

GE2019 was not a Brexit election: trust and credibility, anti-politics and populism

Prof Matt Flinders

The belief that GE2019 was ‘a Brexit election’ has arguably emerged in the post-election analyses and commentary as ‘a self-evident truth’ and there is little doubt that the mantra of ‘get Brexit done’ was highly influential. However, the danger of this ‘self-evident truth’ is that it risks veiling the existence of a more troubling series of underlying issues that all revolve around the existence of a growing gap between the governors and the governed.

The public’s attitude to politicians, political institutions and political processes was far from positive before the election was even called. Three-quarters of those surveyed believed that the main political parties were too divided to serve the best interests of the country, and the same proportion lacked confidence in the confidence of MPs to cope with Brexit. The 2019 Future of England survey suggested that a majority of people on either side of the Brexit debate said that the break-up of the union, undermining faith in democracy, protests in which members of the public get badly injured and violence directed towards MPs were ‘worth it’ to achieve their desired Brexit.

This may explain why ‘get Brexit done’ proved such a seductive commitment, but it might also explain why GE2019 was mired in concerns regarding aggression, abuse and victimization. As the Joint Committee on Human Rights reported in October 2019, ‘The level of abuse faced by elected representatives and others in public life is now so great it is undermining their engagement with constituents’

But, at base, this was an election born through political frustration, that fuelled anti-political sentiment and was almost defined through a constant focus on two key themes: trust and credibility. As the various leadership debates underlined, the public did not trust Boris Johnson, and they were equally dubious as to the credibility of Jeremy Corbyn’s plans for public spending. In this context what GE2019 evolved towards was a form of ‘pitchfork politics’ fuelled by an acceptance of anti-political context and therefore a shift towards increasingly populist positions. Populism, however, of very different kinds. For Boris it was a strong form of political populism defined through the lens of ‘the people’ versus ‘politicians’, ‘parliament’, ‘judges’ and just about anyone that challenged the ‘self-evident truth’ that he knew what was best for the country. Corbyn, on the other hand, adopted a form of economic populism in which the age of austerity was replaced with a new age of financial exuberance. Jeremy Corbyn may have offered a very distinctive style of populism-in-a-cardigan but he, like Boris, knew exactly who he was against,

“So we’re going after the tax dodgers. We’re going after the dodgy landlords. We’re going after the bad bosses. We’re going after the big polluters.” Jeremy Corbyn, 2019

So in some ways GE2019 was defined by Brexit but it’s also possible to suggest that it reflected the latest stage in a far-longer and highly-worrying decline in public confidence in politics that has been building-up. Brexit provided the lightning-rod, it’s vented frustrations but many of them have little to do with the UK’s membership of the European Union and more to do with deeper and more profound frustrations concerning the evolution and future of democracy. To define GE2019 simply as ‘a Brexit election’ may well provide a short-term and relatively obvious interpretation of recent

events but it might also distract attention from the deeper challenges regarding the health of British democracy that must at some point be addressed.