

# UK general election preview: What to look out for as Britain goes to the polls

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2017-6-7

*The UK's snap election on 8 June initially looked like being a comfortable victory for Theresa May and the Conservatives, but with the polls tightening in the last few weeks, there is now far more uncertainty about the outcome. We asked some of our contributors for their reflections on the campaign and the key things to watch out for when the results come in.*

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## **Patrick Dunleavy: Three things we've learned already from the 2017 campaign turnaround**

### **1. *Don't send an untried leader into a general election campaign***

The Conservatives short-circuited their initially planned leadership election campaign in 2016, persuading or arm-twisting every rival candidate to withdraw. So they chose Theresa May in spectacular ignorance of her abilities to connect with ordinary voters – which GE2017 has shown to be pretty well zero. My highlight of the mistaken Tory campaign was watching May talking to a huddle of 50 cloned Tory activists isolated in the middle of an enormous Scottish warehouse, full of packing cases stacked to the ceiling. Even most of them looked unconvinced, and worried something would fall on top of them. Meanwhile Philip Hammond (Chancellor of the Exchequer, a fluent and potentially influential figure) was touring the wilds of East Anglia – and every other minister was keeping their head down.



### **2. *There is large public support for a simpler social democratic message, one that Jeremy Corbyn successfully activated and articulated***

The British left has long said that if Labour stood out clearly for something (as opposed to the dozy managerialism of the later Blair/Brown years, and of Ed Miliband) the public would respond. You have to make public opinion, they argued, not trail along always letting the Tory press set an agenda. Stand firm for anti-austerity, for defence of public services, and for multi-cultural diversity and people will come around. Corbyn has made this happen, through a combination of looking honest, not insulting opponents, and staying cheerful. He may well still lose, but even the dozy Parliamentary Labour Party can never neglect this lesson again.

### **3. *Anti-elitism has mileage for the left as well as the right***

Labour's slogan was "For the many, not the few". It looks naff at first sight, but endlessly repeated it has a certain

populist resonance. Many British voters seem to want to repeat Brexit in a new way, by again doing the transgressive thing on offer, and giving the incumbent government a kick in the backside.

### **Patrick Dunleavy – LSE**

Patrick Dunleavy is Chair of the LSE Public Policy Group and a Professor of Political Science at the LSE. His latest (co-authored) books are [The Impact of the Social Sciences](#) (Sage, 2014 – free materials [here](#)) and [Growing the Productivity of Government Services](#) (Elgar, 2013).

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### **Eunice Goes: Corbyn will lose the election, but he has already changed British politics**

It is unlikely that Britons will wake up on Friday to the news that the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is on his way to Downing Street, however he has achieved something else: he has succeeded in shifting the public debate to a policy agenda normally associated with the left. If the 2015 general election was about demonstrating economic credibility by signing up to austerity, in 2017 the excesses of market fundamentalism, the failings of austerity and a reappraisal of the role of the state have dominated the political debate.



Corbyn's 'there-is-an-alternative' message and his plain-speaking style has mobilised thousands of young voters, but it is important to bear in mind that he did not achieve this transformation by himself. His predecessor, Ed Miliband, also tried to challenge the ideological consensus about the deficit and the role of the state in a market economy, but his attempts were met with derision by his political opponents and by most of the media "commentariat".

However, austerity fatigue has now set in. So much so that the Conservative government has started to respond to the changing political climate. This adaptation has been particularly visible in Theresa May's brand of conservatism, which seems to have jettisoned the main planks of Thatcherism to serve the interests of the 'Just About Managing' voters. The problem for the Labour Party is that the success of its transformative message depends on others. Ultimately, the past two years have shown that voters and the media only accept Labour ideas as credible if they are normalised and articulated by the Conservative establishment.

### **Eunice Goes – Richmond University**

Eunice Goes is Associate Professor of Politics at Richmond University. She is the author of [The Labour Party Under Ed Miliband: Trying But Failing to Renew Social Democracy](#) (Manchester University Press, 2016).

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### **Thomas J. Leeper: The Brexit election that never was**

When Prime Minister Theresa May [announced the 2017 general election](#), she argued that the country needed an election now "because we have at this moment a one-off chance to get [Brexit] done." With a considerable polling lead in a hypothetical match-up against Jeremy Corbyn, May sought an electoral mandate to leave the EU. And those Eurosceptics pushing for a "hard" Brexit seemed content to go along with that, with UKIP [agreeing not to oppose pro-Brexit Tories](#).



Yet polling [now suggests](#) that voters are far more concerned about healthcare than about Brexit or any of its constitutive issues. And voters have long perceived Labour to be the better party to handle healthcare. Rather than being a second referendum on Britain's membership of the EU, the election has turned into a conventional general

election. The Brexit cleavage continues to cut across the traditional party divide, but Labour seems poised to win back some of the support of its Eurosceptic constituents and still holds [large majorities](#) of young people and the highly educated. All of this is bad news for the Conservatives.

