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## **Proposal to Repeal the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011 in the UK Constitutional System**

**Keywords:** Constitution, parliamentary term, elections, dissolution of the House of Commons, royal prerogative

**Słowa kluczowe:** konstytucja, kadencja parlamentu, wybory, rozwiązanie Izby Gmin, prerogatywa

### **Abstract**

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which entered into force in 2011, introduced completely new regulations on the dissolution of Parliament and the duration of its mandate. It repealed the royal prerogative under which the queen, on the advice of the Prime Minister, had the power to dissolve Parliament at any time, which would ultimately lead to parliamentary elections. Despite the introduction of a fixed parliamentary term, constitutional practice, in particular the precedents of 2017 and 2019, have shown that the fundamental objectives of the new act, i.e. to ensure the stability of governments and to prevent the Prime Minister's manipulation of the election date for political gain, can be easily undermined. This article attempts to analyze and evaluate the functioning to date of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 in the UK constitutional system and to examine the possible implications of repealing the Act for the functioning of the UK Constitution.

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## Streszczenie

### **Propozycja uchylecia ustawy o stałej długości kadencji w systemie konstytucyjnym Zjednoczonego Królestwa**

Ustawa o stałej długości kadencji, która weszła w życie w 2011 r. wprowadziła całkowicie nowe regulacje dotyczące rozwiązania parlamentu oraz czasu trwania jego pełnomocnictw. Uchylała ona prerogatywę monarchy, który za radą premiera posiadał kompetencję do rozwiązania parlamentu *de facto* w każdym czasie i doprowadzenia do wyborów parlamentarnych. Pomimo wprowadzenia sztywnej kadencji parlamentu praktyka konstytucyjna, w szczególności precedensy z 2017 r. i 2019 r. pokazały, że podstawowe cele nowej ustawy, tj. zapewnienie stabilności rządów oraz zapobieganie manipulowaniu datą wyborów przez premiera w celu osiągnięcia korzyści politycznych mogą być z łatwością podważone. Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena dotychczasowego funkcjonowania ustawy o stałej długości kadencji z 2011 roku w brytyjskim systemie konstytucyjnym oraz analiza ewentualnych skutków uchylecia ustawy dla funkcjonowania konstytucji brytyjskiej.

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## **I. Introduction**

One of the hallmarks of the British parliamentary system was the traditional lack of a fixed term of office of the House of Commons the way it operates in continental constitutionalism, i.e. a fixed duration of the legislature's legally defined mandate<sup>2</sup>. Until very recently, the date of the parliamentary elections had remained unknown to British voters and to the opposition parties before it was announced by the Prime Minister. Technically, the Head of Government had the constitutional prerogative to choose the date of general elections. To this end, he addressed the monarch, whose role under the constitutional convention was merely to sign

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<sup>2</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Prawo wyborcze do parlamentu Zjednoczonego Królestwa Wielkiej Brytanii i Irlandii Północnej*, [in:] *Prawo wyborcze do parlamentu w wybranych państwach europejskich*, eds. S. Grabowska, K. Składowski, Zakamycze 2006, pp. 44–45.

and promulgate a proclamation to dissolve the House of Commons and to announce the elections<sup>3</sup>.

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which entered into force in 2011, introduced completely new regulations on the dissolution of Parliament and the duration of its mandate. For the first time ever in the history of British constitutionalism, this question had been regulated in statute law. It repealed the prerogative of the monarch, who on the advice of the Prime Minister had the actual power to dissolve Parliament at any time and announce parliamentary elections, often well ahead of the expiry of the House's mandate<sup>4</sup>. The act primarily replaced the queen's formal prerogative to decide on the date of dissolution of Parliament and introduced new legal mechanisms. A fixed five-year term was established and early parliamentary general elections could only be ordered on the basis of a resolution of the House of Commons adopted by a qualified majority or in a situation in which, after a vote of no confidence in the government, the House of Commons is unable to pass a vote of confidence for the new government. Despite the introduction of a fixed parliamentary term, constitutional practice has shown that the basic objectives of the new legislation, in particular to ensure the stability of governments and to prevent the manipulation of the election date by the Prime Minister for political gain, can easily be undermined. This was particularly evident in 2017, when then Prime Minister Theresa May easily led to the holding of early parliamentary elections in the hope of building a secure majority in the House of Commons<sup>5</sup>.

This article attempts to analyze and assess the functioning to date of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 in the UK constitutional system and to examine the possible implications of repealing the Act for the functioning of the UK Constitution.

