast in Conservative and Labour constituencies was much the same as it had been in 2010, evidently the same was not true when it came to the relative efficiency of the distribution of the two parties’ votes. Up until the 1980s, this source of bias had persistently advantaged the Conservatives, not least because Labour piled up huge majorities in constituencies with lots of heavy industry, including not least coal mining. But, since

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1997, it has been Labour’s vote that has been the more efficiently distributed.\(^\text{13}\) Indeed, it was as a result of this development, together with the advantage that the party continued to draw from differences in the sizes of constituencies, that ensured that at recent elections the system treated Labour much more favourably than the Conservatives (as indicated by the third column of Table 2.2, which brings together the two potential sources of bias by comparing the median and the overall Conservative share of the two-party vote) enabling Labour in particular to win a comfortable overall majority of 66 in 2005, even though the party only enjoyed a three-point lead in terms of votes.

Now, however, this position has apparently been reversed once again. The median Conservative share of the two-party vote in 2015 was no less than 2.1 points higher than the mean share, a figure that, as the third column of Table 2.2 shows, is more than enough to counterbalance the impact of the difference between the size of Conservative and Labour held constituencies. There is one key reason for this change. The Conservatives performed particularly well in those seats that they won most narrowly in 2010, and which thus the party might have been expected to lose, given that across England and Wales as a whole there was overall a one-point swing\(^\text{14}\) from Conservative to Labour. In fact in those seats that the Conservatives won most narrowly over Labour in 2010, there was typically a swing to the Conservatives; in seats that the party won with less than a five-point majority, this swing was of the order of 1.1 points in the opposite direction to that seen nationally. Not least of the reasons for this development is that, in line with the pattern at previous elections,\(^\text{15}\) Conservative MPs who were elected for the first time in 2010 after ousting an incumbent Labour MP, and who had had the opportunity in the intervening five years to enhance their popularity locally, typically outperformed their party. On average, such new incumbent Conservative MPs enjoyed no less than a 4.5-point increase in their support.

As a result, the Conservatives suffered a net loss of just two seats to Labour instead of the loss of 11 seats that the party would have suffered if there had been a one-point swing to Labour in every seat in England and Wales—a pattern without which the Conservatives would not have won an overall majority. Meanwhile, the impact that this relative Conservative success in marginal seats had on the efficiency of the distribution of its vote is underlined by the fact that of the 74 seats that we previously defined


\(^{14}\)Swing is defined as the change in the Conservative share of the vote less the change in Labour’s share of the vote divided by two. In 2015, the Conservative share of the vote increased in England and Wales by 1.4 points, while Labour’s did so by 3.4 points. \((1.4 - 3.4)/2\) thus equates to a one-point swing to Labour.

as marginal, no fewer than 45 would be won by the Conservatives in the event of an even division of the GB-wide vote, while just 29 would be won by Labour. In short, the Conservatives are now clearly winning more seats with relatively small majorities.

However, there is one further important change in the distribution of Conservative and Labour support of which the statistics in Table 2.2 do not take proper account. This is the number of votes that each party ‘wastes’ in seats that are won by parties other than Conservative or Labour. Because, at recent elections, many more of the seats that the Liberal Democrats have won have been ones in which their principal competitors were the Conservatives rather than Labour, this has hitherto been a source of disadvantage for the Conservatives. But at this election, the collapse in Liberal Democrat support enabled the Conservatives to capture no fewer than 27 seats from the Liberal Democrats, more than twice as many as the 12 seats that Labour gained from that source—gains that were instrumental to the Conservatives’ ability to win an overall majority despite enjoying a somewhat smaller lead in votes over Labour than in 2010. There are now just four seats left in which the Conservatives are second to a Liberal Democrat incumbent.

At the same time, Labour lost seats to the SNP in unprecedented fashion. No fewer than 40 of the 41 seats that the party was attempting to defend in Scotland were captured by the Nationalists. In combination, these two developments ensured that it was now Labour that was wasting more votes in constituencies that were won by third parties. On average, Labour won 23.3% of the vote in seats won by third parties, whereas the Conservatives secured just 15.6%—almost a complete reversal of the position in 2010 when the Conservatives on average won 28.4% in such seats, Labour just 16.6%.

