

# Coalition government: doomed to fail?

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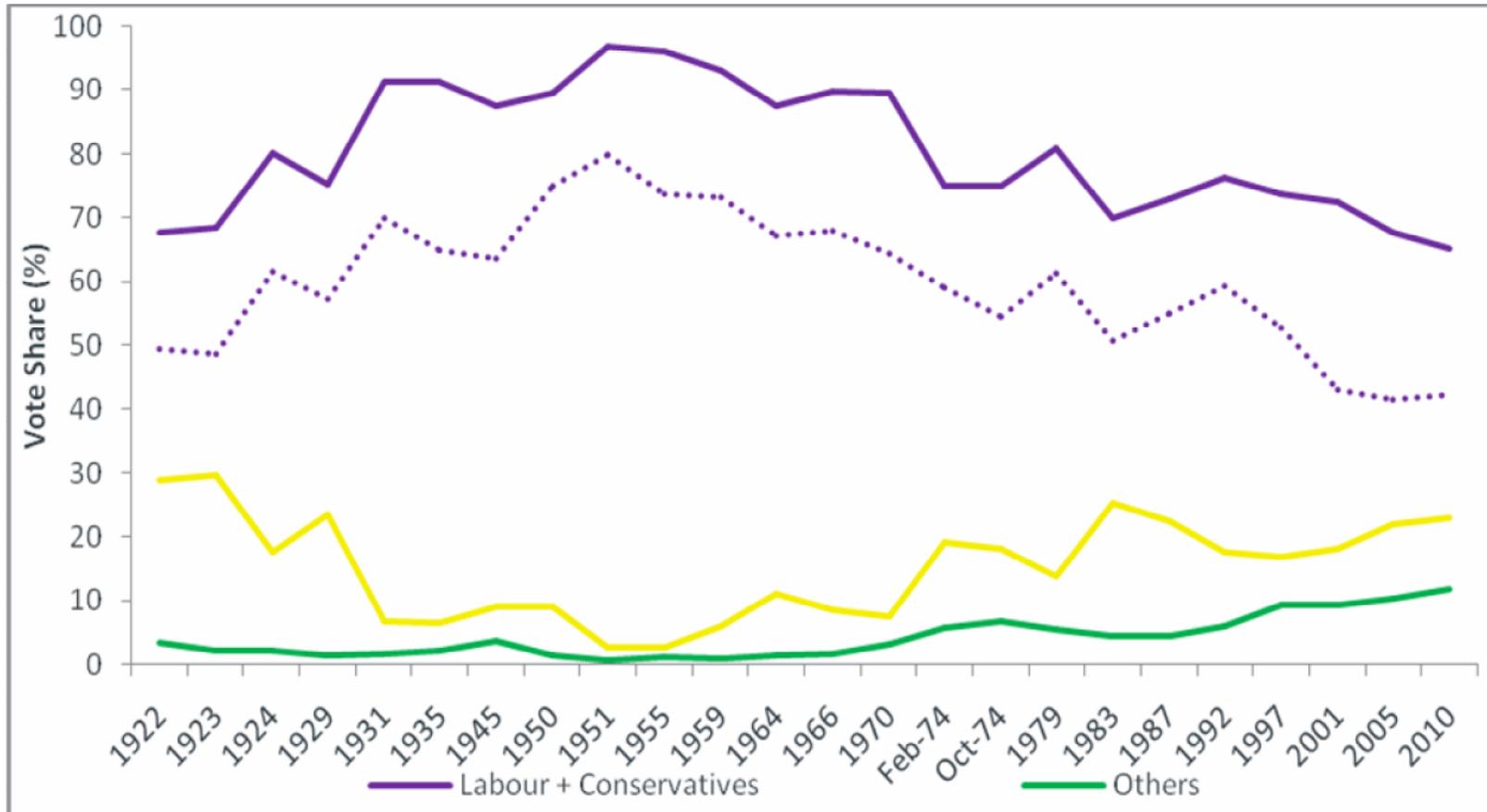
UCL lunchtime lecture

