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A Changing Party System
in Once Typical Two-Party Politics:
Analysis of the British General Election
in May 2010

Kazuaki Nagatomi

I.   Introduction

The British general election on 6 May 2010 became a historic event. Until this time, Labour had kept an absolute majority of seats for thirteen years. At this election, however, the Conservatives increased their number of seats by nearly 100 out of 650 mainly at the expense of Labour, making them the largest party. Nevertheless, they were not able to win an absolute majority of seats, forcing them to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. It was the first time since the 1974 general election that no party won an absolute majority of seats – in other words, a hung parliament emerged. And it was the first time in the post-war era that a coalition government was formed, as a single-party minority government was formed in 1974.

Afterwards, a variety of topics pertaining to this general election have been discussed. Among them, one of the hot topics has been the operation of the first-past-the-post system (e.g. Denver, 2010; Curtice, 2010). The thesis that this electoral system fosters a two-party system, being likely to produce a single-party majority government, has been well-known since Duverger's classic work (1951). On the contrary to this thesis, however, the outcome of this general election was a hung parliament. Unsurprisingly, this fact has drawn much attention. This was fuelled by an agreement between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats about holding a referendum on changing the electoral system. The referendum was eventually held in May 2011, but the proposal for the reform was rejected.

A trend in recent studies on electoral systems and party systems in the United Kingdom is to ascertain the biases in the operation of the first-past-the-post system. Questions such as to which party and to what extent this electoral system is advantageous have been posed (e.g. Johnston et al., 2001; Curtice, 2010). These questions are obviously connected to the debate over the electoral system reform. Differently from these studies, however, this article takes the first-past-the-post system as given, addressing the change in

the party system, particularly at the constituency level. The fragmentation of the British party system has already been cited after this latest general election (e.g. Kavanagh & Cowley, 2010, 347-349; Quinn, 2011, 408-411), but the collapse of the two-party system is so apparent that an in-depth analysis of the party system appears to be neglected. Still, such analysis is necessary to understand why a hung parliament occurred. Sorting out the conditions of a hung parliament and compiling constituency-level data, this article tries to demonstrate the shift towards a multi-party system since the 1990s.

This article makes an examination in the following way. The next section outlines the British party system and confirms what an important position British politics has occupied in the development of political science. This section also enumerates the parties currently operating in the United Kingdom, which will be the main actors in the following sections. The third section of this article takes an overview of all post-war general elections, particularly each party's share of seats. This section considers the 1997 general election to be the turning point from the point of view of seat distribution. At this general election, the total of seats for the parties other than the Conservatives and Labour broke the 10 per cent barrier, which has been maintained since then. This has diminished the 'pie' for the Conservatives and Labour, which has made them more difficult to secure an absolute majority of seats than before. The fourth section analyses the five general elections in the last couple of decades, using the indices of party systems. This section establishes that the shift towards a multi-party system occurred initially in the Conservatives' heartlands and later in Labour's. This section also shows the increase in the Liberal Democrats' 'safe' seats, which makes it even harder for the two largest parties to scramble for seats. The final section concludes by discussing the impact this general election could have on real politics and political science.

II.   Outline of the British Party System

The dominance of the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in British politics has been regarded as a model of a two-party system. Duverger (1951), who initiated the classification of party systems, distinguished a one-party system, a two-party system and a multi-party system and treated British politics as typical of a two-party system. The well-known 'Duverger's law', which argues that the first-past-the-post system fosters a two-party system and proportional representation a multi-party system, was raised in this context. Sartori (1976), who developed the classification, categorised seven types of party systems including a two-party system and also mentioned British politics. Thus, the two-party system in British politics occupied an important position in the development of studies on party systems.

The importance of the British two-party politics in political science has not been confined to studies on party systems. The observation of British politics has been instrumental in developing a volume of theories. This is epitomised by the phrase of

'Westminster model' of democracy (Lijphart, 1984). It goes without saying that Westminster is the name of a place in London where the Houses of Parliament are situated. In this way, the British two-party politics has given plenty of ideas to political scientists all over the world.

Until the 2010 general election, a single-party government formed by either the Conservatives or Labour had lasted. It allowed British politics to keep the look of a two-party system. However, the signs against the two-party system had already been noticeable. The Liberal Democrats had gradually increased their seats in Parliament. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the British National Party and the Green Party had won seats in local councils and the European Parliament, although they had not been able to win a seat in the House of Commons. The Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru had gained influence in Scotland and Wales respectively. The 2010 general election was held under such circumstances.

In the meantime, Northern Ireland has formed a completely different party system from Great Britain. The main division in the Northern Irish party system is the positioning of Northern Ireland. Unionist parties such as the Democratic Unionist Party and the Ulster Unionist Party are in favour of Northern Ireland staying in the United Kingdom, while nationalist parties such as Sinn Féin and the Social Democratic and Labour Party are against it. The Alliance Party take a neutral stance on this issue. Other small parties such as the Progressive Unionist Party and Traditional Unionist Voice also exist.

III.   Overview of All Post-War General Elections

Following the previous section which has outlined the British party system, this section takes an overview of all post-war general elections. The focus is on what differentiates the 2010 general election from the previous general elections in the occurrence of a hung parliament.

In respect to a hung parliament, we need to distinguish two cases:
A. a case where Labour's number of seats and the Conservatives' number of seats are so close that neither party have an absolute majority of seats; and
B. a case where the total of seats for the parties other than Labour and the Conservatives is so large, in other words, the total of Labour's seats and the Conservatives' seats is so small that neither Labour nor the Conservatives have an absolute majority of seats.
Case A and Case B are not irreconcilable. In Case B, the key actor is the Liberal Democrats, as they occupy a large proportion of seats except for Labour and the Conservatives.

