

# UK 2017 general election: polls vs. campaigning





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## Summary:

After Brexit was confirmed, there has been a leadership crisis in the United Kingdom. David Cameron's resignation led to a power vacuum subsequently filled by Theresa May. With all polls being favourable to a mainly conservative Parliament and with a will to have popular legitimacy through elections, Prime Minister May decided to call for early elections. This electoral process has been interesting to check that campaigning is important and that the way leaders and parties communicate during this process has an impact in final results. Brexit has been one of the main issues discussed during the elections and will still have an impact at many levels for the different parties. This analysis intends to go over the main aspects of the 2017 UK general election, making especial points on how leaders and parties communicated and what made a difference throughout the process.

## Keywords:

General election, UK, Brexit, online campaigning, polls, electoral strategy.



## ABSTRACT

With all the polls predicting a clear preference of the British people for the Conservative Party throughout post-Brexit time, Prime Minister Theresa May decided to call early general elections for 8 June 2017. On 19 April 2017, the image of the nation's leader in front of 10 Downing Street announcing the decision caught many stakeholders by surprise, especially at Westminster.

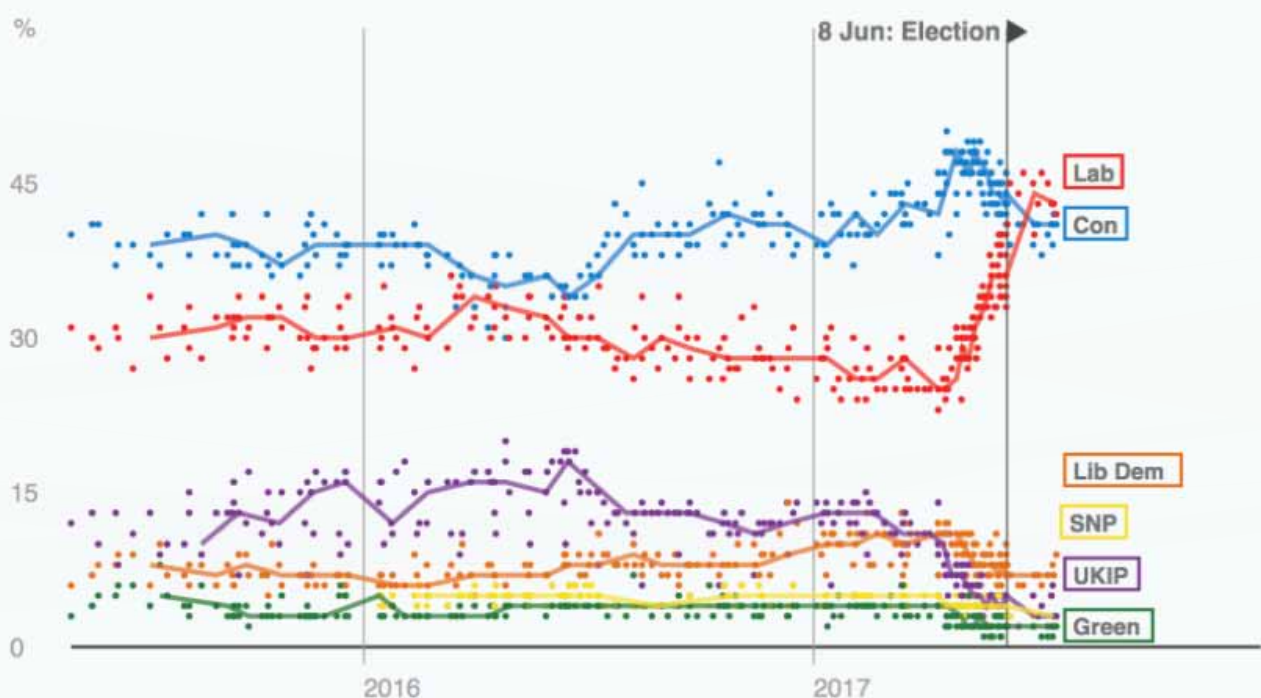
In order to understand the logic behind the decision to call for elections, it is important to look at the voting intention of Britain, for which polls showed a significant advantage of the Tories over the Labour Party (more than 20 percentage points), which would allow them to maintain or even strengthen the absolute majority they had at the House of Commons after the 2015 general election. If early polls were to be right, the scenario would be perfect for the conservatives for the Brexit negotiations with the European Union and for the agenda-setting

in a UK completely outside of the European institutions. If elections were to be held in 2019, it would not allow the conservatives to finish the process with a strong leadership and they were probably also aware of the impact of wear in public opinion that a process like the Brexit negotiation could carry.

