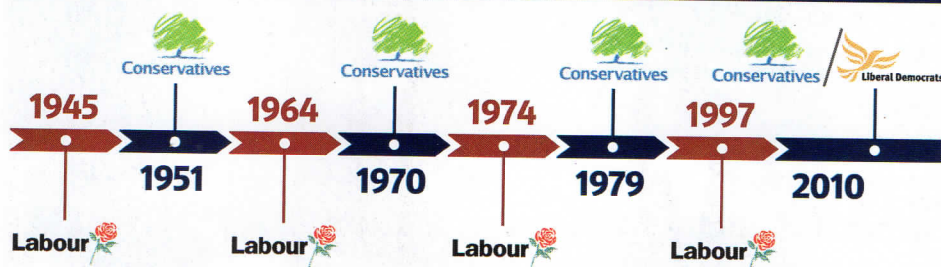


Expert view

Peter Kellner, President of YouGov, gives his thoughts on the potential outcome of next year's general election

Timeline - Post-war governments



Seldom has the outcome of an impending general election been so uncertain; and the uncertainty may not end on May 8, when the votes have been counted.

Normally, if either Labour or Conservative is clearly ahead at this stage, we can be fairly sure who will win – and also sure that they will have a clear overall majority in the new House of Commons. Our first-past-the-post voting system, with its bias in favour of large parties, has historically made coalitions and minority governments a rarity.

That changed in 2010, when the Tories enjoyed a comfortable seven-point lead over Labour in the popular vote but still fell well short of the 326 seats they needed to win outright. This time there is a real prospect of an even more complex outcome. The overall result will depend on four factors, none of which can be predicted with certainty:

- The Labour-Conservative balance. In recent weeks, neither has established a clear lead. Will one of them break the deadlock between now and May?
- The performance of the Liberal Democrats. They won 57 seats last time. They will certainly lose many of them. But how many, and who to? We can't be sure at this stage.
- The Ukip surge. Nigel Farage's party may well win some seats, though I should be surprised if they get to ten. The bigger uncertainty is whether the Tories will squeeze Ukip's vote in the Labour-Tory marginals, the Conservative

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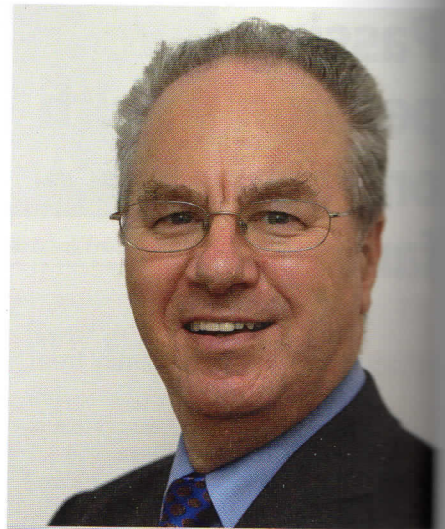
message will be: "Vote Farage, get Miliband". If this terrifies enough Ukip supporters, the Tories could hold on to up to 20 seats they might otherwise lose.

- How many Labour seats will the SNP capture in Scotland? Last time Labour thrashed the SNP north of the border by 41 seats to six. Despite losing the recent referendum on independence, the SNP is now on a roll. It is likely to win some seats, but the number could be anywhere from three to 30.

In short, the overall outcome is quite uncertain. However, I think one thing is probable, and two very possible.

The probable outcome is that neither Labour nor the Conservatives will win outright. We are likely to have another hung parliament. Whether we end up with a minority government or another coalition will depend in part on the precise numbers – a few seats either way could make a big difference to the political options.

It is possible that the outcome will be messy. That is, neither Labour nor the Conservatives will be able to reach the 326 winning post by simply doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats. The fortnight after election day could be as



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During the past four decades he has written for a variety of newspapers, including The Times, Sunday Times, Independent, Observer, Evening Standard, New Statesman. He has also been a regular contributor to Newsnight (BBC2), A Week in Politics (Channel Four), Powerhouse (Channel Four), Analysis (Radio Four) and election night results programmes on television and radio. He has written, or contributed to, a variety of books and leaflets about politics, elections and public affairs.

dramatic and uncertain as the fortnight leading up to it. We might even end up with the Tories as the largest party, but Ed Miliband becoming Prime Minister, by doing a deal with both the Lib Dems and the SNP.

It is also possible that, if the result is messy, there will be another general election within 18 months. True, we now have a law that ordains fixed-term, five-year parliaments. But it contains two escape clauses. An early election takes place if either a) two-thirds of MPs vote for one, or b) the Government loses a vote of confidence, and no fresh government is endorsed by MPs within 14 days. Don't assume that next May's general election will be the last until 2020.