

COMPASS THINK PIECE

# Uncertain Terrain: The Realignment of the Political Blocs and the Regressive Alliance

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ken Spours** is Professor of Post-Compulsory Education at UCL Institute of Education. Using 21st Century Gramscian Marxism, he has a particular interest in the exploration of alliance building and 'progressive bloc politics'.

## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This is the first in what we hope will be a series on 'the political conjuncture' – the Gramscian term for the combination of circumstances, ideas, forces, leaders and events that shape the immediate terrain on which we act. This is opposed to the deep tectonic plates of culture, technology and ideology which shape the bigger and longer-term political picture. The aim is to use different writers to produce new conjunctural analyses when the moment demands it. In these fast moving, complex and unpredictable times this could be quite often. So we are keen to keep exploring these key tactical issues and would welcome any comments or ideas about how.

Compass **Think Pieces** are shorter, sharper and more immediate responses to key issues. The ideas and the thoughts are always those of the author, not Compass. They can cover any topic that helps us understand better what a good society should or could look like and how we might get there. We welcome suggestions for future publications, especially from women and any groups or people in society who are under-represented in the field of political thought and action.

If you want to contribute to this series or have ideas about what we should cover please contact: [neal@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:neal@compassonline.org.uk) in the first instance.

## Summary

As Leave/Remain challenges Left/Right identities, at least while the ‘Brexit Window’ is open, Britain faces an unpredictable and unprecedented four-way party split. We may, therefore, be entering a new era of Bloc Politics.

The evolving Conservative/Brexit Party/DUP political Bloc - Regressive Alliance - has distinct advantages because it can coalesce around a Johnson Conservative leadership and Leave/No Deal with the potential to collaborate electorally. Since the accession of Johnson as PM, there is evidence of an uptick in Conservative electoral fortunes as it drains Brexit Party support.

A broad progressive political formation, on the other hand, faces a series of obstacles including a Remain Alliance focused on the Brexit binary; the divergence between those who want a politics of transformation not restoration; first-past-the-post behaviours with little incentive to collaborate electorally; a Labour leadership unwilling to reach out within the Labour Party, never mind beyond it, but also the reluctance of the Lib Dems to build bridges beyond Remain or the Greens to lead on alliance-building as they did in 2017.

With such a slim government majority another election is likely, and the fear is it will not go well for progressive and transformatory forces resulting in the long-term breakup of the two-party system, with Labour and Tory splits a distinct possibility.

The threat of a Johnson-led Conservative Party and the Regressive Alliance should galvanise thinking about how to create a long-term and transformative Progressive Alliance in an era in which there is an overwhelming need for political collaboration – not least on a new democratic settlement. Otherwise this will be an era of real party-political diversity, but not cross-party collaboration.

## Introduction – a rolling analysis

The aim of this paper is to provide a political analysis of the current period to help understand the combination of forces and ideas that are shaping the immediate terrain of UK politics in what can be seen as the ‘Brexit Window’.

For about 18 months following the May 2017 General Election there had been an electoral stalemate of the Conservative and Labour parties, both obtaining about 40 percent of voting intentions. During 2019 this electoral binary has given way to a highly unusual ‘four-way’ party situation driven by Brexit polarisations. This is evolving rapidly with the Conservatives now dominating the Brexit Party and thus leading the ‘Regressive Alliance’, but the potential ‘Progressive Alliance’ more split between Labour and the Lib Dems.

As well as exploring the dynamics of this new political landscape, the paper also attempts to apply ‘political bloc analysis’ to help analyse how the different political parties, including political and social forces beyond the four parties, could be seen to be coalescing into longer-term ‘progressive’ and ‘regressive’ political and ideological formations that take us beyond the Remain/Leave binaries that dominate before the Brexit Window eventually closes.

This conjunctural analysis will be revisited every few months in order to track a rapidly changing and dynamic situation.

## Part 1. Shifting political landscape in 2019

### The erosion of the 40 percent blocs

The decline of the dominant role of the Conservative and Labour Parties since 2017 can be seen in Figure 1 below. The polling data reported in this section is accurate as of 5 August 2019.

During the period January - July 2019, Labour support declined by about 14 points from 39 percent to about 25 percent. By way of a rough estimate, about nine points appeared to have been transferred to the Lib Dems; about three percent to Greens and possibly three percent to the Brexit Party. The Conservative Party also shed about 14 points, with most of this going to the Brexit Party and some to the Lib Dems. The newly registered Brexit Party thus built its 20 per cent performance mainly from Conservative defectors; virtually all UKIP voters and a residue from Labour. Conversely, the Lib Dems doubled their electoral appeal from nine percent to 18 percent, based mainly on Labour defectors and some Conservatives. The Greens have also benefitted from their clear Remain position, doubling their vote from about three percent to six-seven percent.

