The UK needs a new electoral system not a new political party

The new Independent Group of former Labour and Conservative MPs says it wishes to fix the UK's broken politics. However, argues **Jack Bridgewater**, *the first step in fixing politics at the centre is to reform the electoral system.*

Picture: Jason, via a (CC BY-NC 2.0) licence

The resignation of 11 MPs from the two main parties (eight from Labour and three from the Conservatives to date, with more rumoured) to form the Independent Group, a proto-political party, has garnered much attention. Splits in parliamentary political parties summon a nervousness in our political elite that is relatively specific to the UK. This is partly because we are not used to them and partly because of the myth that a previous Labour Party split led to landslide defeats for the party in 1983 and 1987. Splits are unfamiliar to us because our first-past-the-post electoral system makes it difficult for new parties to win seats in general elections. Suspicion of break-away parties is bolstered by a two-party system that discourages fluidity of ideology and legitimises binary decision-making. This enables the two main parties to clash in a partisan manner that is unrepresentative of a diverse country and makes complex issues such as leaving the European Union more difficult to resolve.

In 2011 the UK had a now largely forgotten referendum on whether to replace our voting system with the alternative vote (AV) system, notably not a proportional system, but one that could have increased the influence of minority party voters (if not the parties themselves). This was advocated by the Liberal Democrats and was held at their request as part of the coalition agreement. It was not backed by the Conservatives, while the Labour Party was divided on the issue, and the proposal was soundly rejected by 68% of voters, who opted to stay with the current system. Taking into account the current problems our parliament is having, is first-past-the-post still working?

Our two main parties have good reason to fear transition to proportional representation, but not necessarily for the reasons often cited. Break-away parties do not usually take voters exclusively from one party. Admittedly, when the Social Democratic Party (SDP) split from Labour in 1979 they did disproportionately take with them voters who identified with the latter. However, as Crewe and King point out in *SDP: The Birth, Life and Death of the Social Democratic Party* it is false to claim that the party helped Margaret Thatcher win landslide victories in two elections. The voters that abandoned the Labour Party were likely going to leave anyway, and without the SDP they may have switched their votes directly to the Conservatives. Were it not for the SDP it is possible that the Conservatives would have got an even larger share of the vote.

Additionally, there is little evidence to suggest that proportional representation substantially increases the number of parties overall. In the UK for example, there is already a multitude of parties within our system that represent a broad array of positions. However, these parties are not properly represented in the House of Commons (devolved assemblies and parliaments are more proportional). The list of injustices is long, but more recent examples would be the Liberal Democrats achieving 23% of the vote in 2010 but only 9% of seats, and UKIP in 2015 achieving 13% of the vote but 1 seat.

The reason the two main parties should be wary of a change in electoral system is that it would challenge their monopoly on political power in Westminster. It would enable people to vote for parties that more closely represent their own views, without the fear that this party will not be accordingly represented in Parliament. It takes us away from binary choices and towards a system that is based on power-sharing and compromise. Both the current Labour and Conservative leadership should embrace this. They would have to worry less about being broad churches, and less about reducing their ideology to an argument about their side being better than the other. They could instead focus more on pursuing the policies they think are the correct ones and on how to cooperate with, rather than blindly oppose, other parties that have similar goals to them.

This brings us back to the Independent Group. If they truly think that 'politics is broken' then, rather than occupying a centre ground which already has a party that could claim to be doing the same, they should argue for a radical overall of our electoral system. This should be put ahead of all other concerns for the new party. It is unlikely that they will achieve substantial numbers of seats in any general election, so if they really want to see political change they need to change the system in which they operate. Do not blame these individuals, Conservative or Labour, for the fact that they are forced into parties that do not necessarily represent them or many of their voters as well as they could.

This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit.

About the author
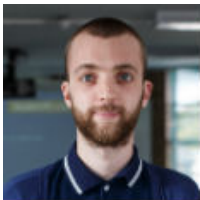
Jack Bridgewater is a PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the University of Kent. He runs the podcast 'How to Win Arguments with Numbers' and his research focuses on voter attitudes towards party leaders. He tweets at @JLBridgewater.

Similar Posts

- General election 2019: a postcode lottery
- What happens when the voting age is lowered to 16? A decade of evidence from Austria
- Why did the Conservatives' large lead in vote shares produce only an 80-seat majority?
- A great or Pyrrhic victory? The dangers ahead for Boris Johnson
- General election 2019: what are the prospects for UK human rights, and the Human Rights Act after the election?