



Political Parties / Electoral Systems

Has Brexit identification replaced partisan identification in UK elections?

What's the story?

Local elections were held in parts of the UK on 2nd May. Three weeks later, on 23rd May, UK-wide voters participated in the 2019 European Parliament election. On 6th June, the Parliamentary constituency of Peterborough also voted in a by-election, triggered by the recall of Labour MP Fiona Onasanya. All three elections saw a remarkable drop in support for the two main parties. The size of the swing towards the 'Leave' supporting Brexit Party and 'Remain' supporting Liberal Democrats and Greens has led to a discussion of whether voters now identify more strongly with their 2016 referendum vote than they do a particular party, and whether this realignment means the end of the two-party system.

What happened in the 2019 local elections?

As you can see from the tables on page 4, the two main parties struggled in the English local elections. The Conservative Party lost more than 1,300 council seats, and control of over 40 councils, giving them their worst local election result since 1995. Labour, which had hoped to win hundreds of seats, also lost 84 seats and 6 councils. The party made gains and losses in both Remain and Leave voting areas. The UK Independence Party also lost 145 seats, leaving them with 31 councillors. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats gained over 700 seats and control of 10 additional councils, and the Greens won almost 200 seats. Independents also performed well, doubling their seats, and gaining control of several councils.

What happened in the 2019 European elections?

The Conservative Party had its worst result since 1832, coming fifth with only 9% of the vote. Many commentators noted how remarkable it was for the Government to receive less than 10% of the vote in a national election. Labour also performed poorly, winning just 14% of the vote - its lowest share in a nationwide contest since the December 1910 General Election. Labour also came an unprecedented fifth place in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party came first with 38% of the vote - more than the Scottish Conservatives, Scottish Labour and Liberal Democrats combined - and third in Wales, coming behind Plaid Cymru for the first time in a Wales-wide election. It was the Brexit Party, which had formed only four months earlier to campaign for the British withdrawal from the EU, that came first, winning 32% of the vote and 28 seats. The Brexit Party came first in Wales, second in Scotland, and first in every English region except for London, where it finished third. Second place went to the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats, which campaigned with the slogan "Bollocks to Brexit", and won over 20% of the vote. The pro-Remain Green Party came fourth with their best performance since the 1989 European elections.

What happened in the Peterborough by-election?

The by-election was triggered after Peterborough constituents used a recall petition to remove Labour MP Fiona Onasanya from office, following her conviction for lying about a speeding offence. Labour managed to hold on to the seat, but it only narrowly beat the Brexit Party, which came second. In fact, at just 30.9%, Labour had the smallest vote share of any previous by-election winner. The two main parties won a combined vote share of 94.9% in Peterborough in the 2017 General Election, but just 52.3% in the by-election. Asked about his party's narrow defeat, Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage said the result showed that "British politics has fundamentally changed, it is no longer just two parties contesting."

Debate! YouGov has been asking people how they intend to vote in a general election for 19 years. With the exception of a single poll in 2010, led by the Lib Dems, these polls have always been led by one of the two main parties. However, in YouGov's first three polls since the European elections the Lib Dems led the first, and the Brexit Party led the second and third. Should the two main parties be worried?



How does this fit into your exams?

Electoral systems – Should FPTP be replaced with a more proportional electoral system?

Firstly, these recent elections serve as excellent examples when discussing the merits and flaws of different electoral systems. As you can see from the 2019 European Parliament election results tables on pages 4-6, both the closed party system, used in England, Wales and Scotland, and the single-transferable vote (STV), used in Northern Ireland, produced results that are far more proportional to those typical under First-Past-The-Post. By ensuring that third parties have a much fairer chance of winning seats, both systems offer voters far greater choice, reducing tactical voting and the number of wasted votes. Some might argue that the gains made by third parties resulted from voters' desire to protest the performance of the main parties, safe in the knowledge that doing so would not change the balance of power in Parliament. But others argue that the scale of the swing in these elections shows that the UK is now a multi-party system that would benefit from a proportional system that would better translate the far more fragmented views of the electorate into seats in the House of Commons.