There also needs to be taken into account that Theresa May was not elected Prime Minister of the UK as a result of universal suffrage, but as a consequence of an internal voting of her party after David Cameron's resignation. Therefore, the decision to call for election could also be related to the legitimacy-building factor.

During the campaign, and as it is common in Anglo-Saxon cultures, the main media channels clearly stated which candidate or party they supported, which had an impact in public opinion. For instance, The Guardian, The Daily Mirror or The New Statesman stated their pre-electoral preference for the Labour party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. However, The

### Voting intention





Financial Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Sun, The Daily Mail and The Daily Express clearly supported Theresa May's Conservative Party.

As a last highlight, it is important to remember that, during the campaign, there was only one streamed debate between the main 7 parties in the UK and the biggest concern was the absence of May in it. This was fiercely criticised by the other parties, that accused her of not facing the consequences of her own decisions. In a moment where polls had shortened the distance between the two main parties and reflected more accurately the actual results of the election, the decision to not attend the debate negatively impacted the Prime Minister both at image level and visibility level. Even though she had media coverage, the debate would have been a perfect opportunity to appear as a strong leader before the country and to present her plan for the future of the UK in a pedagogical manner and therefore improve British confidence in the government and her leadership.

## WHEN ONLINE CONVERSATION MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

During the last decade, every time there is a relevant electoral process, the impact of social media and the Internet is analysed and the discussion on whether these platforms have a real power over population's electoral decisions happens. Therefore, it seems interesting to check what role has the Internet played in the latest UK general election.

Since the 2010 election, social media and news on the Internet have been an important tool for all parties involved in UK elections; not just political parties, but also civil society, media, population and other stakeholders have participated in online campaigning. Even more so, there is a general belief that election campaigns cannot make a real difference in electoral results, but

*// Since the 2010 election, Internet have been an important tool for all parties involved*

they have a more awakening effect as well as making the electoral process more visible. Of course, indecisive voters are also one of the main target in campaigns. Nonetheless, 2017 has shown that even though pre-electoral polls presented the Tories as the clear winners of the election, the actual results differed quite a lot and the composition of the current Parliament

differs from those calculations. The main achiever of this process has clearly been the Labour Party, which achieved 40% of the votes (only 2.4% less than the Conservatives) and won 30 seats.

An interesting approach to analyse the possible reasons why this occurred is to look at how social media behaved during the campaign and pre-campaign.

Many analyses have shown that one of the objectives of the Labour Party was to attract young voters and therefore managed to do two things that have had an impact in the results: on the one hand, they have managed to make Jeremy Corbyn an attractive figure for young voters. This is a phenomenon that has occurred in the US as well, where an older aged man with leftist ideas (in that case it was Bernie Sanders)



has built a narrative and an image that tunes in with many young voters' claims and agendas. One of the most memorable images of this campaign in line with this argument is when Corbyn made a short speech on 20 May just before the start of a The Libertines concert at Prenton Park, where he was cheered by 20,000 people, many of which were young voters.

On the other hand, the Labour Party has been using social media quite tactically over the campaign. While May's Conservatives relied more on poll predictions and the image of stability after Brexit, the socialists invested on online communication. How so? Just looking at the data given by researchers before the actual election day, the leftist party had a major peak in followers across social media platforms: they added more than 1.3 million across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, while 848 thousand was the increase of the Conservatives. Moreover, the biggest difference has been seen on Facebook, where since May

*// The Labour Party has been using social media quite tactically over the campaign*

announced the election, the increase in followers has been of more than 60% for Corbyn's party, while the Tories only saw a rise of 6%. But not only did the Labour beat the Conservatives in number of followers, but also on number of likes, replies and engagement level achieved. This data is very relevant for the effect Facebook has in electoral processes: it has allowed to better

target voters and to improve the nuances of segmentation techniques, make politicians more interactive and communicative with voters ("humanising" politics), etc. Additionally, Facebook is the most widely-used social media platforms across the UK, which also explains the effect of using it in campaigns.

