

Why Tomorrow's Electoral System Favours Farage

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Whilst the D'Hondt system of allocating seats in the European Parliament on a regional basis is in an important sense 'more democratic' than the first-past-the-post system at Westminster, it remains biased against smaller parties. The regional allocation is the primary cause of this as there is a high effective threshold for representation in smaller districts.

In the North East of England with 3 MEPs, for example, the effective threshold for representation is over 15%. In the East Midlands (5 MEPs), it is around 12%, whilst here in the West Midlands (7 MEPs) it is about 10%^[1]. Why does this matter? Regions of England that are more pro-Brexit (West Midlands, East Midlands, North East) tend to be smaller and have fewer MEPs whilst regions that are less pro-Brexit (London and the South East^[2] in particular) tend to be larger.

This is important because, whilst the Brexit Party looks set to win a majority of the Brexit vote, Remainders are split between several different parties (Liberal Democrats, Greens and Change UK). Moreover, most Labour voters lean Remain. Thus, it is conceivable that, although over 40% of people in the North East supported Remain in the 2016 referendum, the region will return zero pro-Remain MEPs because no individual pro-Remain party will get above 15% of the vote^[3].

In contrast, in the Remain bastion of London, each pro-Brexit party only needs to receive around 9% of the vote in order to win a seat (a hurdle that both the Brexit Party and the Conservatives look set to clear). It is conceivable that pro-Brexit parties could win 3 seats (out of 8) in London.

This means that whilst pro-Remain parties look set to win a significant share of total votes cast, they will (collectively) win far fewer seats than the Brexit Party. Moreover, for Remainders seeking to organise to maximise the number of Remain-supporting MEPs it is unclear what the optimum strategy is given uncertainty over how other Remainders

will vote⁴¹. This is particularly so given that substantial numbers of Remain voters will support the Labour Party (either through habit or because of its policies on other issues).

Such ruminations have led some to suggest avoiding tactical voting in its entirety⁴². Although that recommendation is probably a bit strong it does point to the complexities facing the pro-Remain political landscape. It also suggests a potential disconnect between how strongly each group feels about Brexit.

Where many Brexiters feel sufficiently strongly to vote for a single-issue party with no manifesto or policies, Remainer sentiment appears more nuanced. Some feel unable to support the Liberal Democrats (the largest pro-Remain party in most English regions) due to their cohabitation with the Conservative Party during the coalition years.

Others feel that, whilst Brexit is important, they wish to support a party that shares their environmental views. For many Labour voters, the party's ambiguity on Brexit is a potential turnoff. However, they feel that a focus on social justice is even more important. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised by this. Whereas the campaign to leave the EU focussed heavily on a handful of extremely emotive themes, the campaign to remain part of it focussed on the practical benefits of the Union.

The optics of this election are also important. Even in the event that pro-Remain parties win a significant number of seats, because those seats are widely spread amongst parties the Brexit Party will appear to have a great many more seats than any individual pro-Remain party. Moreover, whilst Brexit is a particularly important theme for all parties at this election, none of the three largest pro-Remain parties can truly be labelled 'single issue'. The result is that it becomes easier to suggest that other factors were at play.

We saw elements of this in the local elections: it is almost impossible to disentangle the impact of Brexit from the myriad of other factors that led to a surge in support for the Liberal Democrats (and, to a lesser extent, the Green Party). Was it local issues, was it Brexit or was it simply reverting to type? We do not know.

Finally, note that the simple dichotomy presented during a referendum translates poorly to actual policymaking. The public essentially voted to suggest that they were unhappy with the present relationship with the EU. However, no realistic discussion took place regarding what might replace it. Even today, there remains a disconnect between what is feasible and what is desired from Brexit. The reality is that almost everybody – whether a Remain voter or a Leave voter – sits somewhere on a spectrum.

Almost nobody who voted Remain believes that the EU is perfect. Likewise, I have struggled to find a single Leave voter who seriously wanted to emulate North Korea in eschewing any kind of relations with other countries. Nor are there many who wish the UK to leave the EU in order to follow the US regulatory framework (and all the political choices that come with that).

Voting against something was the easy bit. Perhaps that is why Parliament has found mapping out an alternative relationship so very difficult.

[1] https://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/people/michael_gallagher/EISystems/Docts/effthresh.php

[2] Although the South East of England voted to leave the EU in 2016, it did so by a smaller margin than any other region of England and by less than England as a whole. Given demographic changes since then it is plausible that it might vote 'Remain' if a second referendum were to be held today. The same cannot be said of the Midlands or North East.

[3] Imagine the not-improbable situation where the Lib Dems receive 10% of the vote, the Green Party 7% and Change UK 8%. The 3 pro-Remain parties receive a total of 25% of all votes in the region but don't win a seat. The Brexit Party also receives 25% of all votes but *do* win a seat.

[4] <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/05/10/when-a-tactical-vote-may-not-work-the-complex-choice-facing-remainers-in-the-ep-elections/>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/13/why-i-wont-be-advising-people-to-vote-tactically-in-the-european-elections>