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<sup>3</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego do brytyjskiej Izby Gmin w XXI wieku. Ciągłość i zmiana w prawie wyborczym i praktyce ustrojowej*, Poznań 2019, pp. 99–100; J. Marszałek-Kawa, D. Plecka (eds.), *Dictionary of Political Knowledge*, Toruń 2019. Cf. R. Brazier, *Constitutional Practice*, Oxford 1994, p. 198; S. Gebethner, *Rząd i opozycja Jej Królewskiej Mości w systemie politycznym Wielkiej Brytanii*, Warsaw 1967, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> A. Michalak, *Konsekwencje uchwalenia the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 dla brytyjskiej konstytucyjnej praktyki parlamentarnej*, "Białostockie Studia Prawnicze" 2019, vol. 24, No. 4, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, p. 124.

## II. Parliament's Mandate Prior to the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011

Formally and traditionally, until 2011 the right to dissolve and convene the House of Commons was a royal prerogative. Parliament could not meet without the consent of the monarch and continue its work once the monarch had decided to dissolve it. A proclamation issued under this prerogative was the only way to terminate the mandate of the House. While the prerogative of dissolving Parliament was enshrined in common law<sup>6</sup>, it was not subject to judicial review since it was seen as an element of institutional balance between the legislature and the executive branch. Furthermore, it was believed that an introduction of a fixed duration of Parliament's mandate or of the self-dissolution of the House of Commons would infringe the established order and violate the British system of separation of powers, which has increasingly become political rather than fixed in the legal system<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the actual absence of a fixed term of office in the British parliamentary system made the dissolution of Parliament not only a mere conclusion of its work, but actually a constitutional requirement, as the concept of the expiry of a term of office, i.e. the expiry by law of Parliamentary mandate, was alien to the British system<sup>8</sup>.

Since the middle ages, the duration of mandates was regulated by acts passed by Parliament<sup>9</sup>. The stability of legal solutions concerning the duration of Parliament's mandates was introduced by the Septennial Act 1715, which established a maximum period of seven years for Parliament's mandates. Passed in 1715, the act was in force for another 200 years. It was amended only by the Parliament Act 1911, the cornerstone for the entire constitutional system of Great Britain<sup>10</sup>. It curtailed the period of the House of Commons' mandate

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<sup>6</sup> R. Blackburn, *The Meeting of Parliament*, Dartmouth 1990, p. 42.

<sup>7</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Zasady podziału władzy w Wielkiej Brytanii*, [in:] *Zasady podziału władzy we współczesnych państwach europejskich*, eds. S. Grabowska, R. Grabowski, Rzeszów 2016, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> T. Wiecech, *Wpływ ustawy o kadencji parlamentu (Fixed-term Parliament Act, 2011) na brytyjski system rządów*, [in:] *Konstytucjonalizm w państwach anglosaskich*, ed. A. Zięba, Kraków 2013, p. 245.

<sup>9</sup> More on this question cf. K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, pp. 101–103.

<sup>10</sup> E. Wicks, *The Evolution of a Constitution: Eight Key Moments in British Constitutional History*, Oxford 2006, pp. 83; R. Kelly, L. Maer, *The Parliament Acts*, Briefing Paper, No. 00675,

from seven to five years<sup>11</sup>. The adopted period of maximum five-year mandates was based on a compromise and an attempt at striking a balance between the principle of representation and responsibility to the voters and the desire of successive governments to ensure a sufficient period to pursue their political agenda. It should be remembered, however, that the Parliament Act of 1911 was not, in fact, prompted by the government's desire to reform the law on the duration of the powers of the House of Commons, but by the direct political need to limit the legislative powers of the House of Lords. Within the framework of the revised constitutional system of checks and balances, the increased accountability of the government and the House of Commons to voters was presented as an argument for establishing the primacy of the lower house over the House of Lords in the legislative process<sup>12</sup>.

The five-year maximum term of Parliament's mandate under the Parliament Act 1911, combined with the royal prerogative exercised in fact by the Prime Minister, led to the adoption of a "flexible term" regulated by the executive in the UK. The only constraint imposed on it when deciding on the duration of parliamentary work was a statutory standard which provided for a maximum term of office.

The constitutional practice of the last century demonstrates that no customary rules have applied to the minimum period that had to elapse between elections. The average time between parliamentary elections held between 1918 and 2010 was four years, but these statistics tell us little about the actual state of affairs. The periods between parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom varied greatly in practice, from less than one year – the Parliament from 1923–1924 and from February 1974 until October 1974, to over five years – parliamentary terms from 1959–1964, 1992–1997 and 2005–2010. Most often, however, unless exceptional political circumstances arose that urged the Prime Minister to seek the dissolution of the House of Commons, these mandates were around four years<sup>13</sup>.