In order to exemplify Case B, I will make some assumed calculations. Under the circumstances where other parties' total of seats is only 2 per cent – at the level in the 1950s and the 1960s as shown in Figure 1 below, the 'pie' for Labour and the Conservatives is 98 per cent of all seats. In this case, in order to win 51 per cent of all seats, either of the two largest parties need to win 52 per cent of the 98 per cent pie, the ratio of seats between the
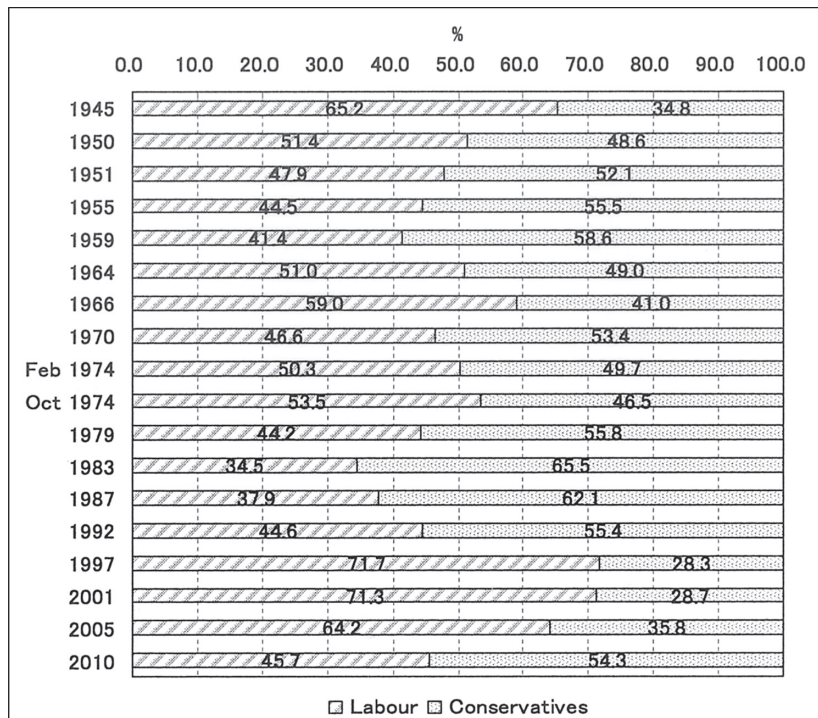
two largest parties being 52:48. In short, a 4 percentage point lead is enough. In the same way, under the circumstances where others' total is 7 per cent – at the level in the 1980s and the early 1990s, the ratio is 55:45. Thus, a 10 percentage point lead against the opponents is required in order to win 51 per cent of all seats. Finally, under the circumstances where others' total is 14 per cent – double the figure mentioned above and at the level at the two latest general elections, the ratio is 59:41. Thus, the lead has to be more than 18 percentage points. Since this is the minimum figure, a 20 percentage point lead would probably become an effective target for the two largest parties under such circumstances. In this way, the increase in other parties' total of seats forces either of the two largest parties to have a bigger lead over another in order to obtain an absolute majority of seats.

Cases A and B can be ascertained by looking at each party's share of seats. Case A can be gauged by looking at the gap between the two largest parties' shares of seats, and Case B by looking at the total of the shares of seats for other parties. Figure 1 shows each party's share of votes at general elections since 1945, while Figure 2 shows the ratio of Labour's seats to the Conservatives' seats. Since Figure 1 is related to Case B and Figure 2 to Case A, I will examine them in this order.

Figure 1. Each Party's Share of Seats at General Elections
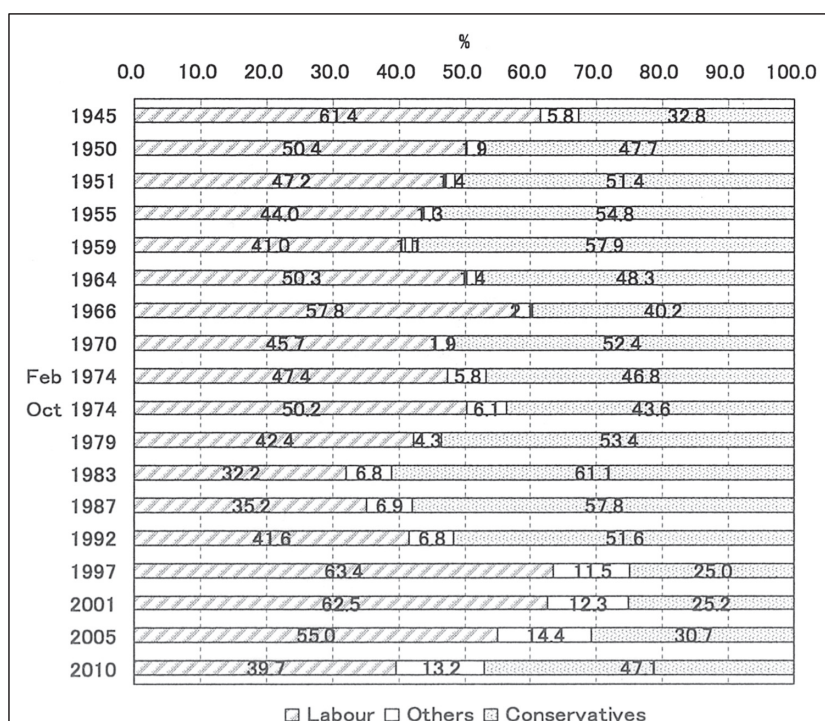
Source: Rallings & Thrasher, 2007a, 59; House of Commons Library, 2011, 78-79.