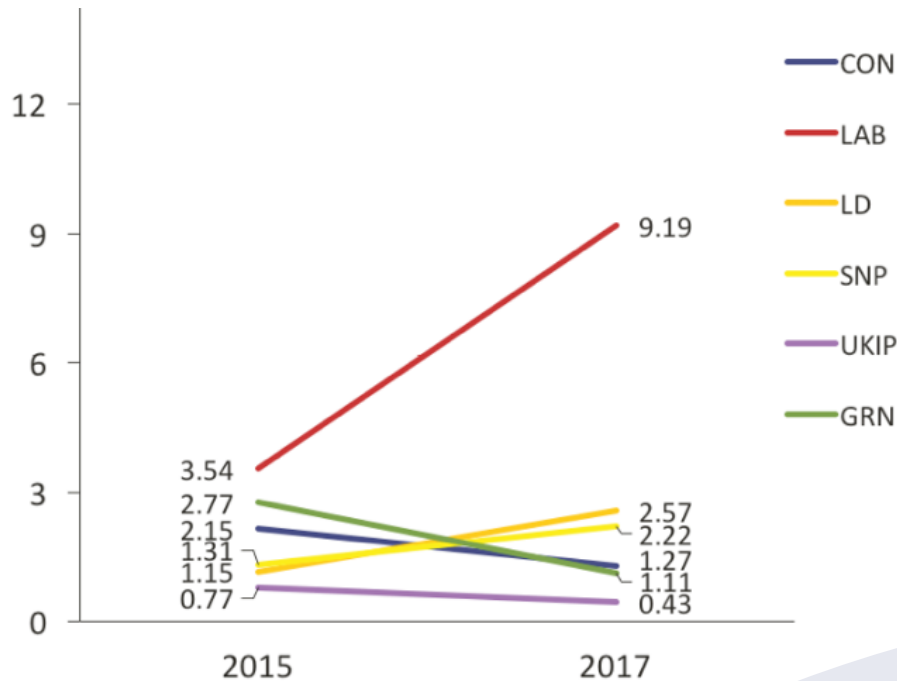
Richard Fletcher (University of Oxford), has compared the behaviour of the main 6 national parties<sup>1</sup> in the 2015 and the 2017 general election on social media, especially on video posts. According to the data presented, the Conservatives did not manage to post as many videos as the Labour Party did, which also

<sup>1</sup>: The Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, UKIP, SNP (Scottish nationalists) and the Green Party.





Average number of Facebook video posts per day  
 (2015 and 2017)



Source: Richard Fletcher

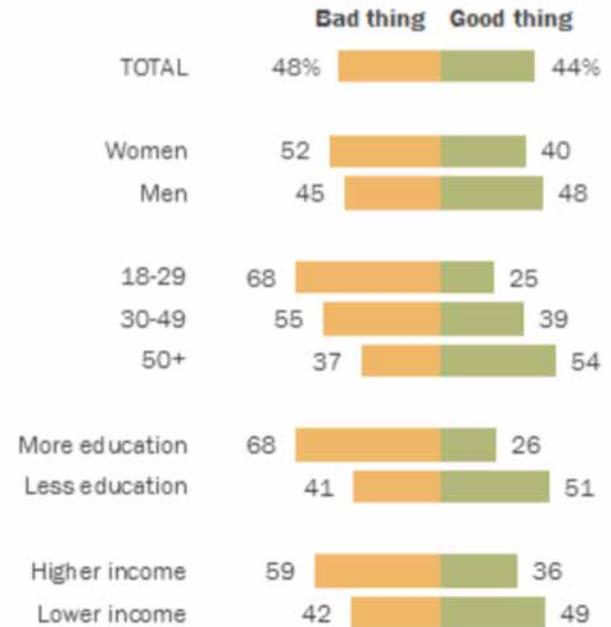
resulted in lower interactions generated (400 vs 2.5 million that their main rivals generated), so the digital campaign lacked resources and strategy in order to create an impact.

However, it seems that if the Labour Party managed to control online space so well and if the Internet makes a real difference, they should have won the election. This would be a too simplistic conclusion to the analysis of the impact the Internet has in electoral processes. The reality is that even though the Conservative Party won the elections, they lost 13 MPs and the absolute majority they had, whereas the Labour Party defeated the polls and had achieved a rise of 30 MP, strengthening their role as the Leaders of the Opposition and increasing their bargaining power and electoral options in future elections.



