

Will the UK be hung?

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This is my [latest column on Forbes.com](#), published last night:

The UK goes to the polls on Thursday after one of the most fascinating election campaigns of recent times.

Opinion polls suggest that no party is likely to secure an overall majority in the next parliament. This has not happened in an election since the first general election of 1974 and we have not had a minority government since the late 1970s. For many voters this is, therefore, virtually unknown territory.

The opinion polls may be wrong of course, but they also reveal something potentially much more significant. There is a very strong possibility that no more than 60% of all votes cast today will be for our two main parties — the Conservatives and Labour. Between them, these two have formed every UK government since 1923.

The change in voting patterns is not new. Our third political party — the Liberal Democrats - have seen their share of the vote rise steadily over many years, from a low of less than 5% immediately after World War II to 22% in 2005, and are forecast to pick up more than 25% this time round. This is partly because of the totally unforeseen effectiveness of their leader, Nick Clegg in the televised leadership debates held for the first time ever in the UK during this year's campaign.

For the curious that still leaves well over 10% of unaccounted votes. These are attributable to small parties, including nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, protestant Unionists, also in Northern Ireland and two other parties that might, just possibly gain their first-ever MPs this time. They are the Greens and the far right, and overtly racist, British National Party.

All of which presents two problems. The first is that we have almost no experience in the UK of the horse trading required to form a coalition government, but there is every likelihood that, if the pun can be excused, this will have to be learned on the hoof starting Friday morning.

No one is sure what will happen, except that if the opinion polls are anything like accurate and the vote is distributed as pollsters expect then it is possible that the Labour and Conservative parties might have remarkably similar numbers of seats on Friday but be some way short of a majority in the House of Commons, even though the Conservatives will almost certainly have won the largest share of the popular vote.

In contrast, the Liberal Democrats, despite their popularity, are predicted to pick up the largest proportion of second places, and that means they will hold the balance of power with many fewer seats than either other party — and be king makers even if they decline to become part of a coalition with the other parties. It's a scenario some think likely because the Liberal Democrats' MPs are very split between those who look broadly left and broadly right.

That leaves the UK facing a potentially new form of government, which opinion polls also show is exactly what the majority of the electorate want.

There is something else that the UK will face, and that is a demand for change. The Liberal Democrats, for the very obvious reason that it would suit them, have long demanded proportional representation for the UK. The Labour party are recent converts to the idea, partly because they risk of losing political office. All minority parties favour it.

One party stands out against the rest. That is the Conservatives. They are demanding a reduction in the number of elected Members of Parliament, supposedly to save cost. Actually, and with little apparent disguise, they would in the process seek to redraw all constituency boundaries to ensure that they had what they think will be a built-in and almost perpetual majority in Parliament thereafter, even on their current proportion of the poll.

The economy is important; dealing with the deficit is important; deciding who will be the next prime minister of the UK is important but no one should ignore this over-riding issue of the future direction of the UK's electoral system and the nature of its democracy. If by some chance the Conservatives win a majority, however small tomorrow, they could undertake a revolution in the UK as big as any former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher achieved by delivering themselves a parliamentary majority for a generation to come on a share of the vote that will leave the vast majority in the UK disenfranchised in perpetuity.

And therein lies their risk. Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England has already said that whoever wins election will have to impose cuts in public services and put in place tax rises so draconian that they will not be re-elected for a generation. If the Conservatives seek to change the electoral system and King's scenario comes to pass anyway then the retribution of the combined opposition parties on the Conservatives if they ever won power again would be very harsh.

So the UK could be hung after all — and not just at this election but for a long time to come.