

What about the 'Other' parties?

Mar 12 2010

Posted by [Patrick Dunleavy](#) and [Chris Gilson](#)

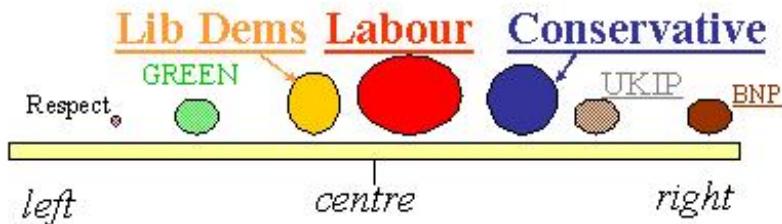
 [BOOKMARK](#)    ...

In our most recent polling measures, the 'Other' category has recently been polling at 14 per cent across a range of polls, and often higher. The combined support for UKIP, the Greens, the BNP and the Nationalists in Scotland and Wales has rarely fallen below 12 per cent in any recent polls.

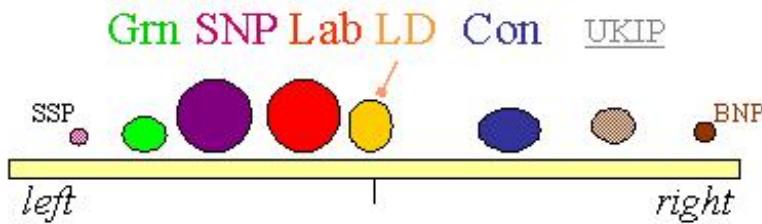
This is a historically high level – this time five years ago, the same category was polling at around 8-9 per cent. And two months prior to the 2001 election the 'Other' parties were polling just 5 per cent. In other words, support for these 4th, 5th and smaller parties has more than tripled in less than a decade.

Why might there be such a great difference this year? How has the UK political landscape been changing over the past 5-10 years for the smaller parties? The following slide from Patrick Dunleavy's presentation at the [British Election Conference](#) last weekend, we can see that there is far more to the UK's 'election landscape' than Labour and the Conservatives.

The English party system



The Scottish party system



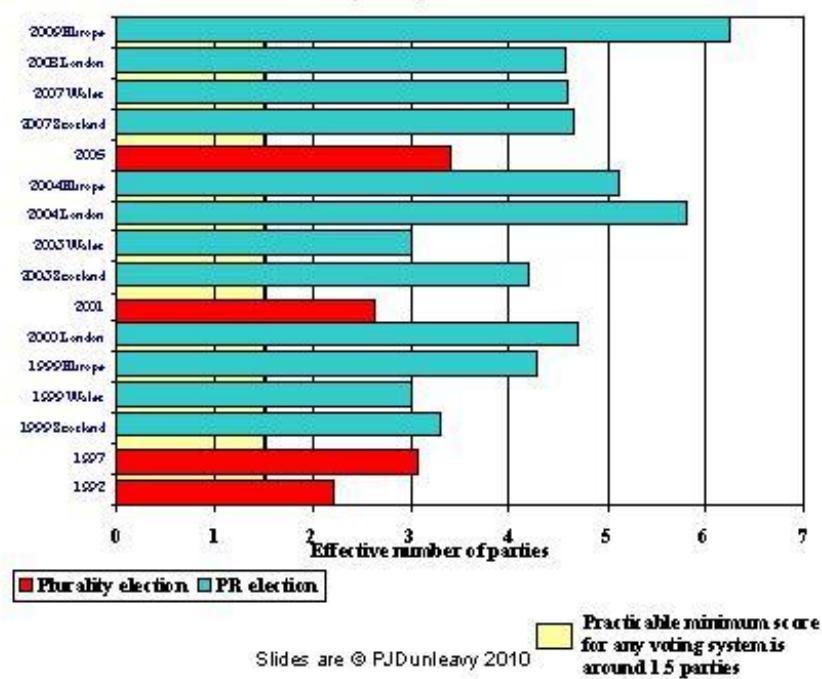
Slides are © PJ Dunleavy 2010

The Tories used to be able to rely on 'no enemies on the right', but now UKIP and the BNP are an increasingly potent menace who could cost David Cameron vital percentages of support in a close-fought race. With Tory grandee Norman Tebbit urging Conservative voters to back Nigel Farage of UKIP against Speaker John Bercow in his constituency, this is a populist story that could run better than ever before – feeding on voters' unease over EU immigrants, and wider concerns over Tory MP's duckhouses on expenses and Lord Ashcroft's tax affairs.