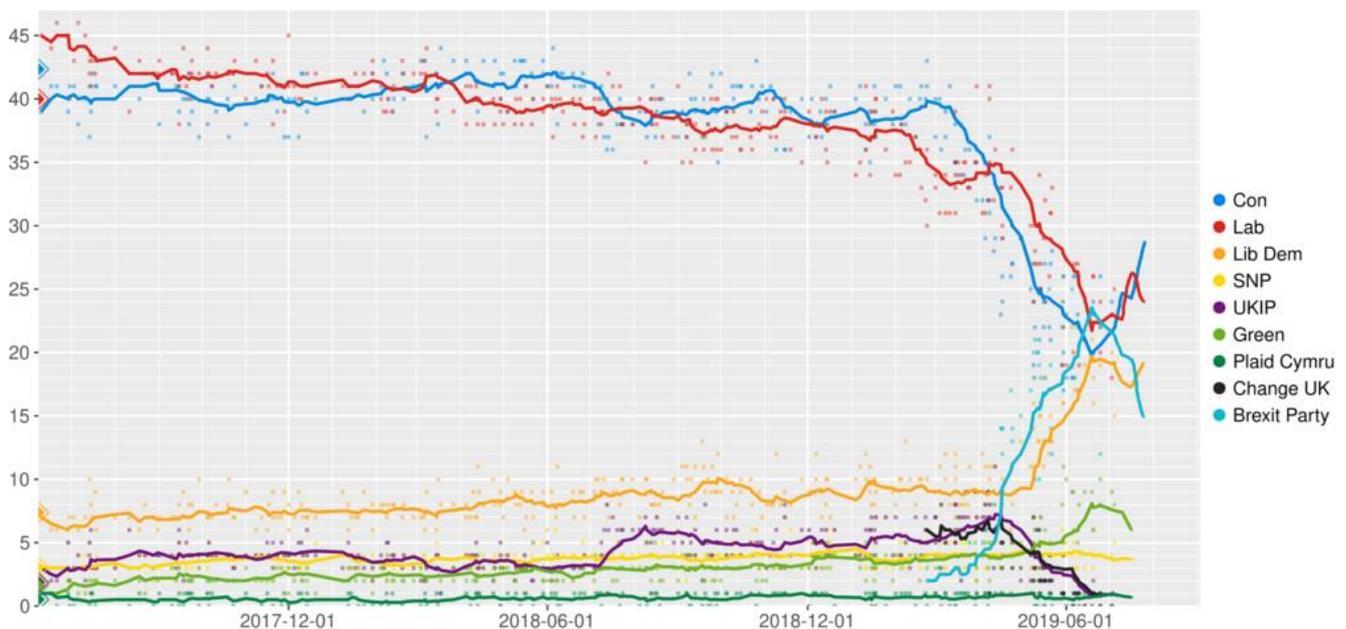


Figure 1 UK Polling data 2016-28 July 2019. Source: *Opinion polling for the next United Kingdom general election - Wikipedia* 28 July 2019

The latest polling evidence (as of 5 August) shows that since Johnson became PM there has been a distinct uptick in Conservative voting intentions. The Tories are now averaging 30-31 percent (up 5-6 points), paralleled by a sharp decline in support for the Brexit Party at 13-14 percent (down 6-7 points). Labour remains on 25 percent and the Lib Dems on 18 percent with the Greens on 6 percent. In recent weeks, therefore, the movement has been to the Tories within the Leave-shaped Regressive Alliance, whereas Labour, Lib Dems and the Greens appear to be caught in a relationship of static equilibrium. This picture is expected to continue to evolve in the coming weeks.

The driving force behind these shifts is the 'Brexit Window' – a reframing of political and ideological allegiances which has taken on an increasingly divisive cultural dimension of Leave/Remain with the closing of any space for a compromise around a soft Brexit, leaving the polar opposites of No Deal or a second referendum/voke as the dominant choices.