Critics have pointed to the Peterborough by-election as a worrying sign of what could happen if trends continue into the next general election. The vote in Peterborough was split not simply between Labour (30.91%) and the Conservatives (21.35%), but also the Brexit Party (28.89%) and Liberal Democrats (12.26%). This resulted in Labour winning with the smallest vote share in by-election history. The four-way split means that the constituency is now represented by an MP who won less than a third of the vote. When you factor in that turnout was only 48.4%, the mandate becomes even more questionable. Critics have questioned what would happen if such results were replicated on a larger scale. They argue that a combination of FPTP and multi-party politics could produce a wildly unrepresentative government, which might nonetheless attempt to use its majority to push through a radical programme. Under FPTP, only a relatively small change in the national vote could make the difference between the Brexit Party failing to win a single seat in the Commons, and winning a landslide victory.

Of course, it remains possible that voters will tactically return to the main parties in a general election, for fear that their third-party vote will be wasted. While this might lead MPs to win with slightly larger majorities, critics question whether it really strengthens their mandate if they were chosen not due to a genuine desire to elect them, but to avoid a rival party coming to power. The Economist quoted an enthusiastic Green supporter at a rally in Cambridge who said that while he normally voted Labour, he was supporting, and had even volunteered to work for, the Green Party's European Parliament election campaign. However, when asked if he would also support the party in a general election he replied, "There's not much point, really." Critics argue that voters should not be compelled to think this way.

The 2019 local elections in England and Wales provide an extreme example of how FPTP can limit voter choice. The Electoral Reform Society found that 300 council seats were guaranteed for one party weeks before any votes were cast, leaving 850,000 voters without a say on who represents them locally. 150 councillors automatically won because they had no opposition, while another 152 seats were guaranteed to a particular party because the opposition did not field enough candidates to compete for every available seat. Some areas were particularly badly affected. For example, Fenland District Council in Cambridgeshire had 12 of the district's 39 seats go uncontested, meaning that a third of representatives were decided without any votes cast. A proportional system, with larger, competitive, multi-member wards, would likely inspire more parties to stand in areas that are currently all but certain to give a simple plurality to a particular party. Supporters of electoral reform point to the Scottish local elections, which have used the STV system since 2007. They argue that since adopting this more proportional system the problem of uncontested seats has almost disappeared, giving voters far more choice. The Welsh government is currently consulting on whether to allow councils to switch to a more proportional system and supporters of electoral reform argue that England should do the same.

Ultimately, critics argue that FPTP is designed for a two-party system that no longer exists, it simply cannot keep up with significant changes in party alignment exacerbated by the 2016 EU referendum.



Political Parties – Is the UK still a two-party system?

The recent elections are also interesting examples to consider when debating the UK's party system. A two-party system is one in which only two parties have a realistic chance of forming a government, as they attract the vast majority of votes, and win nearly all of the available seats in the legislature. From 1945 to 1974, it was clear that the UK was a two-party system, dominated by the Conservative and Labour parties. At the 1951 General Election, the Labour and Conservative parties' combined vote share was a remarkable 96.8% and all but nine MPs were Labour or Conservative. A closer look at voting behaviour in this period shows that there was clear partisan and class alignment. Around two-thirds of working class voters loyally voted for the Labour Party, election after election, while three-quarters of middle class voters stuck by the Conservatives. There were relatively few 'floating voters', who regularly voted for different parties, and support for third parties was extremely low. However, since the 1974 General Election, which resulted in a hung parliament, the picture has become more complicated. Voting behaviour in recent decades has continued to show increasing levels of partisan and class *dealignment*. Voters have become much less loyal to the two main parties, and the once strong link between class and party has also broken down. Many voters have become increasingly motivated by political issues that cut across the traditional left-right divide, much to the benefit of third parties that adopt clear positions on these increasingly salient issues. The Labour and Conservative combined vote share fell from a high of 96.8% in 1951, to a low of 67.3% in the 2015 General Election.

