

GENERAL ELECTION 2019: POST-ELECTION ANALYSIS



interel
ELECTION
INSIGHTS 2019



General Election 2019

An analysis of the outcome and next steps

The Conservative Party has won the 2019 General Election. The Conservatives gained 47 constituencies to win 365 seats in total, giving them a substantial majority of 80. This is the party's best performance since 1987.

The Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats suffered major defeats, with both parties losing seats and the Labour Party seeing a steep fall in their share of the vote, making this their worst result since 1935.

The outcome of the election gives the Conservatives a clear mandate to deliver their domestic reform agenda and to push the Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament, taking the UK out of the EU on 31st January 2020.

THE RESULT

The Conservative victory was at the higher end of what the opinion polls predicted. This was especially the case as the polls had suggested that Labour was gaining ground on the Conservatives in the final week of the campaign.

The scale of the defeat for Labour means that their leader Jeremy Corbyn has already had to announce that he will not fight the next election, and a contest to decide his replacement will likely soon follow.

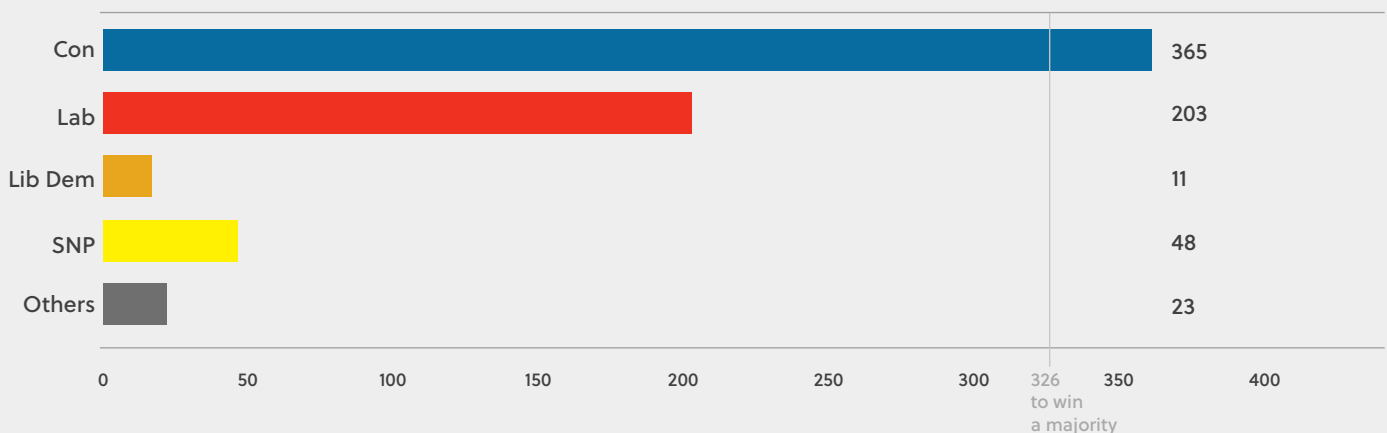
The election was also a bitter disappointment for the Liberal Democrats, who despite going into the campaign positioning their leader Jo Swinson as a potential Prime



Minister, saw only a modest increase in their vote and went backwards in terms of their share of seats. Demoralised and marginalised, they too now face a leadership election.

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party made gains, largely at the expense of the Conservatives, while Labour was reduced to their 2015 position of one seat. This puts the question of the constitutional settlement back on the agenda ahead of the next Scottish Parliament election. In Northern Ireland, a reversal for the Democratic Unionist Party also suggests the constitutional issue will become topical in this Parliament.

SHARE OF THE SEATS



CONSERVATIVES

For the Conservatives, the result is a vindication of Boris Johnson's leadership and approach towards Brexit. He can feel rewarded in the knowledge that, for the moment, he proved his doubters wrong.

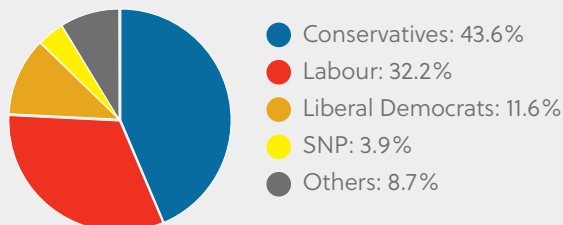
During the summer, former Conservative MP Nick Boles, who left the party due to disillusionment with their stance on Brexit, said that Johnson's strategy was to unite the pro-Brexit vote around the Conservatives and then win against a pro-EU vote that was divided between the opposition parties.

