

# Brexit looks Safe for the Time Being

**By Dr Graham Gudgin**

*In the second of our election prediction briefings we observe that the latest poll of polls show a continuing Conservative lead over Labour of 11 points. Using our elections model we predict that this could lead to an 87-seat Tory majority. However Labour support continues to rise, probably due to the tactical voting intentions of LibDem supporters. The election outcome will depend on far this trend goes.*

Election anxiety is not a recognised medical condition, but it seems to affect many people who take Brexit seriously. Quite a few of my Brexiteer friends are on tenterhooks about the December 12<sup>th</sup> outcome. They tend to take polls with a pinch of salt and are all too aware that Theresa May threw away a 20-point lead only two years ago.

After all that Brexiteers have had to endure since the referendum one can understand their concerns. Almost every day both parliament and the media did all they could to undermine a legal and well-conducted referendum. They compounded their felony by pretending that they were only concerned about no deal or wanted only the best for the country especially for poorer areas or that a half Brexit is what people really wanted.

The European election in May 2019 changed everything. Voters expressed in no uncertain terms what they thought of a Theresa May Government which had failed to honour the referendum and leave the EU. A derisory 8.8% of the vote threatened the very existence of Europe's most successful parliamentary party. The Tories' legendary survival instinct then switched in. They ditched their leader, elected a new leader with kerb appeal and did a deal with the EU that all Remainers had pronounced impossible.

It is thus understandable that on the verge of electing a Leaver parliament and within two months of finally exiting the EU that many should be watching events from behind the sofa. It is difficult to argue that they are wrong to worry but the reality of this five-week election campaign is 'so far so good'.

It is true that polls are tending to differ about the size of the Conservative lead so best to look at poll averages in the so-called poll of polls. These can be calculated in different ways but tend to produce similar results. Politico's latest poll of polls, with all polls included and weighted by their degree of uncertainty, suggests that the Tories are on 43% and Labour at 32% – an 11-point lead. The LibDems trail at 14%.

The Times also publishes a Poll of Polls, in this case a fortnightly average of five major polling organisations. Its latest figures have the Tories on 40%, Labour on 28% and the LibDems at 16%. A fortnight is a long time in an election campaign and if we focus on the last few day's polls from these organisations the figures would be closer to 42% for the Conservatives, 29% for Labour and 14% for the LibDems. These figures are close to those of Politico but put Labour a little lower.

The pattern over the last six months has been one of large movements within but not between the Leaver and Remain camps. The Leave camp, consisting of the Tory, Brexit and UKIP parties, had 45% of the vote in June when the Brexit Party dominated. The Tory recovery which started as soon as Theresa May announced her resignation, was wholly at the expense of the Brexit Party. By early November at the start of the election campaign, the Leave block had 48% with the Tories on 38%. By this week the Leave block has fallen back a little to 46% by now with almost all of that vote held by the Tories at 43% and 11 points ahead of Labour.

In the Remain block Labour has taken votes from the LibDems in what looks like tactical voting to maximise the remain vote. In June the Remain block of Labour, LibDems, Greens, Plaid Cymru and the SNP had 53% of the vote. This level changed little until the start of the election campaign and Labour's share of this Remain vote was also stable. Since then the Labour vote has risen sharply as it did during 2017 campaign, in the 2019 case from 25% to this week's high of 32%. The gains have been wholly at the expense of the other pro-Remain parties and the Remain block now stands at 51%.

What all of this means is the Remain block has a slight lead, but their vote is split to a greater degree than among the Leave block. In a first-past-the-post election a split opposition matters a lot. The

Conservatives have a commanding 11-point lead over Labour and will win the election comfortably if this is sustained for another ten days. The question now is whether LibDem and Green voters will swallow their distaste for Jeremy Corbyn and switch to Labour in greater numbers than they have done so far. It is this potential collapse of LibDem votes which presents the main danger to the Tories.

We might also add the DUP's nine or ten potential seats (1% of the UK vote) into the Leave block. The DUP oppose Boris Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement and are keeping open the possibility of supporting Labour in a hung parliament. In practice they are much more likely to return to supporting a Conservative government, whether in a hung parliament or with a Tory majority. Boris Johnson can offer the DUP a role in negotiating a free trade agreement which can remove most of difficulties connected with a border in the Irish Sea.

The anxiety of Remainers will thus continue and in truth much could change in the next few days. However, the Conservative lead has been solidly maintained through the campaign so far. The current lead should result in 368 Tory seats and an overall majority of 65. Even if a further quarter of LibDem and Green voters swung to Labour the Tory majority would still be 40.

	<b>Vote % (Polls)</b>	<b>Seats 2017</b>	<b>Projected Seats 2019</b>
<b>Tory</b>	43	317	357
<b>Labour</b>	33	262	211
<b>Lib Dem</b>	12	12	15
<b>Brexit (UKIP in 2017)</b>	3	0	0
<b>Green</b>	2	1	1
<b>SNP (Scotland)</b>	42	35	43
<b>Plaid Cymru (Wales)</b>	12	4	4
<b>DUP (in NI)</b>	36	10	10
<b>SDLP (in NI)</b>	12	1	1
<b>Tory Majority</b>		<b>3</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Effective Majority</b>		<b>12</b>	<b>92</b>

This is the estimate of the BfB constituency model assuming current poll of poll vote shares estimated by Politico and a uniform swing across England and Wales. In Scotland a pickup in Conservative support now makes it possible for the Scottish Conservatives to retain 11 of their 13 of their seats giving an important boost to Boris Johnson's chances.

This optimistic view for Brexit supporters was supported this week by a major YouGov poll of 100,000 voters. YouGov used the age, social class and other characteristics of constituency make-up to predict 359 wins for the Conservatives and only 211 for Labour and 14 for the LibDems. These predictions are almost identical to our own which were obtained in a different way.

The danger is of course that the transfer of LibDem votes to Labour will continue to deepen. The squeeze on minor parties has gone further on the pro-Brexit side leaving less still to gain. If the LibDems are squeezed back closer to the 7.4% they gained in the 2017 general election, then the Conservative majority could be pared back by further 12-20 seats. At this point tactical voting among Brexit party supporters would become important. We calculate that there are close to 40 Labour-held constituencies in which the Brexit party votes are greater than the predicted Labour majority. Even if many Brexit party supporters switched their votes at this late stage not all of their votes would go to the Tories but at least some extra Labour seats could be won by the Conservatives. If there was a collapse in the LibDem vote in favour of Labour these constituencies could make the difference between an outright majority and a hung parliament.

A collapse in the LibDem vote looks unlikely for now but if the election focus swings more strongly onto Brexit in the last few days of the campaign even more Remainers could be induced to vote tactically. This presents a dilemma for Boris Johnson. He has wanted this to be a Brexit election but needs to avoid the possibility of a greater level of tactical voting by Remainers.

*This is a revised version of the original article correcting an error in the table. The conclusion that a Conservative and hence pro-Brexit victory looks reasonably assured remains unchanged.*

*Graham Gudgin is the co-author with Professor Peter Taylor of 'Seats, Votes and the Spatial Organisation of Elections' republished in 2012 by the European Consortium for Political Research as an ECPR Classic.*