Figure 2.   Ratio of Labour's Seats to the Conservatives' Seats at General Elections

Year	Labour	Conservatives
1945	65.2	34.8
1950	51.4	48.6
1951	47.9	52.1
1955	44.5	55.5
1959	41.4	58.6
1964	51.0	49.0
1966	59.0	41.0
1970	46.6	53.4
Feb 1974	50.3	49.7
Oct 1974	53.5	46.5
1979	44.2	55.8
1983	34.5	65.5
1987	37.9	62.1
1992	44.6	55.4
1997	71.7	28.3
2001	71.3	28.7
2005	64.2	35.8
2010	45.7	54.3

Source: Rallings & Thrasher, 2007a, 59; House of Commons Library, 2011, 78-79.

Case B can be gauged by others' total of the shares of seats in Figure 1. Others' total has gradually risen, although there have been some fluctuations. It broke the 10 per cent barrier at the 1997 general election for the first time in the post-war era and has kept more than 10 per cent since then. Despite a small drop, others' total at the 2010 general election was the second highest to the 2005 general election in the post-war era. The main contributor has been the Liberal Democrats, as they doubled their seats at the 1997 general election and have occupied approximately two thirds of others' total of seats at recent general elections. In other words, the total of Labour's seats and the Conservatives' seats has dropped to less than 90 per cent at the last four general elections.

Figure 2 is related to Case A. The gap in the ratio of the Conservatives' seats to Labour's seats was 8.6 percentage points at the 2010 general election, which was much smaller than the corresponding figure of 28.4 percentage points at the 2005 general election and the smallest since 1997. Yet, the gap at this general election was not the smallest in the post-war era, as it was not far from the level at the 1992 general election and larger than the corresponding figures in 1950, 1951, 1964 and 1970 as well as the two general elections in 1974.

These findings verify that the emergence of a hung parliament at the latest general election is the consequence of the mixture of Cases A and B. Until the 1992 general election, the total of seats for other parties was small enough for either Labour or the Conservatives to have an absolute majority of seats, even when the competition between these two parties was close, except for the general election in February 1974. Since the 1997 general election, the total of seats for other parties already rose. Fortunately for Labour, the gap against the Conservatives was so large at the 1997, the 2001 and the 2005 general elections that Labour were able to enjoy an absolute majority of seats. At the 2010 general election, however, the gap between the two parties was as small as at the 1992 general election. In this way, the combination of Cases A and B lead to the hung parliament.

Here, I will spotlight the general election in February 1974, because it was the only other election when a hung parliament occurred in the post-war era. At this general election, others' total of seats was 5.8 per cent, which was less than half the corresponding figure at the 2010 general election. In the meantime, the competition between Labour and the Conservatives was extremely intense, as the gap in the ratio of Labour's seats to the Conservatives' seats was only 0.6 percentage points. Thus, the hung parliament in 1974 was caused by Case A but not so much by Case B. As the hung parliament at the 2010 general election is the mixture of Cases A and B, this is the difference between the hung parliaments in 1974 and 2010.

Hence, the increase in the seats for the parties other than the Conservatives and Labour, especially for the Liberal Democrats, has lead to the decrease in the total of the Conservatives' and Labour's seats. The breakthrough seems to be the 1997 general election from the point of view of seat distribution, as others' total rose over the 10 per cent line. A smaller pie for the two largest parties has definitely made them difficult to take an absolute majority of seats. Assuming that others' total of seats is 14 per cent – at the level at the latest two general elections, the two largest parties need an almost 20 percentage point lead of seats at least over the opponents in order to obtain an absolute majority of seats. Labour's landslide victories at the 1997, the 2001 and the 2005 general elections enabled them to have an enough lead. However, at the 2010 general election, the gap between the Conservatives and Labour was not so large that a hung parliament occurred, albeit the gap not the smallest in the post-war era.

IV.   Analysis of General Elections since the 1990s

As mentioned above, the 1997 general election was the watershed from the point of view of seat distribution, as the total of the Conservatives' and Labour's seats dropped below 90 per cent of seats for the first time in the post-war era. Therefore, in contrast to the previous section which has reviewed all post-war general elections, this section concentrates on general elections since the 1990s, making detailed analysis of the change in the British party system. It allows us to include the 1992 general election – the last before the earmarked

1997 general election – in the scope of analysis so that we will be able to compare the post-1997 situation with that prior to 1997. It means that this section deals with five general elections, namely the 1992, the 1997, the 2001, the 2005 and the 2010 elections.

The 1992 general election, the last election when the total of the Conservatives' and Labour's seats exceeded more than 90 per cent, was won by the Conservatives. The 1997 general election, the first election when others' total of seats exceeded 10 per cent, was won by Labour. The 2001 general elections was won by Labour again, and, since the electoral results were similar to the 1997 general election, the results of the analysis at the 2001 election below are also expected to be similar to the 1997 election. The 2005 general election is the last of the three successive elections won by Labour, albeit losing some seats, and it was the election when the Liberal Democrats set the highest record of their seats. Finally, the 2010 general election is, needless to say, the target of this article.

1. Indices of Party Systems

Before embarking on the analysis, this subsection introduces the indices of party systems, because they will be the main tools in the analysis of this section.

