

United Kingdom

Back to the voting booth

- On Tuesday, Theresa May announced that early elections would be held on 8 June. So far, the Conservatives had managed to surmount numerous difficulties.
- Yet more and even bigger obstacles lie ahead: the Europeans seem to be united in their determination to follow a precise calendar for Brexit negotiations, whereas the Conservatives have only a small majority in the House of Commons, and Scotland has confirmed its intention to hold a new referendum on its independence.
- The time has come to close ranks behind Theresa May, who is nonetheless taking a big risk: what if the British were to prove the polls wrong once again?

On Tuesday, Theresa May announced that early elections would be held on 8 June. On Wednesday, she easily obtained approval from the House of Commons to organise snap elections. The current house will be dissolved on 2 May, and the campaign will officially begin.

In the previous legislative elections in May 2015, the Conservatives were swept to power without needing to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. David Cameron remained Prime Minister. No longer tied to the pro-Europe Lib Dems, Mr. Cameron felt obliged to uphold one of his campaign promises: to renegotiate the country's EU membership and to hold a referendum on the outcome of those talks. This was achieved in June 2016, with the referendum results we know all too well. David Cameron resigned and was replaced by Theresa May, who could have held office until the next elections in May 2020.

Since the June 2016 referendum, early elections have always been an option. Yet the various obstacles were surmounted one after the other. At first, some thought the Conservatives would never overcome the divisions that pitted the "Bremainers", those who wanted to remain in the EU, from the "Brexiters", who won the referendum. In the end, a broad consensus was rapidly formed around Theresa May, who formed a more or less well-balanced government made up of supporters from both factions. Tensions also broke out within the Labour Party, but Jeremy Corbyn managed to hold them back fairly easily. Scotland became the most vocal opposition, along with the Irish and the Welsh, albeit to a more moderate degree. The battle then turned to the courts, with the High Court of London appealing to the Supreme Court to rule whether the government or Parliament should have the final word on validating the terms of Brexit.

Theresa May managed to surmount all these obstacles, and on 29 March, the UK finally sent a letter of notification of its intention to

Current composition of the UK parliament

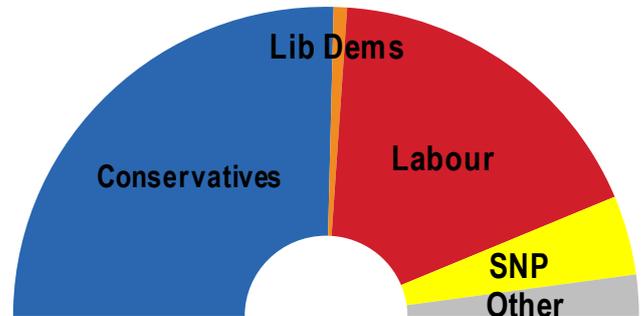


Chart 1

Source: House of Commons

withdraw from the EU to Donald Tusk, President of the European Council. Brexit negotiations cannot begin until the special European Council meeting of 29 April, and they will not unfold as the British wanted¹. Moreover, the Conservatives only have a 4-seat majority in the House of Commons.

Theresa May thus faced the risk of having to present an unfavourable draft agreement to parliament, where Labour, the Lib Dems, and the Scottish National Party (SNP) would only need to win over a few Conservatives to reject the proposal. Instead, she decided to gamble on new elections, in hopes of building a bigger parliamentary majority and "securing" the vote on the draft agreement that will come after two years of negotiations.

Another explanation for Theresa May's decision is that she wanted to show a united front and give the UK a stronger hand in its negotiations with the Europeans. Other outcomes also exist. It is worth noting the Conservative Party's large lead in the polls, as well as the increasingly high probability that Brexit negotiations could well extend beyond the 2-year deadline.

The window of opportunity was closing: if the Conservatives wanted to build on their majority, they had to do it now, before Brexit talks began with Europe. As Theresa May herself pointed out, all elections are risky. For the Conservatives, the biggest fear is not the Labour party. In our opinion, the main risk for Theresa May is that the Lib Dems could stage a comeback. Disappointed pro-Europeans could see this snap election as an occasion to express their discontent with the results of the June 2016 referendum. What would become of the UK's negotiating position if the Conservatives have to contend with the Lib Dems? It also raises the question of Europe's position. For the moment, the official European stance is that a country cannot unilaterally back away from Article 50 once it has been triggered. The Lib Dems' presence in the government might soften this approach.

¹ "Britainectomy", Alexandra Estiot, Eco Perspectives, 2nd quarter 2017.