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UK update

Can UKIP win seats under FPTP?

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You can use this update to further your understanding of this topic.

In the wake of the Corby by-election in November 2012, where UKIP came third capturing 14% of the vote, its leader Nigel Farage pronounced: 'There's a big change in politics, UKIP is now the third party'. There is no doubt that the second half of 2012 was good for UKIP — it followed up the Corby result with second place in the Rotherham by-election with 21% of the popular vote. Opinion polls regularly showed UKIP running neck and neck with the Liberal Democrats, and on some occasions overtaking them. So, were the words of Nigel Farage simply spin or is there a new force in British politics that can make an impact in the 2015 general election?

UKIP's profile was raised in the last Euro-elections in 2009 when their 2.5 million votes translated into 13 seats in the European Parliament with MEPs spread across nine regions in the UK. It has declared its aim is to come top of the poll in the Euro-elections in 2014, in the hope that this will increase pressure on Conservative MPs to commit to a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. However, of course, Euro-elections are contested using a regional closed-list system that favours small parties, other elections where first-past-the-post (FPTP) operates pose greater challenges to UKIP.

How can small parties win under FPTP?

The long-held view was that it was near impossible for small parties to win seats at general elections while FPTP was being used. However, the success of the Green Party in winning Brighton Pavilion in 2010 challenges this assumption. Nevertheless, for a small party to win a constituency requires a number of conditions to be in place.

- First, the party needs a base in the constituency — this can be demonstrated by concerted local campaigns that lead to success in local government elections.
- Second, the chances of success increase in constituencies where the vote is split four ways, as this in all likelihood decreases the percentage of the vote needed to win.
- Finally, the small party has to overcome the credibility issue — potential supporters have to feel that they will not be wasting their vote.

Does UKIP have what it takes to win under FPTP?

These factors work against UKIP, which obtained 3.1% of the popular vote in 2010. In terms of success in local government elections, UKIP's record is not impressive (Table 1). It would appear that UKIP suffers from the perennial problem of small parties operating under first-past-the-post — their vote is thinly spread. In 2010, UKIP's highest vote was in Buckingham where Farage polled 17% in coming third. However, this was no normal seat — the incumbent MP being the Speaker John

Bercow. As a result of a long established convention, neither Labour nor the Liberal Democrats contested the Speaker's seat and there is little doubt that this situation inflated the UKIP vote.

Table 1: Who is the third party in UK politics?

	Members of Parliament	Local councillors	Members of European Parliament
Liberal Democrats	57	3,000 (approximately)	12
Green Party	1	147	2
UKIP	0	26	12

UKIP's only local government success was in Huntingdonshire, where they took control of Ramsey Town Council capturing nine of the 17 seats. However, based on past general election results there is little to be optimistic about, as the party only achieved 6% in the Huntingdon constituency in the last general election.

Evidence points to the fact that UKIP are benefitting from protest voting mid-term in the coalition government's term. They are helped by mid-range tabloid newspapers, which have a strong, persistent eurosceptic tone. Opinion poll data suggests that UKIP is winning support from more Conservative rather than Labour voters by a ratio of 2:1. Their support is greatest amongst traditional Conservatives who are over 60 years of age, living in the South and Midlands. In recent speeches, Nigel Farage has made it clear that he is targeting traditional Conservative voters who are unhappy with the current Conservative leadership over the European Union and same-sex marriage.

Conclusion

Therefore, it seems likely that at the next general election, rather than winning seats, UKIP will play a largely destructive role — its intervention may help Labour capture seats where small majorities are bolstered by UKIP shaving off a section of the disillusioned eurosceptic Conservative vote.

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