Meanwhile Labour and the Liberal Democrats face a Green challenge that could damage them in the same way, losing them vital marginal voters in close fought seats. In Scotland the SNP is clearly on Labour's left, although it has lost ground in recent polls and Labour's problems there seem to be easing.

The strong showing of all these smaller parties is remarkable because all but the Nationalists are certain to do badly in terms of winning seats the First Past the Post voting system. Historically voters have been reluctant to 'waste their votes' in general elections on parties that will not win seats, and therefore will have zero representation in the House of Commons. This is made very clear with our measure of the 'effective number of parties':

'Effective number of party' scores since 1992



The red bars shown above are for UK General Elections, where the effective number of parties has been between 2.5 and 3.25 in recent years. Yet the other green bars show that in other important UK elections – for the European Parliament, Scottish parliament and London and Welsh Assemblies – the number of parties is far greater.

The difference here is that all the green bar elections use proportional representation systems – so that more candidates are elected from a greater number of parties, as British voters clearly recognize now. Our next Table below shows that the parties beyond the 'Big Three' have often done very well under PR, and especially in recent years have often depressed the combined Labour/Conservative share of the vote below 50 per cent (which has happened six times in the last 7 years).

The most recent nationwide poll, the 2009 European election, was particularly striking – with UKIP racking up more voters than either the Liberal Democrats or Labour. In the 2005 General Election UKIP fielded 475 candidates, the BNP 117, and the Green Party 182. This year they will undoubtedly try to contest more seats to take advantage of their strong showing in the 2009 European elections.

UK Election Results 2003-2009

Election	Type of Election	Total 'Other Parties' per cent	Total Labour and Conservatives per cent
2009 Europe	PR	43	43
2008 London Mayoral	SV	12	79
2008 London Assembly	AMS	28	61
2007 Wales Regional	AMS	37	51
2007 Scotland Regional	AMS	46	43
2005 General	FPP	10	68
2004 Europe	PR	39	46

2004 London Mayoral	SV	21	64
2004 London Assembly	AMS	31	52
2003 Wales Regional	AMS	32	56
2003 Scotland Regional	AMS	43	45

Note: In case you are wondering why the Other vote and Tory + Labour vote shares here don't add up to 100%, remember that the UK's 3rd party, the Liberal Democrats, are not shown above: their big level of support makes up the difference.

Much to their frustration, the leaders of UKIP, the Greens and BNP will not be participating in television debates, nor even receiving a great deal of media coverage. But they have one asset. They are on the ballot paper – meaning that millions of voters who have supported them as recently as 2009 will suddenly be reminded on polling day itself that they have a choice. And they are starting this general election from a higher base than ever before, and with voter dissatisfaction with the MPs from the Big 3 at an all-time high as well.

Finally, many people in Westminster and the national press still essentially think of the UK as essentially a two party state. In fact, as Professor Patrick Dunleavy has argued strongly since 2001, the UK is more like a five party system in terms of how people vote. The table below shows that while 77 per cent of US election contests have only 2 or 3 candidates, in the UK only one contest in 25 is still restricted to 3 candidates – 95% of UK contests have 4 or more candidates. In fact the average UK constituency in 2005 had five candidates – the same number as India in 2004. But India has a parliament with more than 45 clear parties in it, and a governing coalition of 18 parties – so they are well down the road to a fragmented multi-party system.

**The percentage of constituency outcomes
with different numbers of parties in the USA, India and UK**

<i>Number of parties with 1% or more of total votes:</i>	United States, Senate elections 2002, 2004, 2006	Indian general election 2004	UK general election 2005
2	37	4	0
3	40	14	4
4	17	23	32
5	4	27	41
6	1	18	18
7	1	9	5
8+	0	5	1
<i>Total</i>	100%	100%	100%
<i>N of cases</i>	100	546	628

 Rows consist with Duverger's Law
Slides are © PJDunleavy 2010

Posted by Patrick Dunleavy and Chris Gilson