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UK politics

The 2024 general election: do we now have a multi-party system?

Let's look at the key concepts in this article:

- **Two-party system:** where only two parties compete and one wins power, e.g. the Democrats and Republicans in the USA, resulting in single-party government.
- **Multi-party system:** where more than two parties compete for power, e.g. Germany or any country that uses a proportional voting system. This often results in a coalition government.

The UK's two-party system

The Westminster Parliament usually operates with a two-party system, where the Labour and Conservative parties dominate and take turns to govern. This was very much the case between 1945 and 1970. Not only did the two parties win over 90% of the seats, but they also received over 90% of the vote. Although there was a coalition government from 2010 and a minority government in 2017, the results of the 2019 general election suggested a return to this form of system, albeit with significantly less than 90% of votes and seats going to the two main parties.

The dominance of Labour and the Conservatives at Westminster exists mostly because the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system over-represents large parties and under-represents smaller ones. It favours those with geographically concentrated votes (e.g. Labour voters dominate most UK cities), rather than those whose support is more spread out across the UK (e.g. the Green Party). FPTP can also encourage tactical voting – when people choose whoever is most likely to defeat a candidate, rather than voting for who they would ideally support. Tactical voting often means not voting for a small party.

What changed in 2024?

In many ways, the results of the 2024 general election were surprising. Although the Labour Party won a landslide majority of seats, their vote share was low, at 33.7%. In fact, 42.6% of voters did not vote either Labour or Conservative. In contrast, smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats, Reform UK and the Green Party did surprisingly well in managing to win a significant number of seats, not just votes (see Table 1). This is quite an achievement in an election using FPTP. As a result, we can now argue that Westminster has a multi-party system.

Table 1 **Number of seats after the 2024 general election**

Party	Seats
Labour	411
Conservative	121
Liberal Democrat	72
SNP	9
Sinn Féin	7
Independent	6
Reform UK	5
DUP	5
Green Party	4
Plaid Cymru	4
SDLP	2
Alliance, UUP and TUV parties	1 each

Why did this happen?

There are many reasons why there was a rise in support for smaller parties and independent candidates:

- Many former Conservative voters were disillusioned by the performance of the government under Rishi Sunak. Some of them, particularly those concerned about immigration, voted for Reform UK. These voters may return to the Conservative Party in the future, or they may not.
- As a potential prime minister, Keir Starmer did not resonate strongly with all voters. As a result, some left-leaning voters who thought that Labour would probably win anyway, chose to give another party (such as the Greens) their support.
- The issue of Palestine was important in some constituencies, particularly those with a large Muslim community. This led to success for some independent candidates such as Shokat Adam in Leicester South.
- Finally, it has been argued by some political commentators that Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader, was successful in raising his party's profile during the election campaign and this led to an increased vote share and significant levels of tactical voting.

What is the likely impact?

Some commentators are already arguing that, due to the lack of unity and direction within the official opposition (the Conservative Party), the Liberal Democrats are the most important check on the powers of the government. For example, the Lib Dems are calling for increased spending on the NHS and a U-turn on the abolition of the winter fuel payments.

Five independent MPs have come together to form the Independent Alliance. This means that they will work together on some issues which will allow them more influence. Jeremy Corbyn, former Labour Party leader and a highly experienced politician, is one of this group. It will be interesting to see what contributions they are able to make.

The Labour landslide victory, despite the low vote share for both Labour and the Conservatives, has predictably led to renewed interest in proportional representation (PR). Reform UK, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party are all campaigning for PR to be introduced, despite the fact that these parties have little else in common. Clearly, if a proportional system was introduced, these parties would have considerably more MPs and coalitions would need to be created. However, a change to the voting system is unlikely to be a priority for a Labour government which has clearly benefited from FPTP.

Tactical voting may become more widespread. In 2024 there were websites such as www.getvoting.org which showed voters who to vote for to achieve a desired outcome. This was significant for the Liberal Democrats and helped them to increase their number of MPs. Voters could continue to vote tactically if they feel it makes a difference.

Reform UK may become a serious challenger and an alternative right-wing party to the Conservatives. With five MPs (they had none in the previous government), including the high-profile Nigel Farage, Reform UK now has a voice in Parliament to express its anti-immigration views. It will be interesting to see if the party decides to cooperate with the Conservatives, or whether they will focus their attention on replacing them. On the other side of the political spectrum, the Green Party's four MPs (up from one) are likely to criticise Labour from a left-wing perspective.

Conclusion

We now have a multi-party system in Westminster, as well as in the devolved assemblies. It seems likely that this will continue beyond the next election, as voters are clearly disenchanted with the two main parties. This will lead to growing calls for a change in our voting system so that smaller parties have fair representation.

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