4 November 2010

# Structure of today's talk

- Are hung parliaments here to stay?
- Stability of coalition government
- Fixed term Parliaments
- Referendum on electoral reform
- Reducing the size of the House of Commons
- Failure of political reforms threatens the coalition

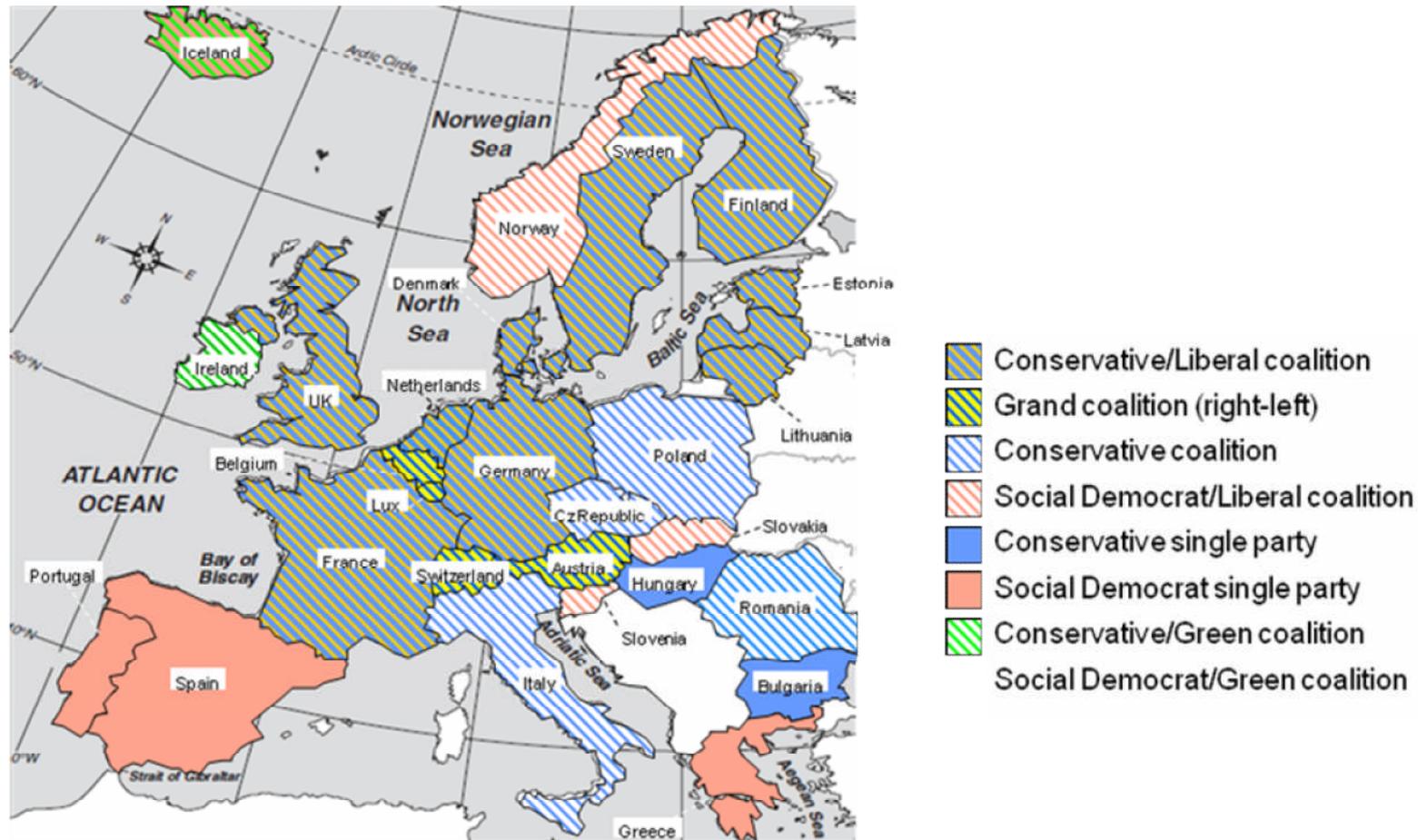
# Decline of the two party system since 1950s