The most commonly used index of party systems is the one proposed by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). This index is usually known as the effective number of parties, but this article calls it the Laakso-Taagepera index in order to avoid confusion with other indices mentioned below. This index is expressed as follows:

$$N_2 = \frac{1}{\sum p_i^{\,2}}$$

where N_2 is the Laakso-Taagepera index and p_i is party i's share of votes or seats. If every party's share is the same, the index equals the actual number of parties. The closer to 100 per cent a party's share is, the smaller the index becomes. If a party's share is 100 per cent, the index becomes 1.

The Laakso-Taagepera index has some limitations, as Taagepera himself (1999) admitted. A problem with the index is that, in the case where a party are dominant, the effective number of parties tends to be overestimated (Taagepera, 1999). I will take examples of a three-party competition, as it is the focus of this article. In the case where the index is close to 1, it suggests that a party's share is much larger than the other two's. In another case where the index is close to 3, it suggests a keen competition between the three parties. A difficulty in interpreting a value arises when the index is close to 2. Assume two cases:

α. Party A's and Party B's shares are just 1/2 – 50 per cent each, while Party C's share is 0 per cent; and

β. Party A's share is just 2/3 – 66.67 per cent, while Party B's and Party C's shares are 1/6 – 16.67 per cent each.

Case α is a close competition between Party A and Party B, while Case β is one-party

dominance. The Laakso-Taagepera index, however, cannot distinguish these cases, as, in both cases, the value is 2.

Because of this problem, the Laakso-Taagepera index has been criticised, and alternative indices have been proposed (e.g. Molinar, 1991; Niemi & Hsieh, 2002; Dunleavy & Boucek, 2003). Still, the Laakso-Taagepera index is frequently used, particularly in the area of comparative studies (e.g. Lijphart, 1984; 1994; 1999; Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005). A reason seems to be the simplicity of the formula. It is easy to understand the formula as well as to calculate values.

In the light of the frequency of the use of the Laakso-Taagepera index, it is not reasonable to ignore this index. In the meantime, it is necessary for this article to recognise that this index cannot distinguish Cases α and β mentioned above. Thus, this article uses the Laakso-Taagepera index as well as another index which can compensate for the problem of the Laakso-Taagepera index. After all, no index is perfect. Therefore, a good strategy is to use more than one method. As Taagepera (1999) states,

> Two numbers are inherently able to transmit more information than a single one (Taagepera, 1999, 503).

Among alternative indices, this article employs the index proposed by Molinar (1991). Hereafter, this article calls this index the Molinar index. This index is expressed as follows:

$$NP = 1 + \left\{ \frac{1}{\sum p_i^{\,2}} \times \frac{\left(\sum p_i^{\,2}\right) - p_1^{\,2}}{\sum p_i^{\,2}} \right\}$$

where NP is the Molinar index and p_1 is the largest party's share. Molinar gives an account of the index as follows,

> The trick in NP is to count the winning party differently from the rest, *counting the winning party as one* and weighting N [the Laakso-Taagepera index] by the contribution of the minority parties (Molinar, 1991, 1385, emphasis in original).

I have calculated the values of the Molinar index with the examples of Cases α and β mentioned above, in order to see how different the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index are. In Case α, the value of the Molinar index is 2 in the same way as the Laakso-Taagepera index, obviously because two parties' shares are just 1/2 each. In Case β, however, the value is 1.22. Therefore, in contrast to the Laakso-Taagepera index which cannot distinguish Cases α and β, the values of the Molinar index in these cases are quite different to each other.

The Molinar index has too faced some criticism. For example, Taagepera (1999) argues that the Molinar index tends to underestimate the effective number of parties when

more parties are actually relevant. Bearing the characteristics of both indices in mind, this article uses the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index.

2.   Way of Calculation

I have calculated the values of the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index in every constituency at the five general elections, on the basis of each candidate's share of votes in each constituency. The reason why I have adopted the calculation at the constituency level is related to the operation of the first-past-the-post system. Under this electoral system, the nationally or regionally aggregated share of votes does not always match the distribution of seats. If a party lose by a small margin or win by a large margin in many constituencies, the party would take a smaller share of seats in comparison with their share of votes, and it would be inefficient. A good example is the Liberal Democrats at the 2010 general election, as they increased their share of votes by 1 percentage point but actually lost five seats. This is exactly a reason why the first-past-the-post system has been criticised. Therefore, the calculation of the indices with nationally or regionally aggregated electoral results does not always reflect the actual circumstances of party competition precisely. Rather, it would be accurate to use constituency-level results.

The ideal way of analysis is to compare the values of each constituency across the elections, but it is infeasible because boundaries of constituencies have been changed. The boundary change took place throughout the United Kingdom between the 1992 and the 1997 general elections, in Scotland between the 2001 and the 2005 general elections and in England, Wales and Northern Ireland between the 2005 and the 2010 general elections, making the direct comparison of the values in each constituency impossible. Alternatively, I have calculated the national and regional averages of these values. By the way, Rallings and Thrasher (2007b) have provided the notional electoral results projected under the new boundaries. However, since these data are by no means real results and might contain some errors, this article does not adopt them.

I have used the electoral results provided by the Electoral Commission and the *Political Science Resources*[1] for the analysis.

The rest of this section proceeds in the following way. First, I will examine the average of candidates. As mentioned above, the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index measure the 'effective' number of parties. Therefore, it is desirable to also look into the 'actual' number of parties. In this section, in accordance with the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index calculated through every candidate's share of votes in each constituency, the actual number of parties corresponds to the number of candidates per constituency. In the same way as the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index whose values are presented in the shape of averages, I will present the average of candidates per constituency.

Next, I will examine the averages of the indices throughout the United Kingdom to grasp a general trend. I will also look at the highest and the lowest scores of the indices in

order to see the range of the values of the indices.

