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UK politics

The rise of small parties in UK politics

The headline results of the UK general election in July 2024 seemed to confirm the continuing grip that the two main parties have on the keys to Number 10 and the green benches of the House of Commons. The Labour Party achieved a landslide victory, with the electorate handing it a majority of 172, and 411 of the 650 seats in the Commons. A seismic shift in support saw the Conservatives decimated across the country, clinging on to just 121 seats, having lost 251. The next largest party, the Liberal Democrats, hugely expanded its seat count to 72, but it still sat significantly behind the two main parties.

However, a compelling case can be made that these headline figures obscure the true preferences of voters across the UK. In reality, the combined Labour and Conservative vote share of 57.4% was the lowest since the 1922 general election, when Labour was a fledgling party. This is a remarkably low figure, considering that in 2017, the two main parties obtained 82% of the vote, with a huge decline in the number of votes for UKIP and the Liberal Democrats, still tarnished by their record in the coalition government of 2010–15.

Disenchantment

In recent years, small parties have become a beacon for voters disenchanted by the policy offer or leadership of the two main parties, and 2024 was no different. Reform UK performed incredibly well considering its relatively recent incarnation and Nigel Farage's last-minute decision to run for parliament (his eighth attempt to get elected). This populist anti-immigration and pro-Brexit party received 4.1 million votes (14.3%). The Green Party benefited from left-wing former Labour voters disaffected by Keir Starmer's move to the centre, gaining 4% more of the vote than in 2019. The 2024 general election saw the highest number of MPs elected from parties that were not Labour or Conservative since 1923. In total, 117 third-party MPs were elected, representing 18% of all MPs.

However, it is far too early to declare the death of the two-party system. Despite this rise in MPs from third parties, the surge in support that they received from voters is still far from being properly reflected in the Commons. This is exemplified by the disproportionate result for Reform UK, which received 14.3% of votes but just 0.8% of seats. The Green Party received 6.7% of votes but only 0.6% of seats. Labour, in contrast, received 33.7% of votes and 63.2% of seats. This is undoubtedly due to the UK's electoral system, first-past-the-post or FPTP.

FPTP

Under FPTP, any candidate/party who does not come first in a seat receives no representation, and votes have to be concentrated in order to win seats. Reform UK was placed second in 98 constituencies, and the Green Party came second in 40, but under FPTP, second place gets no

representation. Ironically, the Liberal Democrats, who have long called for the introduction of proportional representation, received 2.1% less of the vote than Reform UK, but 11.1% of the seats, a full 67 seats more.

You could argue that this is due to the influence of smaller parties like Reform UK, as they undoubtedly split the anti-Labour right-wing vote and allowed Labour to achieve a huge seat majority with a relatively small vote majority. Out of the 251 seats the Conservatives lost, 170 of them had a vote share for Reform UK that was higher than the margin of the Tories' defeat.

It's also worth pointing out that a formerly prominent smaller party – the Scottish National Party, or SNP – experienced a drastic reduction in its seat numbers, from 48 to just 9 in Westminster. This occurred despite a fall in vote share of just 1.4%.

Participation of small parties

If you are looking to make the case that the smaller parties matter, look to Parliament. Reform UK and the Green Party are now in the Commons, putting pressure on the Labour government from the right and the left respectively. Reform has already shown its influence on the public policy debate, forcing both main parties to prioritise policies to tackle illegal immigration and small-boat crossings during the 2024 election. The Green Party and Reform UK have participated in significant policy debates and hold seats in select committees. Green MP Siân Berry is co-sponsor of Kim Leadbetter's Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill on assisted suicide, and another Green MP, Ellie Chowns, is a member of the Environmental Audit select committee. Reform UK's MPs pressured the government to open a national inquiry into child grooming gangs in January in 2025. These examples may represent opportunities to shape policy and government legislation, but they are a drop in the ocean compared to Labour's majority, which gives it control of the legislative process, including public bill committees, and of parliamentary time.

What about future elections? At the start of 2025, some polls suggested that Reform UK had overtaken Labour and the Conservatives and was winning over donors who previously supported the Conservatives, such as billionaire Nick Candy. However, support from small insurgent parties has often proved to be very transient. UKIP received 3.7 million votes (12.6%) in 2015, but by 2017, that had fallen to just 594,000 (1.8%). It remains to be seen if Reform UK can maintain this surge in support.

Influencing policy

Another argument that small parties are playing an increasingly important role in UK politics is that there are tangible examples where they have influenced the policy of the two major parties. The most notable example is the anti-European pressure placed on David Cameron, Conservative prime minister from 2010 to 2016, from UKIP in 2014–15. This forced Cameron to call a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union. UKIP had come first in the 2014 European parliamentary elections, and two Conservative MPs had defected to UKIP in the lead up to the general elections. The election led to Brexit, and the end of David Cameron's premiership.

The Green Party's concerted campaign for the UK to pursue net-zero carbon emissions by 2030 has arguably pressured the two main parties to embrace net-zero transitional policies, such as banning new petrol and diesel cars from 2030. The SNP also successfully pressured Cameron for a Scottish Independence referendum in 2014.

The SNP, Sinn Féin and the DUP are also important in the Scottish Parliament and Northern Ireland Assembly, administering the devolved governments of those nations. This may change in Scotland in the parliamentary elections of 2026, as the SNP has been shaken by recent scandals involving ex-leaders and dubious party finances. In Northern Ireland, however, the power-sharing agreement is baked into the system of government, and the STV electoral system all but guarantees that the two main parties will have to form a coalition government.

The UK is a unitary system of government, and ultimate power resides in Westminster. The Liberal Democrats, Reform UK and the Green Party may have had a great election, but the dominance of the two main parties is set to remain, as long as the UK maintains FPTP for Westminster elections.

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