

## **BORIS JOHNSON SURVIVES, BUT UNCLEAR FOR HOW MUCH LONGER**

Not surprisingly, Boris Johnson and his supporters in Westminster have been hailing the “convincing” result in Monday’s vote of no confidence. The PM was reported to have told his senior ministers at a cabinet meeting the following day that they “could draw a line under the issues that [their] opponents want to talk about.” Today, at his first appearance in the Commons since the vote, the PM said that “absolutely nothing and no one” will stop him from delivering for the British people. His bluster – delivered during that quintessential British political theatrical event – Prime Minister’s Questions or PMQs as they are routinely referred to (with its raucous, rowdy ritual combative discourse, punctured by choreographed histrionics and jeers) – belies a fraught political landscape.

### **54 Letters**

Yes, Boris did survive, for the time being. Under Conservative Party rules, 15% of the parliamentary party (so, the Tory MPs) could trigger a vote of no confidence. Once the threshold was reached, to remain prime minister Boris needed the support of 180 MPs – 50% plus 1 of the 359-member parliamentary party, voting by secret ballot. Losing would have triggered a leadership contest, in which Boris would have been precluded from standing. The parliamentary party would vote in successive rounds to eliminate all but two; then the party’s national membership of approximately 200,000 would decide between the two. To be clear, this process would not involve the public at large.

The no confidence vote trigger was reached when at least 54 letters were submitted by hand to Graham Brady, the chair of the committee of backbenchers (the 1922 Committee, or ‘22 for short). The process is anonymous (only Sir Graham knows who submits letters), unless a rebel goes public about his/her letter. When exactly the 54-letter threshold was reached is unclear; there was a general desire to avoid interfering with the Jubilee weekend festivities. Sir Graham is reported to have advised the PM on Sunday, as the PM was leaving to watch the Jubilee pageant, that the threshold had been reached. Boris undertook an effort on Monday to rally support, but many reported the effort was subdued. The PM’s anti-corruption tsar, John Penrose, [resigned](#) on Monday, and Boris is reported to have been defiant in his speech to the 1922 Committee just before the vote, saying in retrospect he would have made the same decisions all over again about the social gatherings at the heart of the No. 10 partygate scandal. That statement was not universally well received.

### **Monday’s Vote of No Confidence**

The vote in support of the PM was 211 to 148. But let’s put this in context. On its face 41% of the Tory MPs rebelled. The 148 votes significantly exceed the Tory’s current 77-seat working majority in the Commons. Of 211 MPs who voted to support Boris, at least 130 were so-called “payroll” votes, which means he won the true support of only 81 backbenchers (far fewer than the 148 rebels). (Payroll MPs traditionally included ministers and parliamentary private secretaries; these days, the term also encompasses trade envoys and party vice chairs. These MPs must resign their positions to oppose the government.)

The 148 rebels had plenty of fodder – these were not the “hard-Brexiteers” that brought down Theresa May. They were leaderless, acting without overall coordination. They represented all wings of the party. They acted for any number of reasons: higher tax burdens being too progressive; policy moves to appease the right wing of the party (threats to scupper the Northern Ireland protocol and the deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda); the toxicity of

the brand following partygate; the watering down of the ministerial code to reduce potential sanctions for breaking the rules. For others it was the U-turns, including the Owen Paterson affair – the MP was banned from parliament for breaching lobbying rules; an effort to overturn the ban triggered a rebellion by 13 Tory MPs who voted against and 60 who abstained, causing the government to drop the effort to freeze the suspension.

### **Eyes on the Next General Election**

Some commentators have characterized the rebellion as organic. The snap timing of the vote (Boris controlled when it would be held once the 54-letter threshold was reached) was intended to favor him. Ultimately, MPs can be expected to vote for job security, and Boris is no longer seen by many as able to guarantee victory in the next general election (whenever it may be held). Under the Dissolution and Calling of Parliaments Act, which earlier this year repealed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (part of the Tory 2019 manifesto called for its repeal), the latest parliament can be dissolved is December 17, 2024, with the election to be held 25 working days later. Boris has the power to call an earlier election – now without needing the support of parliament. Snap elections were called in 2017 by Theresa May, which backfired, and in 2019 by Boris, which gave him his current close to 80-seat majority.

