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POINTS OF VIEW

Get ready for a year of change in many of the world's democracies

HAPPY New Year! I'm never quite sure how long you can keep saying that in January, but as this is my first column of 2024 I think I'm pretty safe. I hope you were able to celebrate the festive season and are now looking forward to the coming year, whatever it holds in store.

One thing is certain: 2024 will be a year of change, and in no other sector is that more true than in the world of politics.

And I don't just mean in the UK, where we are (almost) guaranteed to have a General Election, but also in a very large number of other democracies around the world.

When I started this column, I said I wanted to use some of it to help demystify politics, so with big political changes on the 2024 horizon, I thought it important to start the new year with a short explainer about how some of it works.

The biggest and most obvious election coming up in another country is in the United States of America, where Republican (loosely equivalent to our Conservative party) former president, Donald Trump is hoping to make a return to the presidency and prevent the Democratic (similar in philosophy to more left-wing and liberal parties in the UK such as Labour and the Liberal Democrats) incumbent from winning a second term in office.

There are a lot of shenanigans going on in the US at the moment as Trump faces various criminal charges that could lead to him ending up in prison.

Strangely, that wouldn't necessarily prevent him from also becoming president.

The electoral system in the United States is very different from ours here in the UK, but we get so much TV and news coverage of the US that I know it can be easy to confuse the two systems.

I mean, it's confusing enough that the colours of the two main political parties are reversed between our two countries - in the US, Republicans and Democrats are red and blue respectively, while in the UK, the Conservatives and Labour are blue and red respectively.

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Former US President Donald Trump

But the biggest difference between the two systems is surely that Americans get to vote for the person that they want to become President, while in the UK we only get to vote for the person that we want to be our local Member of Parliament, our MP, the person who represents us in the House of Commons in Westminster.

In the UK, there are 650 Members of Parliament, meaning 650 'seats' or 'constituencies', each represented by an MP. At a UK General Election, we individually get one vote to cast to choose who we would like to be our MP in our constituency. That's it. That's the only choice we have to make.

We don't get to choose the Prime Minister, or anyone else in the Government for that matter, just who represents us in the constituency where we are registered to vote (usually where we live). The candidate with the most votes (not necessarily

more than half of the votes, just the most votes of all the candidates on the ballot paper) is declared the winner.

Once all the votes have been counted in all of the 650 constituencies around the country and the individual winners have been declared, each political party counts up how many MPs they now have representing them.

If a party has an MP in more than half of the total number of constituencies - that's 326, which is half of 650 plus 1 - they can form a government by themselves. That's because

when it comes to votes in Parliament to pass new laws, assuming all of their MPs vote the same way, the other political parties can't beat them, even if they all join together. That's because they would only have a combined total of 324 MPs (and therefore 324 votes in Parliament).

This is known as a majority government.

We call this system 'First Past The Post' (FPTP) and it has been around for a very long time. It is called that because it's essentially a race to a finish line - a bit like a horse race. The first person, or in this case political party, to pass the post at the end is declared the winner. With 650 MPs/constituencies/seats, the finish line is set at 326 seats.

But, of course, it isn't always that simple. What if no single party wins 326 seats? Well, that's where things can get very interesting. Sometimes, two parties, whose combined total is 326 or more, may enter into some form of an agreement to form a government together. Sometimes that is a formal coalition, but it can often be much less formal, where agreements are reached almost on a vote-by-vote basis.

We aren't very accustomed to coalitions in the UK as the vast majority of General Elections have produced majority governments. But they are much more common around the world.

Most other democracies have long since ditched the First Past The Post system in favour of various types of proportional representation, which aim to more accurately reflect the votes cast across the country in the number of seats each party gets.

Whatever you think about FPTP, it certainly doesn't often reflect the true way the country voted. In the 2019 General Election, for example, the Conservatives won 365 seats, which is 56.2 per cent of the total. However, only 43.6 per cent of the votes cast were for them. Compare this to the Liberal Democrats, who won 11.5 per cent of the votes cast, but only got 11 seats, or 1.7 per cent of the total.

For the past four years, it's true to say that we've had a government that less than half the country voted for. 2024 will be our opportunity to change that, but it won't happen by accident. Let's make it count.

As always, if you have any questions about politics, please do get in touch. Keep well and warm.

Marie