

Fixed-term parliaments

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 at a time of maximum 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.

Length of 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.

Dissolution mechanism

Fixed term parliament legislation has to provide a safety valve to allow an ineffective government to fall mid term, or a deadlocked parliament to be dissolved. The devolved legislatures all require a two thirds majority for dissolution. The Conservative-Lib Dem coalition agreement proposes a 55 per cent threshold before Parliament can be dissolved. This is intended to strengthen the hand of the Lib Dems: Cameron could not call an early election without the consent of his coalition partners, because the Conservatives command only 47 per cent of the votes in the Commons.

Some commentators appear to have confused a dissolution resolution moved by the government, and a confidence motion tabled by the opposition. On no confidence motions tabled by the opposition parties, the normal 50% threshold should continue to apply.

A final issue is whether the date for the next scheduled general election will change if the government falls mid-term. If an extraordinary election for the devolved legislatures is held in the last six months of a fixed term, the fixed term election is not held.

More detailed briefing on fixed term parliaments can be found at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit/files/research/fixed-term-parliaments.pdf>