

Does today mark the end of two-party politics?

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Britain may be witnessing the end of two-party politics.

Today's local and devolved elections could mark a turning point in the political history of the UK. Labour and the Conservatives are now polling at historically low combined levels, whilst Reform, the Greens, and the Liberal Democrats are all gaining and in Scotland and Wales, the SNP and Plaid Cymru are leading polls, questioning as a result the whole nature of the United Kingdom.

In this video, I explain why Britain's first-past-the-post voting system is now struggling to cope with a fragmented electorate and a fragmented country, why coalition politics may become unavoidable, and why the Westminster constitutional system may not survive unchanged.

I also ask whether proportional representation, Lords reform and wider constitutional change are now inevitable.

Could Britain become a continental-style multi-party democracy as our two-party system and even national unity run out of road?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfQMsyABS7I?si=ajYhi48c9R_7FnVm

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=xiz4v-1ab8dc9-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Today is election day across much of the UK.

In England, most people, but not everyone, will have the chance to vote in local council elections.

In Scotland and Wales, there are votes for the national devolved parliaments.

These are important because these are not ordinary mid-term elections. Something significant is happening, and these elections might be the first to reflect the fact. The results today might signal a fundamental shift in British politics. This could be the moment when two-party politics finally breaks apart in the whole of the UK.

Five parties are now competing for power in England. For most of modern British history, politics has been a contest between two parties right across the UK. That assumption is now under strain. Those five parties are currently polling at between 12% and 26% in England, and that's a remarkably narrow band which is being contested, with nobody clearly head and shoulders above the others.

In Wales and Scotland, the situation is even more complicated because in Scotland, the SNP is in play, and in Wales, Plaid Cymru is, and they are leading the polls in their countries.

Labour and the Conservatives together are commanding just over a third of all votes, which is an unprecedentedly low sum, and the UK electorate is behaving increasingly like a continental European one. Indeed, as one academic has put it, "This is the Dutchification of British politics."

Today's results are expected to reflect that fragmentation. In England, the Labour Party and the Conservatives are both expected to lose a lot of political ground. The Liberal Democrats, Reform, and the Greens are all expected to gain significantly. Whilst in Scotland, the SNP looks likely to lead the devolved government again, maybe with a majority, which is incredibly difficult to achieve in the Scottish Parliament. Whilst in Wales, Plaid Cymru may take power, possibly with Green or Labour support, and that is unprecedented. In Wales, Labour has dominated politics for a century. It won't be by Friday morning.

Independent councillors are also expected to rise in numbers across the UK, and Reform will be the big winner, much as I hate to say it, and despite the evidence from the councils that they hold that they cannot govern. More local authorities in England are likely to end up with no overall control as well.

The first-past-the-post system is struggling as a result. That's what we're going to find out on Friday morning. Britain's voting system was designed for two-party competition, but as the vote fragments, winners can take power on a very much smaller share of the ballot.

Remember that in 2024, Labour won a historic general election landslide on just 34% of the popular vote in the country. But, in 2017, Labour won 40% and still lost that election. Meanwhile, recently, a Liberal Democrat councillor was elected in Cornwall on just 19% of the vote, so split were the parties, and Reform took a council seat in Wales recently on just 22% of the vote. Our voting system is now producing democratically indefensible results. That's the point I'm making.

The warning is that the next general election could produce an indefensible outcome as well, and people may not accept this. There has to be popular support for a government. Twenty-two per cent, or whatever it might be, is insufficient support for any government to govern this country. A party could win a national majority on a small minority of votes cast, and this is not a theoretical risk. It's already happening locally. It could be reproduced nationally, and that is not what the people of this country want. They want governments that represent large blocks of support.

Already, people back proportional representation as a result by more than 45%. That sounds low, but only 25% support the existing system now. The point is, once we take out the undecideds, and that's who make up most of the rest of the population, the support for proportional representation amongst those who have a concern about what is happening is very high indeed because people want governments that represent people, not governments that represent the interests of political parties.

So, pressure for voting reform is going to intensify if the current trend continues. Yet the parties leading the polls have little incentive to change the system. It suits them to continue in power with small levels of support.

And whilst all this is happening, governing is becoming very much harder, as we are already seeing in those local authorities where there are positions of no overall control. Multi-party politics creates real problems of day-to-day governability, especially in a system designed for two-party operation. More councils with no overall control will mean even more difficult coalition negotiations, and different parties on the left and right are finding it hard to build working majorities, whoever they are.

