

# UNDERSTANDING HUNG PARLIAMENTS

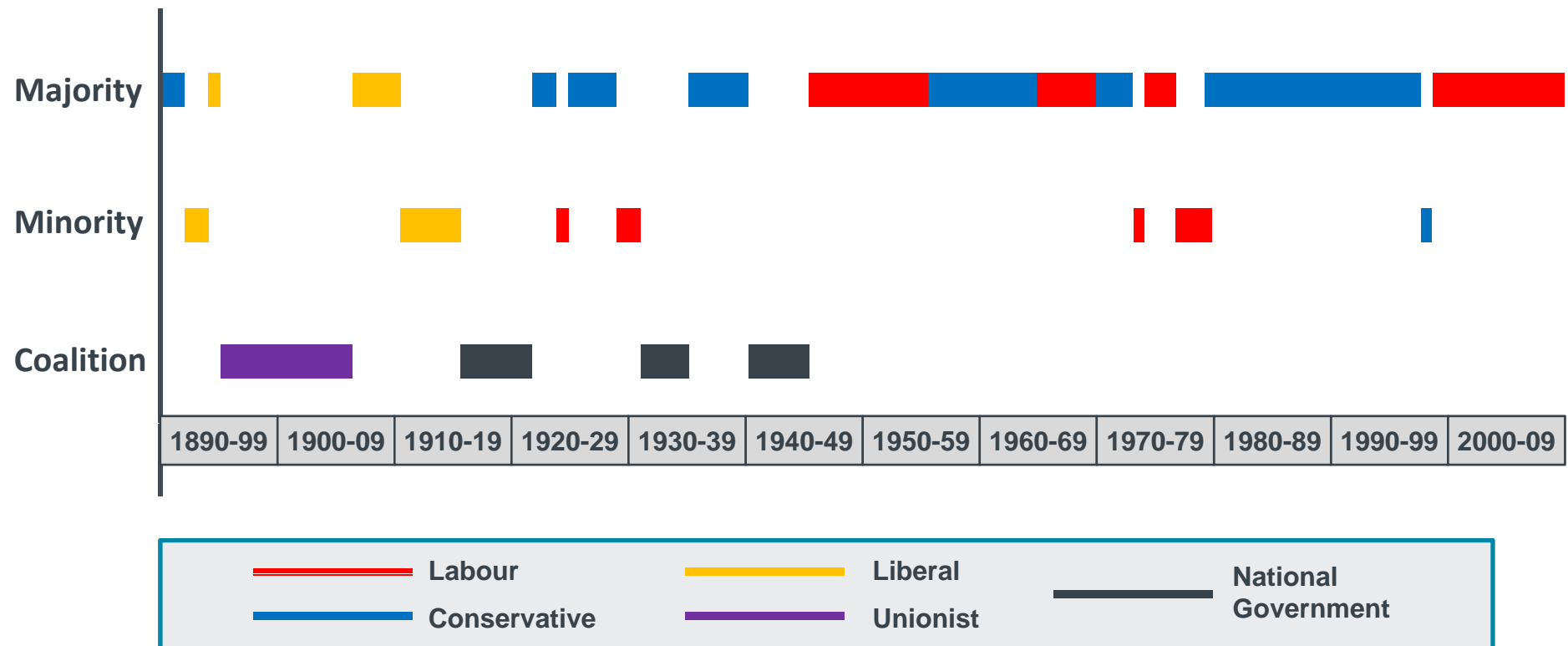
And how Minority Governments work

A Brief Guide

Constitution Unit & Institute for Government

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# What experience does the UK have of hung parliaments?

