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## British Party System and the Brexit Negotiations

Przemysław Biskup

*During their annual conventions in September and October, British parties presented updated visions of the country's EU exit. The Conservatives and Labour eventually took clear "hard" and "soft" Brexit positions, respectively. These decisions result from the division in British society and are intended to reinforce the dominance of both parties against the others. This party competition, however, hardens the position of the British government in negotiations with the EU. It also increases the likelihood of Prime Minister Theresa May being replaced by a Conservative Eurosceptic in case of a crisis in the UK-EU talks.*

**Logic of the Westminster System.** Since its inception, the British party system has always been based on competition between two principal parties. Since the 1920s, these were the Conservatives and Labour. The aim of this competition is to elect a single-party majority government and an effective official opposition. The latter is constituted by the most numerous opposition party in the House of Commons and is obliged to form a shadow cabinet and propose alternative policies. Moreover, it is entitled to special funding from the public purse and the management of some parliamentary activities. A general election with no clear victory leads either to a single-party minority government, or is repeated, while coalition governments are an unwelcome exception. The success of each of the two principle parties depends on their ability to agree broad programmes that cross political camps and to mobilise voters to support them. There is an important threshold of some 400 local constituency majorities that must be gained under the first-past-the-post electoral system in use in the UK for an election to be won. The joint success of the principle parties depends on their monopolisation of public debate and electoral support (duopoly). The stronger the duopoly, the smaller the disproportion between the number of the votes and the seats obtained by each principle party at the expense of third parties, and the stronger the democratic mandate for the government and the official opposition.

**Brexit's Social Background.** For the past 30 years, the Conservative Party (Tories) and the Labour Party (Labour) have focused on representing the middle class, which has made them both economically and socially liberal, and alike. Initially, many traditional voters kept supporting their parties at the ballot box out of an absence of viable alternatives. Over time, however, many of them have become passive, or moved support to third parties. In parallel, the national divisions came to prominence in UK party politics. In the last decade, the combination of the decline in election turnout and support for both principal parties has been undermining the stability of the system.

The campaigns of 2015–2017 revealed an important change in the hierarchy of cleavages in society to which all parties must adapt in their campaign strategies. Namely, we see revealed the shift from social class as a criterion of the leading cleavage in society to one of openness (understood as the public's attitude towards immigration, a multicultural society, national tradition, etc.) combined with age and level of education. The results of the 2016 referendum and the 2017 General Election demonstrated that voters' attitudes towards both the EU and the leading political parties stem from this new leading cleavage. Moreover, the

cleavage has been used to mobilise the passive voters, and it was these newly activated voters who decisively contributed to the unexpected results in the recent campaigns.

**Brexit as a Cross-Party Issue.** Politicians in both principal parties are divided over Brexit. The electorate of both parties is divided, too, with 61% of self-declared Conservative voters and 35% of Labour voters supporting the exit from the EU in 2016 referendum (YouGov). In the UK, such proportions visibly affect the chances of each party for a decisive electoral victory. The cross-party split between Brexit supporters and opponents has been visible in the close cooperation of Tory and Labour “Remainers” in efforts to dilute the EU (Withdrawal) Bill,<sup>1</sup> as well as the calls of Labour “Leavers” to form a national coalition government that would finalise the EU exit.

**Brexit and the Duopoly.** Brexit is one of the most important issues defining public debate before the next general election. Before June 2017, both parties had emphasised the consensus around Brexit, e.g., mutually supporting the EU (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017. This led to the EU temporarily losing importance as a distinction between the principle parties. Consequently, Labour managed to focus the last election campaign on social issues. The 2017 “hung parliament,” however, has forced both the Tories and Labour to intensify their mobilisation of voters. Since they activate the public most effectively within the duopoly, they need to take antagonistic positions within an emotionally engaging two-sided dispute. Brexit offers opportunities in this respect.

**New Positions on Brexit.** The Tory programme is based on May’s September proposal,<sup>2</sup> giving priority to the UK’s recovery of full sovereignty with transitional concessions to the EU. The Conservatives therefore became the party of a “hard” Brexit while seeking to avoid a final break-up with centrist voters. In parallel, Labour declared it would defend UK access to the single market at the expense of concessions to the EU, which puts them as the “soft” Brexit party. Labour is also trying to attract Brexit opponents who have lost faith in the ability of third parties to slow the exit.

Other UK-wide parties have been reduced to representing niche groups of uncompromising “Remainers” (Liberal Democrats, or Lib Dems) or “Leavers” (UK Independence Party, or UKIP). The competition between the principal parties and the third parties, however, is crucial for the ability of the first to form a single-party majority government. In 2017, the Tories managed to retain power only by winning 2 million additional votes at UKIP’s expense. On the other hand, Labour failed to win enough votes from the Scottish National Party and the Lib Dems. The May government’s success also depends on a “confidence and supply” agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and, in this context, on the success of negotiations over the EU border regime.

**Brexit and Leadership.** In the June snap general election, the Tories lost their Commons majority despite the aim to dominate the opposition. As a result, May’s leadership has been permanently undermined ever since. If the conditional, DUP-backed government majority in the Commons erodes by spring of 2019, the favourite to replace the incumbent prime minister would be Boris Johnson, the leader of the Tory Leavers. However, if May reaches an agreement with the EU, the general election may be postponed until 2022. In that case, the chances of the current second-rank leaders to take the premiership would increase. In Labour, the current balance is based on the conditional acceptance of Jeremy Corbyn’s left-wing programme by the Blairite majority of MPs in exchange for shifting Brexit’s political centre of gravity to the EU single market.

**Conclusions and Forecasts.** The weakness of the current Tory government leads the principle parties into fierce competition: both mutual and against the third parties. Consequently, there is a growing political polarisation over the UK-EU negotiations resulting from the influence of a new societal cleavage on Brexit. The parties’ games over the EU will largely decide which one of them, and under whose leadership, will form the next government, and whether there will be a single-party majority. Nevertheless, UK Brexit politics are full of contradictions. Whilst the electoral logic makes the principal parties take antagonistic positions on the EU withdrawal, their decisions in this matter have been contested by a significant proportion of their respective politicians and voters. They are, therefore, sensitive to rebellions within their own ranks.

The approach of the Conservative government to the negotiations with the EU is a result of strong internal tensions and the need to uphold the image of an uncompromising defender of sovereignty. The result is transactional tactics based on an exchange of concessions with the EU. However, in case of EU tenacity, the lack of agreement might also be cost-effective for the Tories, since it plays well with their image as “hard” Brexiters. The heated British debate over the EU-exit model increases the risk of a “no-deal” Brexit, which would be the most unfavourable scenario for both sides. This results in the UK government negotiation position being hardened by the party competition. However, the EU side may moderate the UK debate, first by permission to open talks on future relations, which would strengthen Prime Minister May and facilitate UK concessions. Second, far-reaching transparency in the formulation of EU financial expectations is crucial, since this issue is easily exploited by UK Eurosceptics to shape a negative image of the Union.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Biskup, “The Importance of the UK’s Withdrawal Bill in the Brexit Negotiations with the EU,” PISM Bulletin, no. 93 (1033), 4 October 2017, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>2</sup> P. Biskup, “Theresa May’s Florence Speech,” PISM Spotlight, no. 54/2017, 26 September 2017, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).