The 2017 General Election appeared to provide evidence that the UK's historical two-party system was more resilient than expected, at least in England. The two main parties won a combined vote share of 82.3%, which was the highest it had been since 1970. Not only did the Liberal Democrats and UKIP lose vast numbers of voters, they even lost many of the £500 deposits that are not returned to parties that win less than 5% of the vote in a constituency. But even at this unusual election, there were signs that the two-party system was partly being kept alive by the continued use of FPTP, which encouraged tactical voting and electoral pacts that saw third parties stand aside in many constituencies rather than have a split vote predictably help another party to win. FPTP also rewarded the main parties with more seats than their vote share might suggest they deserve. In England, the Conservatives won 55.7% of seats with 45.6% of the vote, while in Wales, Labour won 70% of the seats with just 48.9% of the vote.

The 2016 EU referendum has only served to further strain the dominance of the two-main parties. The main parties are 'big tents', with diverse memberships. They understand that to win general elections they need broad, cross country appeal, and, despite the views of their more ideological members, they generally try to occupy the political 'centre ground' that many voters are thought to occupy. However, it is difficult to occupy the centre ground on an issue as divisive as Brexit. The 'big tents' include large numbers of 'Remain' and 'Leave' voters, and they represent constituencies that voted very differently in the referendum. Straying from the centre, and adopting a controversial Brexit position, risks alienating many members. Labour cannot endorse a second EU referendum, and the Conservative Government cannot embrace a 'No Deal' Brexit without enraging many MPs, members and voters.

However, polls suggest that many voters identify more strongly with their referendum vote than they do a particular political party. As a result, the main parties also risk losing support if they continue to try to stay in a centre ground that might not exist, given that the 2016 referendum divided voters into distinct Remain and Leave camps. A ComRes poll suggested that Labour support in the European elections would have risen to 38% if it had clearly backed a second referendum. Another poll found that 41% of Labour members, including former Home Secretary Charles Clarke, voted for a different party, while 67% of Conservative members, including former Deputy PM Michael Heseltine, did the same. These may prove to be protest votes that will not be replicated in the next general election. It is also possible that the threat posed by third parties will compel the next Conservative leader to support a 'No Deal' Brexit, and Labour's Jeremy Corbyn to endorse a second referendum. However, if 'Brexit identification' has indeed replaced 'partisan identification' then the failure of the main parties to take clearer Brexit positions may have already opened a door for third parties that could prove hard for them to close.



Results of the 2019 England local elections:

Party	Councillors		Councils	
	Number	Change	Number	Change
Conservative	3,564	-1,330	93	-44
Labour	2,021	-84	60	-6
Liberal Democrat	1,352	+706	18	+10
Residents' Association	119	+49	2	+1
Green	265	+194	0	-
UKIP	31	-145	0	-
Health Concern	8	+6	0	-
Liberal	6	-	0	-
Others	0	0	0	0
Independent	1044	+604	2	+2
No Overall Control	N/A		73	+37

Source: BBC

Results of the 2019 European Parliament Election in the UK:

Party	Votes		Seats	
	%	Change	Number	%
Brexit Party	31.6%	New party	29	39.7%
Liberal Democrats	20.3%	+13.4	16	21.9%
Labour	14.1%	-11.3	10	13.7%
Green	12.1%	+4.2	7	9.6%
Conservative	9.1%	-14.8	4	5.5%
Scottish National Party	3.6%	+1	3	4.1%
Change UK	3.4%	New party	0	0
UK Independence Party	3.3%	-24.2	0	0
Plaid Cymru	1%	+0.3	1	1.4%
Sinn Fein	0.7%	-0.2	1	1.4%
DUP	0.7%	-0.1	1	1.4%
Alliance	0.6%	+0.3	1	1.4%