Third, I will present the average of each index for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland separately. This is because the values of these indices are expected to vary between these four countries in accordance with the different party system mentioned above. The UK average is close to the English average, because English constituencies account for more than 80 per cent of all constituencies. The averages for Scotland and Wales are expected to be higher than for England because of the existence of the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru respectively. The average for Northern Ireland is also expected to be higher than for England, taking account of the unique party system in Northern Ireland. Since England has a much larger number of constituencies than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, I have also calculated the average of each index for nine English regions in order to have a look at regional differences. The nine regions are the North East, the North West, Yorkshire, the East Midlands, the West Midlands, the East, London, the South East and the South West. The geographical definitions of these nine regions accord with those officially used in England. Because of the limitations of space, I will not present the values of the regional averages, but I will mention the tendencies in them.

Finally, I will re-divide all constituencies in three categories, namely constituencies won by the Conservatives, those won by Labour and those won by the Liberal Democrats, and I will present the average of the indices for each category. This will enable us to examine whether the tendency is different depending on each area's strong party. The constituencies won by the parties other than the three parties will be excluded from the analysis, because the number of such constituencies is small. The constituency where the Speaker stood is not included, either, regardless of the Speaker's affiliation. There is a convention that major parties do not field their candidates in the Speaker's constituency. Therefore, the values of the indices in such constituency might become an outlier, being expected to be low. In fact, the values in the Speaker's constituency were evidently lower than the national average at these general elections. In this analysis, it should be noticed that each constituency does not necessarily belong to the same category across the elections. In the case where a constituency won by a party at an election is taken by another party at the next election, this constituency moves across the categories. In short, it should be borne in mind that the constituencies contained in a category are different across the elections.

3. Average of Candidates

Figure 3 shows the average of candidates per constituency at general elections. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats field their candidates in almost all constituencies in Great Britain, while the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru fight in almost all constituencies in Scotland and Wales respectively but not outside their territories. Therefore, these five parties have almost nothing to do with the change in the average.

Figure 3.   Average of Candidates at General Elections

The average zigzagged between the 1992 and the 2001 elections, and the main contributor was the Referendum Party. They popped up at the 1997 general election and fought in 85 per cent of constituencies in Great Britain, pushing the averages up. Then, they disappeared, resulting in the drop of the average at the 2001 election. The average rose afterwards, as the UKIP, the Greens and the British National Party steadily increased their candidates. At the latest election, the electorate in nearly 90 per cent of constituencies in Great Britain had an option of the UKIP, and in more than half the constituencies in Great Britain the British National Party and the Greens each. In Northern Ireland, five parties, namely the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party gradually increased their candidates throughout this period. These parties fought in almost all constituencies in Northern Ireland at the 2010 election.

Thus, at the 2010 general election, there were four parties who fielded their candidates in most English constituencies and five parties fighting in most constituencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively. In addition to them, small parties and independents also existed. This made the average of candidates over 6 at the 2010 general election.

The constituency where the largest number of candidates stood at each general election is as follows:
- at the 1992 general election, Huntingdon in Cambridgeshire, England, having 10 candidates, including John Major, then Prime Minister;
- at the 1997 general election, 7 constituencies having 10 candidates;
- at the 2001 general election, 5 constituencies having 9 candidates;
- at the 2005 general election, Sedgefield in Durham, England, having 15 candidates, including Tony Blair, then Prime Minister; and
- at the 2010 general election, 2 constituencies in England having 12 candidates.

The Prime Minister's constituency sometimes has a large number of candidates, probably because of its salience.

The lowest number of candidates in a constituency was 3 at each of these general elections. There were dozens of constituencies having 3 candidates so that I will not present them, but most cases were the three-horse race between the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

If we only take account of the number of candidates when we define a party system, not only the three largest parties but the UKIP would be, and even the Greens and the British National Party might be, regarded as main parties. This does not properly reflect the reality, however, because a single seat won by the Greens at the 2010 general election was the first ever seat for them in the House of Commons, and the UKIP and the British National Party have never won a single seat. This is why we need to use the indices of party systems to assess the real situation, as below.

4.   General Trends of Laakso-Taagepera Index and Molinar Index

Next, I will examine the UK averages of the indices in order to grasp a general trend. Figure 4 shows the averages of the values of the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index at general elections. Both the averages of the Laakso-Taagepera index and the Molinar index show similar tendencies. Basically, both averages kept rising, regardless of the fluctuations of the average of candidates shown in Figure 3. It suggests a shift towards a multi-party system. Both averages especially climbed sharply at the 2005 election and continued to go upwards at the 2010 election. Compared with the later elections, both averages, especially the average of the Molinar index, were relatively flat between the 1992 and the 2001 elections. As discussed in the definition subsection, the Molinar index took lower values than the Laakso-Taagepera index. Details will be discussed in the following subsections.

