

UK: First-Past-the-Post was the Winner on the Day

Keith Rankin, 9 May 2015

The United Kingdom election result – an apparent outright win to the Tory Conservatives – will be difficult for the left to take; here and in the UK. The most significant point however was that only the Scottish Nationalist Party ran on anti-austerity economic policies. And they did OK! Indeed I think their anti-austerity rhetoric was the main reason that they gained over 50 percent of the Scottish vote.

The UK election result was not at all surprising to me. [Last week](#) I wrote:

"In this FPP system the typical result is one party gaining an overall majority of seats while gaining about 37% of the overall national vote. So don't be surprised if the Tories get returned with an overall majority of MPs this time; they are polling 36%."

I made essentially the same prediction more than two weeks ago on Scoop on 23 April ([United Kingdom General Election on 7 May](#)):

"I think there's a good chance that the Conservatives will win outright, though with less than 40% of the total vote, and probably with about 25% support of all those entitled to vote."

What astounds me is the fact that almost everyone in the UK seemed completely surprised by the result. First they were taken aback by the exit polls seemingly giving conflicting information from all the pre-election polls the day before. Second, they – even the experts – just don't seem to get that a first-past-the-post election with 650 constituencies is in fact 650 separate elections. And, that the winner of many of those elections (at least 30% of them) will be determined not by the winners' score but by the split of the votes cast for other candidates.

This time it was pretty obvious that the crucial political issue would be how the collapsing Liberal Democrat (Lib-Dems) vote split between Labour and Conservative. And the second issue was who would suffer more from the higher UKIP (akin to New Zealand First) support than in 2010. My sense that the Lib-Dems would shed more votes to Labour, and that Labour would lose more votes than the Tories to UKIP seems to have been born out.

On the question of the Lib-Dem attrition, this would obviously differ in the Lib-Dem-held seats from the seats in which the Lib-Dems came second last time, and from the marginal-ish seats (between Labour and Tory) in which the Lib-Dems scored quite well in 2010.

Ed Balls – the British equivalent of David Parker – lost his Yorkshire seat on account of quite a lot of the Lib-Dem votes switching to the Conservatives, and too many former Labour voters switching to UKIP. His particular election – in Morley and Outwood – is significant; like the SNP vote, as its result can be taken as an anti-austerity vote. (If you look at the Guardian's [live election website](#), you can see this constituency just south of Leeds; now blue in a sea of red.)

The problem with the pre-election polling was that it was lacking in nuance; it was too nationwide in its approach, did not give enough information about the extent of the still undecided vote, and underpolled those people hard to reach. The exit polls on the other hand captured the local and regional differentiation, and only polled people who had in fact voted.

Looking at the Guardian's graphic we can see that there were five separate regional elections: Northern Ireland, Scotland, northern England with Wales, London, and southern England. And within those regions the differences were large depending on the rankings of the parties' candidates in 2010. In any future FPP elections (if the British people will stand for any more!), polling will need to be done on a

seat by seat basis, with most resources going into marginal seats and seats with significant third-party support in 2015.

So huge brickbats to the polling industry in the UK, and to the media organisations who strip out the nuance and caveats before reporting them. The pre-election polls messed up likewise in 1970 and 1992. So brickbats too to the media who resolutely refused to look under the surface at these individual regional (Scotland excepted) and constituency dynamics.

On this regional theme, I was also astounded by the lack of pre-election coverage of what a Conservative-DUP governing arrangement would look like, given that the likelihood of the Lib-Dems coalescing again with the Conservatives seemed quite remote. Belfast may be far from London, but its votes count just as much as those of English cities. While it looks like the Tories will not need DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) votes for confidence and supply, it was a near-run thing. And the DUP nevertheless will have some leverage, much as the Maori Party has here in New Zealand.

In 2020, I'm guessing that the Conservatives will be dumped on account of the economic crisis that will likely have been unfolding in 2018 and 2019. But people will want a Labour Party that's offering something that really is better. Further we should note that the constituencies are polarising. There seem to be many huge Tory winning margins, and many huge Labour margins, this time. The winner in 2020 will be the party that gives UKIP voters some reasons to switch back to a mainstream party; this will be more important than the direct Labour-Tory swing in the relatively small number of close marginal seats.

The SNP certainly offered policies, north of the border, which did not give UKIP much of a look in. Next election, Labour should run on a similar platform to SNP. And they should endorse SNP candidates rather than trying to defeat the SNP.

In 2015 the Conservatives have won with less than 37 percent of the vote. Adding in Northern Irish conservatives gives 38 percent to the 'reputable' right (contrast with the populist UKIP right). Yet the left (including the Lib-Dems) has only 49 percent; not enough to claim it was robbed. Nevertheless, we would be looking at a quite different result (with a huge SNP overhang) if these were party votes in an MMP election. First-past-the-post was the winner on the day.
