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The “Brexit Election”: A View From Europe

By Frederick Kliem

SYNOPSIS

With British elections looming, the question is who is likely to win, and what does it mean for Brexit. Can there, finally, be orderly separation?

COMMENTARY

IN 2016 the United Kingdom (UK) electorate voted narrowly to leave the European Union (EU) in a referendum. Three years on, the UK has still not found a way out of the self-inflicted political disarray, indicative of a deep national division and the thorough misjudgement as to what it would take to disentangle the nation from the EU.

The Brexit process has been an all-consuming affair for Britain and the sooner it ends the better. Three years on, the process now sees the second general election; two prime ministers taking their leave; the two main parties divided into two camps, *Leave* and *Remain*; and so is the country itself.

Is It All About Brexit?

Boris Johnson's controversial persona brought new dynamics to the wedged situation, but the new prime minister, thus far, has also been unable to deliver Brexit. The House of Commons now gave the PM what he ultimately wanted: a general election on 12 December 2019 (GE19), which is a second Brexit referendum in all but name.

Granted, there are plenty of other topics up for debate. Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn tries very hard to make this election about anything but Brexit. The [Labour manifesto's](#) Brexit section is comparatively short and located towards the end of that document. Instead, Labour prioritises social issues and a socialist agenda: more funding for the National Health Service and minimum wage increases.

Labour proposes substantial investments in education, health, housing and environmental protection, which Tories claim to be unrealistic, and nationalising those private companies that provide public goods.

The recent London stabbing will also push internal security up on the agenda. With law and order being Conservatism's bread-and-the-butter issue, it should politically benefit the Tories.

As expected, Johnson was quick to politicise the tragedy. He blamed the perpetrator's early release on "leftie" Labour legislation and promised a tougher attitude. Corbyn instead warned against reflexive action and generalisations, which might sit well with left-wing voters, but will look weak to others and further alienate a broader centrist voter base.

Quasi-Brexit Referendum

There can be little doubt that GE19 is a quasi-Brexit referendum. The [public sees](#) Brexit as by far the most important issue facing the country. Accordingly, Brexit dominates the political discourse and GE19 was called precisely for that reason, for PM Johnson to get a clear majority in order to "get Brexit done".

Of course, Brexit played a major role in the 2017 election, too. However, unlike then, this time there are very clear choices for those who want to outright leave, remain, or call a second referendum.

Labour is the only party that remains ambiguous about their own Brexit position. They propose to negotiate a new, softer Brexit deal with the EU, which would then be put to a legally-binding referendum asking to leave on that deal or remain.

By casting responsibility back to the people, Labour tries the balancing act of appealing to both *Leavers* and *Remainers*. This reflects internal party divisions and a leader who used to be a left-wing Eurosceptic and has recently refused to be explicit about his personal opinion. Such ambiguity does usually not go down well with voters.

While Corbyn has an interest in making GE19 about everything but Brexit, the Conservatives promise unequivocally to leave the EU as soon as possible. Brexit may have also divided the Tories, but under Johnson, it has become mostly a *Leave* party. Their [manifesto](#) is clear: titled 'Get Brexit Done', it promises to leave the EU in January.

Similarly explicit are the Liberal Democrats, who vow to cancel Brexit altogether with an outright majority or, more likely, support a second referendum from a minority position. The Brexit Party and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) want Britain to leave the EU immediately without a deal.

In sum, voters have as clear a choice as they could possibly have on Brexit.

A Predictable Election?

Although the Tories [poll](#) an outright majority, the gap has narrowed and the intricacies of the British "first-past-the-post" electoral system mean that popular votes do not

directly translate into seats. In 2017, the Conservatives actually increased their popular vote, but lost their parliamentary majority.

Voters [prefer Johnson to Corbyn](#), both as future PM and in terms of personal attributes. Johnson is widely seen as decisive and strong, while Corbyn is supposedly incompetent. There is also a clear upward trend in Conservative support since Johnson became PM.

And yet, polling has gained a bad reputation lately, and the electoral system makes a difference.

First-past-the-post advantages larger parties in case of clear cleavages, such as the traditional left vs. right. Brexit, however, has diluted clear lines, with Labour especially trying to appeal to *Leavers* and *Remainers* alike. Smaller parties that take an explicit stance on Brexit could win individual seats and prevent an outright majority for either large party.

A further problem is tactical voting. The Brexit Party is not contesting certain seats in order to prevent splits in the *Leave* vote. And *Remainers* who may support LibDem out of conviction may vote Labour instead in order to deny a Conservative win in particular seats.

Nonetheless, currently, the most straightforward and likely result is a Tory majority.

The View From Europe

From a European perspective, it is very unfortunate that the British people have voted to leave the EU. No matter how you spin it, Brexit is a textbook lose-lose situation. Although doomsayers' expectations of a "crashing" British economy are stark exaggerations, Brexit will weaken both the UK and the EU, and no one will be better off afterwards.

As much as it may pain some Europeans, an outright Conservative majority is in the best EU interest. Those who hope for a Johnson defeat should be careful what they wish for.

Everything but an outright Tory majority would prolong the Brexit moratorium and possibly trigger a second referendum with an uncertain outcome. This would continue the unfortunate malaise for years to come and do nothing to increase confidence in either democracy itself or the UK and EU markets. So leave with Johnson's deal, but leave.

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