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House of Commons Library, London 25 February 2016, <http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN00675> (14.07.2018).

<sup>11</sup> R. Blackburn, *The duration of parliament: Historical perspectives on the 1911 amendment to the septennial act*, "The Journal of Legal History" 1988, vol. 9, No. 1, p. 98.

<sup>12</sup> R. Blackburn, *The Electoral System in Britain*, Macmillan 1995, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, pp. 105–106.

The Prime Minister's right to decide on the date of dissolution of the House of Commons was often cited as one of his major powers. It was stressed that this power greatly strengthens the position of the ruling party vis-à-vis the opposition<sup>14</sup>. The Prime Minister rarely waited until the five-year mandate had expired in order to announce the next elections. Obviously, the Prime Ministers tried to optimise the electoral chances of their party and to bring about the dissolution of Parliament at the most opportune time to safeguard victory in the elections and thus to remain in power<sup>15</sup>. The grounds included e.g. a favorable economic situation, spectacular international success or conflict within the opposition party<sup>16</sup>. The surprise effect also played a role. The Prime Ministers usually kept their intentions secret so that the announcement of the elections date did not leave the opposition party a lot of time to prepare the election campaign. An important indicator used by Prime Ministers to determine the date of the elections were the election polls and the results of local government elections and by-elections for the House of Commons<sup>17</sup>. They were a yardstick of social sentiments, tendencies in the flow of the electorate and a valuable predictor of the future election outcome. It should be added, however, that Prime Ministers often relied on their own intuition<sup>18</sup>. When deciding on the dissolution of Parliament, they were aware that the political situation could be volatile and failure to take advantage of a situation of high support in polls could backfire and result in a defeat in postponed elections. On the other hand, when deciding to dissolve the House, they took a deliberate political risk and were often punished by losing their position. While political practice shows that there have been situations in which the incumbent Prime Minister miscalculated and lost the election they had announced<sup>19</sup>, this particular power as a rule favored the ruling party. Petra Schleiter's study demonstrates that the average bonus for the governing par-

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<sup>14</sup> R.K. Alderman, J.A. Cross, *The Prime Minister and the Decision to Dissolve*, "Parliamentary Affairs" 1975, No. 4, p. 386; R. Brazier, *Constitutional Practice*, Oxford 1988, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> D. Butler, *British General Elections since 1945*, Oxford 1995, p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> S. Gebethner, *Rząd i opozycja Jej Królewskiej Mości w systemie politycznym Wielkiej Brytanii*, Warsaw 1967, p. 92.

<sup>17</sup> D. Butler, *By-elections and their interpretation*, [in:] *By-elections in British politics*, eds. C. Cook, J. Ramsden, London 1997, p. 5; R. Blackburn, *The Electoral System...*, pp. 28–29.

<sup>18</sup> R.K. Alderman, J.A. Cross, *The Prime Minister and the Decision...*, pp. 394–395.

<sup>19</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, pp. 109–112.

ty resulting from the Prime Minister's power to freely determine the date of the elections in 1945–2010 was 6%<sup>20</sup>.

### III. The Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011

The 2011 act replaced the queen's formal right to decide on the date of dissolution of Parliament by new legal procedures. It also set the date for the next parliamentary elections, i.e. Thursday, 7 May 2015. All subsequent elections were to take place on the first Thursday of May in the fifth year after the last parliamentary elections. The legislation thus established a fixed five-year term and at the same time resolved to uphold the tradition of holding elections on Thursdays. At the same time, in emergency situations that would entail postponing the elections, the Prime Minister was empowered to issue a statutory instrument and postpone the election.

The act envisages the possibility of holding an early parliamentary general election in two situations: (1) by virtue of a resolution of the House of Commons on self-dissolution and holding early parliamentary general elections, which must be adopted by a majority of at least two thirds of the House (including vacant seats). The legislator introduced the requirement of traditional division lobbies and set a statutory requirement that the resolution should include the words "that there shall be an early parliamentary general election"; (2) by a resolution of the House of Commons on a vote of no confidence in the government, followed by the House's failure to adopt a resolution on a vote of confidence for the new government within 14 days. In the former case, the resolution should state "that this House has no confidence in Her Majesty's Government" and in the latter case "that this House has confidence in Her Majesty's Government". The date of early elections shall be set by the monarch by means of a royal proclamation based on advice from the Prime Minister. The act clearly states that the dissolution of Parliament can only take place according with its provisions, which clearly emphasizes the replacement of the royal prerogative.