This was exactly what happened. The decision by the Brexit Party to give the Conservatives a clear run in all the seats held by the Tories before the election, coupled with a poor performance by Nigel Farage during the campaign, saw pro-Leave voters rally around Johnson and his slogan of "get Brexit done", while Remain inclined voters were disunited and presented with contradictory advice about tactical voting.

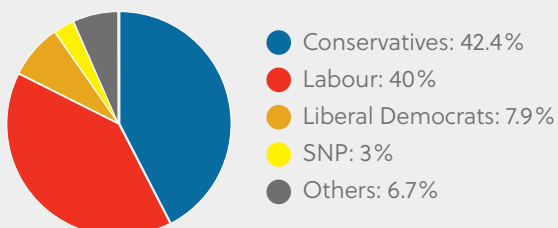
Indeed, the Conservatives' share of the vote remained largely the same as two years ago, securing 43.6% compared to the 42.4% they took in 2017. However, the fall in the Labour vote, from 40% to 32.2%, coupled with a stronger Liberal Democrat performance in Labour constituencies that ate into their support but was not enough to allow them to take the seat, disproportionately benefited the Conservatives and allowed them to significantly increase their tally with only a minor change in their vote.

SHARE OF THE VOTE

2019



2017



The election also saw the beginnings of a realignment of the electorate, as the Conservatives made inroads into northern and working class constituencies that have traditionally been Labour strongholds. Symbolic of this shift were victories in places like Workington, which has been represented by Labour for all but three of the last hundred years, and Bishop Auckland, Rother Valley and Bolsover, all of which elected their first ever Conservative MPs.

At the same time as the Conservatives were winning over working class constituencies, they still held on to seats in more prosperous, southern and home country constituencies. Despite predictions that high profile MPs like Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab were in danger of losing their seats to the Liberal Democrats, this didn't happen.

The outcome of the election means that Johnson should be secure as Prime Minister for the duration of this Parliament and into the next election. His victory gives the Conservatives the votes to pass the revised Withdrawal Agreement, which Johnson successfully concluded with the EU in October, and to set out an ambitious legislative agenda in next week's Queen's Speech.

With most of the newly elected MPs owing their position to Johnson's leadership, with every Tory candidate signing a pledge of support for the party's stance on the EU, and with the former Brexit rebels now out of Parliament, the Conservatives are now more united than they have been at any time since the days of Margaret Thatcher.

Boris Johnson returns to Downing Street the most electorally successful Conservative leader since Margaret Thatcher.





Labour and the Liberal Democrats will go through a period of reflection before a leadership election.

LABOUR

The election was a significant reversal for Labour, who went backwards from 2017 in terms of votes and seat share. Their vote fell from 40% to 32.2%.

It will be of small consolation that in some constituencies the party was able to narrowly hold off a challenge from the Liberal Democrats and that the result could have been worse.

Modern convention has it that party leaders resign after an unsuccessful election campaign. Jeremy Corbyn has already indicated that he will preside over a "process for reflection", mirroring Michael Howard's approach after the Conservatives lost in 2005.

The forthcoming leadership election will no doubt be strongly contested between the different factions of the Labour Party, with the centre-left and centrist wings citing Corbyn as a bigger problem on the campaign trail than Brexit or the impact of financial austerity, and blaming a strongly left-wing manifesto for alienating more moderate voters. On the other hand, the more strongly left-wing activists, who now dominate Labour's membership and remain loyal

to Corbyn, will likely blame Brexit for distracting from a manifesto that may otherwise have enthused the public.

Having spent four years taking over Labour's institutions, the left of the party is loathe to give it up and will be looking for a candidate who can fend off a challenge from the centrist wing of the party. MPs currently vying for contention include Rebecca Long-Bailey, Angela Rayner, and Clive Lewis,

all of whom have been close to Corbyn from the beginning.