# Decline of the two party system

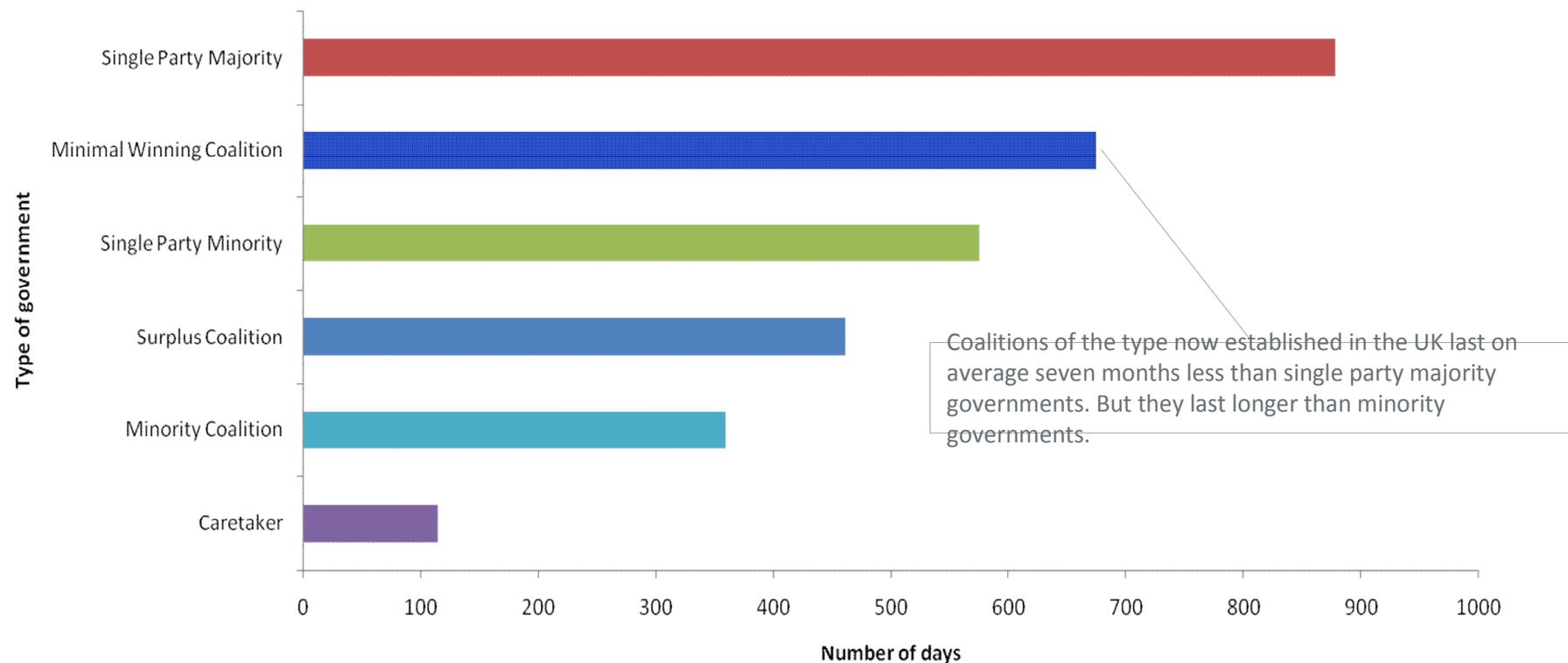
- Conservative + Labour polled 95% in 1950s, 75% in 1974, 65% in 2010
- Lib Dems polled 24%, second best performance ever
- Minor parties polled 10%: UKIP, BNP, SNP, Greens, Sinn Fein, DUP, Plaid Cymru
- In last four elections at least 75 MPs neither Labour nor Conservative
- Hung Parliaments are more likely in future

