

Why there should not be another snap general (Brexit) election



*Having a general election in 2018 is an exceptionally bad way of solving the Brexit problem, argues **Yossi Nehushtan**. Not only is it anti-democratic to have an election about a single topic but the result will not reflect the majority will because the first past the post system never does.*

The Prime Minister recently denied the option of a second referendum, arguing that it would be a 'gross betrayal of our democracy and trust'. However, and as an editorial note in the [Independent](#) argued, it is Brexit of any kind without a second referendum that would be a betrayal of British Democracy – and the will of the people.

At the same time rumours have been circulating about an autumn election following the cool reception May's 'Chequers' plan received from EU leaders in Salzburg. This would be an election that will have no purpose unless it focuses on a signal question, the nature of which is not quite clear, except for that it will relate, in one way or another, to Brexit. It might be the case that an election will be held a few months later and only if Parliament rejects both a potential deal *and* a no-deal exit. Either way, a single-subject election about Brexit will be unhelpful at best and catastrophic at worst. And why so?

If we ignore opportunistic, cynical reasons for holding an election about Brexit, we remain with two main valid reasons for having it: first, it will allow 'the people' to express their updated and informed views about the exact way to leave the EU – or whether to leave the EU; and second, it will shift the balance back from 'direct democracy' to 'representative democracy'.

The anti-democratic nature of a single-topic election

The main purpose of having democratic elections is (or should be) to allow 'the people' to express their political preferences by casting their vote to the candidate or party which is more likely to realize them. Political preferences are normally complex. Also, not all voters care about each issue to an equal extent. An [opinion poll](#) by YouGov showed, for example, that in three points in time during 2015, an average of no more than 25% thought that 'Europe' was one of the three 'most important issues facing the country at this time'. It is true that we can expect a different answer today; it is also true that leaving the EU will affect other areas such as immigration and the economy. But this does not affect the 'anti-democratic' argument: general elections should not reduce the complex preferences of voters regarding numerous issues to one narrow question about one specific issue. Many voters may prefer that the UK would leave the EU – but for many other valid reasons they may also prefer to vote for a political party that happens to support 'Remain'.

It will also be unwise to assume that all those who would vote for a party that supports 'Brexit', in fact support 'Brexit'. If it is made clear to voters that any vote for a party that supports 'Brexit' is in fact a vote for 'Brexit' and nothing more, they may be forced to vote for parties which do not reflect any of their other preferences – or to vote for a party which does not represent their preference about the EU, rendering the election almost meaningless. Forcing voters to ignore their political views and preferences, and perceiving these voters as one-dimensional political persons who only care about 'Leave' or 'Remain' diminishes their political personality and makes any such election anti-democratic.

What exactly will the election be about?

A referendum is a dreadful way of making conclusive political decisions but it does put forward one agreed question. If we have a general election soon, we can reasonably assume that it will be about Brexit. But what does it mean exactly? Will the election be about whether to leave or remain? About the choice between a 'no-deal exit' and remain? About the necessary conditions that must be met before we decide to leave the EU? Or perhaps about trusting Theresa May and her cabinet to make the right decision for us? Having a general election about Brexit without knowing what the election is really about is a recipe for confusion and superficial public debate. It will add very little to the barely legitimate referendum's result.

Since we can't really have an election about one specific and agreed issue, any decision that will be made by the new government will be exposed to arguments regarding its democratic legitimacy. And then what? A second referendum? Yet another PM resignation and a new general election? We know that the referendum's result is not legally binding and we also know that we should accord the result limited political-moral weight. There are no good options out there to save us from the consequences of the colossal mistake of having the Brexit referendum in the first place – and the results of that referendum following a shameless, dishonest and cynical 'leave' campaign. But amongst the not so good options – a general election about Brexit is probably the worst.

A one-issue general election in a majoritarian, non-democratic voting system

Even if 'the people' were happy to have an election about a single issue; even if the issue was specific and clear; and even if all voters knew what they are voting for – the result will not reflect the majority will, because UK general elections almost never do. Non-proportional voting systems, such as majoritarian voting systems, completely fail to reflect the majority will. In the UK, for example, in almost all cases in the 20th century in which one political party won more than 50% of seats in parliament, this party did not receive more than 50% of the popular vote. In non-proportional voting systems there is normally no correlation between the percentage of votes a political party gets and the number of seats to which it is entitled. The results of the 2015 and 2017 general elections were no exception to that.

And here we should be careful not to equate free election and public legitimacy with democracy. Voters may be happy with the current system (as the 2011 AV referendum perhaps showed) but for a voting system to be democratic it is not sufficient for it to enjoy public legitimacy – its results should also reflect as accurately as possible the genuine preferences of voters. This is not the case in the UK. This is barely tolerable with regard to any general election, as the majoritarian voting system does have its advantages. It is, however, utterly intolerable when the purpose of the election is to reflect the majority will with regard to one specific question or policy. To have a general election about one specific question, within the framework of a majoritarian voting system, will be as rational as using flipping a coin a rolling a dice as a decision-making mechanism.

Within the context of the Brexit debate, we have three different elements: the percentage of people who oppose any kind of Brexit; the percentage of people who intend to vote for 'Brexit-sceptic' political parties or MPs; and the general election results in terms of allocation of seats in Parliament. Unfortunately, there is almost no correlation between these three elements.

Two different and insightful projections, by [Appelgate and Phillips](#) and [Hanretty](#), showed that because of the our electoral system, if the EU referendum was not a referendum but rather a 'one topic general election', pro-Brexit political parties would have won more than 65% of seats in parliament – while only 51% of the public supported Brexit at that time.

Recently, a '[poll of polls](#)' indicated that the remain camp now enjoys a majority of 52% of the public. Also recently, a [YouGov](#) poll indicated that 42% of the public intend to vote for the Conservatives whereas 36% intend to vote for the Labour. No one can predict the results of a general election in terms of allocation of seats in Parliament, even if the election are held tomorrow. Yet again, we can expect no correlation between these three political elements.

When we realise this political mess, it is quite clear why the idea of having a Brexit-focused general election can only be counter-productive.

The above is an updated version of [this article](#). It gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. It first appeared on [LSE British Politics and Policy](#). Featured image credit: [Pixabay](#) (Public Domain).

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