
UK ELECTION: WHAT ARE THE BIG ISSUES?

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The UK general election is being billed as the most important to take place in decades. With Boris Johnson's Conservatives seeking a majority, and rivals desperate to alter course on Brexit, what are the key issues?

To leave or not to leave

It's still the same old question. For Boris Johnson and the Conservatives, the central message of the whole campaign is clear — "Get Brexit Done."

The currently ruling Conservatives are eager to capitalize on impatience among a large part of the electorate 3 1/2 years on from the referendum. They have pledged that Britain will leave the EU on January 31 next year [] with a transition period until the end of 2020. Question marks remain over any trade deal. Some within the party would prefer a hard form of Brexit that would prioritize a trade deal with the United States over maintaining close relations with Europe.

The Labour Party fears losing voters in parts of the country that voted for Brexit in 2016 [] particularly in the north and Midlands [] it adopts an anti-Brexit strategy. Instead, its policy since the referendum has been one of "constructive ambiguity," something reflected in its manifesto [] which appears to be neither for, nor against, Britain's exit from the EU.

Instead, Labour wants to renegotiate a softer Brexit deal, which it would then put to the people in a second referendum with the option of remaining in the bloc.

After a shrill referendum campaign, nearly 52% of British voters opted to leave the EU on June 23. Polls had shown a close race before the vote with a slight lead for those favoring remaining in the EU. Conservative British Prime Minister David Cameron, who had campaigned for Britain to stay, acknowledged the "will of the British people" and resigned the following morning.

Should the Liberal Democrats win the election outright, they say this would effectively be a mandate to cancel Brexit altogether. Indeed, such an outcome is very unlikely. The Liberal Democrats have said they are open to working with other parties to secure a second referendum if the Conservatives fail to win an outright majority.

From the cradle to the grave

The founding of Britain's National Health Service (NHS) is widely seen as the proudest moment in the history of Britain's Labour Party.

The NHS was established in 1948 as a free-at-the-point-of-service health care system available to all Britons "from the cradle to the grave."

As well as being its crowning glory, the NHS is also the weapon of choice for any Labour Party in taking on the Conservatives, who have long struggled to gain public trust in their stewardship of the much-loved institution.

Corbyn has accused Johnson of putting the service system "up for sale" in any trade deal with US President Donald Trump.

Indeed, the emergence of a photo of a four-year-old boy with suspected pneumonia sleeping on a pile of coats on the floor of an NHS hospital precipitated a potentially damaging campaign moment for the Tories.

When confronted with the image on a journalist's smartphone, Johnson avoided making a comment and hid the phone in his pocket [] response that was criticized as clumsy and lacking in empathy.

Room without a view

Snapshot of a small British city: Wigan, west of Manchester. In the Brexit referendum, nearly 64 percent of its residents voted in favor of leaving the EU. Sebastian Wells took his camera there. His work and that of the other graduates of Berlin's Ostkreuz School of Photography comprise an exhibition that affords a view of Great Britain before the looming Brexit.

The Liberal Democrats have promised to fund an increase in health spending with a slight rise in income tax to tackle workforce shortages and to invest in mental health.

It's the economy, stupid

The Conservative Party has long claimed to be the most competent on the economy.

This time around, the party wants to invest in public services, while also cutting taxes.

It promises that Brexit provides an opportunity to "unleash Britain's potential" by ending uncertainty and allowing investment to flow into the UK economy. The party says Brexit can be an economic success, despite forecasts from the government's own treasury that the UK will be poorer under any form of exit from the EU.

Labour promises to "rewrite the rules of the economy so it works for everyone [] just the billionaires" with policies of wealth distribution and renationalization. It says any Labour Brexit will put jobs first and foremost, avoiding potential economic damage.

Both of the main parties' manifestos make no sense economically, according to Britain's Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). The independent think tank says a hard Brexit under the Conservatives would pose a real risk to the UK economy. Meanwhile, it said, Labour's ambitious spending plans while increasing taxes only for the top 5% of the population didn't add up.

Only the Liberal Democrats plans [modest] modest tax rises and public spending increases [were] were singled out for praise by the IFS. The institute also predicted a growth dividend of 2% if the party's policy of canceling Brexit was enacted.

Crime and sentencing back in focus

Police numbers have been a key issue in the campaign, with the Conservatives saying they would put 20,000 more police onto the street.

Critics were quick to point out that there has been a cut of roughly the same number of police [between] between 19,000 and 22,000 — since the Tories came to power in 2010.

Labour blames an increase in violent crime on the number of police taken off the street and cuts to other services. It promises to invest in "policing to prevent crime and make our communities safer" and also to address "the causes of crime."

The Conservatives [are] seen as the party of law and order [and] also pledged "tougher sentencing for the worst offenders."

Crime and sentencing was always bubbling away at the back of this election campaign, but the London Bridge attack at the end of November put it back in the spotlight. The perpetrator of the attack was released halfway through his sentence under a law introduced by the last Labour government. This was seized upon by Johnson, who called for an end to automatic early releases as well as the complete end of release on license for people convicted of terror offenses.

Greener on the other side

Everyone likes trees, so a promise to plant more of them is unlikely to harm any party's electoral chances. The election has seen parties of most political hues promising to plant ever-increasing numbers.

The Conservatives promise 30 million a year, the Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party (SNP) 60 million, the Greens 70 million and Labour 100 million.

On emissions, the Conservatives also have the least ambitious target [to] become carbon neutral by 2050. The Liberal Democrats are aiming for 2045, while Labour is looking at zero net emissions by the mid-2030s.

Labour is hoping to attract young people, for whom the environment is a touchstone issue, to vote for it. The party is promising a "green industrial revolution," creating eco-friendly jobs in industry, transport, energy and agriculture as a key plank of its manifesto.

The Conservatives say they'll use Brexit as an opportunity to protect and restore the natural environment after Britain leaves the EU. It's unclear why this is not possible within the bloc.

Surprisingly, Labour came out top in a survey of policies by the environmental group Friends of the Earth — ahead even of the Greens.

A similar survey of commitments by Greenpeace put the Greens top with Labour in second place. The Liberal Democrats were third with the Conservatives in sixth place, behind Wales' national party Plaid Cymru and the SNP.

The integrity of the United Kingdom is an issue all over again. A potential north-south break up is on the cards with renewed calls for a Scottish independence referendum.

Although a 2014 referendum about whether Scotland should be independent was deemed a once-in-a-generation event, things have changed.

The creator of the world-famous Gruffalo monster, illustrator Axel Scheffler, conceived this drawing of a European heraldic animal: the EU owl. Born in Hamburg, the artist has lived in London for almost 30 years. Since the Brexit referendum, however, the United Kingdom "no longer feels like a home," he said. Scheffler initiated the book "Drawing Europe Together."

The major argument against breaking up the more than three-centuries-old union was that it would leave Scotland outside the European Union. Brexit changed all that. Most voters north of the border wanted to stay in the EU, and now feel they are being pulled out of the bloc against their will.

Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon has said she is keen for another independence referendum to be held, and it could be the price of any coalition or confidence-and-supply arrangement with Labour.

While the issue is a particularly hot topic in Scotland [] it could help the Conservatives [] it's also likely to influence some voters in the rest of the UK. Boris Johnson has been keen to link Labour and the SNP, and a possible "return to division and uncertainty."

Meanwhile, Jeremy Corbyn is pointing at the potential of an east-west split, with the likelihood of future customs declarations and border checks between Britain and Northern Ireland under Johnson's Brexit deal.

Kaynak/Source: