



Forecasting the 2015 British general election: The 1992 debacle all over again?



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ABSTRACT

This article introduces and reviews a set of twelve academic forecasts of the 2015 British general election. Along with the vast majority of others including journalists and betting markets, they failed by a big margin to predict that the Conservatives would emerge with an overall majority of seats. Several suffered from the 1992 scale inaccuracies of the vote-intention opinion polls. Forecasts based on other data sources typically did a bit better, but also fell short. Nonetheless, this was not 1992 all over again. The dramatic collapse of the Liberal Democrats and rise of the SNP, UKIP and Greens were successfully anticipated. Also this collection includes numerous methodological advancements, with several new methods and developments to established approaches.

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1. Introduction

In Britain, scientific election forecasting has been a serious enterprise for some time, at least since the 2001 general election. Its zenith was reached with respect to the 2010 general election, when academic modellers unanimously foresaw a “hung parliament” for that contest, something that many pundits scoffed at. That triumph of the scholars was documented in a special issue of *Electoral Studies*, which published a collection of papers on these successful ex ante forecasts, by six different teams. [See the critique and summary of these papers in [Gibson and Lewis-Beck \(2011\)](#).] The journal, *Electoral Studies*, has again graciously agreed to host the publication of papers forecasting, before-the-fact, the outcome of the 2015 general election in Britain. That collection is at hand, and records the predictions of twelve different teams, double the number for 2010.

At first blush 2015 appears to be the nadir of the forecasting enterprise, for each of the teams again foresaw a “hung parliament”. Of course, the election itself proved this forecast wrong, giving the Conservatives a solid majority of seats, so enabling them to rule alone.

That this same prediction – a “hung parliament” – served the forecasting community so well in 2010, and so badly in 2015, holds

considerable irony. The forecasters were not alone in making this big mistake, however, as the pollsters and the media also chimed in with their own false predictions. In their February survey, [Hanretty and Jennings \(2015\)](#) found academics, pollsters and journalists had very similar views on the likely outcome in both votes and seats, with just 6% suggesting one party would emerge with a majority. Throughout the year the betting markets had a hung parliament as overwhelmingly likely, with just a 6% implied probability of a Conservative majority in the final week ([Tapper, 2015](#)).

The situation is reminiscent of 1992. That was hitherto the last time the campaign polls suggested a close race and it also was the last time the Conservatives had won a majority. Inevitably many of the forecasting teams fell foul of the error in the Conservative and Labour vote intention polls. But there is much more to election forecasting models now than just extrapolation of opinion polls. And there was much more to the 2015 election than the contest between the two main parties. The Scottish National Party (SNP) took nearly all the seats in Scotland on just under 50% of the vote (up 30 points on 2010). Meanwhile both UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Greens increased their vote four fold and the Liberal Democrats lost nearly two-thirds of theirs. These developments were anticipated by most opinion polls and forecasters alike. Summing up the pre-election consensus view is a lead header from *The Economist* (May 2nd – 8th, 2015, p.48): “Next week Britain goes to the polls in its strangest, closest general election for many years.” They were right about the strangeness if not about the closeness.

Below, we first characterize the different papers and their

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approaches, highlighting just some of the numerous methodological developments. Then, we assess their vote share estimates, before we turn to assessment of the seat share estimates. We conclude with reflections on some of the potential lessons for the future of election forecasting in Britain.

2. The papers

These dozen papers were submitted to the editors *before* the May 7th election day. Therefore, the forecasts were on record in advance of the contest. In other words, they are true forecasts, studied *ex-ante* predictions. While the science, not to say the art, of election forecasting stands well-advanced in Britain, it is not unique to those islands. The American community of election forecasters has also been quite active, most notably in the 2012 United States presidential election, which saw the return of President Obama. After that contest, *PS: Political Science and Politics*, published comments from sixteen different forecasting teams, each assessing their performance. [See Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier (2014), for an introduction to that symposium.] The approaches employed there varied, but could be grouped according to their reliance on vote intention polls, explanatory structural modelling, political stock markets, or subjective expert judgements. The British work here draws on the vote intention and modelling approaches, as well as adding several other strategies.

