

Corbyn, May and Brexit maths: division or addition?

Blog post by Chief Economist Gregor Irwin, 7 February 2019

We've now seen several votes in the House of Commons which are revealing about the appetite for rebellion on Brexit. Three stand out: the "meaningful vote" on January 15th; and the votes on the Brady and Cooper amendments two weeks later. The meaningful vote saw a record defeat for the government by a margin of 230, with 118 Conservatives rebelling against the party whip. The vote on the Brady amendment saw the government restore its majority, with 101 of the Conservative rebels returning to vote with the government alongside the 10 Democratic Unionists, giving the government a majority of 17. The Cooper amendment was defeated by 23 votes and was notable because 25 Labour MPs defied the party whip (see Fig 1).

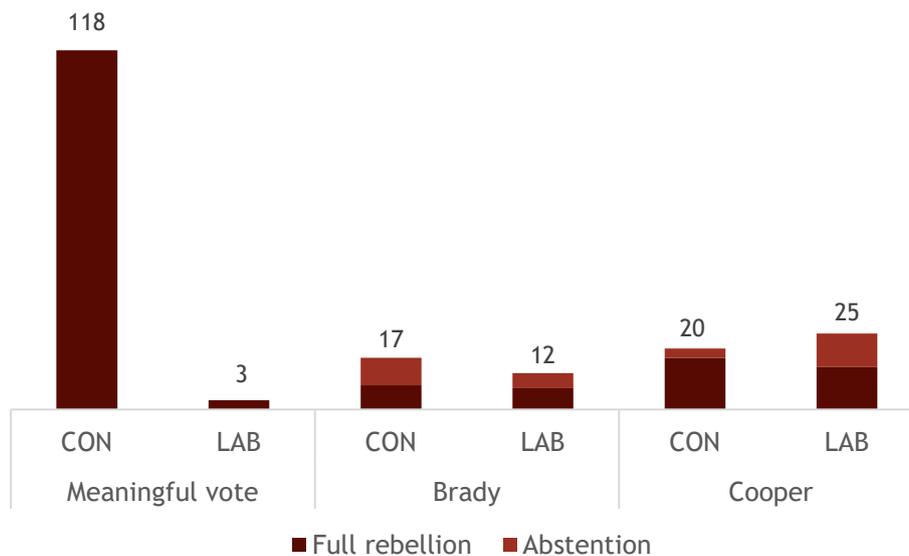


Fig. 1: Brexit rebels (source: Hansard)

What do these votes tell us about the prospects for a second meaningful vote? First, this is all about the Conservatives, the DUP and Labour. The SNP and Liberal Democrat MPs are voting as cohesive blocs against the government, while the clutch of independents break both ways in a consistent and roughly even manner.

Second, the government's preferred starting point for getting over the line in a second vote is to contain the number of Conservative rebels. The problem is that the demands of both the DUP and hard-Brexiter Conservatives look difficult to satisfy and there is a hard core of Conservatives who may vote against the government in any circumstances because they would prefer no deal.

Third, Labour votes are now critical. The government would have lost the Brady vote if it had not been for the seven Labour MPs who voted with the government and five others who abstained (a sixth was absent due to long-term illness). For every lost DUP vote or Conservative rebel, a Labour MP needs to step in to give the government its Brexit majority.

May appears intent on running the clock down, but that strategy has its limits because most MPs see an extension of Article 50 as inevitable. Despite the failure of the Cooper amendment, there is almost certainly a majority in parliament who would attempt to block a no-deal Brexit, possibly with the help of some Conservatives who have previously been loyal to the government (including some ministers). The threat of no deal is a bluff that will almost certainly be called eventually, if it is maintained.

May is also attempting to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement, but that clearly has its limits. It's implausible that the EU will ever agree to replace the backstop, as the Brady amendment demands. The best she can hope for is that she gets enough to contain the inevitable Conservative rebellion and (probably) the absence of DUP support.

This means May almost certainly needs more Labour votes than the 25 who have shown a willingness to rebel so far. So far, she has been trying to lure more Labour MPs by promising to maintain labour and environmental standard. But they will know that these commitments can always be reversed by a future government, which explains why Conservative backbenchers are not raising too many objections.

Something bigger will be required and that most likely involves doing a deal with Labour. But that also presents both party leaders with acute political dilemmas.

The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, has made the first move by setting out five demands for a cross-party deal, which include a permanent customs union and maintaining "close alignment" with the single market. Importantly, everything Corbyn is asking for can be done in the political declaration, which the EU says can be renegotiated, while leaving the withdrawal agreement untouched.

May's dilemma is that if she opens the door to a deal along these lines with Labour, she will close the door to support from many of her own MPs, who are deeply hostile to a permanent customs union as it would restrict the UK's ability to strike independent trade deals. At best, she may get her Brexit deal, but at the cost of a deep and permanent divide in the Conservative Party.

Corbyn has his own problems, which could become acute in the endgame. He does not want to be seen to be frustrating Brexit or pushing the UK towards no deal, which is why he has made this offer. But this is already a step too far for some of his MPs, who accuse him of "facilitating" Brexit. If he's not careful, some of his MPs may end up quitting the party.

So, we now find ourselves in a situation where, one way or another, getting parliament to back a Brexit deal requires substantial cross-party support and that probably means a deal between the two main parties. That does not come naturally in the UK system. The price could end up being a permanent divide in one or both of the main political parties.