EUROPE 22.04.2017 | Matthew Laza

# Polling in June, come what May

## The whats and the whys of Britain's snap election

*On Wednesday 19 April, British Prime Minister Theresa May won the overwhelming backing of MPs to launch an early election campaign. Her announcement marks the start of a seven week election campaign, with May promising "stability and freedom" under her Conservative party, whilst her Labour challenger, Jeremy Corbyn, has vowed to "overturn the rigged system" of government and distribute wealth more fairly, should he win. Journalist and political campaigner, Matthew Laza, spoke to Hannes Alpen and Ellie Mears about May's surprise announcement.*

**British Prime Minister Theresa May has repeatedly ruled out calling a snap election. Why the sudden U-turn?**

Many, including me, thought that when Mrs May took over the premiership the political situation was so overwhelmingly advantageous to the Conservatives, it would be very hard to resist temptation and call an early general election. She did a pretty good job of showing an iron will, but I think two main factors persuaded her she would never get an opportunity as good as this to cement her hold on power and deliver a substantial majority for the Conservatives.

Firstly, I think the Prime Minister genuinely believes that it is in the British national interest for her to have a 'strong' hand to 'get on with Brexit'. She wants to use an overwhelming electoral mandate as a battering ram to all those - the House of Lords, the 'liberal' media, Cameronite Tories (Conservatives) - who she thinks are getting in her way on Brexit.

Her second, and much more partisan, calculation is the fact that she that is facing an opposition weaker than at any time since 1945. I am convinced it was the implosion of the (anti-EU) United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in recent weeks – a poor by-election result, its only MP leaving and continued leadership troubles – that was the final factor in making a snap election just too good to resist any longer. Although after the charismatic Nigel Farage's (many) resignations as leader and the achievement of Brexit the potency of the threat from UKIP had somewhat diminished, they were still

running third in national opinion polls. It wasn't enough in a 'first past the post' system to deliver MPs to Westminster, but enough to split the centre right vote in Labour-held constituencies. Now with UKIP at their weakest for years, May has the real prospect of bringing to the Conservatives straight 'switchers' from UKIP, putting into the Tories' sights parliamentary seats in the English Midlands and North that have hitherto been Labour for generations.

**How will the elections affect the Brexit negotiations?**

In reality, as far as the negotiations themselves are concerned I don't believe it will make any difference at all. The Prime Minister, rightly, believes she is likely to be politically emboldened at home by a strong re-election on 8 June. But securing her domestic political position will not translate into either changing what Britain wants from the negotiations or what the other EU27 are likely to let it have.

The Conservatives have been trying to spin that a large parliamentary majority will 'free the PM's hand' on Brexit, and give her flexibility by ensuring she isn't beholden to either the small number of anti-Brexit Tory MPs or the larger number of hardcore Tory Eurosceptic MPs. Either block has, at the moment, the ability to deny her a majority in the Commons if they side with Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party (SNP) and vote against the government. However, this seems a smokescreen. If, as looks increasingly and depressingly likely, we are heading for a hard Brexit, Mrs May really wants a substantial majority to steam-roller the non-deal through parliament, on the basis that Labour will, at that point, finally have to oppose it.

**Calling a snap election is a smart move for the Tories because they are leading the polls, but Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's also welcomed the move. Why?**

In the first instance he doesn't really have any choice. It has truly called his bluff. The Tories' number one aim was to make sure Corbyn was the Labour leader they faced at the polls. The fact he may have struggled to cling-on till 2020 would have been another factor in their calculation to go early. For Corbyn, it is impossible for an opposition to resist an election in British political culture; being seen to deny the public their say would be disastrous. Also Corbyn and many of his more messianic supporters genuinely believe that his leadership is the first time ever that British voters will have been offered a truly 'radical socialist' alternative. They believe the opinion polls and 'mainstream media' are wrong, and that once his ideas get the exposure a general election provides – when the broadcasters have

to give the two big parties equal time – the British people will be converted to his way of thinking. I think this is pure fantasy. He has got off to a terrible start both presentationally and in terms of a confused, incoherent message. Tragically, Labour is heading for its worst defeat since the 1920's.

**The parliamentary Labour party is strongly divided between those who support Corbyn and those who want him dethroned. Will Labour manage to pull together before the elections?**

In fact, the parliamentary party isn't seriously divided. The overwhelming majority oppose Corbyn and think he is going to lead the party to electoral carnage, costing many current MPs their seats in parliament. Only a small minority, less than ten per cent, can be regarded as genuine supporters of the present leader. Between now and 8 June, Labour MPs in all but the safest seats will be fighting for their political lives. They will be concentrating on presenting themselves as strong local voices for their areas and distancing themselves from Corbyn as much as possible. As for his leadership, they know it is too late to do anything now and will be just hoping they are still MPs on 9 June, and can play a part in forcing him out and electing an electable successor.

**Let's suppose that Labour loses substantially. Would that spark a new leadership contest in the Labour Party?**

Yes. Morally and politically of course it should. In the parallel universe the Corbyn die-hards live in, they think he can carry on, even if Labour has lost around half its MPs and got the lowest share of the vote for a century. In reality, unless the polls are completely wrong, and at the last election they seriously overestimated Labour's support, there is no way he will be able to carry on.

**The Liberal Democrats are presenting themselves as Britain's pro-Europe party. To what extent will they try to capitalise on Labour's somewhat lacklustre response to the threat of a "hard Brexit"?**

The Lib Dems are almost as happy as Theresa May about the early hustings. In 2015 they were in a shocking position. They faced a double whammy of having 'betrayed' their more progressive supporters on issues like university tuition fees, whilst also being squeezed by voters worried about a vote for the Lib Dems opening up the prospect of an unstable Labour/SNP/Lib Dem coalition. These voters decided instead to take 'safe haven' with the Tories. This time they have clear 'market definition' as the unequivocally anti-Brexit party and amongst liberal, prosperous metropolitan voters in

constituencies that voted to remain, that will give them real traction. They will win back several seats from the Tories in wealthy south-west London, for instance. They'll certainly have a good campaign, helped by the contrast between them and Corbyn who is seen as confused and weak, and not just on Europe. The real question for the Lib Dems is whether they can translate political momentum into parliamentary seats, when many of their other targets are in small towns and rural areas in places like the South West of England that voted heavily to leave. The only for them is up, and it's just a question of how far up.

**How would a strong Tory win affect SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon's chances of securing a second independence referendum in Scotland?**

This is actually a really tricky election for Sturgeon and the SNP. In 360 degree contrast to the Lib Dems, they were massively successful in 2015, winning all but 3 of Scotland's parliamentary seats, so now the only way is down for them. They will still win the vast majority of Scottish constituencies, but even losing half a dozen to the resurgent Scottish Tories, and perhaps the odd one to the Lib Dems, weakens Sturgeon's hand. There will be a second referendum, in is a matter of when. It is arguable that the early poll, if it shows even slightly reduced SNP support, strengthens May's hand in insisting that #IndyRef2 has to wait until after the Article 50 process is concluded and Brexit is delivered. Sturgeon will protest, but legally she may have no alternative but to wait. Politically, as polls show support for independence if anything slightly lower than the lost 2014 vote, that may secretly suit her – locking her into a dispute with London on the constitution, and taking attention away from the SNP's less than stellar record running Scotland.

---




**Matthew Laza**
London

Matthew Laza is director of *Policy Network,* a British think tank. Previously, he worked as senior BBC current affairs programme maker before becoming a senior adviser to Ed Miliband, former chair of the Labour Party, in the run up to the 2015 election.