

Parliament has a strong and clear mandate for Brexit, Remainers and EU politicians shouldn't question it

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*The recent general election gave the UK Parliament a strong and clear popular mandate for delivering Brexit. **Annette Bongardt** and **Francisco Torres** emphasise that with more than 85 per cent of the vote on a clear Brexit platform (Conservatives, Labour, UKIP) – promising to respect the Brexit referendum result – not only the new government but indeed almost the entire new Parliament have a clear Brexit mandate. Most MPs were elected on a Brexit or even hard-Brexit platform. They argue that Remainers and EU politicians shouldn't question it as it would undermine the democratic process and the cohesion and sustainability of the EU alike.*



On June the 8th most of the MPs were elected on a Brexit or an even hard-Brexit platform. In that sense, Theresa May achieved her aims to the extent that this election confirmed both the referendum and the Article 50 notification bill (voted in by a large majority in both houses). This is a significant change in so far as MPs who were elected in 2015, that is, before the June 2016 referendum, had not been candidates on such a platform, while this time they ran on their party's manifestos.

Of course, there can be no denial that Theresa May miscalculated her bet to substantially increase the number of Conservative MPs and thereby her grip on the Tory party. May and almost everybody else (even in the Labour party) underestimated Jeremy Corbyn's success in the election campaign.

Yet it is puzzling that many analyses of the election results prefer to completely focus on the Labour party's electoral success (although the party got 56 fewer seats than the Conservatives) and on May's failed gamble, deriving implications for Brexit that we think are ill-founded.



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Our four basic conclusions from the election outcome are as follows:

1) Theresa May and her hard-Brexit platform clearly won the elections

Under Theresa May, the Tories' vote share actually increased by 5.5 per cent, that is, from 36.9 per cent to 42.4 per cent. To put the result into perspective, it equals the achievement by Margaret Thatcher (albeit twice) in the 1980s. Whereas she may have failed to increase the number of Tory MPs, she clearly won the popular vote: in the election, 42.4 per cent of the UK electorate supported her hard Brexit stance including the idea of "better no deal than a bad deal".

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In fact, in terms of the voting share, Theresa May has not been matched either by any of the other European leaders in recent legislative elections. Just to mention the electoral results for the legislatures of a few other European leaders and/or parties in government: Angela Merkel's CDU and CSU combined were under 42% of the vote in 2013; Emmanuel Macron's 'En Marche' seems to be around 32% of the vote in June 2017; Italy's coalition of the Partito Democratico with other smaller parties obtained below 30% since 2013; Mariano Rajoy's Partido Popular got 33% in 2016; António Costa's Partido Socialista obtained 32.3% in 2015; Alexis Tsipras's Syriza got 35.5% in 2015.

2) Jeremy Corbyn was the second winner of the elections, on a clear Brexit platform

The elections meant that Corbyn's pro-Brexit stance in the Labour party won. Corbyn's position in the previous parliament with regard to triggering Article 50 was confirmed. As a result, the internal opposition (so called Blairites) will have difficulties trying to change his line as Corbyn obtained a voting outcome for Labour 10% above what the party had obtained under the leadership of Ed Miliband and Gordon Brown and even 5% more than Tony Blair in 2005.

Corbyn's pro-Brexit stance in the Labour party won

It seems a fair observation that May did Corbyn a big favour by not discussing Brexit (and the economy). This allowed him to avoid tensions in his party and embark on his preferred topics such as the NHS, the elderly, the cost of tuition, public transport, etc. It was a strategic mistake by the Prime Minister. Corbyn, who had constantly been under attack particularly by the media and by part of his own party, was also able to appeal to the young voters and mobilise them, a bit like Bernie Sanders in the US or Mélançon in France. Although perhaps more the result of a protest vote in favour of an economically old-fashioned but more humane type of politician, it was also a personal victory.

3) Anti-Brexit platforms led by Nicola Sturgeon and Tim Farrow were defeated in these elections

The share of the vote of the parties that were against Brexit went down. The Scottish National Party (SNP), opposing Brexit, went significantly down from 4.7 per cent to 3.1 per cent of the vote and lost 13 MPs to the Tories running on Theresa May's hard-Brexit platform. It is by all accounts remarkable how Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish First Minister, by far the biggest loser of this election, could say after her SNP losing both voting share and seats, that the election was a big defeat for Theresa May and for Brexit.

The Liberal Democrats, who had aimed at getting the vote of part of the referendum's 48 per cent remain vote, also went down to 7.36 per cent of the vote. Their pledge to hold a second EU referendum did not resonate with voters. It

is therefore surprising that their leader, Tim Farrow (who resigned in the meantime), and their former leader, Nick Clegg, who failed to regain a seat in Parliament, saw the party's share go down and rather talk about a big defeat for Theresa May's Brexit stance. But that is party politics: candidates tend to say that in one-way or the other they won the election.

4) The UK Parliament now has a clear and strong popular mandate for Brexit

With more than 85% of the vote on a clear Brexit platform, promising to respect the Brexit referendum result, the new government and the entire new Parliament have a clear Brexit mandate. The election seems to show clearly that a good part of the 'Remainers' are now supporting Brexit. About 44% of voters supported hard Brexit. Another 40% voted for a clear Brexit (Jeremy Corbyn's stance was clear on that: in the official party line, voting the Article 50 bill and during the campaign). Labour does not discuss what type of Brexit it wants, but so far has avoided any mention of staying in the single market even if that was possible – in fact, it voted against tentative amendments or has not defended even remaining in the Customs Union. Labour only pledges "tariff-free access to the EU market", which can be read as a free trade agreement.

These results come on top of:

1. the European Union Referendum Act 2015, which was passed by 544-53 votes on its second reading in the Commons and approved by the House of Lords;
2. the result of the referendum in favour of Brexit;
3. the triggering of Article 50 with the support of an overwhelming majority of MPs in parliament at the end of March 2017 (even an amendment to the Article 50 bill by the House of Lords, proposing that the government should commit to staying in the single market, was defeated by 299 votes to 136 – the Labour party did not support it on the grounds that it would mean acting "as if the referendum hadn't happened").

That notwithstanding, many anti-Brexit (not necessarily pro-European) observers circle in on May's failed gamble to interpret the election results as popular support for a softer Brexit (whatever that means) or even for remain, subverting the popular mandate. Also, some EU leaders and politicians and even members of the European Commission, without any mandate from colleagues in the other EU27 to do so (as such a position requires unanimity) hint at the fact that the UK can stop exiting and remain in the EU, thereby undermining the position of the EU chief negotiator. That seems to us, on the one hand, a subversion of the democratic process that led to the country's decision to exit the EU and on the other a (not very wise) invitation for any EU country to try to extract short-term dividends at the expense of the common good and the sustainability of the European project. Were there no lessons learnt from the rise of populism?

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog or the LSE.

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