

The Brexit “Party” is over

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As I write this blog column, much is being made in the media of the incipient “victory” of Nigel Farage’s latest political vehicle in the guise of the “Brexit Party”. The Brexit Party is forecast to do particularly well in the Midlands, with YouGov for example predicting a 40% vote share in the West Midlands^[1] (which would see it return 3 out of 7 MEPs for the region).

However, as to the UK overall, this leaves me asking just what would constitute “victory”. Given our narrow focus in the UK on individual party vote share, is simply being the “Number 1” party enough? Given that UKIP got about 27% of the vote across the UK in the 2014 EU Parliament elections, the Brexit Party would certainly have to do better than that. Anything less would be a “loss”. Current polls forecast them as obtaining between 32 and 37%^[2] of the vote share, which would certainly make them the no. 1 party by vote share.

However, against this, the same polls have combined “Remain” party (that is, the Lib Dems, Greens, Change UK and SNP and Plaid Cymru) shares at about 36%². In between we have Labour and the Conservatives, who as a collective of MPs (as opposed to their official party stances) lack a clearly defined “in” or “out” approach to Brexit.

Hence, I think that a “major win” would only occur if the Brexit Party secures more than 40% of the vote, which would put them within the range of winning scores of seats (if not an outright majority) in a Westminster (First-Past-the-Post) election, should such a share be repeated. This is especially so given their platform of exiting the EU with “no deal” which polls also suggest only about a quarter of UK voters would support^[3].

Of course, such an outcome is far from certain – Nigel Farage himself has never won a Westminster contest, despite having tried so on seven previous occasions. That said, success for the Brexit Party clearly will have seismic implications for the Conservative Party, whose members overwhelmingly support exiting the EU ASAP (aka

preferring “no deal” over a “bad deal” [4], to paraphrase Theresa May) and for whom again the same polls have predicted a collapse in their vote share to less than 10%².

Tory MPs then will be under immense pressure to support a harder stance on Brexit and the prospect of a leadership election in the autumn with the likely outcome of a Brexiteer PM lends credence to this. However, Brexiteers do not command a majority in this Parliament, which could prompt a Brexiteer PM to seek a fresh election to try and secure a mandate from “the People” (assuming they could must the two-thirds majority needed in the House of Commons to enact this – distinctly possible given the current preference of Jeremy Corbyn to bring on an election).

What would happen then? A Tory-Brexit party coalition? I think this would a recipe for more chaos, as the Remainer element of the Tory party surely could not support such a combination and would most likely cross the floor. The alternative then is some type of “rainbow coalition” of centre-left parties. Given the likely strength of the SNP in such a grouping, the “cost” of such a rainbow alliance could well be another independence referendum for Scotland.

There is still the distinct prospect of course that in the absence of ratification of a withdrawal agreement (Meaningful Vote 4.0) the UK could still face the default scenario of No Deal come October 31st if Government and Parliament cannot agree on a further extension to Article 50 by then. I say this as it is unlikely that anything will be resolved between the summer Parliamentary recess and then September party conference season, leaving us with only a few Parliamentary sitting days in October to resolve this dilemma.

In my view then, the stated objective of the Brexit Party to exit the EU with no deal is more likely to happen by default, or accident, rather than deliberate intent on the part of the Government. And I do not think that the Brexit Party will win more than 40% of the vote share come this Sunday night, when the EU election results will be published.

Indeed, polling for a Westminster election, were one to occur now, only puts them at 18%¹ – marginally better than the Lib Dems. Coming back to my earlier point about only a quarter of the public wanting to

exit the EU with No Deal, it seems more likely that the UK will be seeking to extend Article 50, come October 31st (indeed, as Jean-Claude Juncker, soon to be outgoing President of the European Commission, mused over the past 48 hours).

As to the big question of “in” or “out” polls have consistently shown a trend in the direction of staying in the EU by a majority of respondents^[5]. Which leads me to project then that for the Brexit Party, how long then until the Brexit “Party” is over?

[1] https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/hpztu0aw1o/YouGov_Datapraxis.%20Best%20for%20Britain%20and%20Hope%20Not%20Hate_190517_1w.pdf

[2] <https://inews.co.uk/news/brexit/european-elections-polls-polling-eu-vote-2019-brexit-party-latest-predictions-tomorrow/>

[3] <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/in-the-event-of-parliament-voting-down-the-brexit-deal-that-the-government-negotiates-with-the-european-union-what-do-you-think-should-happen-next/>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/jan/04/most-tory-members-would-choose-no-deal-over-may-brexit-plan>

[5] <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/if-a-second-eu-referendum-were-held-today-how-would-you-vote/>