Figure 4.   Laakso-Taagepera Index and Molinar Index at General Elections
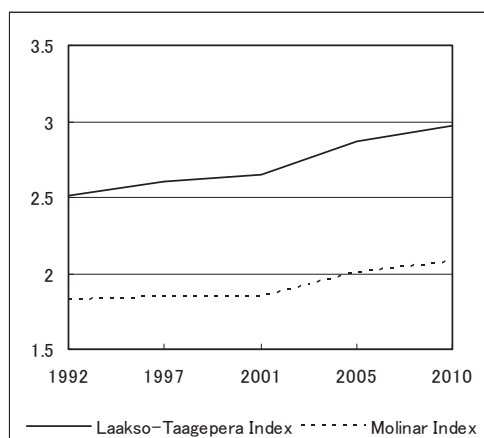
Here, I will have a look at the highest and the lowest scores in order to see the range of the values. Initially, in terms of the Laakso-Taagepera index, the constituency which scored the highest at each general election is as follows:

- at the 1992 general election, Edinburgh Leith in Scotland, scoring 4.25;
- at the 1997 general election, Belfast South in Northern Ireland, scoring 4.34;
- at the 2001 general election, Moray in Scotland, scoring 4.27;
- at the 2005 general election, Belfast South again, scoring 4.02; and
- at the 2010 general election, Londonderry East in Northern Ireland, scoring 4.53.

These constituencies concentrate on Scotland or Northern Ireland, suggesting the larger number of parties in these countries. The highest score at each general election took a value of more than 4, suggesting the existence of five or more parties. In the two Scottish cases, independents and, in the 2001 Moray contest, the Scottish Socialist Party received a small portion of votes along with the four main contenders of Labour, the Scottish National Party, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. In the cases in Northern Ireland, a variety of parties mentioned above fielded their candidates.

On the other hand, the constituency scoring the lowest is as follows:

- at the 1992 general election, Blaenau Gwent in Wales, scoring 1.56;
- at the 1997 general election, Bootle in Merseyside, England, scoring 1.43;
- at the 2001 general election, Liverpool Walton in England, scoring 1.59;
- at the 2005 general election, Bootle again, scoring 1.70; and
- at the 2010 general election, Liverpool Walton again, scoring 1.84.

In every case, the Labour candidate overwhelmed other candidates. Bootle and Liverpool Walton adjoin each other in Labour-dominated Merseyside. The lowest score used to take a value in the region of 1.5, but it increased recently to reach to 1.84 at the latest general election.

Then, I will turn to the Molinar index. The constituency which scored the highest at each general election is as follows:

- at the 1992 general election, Inverness, Nairn and Lochaber in Scotland, scoring 3.96;
- at the 1997 general election, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale in Scotland, scoring 3.44;
- at the 2001 general election, Argyll and Bute in Scotland, scoring 3.63;
- at the 2005 general election, Ochil and South Perthshire in Scotland, scoring 3.41; and
- at the 2010 general election, Norwich South in England, scoring 3.65.

The four constituencies apart from Norwich South are placed in Scotland, suggesting the larger number of parties in this country in the same way as the Laakso-Taagepera index. In terms of the 2010 Norwich South contest, Simon Wright, the Liberal Democratic newcomer, ousted Charles Clarke, the Labour incumbent whose curriculum vitae includes high-profile portfolios such as Education Secretary and Home Secretary, by a small margin of less than 1 percentage point of votes. This was one of the dramatic contests at this general election. Along with Wright and Clarke, the Conservatives too gathered more than 20 per cent of votes, and the Greens almost 15 per cent, pushing up the score of the Molinar

index. The highest score at each general election was in the range of 3.4 and 3.7 except for the 1992 general election.

On the other hand, the constituency scoring the lowest is as follows:
- at the 1992 general election, Blaenau Gwent in Wales, scoring 1.04;
- at the 1997 general election, Bootle in Merseyside, England, scoring 1.02;
- at the 2001 general election, Bootle again, scoring 1.04;
- at the 2005 general election, Bootle once again, scoring 1.06; and
- at the 2010 general election, Liverpool Walton in England, scoring 1.09.

Apart from the 2005 general election, these constituencies match those scoring the lowest of the Laakso-Taagepera index at each general election. As the Molinar index does not take a value of less than 1, the closeness of these lowest scores to 1 suggests the dominance of the winning party in these constituencies.

5.   Laakso-Taagepera Index and Molinar Index on a Country Basis

Thirdly, I will examine the averages of the indices on a country basis. Figure 5 shows the average of the values of the Laakso-Taagepera index on a country basis. The averages tended to rise, although there were some fluctuations in the Scottish average. The Scottish average dropped at the 1997 and the 2010 elections, although the 2010 average was higher

Figure 5.   Laakso-Taagepera Index at General Elections on a Country Basis
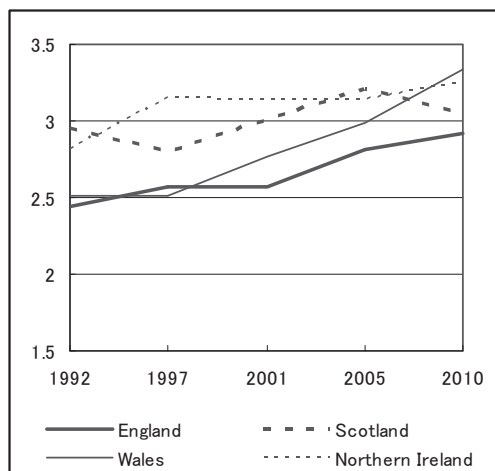
than the 2001 average. As expected, the English average tended to keep lower than the other three averages. The English average began at less than 2.5 in this period and approached but did not reach to 3. The averages for the other three countries exceeded 3 at the 2010 election, suggesting the existence of four or more parties in each country. This is consistent with the existence of the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru in Scotland and Wales respectively in addition to the three largest parties, and with the unique party system in

Northern Ireland. The averages for the nine English regions also tended to rise throughout this period, although not presented here.