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<sup>20</sup> P. Schleiter, *Written evidence*, [in:] *A Question of Confidence? The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*, House of Lords, Select Committee on the Constitution, 12th Report of Session 2019–21; <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/465/html> (25.10.2020).

The new regulation departs from the tradition of over 800 years and foregoes the flexibility of solutions considered to be one of the main advantages of the British Constitution. For the first time in the history of the United Kingdom, it establishes the principle of a fixed term of office of the House of Commons. It narrowly constrains the earlier almost unlimited possibility of dissolving Parliament and holding early elections and introduces a dissolution mechanism that completely eliminates any participation of the monarch and thus of the Prime Minister<sup>21</sup>. The dissolution of Parliament and early elections can now be decided on solely by the House of Commons, under specific circumstances at that. This removes from the UK political constitution the arbitrary right of the Prime Minister to decide freely to terminate the mandate of Parliament and set a date for elections. The reform moreover shifted emphasis in the system of separation of powers in the UK by formally strengthening the legislative branch in relation to the executive<sup>22</sup>. The right of the executive to dissolve Parliament was seen as a balancing act against Parliament's right to express a vote of no confidence for the government<sup>23</sup>.

Another major consequence of the act is the introduction of much uncertainty as to the collegial responsibility of the government<sup>24</sup>. Even a thorough examination of the act reveals no provisions which would unequivocally state that the motions for a vote of confidence and a vote of no confidence, specified in the 2011 act, are the only ways of enforcing the political responsibility of the government by the House of Commons. None of the provisions has explicitly invalidated the conventional rules of such responsibility. Importantly, the vote of no confidence, interpreted as a parliamentary verification

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<sup>21</sup> T. Wiecech, *Rozwiązanie parlamentu w Wielkiej Brytanii na podstawie ustawy o kadencji parlamentarnej z 2011 r.*, "Przeгляд Sejmowy" 2013, No. 3, pp. 80–81.

<sup>22</sup> P. Schleiter, V. Belu, *The Decline of Majoritarianism in the UK and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act*, "Parliamentary Affairs" 2016, vol. 69, No. 1, p. 46; D. Howarth, *Westminster versus Whitehall: Two incompatible Views of the Constitution*, UK Constitutional Law Blog, 10 April 2019; <https://ukconstitutionallaw.org/2019/04/10/david-howarth-westminster-versus-whitehall-two-incompatible-views-of-the-constitution> (10.04.2019).

<sup>23</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Zasady podziału władzy...*, pp. 96–97.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. P. Norton, *The Fixed-term Parliaments Act and Votes of Confidence*, "Parliamentary Affairs" 2016, vol. 69, No. 1, p. 3; P. Schleiter, S. Issar, *Constitutional Rules and Patterns of Government Termination: The Case of the UK Fixed-term Parliaments Act*, "Government and Opposition" 2016, vol. 51, No. 4, p. 605.



of having the support of a parliamentary majority, combined with the possibility of asking citizens to confirm or not the mandate to exercise power, was considered a key element of the British parliamentary system and democratic political order. The incompatibility of statutory and conventional demonstrated solutions may raise constitutional and political issues in the future<sup>25</sup>.

#### **IV. Proposed Repeal of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011**

The main objective of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was to safeguard the political system against an early dissolution of Parliament for political reasons, i.e. in order to optimize the voting result. The post-2011 constitutional practice has shown that this intention has completely failed.

The political ineffectiveness of the act was highlighted by Prime Minister T. May who in early 2017 announced early parliamentary elections in the hope of building a secure majority in the House in view of the need to ratify the agreement to leave the European Union (Brexit deal). The Prime Minister announced her willingness to hold an early parliamentary general election and then an overwhelming majority adopted a resolution to hold this election<sup>26</sup>. Interestingly, had Parliament not consented to the Prime Minister's request, the likely scenario was to move for a no-confidence vote for the PM's own government or to pass an act on early elections. In both cases all that would have been needed was the support of a parliamentary majority<sup>27</sup>. This circumstance showed that, despite the 2011 act being in force, Prime Ministers still have sufficient legal and political instruments to hold an early election at their convenience.

This was confirmed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson in 2019. Not having obtained the required two-thirds majority of the votes necessary for the dissolution of the House of Commons and the holding of new elections in October 2019, he submitted a draft Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019 to Parliament and, after speedy work in Parliament, it was passed within two days, after which it obtained the royal assent. The passing of this ephem-

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<sup>25</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> HC Deb 19 April 2017, pp. 681–712. Cf. P. Cowley, D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017*, Palgrave Macmillan 2018, pp. 5–11.