A Brexit-themed election victory might have given the PM a chance to enact broadly popular policies, such as reducing immigration. My ongoing research with Professor Simon Hix (LSE) and Professor Eric Kaufmann (Birkbeck), for example, suggests that [voters prefer considerably lower immigration levels](#). But immigration control will be one of several issues on voters' minds this Thursday. Rather than giving the PM a mandate to focus her attention on quickly securing Brexit, she seems likely to receive a mandate for five years of struggle against an emboldened Labour opposition over a wide array of policies, all against the backdrop of a tedious two-year negotiation with the EU.

### **Thomas J. Leeper – LSE**

Thomas J. Leeper is an Assistant Professor in Political Behaviour in the Department of Government at the LSE. His research on individuals' public opinions primarily focuses on how mass attitudes reflect an interaction between the broader information environment – including the mass media and political elites – and individual-level attributes – namely citizens' expressed behaviors, psychological traits, social identities, motivation, and opinions. He tweets [@thosjleeper](#)

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### **Eleanor Knott: EU citizens – taxation, but no representation**

Neither the Conservatives nor Labour have outlined their plans to secure the rights of non-UK EU citizens in their manifestoes. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats and Greens have placed the need to guarantee the rights of EU citizens front and centre in their pledges to fight a hard Brexit.



Whoever forms the government is slated to begin Brexit negotiations with the EU on 19 June. The rights of non-UK EU citizens is one of three key requirements of the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier. In other words, assuming the Conservatives or Labour form the next government, they will not be able to avoid the complex issue of non-UK EU citizens for long.

In their manifesto, the Conservatives continue to pander to a rhetoric of British citizens first and controlled immigration. This rhetoric assumes British citizens are unaffected by the uncertain future of non-UK EU citizens in the UK. Worse still, the Conservatives continue to act as if the rights of non-UK EU citizens are *not* uncertain and as if nothing has changed since the Brexit referendum. Yet, the Brexit referendum changed everything for non-UK EU citizens, from their status in the UK to their sense belonging. As [Barnier](#) argued in May 2017, the “only cause of uncertainty [for non-UK EU citizens] is Brexit”.

This is consistent with the EUintheUK Survey I conducted last year, which around 3,000 non-UK EU citizens participated in between July and August 2016. The survey showed that for many, the Brexit referendum transformed their image of the UK from a tolerant to an unwelcoming country where many non-UK EU citizens felt unwanted and unrepresented. In other words, many non-UK EU citizens felt the vote to Leave the EU was also a vote against EU citizens.

The Liberal Democrats and Greens understand this uncertainty. But they will not lead the next government. How and when will the next government secure the residency and working rights of non-UK EU citizens? How will they secure their pensions? Three million people in the UK are waiting for, and need, answers to these questions.

### **Eleanor Knott – LSE**

Eleanor Knott is a Fellow in the Department of Methodology at LSE. As well as eastern European identity politics,

she currently researches the experiences of non-UK EU citizens following the Brexit referendum. She tweets [@ellie\\_knott](#)

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### **Isabelle Hertner: The Liberal Democrats' pro-EU campaign has fallen flat**

The 2017 snap elections should have offered an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to shine. Against the Eurosceptic Tories and the EU-ambivalent Labour Party, the Lib Dems stand out as Britain's Europhiles. In their manifesto, they wrote that: "We passionately believe that Britain is better off in the EU. We will fight against the Conservatives disastrous hard Brexit – their choice to make the UK a poorer place."



Unlike the Conservatives and Labour, the Lib Dems want Britain to stay inside the EU's Single Market and Customs Union. Like the Greens, the Lib Dems have offered a referendum on the government's final Brexit deal. These policies should please many of those who voted Remain in the 2016 referendum. And yet, despite their EU-enthusiasm, the Lib Dems are only expected to win around 9 percent of the votes, or 12 seats in Parliament. Why has their EU-focused campaign produced such limited returns?

For a start, although the complexity of Brexit triggered this election, it hasn't been the key theme of the campaign. Instead, issues such as social care, health, and the fight against terrorism have dominated the agenda. This has worked against the Lib Dems, who wanted to focus on Britain's future relationship with the EU. Also, many remain voters appear to have accepted that Brexit will happen and are prepared to vote strategically for the Tories or Labour.

Coupled with this is the fact that although the Lib Dems have doubled their membership size since 2015, the party still lacks financial resources and visibility. With only nine MPs, they remain limited in what they can achieve. Finally, it appears that the voters have moved away from the centre-ground of British politics and the Lib Dems' social and economic liberalism may now be slightly out of fashion.