Figure 6 shows the average of the values of the Molinar index on a country basis. The interpretation of the values of the Molinar index is not as straightforward as the Laakso-Taagepera index. Basically, in the same way as the Laakso-Taagepera index, the trend towards a higher average can be found, as all the four averages recorded more than 2 at the 2010 election. The English average stayed at the same level between the 1992 and the 2001 elections before rising at the 2005 and the 2010 elections. The Scottish average dropped at the 1997 election and kept lower at the 2001 election than at the 1992 election. It recovered the 1992 level at the 2005 election but fell again at the 2010 election. The Welsh average also dipped at the 1997 election, although, differently from the Scottish average, the Welsh average returned to the 1992 level at the 2001 election and kept soaring since then. The Northern Irish average peaked at the 2001 election. According to my calculation for the English regions, in the same way as Scotland and Wales, the averages for the North East and the North West dropped at the 1997 election, while those for the East and the South East rose at the same election.

Figure 6.   Molinar Index at General Elections on a Country Basis
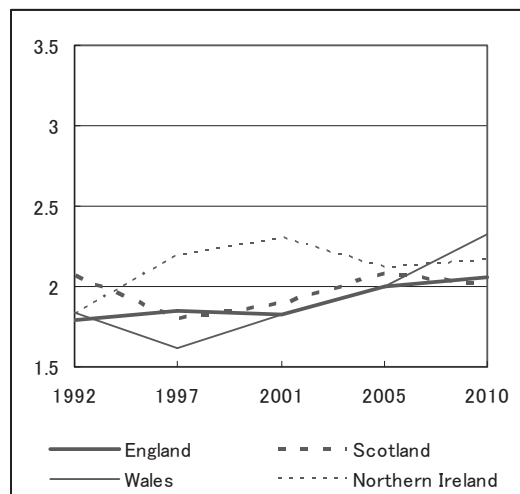

In this way, the basic tendency is that the averages of both indices have been rising. It demonstrates that the British politics has been shifting towards a multi-party system. Despite this, fluctuations can be found, especially in the Molinar index. As mentioned above, a feature of the Molinar index is that the value tends to become lower in a case where a dominant party exist. This leads to an inference that the tricky change in the Molinar index might be related to the strength of parties in each area. The 1997 general election saw Labour's landslide victory, while the areas where the average of the Molinar

index dropped in 1997, namely Scotland and Wales as well as the North East and the North West of England, are Labour strongholds. On the other hand, the Conservatives are relatively strong in the East and the South East of England where the averages rose at the 1997 election. Thus, each party's base in each area seems to be reflected by the Molinar index. The fluctuation of the Scottish average of the Laakso-Taagepera index can be explained in the same way. This point leads to the analysis in the next subsection.

6.   Laakso-Taagepera Index and Molinar Index on a Party Basis

Finally, I will examine the averages of the indices on a party basis. Figure 7 shows the average of the values of the Laakso-Taagepera index on a party basis. At the 1992 election, the average was almost the same between the constituencies won by the Conservatives and those won by Labour. At the 1997 election, however, in contrast to the average in the Labour-won constituencies, the average in the Conservative-won constituencies rose, making a wide gap between these two averages. The average in the Conservative-won constituencies stood at 2.94, presumably reflecting the close competition between the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats in many constituencies. Then, while the average in the Conservative-won constituencies plateaued, the average in the Labour-won constituencies leapfrogged that in the Conservative-won constituencies at the 2005 election and continued to rise at the 2010 election.

Figure 7.   Laakso-Taagepera Index at General Elections on a Party Basis
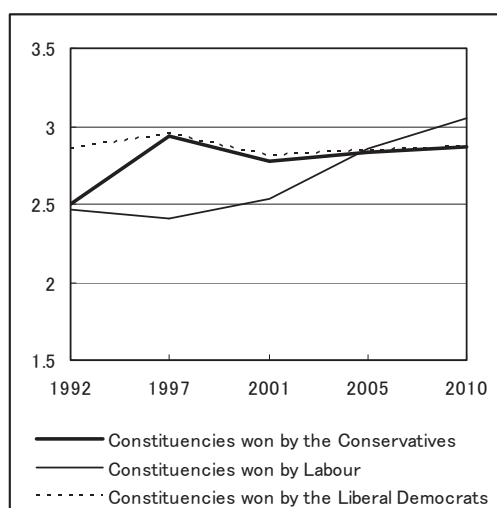

Compared with these two averages, the average in the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats levelled out. It was clearly higher than the other two averages at the 1992 election, suggesting that the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats had already seen a multi-party system. This is because such constituencies had already seen the

three-horse race between the Liberal Democrats and the two largest parties. Then, the average in the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats took almost the same value as the average in the Conservative-won constituencies since the 1997 election and the smallest value among the three averages at the 2010 election. The average in the Labour-won constituencies was 3.05, suggesting the existence of a fourth party in addition to the three largest parties. Perhaps this fourth party are the Scottish National Party or Plaid Cymru, as Labour won approximately two thirds of seats in Scotland and Wales each.

Figure 8 shows the average of the values of the Molinar index on a party basis. These averages basically show similar tendencies to the averages of the Laakso-Taagepera index. One of minor differences is that the average in the Labour-won constituencies sank more sharply than that of the Laakso-Taagepera index at the 1997 election. Another is that the average in the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats was not the lowest but the highest among the three at the 2010 election, although it was lower than at the 1992 election. These differences seem to be related to the feature of the Molinar index. The drop of the average in the Labour-won constituencies at the 1997 election suggests that Labour won by a large margin in many constituencies at this election. The change in the average in the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats suggests that they tended to win by a larger margin than they used to but by a smaller margin than the Conservatives and Labour.