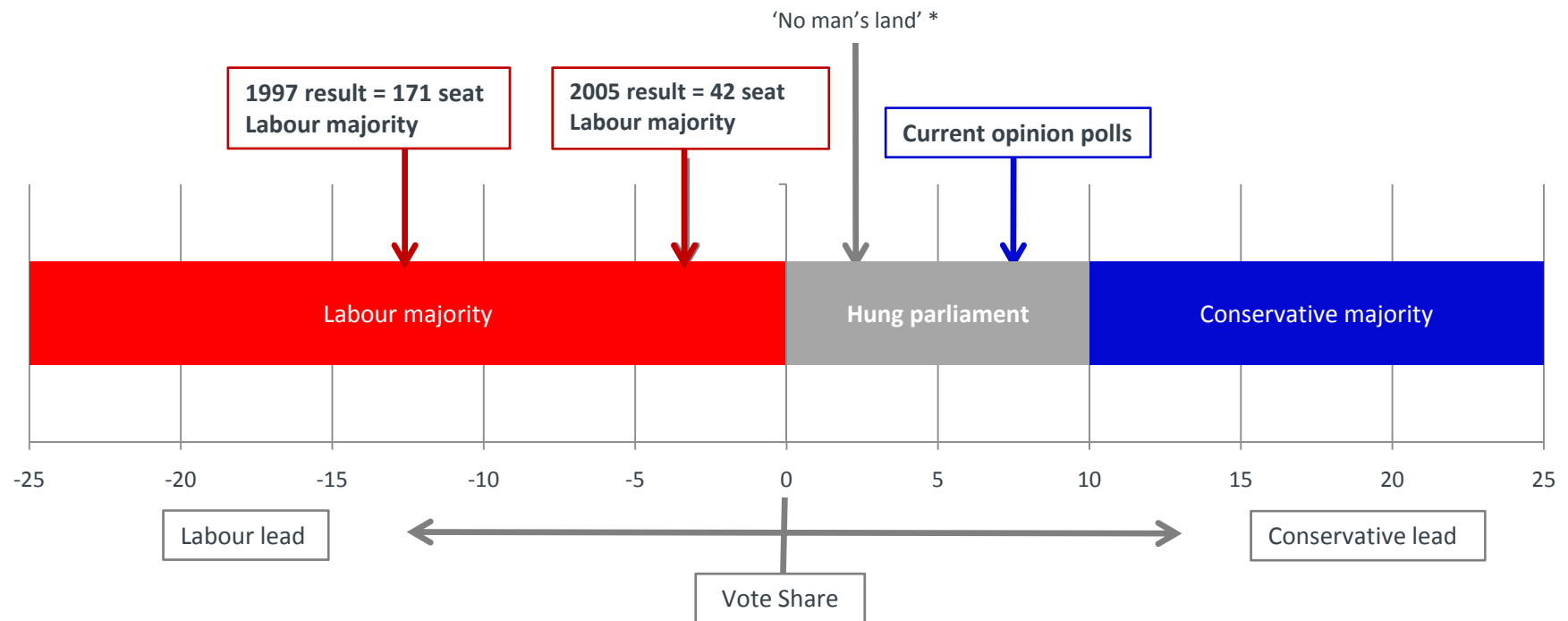


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## What is the international experience?

- In most democracies, single party majority government is the exception.
- Other than the UK, only three EU countries have a single party majority in parliament: France, Malta and Greece.
- Coalition or minority governments are also usual in New Zealand, Scotland and Wales.
- In Canada, which uses the same 'first past the post' system as Westminster, there were 10 'minority parliaments' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and three so far this century.
- The House of Lords also illustrates how a parliamentary chamber under 'no overall control' can operate.

# How likely is a hung parliament in 2010?



\* On the assumption of a uniform national swing between Labour and the Conservatives

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## If there is a hung parliament, does the leader of the largest party automatically become prime minister?