#### **Isabelle Hertner – *King's College London***

Isabelle Hertner is a Lecturer in the Politics of Britain in Europe at King's College London, with the Department of European and International Studies. Her monograph *Centre-left parties and the European Union: power, democracy and accountability* is forthcoming with Manchester University Press.

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### **Stuart Brown: The SNP will win in Scotland, but the story of the night might well be the revival of Scottish Labour**

The 2014 independence referendum, and to a lesser extent the EU referendum in 2016, have carved giant wedges between the electorate north of the border. Scottish voters remain deeply divided over the prospect of a second independence referendum and up until a few weeks ago most opinion polls pointed to a two-way contest between the pro-independence SNP and the anti-independence Conservatives. But a late revival by Labour, matching the party's rise in the polls across the rest of the UK, could put an entirely different spin on the results.



Labour, the once dominant force in the country, has witnessed a [spectacular decline in support](#) since 2014. The party first saw its vote share tumble at the 2015 UK general election in the face of a post-referendum boost in

popularity for the SNP, before it was relegated to third place behind the Conservatives in the 2016 Scottish parliamentary election. In April this year, [some polls](#) had put Labour's vote share in Scotland as low as 13 per cent, a full 20 per cent behind the Conservatives. With voters polarised over the independence issue, Labour has risked being crowded out: opposing independence in principle, but with a softer-spoken brand of unionism than that articulated by the Conservatives.

Scottish Labour's leader, Kezia Dugdale, has attempted to address this problem in recent weeks, strengthening the party's opposition to independence and seeking to reclaim their status as chief opposition to the SNP from Ruth Davidson's Conservatives. Regardless of whether this change in tone has ultimately paid off, or whether Scotland is simply feeling the effect of the wider Corbyn surge, most of the [latest polls](#) have Labour and the Conservatives neck and neck in second place, each with around 25 per cent of the vote. Labour now has some genuine optimism that it might not only hold on to its sole Scottish seat, but that it could even claw back a few of the seats it lost two years ago.

Although the SNP's support has dipped from the historic 50 per cent vote share it secured in 2015, the party has maintained a sizeable double-digit lead in every opinion poll conducted since the last general election. They will likely win a comfortable majority of Scottish seats, though with a smaller total than the 56 (out of 59) they won last time around. And with that majority, Nicola Sturgeon will claim there is further impetus for her planned second referendum.

But if Labour's momentum continues, and if the Conservatives' vote share holds firm, the result will be portrayed as a clear step backwards for the SNP – albeit one that is far from fatal for their aspirations of taking the independence question back to Scottish voters.

#### **Stuart Brown – LSE**

Stuart Brown is the Managing Editor of EUROPP and a Research Associate at the LSE's Public Policy Group. He recently published a book on the European Commission, [The European Commission and Europe's Democratic Process](#) (Palgrave, 2016).

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#### **Julian Göppfarth: The view from Germany – a longing for British pragmatism**

The UK election campaign is being widely followed in Germany. However, compared to the media frenzy during the French elections, the reporting is much more neutral and in some cases even indifferent. Far prominent is the discussion of the future German role in Europe in the face of Trump and Brexit. While some fear Germany will increasingly stand isolated against southern EU-countries following the UK's exit, most are optimistic that Brexit will mark the start of a new Franco-German cooperation and a reset for the EU.



The prevailing view is that the UK has decided to leave and whoever is elected PM will have to deal with the mess, not the Europeans, and least of all the Germans. The general consensus is that Brexit will mainly harm the UK, and that even without a post-Brexit deal the German economy would not suffer much. With this said, many German observers bemoan the loss of “traditional British pragmatism” and in their eyes they fear the continuation under the new PM of the irrationalism that led to Brexit. Both candidates, May and Corbyn, have been portrayed in this way.

May was initially compared to Thatcher: a cold liberal, calculating and pragmatic. However, this image has quickly changed in light of her first visit to Washington, where she showed her support for Trump, and her staunch support for anti-immigration measures as well as her lack of unity with European leaders against Trump's withdrawal from the Paris agreement. She is now often portrayed in line with other right wing populist leaders and accused of having thrown her pragmatism over board to please the Brexiteers.

Corbyn's recent rise, on the other hand, baffles many commentators, but few take his chances to win seriously. He is often depicted as symptomatic of a derailed British pragmatism that wishes to move the UK back toward protectionism and the disastrous 1970s. Given his ambiguous stance on Brexit, he is not even cheered by the German Social Democrats who, in contrast, enthusiastically embraced Macron. Ultimately, Germany is nostalgic for a British pragmatism that once helped defend European free markets and free trade at the side of Germany. Some hope for its return, yet most are preparing for life without it.

**Julian Göppfarth – LSE**

Julian Göppfarth is a PhD candidate at the at the London School of Economics. He holds a degree in European Studies from Sciences Po Paris and the LSE and has worked for the European Parliamentary Research Service. His research interests include nationalist ideologies, radicalization, European politics and philosophy.

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