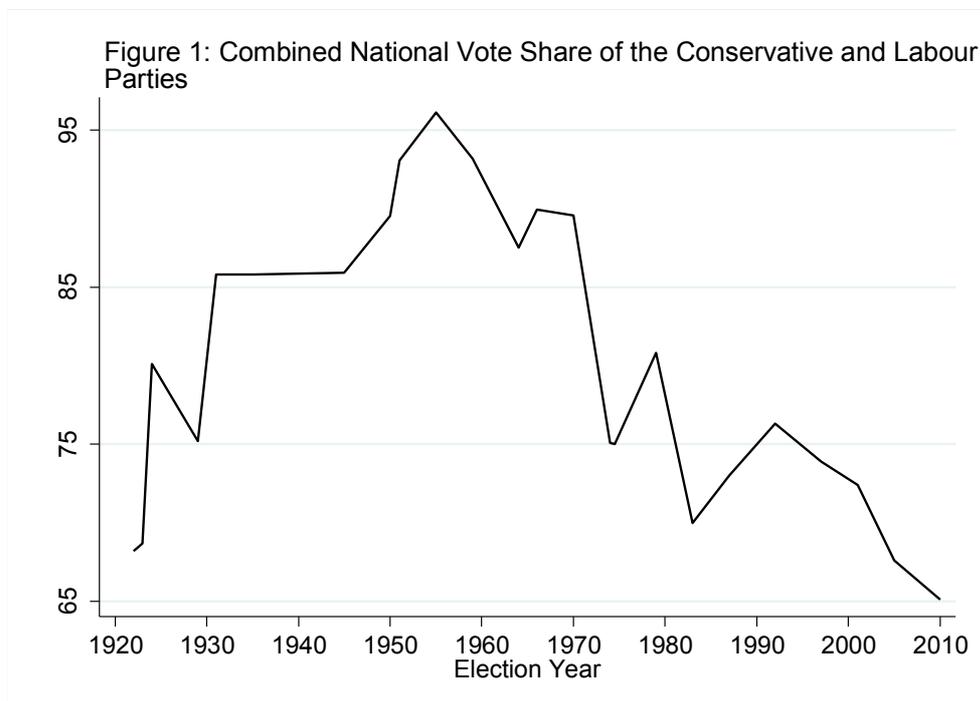


The Continued Decline of the UK's Two-Party System

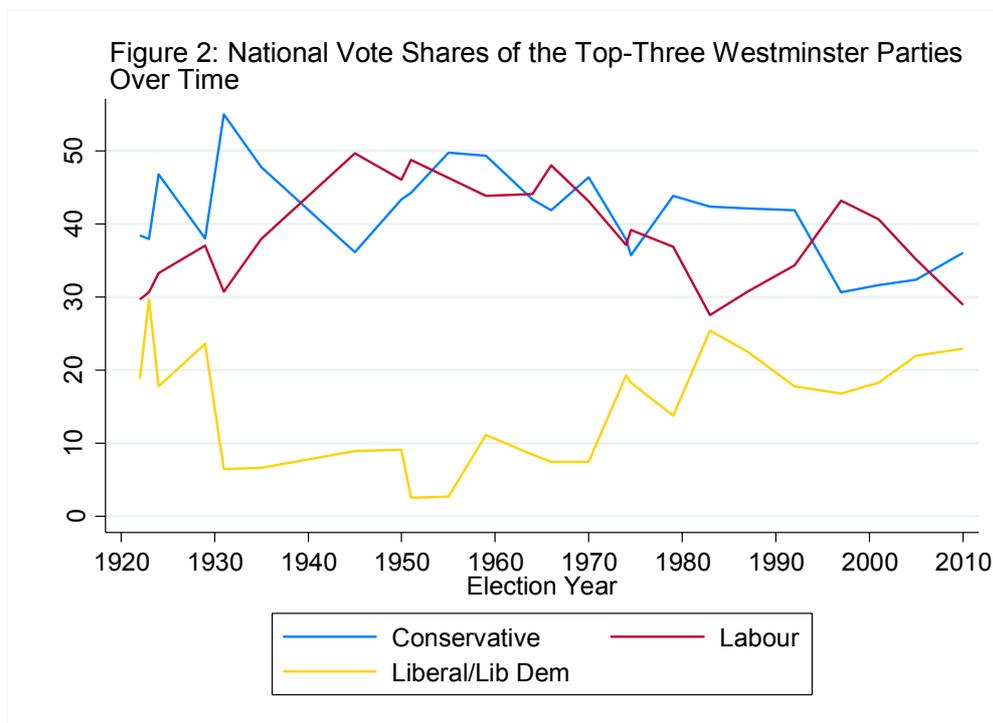
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According to what is commonly referred to as Duverger's Law, the number of parties in first-past-the-post electoral systems is not expected to exceed two. While the party system in Northern Ireland in Westminster elections has not conformed to two-party expectations for quite some time due to a number of important reasons related to the province's past, the party system in Great Britain may be experiencing similar unravelling. Whereas the Conservatives and Labour once dominated elections with more than 90 per cent of both the vote and seat shares, today they dominate only in terms of their seat shares. While the two largest Westminster parties won a combined 564 seats out of a total of 650 seats (which in percentage terms is just under 87 per cent), their vote shares totalled to just over 65 per cent. This can be seen in Figure 1, which presents the combined vote shares of the Conservatives and Labour since Irish partition (back when Labour was still asserting its place in British politics).



What is most striking in Figure 1 is that the 2010 election appears as part of a larger downward trend for the two largest parties, whose combined vote shares have seen a steady decline since the 1950s, reaching their lowest point in 2010. At least until 2010, this decline in the two-party vote corresponded with the resurgence of the Liberal Democrats. This can be seen in Figure 2, which breaks down the two-party vote percentages of the two

largest parties over time and adds the vote shares of three smaller parties, including the Liberal Democrats (and their Liberal and Social Democratic Party precursors).



Even if the polls suggesting massive Lib Dem losses in the 2015 election are to be believed (and they should be), several other parties—namely, UKIP, the Greens, and the SNP in Scotland—will almost surely prevent the two largest parties' vote percentages from climbing much above 30 per cent. (Most polls six weeks out from the general election have the parties on about 33 per cent each, positions little changed for more than a year.) This suggests that the rump two-party vote share seen in 2010 will be repeated in 2015 (and perhaps in future elections). If the downward trend seen in the figures above continues into the future, Britain's two-party system could be in jeopardy. This would be especially true if voters supporting any of the major third parties become frustrated with and seek to replace the first-past-the-post system with an electoral system that rewards third parties with seat shares more proportional to their vote shares (and reduces the larger-than-proportional seat shares of the Conservatives and Labour).