The Conservatives were thus able to win a small overall majority for two main reasons. First, the party profited heavily from the decline in Liberal Democrat support, so that votes that had previously been wasted coming second to the Liberal Democrats were now used to elect Conservative MPs. Second, an above average performance in marginal seats, not least thanks to the local popularity of incumbent Conservative MPs defending their seats for the first time, ensured that the party’s vote was more efficiently distributed and lost rather fewer seats to Labour than would otherwise have been the case. In short, the party won a majority not because the electoral system proved better able to exaggerate the lead of the largest party over the second party, but rather because of the elimination of some of the sources of bias that the party had hitherto suffered.

2. Third parties

Overall, support for parties other than Conservative or Labour fell from 33.4% (in Great Britain) to 31.0%, but this figure is still higher than at any election between 1922 and 2005 inclusive. Between them (including the entirely distinct
parties in Northern Ireland) they won 87 seats in the House of Commons, a tally second only to the 92 seats won by such parties in 2005, and slightly up on the 85 such seats in 2010. However, whereas hitherto it has been the Liberal Democrats that have dominated such representation, their position as the third party in the House of Commons was usurped by the SNP.

So how do we understand the failure of the system once again to deny third parties representation? In fact, just as the ability of the single-member plurality system to provide the winner in votes with a bonus in seats is contingent on the geographical distribution of party support, so also is the extent to which the system fails to reward smaller parties.\(^\text{16}\) If a party’s vote is relatively evenly spread, the system will indeed reward a smaller party with few if any seats, as it means it will secure a relatively small share of the vote everywhere. On the other hand, if a smaller party’s vote is concentrated in particular constituencies, then it may be rewarded quite handsomely by the system.

The contingent and thus potentially very varied way in which the system treats smaller parties was amply illustrated by the 2015 election. The system did more or less exclude some parties. UKIP, which came third in votes across the UK as a whole, ended up (along with the sixth placed Greens) coming equal 10th (behind four Northern Irish parties as well as the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats) in terms of seats. It was the party that came fifth in votes, the SNP, that succeeded in becoming the third largest party in the House of Commons. The crucial difference between the two parties was that UKIP’s vote was for the most part relatively evenly spread, whereas support for the SNP was, of course, confined to constituencies in Scotland.

UKIP’s success in winning nearly 13% of the vote in Great Britain was truly remarkable. It was the first time since the advent of the Conservative–Labour duopoly in 1922 that the Liberal Democrats (and before them the Liberal party) had been usurped in a UK General Election from their position as the third most popular party in terms of votes. It confirmed UKIP’s position as the most significant wholly independent fourth-party challenge in English politics.\(^\text{17}\) But the party was rewarded with just one seat, the Clacton berth of the locally popular defector from the Conservative Party, Douglas Carswell. At 6.2, the standard deviation of its support across constituencies was noticeably much less than that of the Liberal Democrats (8.4). The party only managed to win more than a quarter of the vote in 16 constituencies, and came a close second (i.e., within 10% of the winner) in just two.

Although the SNP’s vote is wholly confined to and thus concentrated within Scotland, in fact within that part of the UK its vote is geographically quite evenly

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\(^{16}\) Gudgin and Taylor, *Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections*.  
spread. In 2010, for example, the standard deviation of Nationalist support was just 8.7; in contrast that for the Labour Party in Scotland was no less than 16.3, while the equivalent figure for the Liberal Democrats north of the border was, at 13.5, also much higher. Despite winning a slightly bigger share of the vote than the Liberal Democrats, the party won just six seats compared with the Liberal Democrats’ tally of 11. But while an evenly spread vote is disadvantageous for a party when it is relatively small, it becomes an advantage when it is well ahead nationally—which is the position in which the SNP found itself in 2015 in winning almost exactly half of the vote in Scotland. Indeed, the SNP’s vote proved to be even more evenly spread this time around with the standard deviation falling to 7.0.