## **Part 2. The Regressive and Progressive Alliances**

### **The Regressive Alliance**

The rightward shift of the Conservative Party, reflected in clear support for Johnson as leader and the establishment of his Cabinet as overwhelming hard Brexiteers, has been largely propelled by the success of a Farage-led Brexit Party. Its political success is three-fold – first to decisively shift the Tories to a nationalist position and locking them into a No-Deal scenario; second to have brought about the collapse of UKIP and the fuelling of far-Right entryism into the Conservative Party (its membership has increased by 50,000 during 2019 and polling of Conservative members has shown widespread support for Farage); and to have sufficiently influenced Conservative politics to the degree that a Johnson-led Government will have at least informal links to him. Farage knows that in a first-past-the-post system the Brexit Party will struggle to become a major representative electoral force. Its aim could, therefore, evolve into digital-based populist disruptions of democratic systems, not least via the Tory Party.

In the current four-party situation, the new Conservative leadership will see the clear electoral potential of a Right Bloc or 'Regressive Alliance'. This will be based ideologically on a neo-Thatcherite nationalism – the detachment from social regulations of Europe in order to pursue the building of an extreme Anglo-Saxon capitalist model based on deregulation, global trade deals and subordination to the US. The composition of Johnson's Conservative Cabinet confirms this, with leading roles for Dominic Raab, Sajid Javid, Andrea Leadsom, Jacob Rees-Mogg, Michael Gove and, critically, Dominic Cummings, in which the top Tory team is a regathering to use the Leave campaign of 2016 as a guide to an upcoming General Election. It is unlikely that there will be a formal political relationship between Johnson and Farage. However, the ideological and informal affinities will mean that Farage is drawn into the orbit of a hard-Right Conservative Party and Conservative electoral fortunes are dependent on attracting Brexit Party support. This means that the Regressive Alliance appears hard-wired for a No-Deal Brexit.

The total electoral size of Right Bloc in July 2019 is about 45 per cent, more than enough to be able to form a sustainable government if the current voter base is mobilised. Therefore, it makes electoral sense for the perpetuation of Brexit culture wars; the polarisation of opinion around No Deal and the development of an electoral division of labour of campaign focus – the Conservatives given a clear run in the South and Brexit Party focusing on the North to eat into Labour votes. This doesn't have to be a public deal or pact and can be an under-the-radar deal not to campaign against other, as Labour and the Liberal Democrats practised to stunning success in 1997. In this the Right Bloc will be supported by important sections of the media: Telegraph, Times/Sky/Murdoch and LBC.

While Theresa May attempted to construct this electoral coalition in 2017 based on a similar Brexit pitch, she failed to win many Northern English constituencies despite securing a record level of working-class votes. But then Brexit was largely seen as a done deal and the election as a waste of time, allowing Leavers

and Remainers to protest-vote for Corbyn<sup>1</sup>. With the shine off the Corbyn new ball and Brexit still up in the air, the same dynamics no longer apply.

However, it will not be all plain sailing for a Johnson-led Conservative Party and Brexit Party in the Regressive Alliance. Coming back to Parliament with No Deal in October will split the Conservatives, but the calculation is that the new Cabinet can weather the storm and call a General Election. Nevertheless, a head-long rush to No Deal risks mobilising opposition, because most people are scared of the economic consequences of a disorderly exit. In addition, while there may be temporary unity on Brexit, many former Labour voters from Dagenham to Wigan clearly have very different long-term socio-economic interests to Johnson or Farage.

Beyond the Brexit Window, and viewing the Right Bloc economically and socially, there are more problems still – such as risks to the historic relationship with corporate business and a continued dependence on older voters. Johnson's spending plans around the NHS, social care and policing, while relevant, are clearly aimed at these sections of the electorate.

In every sense, the Conservative Right Turn is a gamble to use the Brexit Window to regain political momentum from long-term electoral decline. However, this shift will constantly chafe against 21<sup>st</sup>-century economic, geopolitical and social realities that feel very different from the last great Conservative experiment of the 1980s. But how these tensions play out politically will depend in good part on the condition of the opposition.

### **Labour, the Progressive and Remain Alliances**

The Progressive Bloc, insofar as it can even be conceptualised in this way, in electoral terms totals about 50 percent and even a little more if the nationalist parties are included. The Progressive Bloc is thus potentially larger than the Right Bloc, reflecting to some degree the

slight Remain lead over Leave in Brexit opinion polls.

However, the potential progressive formation is ideologically and politically fragmented and faces a major structural barrier in the form of the electoral system, not least because of the split between four parties and not just two. In this sense, it does not really function as a political bloc and certainly not in the same way as the putative Regressive Alliance. Any concept of a Progressive Alliance faces major short- and long-term challenges.

