

KEY TOPIC DEBATE: THE IMPACT OF MINOR AND EMERGING PARTIES ON UK POLITICS

The rise of minor and emerging parties in the UK

The rise of minor and emerging parties can bring huge benefits to democracy by creating new channels for political participation and engagement. The success of minor parties is driven by partisan dealignment and class dealignment. This has seen attachment to the main political parties decline, creating a fragmentation of the electorate and much higher levels of electoral volatility. Added to this is the failure of the main political parties to clearly represent issues important to certain voters. This is particularly true where there has been a rise of issues that cut across the traditional left-right spectrum such as Brexit, Scottish independence and the environment. These new divides are creating new political tribes that do not fit neatly into the traditional voting blocks that back the main political parties.

Weakening party loyalties mean that voters are more likely to vote for minor or emerging parties in 'second order' elections in particular; these are elections which are not for the national parliament (Westminster in the case of the UK). Elections to devolved assemblies, the European Parliament, local elections and mayoral elections have generally shown declining support for the main parties, lower turnout and higher levels of votes for minor parties. This trend has been enhanced by the introduction of alternative voting systems to FPTP in 'second order' elections, such as AMS and STV in particular, which are more conducive to minor and emerging party success. The success of minor and emerging parties in 'second order' elections has allowed them to establish themselves and contribute to the growing vote share that they are winning in general elections.

How much impact have minor and emerging parties had on UK politics?

- ✓ **Minor and emerging parties have changed the electoral landscape in the United Kingdom, both in Westminster and 'second order' elections.**
 - » The SNP has now been the largest party in the Scottish Parliament following the elections in 2007, 2011, 2016 and 2021 and has gone on to form the government on each occasion. The SNP has also been the largest party in Scotland in the General Elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019 and has established itself now as the third largest party in the House of Commons.
 - » Minor and emerging parties have challenged FPTP's ability to deliver strong, stable one party governments based on clear majorities. In two of the four elections between 2010 and 2019, FPTP has delivered hung parliaments, although 2019 saw a result that delivered a strong, one-party Conservative government with a majority of 80.
 - » Following the 2017 election, the DUP agreed a confidence and supply deal with the Conservative party. As part of the negotiations, the DUP secured additional annual spending commitments for Northern Ireland and an agreement for the Tories to axe planned reforms to the pension triple lock and winter fuel allowance.
 - » In 2021, the Green Party secured record shares of the vote in both the Scottish Parliament (8%) and the London Assembly (12%) election. Meanwhile, the party won as much as 11% of the vote where they stood in the local elections, gaining an additional 88 council seats across the UK.
- ✗ **General Elections, and the House of Commons, remain dominated by the main parties as a result of FPTP.**
 - » The main issue facing minor and emerging parties is the use of FPTP in the UK for Westminster elections. Whilst minor and emerging parties may poll well between elections, when it comes to general elections their votes get squeezed as it is clear that only the main political parties have a realistic chance of winning.
 - » In the 2019 European Parliament elections, the Brexit Party secured 31.6% of the vote, more than the Labour and Conservative vote combined, but in the 2019 General Election only secured 2% of the public vote.
 - » Only parties with a concentrated vote, such as the SNP, can really break through in terms of winning seats in general elections due to this limitation. However, the SNP is limited by the fact that it is only competing for Scottish seats, which in 2019 numbered only 59 of the 650 seats available.
 - » Minor and emerging parties are often competing amongst themselves for votes where they have overlapping policy ideas or ideals. In 2019, UKIP and the Brexit Party were competing for similar voters.

- ✓ **Introducing political issues onto the political agenda that have been neglected by the main political parties.**
 - » UKIP's concern with immigration, nationalism and the EU brought these issues onto the agenda. In response, the Conservatives and Labour produced policies to introduce immigration controls in the 2015 election, and the Tories pledged the EU referendum to counter UKIP's electoral threat.
 - » The SNP have brought the issue of Scottish independence to the table, leading to the 2016 Independence Referendum and further pressure for IndyRef2 following the 2019 General Election and 2021 Scottish Parliament election.
 - » The Green Party's focus on the environment, alongside quality of life issues like equality and social justice, has carved out a distinct ideological space but all the main parties have looked to 'green' their language and proposals to stave off any threat to their voter base.
- ✗ **Where emerging and minor parties place issues on the agenda, their policies are often adopted by the main parties, limiting their chances of long-term success.**
 - » Minor and emerging parties often raise issues that are distinctive; however, where these issues are distinctive and offer a threat to the voter base of one of the main parties, this policy is poached by the main party, limiting the political space for minor parties to gain votes.
 - » The Brexit strategy and new immigration proposals of the 2019 Conservative Party manifesto effectively collapsed the political space for either UKIP or the Brexit Party to operate in and pick up votes.
- ✓ **Minor and emerging parties have provided an alternative route of political participation for many that feel unrepresented by the main political parties.**
 - » The membership base of the SNP has continued to grow from 16,000 members in 2002 to 125,534 in December 2018.
 - » The Scottish National Party had 125,534 members as of December 2018, more than the Liberal Democrat Party, which had around 115,000 members as of August 2019.
 - » It is estimated that around 3% of the SNP electorate are members of the party in comparison to only 1.7% of the UK electorate who are members of Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats combined.
 - » The Green Party has grown its membership from around 5,000 members in 2002 to 48,500 in July 2019.
 - » Where minor and emerging parties have found effective leadership, with strong political communication skills, then they have been more effective at getting media coverage for their policies and views. A clear example here would be the success of UKIP under Nigel Farage in comparison to its performance under leaders that followed, including Paul Nuttall, Henry Bolton and Gerald Batten.
- ✗ **Minor and emerging parties face obstacles in building up the resources to develop its vote and to get their voices heard.**
 - » Minor parties need to build up and keep a strong membership base to campaign for the party between elections and during election campaigns. UKIP's membership is a case in point; it grew from 9,000 in 2002 to 45,994 in 2015, but fell back again to 26,447 members in December 2018, reflecting the fluctuations experienced by many of the minor and emerging parties.
 - » Minor parties need to raise enough finances to fund their organisation and campaigns, which is extremely difficult given the lack of state funding for parties in the UK. Given that there is a £500 deposit needed for each candidate standing in a general election, parties need significant funds to compete in a large number of seats. Only if the party achieves more than 5% of the vote is the deposit returned; in 2017, 457 Green candidates lost their deposit, costing the party a total of £228,000.

Minor and emerging parties are now a permanent feature of the UK's political landscape, however their fortunes fluctuate. Whilst the SNP and Green Party, for example, have managed to establish themselves, the fortunes of parties such as UKIP and the Brexit Party show just how hard it is for such parties to maintain and build upon their successes.