Brexit and the tragedy of the Commons: how wedge issues generate detrimental outcomes

*The difficulty Theresa May and Boris Johnson had in winning the backing of MPs for their Brexit strategies illustrates the impact that 'wedge issues' can have on party politics, write **Tim Heinkelmann-Wild** and **Lisa Kriegmair (Ludwig-Maximilians-University)**. As issues like Brexit cut across traditional party lines, they are highly likely to create intra-party divisions and make compromises difficult to secure.*

It is a political science truism that individual actors' rational behaviours often produce collectively sub-optimal results. The politics of Brexit within the Conservative party is a case in point. Brexit and the repeated failures to deliver it brought the Tories to a breaking point: it contributed to disastrous election results, led to the fall of Theresa May's government, and triggered the loss of a parliamentary majority for the succeeding government under Boris Johnson, leading to an early General Election. How did this come about?

Happier times… Theresa May on 29 March 2017, leaving Downing St to give a statement on the triggering of Article 50. Photo: Number 10</a, via a CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0 licence

The seemingly irrational developments surrounding Brexit were the result of rational strategies employed by factions within the Conservative party in reaction to the divisive nature of Brexit. The key feature of wedge issues such as Brexit is that they cut across party lines, and thus hold the potential to spark intra-party divisions. Non-wedge issues give rise to conflicts along party lines because they map onto the dominant left-right cleavage that gave rise to western party systems. By contrast, issues such as migration, the environment or European integration do not map easily onto the left-right cleavage. When a political issue is a wedge issues for a party, the latter tries to avoid the topic. However, avoiding wedge issues is not always an option – especially for governing parties. When other parties highlight a subject, or when the pressure to solve a problem is high, governing parties have to engage with a wedge issue.

Enacting a policy that addresses a wedge issue is complicated by its divisive nature. When dealing with non-wedge issues, the government is in a strong position. It can count on the overwhelming support of its party and win over recalcitrant members of parliament (MPs) through concessions. With regard to wedge issues, the government is in a much weaker position and a conciliatory approach is not feasible. The number of MPs opposing the government's policy is too sizable and any attempt to secure their support is likely to provoke resistance by other MPs that support the policy.

The ensuing actor constellation therefore resembles a game of 'chicken', pitting the government against party rebels opposed to the government's preferred policy. In this intraparty game (see Figure 1), it is rational for both sides to commit to their preferred policy to force the other side to back down.

Figure 1: A game of 'chicken' within the governing party

	Party rebels make concessions	Party rebels are intransigent
Government makes concessions	Compromise policy 3/3	Rebels determine policy 2/4
Government is intransigent	Government determines policy 4/2	Government failure 1/1

To garner parliamentary support, the government will opt for an uncompromising strategy that we dub the 'politics of intransigence'. It will refuse to compromise and try to enhance the credibility of its commitment to the preferred policy. For instance, it might present the policy as a take-it-or-leave-it offer that parliament may only accept or refuse. The government's intransigence puts rebel MPs who oppose the government's preferred policy in an uncomfortable position. They can either accept a policy they dislike or defeat their own government. To avoid this uncomfortable choice, they are likely to employ an intransigent strategy as well.

The more rebel MPs credibly commit to their preferred policy, the more the government finds itself between a rock and a hard place. It can stick to the proposed policy and risk government failure, or it can make concessions and alienate constituencies that favour their original policy. To avoid this uncomfortable choice, the government is likely to double down on its politics of intransigence to force party rebels to change their stance. While both factions would be better off compromising, it is individually rational for them to counter intransigence with more intransigence – even at the risk of escalating intraparty conflict and government failure.

The politics of Brexit inside the Conservative party under Theresa May's premiership were a clear example of wedge issue politics. The statements of Conservative MPs in which they attributed blame during the debates on Brexit in the House of Commons illustrated that the act of defining a Brexit policy drove a wedge through the party. While blame games in parliament are normally played between the governing party and the opposition, Conservative MPs also assigned blame within their own party to a significant extent. Figure 2 shows that before, during, and after the negotiation of the EU Withdrawal Agreement, more than a quarter of negative statements by Conservative MPs targeted members of their own party.

