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UK SNAP ELECTIONS - WHAT IF?

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Is UK Prime Minister (PM) Boris Johnson about to go for a snap election? This is probably not his preferred option yet. Johnson claims that he needs to keep the hard Brexit threat alive to force the EU to eventually seek a compromise that can prevent a hard Brexit. However, if rebel MPs get to the verge of success in their efforts this week to block a hard Brexit, either by passing legislation that would force Johnson to ask the EU for another Brexit delay or, failing that, by toppling his government, [the PM could move first and put forward legislation for a snap election](#) – possibly as early as Wednesday or Thursday this week.

Strictly speaking, the PM cannot ‘call’ an election as many pundits often write. He must get 2/3 support in the House of Commons for that. But that should not be too difficult for him. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn – despite his poor polling - would reportedly back a snap election. As the situation is fluid it remains unclear whether or not snap elections are really on the cards. But as the option seems to be on the table, we need to consider two “what if” scenarios for such an eventuality: 1) a snap election just before the scheduled Brexit day of 31 October; and 2) a snap election after Brexit on 31 October.

Snap elections before 31 October

Tell them again: A general election before 31 October would de facto be a referendum on a hard Brexit. As the Brexit wing of the Conservative Party see it, 52% of voters backed Brexit in 2016, c82% of voters backed the Conservatives and Labour in the 2017 general election (both parties promised to deliver Brexit), while the Brexit Party won the UK vote in the 2019 European elections with 29 out of 73 seats. Although the 2016 referendum and the 2017 election were not about a hard Brexit, Johnson and his allies seem to believe that they could frame a snap election as a choice between the ‘people’ and an anti-democratic political class. We see two potential complications for the opponents of a hard Brexit in such a scenario:

- 1) To boost his chances of a working majority, Johnson may do a deal with Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party. Farage is popular in the pro-Brexit parts of northern England. He could pick up support in some traditional Labour seats where voters would be reluctant to back Boris. Farage would only support Johnson if the PM adopted a hard Brexit as the Conservatives’ official policy. Based on current polls, a Conservative(32%)/Brexit Party(15%) coalition would get 47% of vote - that could be enough for a sizeable majority for such an alliance. The much more fragmented opponents of a hard Brexit would find it more difficult to agree on joint candidates to run against a Tory/Brexit Party alliance.
- 2) By not voting Conservatives, moderate Pro-EU voters would run the risk of a Corbyn-led government. This could deter them from voting for an anti-Brexit candidate.

In our view, the probability of a Corbyn-led government remains low. Even if Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, independents and the Green Party win enough seats to form a majority – perhaps if Johnson refuses to ally with Farage - such a grand alliance against a hard Brexit may fail to



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form a proper government. There is a lot of bad blood between the ex-Labour independents and the Labour Party. Centrist Liberal Democrat leader Jo Swinson would be unlikely to join forces with Labour in government as long as it is led by Corbyn. In the somewhat unlikely scenario that the pro-EU parties win a majority of seats, they could form a temporary coalition in order to either stop Brexit altogether or hold a second Brexit referendum. A grand alliance of all opponents of a hard Brexit would probably not stay together for long, possibly resulting in new elections again.

Snap elections after 31 October

Snap elections shortly after the 31 October Brexit date could maximise votes for the UK Conservatives:

- After Brexit, a vote for the Brexit party would have become pointless.
- In the same vein, a vote for the Lib Dems in order to promote “remain” would make less sense than before as the “remain” option would no longer exist.
- Right after Brexit, Labour would probably still be led by hard-left Jeremy Corbyn, whom many opponents of Johnson consider unelectable.
- Right after Brexit, even if it is a hard one, the true costs would not be visible.
- As a proven campaigner, Boris may well believe that he could get away with blaming the EU27 for the short-term disruptions of a hard Brexit.

Overall conclusion: The outcome of potential snap elections would be highly uncertain. But unless Corbyn backs down and the opposition overcomes its fragmentation, the hard Brexiteers may have a structural advantage that would give them a reasonable chance to prevail even if a hard Brexit is not the preferred choice of most voters.

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