



PRESS NOTICE

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Fixed-term parliaments and the 55% threshold

There is nothing wrong with the government's proposal for a 55% threshold before Parliament can be dissolved, says the Constitution Unit. But there needs to be more debate about whether the fixed term at Westminster should be four or five years.

Threshold for dissolution

'We should all welcome fixed term parliaments. They bring greater stability, and greater fairness between government and opposition' Prof Robert Hazell said. 'But people have got over-excited about the 55% threshold. That is simply intended to prevent the Conservatives from calling an early election without the consent of their coalition partners. It will not prevent the opposition from tabling confidence motions, on which the normal threshold of 50% will continue to apply'.

'Look at how this works in Scotland. There they have a two thirds threshold for dissolution, as in the other devolved legislatures. But if Alex Salmond faces a no confidence motion, he must resign if a simple majority votes against him. The same principle will operate at Westminster'.

Length of fixed term in other Westminster parliaments

Australia and New Zealand both have three-year maximum terms. The legislatures of Canada and many of its provinces have four-year fixed terms, as do most Australian states. The devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all have four-year fixed terms. Ireland's lower house has a five-year maximum, as in the UK. So a five year term is long by comparison with most other Westminster systems.

'We need more debate about whether the term should be four or five years' Prof Hazell said. 'All other Westminster parliaments which have set a fixed term have gone for four years. There also needs to be more thought about how Westminster's fixed terms will fit with other electoral cycles. 2015 is the date for devolved elections. Do we want Westminster elections at the same time as those for the Scottish Parliament, and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies?'

Notes for Editors

- Fixed-term parliaments are becoming increasingly common in the Westminster world. Their main benefit is greater stability, and fairness between government and opposition. They deny to the incumbent government the right to set the election date to suit their own electoral advantage. They also make for greater predictability, allowing for better planning and long term decision making. The possible disadvantages are longer electoral campaigns, a lack of flexibility and the risk of lame duck governments.
- More detailed Constitution Unit briefing on fixed term parliaments can be found at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/files/research/fixed-term-parliaments.pdf>
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