Figure 2: Conservative MPs' blame attributions per 100 debate pages

■ Blame to government party ■ Blame to opposition parties
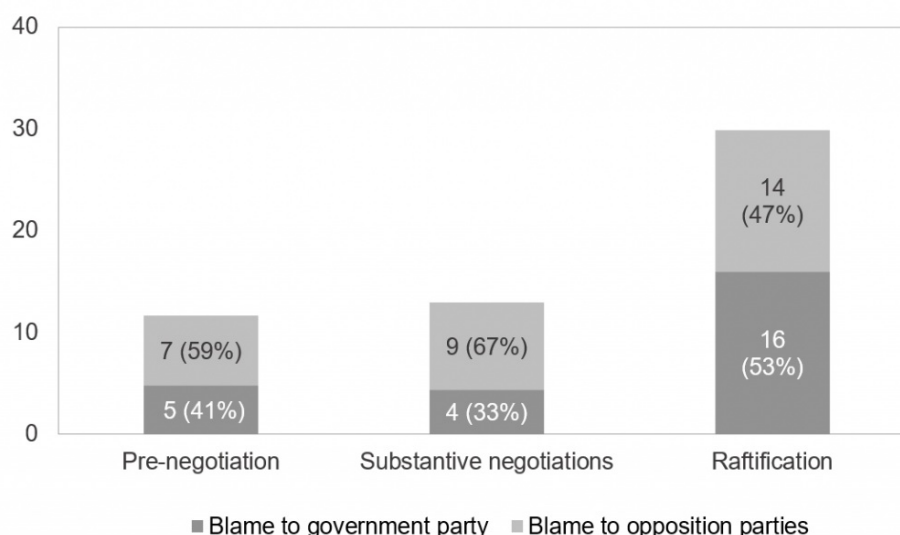
Note: **For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper (co-authored with Berthold Rittberger and Bernhard Zangl) at the [Journal of European Public Policy](#)**

The divisive nature of Brexit gave rise to a game of 'chicken' between Theresa May's government and Tory rebels, with both sides employing intransigent strategies. First, the government's objective was to confront party rebels (and the Commons as a whole) with a take-it–or-leave-it offer, so that they would only be able to accept or reject the negotiated agreement. It therefore sought to keep parliamentary involvement at a minimum. Second, the government framed its agreement as the only policy alternative worth pursuing and ran down the clock to put pressure on parliament to approve the deal. The government also sought to keep on the table the two alternative outcomes – a 'no-deal' Brexit and no Brexit at all – that (at the time) found the least support among MPs. Finally, the government tied its hands to its own Brexit policy by publicly stating its unwavering resolve to stick to the agreement. It emphasised that there was no viable alternative to its deal.

In reaction to the government's politics of intransigence, Tory rebels employed a similar strategy. Pledging rejection of the negotiated agreement, they sought to limit their freedom of action by declaring red lines. During the parliamentary adoption proceedings of the withdrawal agreement, Conservative rebels even began to claim that a 'no-deal' Brexit was preferable to the government's agreement, thus committing themselves to an uncompromising position.

With no side willing to budge, both factions within the Conservative party responded to intransigence with more intransigence. This escalatory dynamic became visible in the share of blame attributions exchanged within the party. It increased from roughly one-third before and during the negotiations, to over fifty percent during ratification. The average number of blame attributions increased by over 200 percent.

In sum, due to the divisive nature of Brexit, the choice of a politics of intransigence was rational for the government and Tory rebels. Yet, it led to seemingly irrational and collectively sub-optimal results: a governing party unable to agree on a policy and a prime minister who saw no other solution to this impasse than to step down. Unfortunately, the politics of intransigence are likely to become a recurring challenge for western democracies. The rise of the new cleavage between communitarianism and cosmopolitanism implies a proliferation of divisive issues. To the extent that governments cannot avoid wedge issues, intra-party conflicts and thus the risk of policy and even government failure are increasing.

For more information, see the authors' accompanying paper (co-authored with Berthold Rittberger and Bernhard Zangl) at the [Journal of European Public Policy.](#)

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE. It first appeared at [LSE EUROPP](#) and has been slightly edited to bring it up to date since first publication.