There needs to be taken into account that not everybody has the same level of engagement in online conversation, and young voters or professionals living in urban areas have more daily interaction though social media and the Internet than other sections of the population like older people, some people who live in rural areas, etc.

*Do you think the UK leaving the European Union will be a good thing or bad thing for the UK?*



Note: "More education" is postsecondary and above. "Less education" is secondary education or less. Income categorization based on income levels that are higher and lower than the median household income within the UK.

Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q48b.

Source: PEW RESEARCH GROUP

## THE ROLE OF BREXIT

Another vital aspect of the 2017 UK general election was the Brexit conversation. Britons had in mind that they were giving legitimacy to negotiate Brexit to whichever leader resulted as Prime Minister after the elections. This particular issue was not easy and pre-electoral polls also showed that uncertainty ruled public opinion. As stated before, the most logical thought is that Theresa May called for early elections with the hope to get a healthy majority in the House of Commons and therefore setting a conservative agenda, which would make a "hard" Brexit more tangible. Of course, if May had met her own and her party's expectations, the bargaining power and legitimacy with which her cabinet would have gone to the negotiation table with the European Union would have been much stronger.



According to the polls, people who saw Brexit as an opportunity to improve Britain's economy and quality of life trusted the Tories and UKIP, while younger voters chose alternative options. Elder population also voted more conservative, regardless of their opinion on Brexit. It needs to be taken into account that by the time the election took place, Brexit was a reality, so the question was: who will be more beneficial to make us better off in this new situation? As final results showed, the Conservatives, as a result of building an image of stability and of better handling of public resources, have managed to convince a larger number of voters even though the results in relative terms have been negative for them.

Another interesting result of this election has been that of the UKIP. The reason of the existence of the United Kingdom Independence Party was to get the UK out of the European Union, so it seemed quite logical that their number of voters got reduced significantly (from 12.6% in 2015 to 1.8% in 2017). Taking into account that the overall turnout increased 2.5%, the 2015 UKIP voters probably chose other options or did not vote as Brexit had already happened. Additionally, since the resignation of their main leader, the charismatic Nigel Farage, there has been a leadership crisis within the party (they have had three different leaders since Brexit was confirmed in the June 2016 referendum). This fact has had a negative impact in the final results obtained, which were not expected to be great either.

*“ The media coverage by the main channels was largely dominated by the two biggest parties*

## POST-ELECTORAL AGREEMENTS: UP NORTH

The most relevant issue around Brexit in the context of elections is the result itself rather than the pre-electoral impact. As the Conservative Party lost their absolute majority, they had to

make agreements with other parties in order to make Theresa May Prime Minister and to establish a stable agenda for the Brexit negotiations. The uncertainty around the post-electoral negotiations to form a government shifted May's expectations. However, even though they lost 13 MPs, it is important to stress that they had 56 MPs more than the Labour Party, which made the Tories only need 8 seats to have an absolute majority. It would have been a great opportunity for the Liberal Democrats (LDs), since their 12 seats would have given May enough room for governing. However, the positions during the Brexit campaign and in the post-Brexit months have been so different that these two parties' honeymoon during David Cameron's first term was far away from having a second part. The Conservatives had to look up north in order to find a partner and there they found the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland. Their 10 MPs





When May publicly announced that the deal was closed, the DUP denied it (also publicly), which made all parties quite nervous and accelerated the next meetings in order to sign the agreement as quickly as possible and appear before the public opinion as a strong partnership that will bring stability to the country in the forthcoming years. However, the DUP also played the media pressure game in order to warn the Conservatives that the deal was not yet closed, which can be a smart strategy if well played.

## HOW DID MEDIA COVER THE CAMPAIGN?

During a political campaign prior to an election, media coverage is a key aspect that parties look at when designing their strategy and it serves as a thermometer for the shifts in strategy while the campaign is taking place.

In the 2017 UK general election, the media coverage by the main channels (TV and newspapers more specifically) was largely dominated by the two biggest parties: The Conservative Party and the Labour Party. However, it was the Conservative Party that stole the spotlight in terms of news related to them and quotes extracted from their representatives. It must be stated that being the governing party when the election is taking place is an advantage in terms of media coverage, even though it does not necessarily get linked to a positive coverage. Nonetheless, most media in the UK have a conservative editorial

line (this can be referred back to the number of newspapers that openly supported each candidate), which also contributes to this aspect. This point differs from the dynamics that happened in the 2015 election, where the presence of smaller parties like the Scottish National Party (SNP) or the LDs was much

were sufficient for May to construct a solid term around basic agreements, where Brexit would be a central debate. Essentially, the DUP was a convenient party to shake hands with given their Euroscepticism and British nationalism. May's plan has always been to make a hard Brexit possible, where the UK's interests prevailed in the EU negotiations and where her leadership was spurred by the Brits. Her first attempt to do so was the call for early elections and hard Brexit was planned to strengthen her image and leadership.