<sup>27</sup> K. Urbaniak, *Reformy systemu wyborczego...*, p. 125.

eral legislation made it clear that the 2011 law does not work at all as an instrument to hinder the Prime Minister's freedom to impose an election date.

Even before the 2017 elections, in its election manifesto the Conservative Party proposed to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act<sup>28</sup>. This proposal stemmed from the unpopular nature of the law, as well as from the incompatibility of its provisions with the flexible regulations of the British Constitution. Again in 2019, in their election manifestos, both the Conservative Party and the Labor Party pledged to repeal this act<sup>29</sup>. In light of these declarations, the fate of the legislation seems a foregone conclusion<sup>30</sup>. The given, fairly vague statement concerning the repeal of the law may raise many questions of a constitutional nature as to how it should be repealed.

The first question that arises is whether the derogation of the 2011 provisions will automatically restore the status quo ante. The repeal of the act will not automatically restore the previous legal order. Actually, according to the Interpretation Act 1978, it is possible, under certain conditions, to restore the previous legal status in force (the repeal law must contain such an instruction), which may indirectly lead us to believe that it is possible to restore the royal prerogative. We can also find confirmation of this position in case law<sup>31</sup>. However, some legal problems can be posed by the prerogative's statutory environment. If the Fixed-term Parliaments Act is repealed, it is necessary to

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<sup>28</sup> *Forward Together. Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future, The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2017*, p. 43; <https://www.conservatives.com/manifesto> (11.02.2019).

<sup>29</sup> "We will get rid of the Fixed Term Parliaments Act – it has led to paralysis at a time the country needed decisive action" – Conservative Party Manifesto 2019, p. 48; [https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba\\_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf) (25.10.2020). "A Labor government will repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which has stifled democracy and propped up weak governments" – Labor Party Manifesto, 2019, p. 82; <https://labor.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Real-Change-Labor-Manifesto-2019.pdf> (25.10.2020).

<sup>30</sup> C. Pattie, R. Johnson, D. Rossiter, *Repealing the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act is a tidying-up exercise, not a major constitutional change*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/repealing-the-fixed-term-parliaments-act> (25.10.2020).

<sup>31</sup> *R (Miller) v. Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (2017) UKSC 5 (Miller)* – "if prerogatives are restricted by legislation, they may sometimes be reinstated by repealing that legislation, depending on the design of the legislation concerned", p. 112; <https://www.supremecourt.uk/cases/docs/uksc-2016-0196-judgment.pdf> (11.03.2019).

either set a maximum period of five years for the mandate of the House of Commons in the act or to explicitly restore the validity of the Septennial Act 1715<sup>32</sup>. In this context, it is more appropriate, and also within the wording of “repeal of the act”, to adopt a new statutory regulation, lifting the 2011 act and introducing partially or wholly the rules previously governed by constitutional prerogatives and conventions<sup>33</sup>. It seems that Britain’s attachment to tradition will result in the pursuit of a solution combining both proposals, with a formal return to the prerogative.

## V. Conclusions

Under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the monarch’s prerogative to dissolve the House of Commons was replaced by a fixed five-year term. However, the new legislation does not align with the rules still in operation in the UK’s parliamentary and cabinet system. There is consensus among the two largest political parties on the need to repeal the existing rules on dissolution of Parliament and those on the timing of its mandates. Although the fate of the act seems to be sealed, there are no forthcoming legal solutions. According with British parliamentary tradition, the required amendments to the act will be preceded both by a formal impact assessment of this legislation and by thorough parliamentary work, so that the solutions adopted are no worse than those currently in force. It seems, however, that abandonment of the current regulation will increase the cohesion of the British constitutional system and will be much better aligned with the British Constitution, governed by different categories of standards and principles. The vast Conservative majority in Parliament following the 2019 elections<sup>34</sup> legitimises the claim that the 2011 reform will be reversed and the United Kingdom will return to the formula of a flexible term of the House of Commons.

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<sup>32</sup> More on that cf.: R. Craig, *Restoring Confidence: Replacing the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011*, “Modern Law Review” 2018, vol. 81, No. 3, p. 492.

<sup>33</sup> R. Hazell, *Can Boris Johnson simply repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act?*, <https://constitution-unit.com/2020/02/05/can-boris-johnson-simply-repeal-the-fixed-term-parliaments-act> (25.10.2020).

<sup>34</sup> D. Denver, *The Results: How Britain Voted*, [in:] *Britain Votes: The 2019 General Election*, eds. J. Tonge, S. Wilks-Heeg, L. Thompson, London 2020.

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