The media and the European Elections

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What does it mean to 'win' an election? The question sounds trite but actually is of enormous importance. It's no surprise that Donald Trump talks about "winning" a great deal. It implies a binary outcome. The same was true in the 2016 referendum on whether to leave the EU or not. Yet the reality is that the stark dichotomy of 'Leave' and 'Remain' masks a plethora of views.

It is uncontroversial to state that much of the US media dislikes the Trump presidency and many are deeply critical of him. Nevertheless, the media has a curious symbiotic relationship with him. Trump's penchant for delivering outrageous statements and 'presidency by Twitter' garners (often critical) media attention in much the same way that wasps are attracted to a honeypot.

The same is true in the United Kingdom. Boris Johnson is a past master at 'media by outrage'. For all his diplomatic gaffes at the Foreign Office, he remains a top contender to be the next Prime Minister. This is a man for whom appearing stuck on a zip wire managed to turn into a media coup.

In reality, we should have been more alert to this phenomenon. Johnson would not be the first outrageous European leader whose winning electoral ways appear baffling to outsiders. For years, Silvio Berlusconi was able to dramatically dominate Italian politics, shrugging off gaffes including commenting that a German European politician should play a concentration camp guard in a film and praising Mussolini.

It is in this context that we should understand the rise of "Brexit personality" Nigel Farage and assess the rise of his newly formed "Brexit Party", which is widely predicted to win the largest number of British MEPs in the upcoming European Parliamentary elections. Standing on a platform of a 'hard Brexit', the Brexit Party has no manifesto or official policies, arguing that these will be unveiled *after* the results. Perhaps this is unsurprising given how

difficult it has been to hold fractious parties together in the past (see the steady denuding of UKIP over its previous parliamentary term).

Nevertheless, if the Brexit Party does indeed win the largest number of MEPs, should we accept its leader's implication that a majority of the UK populace support withdrawing from the EU without any Withdrawal Agreement? No.

It means nothing of the sort and it is a dangerous fallacy to pretend that it does (see below for an explanation of why). Farage is a character. He is a skilled political operator who has worked hard (and extremely effectively) to cultivate a particular political image. So is Trump. So is Johnson. So was Berlusconi.

Like the above, Farage is extremely skilled at getting attention, and because of this he is good for ratings, business etc. Look at The Guardian for evidence: why does that bastion of left-wing thought devote so many articles to Farage? They are responding to obvious incentives – readers demand it. The 'march for Brexit' was a damp squib (literally, given the weather). Nevertheless, it got attention even from its opponents.

Sensational stories are more interesting than boring ones, and sensational people are far more fun to cover. Rather a demagogue than a manager! As a result, the rise of the Brexit Party is often described as "meteoric" or "stunning". It is neither.

At the last European election, UKIP (headed by Farage) won 27.5% of the vote in Great Britain. Current opinion polls suggest that the Brexit Party is on course to win slightly more than this. Such a result is hardly resounding given that the Party has attracted significant numbers of Eurosceptic Conservative voters.

This is not to criticise the media. Nobody would watch Eastenders or Coronation Street if the characters' lives were as humdrum as our normal lives. We as viewers, readers and listeners give them strong incentives to follow and report on sensational stories and that rewards sensational characters.

The headline "Brexit Party Scores Stunning Victory in Elections" alongside a picture of a grinning Nigel Farage with a pint in his hand is

far more likely to garner attention (positive and negative) than a headline entitled "Hard-Brexit Parties 30%, Remainer Parties win 30%, Soft-Brexit Parties win 40%" followed by a detailed (and tedious description of the precise results and nature of each party's platform). Yet the latter reflects the most recent opinion polling with the former being simply a manifestation of the fact that there is one "hard Brexit Party" and multiple Remainer parties.

So, no. The Brexit Party won't "win" the upcoming elections in any meaningful sense, even if (as expected) it will have the largest number of MEPs. Nor should this be taken as any kind of mandate (either as a second referendum by proxy or as a mandate for a hard Brexit).

To see why, consider the following. In the 2015 General Election, the Scottish National Party won all but 3 of seats in Scotland. Just one year later, the same party came very close to winning an outright majority in the Scottish Parliament on the back of well over 40% of total votes cast. A stunning victory.

Did this imply majority support for independence in Scotland? No it did not. Just one year earlier, the country had voted against leaving the UK by a margin of 55.3% to 44.7% on an exceptionally high turnout. Similarly, it is entirely possible for the Brexit Party to win a large number of seats even if the UK were to vote Remain in a second referendum.