# Coalition governments in Europe



# Are coalitions inherently less stable?

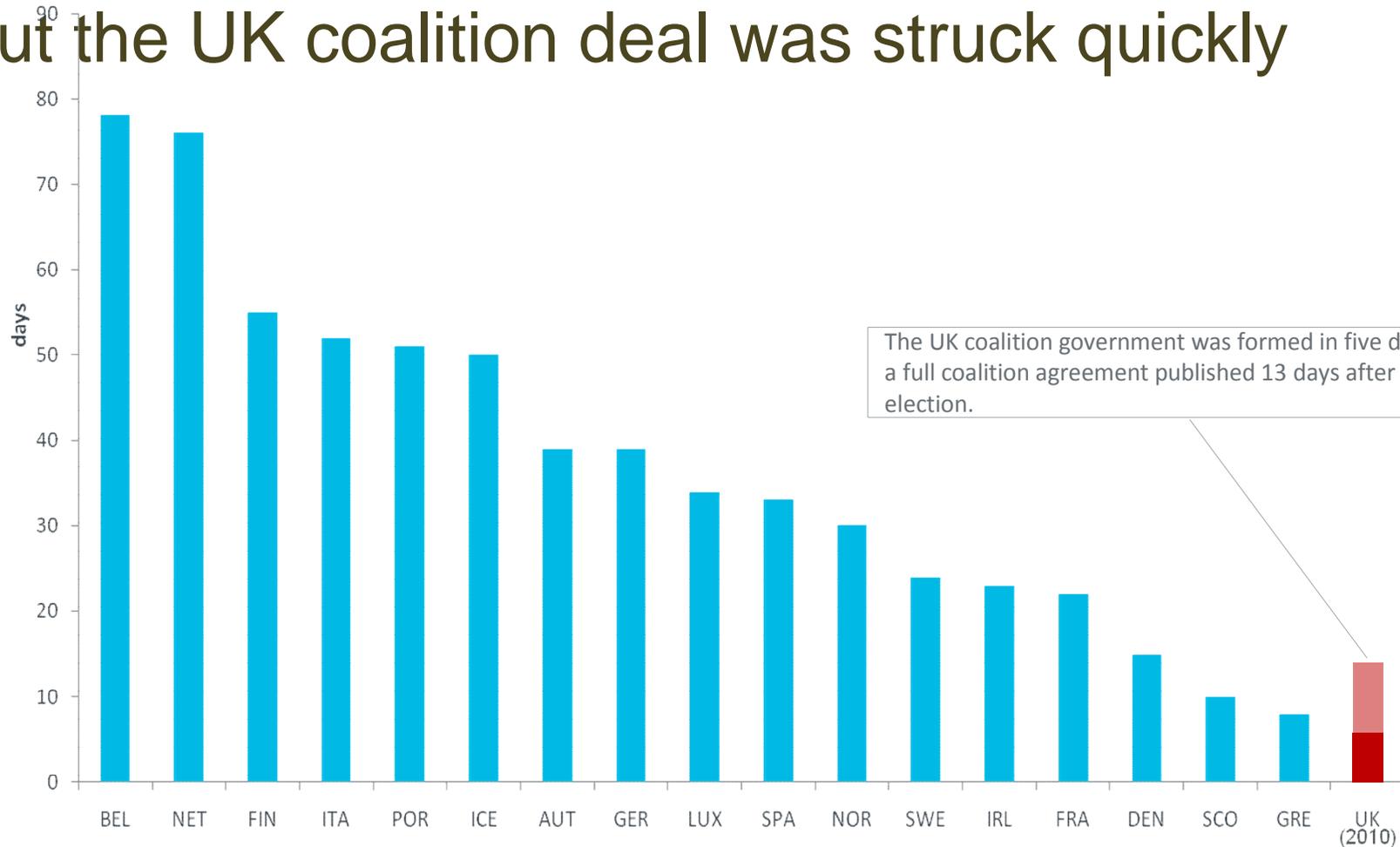
Average duration of types of government



NB. According to standard methodology, a government is counted as terminating at the time of an election even if the incumbent party or parties win the election and return to power. So UK governments have a maximum duration of 1827 days (5 years). A change of PM also counts as a government change.  
 Source: Woldendorp, Keman and Budge (2000), *Party government in 48 democracies (1945-1998): composition, duration and personnel*, p.86.

