

Research Report

First Report

The crisis of crisis: Brexit, decision-making and democracy

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Project Summary

The development of Brexit has been characterized by its political contestation and seeming crisis of political decision-making. A process which has been prolonged by continuous parliamentary indecisiveness and disagreement, has also been subject to heavy criticism from the public for the same reasons, in some instances, calling into question the capability and legitimacy of the parliament in effective governance and upholding democracy. The development of divisions in the House of Commons is heavily pinned by news coverage,

public sentiment and scholars as the manifestation of indecisiveness and crisis as they on multiple occasions have failed to come to agreement. In order to get a more informed understanding of the development of decision-making in Brexit, but also of the extent of crisis of political decision-making, mapping the voting record is crucial. It is relevant for any discussion and understanding of Brexit to ask Does the voting record, and its change over time, reflect the contestation and indecisiveness as portrayed by the media and public? How? What does the voting record tell us about the development of crisis? Which patterns of decision-making can we see from the voting record in this time of crisis? In response to the lack of a significant and substantial chronology and analysis of the House of Commons voting record during Brexit, this research seeks to establish such baseline.

After exploring and consulting existing literature on the subject we identified four relevant sources of evidence to be consulted for the project; existing literature, media coverage by 7 selected key newspapers, public polls and the Parliament's Hansard records. Hereunder, the Hansard records can be divided into the debate transcripts and the division voting results, each contributing to qualitative and quantitative data respectively. Dr. Staiger and I have co-curated a timeline of events which will be used as the main point of reference for analysis. Moreover, I have identified and collected all divisions in the Parliament relevant to the crisis period including speeches of the most monumental divisions in a labelled archive. Then I have identified relevant polls on public support of Brexit and perception of the parliament during the crisis period as well as selected the media news outlets to be used for analysis. All quantitative and qualitative data (including reading summaries of relevant texts) has been collected as a data archive for future use for the project.

Through literary review and preliminary data analysis it seems that the development of stalemate in the Parliament during Brexit was not static but moved in ebbs and flows, closely related to key events. Likewise, for media coverage and public opinion. However, opinions (in polls) and the Parliament remained in a steady-state equilibrium, contested around the options of Brexit, with a lack of a stable majority on any of the Brexit options, despite several points-of-no-return.

Difficulties

My Laidlaw journey, while extremely giving, has been nothing short of challenging. While I am now at a place where I feel comfortable with the project and can clearly see the value of the work I have done, this was something that I struggled immensely with at first. Upon starting my project, it seemed that, the more literature I dove into the more overwhelmed I became, as I realized exactly how little I knew about the topic. My supervisor and I then began to refine my research question to really respond to what was needed in the field. Here I realized how much meaningful research relies simply on finding out what is meaningful to research in the first place. Brexit has been studied by the greatest political scholars of our day and is indeed not short of experts. So what was my unique contribution? What was my niche? Here we started to play with the combination of research methods; from using division votes and media to votes and polls to now votes *and* polls *and* media to create the most holistic overview of stalemate by using different perspectives. One major issue in my project though, has been my focus on quantitative data sets, namely, the Parliament voting record and the public opinion polls. That is because, firstly, my supervisor is unfamiliar with the type of data processing I would like to do and secondly, I made gross miscalculations as to the ease of accessing the available data. The latter was on one hand due to the format of the data being in SQL, a completely new coding language to me which I had to learn on the spot. And on the other hand, because the

organizations which host the processed data have been unresponsive. This has meant that data processing which was supposed to take only a couple of days, had stalled several times, and forced us to change our methodology several times.

Besides issues with data, the other major difficulty and reason for delay on the project has been personal issues for both my supervisor and me. My supervisor had to move over the summer, while I had a hard time managing the research work between illness in my family and moving as well. However, while neither my supervisor and I have had the streamlined research flow which we (or perhaps mostly I) expected, I realized that research is not conducted in a vacuum. Elements which make for great research, such as collaboration, also make for major challenges. As obvious as it sounds, we cannot predict professional or personal obstacles which arise under the way, but we can learn to be flexible and adaptative. I have learned a lot about redesigning (and then redesigning again and again) my very first plan. Rather than taking it as a failure that methodology or timeline A did not work out because of unforeseen circumstances, I have begun to realize that research is not just about handling intellectual challenges, such as analyzing an opinion poll. But is its just as much about handling all the very real challenges *around* doing research, such as how to access data in a coding language you have never even heard of, or trying to stay on track with your timeline while not having access to WIFI for 3 days.

I look forward to seeing the outcomes of this project now not only because of my academic interest in democracy and decision-making, but also because of all the personal lessons which I have learned in undertaking this research, which I believe have been monumental to my development as a scholar.

Impact

My work on the Crisis of Crisis will contribute to the research for Dr. Staiger's project on Brexit which will eventually be one or several journal articles. My specific contribution as stated above is the mix of quantitative and qualitative methods with creating the timeline and collecting data. I think the biggest impact my work has on the field of Political Science is for the discoveries on how political stalemate was (as reflected by the actual voting record) and was perceived (as reflected by the public opinion polls and press) in Brexit, the two being different, which adds to the conversation on the relationship between actual political action and the perception of political action. More importantly, I think my work contributes to understanding perhaps the danger of political stalemate and possibility of complete deadlock which has been otherwise been brushed off by many great scholars. In that way I feel that my work had impact in propelling Dr. Staiger's much larger Brexit project forward, and contributing with quantitative data collection otherwise unavailable to her, as well as an in the discoveries I made as I reviewed the data underway.

Potential for improvement

I could write about all the stuff that still needs to be done, but because my work was only one piece of the puzzle in this much larger research project, rather than talking about what needs to be done now to make my work most effective, aka how to analyze the data I have collected, I want to focus on what I could have improved if I were to do the exact same tasks again. I would first improve my own mindset approaching the research more than anything else. Approaching the research, my expectations and the results I wanted were already set in stone, later forced to change as no research project ever goes completely to plan. In the future I want to approach research with not just a much more open mind, but with the anticipation that the deliverables and results on the other end likely will look a lot different to what I

imagine when starting. I also would like to work more collaboratively – I think the project could have benefitted from perspectives of others who have done a lot of similar quantitative data collection and processing before. Reaching out to such people, peers or professors, may have gotten me past by hurdles much quicker and with less pain. In the future I will be much more keen to reach out to other researchers who likely have faced and solved similar problems. I think that I for a long time felt like I was ‘failing’ because I was facing so many difficulties in my research project, and I think that kept me from discussing my project with peers and other researchers as much as I had liked. Now knowing that I was in fact not failing, but simply discovering and trying my best, I realize the true value of shredding one’s one’s pride and engaging in scholarly dialogue on your project to gain different perspectives, which I would definitely do much more in the future. My last thing for improvement would be my ambition. I think I was too ambitious in terms of how much work I could do alone in one summer. If I were to do it again, I would probably narrow the scope or the tasks, allowing me to find more depth instead of breadth.

Further study

Future scholars working in the Crisis in Krisis project would benefit from using the data I collected to visualize the development of stalemate in the parliament as measured by the margin of divisions getting accepted or rejected in the Parliament. This could be done as a graph displayed together with the timeline of major events which we have already defined, as well as include public opinion polls. The graph could likewise be analyzed in consultancy with literature and media coverage at the time of major events that I have already provided too. This visualization would combine several data sources to create a more holistic overview of the development of stalemate, and its perception by the public.