



## UK general election: May's mandate

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The United Kingdom's general election will take place on June 8. Prime Minister Theresa May's motivation for calling this election is well timed, given disarray within the Labour Party and the weakness of UKIP. The Liberal Democrats can expect only a modest comeback, and the Scottish Nationalist Party is set to recede. May looks certain to get the stronger mandate that she seeks. However, it is debatable whether a wider majority in Parliament will give her a true advantage in upcoming Brexit negotiations.

The election's outcome will affect more than just Brexit. May and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn have radically different visions for Britain. The future of Scotland, the realignment of the radical left, and the permanence of political shifts following the Brexit referendum will all be discussed.

### Snap election strategies

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Apart from the political reasons for calling the election, there are two other reasons why one might call a 'snap election' before the normal end of Parliament's five-year term. The first reason would be because the governing coalition does not provide a reliable majority. The Conservative Party is not experiencing this weakness. The second reason would be that Parliament is in conflict with the people. In this case, a majority of Parliament stood against Brexit while the people demanded otherwise. Theresa May, therefore, seeks to realign Parliament with the people and secure a mandate for Brexit.

Theresa May has made two points about the referendum. Firstly, she states, "Brexit means Brexit." This implies that the United Kingdom cannot remain a member of the European Union's customs market. This arises from a rejection of freedom of movement along with a recognition that remaining in the single market would force the United Kingdom to adhere to EU law while having no say in its formation. Secondly, she finds that the Brexit referendum not only decided the country's relationship with Europe, but also the way in which the country should be governed. In her view, people want a more responsive government that focuses more readily on those left behind economically. The recently published Conservative manifesto outlines this different sort of government.

Survey evidence shows that 'Leave' voters intend to move from UKIP, the SNP, and Labour to the Conservative Party. However, 'Remain' voters do not intend to abandon the Conservative Party. One-third of SNP voters voted 'Leave', and there is some chance that they will instead vote for the Conservative Party in the upcoming election.

In Northern Ireland, the focus is on whether Sinn Fein, the nationalist party, can maintain its improvement. Sinn Fein nearly overtook the Unionists in recent elections. If this trend continues, there will be greater strains on the United Kingdom's union with Northern Ireland given that voters there predominantly voted 'Remain'. The referendum also brings the issue of the Irish border back into politics.

### Economic

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The snap election is opportune not just for political reasons, but also for the state of the economy. Theresa May's government would like to have the freedom and flexibility to address economic issues after the election. This could entail tax hikes to allow spending on social policies.

This comes at a time when the economy has been feeling the effects of Brexit. However, the outlook for the UK economy is not necessarily negative. Current inflation of roughly three percent, high because of sterling devaluation, has likely peaked given stabilisation in the currency's value. Inflation has slowed growth in real wages, while unemployment has fallen to a low point not

seen since 1975. However, young people continue to indicate trouble finding jobs. This is partially a regional issue, as some parts of the country have not seen major growth in employment opportunities. Many recently created positions are also either part time or for low-skill work. A survey shows that UK employers find they have easy access to skilled labour and are yet to find tightness in the labour market.

Inflation numbers are expected to come down slightly while wages pick up. However, these effects may obtain by-elections in June. In response to these uncertainties, May will want to emphasise flexibility and pushing through funding for social policies in hard-hit areas. However, her efforts to make a Conservative version of socialism may not ring clearly. Brexit and the issue of potential tax rises will be the main focuses for voters.

## **Brexit dimensions**

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The rest of the European Union dismisses the idea that a stronger majority in the UK Parliament will put Theresa May in a stronger position for Brexit. Instead, they see this as a more practical legal process. The likely new Conservative MPs voted for Brexit and have been outspokenly pro-Brexit. This means that there may be more members of Parliament who want a 'hard Brexit'. The party's written manifesto, promising that no deal is better than a bad deal, will also constrain upcoming negotiations. A popular mandate could be seen as approval for walking away from negotiations with the European Union. However, it is still more likely than not that a deal will be reached.

EU ministers will meet next week to establish their basis for Brexit negotiations. The context of an election campaign in the United Kingdom could complicate this start. EU ministers will focus on a divorce bill to settle accounts, the rights of EU citizens in the UK, and the sensitive border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. UK Brexit Minister David Davis does not agree with this basis for negotiations, seeking to focus on citizens' rights first. A Conservative Party with a stronger mandate for Brexit will not necessarily improve the United Kingdom's negotiating position in these regards.

On the EU side, the new French President Emmanuel Macron strongly supports the European Union. Angela Merkel has also stated explicitly that if the United Kingdom were to restrict freedom of movement, the European Union would respond with similar restrictions.

## **Q & A Session**

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### **Parties' gains and losses**

The Conservatives are looking to make gains in the Midlands and the North West, which form typical marginal seats. The Conservative Party may even make gains in marginal seats in London. In the non-industrialized areas of Scotland such as Aberdeenshire and Perthshire, the Conservative Party may also make gains. The party may also hold regions in Wales and England's south-west, where many favoured Brexit. The Liberal Democrats may win prosperous suburbs around London such as Twickenham and university towns such as Oxford and Cambridge which voted for Remain. This will present a respectable handful of seats, though there will be no large breakthrough. The SNP may be past its peak and will lose seats to Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. This result would blunt the call for a second referendum on Scottish independence.

Labour will take heavy losses. A success for Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party would amount to roughly 200 seats. Polls have historically overestimated support for Labour, and support is more likely to go down than up in the elections. Many previously safe Labour seats have been challenged by UKIP and may subsequently end up under Conservative control.

### **UKIP health**

In this election, the UKIP vote is swinging toward the Conservative Party. However, it is too early to say that the party has been defeated. UKIP could recover by criticising the Conservatives on immigration policies resulting from negotiations with the European Union.

### **Labour members becomes Conservative**

This election may present unique circumstances in the context of Brexit, with voters hoping to give Theresa May a mandate in upcoming negotiations. There is a chance that these voter shifts could become permanent. Labour Party leadership issues have also fuelled this shift. By the advent of Brexit negotiations, however, the opposition may have recovered.

### **Labour's future**

Even if Jeremy Corbyn were to resign following this election, he would likely be replaced by a politician of similar ideological underpinnings. Labour will have to tackle long-term leadership problems and may struggle to find effective leaders. Labour struggles given a split between educated, internationalist middle-class constituents and working class constituents who seek different things and disagree on migration.

Theresa May will have a mandate for five years, leaving considerable scope for revision within both the Labour and Conservative parties. Theresa May will emphasise flexibility in her policies over this time.

### **Theresa May's leadership**

Theresa May attracts many in the working class who would not otherwise vote for the Conservative Party. However, May will find conflict in constructing a gentler private enterprise system and socially responsible capitalism because it contradicts the logic of Brexit. Brexit will instead demand free trade and reductions in subsidies and protectionism. It has no real scope for industrial strategy. This deep-seated conflict may come to fruition after elections.

Immigration as a policy will be difficult to tackle. The Conservative Party has indicated a target to cut overall migration to 100,000 per year. In the 12 months leading to September 2016 net migration to the United Kingdom numbered 273,000, with roughly half of them from the European Union. Immigration from outside of the European Union indicates that the UK economy needs these immigrants. The Office of Budget Responsibility finds that cutting net migration to 175,000 people will cost the British national budget 5.9 billion pounds annually by 2021 due to reduced taxes and economic growth. Pushing these reforms will be difficult once it becomes clear how immigration restrictions could damage the UK economy. Regardless of these difficulties, May and the Conservative Party will benefit politically from attempts to cut migration.

### **Domestic reform and Brexit**

The government's ability to enact domestic reform will be restricted by Brexit and its effect on the economy. Brexit will make the United Kingdom more dependent on world markets. The low skill level of the United Kingdom's workforce will also place a drag on reform.

Brexit will also dominate the capacity of civil servants, who will have to navigate a massive reshaping of the UK economy. Also, May will have to source funding for reform policies and might have to increase taxes to pay for her proposed policies.