In the short-term and within the Brexit Window, a distinction has to be made between a 'Remain Alliance' and a 'Progressive Alliance'. The Remain Alliance (metropolitan and centrist sections of Labour, the Lib Dems, One Nation Conservatives and elements within the nationalist parties) could be regarded as a 'restoration alliance' in that its abiding sentiment is a return to the centrism of the Blair/Cameron era; as if that was feasible, let alone desirable. There is a Remain-and-Reform wing to the anti-Brexit movement, that includes the Greens and some of the Labour left, but it is relatively weak and the route to reforming the EU is a distant objective.

A Progressive Alliance that wants to transform the political and economic landscape in the Brexit Window, on the other hand, would have to cut across the new and problematic ideological and cultural binaries in an attempt to forge enough common interest between communitarian and cosmopolitan instincts. This would mean actively reaching out to Brexit constituencies, notably Labour's traditional working-class voters in the Midlands and the North, rather than leaving them prey to the Brexit Party. This may well be impossible within the Brexit Window – but regardless of the Brexit outcome, the seeds of democratic and economic transformation must now be sown.

Not least, this progressive position has potentially transformative characteristics because it could swing attention back to regional economic regeneration/the Green

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<sup>1</sup> Goodwin, M and Heath, O. (2017) *The UK 2017 General Election Examined*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

New Deal and a focus on citizens' assemblies and new democratic and participatory approaches. But can a Progressive Alliance cut across the political incentives of the Hard Remain position of the Lib Dems and Greens?

And as ever, fuelling problems for the Progressive Alliance is 'first-past-the post (FPTP) behaviours' – the logic of the voting system that encourages politically self-interested attitudes and actions. All potentially progressive parties are currently exhibiting FPTP behaviours. The Labour Party is convinced that it can go it alone by pivoting towards Remain and highlighting the threat of the Right Bloc and a No Deal in order to bring back Lib Dem and Green votes. As part of these FPTP behaviours and its own Left sectionalist outlook, the Labour leadership will most likely, in private at least, welcome Johnson as PM as a polarising force – thus clarifying the high-stakes nature of the FPTP system – its Corbyn or Johnson! This in part explains the hostile reception dished out by Corbynites to the new Lib Dem leader who might otherwise cloud this clear picture. These moves could conceivably push its electoral performance past 30 percent mark. Meanwhile, and unsurprisingly Jo Swinson has stated that the Lib Dems will not talk to Corbyn, and the Greens are reluctant to support a national push for alliance-building as they did in 2017.

But a partially successful Remain Alliance could be built. This did not take place in the Euro elections, but did in the recent Brecon and Radnorshire by-election and could in any General Election. The Lib Dems won this particular local contest due in large part to the fact that the Greens and Plaid Cymru stood aside, while the Conservatives and Brexit Party remained in competition. But it must be noted that the forces of the Regressive Alliance polled more than the Progressive Alliance, which continues to point to the power of the Brexit binary.

There is also the matter of internal party divisions. Conservative divisions will be laid bare by No Deal and its rejection by a sizeable number of ex-ministers and Conservative MPs. Labour's internal relations remain fraught. There is deepening concern about an introspective Corbyn leadership that has also

been consumed by the Anti-Semitism row. There is, however, the prospect of greater unity around an evolving Remain position, the rejection of No Deal, and its radical economic and social programme.

The Conservatives will be looking very closely at polling in the new Johnson period to see if the improvement in their political fortunes is maintained in the coming period. Before the Johnson accession, the Conservatives feared a General Election. It may be the case that they now fear it somewhat less, because they feel they now have political momentum and see an opportunity, while Labour is beset with its own problems.

### **The political potential of both blocs**

Electurally the Regressive Alliance currently appears to have the advantage of a clear ideological position (nationalism, sovereignty, Leave) and the means of coalescing this through a formal or, more likely, informal relationship between a Johnson-led Conservative Party and a Farage-led Brexit Party (with the DUP in the wings). They don't have to agree anything other than to keep their campaigning tanks off each other's lawns across target seats.

However, as the Peterborough by-election showed, national trends do not play out neatly on the ground. It is possible that if Labour has a clear economic programme to appeal to its working-class base (albeit diminished) and pivot sufficiently to Remain to keep youth and progressive middle classes on board, it could assemble winning positions in different types of constituencies. While FPTP plays havoc in a four-way split, it is hard to see how Labour can hope for more than minority government status. Eventually someone is going to have to talk to someone else.