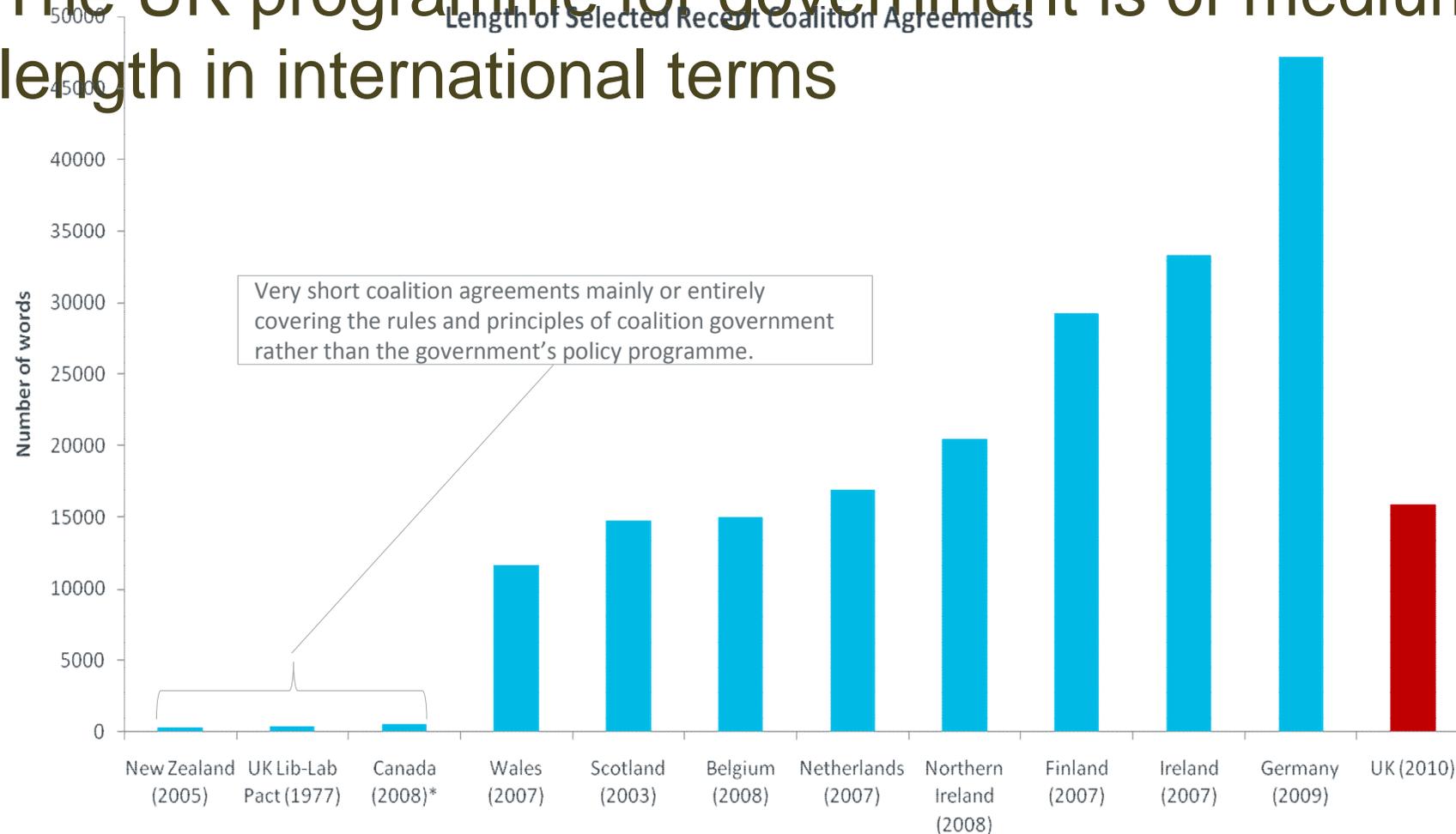
Length of government formation process after elections

