

Is Boris Johnson's electoral strategy working? Here's why it's so hard to tell

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The problem for the Conservatives is that the usual approach to mixed polls won't work for them this time.



What's going on in the country? The picture from the polls is mixed.

One group of polls – Ipsos Mori, YouGov, Kantar and Opinium – show that Boris Johnson's gamble is working: his leadership has resulted in the defection of a group of voters who backed the Conservatives under David Cameron and Theresa May to the Liberal Democrats, imperilling a slew of seats in the south of England, and putting his 13 Scottish MPs at risk, but crucially the Tories have also pulled far enough ahead of Labour that they ought to, all things being equal, more than make up for losses to the SNP and Liberal Democrats with gains at Labour's expense. Let's call this group the "big Johnson" pollsters for ease of reading.

But the other group of pollsters – Survation, Deltapoll and ComRes – show a very different pattern: that the Conservatives have paid the price, in that they are losing many more votes to the Liberal Democrats, but they have failed to pick up the prize. The party has picked up *some* Brexit Party voters but not enough. As a result, they are in a position in which they look to be losing seats to the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, but without making enough gains to offset that. In fact, if ComRes is right, then the next election could see Jeremy Corbyn enter Downing Street on as little as 25 per cent of the vote. We'll call this group the "little Johnson" group.

So it's not true to say that "the polls are all over the place" – we actually have a very stable polling picture, with few changes outside the margin of error, it's just that we have two groups of pollsters showing two very different stable pictures. Nor can we simply ignore the group that "got it wrong" last time: Ipsos Mori and YouGov got the 2019 European elections right, while Survation got the general election right.

Usually, the pollsters showing very different pictures doesn't matter all that much for political parties, because they can simply act as if they are facing the worst case scenario. Regardless of whether the little Johnson polls are right or the big Johnson polls are right, Labour has the same tactical advantages and disadvantages: it needs to improve the ratings of its leader, Jeremy Corbyn, and to squeeze the Liberal Democrat vote in Conservative-Labour battlegrounds.

But the difficulty the Conservatives have is that acting as if the worst-case scenario is right may be very dangerous. Why? Because if they have already achieved "big Johnson", then what they desperately need to do is keep the opposition vote split. Loudly shouting about how the Labour Party wants to block Brexit, or implying that Remainers are traitors, has no benefit, because they've *already* knackered the Brexit Party and all they are doing is risking that Remainers will conclude one or all of the following: a) that they can happily vote Labour on the Brexit issue or b) that the Conservatives dislike them so much that they should find any electoral lever to stop them.

What they should do if the "big Johnson" polls are right is find ways that are cost-free among Brexit voters to make angry Remain voters feel more relaxed about continuing to vote Liberal Democrat or Green: talking up their plans to tackle climate change (not to win them over directly but simply so that these voters can say "Well, actually, Johnson and Corbyn have pretty similar climate policies"), and so on.

The problem is that if the Brexit Party isn't finished then this strategy risks aggravating their problems on their right flank. And that's one of the vulnerabilities in the Conservative electoral strategy: that the action the party might *need* to take might also be the action it should be most scared of taking.

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A tricky balancing act.