

# Theresa May replaces David Cameron – but will there be an early General Election?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Theresa May will today become the Prime Minister, following the decision of Andrea Leadsom to abandon her campaign. Here, **Sean Swan** looks at the possibility that this change of leadership could bring an early general election, and argues that it is unlikely to benefit the main parties and is thus unlikely to happen.*



The argument has [been made](#) for an early general election. The question is what would be the likely impact of such an election on the political parties coming, as it would, in the wake of a referendum which has opened up entirely new political cleavages at a time when the two main parties are in internal turmoil.

The Conservatives currently have a majority and are in government. They are also the party that was most deeply divided during the referendum. It is not clear they stand to gain anything from an early general election. The Tories are now united on Brexit. Theresa May [has declared](#) that “we are all leavers now” and “Brexit means Brexit”. But beneath the surface the party remains potentially split between maximalist and minimalist Brexiteers. This was visible in the leadership contest. Andrea Leadsom, a Maximalist, wanted the immediate triggering of Article 50. Theresa May a Minimalist (?) wanted invoking Article 50 to be postponed not just until after the leadership race but until next year. May’s position is understandable. The only card the UK has to play in what are likely to be tough negotiations with the EU on post-Brexit access to the Single Market is the implied threat of not triggering Article 50. The difficulty lies in the possibility that Maximal Brexiteers will mistake a strategy designed to get the best possible post-Brexit terms for the UK as a subterfuge to effectively ignore the referendum result. May is somewhat hampered here by the fact that she backed Remain. Leadsom would have had an easier time of it in that regard.

The degree to which the Conservatives are convincing as Maximalist Brexiteers will determine the electoral fortunes of UKIP. UKIP currently have only one MP, so stand little to lose from an early election – and possibly much to gain. The referendum might be assumed to have shot UKIP’s fox, but any backsliding on Brexit – real or imagined –

would breath new life into them. It would allow them to claim that UKIP, and only UKIP, represent the 52% majority who voted Leave. Similarly any Brexit deal that allowed continued free movement could be maintained by UKIP to be a betrayal of the spirit of the referendum result. The Tories seem to be conscious of this and it is no doubt why Cameron, Hunt, May and Leadsom have all stated that any new deal with the EU must involve control over migration. However the sticking point will arrive if it comes to a straight choice between access to the Single Market with free movement or no access without it – and this is the current position of EU.

Of course it is questionable whether or not all, or even most, Leavers voted out on the basis of migration. It was a convenient argument to make by Remain as it allowed the Leave position to be described as at least implicitly racists. The alternative interpretation, that austerity, lack of investment in housing, education and training, and increased job insecurity, played a major role in the mood that led to the out vote, was not one that the Leave side, comprising as it did of a collection of right-wing market fundamentalist, would want to entertain.

Labour's position on Brexit seems to be to accept the referendum result but argue for the best possible post-Brexit deal for ordinary people. Jeremy Corbyn [has argued](#) that the out vote had a lot to do with economic policy. The real question is can he articulate this clearly and outline a credible, concrete economic alternative? Ordinarily speaking Labour as the Opposition should welcome an early election but of course, these are not ordinary times for Labour. Labour is currently deeply divided between, on the one hand, a middle-class liberal metropolitan parliamentary party and on the other, a working-class social democratic leader and membership. The liberal element want a sort of neoliberalism with a human face. The social democratic element want an alternative, presumably more Keynesian, economic policy. The liberal element want identity politics, the social democratic element want class politics. The liberals want sameness, the social democrats equality – that is the liberals are concerned that there should be proportionate representation of various ethnic groups and genders within the existing economic hierarchy; the social democrats are concerned with lessening economic inequalities – that is with challenging the existing economic hierarchy. These two positions need not be mutually incompatible, but in practice appear to be – possibly because the liberal position poses no real threat to the economic *status quo* and is in fact shared by Cameron's Tory party.

Given the current turmoil in the Labour party, it is not easy to make predictions, but if Corbyn manages to hang on (or is replaced but succeeded by a similar social democrat), it is not inconceivable that constituency Labour parties would deselect liberal MPs as candidates in an early general election. This would almost certainly lead to a split in Labour and deselected Labour MPs standing as some new breakaway grouping. The possibility of a split in Labour – that is of some paring of the ways between the liberal group of MPs and the social democrat MPs, party leader and membership – is possible. It may even be necessary. An early election might hasten this and lead to some rerun of the Liberal SPD Alliance.

The Lib Dems did appallingly badly in the last election, but are the party best placed to make the most of any early general election. The Lib Dems are traditionally the most Europhile of all the British parties and have now draped themselves in the EU flag. Tim Farron has [vowed](#) to fight the next general election on a pledge to stop Brexit arguing that it would be “legitimate for the Liberal Democrats to go into the next election and say we offer you a chance to reconsider [Brexit]”. The Lib Dems benefitted from disaffected Labour votes in the wake of Blair's invasion of Iraq, today they are well placed to benefit from disaffection with the referendum result. There is no significant difference in their politics and that of the liberal tendency within Labour. The Lib Dems could well provide a ready made home for de-selected Labour MPs (or even for [certain Conservatives](#), if the Max Brexit position comes to dominate in the Tory party).

Plaid Cymru's reaction to the Brexit vote is the [calling](#) of a special party conference on 16 July to launch a campaign for Welsh independence within the EU. But Wales voted out and Plaid is still a minor party in Wales. In Scotland the situation is radically different. Scotland voted Remain and the Brexit cleavage intersects with the nationalist/unionist cleavage. No doubt in any early general election the SNP would campaign for a new referendum on independence if Scotland's position in the EU is threatened by London. While the Conservatives would probably perform much better

than they did in 2015, it is certain that the SNP would still take the overwhelming majority of the seats in Scotland and that this could be construed as a mandate for a second Indyref. Whether or not Nicola Sturgeon would use that mandate would come down to whether or not she thought she could win it, but [opinion polls](#) post-Brexit are much better than prior to the calling of the 2014 Indyref.

Given the Brexit cleavage, an early election would benefit UKIP and the Lib Dems most. It would also provide the SNP with a mechanism for mandating a second Indyref. What is not obvious is that an early election would benefit either of the two main parties – it is thus not likely to happen.

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*Note: this post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our comments policy before posting.*

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