

The 2015 election could reignite the debate about electoral reform in Britain

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2/16/2015

The forthcoming election looks as though it will pose further questions about the continued merits of using the first-past-the-post electoral system, writes [John Curtice](#).



Britain's [first-past-the-post](#) system is often defended on the grounds that it enables voters to choose between alternative governments. Two qualities supposedly give it this character. First, it gives the party that comes first in votes a bonus in seats, thereby enabling that party to secure an overall majority and govern on its own. Second, the system deals harshly with third parties, discouraging voters from backing them and ensuring that even if they do, those parties will win very few seats.

In truth, this vision of what first-past-the-post delivers has been open to question for some time. At the last election only two in three votes cast across the UK as a whole were expressions of support for one of the two largest parties, fewer than at any time since 1922 (the year that Labour first [displaced the Liberals](#) as Britain's principal party of the left). More than 80 MPs were elected for parties other than Conservative and Labour. Above all, no single party secured an overall majority, and as a result the country has had its first taste of coalition government since 1945.

But, as I write in [a new report](#) for the Electoral Reform Society, the forthcoming election looks as though it will pose further questions about the continued merits of using the system. Despite a sharp decline in support for the Liberal Democrats (their support currently averages 8 per cent according to four of the leading pollsters), smaller parties are knocking more loudly at the door of the Commons than ever before.

The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has been enjoying unprecedented levels of support since 2012 and has now been the third most popular party in the polls for some time (at present standing at 13 per cent). More recently, the Greens have [enjoyed greater popularity](#) than at any stage since a brief surge it enjoyed in the late 1980s (now also at 8 per cent). And despite [losing a referendum](#) on independence last September, the Scottish National Party (SNP) is now a commanding first place in [polls conducted in Scotland](#) (the equivalent of 4 per cent to 5 per cent of the GB-wide vote).

Odds are against a majority government

Meanwhile, neither of the two largest parties looks capable of winning an overall majority in what in any event is not an even-handed contest between them.

Taking into account the potential impact of the SNP's current popularity in Scotland, Labour are still likely to win an overall majority if they can secure a five point lead over the Conservatives. David Cameron's party, in contrast, is likely to need a seven-point lead over its principal rivals – and even that figure will only be enough so long as there is no significant recovery in the Liberal Democrats' fortunes. Yet, just one point ahead at present, Labour have not enjoyed as much as a five point lead in the polls since last April, while the Conservatives have not been seven points ahead since shortly after the last election.

In short, it looks as though Britain will find itself with another hung parliament after May. The decision about who should be the country's next prime minister will effectively be placed in the hands of a plethora of smaller parties. However, it looks as though the parliamentary strength of these parties will bear little relation to their relative popularity.

Just how many seats UKIP would win on 13 per cent of the vote is highly uncertain. Nobody is quite sure just where

they might strike it lucky and ease past all their rivals. But at the moment it looks as though their tally might represent no more than the number of fingers on two hands, and maybe only those on one.

Meanwhile, although the Greens are running at much the same share of the vote as the Liberal Democrats, they will do well to pick up a second seat to add to the first they won in 2010. In contrast the Liberal Democrats themselves – some of whose MPs at least are well dug in locally – could still emerge with 20 or so seats.

Who's getting lucky?

The smaller party that appears to have most to look forward to in May is the SNP. At present, it appears capable of winning some 50 or so seats north of the border. Such an outcome would mean that, far from being treated harshly by the first-past-the-post system, the party's share of seats in the Commons would actually be greater than its share of votes cast. The reason for these potentially contrasting fortunes is, of course, geography. UKIP's support tends to be fairly evenly spread and so the party is likely to struggle to come first in many seats. The SNP's vote is concentrated in one corner of the UK and so the party can pull ahead in many a Scottish seat.

First-past-the-post has in truth never been a system that necessarily treats smaller parties harshly – only those whose support is relatively evenly spread. The 2015 election could now well leave us asking whether this is really what we want our electoral system to do.

About the Author

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