This change was in part at least the result of a crucial, if arithmetically almost inevitable, pattern given the scale of Labour’s losses north of the border. Labour’s vote fell by almost 18 points across Scotland as a whole. But in nine constituencies, Labour did not win as much as 18% of the vote in 2010. This meant that to some extent at least Labour’s vote must fall more heavily in seats where the party was previously relatively strong (and thus often the SNP relatively weak). This is indeed precisely what happened. As Table 2.3 illustrates, for the most part Labour’s vote fell more heavily—and the SNP’s vote increased more substantially—the stronger Labour had been in 2010. The only exception to this pattern was in seats where Labour won between 30 and 40% of the vote in 2010, among whom are included the seat of Edinburgh South where uniquely Labour managed to increase its share of the vote, thanks in all probability to a high level of tactical switching to Labour by Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters.18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour % share 2010</th>
<th>Mean change in % Labour support 2010–2015</th>
<th>Mean change in % SNP support 2010–2015</th>
<th>(No. of seats)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 20%</td>
<td>−7.7</td>
<td>+21.6</td>
<td>(9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–30%</td>
<td>−14.5</td>
<td>+27.1</td>
<td>(6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–40%</td>
<td>−8.6</td>
<td>+23.7</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–50%</td>
<td>−18.3</td>
<td>+31.0</td>
<td>(17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 50%</td>
<td>−26.0</td>
<td>+35.9</td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All seats</td>
<td>−17.8</td>
<td>+30.0</td>
<td>(59)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculations.

As we might anticipate, SNP support also increased less where the party had previously been strongest. In the six seats that the party won in 2010, for example, support for the party rose on average by 14.1 points, less than half the equivalent figure for Scotland as a whole.

---

18As we might anticipate, SNP support also increased less where the party had previously been strongest. In the six seats that the party won in 2010, for example, support for the party rose on average by 14.1 points, less than half the equivalent figure for Scotland as a whole.
As a result of this pattern, Labour’s vote in Scotland became much more evenly distributed; the standard deviation of its support fell to just 10.4. And now that it was by a long way only the second most popular party in Scotland, this evenness helped to ensure that the party’s losses and the SNP’s gains were almost as high as they could possibly be. True, if the fall in Labour support and the rise in the SNP vote had been uniform across the whole of Scotland, Labour would still have lost as many as 38 of its existing 41 seats to the SNP, but in the event its tally of losses proved to be as many as 40.

The almost inevitable consequences of what happens to the geographical distribution of a party’s vote when it loses ground very heavily are also apparent in the case of the Liberal Democrats. The party’s vote fell almost as heavily across Britain as a whole—by 15.5 points—as Labour’s did within Scotland. But there were 170 constituencies where the party did not manage to win as much as 16% of the vote in 2010. In this case too, it was thus inevitable that to some degree at least support for the party should fall more heavily in places where it had previously been stronger, thereby reducing the extent to which its vote varied from one constituency to another.

This, indeed, is what happened. In those seats where the party won less than 16% of the vote in 2010, the party’s support fell on average by 10.4 points. On the other hand, it fell by 15.8 points in those places where it secured between 16 and 28%, while in those constituencies where it had started off with more than 28% of the vote last time, its vote fell on average by as much as 19.8 points. One of the features of the party’s performance at recent elections had been a measure of success in developing areas of local strength, thereby ensuring a more geographically varied vote that proved more rewarding when it came to winning seats.19 Most of that increased variation was now lost. At 8.4 not only was the standard deviation of party support well down on the equivalent figure of 10.4 in 2010, but in fact it was lower than at any previous election since 1983.

Not that the party lost all of its concentrations of local strength. It has often been remarked that Liberal Democrat MPs are typically especially dependent on their local popularity in order to win and retain their constituencies. Indeed, the party hoped that this local popularity would on this occasion enable some of its MPs to defend their seats successfully against the national tide. They were not wholly mistaken in that expectation. In those 47 seats where the local Liberal Democrat MP was attempting to defend his or her seat, the party’s vote fell on average by just under 14.5 points, well below the near 20 point drop that the party generally

suffered in seats where it was relatively strong. But all that this simply meant was that the vote for the typical Liberal Democrat MP fell by more or less as much as the party’s support did across the country as a whole. Indeed, the party’s eventual tally of eight seats, its lowest since 1970, was still two seats fewer than it would have been if the change in support for the party had been uniform across the country.