Source: BBC



2019 European Parliament Election - Vote share by constituency in Great Britain:

East Midlands		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	38.2%	3
Lib Dem	17.2%	1
Labour	13.9%	1
Con	10.7%	0
Green	10.5%	0

East of England		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	37.8%	3
Lib Dem	22.6%	2
Green	12.7%	1
Con	10.3%	1
Lab	8.7%	0

London		
Party	Vote	Seats
Lib Dem	27.2%	3
Labour	23.9%	2
Brexit	17.9%	2
Green	12.5%	1
Con	7.9%	0

North East England		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	38.7%	2
Labour	19.4%	1
Lib Dem	16.8%	0
Green	8.1%	0
Con	6.8%	0

North West England		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	31.2%	3
Labour	21.9%	2
Lib Dem	17.2%	2
Green	12.5%	1
Con	7.6%	0

South East England		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	36.1%	4
Lib Dem	25.8%	3
Green	13.5%	1
Con	10.3%	1
Lab	7.3%	1

South West England		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	36.7%	3
Lib Dem	23.1%	2
Green	18.1%	1
Con	8.7%	0
Labour	6.5%	0

West Midlands		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	37.7%	3
Labour	16.9%	1
Lib Dem	16.3%	1
Green	10.7%	1
Con	10%	1

Yorkshire & the Humber		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	36.5%	3
Labour	16.3%	1
Lib Dem	15.5%	1
Green	12.9%	1
Con	7.2%	0

Scotland		
Party	Vote	Seats
SNP	37.8%	3
Brexit	14.8%	1
Lib Dem	13.9%	1
Con	11.6%	1
Labour	9.3%	0
Green	8.3%	0

Wales		
Party	Vote	Seats
Brexit	32.5%	2
Plaid Cymru	19.6%	1
Labour	15.3%	1
Lib Dem	13.6%	0
Con	6.5%	0
Green	6.3%	0

Source: Guardian



Northern Ireland results:

Party	Candidate	1 st pref vote %	1 st count	2 nd count	3 rd count	4 th count	5 th count
Sinn Fein	Martina Anderson	22.17%	126,951	128,117	128,190	128,200.5	152,436.5
DUP	Diane Dodds	21.83%	124,991	127,291	155,422	-	-
Alliance	Naomi Long	18.5%	105,928	115,327	122,263	123,917	170,370
SDLP	Colum Eastwood	13.72%	78,589	80,949	82,101	82,413.5	-
TUV	Jim Allister	10.83%	62,021	63,872	79,540	89,854	90,079
UUP	Danny Kennedy	9.26%	53,052	54,736	-	-	-
Green	Clare Bailey	2.18%	12,471	-	-	-	-
UKIP	Robert Hill	0.89%	5,115	-	-	-	-
Independent	Jane Morrice	0.3%	1,719	-	-	-	-
Independent	Neil McCann	0.17%	948	-	-	-	-
Con	Amandeep Singh Bhogal	0.12%	662	-	-	-	-
Total Valid Votes – 572,447				Quota – 143,112			
Source: BBC / Electoral Commission							

How did votes change from the 2017 General Election?

Of the 2017 Conservative voters who took part in the European elections...	
53%	Voted for the Brexit Party
12%	Voted for the Liberal Democrats
Only 21%	Voted Conservative again

Of the 2017 Labour voters who took part in the European elections...	
22%	Voted for the Liberal Democrats
17%	Voted for the Greens
13%	Voted for the Brexit Party
Only 38%	Voted Labour again

Of the Brexit Party's 2019 voters...	
67%	Came from the Conservative Party
14%	Came from the Labour Party
10%	Came from the UK Independence Party

Of those who voted 'Leave' in 2016...	
64%	Voted for the Brexit Party
9%	Voted Conservative
8%	Voted Labour

Of those who voted 'Remain' in 2016...	
36%	Voted for the Liberal Democrats
19%	Voted Labour
19%	Voted Green
9%	Voted Conservative

Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls