

European  
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

# The Conservatives led by Boris Johnson running favourite of the legislative elections on 12th December in the UK

On 12th December around 47 million Britons will elect the 650 members of the House of Commons, the lower house of Parliament. Outgoing Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Conservative Party) hopes that these general elections, which will be taking place two years earlier than planned (the next election of this type was planned for spring 2022), will end the soap-opera of Brexit, which has caused more than three years of uncertainty in the UK since the referendum on 23rd June 2016.

It is feared that the election will also only focus on Brexit and on the position of each of the parties on this specific question and that the campaign will push general issues on the agenda during general elections like healthcare, employment, education, the environment etc... to the back burner.

Brexit has changed traditional partisan affiliations and has made the British electorate more volatile. *"A great number of people identify very strongly about being Remainers or Leavers, rather than being conservative or labour. With a level of attachment to one Brexit camp or than we have seen regarding a political party since the 1960's,"* analyses John Curtice, professor of political science at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland. The Britons must as a result vote more for a party's Brexit project than for its programme. We should note that the pro-Brexiteers rally more voters beyond the Conservatives, whilst Remain is divided between Labour and the LibDems.

According to a poll by YouGov for the Sunday Times on 14th and 15th November, the Conservative

Party is due to win on 12th December next with 42% of the vote. Labour is due to take 28% of the vote and the LibDems 13%. The Brexit Party, created by europhobe Nigel Farage, is due to win 5% of the vote just like the Scottish National Party (SNP). Finally, the Green Party of England and Wales is due to win 3% of the vote. *"The progress made by the Tories can be explained by the decline of Nigel Farage's Brexit Party following the entry into office of Boris Johnson, because the Prime Minister has a clear position regarding Brexit,"* stressed Sara Hobolt, a professor of political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

The House of Commons was dissolved on 6th November, the day the election campaign was launched. The upcoming legislative election is the first to be organised in winter since 1923 and the third in the UK's entire history ever to take place in this season.

## THE NEVER-ENDING BREXIT SOAP-OPERA

Former Prime Minister (2016-2019) Theresa May was greatly criticised for her conduct of the Brexit negotiations. In November 2018, she succeeded in concluding an agreement over the project to leave the EU with the European Council. The latter was rejected three times on 15th January, on 12th and 29th March 2019 by the House of Commons. The date of Brexit initially set for 29th March 2019, was delayed once again to 31st October 2019.

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On 24th May last Theresa May announced that she would be leaving as head of the Conservative Party. She managed current affairs until 24th July when Boris Johnson was appointed by the Tories to take over as Prime Minister after having won 66.1% of the vote. The new head of government promised not to delay Brexit beyond 31st October indicating that *"he would rather die in a ditch than accept a further delay of Brexit."*

On 28th August he asked for and won the suspension of parliament until 14th October on the part of Queen Elizabeth II. But the Supreme Court deemed on 25th September this decision illegal, nulle and void for the following reasons: the suspension took place in exceptional circumstances, just before Brexit, and it was for an exceptional duration (five weeks instead of just a few days), and as a result the judges deemed that with this suspension Boris Johnson was preventing parliament from doing its work.

On 3rd September the Prime Minister lost his absolute majority in the House of Commons. On 17th October a new agreement was found between the UK and the EU. Two days later the House of Commons refused to approve this text since it would have had to assess it quickly and shoddily. On 22nd October after three failed attempts Boris Johnson finally convinced MPs of the need to organise a snap election, the only way, in his opinion, to bring the country out of stalemate.

On 28th European leaders approved a further delay for Brexit, postponing it until 31st January 2020. The next day parliament approved the organisation of an early general election.

Boris Johnson is standing as the only one of being able to finalise Brexit on the new date. He is asking the British to grant him a majority to win approval for the agreement signed with the EU on 17th October. *"If you want Brexit to be done, vote for me,"* he repeats. He also announced that if he wins, he will present the agreement to exit

the EU to the House of Commons on the first day of the new session. *"The agreement is ready, just put it in the microwave,"* he declared, hoping to show that he wants to be able to take care of the country's other problems quickly.