## **Part 3. Three political scenarios (August 2019)**

How far four-way party situation plays out as two blocs will depend on possible scenarios over the coming months. Here we briefly rehearse three related possibilities.

### **Scenario 1. Close the Brexit Window through a May-style deal or Leave and Delay**

As the point of Leaving draws close, so will grow the anxiety about No Deal and a sheer weariness with the Brexit Window. The official Conservative Government position is to obtain a repackaging of May’s Deal to attract enough support from Labour MPs who want to this Brexit era to draw to a close, and to communicate the message that Leave have won. Alternatively, the PM could leave politically, but delay economic separation by moves to negotiate a Canada-style option. Either way, this will cause deep splits both within Labour and within the Conservatives – as a betrayal of both Hard Remain and Hard Leave positions. While a revamped Deal is official Conservative policy, the EU is very unlikely to agree, particularly if it involves a removal of the Irish Backstop, compromising the functioning of the Single Market. All the signs, therefore, are that the Conservatives are heading for No Deal while stating that their political objective is the opposite.

**Scenario 2. No Deal is rejected by Parliament**

It is possible that Johnson will return with No Deal, get Cabinet backing and put it to Parliament. The Parliamentary arithmetic suggests this would be rejected and Johnson would call a snap General Election to win a majority to deliver Brexit. Johnson will want to persuade the electorate and key interest groups that No Deal will have only temporary downsides and that these will be offset by an emergency Government spending programme.

**Scenario 3. General Election possibilities**

All roads thus far appear to point to a General Election in the near future rather than a People’s Vote. Whether it’s a pre- or post-Brexit General Election and how much Brexit dominates the landscape will be critical (see Figure 2 below).

	<b>Pre-Brexit GE</b>	<b>Post-Brexit GE</b>
<b>Conservative</b>	<p><b>Upside:</b> Mandate to deliver against Parliament and EU blocking will of the people. Unites the Regressive Alliance</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> High risk because of forecasts of economic and geopolitical disruption and how these could impact on different sections of the population</p>	<p><b>Upside:</b> Majority to make Brexit work</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> Regressive Alliance no longer needed, Progressive Alliance forms and return to domestic issues where Labour is arguably stronger.</p> <p>Any significant delay could enable an economic downturn engendered by No Deal/Bad Deal to intensify</p>
<b>Labour</b>	<p><b>Upside:</b> domestic issues back into play, but unlikely to be as helpful as 2017</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> Brexit position <u>unravels</u> and they win neither Leavers nor Remainers.</p> <p>Greater scrutiny of <u>Labour</u> as an election victory is a real possibility.</p>	<p><b>Upside:</b> domestic issues back into play and Brexit dilemmas electorally and politically are largely over</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> none</p>
<b>Lib Dem</b>	<p><b>Upside:</b> Clear Remain Position</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> none</p>	<p><b>Upside:</b> none</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> Remain bubble bursts and few other issues to campaign on</p>
<b>Brexit Party</b>	<p><b>Upside:</b> can capitalise on an anger at establishment block</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> none</p>	<p><b>Upside:</b> Possibility of this isn’t a real Brexit campaign</p> <p><b>Downside:</b> Leave bubble burst</p>

Figure 2 Possible pre-and Post-Brexit General Election scenarios

This brief analysis points to an early General Election either to seal No Deal or gain a majority to deliver on any deal - there will be no way through the crisis without effective parliamentary control and the Tories under Johnson will be more confident of winning it. Whatever the outcome of such an election, and the fear is it will not go well for progressive and transformatory forces, the long-term breakup of the two-party system, with Labour and Tory splits on the cards, looks a distinct possibility. We could thus be firmly into the territory of bloc politics.

#### **Part 4. Questions**

This first political conjunctural analysis concludes with questions – short- and longer-term – related to the formation of the two blocs to which we hope to return.

1. In what ways are the political Right taking advantage of the Brexit Window to coalesce a Regressive Alliance?
2. What problems will a Johnson-led Conservative Party face in this ideological and political relationship?
3. How far can Labour overcome its own internal divisions in the Johnson period and present a viable economic and political alternative?
4. What kind of settlement might be arrived at between Labour, Lib Dems, Greens and the nationalist parties around a radical economic, democratic and social programme?
5. How far is collaboration dependent on moving beyond FPTP behaviours and a new democratic deal?
6. What potential is there for a preliminary democratic platform for a Progressive Alliance (e.g. opposition to a No Deal and the Regressive Alliance) that leads to another stage of discussions about a possible progressive settlement?