



## CRS Insights

# The United Kingdom Election

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### 2015 Election Result

The United Kingdom's (UK's) general election that was held on May 7, 2015, resulted in a decisive victory for the Conservative Party, led by incumbent Prime Minister David Cameron. With [331 seats](#), the Conservatives have the numbers to form a single-party government with a narrow absolute majority in the 650-seat House of Commons. After winning 307 seats in the 2010 election, Prime Minister Cameron and the Conservative Party have led the UK government for the past five years in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, who held 57 seats. The Labour Party suffered a considerable defeat in the 2015 election, with party leader Ed Miliband resigning after the party dropped to 232 seats, down from the 258 it won in 2010.

The result came as a considerable surprise to many observers. In the weeks prior to the election, polls consistently projected an extremely close finish, and it appeared nearly certain that the UK was headed for a second consecutive "hung Parliament," with no party expected to win a majority. The UK political establishment had braced itself for a post-election period of maneuvering and uncertainty in which both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party would attempt to form a government by striking deals with smaller parties. Compared to the final results, however, [pre-election polls](#) underestimated the level of Conservative support and significantly overestimated support for Labour.

**Table 1. May 2015 UK General Election Results**

Party	# of Seats	Net # of Seats +/-	% of Vote
Conservatives	331	+24	36.9%
Labour	232	-26	30.5%

Scottish National Party	56	+50	3.1%
Liberal Democrats	8	-48	7.8%
UK Independence Party	1	+1	12.6%
All Others	22	-6	9.1%

**Source:** "Election 2015 Results," BBC News,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/election/2015/results>. **Note:** Turnout was 66.1%.

The signature initiative of the Conservative-led coalition government that took office in 2010 was a far-reaching austerity program aiming to reduce the country's budget deficit. Their victory in the 2015 election allows the Conservative Party to continue implementing this program as the centerpiece of their domestic economic policy. Although many observers note that austerity has heightened social tensions in the UK and generated criticism of the Conservatives' ideology, the UK's budget deficit has decreased, and in recent years economic growth has improved.

### The UK's Changing Political Dynamics

Following the 2010 election, many analysts concluded that coalition governments were likely to become the new norm in UK politics, as a system long dominated by the two large parties grows increasingly fragmented. Although the surprising Conservative majority defied such expectations for 2015, developments related to the smaller parties reflect a number of dynamic changes:

- The losses suffered by the Liberal Democrats were even greater than expected. After winning 57 seats in 2010 and entering government for the first time as the junior coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats were reduced to eight seats. Party leader Nick Clegg, who served as deputy prime minister in the coalition, resigned his position. For decades the Liberal Democrats have sought to portray themselves as a progressive, third-party alternative to the two large parties. In large measure, support for the Liberal Democrats plunged due to unhappiness among voters who felt that the party betrayed its principles by agreeing to a coalition with the Conservatives.
- The Scottish National Party (SNP) made huge gains, winning 56 seats out of Scotland's 59 constituencies. Following the 2010 election, the Labour Party held 41 seats in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats held 11, and the SNP held 6. The SNP led the "Yes" campaign for Scottish independence that was defeated in a September 2014 referendum and is outspokenly critical of the Conservative Party's policies and ideology. With the SNP emboldened by this result as it becomes the second-largest opposition party, Scotland is likely to remain a prominent topic in UK politics.
- Over the past several years, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a populist party opposed to immigration and British membership in the EU, has gained support by drawing away disaffected Conservative voters and capitalizing on anti-establishment sentiments. UKIP notably took first place in the UK's May 2014

elections for the European Parliament. UKIP won the third-highest percentage of the nationwide vote, with 12.6%, but was able to win only one parliamentary seat. Unable to win a seat himself, party leader Nigel Farage resigned his position.

## The UK and the EU

The 2015 election could have important consequences for the UK's membership in the European Union (EU). Prime Minister Cameron indicated in 2013 that, if reelected, he intended to negotiate a "new settlement" with the EU and put the UK's continued membership to an "in-or-out" national referendum by 2017. The referendum campaign and possibility of a so-called "Brexit" are now set to become central preoccupations of British and EU politics, and the outcome is difficult to predict: an April [poll](#) indicated 40% would vote to stay in the EU and 39% to leave, with a significant group of undecided voters.

## The U.S.-UK Relationship

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



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