

# Want to form a coalition? Follow this simple step-by-step guide

Charles Lees, [University of Bath](#)

Dear [Dave](#), [Nick](#), [Ed](#), [Nigel](#), [Natalie](#), [Nicola](#), [Leanne](#), [Peter](#), [Alasdair](#), [David](#), and [Mike](#) (Gerry and Martin, you can [ignore all of this](#)),

The outcome of the 2015 General Election may surprise us all. But what's clear is that [none of you will be able to govern alone](#). The coalition seemed like a one-off in 2010, but now it looks like the new normal of UK politics.

This is frustrating for you, Dave and you, Ed, but it does provide new opportunities for the others. You may get the chance to be in government or at least exercise influence over it.

In order to make sure you understand what the stakes are in this game, and how you can best play the hand dealt you by the great British public on May 7, I've put together a bluffer's guide for you.

## Rule 1: draw red lines in pencil

Nick [knows what happens](#) when you campaign with a big flagship policy only to have to go back on your word after the election. But by the same token, you should never completely rule yourself out of making a political deal with your opponents. You never know when you will need to talk to that erstwhile implacable political foe, as Ed may find out if Nicola holds the balance of power.

## Rule 2: take your time

There will be a lot pressure from the civil service, media, and financial markets to come to a quick deal after the election. But there's no need to rush.

As far as Europe goes, the time it usually takes for a new government to form in the UK is uniquely short. The average time for European countries is about a month and, in some countries (see the [Netherlands](#) and [Belgium](#)) it can be many months before a government forms. And guess what – they are no less stable for it.

So take your time, and weigh up your options.

## Rule 3: really, really know your options

So you think you know the numbers, but how well informed are you about them? Did you know that [1,024 possible coalitions](#) could have been formed after the 2010 election? This of course ignores inconvenient details such as party membership, ideology, pre-election promises, and personal enmities, though. Taking all that into account, these are the likely options in 2015:

### Conservative minority government

Dave, I am sure you will find this an attractive option if the parliamentary arithmetic allows. As the incumbent prime minister and possibly the leader with the largest share of parliamentary seats, you will argue strongly that this is the [only legitimate option](#). But the UK is a parliamentary democracy, and you'll have to command the confidence of the House of Commons and be able to put forward a legislative agenda to make it work.

Strike a deal with Nick if you can, but you might also need to bring someone else in. Nick and Nigel [don't get on](#). Can you get them to play nicely if Nigel is elected? If not, ditch Nigel and consider looking to Northern Ireland to link up with Peter or David.