The SNP's rise has already produced a conflictual relationship between London and Edinburgh, and the same situation is quite likely in Wales now, especially if Plaid Cymru can take the same confrontational approach to London that the SNP has done. And this is a situation that could easily be reproduced in the House of Commons in 2029.

On top of that, the House of Lords makes this situation even more difficult when it comes to maintaining parliamentary democracy in Westminster. The House of Lords is

made up of people who are appointed for life. They do not reflect current political opinion, and that was okay when most parties were going to continue in office, taking turns between them on a regular basis. But the fact is that we now have the absurd situation where the SNP have no members of the House of Lords, nor has Reform, and the Greens have just two. Even Labour, with two hundred and nineteen peers at present, has struggled to pass its own legislative agenda during the course of this parliament, and that is going to create a crisis if Reform gets to the point where they could create a government. That would create an immediate constitutional crisis for the Lords, because Reform will want to pack that house with new members whom they will want to appoint to ensure that they can get their measures passed, and that will bring the whole system into disrepute.

All of this is because voters are now treating voting like shopping. The old close connection between voters and parties based largely on class has now broken down. Voters are switching between parties in ways that were previously unusual in Britain because what they recognise is that what the Tories are offering, what the Labour Party is offering, what the Liberal Democrats are offering, and even what some other parties are offering, are all remarkably alike. They're willing to try one party, and if they don't like it, move on to the next in the hope that they will find managerial competence somewhere. But they have forgotten what ideology even means, as have most of the parties in question themselves.

Once that connection between people and party is broken, history shows it's very hard to restore it, and this is not just about tactical voting. This is a structural change in political behaviour in the UK because we have created parties that are so alike that the divisions between them that allowed old party loyalties to be sustained have collapsed. A hung parliament in 2029 is now looking likely as a result.

Experts are already forecasting coalition government after the next general election. The current fragmentation makes a hung parliament more likely than not, and on the right, Reform and the Conservatives could seek to form some form of electoral pact, whilst on the left, Labour, if they have any seats left, might need to do deals with the Lib Dems, the Greens, the SNP or Plaid Cymru.

Britain's electoral system was not designed for this situation. We are approaching a tipping point where it can no longer manage the situation that is being created. At the same time, those in Parliament may well not be representative of the UK very soon.

But remember, that is a peculiarly English problem. In England, we do not have PR, but in Wales and Scotland, for the devolved parliaments, we do, and in Scotland, there is proportional representation with regard to local council elections as well. If we can use PR in Wales and Scotland, why can't we in England or for the UK as a whole, and why can't we for English local councils? This is a problem that has to be addressed.

Today's elections are a marker on that journey. What happens today will tell us how far

that fragmentation has now gone. Strong gains for Reform, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens will confirm the trend. If the results for the SNP and Plaid Cymru put them into power in Scotland and Wales, we will know that independence politics is consolidating. Labour's losses will measure by how far its support has collapsed, and the Conservative result will show whether two-party politics has any road left at all in the UK.

Today is then not just a local election. It is a test of whether British democracy can still function as designed. Fragmented politics could make the delivery of coherent economic policy in the future much harder to achieve. Governments formed on small vote shares lack the mandate for difficult decisions, and coalition negotiations, whilst they work in other countries, are something we're unfamiliar with, and they could dilute necessary policy responses in the UK for a while to come, just because we don't know how to do them.

At a time of serious economic pressure, of fuel and food shortages plus inflation, this will have massive consequence. A government uncertain of its majority cannot plan beyond the next few weeks, and even Labour might be in that situation now, given the mess it is in. The democratic crisis and the economic crisis in this country are now reinforcing each other, and the question is, can our systems adapt?

Can we move to a continental European multi-party political system?

Can we adapt our electoral and constitutional systems that were designed for two parties to suit this purpose, or do we need to go back and redesign from scratch?

Do we need voting reform, Lords reform, local council election reform, and new rules for coalition governments, which will become more common?

Today's results will not solve that tension, but they will sharpen it. The country is going to the polls today inside a political system that is running out of road. We need to rebuild our democratic electoral systems and fast. The alternatives, as Winston Churchill put it, are all very much worse. The fascists are knocking on the door. Now is the time to prevent them from getting in.

That's what I think. What do you think? There's a poll down below. Let us have your comments. Please like this video if that's what you do. Please share it, and if you'd like to support our work with a donation, we'd be very grateful.

Poll

[poll id="389"]