Despite increasing its average share of the vote in the seats it fought (568 in Great Britain) from 1.8% in 2010 to a record 4.2% in 2015, the Greens could do no more than retain the Brighton Pavilion seat that Caroline Lucas first won in 2010. The party’s vote remained very evenly spread with a standard deviation of just 2.8. Apart from Ms Lucas’ seat, the party managed to win over 20% of the vote in just one other constituency. The party was left still looking some way apart from having the level, and distribution, of support needed to make a substantial parliamentary breakthrough. Like UKIP, its vote was much less concentrated than that for Plaid Cymru in Wales, who managed to retain the three heavily Welsh-speaking seats it already held, or that for the four principal parties that exclusively fought seats in Northern Ireland, all of whom won more seats than either the Greens or UKIP.

As a result of the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote and the sharp differences in the way the electoral system treated the smaller parties, the 2015 election has occasioned a fundamental change in the character of third-party representation in the House of Commons. Hitherto it was dominated by a party, the Liberal Democrats, that had a substantial GB-wide vote, albeit one that had become somewhat more geographically variegated than previously. Now, third-party representation is largely the preserve of parties that only contest elections in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, and which are primarily concerned to represent the distinctive interests and identities of those parts of the UK. That is the inevitable consequence of using an electoral system that is responsive to the geography as well as the level of a party’s support.

3. Prospects and implications

Critics of the single-member plurality system often focus on the disproportionality of the results that the system can produce. Indeed, on one measure, the sum of the differences between the parties’ shares of the vote and their shares of the seats

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20 And, indeed, the average drop of 21.6 points that the party suffered in the 10 seats where the incumbent MP stood down.

21 Or, more accurately, if the change in party support across England and Wales as a whole had applied uniformly across constituencies there, while the change in support in Scotland had occurred in every constituency there.
(divided by two)\(^{22}\) at least, the outcome of the 2015 election was almost as dispro-
portional as that of any previous post-war election—only the outcome in 1983 was
slightly more disproportional.\(^{23}\) Certainly if some form of proportional represen-
tation had been in place, such as the regional party list system used in elections to the
European Parliament,\(^{24}\) the Conservatives would not have had an overall majority,
though David Cameron might have still have been Prime Minister (and the UK
facing a prospect of a referendum on its membership of the European Union) if
he had been able to come to an agreement on forming a government with UKIP
(Table 2.4).

However, this criticism of the electoral system arguably misses the point. It is not
meant to produce results that are proportional. Rather, as noted earlier, it is meant
to be systematically disproportional such that the winner secures an overall major-
ity and smaller parties reap little reward. And despite the success of the


\(^{23}\) Measured across the UK as a whole, this index of disproportionalitv was 24.3 in 1983 and 24.0 in 2015,
though if the calculation is confined to Great Britain the two elections are equally disproportional,
with an index value of 23.9 in both cases. However, on another measure, the Gallagher least-squares index
Studies*, 10.1, 33–61] that places greater weight on large differences between a party’s share of the
vote, the 2015 result was, in fact, no more disproportional (with an index score of 15.0) than that in
2010 (15.1) and indeed was less so than at any election since and including 1997. I am very grateful to
Dr Stuart Wilks-Heeg for his assistance on this point.

\(^{24}\) But assuming that a party would have to win at least 5% of the vote in a region to be entitled to any seats
in that region.

Table 2.4 Projected outcome of the 2015 election under regional proportional representation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Projected seats</th>
<th>% Share of seats</th>
<th>% Seats — % votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>+1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>+2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKIP</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Democrats</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNP</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (NI)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculations.
Seats allocated by Government Region. Total number of seats in each region, proportional to current electorate,
using St Lague divisor. Division of seats within each region determined by D’Hondt divisor, but confined to those
parties in a region that won at least 5% of the vote.