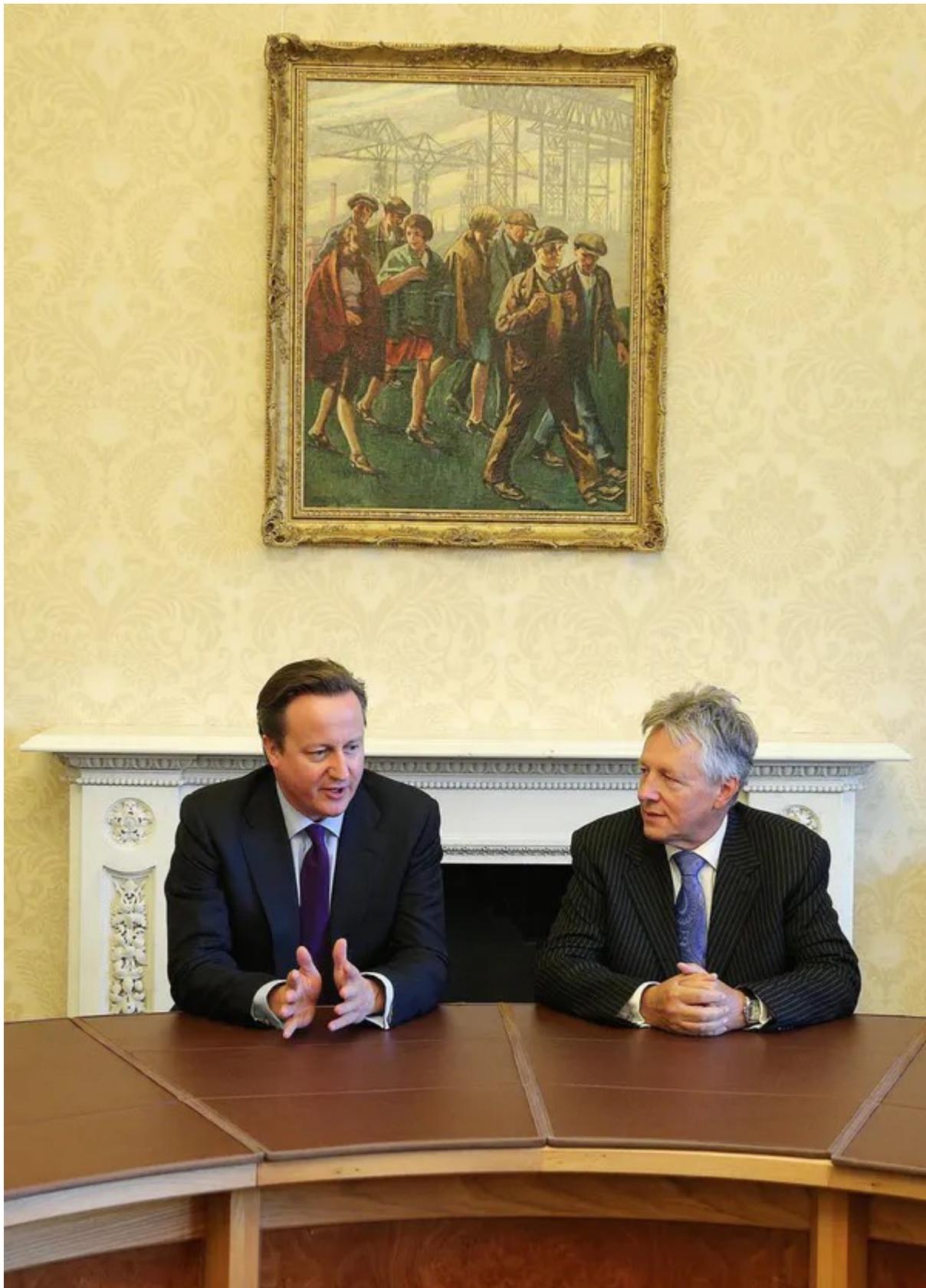
### **Labour minority government**

Ed, you've made this option more complicated by [ruling out "deals" with Nicola](#) and by not going out of your way to woo Nick. On the plus side, you have more potential allies – and even if they're not really allies, it would be hard for Nicola to vote with Dave to bring down Labour. What would she tell voters in Scotland? So Nicola, are you able to really lever Ed? And Ed, can you call Nicola's bluff? Or can you find other potential partners? Have you talked to Nick? If you haven't, you should.

### **Conservative-led coalition**

Dave, Con-Lib 2.0 would be the best available option for you. You get on with Nick and his party are a known quantity (and a bit of a pushover, you might think, but never say out loud). It becomes more problematic if you need a third party to command a majority in the Commons. Would this just be "[confidence and supply](#)" or would you need to offer a formal partnership?

Nigel might co-operate on confidence and supply, but would Nick be prepared to sit around the cabinet table with him or Douglas Carswell? In fact, Nigel has [ruled out entering a formal coalition](#), but he also said he'd [resign](#) if he fails to win South Thanet – and Douglas might take a different view on formal co-operation.



Dave and Peter: a full house? [Northern Ireland Office](#), [CC BY](#)

What about Peter or David? Their “plain speaking” on cultural issues like [abortion](#) and same-sex marriage might be a problem with your more metropolitan members and supporters. The Northern Irish parties are also keen on increasing public spending in Northern Ireland. Will die-hard provincial Tory backbenchers stand for more big-state largesse flowing to the Celtic fringes?

### **Labour-led coalition**

All options come with risks, Ed. The perils of working informally with Nicola would only be amplified in

a formal coalition, and it's hard to see how governing with the SNP would help Labour win back Scottish seats. At the same time, a Lab-SNP arrangement would play very badly south of the border, all too easily fitting a narrative of English taxpayers subsidising rebellious Scots. Ed, I can't see Lab-SNP ending well, and would avoid it if I were you.

An alternative for you would be some sort of "rainbow coalition", perhaps cobbled together with Nick and bringing in Leanne, and possibly Peter, David, or Alasdair along for the ride. Given the number of parties this might involve, coalition management would be a serious problem, and the press would have a field day over the inevitable gaffes and rifts. Finding a way forward over key issues such as economic policy would be tortuous. Ed, you would have to think long and hard about this option as well.

## **Rule 4: Know when not to play your cards**

None of the most likely options for government are problem-free. Any government that emerges after May 7 will be clunky, fractious, and vulnerable to manipulation over timetabling, procedure, and favour-trading. It will not be an easy ride under any circumstances – and in the context of a fragile economic recovery, austerity, growing enmity between the UK's constituent nations, and calls to leave the EU, the next five years are going to be unpleasant and potentially disastrous for any party whose leader makes the wrong choice in the days after May 7.

I know it's almost impossible for politicians to give up the chance to govern, but all of you might want to consider it this time. All good card players know that there is a time to play your hand and a time to hold.

For one or two of you, there may never be a better opportunity to cash in your cards. For others, including Ed, this might be the right time to pass. Let's wait until May 8, and see the hands you are actually dealt.

[Charles Lees](#), Professor of Politics, [University of Bath](#)

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).