

# The 'sure bet' by Theresa May ends up in a hung Parliament

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The decision by the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, to call a snap election to reinforce her parliamentary majority has been a boomerang: not only has not she strengthened her parliamentary party, but the Conservatives have also lost the absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons. Table 1 reports the results, in terms of votes and seats, of this 2017 British general election compared to those of the 2015 general election. Despite a notable increase in its share of votes (the best result since Margaret Thatcher's years), the Conservative party has lost 12 seats, dropping to 317 MPs.

The Labour party has obtained a remarkable and unexpected result, by increasing its share of votes (from the 30.5% to the 40%) and its parliamentary seats (from 232 to 262 MPs). For Jeremy Corbyn, considered at the beginning of the campaign nothing more than a weak and unviable leader, this election has been a resounding success, since it has brought the Labour Party to the best result in terms of share of votes since 2001 and in terms of seats since 2005.

It is notable, from the increase in the share of votes for the two main parties, that the format of the party system has substantially come back to a two-party system. Indeed, the aggregate share of votes of Conservatives and Labour is 82.4%, the highest result since 1970. Since then on, the increasing competitiveness of the Liberal Party – and then of the Liberal Democrats – and also, more recently, of the UKIP and the Scottish National Party (SNP) contributed to a rise in the British party system's fragmentation, thus progressively departing from the two-party model which dominated British politics from the mid-1940s onwards.

This outcome was possible mainly due to the collapse of the UKIP, which emerged as the third largest party in 2015 by advocating the exit of the UK from the European Union. The party has fallen to 1.8% in this last British general election. Interestingly, UKIP's losses might have been caused by the Brex-

Table 1. Results of the 2017 UK general election and comparison with 2015

Party	2015		2017		Diff. 2017-2015	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Conservative	36.8	330	42.4	317	5.6	-13
Labour	30.5	232	40	262	9.6	30
Scottish National Party	4.7	56	3	35	-1.7	-21
Liberal Democrats	7.9	8	7.4	12	-0.5	4
Plaid Cymru	0.6	3	0.5	4	-0.1	1
UKIP	12.7	1	1.8	0	-10.9	-1
Green	3.8	1	1.6	1	-2.2	0
Others (Speaker)	1	1	1	1	0	0
Total Britain		632		632		
Democratic Unionist Party	0.6	8	0.9	10	0.3	2
Sinn Fein	0.6	4	0.7	7	0.1	3
SDLP	0.3	3	0.3	0	0	-3
Ulster Unionist Party	0.4	2	0.3	0	-0.1	-2
Independent	0.1	1	0.1	1	0	0
Total UK	100	650	100	650	0	0

it referendum, meaning that, after having reached this objective, the party has somewhat lost its main political goal. Yet, it could have been expected that the biggest gainer from the UKIP demise would have been the Conservative party, also given the Hard Brexit stances carried on by many of its prominent politicians. Conversely, and still waiting to obtain a more fine-grained picture thanks to the analysis of electoral shifts, it is also the Labour Party that seems to have benefitted from the UKIP decline. This might have been related to Corbyn's leftist positions, which could have allowed the party to attract working-class voters who had supported the UKIP in the recent past.

While after the 2015 general election many pundits were commenting about the irresistible rise of the SNP, this election has partly debunked this narration. Despite maintaining the first rank both regarding seats and votes in Scotland, the party led by Nicola Sturgeon has lost 21 MPs. Moreover, after the 2015 catastrophe, the Liberal Democrats have managed to slightly increase their representation in the House of Commons, despite a further decrease in their share of votes, possibly also thanks to a stronger concentration of their support in some crucial constituencies, especially in Scotland. Also, the Green Party has

been severally damaged by the increased concentration of votes into the hands of the two main parties, and has only managed to hold the seat of its leader at Brighton Pavilion. Finally, and this is a crucial piece of information for this contribution, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has gained 10 seats in the House of Commons, its largest result ever. These seats are likely to become a fundamental support for the Conservative government in Westminster.

Table 2 reports the seats obtained by parties in Great Britain (Northern Ireland is excluded), disaggregated by region, and the difference with 2015<sup>1</sup>. The first striking piece of evidence is the Conservatives' breakthrough in Scotland, where the party has moved from 1 to 13 seats, at the expenses of the SNP, thus becoming the second largest party in the region, outperforming the Labour. More generally, Theresa May's party has lost seats in the rest of the country, especially in London (-7 seats) and in the southern part of Great Britain (-10). Conversely, the Labour Party has reinforced its Scottish representation (+ 6 seats), but has gained positions throughout the entire Great Britain.

Overall, the number of seats having changed hands is 66<sup>2</sup>, basically the 10% of the seats in the House of Commons, and a third of these changes have occurred in Scotland, the most volatile region from this viewpoint. Indeed, the SNP has lost 12 seats in favour of the Conservatives, 6 to the Labour, and 3 to the Liberal Democrats. From a more general viewpoint, the Labour Party has obtained a net gain of 22 seats against the Conservatives, winning 28 seats where the incumbent was a Tory and losing 6 seats where they were the party of the incumbent MP.

As the reader may recall, some days ago we wrote an article based on the YouGov's estimates for all Great Britain's seats, excluding Northern Ireland ([Emanuele and Marino in this volume](#)). Some of those seats – 97 – were categorised as lean and tossup ones (where a clear winner was not evident in the polls). What has been the result of the races in such seats? Out of 65 marginal seats with an expected close race between the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, Corbyn's party has performed slightly better, securing 34 seats against the 31 ones won by the Conservatives. As highlighted before, the Conservative Party has instead gained ground in Scotland by winning 11 out of 12 marginal seats, at the expenses of the SNP. Moreover, the Liberal Democrats have performed pretty well in the marginal challenges against the Conservatives: they have won 7 races out of 11.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the British electoral map after the 2017 general election, see [Johnston et al.](#) (2017)

<sup>2</sup> We do not consider as a switching seat the result of the 2016 by-election in Richmond Park.

Table 2. Seats by region in Great Britain and differences with 2015

	Seats	CON	LAB	LIBDEM	SNP	PL_CY	UKIP	GREEN	OTHERS
North East	29	3	26						
North West	75	20 (-2)	54 (+3)	1 (-1)					
Yorkshire and The Humber	54	17 (-2)	37 (+4)	0 (-2)					
East Midlands	46	31 (-1)	15 (+1)						
West Midlands	59	35 (+1)	24 (-1)						
East of England	58	50 (-2)	7 (+3)	1			0 (-1)		
London	73	21 (-6)	48 (+3)	3 (+2)				1	1
South East	84	72 (-6)	8 (+4)	2 (+2)					
South West	55	47 (-4)	7 (+3)	1 (+1)					
Wales	40	8 (-3)	28 (+3)	0 (-1)		4 (+1)			
Scotland	59	13 (+12)	7 (+6)	4 (+3)	35 (-21)				
Total Britain	632	317	261	12	35	4	0	1	1

What are the prospects for British politics after this general election? The gamble by Theresa May has clearly failed. According to the latest news, she should be leading a minority government backed by the right-wing Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). It is unclear whether this solution would allow her to stay at 10 Downing Street for the upcoming legislature. For the first time since 1974, and despite the presence of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system, the UK will cope with instability, allegedly resembling what has happened or might happen in many Mediterranean countries<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, despite the Brexit, the United Kingdom is closer to its Southern European counterparts than ever, at least from the political uncertainty viewpoint.

## References

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<sup>3</sup> On Southern European instability, especially in the past few years, see for instance [Bosco and Verney](#) (2016)