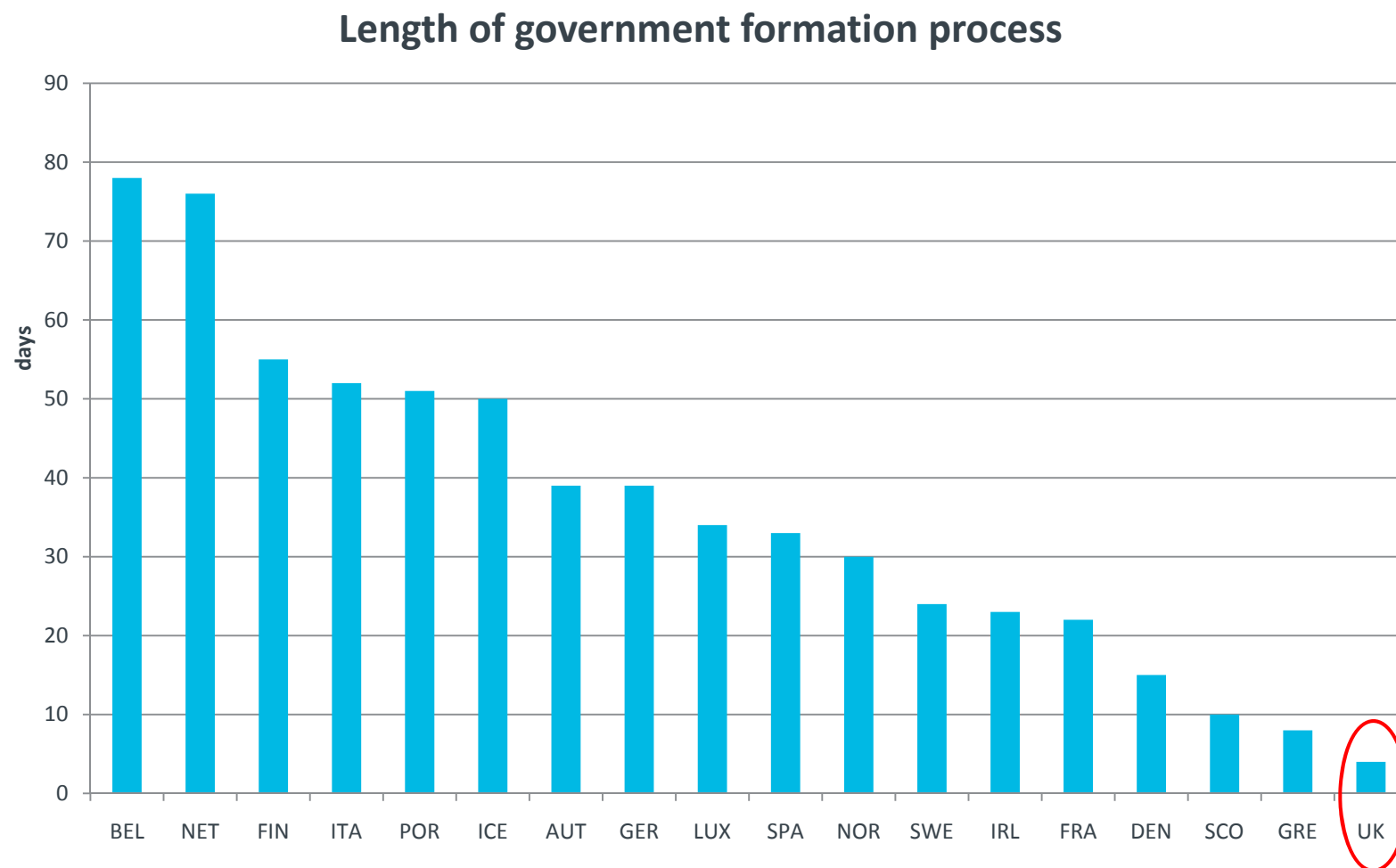
- No – this is a common misconception.
- The party leader who can command the ‘confidence’ of the House of Commons becomes Prime Minister.
- This could be the leader of the second largest party, if he is able to secure the support of smaller parties.

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## Does the Queen play a role in determining who will form the new government?

- No. The political parties in the Commons must establish between themselves who can command confidence.
- Negotiations between parties will be supported by the civil service.
- The Queen will be kept informed of progress via contact between her Private Secretary, the Cabinet Secretary and the PM's Principal Private Secretary
- When these negotiations have concluded the incumbent PM will then advise the Queen whom to ask to form a government.

