

The UK's general election: Mandate for a softer Brexit or preparation for going over the cliff edge?

Fabian Zuleeg

Prime Minister Theresa May has called for a general election on 8 June, to strengthen her mandate. Under British electoral law she needs a two-thirds majority in Westminster, but the Labour Party already looks set to support this move. This general election will be seen as being under the auspices of Brexit, with the Prime Minister claiming that an early election is “necessary to secure the strong and stable leadership the country needs to see us through Brexit and beyond”. Indeed, she has called for the opposition parties to make their Brexit vision(s) the central issue of the elections: “Let us tomorrow vote for an election, let us put forward our plans for Brexit and our alternative programmes for government and then let the people decide.” But despite this strong linkage between domestic and European politics, it is far from clear what this will mean in terms of the Brexit process.

Domestic dominance

What seems almost a foregone conclusion (if the opinion polls are any indication) is that this will be a resounding victory for the Conservative Party. The Labour Party seems in no shape to fight, let alone win a general election, and the Liberal Democrats are still a long way from regaining the strength they had when they became junior partners in government in 2010. The threat from UKIP has been seen off by the Conservative Party strongly advocating the Leave position ever since the referendum. And the Scottish National Party will struggle to replicate its stunning electoral success in 2015, when they gained 56 out of the 59 Scottish seats.

In consequence, the independence threat from Scotland might well be seen as having been contained. UKIP's *raison d'être* is likely to be under question and a catastrophic showing of the Labour Party would reopen its leadership question, ensuring that for the foreseeable future the official opposition will be weakened, even if there is a slight recovery of the Liberal Democrats. In contrast, the Conservative Party will be united, having few Remain MPs left given the political preferences of the Conservatives' constituency associations, and led by a Prime Minister who has a strong mandate to deliver Brexit.

Towards a soft transition?

Some commentators have argued that this will enable the Prime Minister to turn the UK away from the cliff edge; to avoid a hard Brexit at the end of the Article 50 period, when the UK would suddenly be outside the single market and the EU customs union. In this scenario, the Prime Minister could buy some time by accepting a transition deal that would enable the UK to negotiate a long-term trade and investment deal, minimising the negative impact of an abrupt disjuncture. This would also help to avoid the pressure that comes from the very short Article 50 negotiation timeframe and the limitations on negotiating a trade deal during this period.

Such a transition is seen by many as being in the UK's best economic interest if Brexit cannot be avoided, and there have been conciliatory statements from the UK government in recent weeks. It remains, however, politically tricky: it does not deliver on the UK's red lines (regaining control and exiting the jurisdiction of the ECJ, and limiting migration), at least not for the foreseeable future. It would also compel the UK to compromise in the Article 50 negotiations, for example with regard to the exit payments and issues such as Gibraltar. But many have claimed that a general election mandate would enable Theresa May and other like-minded Conservatives to push through such a deal, ensuring a softer Brexit.

For country or party?

However, domestic dominance is a double-edged sword. Equally, it would enable the Prime Minister to push through a fast Brexit, without a deal, with little possibility for the opposition to intervene or even slow down the process. Such a Brexifast is seen by many as being highly unlikely, as it contradicts the country's national (economic) interest. So why would Theresa May even contemplate such a move in case she receives a strong mandate from a general election?

One possible answer lies in the nature of such a mandate. Is it to deliver Brexit in any way or might it be seen as a more narrow mandate to deliver Brexit along the red lines that have been set out? Certainly, the Brexiteers in the Conservative Party, who will be strengthened in the general election, will not be satisfied with a transition deal that effectively continues the UK's membership, even if it might only be for a temporary period, nor with concessions to 'Brussels'. Together with the Eurosceptic press, there will be strong pressure to prevent 'back-sliding'.

In addition, if there was a fear that a strong Leave-oriented Conservative Party could lose the centre-ground voters, a good general election showing will prove them baseless. With the prospect of a weak opposition, the Conservatives might gain voters both from a Labour Party in turmoil and from UKIP – but the latter only if the Conservatives are expected to deliver a hard Brexit. Carrying out Brexifast might also take the wind out of the sails of the Scottish Nationals, strengthening the Union and the Conservative Party.

Traditional targets

Rather than the Brexiteers within the Conservative Party, this general election might well aim at weakening the opposition parties, a much more natural target. In her announcement of the early general election, Theresa May made this very clear: "The country is coming together, but Westminster is not. ... Our opponents believe that because the government's majority is so small, our resolve will weaken and that they can force us to change course. They are wrong. They underestimate our determination to get the job done. [...] what they are doing jeopardises the work we must do to prepare for Brexit at home and it weakens the government's negotiating position in Europe."

Holding a general election now, with a large majority, would give the Prime Minister the ability to politically drive through Brexit, no matter what the economic consequences and regardless of whether there is a deal or not. If she is contemplating the possibility of a breakdown in the talks, it would not only give her a strong hand to play at home, but it would also shift blame to Brussels, which would be portrayed as rejecting a reasonable compromise proposed by a leader with a strong domestic mandate. In addition, she would then have a rather lengthy time period before she would have to face the polls again, giving her time to deal with negative consequences, with the possible bonus of having killed off the drive for a second Scottish independence referendum.

Which way to turn

Whether this early general election call is predominantly driven by party interests or by a wish to control the more extreme Brexiteers is hard to say. Characteristically, Theresa May is keeping her cards close to her chest. But depending on the negotiation trajectory, this general election might not set the path towards a soft landing, as many hope. Rather, it might ultimately turn out to be the justification for a Brexifast, which will be welcomed by many Brexiteers in her party. It might be telling that they have been uncharacteristically quiet during this whole discussion on a softer Brexit transition process: maybe their belief in a quick and hard Brexit, delivering on all their red lines, has remained intact regardless of recent developments.

Fabian Zuleeg is Chief Executive and Chief Economist at the European Policy Centre (EPC).