Figure 8.   Molinar Index at General Elections on a Party Basis
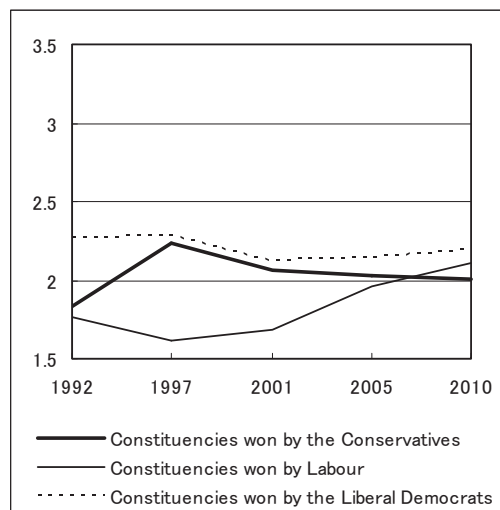
Here, it should be reminded that the constituencies belonging to a category differ across the elections. The rise of the averages in the Conservative-won constituencies at the 1997 election suggests that the Conservatives not only lost seats but also decreased margins in these constituencies. This was followed by the rise of the averages in the Labour-won constituencies. From the same point of view, the drop of the average in the constituencies

won by the Liberal Democrats at the 2001 election is considered to reflect the increase in a margin in these constituencies. In other words, they not only increased their seats but also increased 'safe' seats.

Hence, at the 1992 general election, the contests in the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats were already the three-horse race, while those in the Conservative-won and the Labour-won constituencies were closer to the two-horse race, although the existence of the Liberal Democrats was unneglible. At the 1997 general election, the shift towards a multi-party system is found in the constituencies won by the Conservatives. They regained the grip in these constituencies to some extent at later elections, but it has never returned to the 1992 level. At the 2001 general election, the overall electoral results were similar to those at the previous election, but there is a notable trend that the Liberal Democrats increased their safe seats, seemingly consolidating their support base. Labour's downturn began at the 2005 general election and continued at the 2010 general election. The tendency towards a multi-party system eroded in the Labour-won constituencies in this period.

V.   Conclusion

This article has investigated the change in the British party system in order to give a perspective on the backgrounds of the hung parliament at the 2010 general election. The analysis of this article has demonstrated that the British party system has shifted towards a multi-party system. The key actor is, as expected, the Liberal Democrats. The breakthrough was the 1997 general election, as the total of seats for the parties other than the Conservatives and Labour exceeded 10 per cent for the first time in the post-war era. This was attributed mainly to the performance of the Liberal Democrats, as they doubled their seats at this time. It implies that a pie available for the two largest parties has become small. Fortunately for Labour, they won the 1997, the 2001 and the 2005 general elections by a big margin against the Conservatives, leading to a single-party government despite the advance of the Liberal Democrats. At the 2010 general election, however, the Conservatives were not able to win enough seats to secure an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons.

The change in the British party system can be confirmed not only at the national level but also at local constituency level. The indices of party systems principally indicate the shift towards a multi-party system. This shift was initially found in the constituencies won by the Conservatives at the 1997 general election and later in those won by Labour since the 2005 general election. On the other hand, the constituencies won by the Liberal Democrats had already seen a multi-party system prior to the 1990s. In the last decade, they increased their safe seats. This has further made a pie for the two largest parties small.

These findings are consistent with the argument by Cutts, Fieldhouse and Russell (2010) that the Liberal Democrats had first grown at the expense of the Conservatives and gained at Labour's expense in 2005. The question why the Liberal Democrats have

advanced is beyond the scope of this article, but Russell and Fieldhouse (2005) have given a hint. The Liberal Democrats positioned themselves as an anti-Conservative party, and, during the Conservative Governments prior to the 1997 general election, they gained the credibility as main challengers to the Conservatives through the success at by-elections and local elections (Russell & Fieldhouse, 2005).

In this way, the coalition government in consequence of the hung parliament at the 2010 general election was the outcome of the continuous change in the British party system since the 1990s, although the change had been beneath the surface in the sense that a hung parliament had not emerged until then. It might be too early, however, to conclude that a hung parliament continues in the United Kingdom. The next general election could become the crossroads in British politics. If a hung parliament occurs again, it might imply that British politics is heading for the era of coalition politics; if a hung parliament does not occur and a single-party government is formed by either the Conservatives or Labour, the current coalition government would be regarded as an exceptional one-off event rather than a lasting trend. Therefore, the next general election might shape the landscape of British politics in coming decades. In this sense, the performance of the current coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats would be crucial; the evaluation of the coalition government would undoubtedly affect the outcome of the next general election, shaping the British politics in future. We shall wait and see what will happen in the next few years.

The change in the British party system has a big impact also on political science. Firstly, as the change examined in this article apparently violates Duverger's law, we need to elucidate which factor has enabled such a change despite the first-past-the-post system still put in place. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the observation of British politics as typical of two-party politics has inspired a large number of political scientists, not confined to electoral studies. Therefore, the change in British politics requires and encourages us to re-examine a volume of theories in political science.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] The datasets used in this section were downloaded via the internet. The internet addresses of these datasets are as follows:
- for the 2010 general election, www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/excel_doc/0020 /105725/GE2010-constituency-results-website.xls

- for the 2005 general election, www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/excel_doc/0005
/47264/Generalelection2005_A-Zconstituencyresults_18784-13893__E__N__S__W__.xls
- for the 2001 general election, www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/outlaw/ge2001.zip
- for the 1997 general election, www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/outlaw/ge1997.zip
- and for the 1992 general election, www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/outlaw/ge1992.zip
All the datasets were retrieved on 11 February 2011.

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