The outgoing Prime Minister hopes to win the absolute majority of which he has been deprived. *"At the end of her mandate, Theresa May turned the voters who want to stay in the EU as well as those who want to exit against her. Very cleverly Boris Johnson has worked to retain the latter on his side even if that meant losing the former"* analyses Chris Curtis of the pollster YouGov. *"The Conservatives lacked leadership before Boris Johnson took over. Despite an accumulation of scandals and defeats in the House of Commons, people can see that he has been trying to end the stalemate,"* maintains Paul Goodman, the manager of the information site, Conservative Home.

*"Boris Johnson is taking a big risk: a parliament without a majority and he is out,"* indicates John Curtice, a political expert. The head of government is in a strong position, but the Conservatives should be wary and remember the lessons of the last elections on 8th June 2017 when Labour, forecast to lose in the polls, finally achieved a better result than forecast and deprived the Conservatives of their absolute majority. Moreover, the first TV debate between Boris Johnson on 19th November revealed tighter results than forecast in the polls between the two leaders.

The Tories might for example lose a dozen seats in Scotland, a region that supports Remain, to the benefit of the Scottish National Party. In the south of England voters might also turn towards the pro-European LibDems. However there are two reasons for them to have hope: they might win some seats that are presently held by Labour in constituencies that support Brexit in the north of England.

After nearly ten years of spending cuts and budgetary deficit, the conservative programme includes plans for spending increases in infrastructures (new positions in the police force and the opening of new hospitals). The party hopes to increase the minimum hourly wage by 27% (£10.50 i.e. 12,25 €) over the next five years.

### WHO IS THE OPPOSITION?

Labour is promising to organise a new referendum six months after the election, offering the choice between an agreement to exit the EU, notably including the signature of a new customs union with Brussels, and guarantees regarding the respect of social rights and environmental laws (that the party hopes to be able to negotiate in three months) and the upkeep of the UK in the EU. *"We are the only party to offer a choice to the people. The British will be called to choose between the divorce agreement with the Union which will have been negotiated and staying in the Union. The people of this country will make the final decision,"* declared Jeremy Corbyn. The Labour leader also indicated that in this referendum he will campaign for a position chosen by his party. *"I shall fall in line with the decision of the party whatever it is,"* maintained Jeremy Corbyn during Labour's annual congress, which took place in Brighton in September.

It is unclear that this position will reassure Labour sympathisers, who have always criticised their party for its lack of clear position on Brexit. The party is divided over the issue, which for the last three years has prevented the formulation of alternative options and to be proactive.

A notorious eurosceptic and much more to the left than the previous Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn has a popularity rating that is the lowest ever recorded by a Labour leader. According to the pollster Ipsos MORI institute,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of Labour voters (76%) say they are unhappy with the

Labour leader. Moreover, only one in two of them trust him to make the right decisions over Brexit.

The Labour Party is trying to include economic and social questions in the electoral campaign agenda. Jeremy Corbyn is standing as a defender of public services and fairer distribution. Labour recently unveiled a public investment plan of £400 billion (468 million €) over ten years. The latter plans that specific focus will be lent to schools, hospitals and housing - three areas which will benefit from a special fund of £150 billion (175.7 milliards €) in addition to the £250 billion (292.8 billion €) that have already been planned for this purpose.

The Labour programme also promises the nationalisation of the railway network and the water and electricity services, a better redistribution of the shares of major businesses to employees and an increase in taxes for the wealthiest. Finally, Labour is fighting for a four-day week without any losses to wages, an increase in the minimum wage, the closure of private schools and carbon neutrality by 2030.

The LibDems, who are fervent Europeans, want nothing more than to cancel Brexit. They might attract the votes of the moderate Conservatives as well as those of the Labour voters who are disappointed by Jeremy Corbyn's hesitation. The LibDems signed an electoral pact with Plaid Cymru, a Welsh regionalist party, and the ecologists of the Green Party of England and Wales in 60 constituencies. When asked, Labour and the Scottish National Party (SNP) refused to join the pact.