One of the main negative issues that the deal had was the communication errors from both parties. When a deal is in negotiations, it is important to coordinate the responses in order to project an image of stability and of being a skilled negotiator. Nonetheless, there was a mismatch at the begging of the negotiations between the communication of both political forces, which mainly harmed the Conservatives.

*“ Immigration was not one of the main topics even though it was a relevant discussion during the Brexit campaign ”*



higher in comparison. Ironically, one of the most relevant parties in the post-election negotiations, the DUP, received very little attention in media coverage during the campaign, especially at the national level. However, as a consequence of a hung Parliament, they became a main topic after the election.

In terms of the issues media covered during the campaign, Brexit was the key common element of coverage, especially at the beginning and at the end of the campaign period. Unlike other elections in the UK, the mainstream media was much more policy-driven than previous years. Paradoxically, immigration was not one of the main topics even though it was a relevant discussion during the Brexit campaign. It got replaced by security and defence, which was mainly caused by the Manchester Arena bombings, which took place on 22 May. This issue shifted media coverage and news channels, as well as politicians, started to prioritise security as a discussion topic during the campaign.

Lastly, regarding the tone used by newspapers and TV channels towards the different parties, it could be observed that they were quite belligerent with the candidate and party that they

did not support. In general, the Labour Party was more criticised than the Conservative Party, although there was a period where the tendency shifted largely due to the Tory social care policy (health care and social care was also one of the top issues covered by the media).

*“ A key aspect is to understand what is the public like in the election that will take place*

## CONCLUSIONS

This general election was presented by Prime Minister Theresa May as an opportunity for herself and her party to achieve high level of legitimacy for the Brexit negotiations. In a moment where the polls gave the Conservative Party a wide victory and taking into account that the EU-UK negotiations would have a negative impact because of the wear it carries, she decided that early elections was the best solution. However, the result of the elections created a hung Parliament that resulted in rushed post-electoral negotiations and an image of uncertainty.

As a main conclusion on the 2017 UK general election, it must be highlighted that even though polls were giving a negative result to the Labour Party and a clear absolute majority to the



Conservatives before May called the elections and during the first period of the campaign, it has been proven that a good campaign strategy can make a real difference and reflect in successful results. A key aspect is to understand what is the public like in the election that will take place. In this election, Corbyn's party targeted young voters and indecisive voters mainly and launched an online campaign that focused on generating conversations and smoothing the channel of communication between them and the public. Knowing that mainstream media was not going to be favourable to their results, they decided to use alternative methods that would have a real impact in the election results.

These methods are becoming more and more relevant in campaigns and traditional parties are learning how to attract voters via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The way the Labour Party put that strategy into place was by treating these platforms as an alternative media channel in a way. Therefore, they posted audiovisual content that did not have room in mainstream media spaces and started conversations with the objective of selling their policy proposals and influencing the public.

Moreover, Brexit was, as expected, one of the main issues discussed during the campaign and a central debate in political conversations. However, other topics like security, the economic situation, the NHS (National Health Service) stole the importance immigration had in the Brexit campaign.

// ***The way  
Brexit gets  
communicated  
to the public, will  
have a real impact  
in future elections***

The situation the current government has before Brexit and the internal issues is not as strong as they did before the election, where the Conservatives had an absolute majority and the possibility of setting the agenda. Losing power at the Parliament made the internal differences within the conservatives arise and May has had a hard time

trying to calm her ministers in order to obtain a stability image that was somehow lost by public declarations made against each other. However, even though they have had to sign an agreement with the DUP, this is predicted to be quite stable and will not be an issue that will give an extra headache to the government.

Lastly, the way Brexit gets negotiated and, most importantly, the way it gets communicated to the public, will have a real impact in future elections and all parties should be clever enough to design a continuous campaign so that their influence in public opinion is improved and their image is

benefitted from it.



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