# How long is the process of forming a government likely to take?



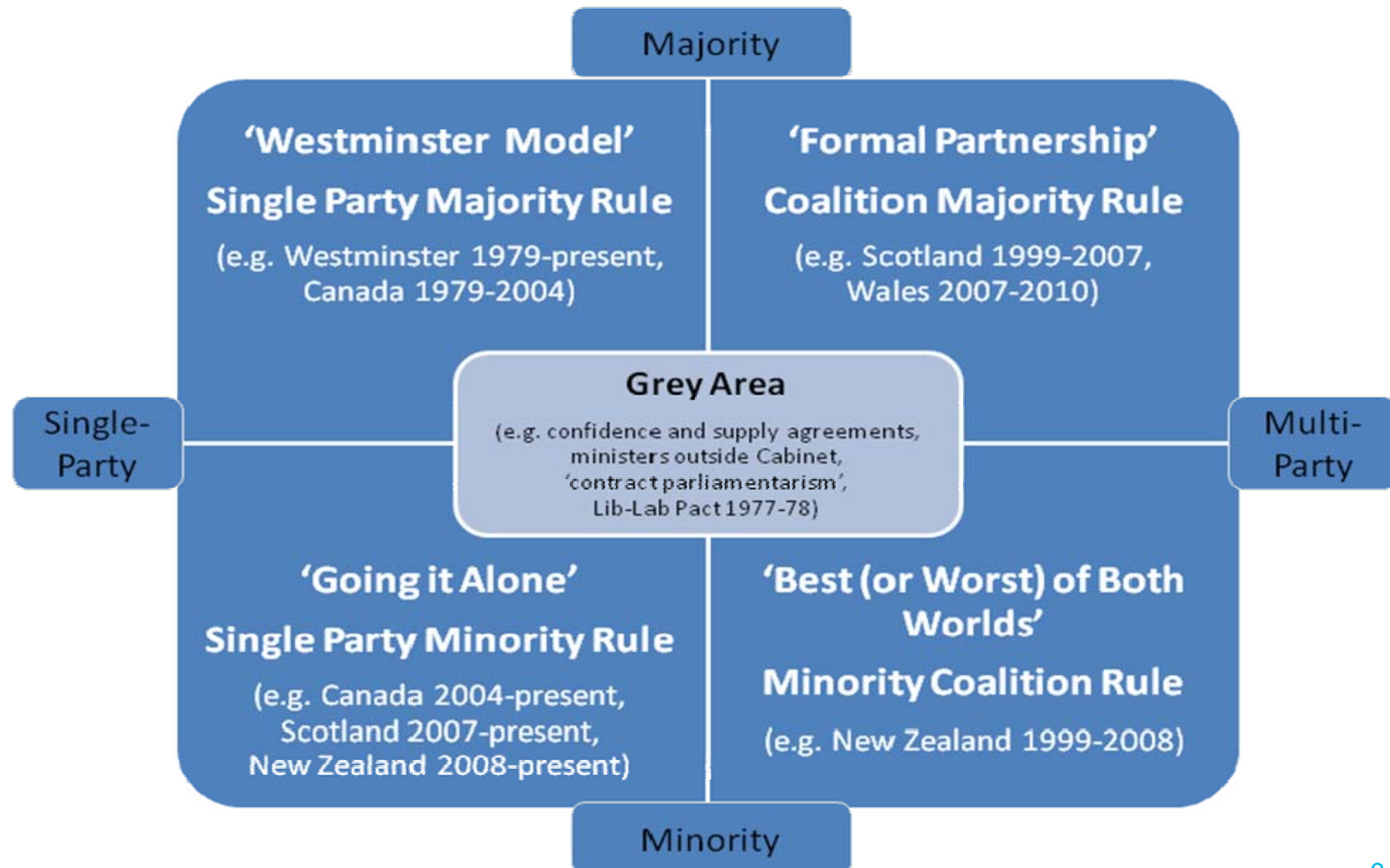
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## Who is in charge of the country while a new government is formed?

- The incumbent government remains in office until it is clear who is to form the next government. Ministers retain their previous posts
- In this period, the government is expected to defer controversial decisions; or to consult the opposition parties where necessary.
- This 'caretaker convention' is being codified by the Cabinet Office in a new Cabinet Manual.
- The government retains its capacity to respond properly to emergencies.



# What different types of government can emerge from a hung parliament?



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## What are the key differences between minority and coalition government?

“Coalition (majority) rule makes life difficult within government but simple in parliament. Minority government is the other way round.”

“Minority government is a challenge for the opposition as much as a challenge for the government.”

“A hung parliament will lead to multi-party *governance*, even if single party *government* continues.”

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## Given the current political context, what is most likely to happen if we have a hung parliament?

- A formal coalition is unlikely.
- Most likely is that the largest single party will form a minority government.
- Such a government may seek to sign ‘confidence and supply agreements’ with smaller parties.
- The smaller parties would pledge to support the government on the Queen’s Speech and the Budget

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## Does a minority government necessarily mean weak and unstable government?

- Minority governments elsewhere have governed effectively.
- In Sweden a minority government tackled the country's severe budget deficit in the 1990s.
- The Scottish minority government elected in 2007 has also been effective.
- To be successful, minority governments must learn not to govern as if they had a majority.
- It is necessary to develop good relations with other parties, to negotiate and compromise on policy.

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## If there is a hung parliament, will there be another election within a few months?

- A minority PM may seek to govern for a short period before calling another election to gain a majority.
- An early election may also occur if a minority government is defeated on a confidence vote.
- But such a defeat does not necessarily trigger an election if an alternative government can be formed.
- A minority government may be able to govern effectively for a full term.
- An early election would be expensive and may prove unpopular.
- It may also deliver another hung parliament.

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## Minority government can be effective if:

- It has a clear strategy.
- It focuses on policy outcomes.
- It understands the need to consult and negotiate on how to achieve those outcomes.
- It accepts there may be less legislation as a result.