Finally, the Brexit Party, founded in January 2019 by MEP Nigel Farage, hopes for a clear, fast break from Brussels. He could be a threat to the Conservative Party and attract some of its hardest supporters, who advocate the severest kind of break from the EU. He finally announced that he would not put forward candidates in the

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317 constituencies won by the Tories in 2017 and that he would “concentrate on the seats held by Labour”. He will present a total of 275 candidates. Nigel Farage’s priority is to prevent the organisation of another referendum.

### THE BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The British Parliament comprises two houses: the *House of Commons* and the *House of Lords*.

The members of the House of Commons are elected for 5 years. For a long time, the length of the legislature was not set and the Prime Minister could decide at any moment to ask his fellow countrymen to go to ballot. Since 2011 and the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, elections (when they are not early) take place on the first Thursday of May in the fourth year following the previous election. The House of Commons is automatically dissolved 25 days before this date. For the general elections, the UK is divided into 650 constituencies: 529 in England, 59 in Scotland, 40 in Wales and 18 in Northern Ireland.

The vote is undertaken according to a one-round single majority list. Baptised First past the post in reference to jargon used in horse-racing, this system privileges the candidate which comes out ahead, whether this score is 60% or 30% of the vote. This system is deadly for the “small” parties which can only hope to win a seat if their votes are geographically concentrated, as are those won by the regionalist parties (Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish) which do manage to win some seats.

The candidate lists must be supported by at least 10 voters. A deposit of £500 (585€) per constituency has to be paid, which is reimbursed if the list wins at least 5% of all of the votes cast in the constituency.

8 political parties won seats in the House of Commons after the legislative elections on 8th June 2017:

- the Conservative Party (Conservative), a party created in 19th century and led since July 2019 by Boris Johnson has 317 MPs ;
- the Labour Party (Labour), founded in 1900, led by Jeremy Corbyn, with 62 seats;
- the Scottish National Party (SNP), an independence party led by Nicolas Sturgeon, with 35 seats;
- the LibDems (LibDem), created in 1988, led by Jo Swinson, with 12 seats;
- the Democratic Ulster Unionist Party (DUP), a protestant unionist party which defends the interests of the protestant community of Northern Ireland, which supports the upkeep of the region in the UK, led by Arlene Foster, with 10 seats;
- Sinn Fein (SF), a Irish republican and nationalist party led by Mary Lou McDonald, with 7 seats;
- Plaid Cymru (PC), a Welsh regionalist party led by Adam Pryce, with four seats;
- the Green Party of England and Wales (G), an ecologist party led by Sian Berry and Jonathan Bartley, with one seat.

The upper house of the British parliament, the House of Lords has 813 members at present (the figure varies), including 257 Conservatives and 207 Labour. It comprises life peers or those knighted for services to the nation – former MPs of the House of Commons, former high ranking civil servants, judges, industrialists – hereditary Lords (these were abolished by the reform of 1999 but 92 of them (chosen by their colleagues, and groups from the House of Lords) were maintained in office on a temporary basis) and 26 bishops from the Anglican Church. Every year each political party has the right to put forward the name of personalities they want to see appointed as life peers. The Lords cannot prevent the vote on a bill put forward by the government or the House of Commons, but they can delay it, which they do but rarely.

## Reminder of the legislative election results in the UK on 8th June 2017

Turnout : 68,07%

Political parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes cast	Number of seats
<b>Conservative Party</b>	13 632 914	42.45	317
<b>Labour Party</b>	12 874 985	39.99	262
<b>Scottish National Party (SNP)</b>	977 569	3.04	35
<b>Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dem)</b>	2 371 772	7.37	12
<b>Ulster Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)</b>	292 316	0.91	10
<b>Sinn Fein (SF)</b>	238 915	0.74	7
<b>Plaid Cymru (PC)</b>	164 466	0.51	4
<b>Green Party of England and Wales (G)</b>	525 371	1.63	1
<b>UK Independence Party (UKIP)</b>	593 852	1.84	0
<b>Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)</b>	95 419	0.30	0
<b>Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)</b>	83 280	0.26	0
<b>Independents</b>	145 365	0.45	1
<b>Others</b>	166 385	0.52	0

Source : <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7979#fullreport>

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