# But the UK coalition deal was struck quickly



Source: de Winter, L. (1995), 'The role of parliament in government formation and resignation', in Doring, H. (ed), *Parliaments and Majority Rule in Western Europe*, p.118.

# The UK programme for government is of medium length in international terms



\* Proposed Liberal-NDP coalition – ultimately was not formed

Institute for Government analysis, June 2010

# Coalition Agreement for Stability and Reform

- Issued by Cabinet Office 21 May
- 5 year agreement to May 2015
- Based on goodwill, mutual trust, agreed procedures. 'Good faith and no surprises'
- Close consultation between PM and DPM

# Government and Cabinet Committees

- Coalition Committee, co-chaired by PM and DPM
- Unresolved issues can be referred to CC by chair or deputy chair of any Cabinet Committee
- Each committee has chair from one party, deputy chair from other
- Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group:  
Danny Alexander, Oliver Letwin, Francis Maude and Jim Wallace

# Support for the Government in Parliament

- Government policy and legislation to be supported by both parties in Parliament
- Same whip applies to both parties
- Conservative chief whip, Lib Dem deputy
- Parallel arrangements in Lords, where new government has effective majority thanks to LDs

# Fixed Term Parliaments

- Deny government the right to set the election date to suit its own electoral advantage
- Greater stability and predictability, allowing better planning and long term decision making

## **Two main issues**

- Length of fixed term
- Provide safety valve to allow early dissolution

## Length of Fixed Term in other Parliaments

- Australia and New Zealand have 3 years max
- Canada and provinces have 4 year fixed terms; and Australian states
- Scotland, Wales, N Ireland 4 year fixed terms
- Most European countries have 4 year fixed terms
- So 5 year fixed term is relatively long

# Safety valve for mid term Dissolution

- Two main routes to early dissolution in FxtPs Bill
- 67% vote by HC, requiring cross party support
- No confidence motion (50%) threshold, with no alternative government formed in 14 days
- Do we need dual threshold?
- Prerogative power of dissolution is abolished

# Referendum on Electoral Reform

- Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill
- Cons supported FPTP, LDs STV, Labour AV
- Cons and LDs whipped to support the bill, but free to campaign on opposite sides in referendum
- LDs want early referendum, and Cons want early start to reducing size of House of Commons

# Will AV referendum be won?

- Voters know nothing about electoral systems
- Difficult to explain difference bet FPTP and AV
- AV is preferential voting system, not proportional
- Estimated AV results in 2010 Con 280, Lab 260, LD 80  
(Actual results Con 307, Lab 258, LD 57)
- Political parties and electoral reformers divided
- Very little time for public education Feb to April 2011
- Confused public may vote for status quo: Canada

# Reducing size of House of Commons

- HC to be reduced from 650 MPs to 600
- Requires wholesale boundary review
- Last boundary review ran from 2000 to 2008
- Need to streamline process, abolish local inquiries
- Conservatives want equal sized constituencies, plus or minus 5%, to reduce bias against them
- Accusations of gerrymandering
- Difficult passage for legislation in Commons and Lords