Candidates from the centre include Sir Keir Starmer, Labour's moderate Brexit spokesperson who remains popular with activists, and Yvette Cooper, chair of the Home Affairs Committee and a former Minister who stood against Corbyn for the leadership in 2015. Other potential candidates include Birmingham MP Jess Phillips, and Emily Thornberry, the Shadow Foreign Secretary.

There is not yet a fixed timetable for any leadership contest, which may now not take place until the spring of next year or even later. This will give the Corbyn wing of the party time to find a way to promote a favoured candidate – for example, by suggesting that the next leader should be a woman, or that they should come from a constituency outside London.

Key to all this is that Corbyn and his supporters on the National Executive Committee have control of the election timetable. In addition, the electoral college of party members, unions and affiliates, who supported Corbyn in 2015 and 2016, could be minded to choose the most left-wing candidate. This could in the long term make it more difficult for Labour to recover and offer a policy platform that appeals to voters who have gone over to the Conservatives.

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

For the Liberal Democrats, the result is nothing short of a disaster. Their assertion that Jo Swinson should be considered a credible candidate for Prime Minister was always hubris, but as late as October they were confident of picking up dozens of seats, possibly going into three figures. Their activists were energised by a strong performance in the European Parliament elections earlier in the year, and motivated by a clear pledge to overturn Brexit, in contrast to Labour's ambiguity on the issue.

It will be of small consolidation to Labour that the result could have been worse.



Even before the end of the night, it was clear that their ambitions would not be realised. This election represented their second worst result in their 31 year history. Despite increasing their vote share, they failed to make any progress from the last election and went backwards, finishing with one fewer seat than they won in 2017 and ten fewer than they had at the start of the campaign. High profile defectors from both the Conservatives and Labour were unsuccessful in target seats in London. Worst of all, Swinson suffered a personal defeat, losing her Dunbartonshire East constituency to the SNP.

This performance will likely trigger a period of contemplation in the party. Their campaign pledge to revoke Brexit will come under scrutiny, amidst criticism that it alienated voters who just want an end to the process. The decision to run a presidential style campaign around Swinson will also be questioned, particularly as polls suggested that the more the public saw of her, the less they liked her. As the campaign went on, the Liberal Democrats suffered the classic third party squeeze, while the first past the post electoral system meant they finished with far fewer MPs than their vote share might have deserved.

All of this overshadowed what was otherwise a sensible offering to the electorate. The party was praised by the Institute for Fiscal Studies for having the only manifesto whose figures added up and for putting forward realistic plans for decarbonising the economy.

However, in the end the Liberal Democrats allowed themselves to be painted as a protest vote and the party of last resort. Swinson's defeat will now trigger a leadership election, the party's fourth in four years. Their small number of MPs means they will struggle for relevance in a Parliament where the governing party now has a substantial majority. Looking forward, they will need to redefine liberalism for the

modern era, and find an issue outside Brexit that will allow them to capture a niche in our fractured politics.

SCOTLAND, WALES AND NORTHERN IRELAND

The results in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were as dramatic as the rest of the UK, and the consequences will be equally as profound.

In Scotland the SNP made 13 gains, strengthening what was already a dominant position in Scottish politics, although they did not win as many seats as the exit poll had predicted. The Scottish Conservatives lost half their seats, a disappointing reversal from 2017, where the popularity of their former leader Ruth Davidson had seen a revival in their fortunes. The result was equally disappointing for Labour, who returned to having only one MP north of the border. The Liberal Democrats' only solace was gaining the North East Fife constituency, a seat where they have always performed well.

For the SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon this was the best possible result. She will be able to claim that the result is a mandate for a second Scottish independence referendum, and she will hope that the Conservative victory in the UK as a whole will deepen anti-Tory feeling in Scotland. The strong performance of her party also helps her at a time when her leadership has been questioned owing to controversies around the SNP's management of health and education in Scotland. The forthcoming trial of former SNP leader Alex Salmond for alleged sexual misconduct will be destabilising for Sturgeon and last night's result will help her fend off any internal challenges to her authority.

In Wales, Labour remained the largest party, although the Conservatives made progress by winning six seats. This will give them a boost heading into the 2021 Welsh Assembly elections.

In Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party had a very poor night, losing two seats, including that of their well-regarded deputy leader, Nigel Dodds. The anti-Brexit parties managed to bridge traditional sectarian divides, with the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party winning two seats and the cross-community Alliance Party taking 17% of the vote, their best ever performance.

