

Labour majority obscures volatile UK politics

It was a foregone conclusion that Labour would win the UK General Election by a landslide, however, underneath their huge majority there is a more interesting story. Having only increased their national vote share by less than 2% since 2019, whilst at the same time losing seats to pro Gaza independents and coupled with the rise of the Greens and Nigel Farage's Reform, the next five years are wide open politically.

The election campaign, seen as one of the worst and least inspiring in recent memory, had incumbent Prime Minister Rishi Sunak desperately bleating on about tax cuts and how his opposite number would welcome 'illegal migrants', while the Labour leader insisted to anyone who would listen that he had transformed the Labour Party and despite his election slogan being 'change', that would certainly not be on the agenda should he win.

Largely seen, due to monumental Tory unpopularity, as a government-in-waiting, Labour were able to enjoy puff pieces in the press and businesses flocked to be associated with the party as they touted their 'iron-clad' fiscal rules and novel ideas of using the private sector, rather than government funding, to fix public services. Over the course of the campaign Sunak and Starmer took turns to demonise asylum seekers, declare increasingly aggressive lines on trans rights, and criticise environmental protestors and in doing so seemingly chase the same voter profile. However, while the Labour Party was being projected to win a huge majority and consistently maintained a large lead over the Conservatives, Starmer's approval rating itself was a record low for a politician on the cusp of winning an electoral landslide.

Voters were sure they wanted to kick the Conservatives out after 14 years of disastrous rule, but were they really persuaded by what the other party was offering? A YouGov poll this week showed that the main reason voters cited for wanting to vote Labour in 2024 was to 'get the Tories out' (48%), while only 5% cited agreement with Labour's policies.

During the campaign, polling indicated that the top priorities for the electorate were the cost of living, the state of public services, with immigration in third place, albeit much lower for prospective Labour voters than Conservative. However, all voters were offered by Labour was a lightweight manifesto that gestured towards 'growing the economy' as the solution to most questions, but never outlined how exactly that would happen and provided little else in terms of actual policy. At the same time Labour attempted to purge its left flank, setting up unnecessary and resource-consuming fights, the largest of which was against Jeremy Corbyn, the previous Labour leader, who ran as an independent against the party and won.

With almost all 650 constituencies declared, Labour has won a massive majority of 410 seats while the Tories have plummeted to 119. Beneath the headline result are some fascinating details. The Labour majority was achieved with less proportion of the national vote share than they received with their ambitious left-wing manifesto in 2017, and only a 2% increase compared to 2019, which was deemed the worst result for Labour since the 1930s and used as a pretext for the destruction of Labour's left-wing agenda. John Curtice, election expert for the BBC has pointed out that vote share for Labour only actually improved in Scotland, where the Scottish National Party have imploded losing 37 seats leaving them with 9, and that Labour support has, in fact, decreased in Wales and remained static in England.

It is the lowest vote share for a party winning a parliamentary majority and the second lowest voter turnout since the 1800s. A broad but shallow majority within a landscape of voter discontent.

The Conservatives on the other hand lost an enormous 20% of their national vote share, underscoring the perception that the Tories lost the election, rather than Labour having won it. Furthermore, the two main parties have witnessed a shrinking of their combined national vote share while smaller parties and independents have surged, calling into question the UK's First Past The Post (FPTP) electoral system. FPTP is one of the simplest electoral systems with a winner-take-all method, which often produces disproportional results due to the fact that political parties do not get representation according to their share of the popular vote.

The Liberal Democrats won 71 seats, an increase of 63 and their best result in a century, after a campaign which saw their leader Ed Davey bungee jump, take part in aqua aerobics session, and go paddle boarding as he declared he wanted to "have fun" in this election campaign. The Green Party has historically only ever had 1 representative in Parliament, for the liberal and ecologically-minded Brighton Pavilion. They have exceeded expectations achieving their maximum pre-election target of 4 seats on an explicitly left wing platform of public ownership of utilities and railways, a transformative green agenda, and rental controls. 5 pro Gaza independent candidates unseated or defeated Labour MPs, an incredible feat in the UK electoral system, a historic achievement, and a huge rebuttal of Labour's line on Israel and Palestine demonstrating that foreign policy has become a wedge issue for parts of the electorate.

On the other hand, Farage on his 8th attempt and with billionaire media backing has finally won a seat in Parliament along with 3 other candidates for his party, marking the first time the far-right has entered the House of Commons. What's more concerning is Reform came second in around 100 seats and amongst young male voters, while Farage himself was the party leader with the most views on TikTok.

Sinn Fein won an unprecedented 7 seats in Parliament, which they will, as always, leave vacant in protest, making them the biggest party in Northern Ireland as unionism further fragments.

Looking forward, Farage's Reform are now a serious political force that will continue to drag the Tories right-ward cannibalising their vote. Labour, so concerned with capturing disillusioned Conservative voters have underestimated the backlash in urban areas and now have a credible threat to their left with an emboldened Green Party. The media tend to disproportionately focus on Farage, but pro-Gaza independent MPs won more seats than his party with grassroots organising and no billionaire backing.

Electoral reform must now be top of the agenda as the UK has transformed into a multi-party system and its FPTP model creates a dangerous lack of representation. After 14 years of Conservative governments from austerity to Brexit and Partygate to Rwanda, voters have lived through an era of cruelty and decline. With France on our minds, it is important for

Labour to provide results for the public and make a difference to people's lives, or else leave a vacuum for Farage and the far-right to fill.