## Possible failure of political reforms threatens future of the coalition

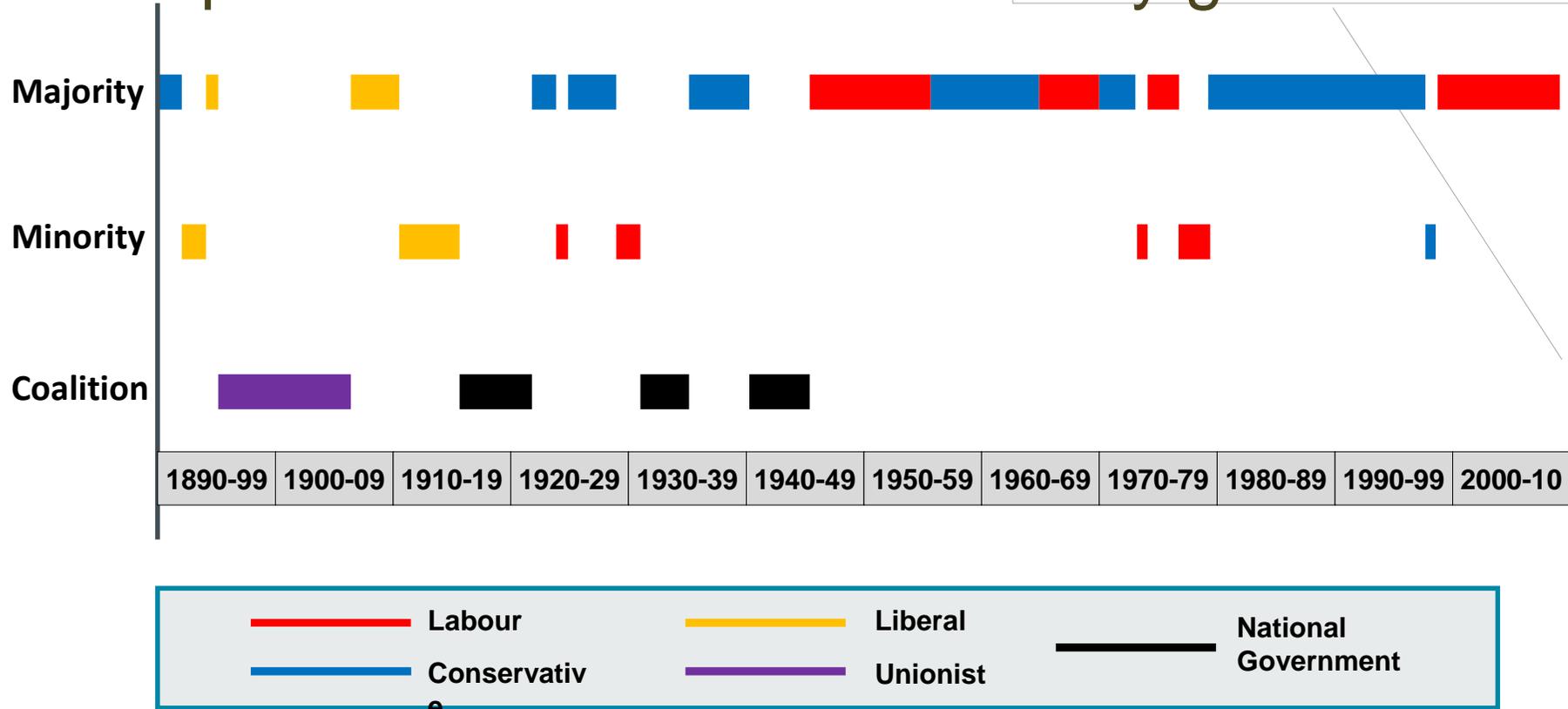
- Lib Dems support coalition to deliver political and constitutional reform
- Mad rush to legislation, no consultation
- Unnecessary fight over 5 year fixed terms
- Referendum on AV is likely to be lost
- Accusations of gerrymandering parliamentary boundaries
- Lords reform remains genuinely difficult

## So what might happen next?

- The Lib Dems might split, as in previous coalitions
- They might leave the government but support it on supply and confidence, allowing them to develop greater distinctiveness
- Future hung parliaments might see minority governments, not necessarily coalitions
- What will develop as the UK tradition?

# The pattern of coalition and minority government in C20

The Conservative-LibDem government is the first coalition government at Westminster since 1945



Source: Akash Paun and Robert Hazell (eds.) (2009), *Making Minority Government Work*, p. 18