Britain Votes 2015
Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/68/suppl_1/25/1403168/A-Return-to-Normality-How-the-Electoral... by guest on 16 September 2017
Conservatives in winning a small overall majority, it is whether the system can be relied upon to achieve those objectives that the question marks still arise.

As already noted, the Conservatives were able to win an overall majority not because the system proved more effective at generating a ‘winner’s bonus’ but rather because some of the ways in which the party was treated less favourably than Labour were no longer present. Indeed, there are actually fewer marginal seats than ever before. Meanwhile, the number of third-party MPs is more or less as high as it has ever been. This does not sound like a recipe for ensuring that future elections will necessarily produce an overall majority—and certainly not ones of the size that until recently were commonplace for most of the post-war period.

That this, indeed, is the case becomes apparent when we examine how many seats each party might win under certain hypothetical conditions. Table 2.5 presents what the outcome would be if the level and distribution of support for third parties remains as it was in 2015, but the Conservative lead over Labour varies as a result of movements of support from the outcome in 2015 that occur uniformly in each and every constituency. Thus, for example, the first row of the table shows what would happen if, as a result of a 0.4-point swing of support from Conservative to Labour that occurred in each and every constituency, the Conservative lead fell from the 6.6-point lead the party actually enjoyed in 2015 to one of 5.8 points. The remaining rows show the consequences of larger uniform swings, that is the 3.3-point swing that would result in Conservative and Labour having the same share of the overall vote, the just over 5-point swing that put Labour 3.7 points ahead of the Conservatives, and the 9.5-point swing that would mean the party was 12.5 points ahead.

Two key points emerge from this table. First of all, the system now does indeed treat the Conservatives more favourably than it does Labour. On these assumptions, Labour would still have 46 fewer seats than the Conservatives if the two parties were to win the same share of the vote and would need to be 3.7 points ahead before it won the same number of seats. Moreover, whereas Labour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Con lead over Lab (% GB vote)</th>
<th>Seats (UK)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3.7</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-12.5</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s calculations.
would need to be as much as 12.5 points ahead of the Conservatives to win a bare overall majority, the Conservatives need a lead of only 5.8 points in order to achieve the same objective. Not least of the reasons for this bias are the continued losses that Labour would still suffer in Scotland on these assumptions. Even the 9.5-point swing projected in the final column would result in Labour recapturing just one seat from the SNP.

Second, the range of results that would result in a hung Parliament in which no one party would have an overall majority is wide indeed. Any outcome between a Labour lead of 12.5 points and a Conservative one of 5.8 points would result in no single party winning an overall majority. This range is wider than it has been after any previous election.\(^{25}\) In short, it would appear that there are still considerable doubts about the ability of the electoral system to generate an overall majority in the event that either the Conservatives or Labour only enjoy a narrow lead.

In practice, the next election will not be fought under the current parliamentary boundaries. Now that they have a parliamentary majority it can be anticipated that the Conservatives will succeed in pursuing a redrawing of the boundaries to a successful conclusion. As the law and the Conservative manifesto currently stand, that redrawing will also be accompanied by a reduction in the number of MPs from 650 to 600.\(^{26}\)

On its own, redrawing the boundaries is likely to ensure that the electoral system treats Labour even less favourably that it does at present, primarily by substantially reducing the difference between the average number of registered voters in Conservative and Labour constituencies. That though will clearly not necessarily ensure that the system is equitable in its relative treatment of the two largest parties. However, reducing the size of the Commons to 600 can be expected to restore to a degree at least the extent to which the system produces a ‘winner’s bonus’. Other things being equal, larger constituencies are more likely to be heterogeneous in their social and political character and thus more likely to be competitive between Conservative and Labour. It seems unlikely, however, that this change will be sufficient to ensure that the electoral system reacquires the ability to produce an overall majority in all but the rarest of circumstances, not least because it will do little to diminish the substantial phalanx of SNP MPs. The UK may have narrowly avoided having another hung Parliament this time around, but it could still well find itself at continued risk of one occurring in future, even if single-member plurality remains in place.

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\(^{26}\) Curtice, ‘The Coalition, Elections and Referendums’. 