Four papers, primarily using vote-intention polling and survey data at national, sub-national and constituency levels, attempt both to forecast vote share at the national level and estimate variation in party performance between constituencies. In general, these efforts move forward in analysis steps. For example, Fisher looks at average vote intentions, then at a regression models that includes vote intention and vote history. He then simulates hypothetical election results which are adjusted using estimates from constituency and individual-level polling data to eventually arrive at seat predictions with uncertainty estimates. Using similar ingredients but a much more formal and thorough method, Hanretty et al. present very thoughtful, creative and technically impressive solutions to a range of modelling problems, even before tackling the most problematic issue of reconciling constituency and national level polling information. In another methodologically impressive approach, Ford et al. build on their polls-to-votes-to-seats model from 2010 in various ways, most notably creating a smoother evolution of the polls-to-votes part and by a complex elaboration of the votes-to-seats model incorporating more parties' various constituency level factors. Mellon and Fieldhouse exploit the unprecedented availability of large-scale individual-level British Election Study (BES) data with full constituency coverage in order to estimate constituency-level patterns in the flow of the vote, correcting for turnout and aggregate characteristics.

Another four papers offer structural models at the national level, using time series data. The Lebo and Norpoth pendulum model has worked well for predicting Conservative and Labour seat totals over decades. The idea is that voters swing between choosing Conservative and Labour governments roughly every 2.5 terms. This time they made adjustments for some of the Prime Ministerial approval coming not from the Conservatives but their coalition partners, and for a different pattern of party performance in Scotland. Stegmaier and Williams develop a model for the pattern of change in party popularity over time based on the Continuous Monitoring Survey (CMS) from 2004 to 2015. For independent variables they include prior party vote, and national economic and political evaluations. Among other interesting findings, they show that economic evaluations affected Tory but not Liberal Democrat support since 2010. Lewis-Beck et al. synthesize economic, political, and vote intention variables into an aggregate dynamic model predicting incumbent

vote share, showing how vote intention improves and economic growth declines in predictive power as the election approaches. Whiteley et al. build on a long tradition of estimating the vote–seats relationship in British politics and develop a novel approach to the problem, taking into account the implications of the massive drop in Liberal Democrat support following the coalition formation.

Local election results are the sole basis for prediction in two of the models. Prosser develops a new model for forecasting from the national equivalent/projected local-elections vote share, with intriguingly similar forecasts from both the 2014 and 2013 rounds of local elections. Rallings et al. develop their local by-elections model, that has been successful since 1997, to include UKIP, allow for different developments in Scotland, and identify constituency variation based on their component ward-level local election results.

Finally, two approaches form classes of their own. Murr shows the efficacy of citizen forecasting (asking people who will win in their constituency) for the past seven British elections, and develops a new method for predicting constituency vote shares from categorical forecasts by citizens of who would win in their constituency. Burnap et al. forecast the election outcome using Twitter. This is a first for Britain. But they take lessons from previous attempts in Germany and Italy, using a sentiment analysis of Twitter mentions of parties and leaders up to two months in advance.

These forecasts are considered below. We begin with a look at the vote share forecasts, then turn to the decisive seat totals forecasts.

3. The votes and seats forecasts: an overview

Table 1 presents the forecasts for the seven parties that won seats in Great Britain, together with the actual vote shares and seat totals for these parties. Forecasters varied in which outcomes they chose to forecast. Sometimes these were matters of choice, influenced by what the teams thought they could adequately forecast with their methods. Sometimes there are structural reasons for absences, e.g. when methods by-pass share forecasts to predict seats directly. With some of the minor or newer parties forecasts were sometimes made, if at all, on a different basis from larger parties, not least because of the lack of adequate or any historical track record of polls or other pre-election indicators. Details on these choices are in the individual papers.

In order to facilitate comparison, we provide in Table 1 the actual vote and seat results by party. As a baseline, note that the Conservative party, leader of the government coalition, received, including that of the Speaker, 331 seats (+24 since 2010). Their coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats, received only 8 (–49) seats, a sum not needed by the Conservatives in any case, as they obtained their own seat majority. The chief rival, Labour, received only 232 (–26) seats, thus trailing the winning Conservatives by just short of 100 seats.

Also included is the average of the final vote-intention polls that were published before the election, and a uniform change seats projection from those polls. This projection incorporated the average of the Scottish polls and adjusted the GB polls accordingly. Although opinion polls should not be judged on the basis of any seats projection that may be generated from them, this nonetheless provides a helpful point of comparison.

Look at column 1, which contains the vote share forecasts. Conservative vote share was consistently underestimated, regardless of the forecaster. (Closest were three teams, each within 2 percentage points, with an estimate of 35%). The average error was large and about the same as that for the opinion polls, minus 4 percentage points. In general, something seems clearly wrong with

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