Boris in theory is safe for another year under 1922 Committee rules, but recall that Theresa May was forced out of office in 2018 in under six months after winning a vote of no confidence by a healthier margin of 200 to 117 (63-37% vs. 59-41%). The vote against Boris was not only greater than the vote against Theresa May, it was also greater than the vote against Margaret Thatcher in 1990 (204-152, in the leadership contest against Michael Heseltine), following which she resigned. The 1922 Committee could always change its rules to shorten the 12-month grace period before the next no confidence vote.

Commentators do not expect action by rebel Tories to accelerate the timeline for another challenge until the party conference in September. Boris in effect has until then to reverse the growing sentiment against him

Margaret Thatcher, John Major and Theresa May all faced internal Conservative Party contests and won, but ultimately stood down (Thatcher after a few days – while she won the first round, a second round was triggered and she declined at that point to continue; Major after losing to Labour two years after he triggered a leadership contest against himself; and May after less than six months). David Cameron stood down after the Brexit referendum before a no confidence vote became an issue. (Iain Duncan Smith faced a vote of no confidence after two years as party leader and lost 90-75.) Boris now becomes the fourth of five Tory prime ministers to face the wrath of the parliamentary party. Major succeeded Thatcher, May succeeded Cameron and was then replaced by Johnson (after being brought down by the Brexit faction), all determined not by the public but by the party.

### **More Headwinds**

More bad news for Boris is expected as two critical byelections will be held on June 23 in Wakefield in the “red wall” north (likely to be won by Labour) and in Tiverton and Honiton in the south-west (likely to be won by Liberal Democrats), resulting from one MP being forced to step down as a result of a sexual assault conviction and one for watching pornography in the Commons. Some believe that rebel MPs should have held off submitting their letters until after the June byelections.

Boris also faces a cross-party Commons inquiry (by the Privileges Committee) into whether he misled parliament by insisting repeatedly that he knew nothing about the partygate events. (The vote for the inquiry triggered another U-turn.) The Tories also face issues in Scotland; four of the six Scottish Tory MPs voted against Boris.

There is a sense that the management of the Tories, from a governing perspective, difficult over the past months, will now be more fraught. There is a split in the parliamentary party that transcends personalities. The concerns of the rebels over policy will not disappear, and if they vote with the opposition, Boris will be unable to pass legislation.

Memories of the pandemic and of partygate remain raw, and there is a deep sense of uncertainty. What does a post-Brexit Britain really look like? The pandemic masked a number of negative trends that were the predictable, and in many cases predicted, results of Brexit. In addition, there is rising inflation (the annual rate [hit](#) 9% in April) and severe supply chain shortages, most evident in soaring prices in supermarkets and at fuel pumps and surging home energy bills (none the fault of the ruling party). Travellers faced chaos at airports following the Jubilee weekend holiday and there are looming threats of rail strikes. Food prices also are rising because of severe constraints on exports by Ukraine due to the war. Wage growth is not keeping up.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Boris has a few months to right the listing ship of government and repair the Tory brand among voters, particularly the traditional conservatives in the shires. Only three years ago, Boris pulled off an electoral victory with his simple and effective message of “get Brexit done” that has a built-in tension – needing to appeal to both the newly converted Tory voters in the industrial north (the so-called “red wall” of former Labour voters) and the more affluent traditional conservatives in the south. For the opposition parties, a wounded Boris is an electoral asset. Many believe he will not lead his party in the next general election. At the same time, looking across the electoral landscape, it remains unclear who could lead either the Conservatives (whether Rishi Sunak, Liz Truss, Penny Mordaunt, Tom Tugendhat, Jeremy Hunt, Ben Wallace, Sajid Javid or other contenders) or Labour, for that matter, to victory in the next general election.

Boris has defied the odds his entire adult life – the lies about the benefits of Brexit and the burden of EU membership as part of the Leave campaign; the attempted prorogation of parliament, which was found by the Supreme Court to have been unlawful; financial assistance for the refurbishment of No. 10; threats to violate international law over the Northern Ireland protocol; partygate and accusations of lying about it to parliament. Being jeered at St Paul’s Cathedral last Friday by a crowd that would have been expected to be largely core Conservative supporters must have hit home. He is damaged, and unlike Donald Trump he faces a divided party whose sizable rebel faction views him as a political liability and is unafraid to voice palpable disenchantment. It is unclear whether Boris is now about to run out of runway.

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