With Northern Irish politics in a state of flux, the devolved assembly still suspended and the biggest unionist party suffering a reversal, the constitutional question in Ireland is likely to again become contested during this Parliament.

For Nicola Sturgeon this was the best possible result, helping fend off challenges to her authority.



WHAT DOES THE ELECTION MEAN FOR BREXIT?

The clear majority for the Conservatives means that Johnson should have no problem getting the revised Withdrawal Agreement through when he presents it to Parliament.

The Prime Minister has already indicated that he will move quickly with this, and offer MPs a vote before breaking up for the Christmas recess.

With all Conservative candidates pledging to back the deal, and with the Salisbury convention meaning that the Lords would not be expected to block the will of the House of Commons on a manifesto commitment, it is now almost certain that the UK will leave the EU on 31st January next year.

This will then bring the one-year transition period into effect, during which the UK will retain the benefits and protections of EU membership (albeit without voting or political rights), while it negotiates the future relationship and a free trade agreement.

The deadline for this seems impossibly tight, with most commentators warning that the trade talks will be acrimonious, necessitating further extensions to the transition period. In this sense, it could be argued that the Tory slogan of "get Brexit done" was at best a simplification and at worst a falsehood.

However, Johnson has proved his doubters wrong once before by successfully reopening and concluding negotiations on the revised Withdrawal Agreement. The size of his parliamentary majority also means that, unlike Theresa May, he will be able to marginalise the more ideological pro-Brexit wing of the party and seek compromise with the EU in a way that his predecessor could not.

Against this backdrop, it is not impossible that Johnson could conclude the future relationship talks with the EU by the end of 2020, particularly if this were to be based on a model of tariff and quota-free trade access, mutual recognition for services and underpinned by a set of minimum standards for employment right and environmental protection.

WHAT DOES THE ELECTION MEAN FOR GOVERNMENT POLICY?

Looking beyond Brexit, Johnson is keen to show that he has an ambitious legislative programme aimed at resolving many of the economic and social challenges around opportunity, inequality and aspiration in the UK.

The coming days will likely see a modest reshuffle as the Prime Minister looks to fill ministerial vacancies created by departing MPs, with a more substantial reshuffle taking place after the UK leaves the EU at the end of January. There will also be changes to many parliamentary appointments early in the New Year, as MPs elect new chairs and members of the select committees which scrutinise government policy, and reconstitute All Party Parliamentary Groups, which allow MPs to take forward their interests in different policy areas.

Before then, however, will be a Queen's Speech, confirmed to take place on Thursday 19th January, outlining the Government's priorities for the forthcoming year. A wide range of bills around immigration reform, education and police funding, energy reform and NHS investment are all expected to be listed, as well as legislation needed to see through Brexit which stalled in the last Parliament.

Other priorities will include convening cross-party talks to find a solution to the social care crisis, launching a review of defence, security and foreign policy, and legislating to end the automatic increase of violent or sexual offenders at the halfway point of their sentences.

In addition, we should expect a wider review of the machinery of government. The incorporation of the Department for International Development back into the Foreign Office is a reform that is often mooted. There has also been talk of merging the Department for Exiting the EU, which is now largely redundant, into the Department for International Trade.

While Johnson will undoubtedly enjoy the honeymoon period that all new Prime Ministers experience, but which was denied to him during the summer as a result of the Brexit deadlock, there will be challenges ahead. Trade talks with the EU, as well as other markets like the US, have the real prospect of becoming bogged down and contentious. There will be unpopular decisions to make on transport infrastructure, particularly around HS2 and Heathrow expansion. Changes to social care funding are a political timebomb that proved extremely damaging to Theresa May. The Strategic Defence and Security Review (the most contentious for years) and the 2020 Spending Review process will see different departments going up against each other to protect their budgets.

However, with his popularity at its highest level since his days as London mayor, with a demoralised and fractured opposition, and a solid majority behind him, Johnson ends 2019 in the best possible position to meet these challenges.



Greencoat House
Francis Street
Westminster, London
SW1P 1DH



@InterelUK



www.interelgroup.com



020 7592 3800



interel
ADVANCING INTERESTS