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Theresa May and the Conservative Party Leadership Confidence Motion of 2018: Analysing the voting behaviour of Conservative parliamentarians.

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Abstract:
This article provides the first systematic academic appraisal of the confidence motion against the Conservative Party leadership of Theresa May in late 2018. We construct a detailed dataset of the parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), and then test the significance of a range of hypotheses about how Conservative parliamentarians voted in the confidence motion. Our findings demonstrate how the original remain or leave divide on continued membership of the European Union (EU) was not statistically significant – i.e. our findings demonstrate that whether Conservative parliamentarians voted remain or leave themselves, or whether they held remain or constituencies, did not have an impact upon their vote in the confidence motion. Our findings demonstrate that the lack of confidence in May was dependent upon whether Conservative parliamentarians supported her Withdrawal Agreement (WA) and whether they were members of the European Research Group (ERG). Our research findings contribute to existing academic debates as they show that the drivers of the vote in the confidence motion of 2018 differed from the drivers of the vote in previous Conservative Party leadership elections – i.e. unlike previous contests non-ideological considerations were not statistically significant in terms of explaining voting behaviour.

Keywords: Theresa May, Conservative Party, Prime Ministerial Leadership, Leadership Elections, Confidence Motions.

Introduction

This paper contributes to the academic literature on leadership selection (and ejection), which is an emerging subsection of the academic literature on political leadership in British politics (see Punnett, 1992; Stark, 1996; Heppell, 2008, 2010, Denham and O'Hara, 2008; Quinn, 2012 and Denham, Crines and Dorey, 2019). The focus of our study is on the confidence motion against the former Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, Theresa May, which occurred in December 2018. The confidence motion was triggered after she backed down from holding a parliamentary division (meaningful vote) on the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration[1]. The rationale for our study is as follows. Any attempt to forcibly evict an incumbent and elected leader of one of the main political parties in British politics is worthy of academic appraisal, and it is even more significant when that political party holds office and they are attempting to unseat a Prime Minister. That Conservative backbenchers attempted to utilise a removal mechanism – i.e. the confidence motion provision – which had never been used against a Conservative Prime Minister before, with just three months before the United Kingdom was expected to exit the European Union, only increases its significance.

Our approach will be broken down into the following four sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of the debates around leadership selection (and ejection) within the Conservative Party, identifying the existing academic literature, and explaining how the existing confidence motion procedure works. In addition to identifying those procedures, we also provide an explanation as to why May was not vulnerable to a confidence motion challenge in the period between 2016 and 2017. In the second section, we consider the period between June 2017 and December 2018. Here, we explain how perceptions of May were fundamentally challenged by (a) the decision to call a General Election in 2017, and (b) the outcome of that General Election where the Conservatives lost their majority. More specifically we explain how May's political capital was significantly eroded by her own weak performance in the campaigning period, and how the complexities of the Brexit negotiation period would further undermine her position. In the third section, we outline how we have constructed a dataset of the members of the PCP, and we justify the selection of our hypotheses. In the fourth

[1] The Withdrawal Agreement is a treaty between the United Kingdom and the European Union which sets out the means by which the UK withdrew from the EU. The agreement covered issues such as citizens' rights, the border between the UK and the EU, and financial issues. The Political Declaration is a non-legally binding document that sits alongside the Withdrawal Agreement between the UK and the EU. The declaration outlined future aspirations on the relationship between the two partners on areas such as trade, law enforcement, foreign policy, security, and defence. The key distinction between the two rested in their purpose. The Withdrawal Agreement looked at the terms of departure, whilst the Political Declaration outlined the parameters of the future relationship between the UK and the EU. An amended deal was secured with the EU after Boris Johnson succeeded May as Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister and was subsequently passed by Parliament following the 2019 general election.

section, we present our findings and we explain whether the results confirm our hypotheses, before our concluding section identifies how our paper contributes to the academic literature on the contemporary Conservative Party and leadership selection.

Conservative Party Leadership Selection: Academic Debates and Eviction Rules

As this research contributes to the existing academic literature on leadership selection and ejection within the Conservative Party it is important to position our paper within the existing strands of literature in this area (for general overviews see Stark, 1996; Heppell, 2008; Denham and O'Hara, 2008). The first strand covers the standard appraisals of Conservative Party leadership elections, and concentrates on explaining how new party leaders were elected, focusing on the campaigning period. These have been offered for each of the Conservative Party leadership elections since 1990 – see Alderman and Carter 1991, 2002; Alderman 1996, 1998; Denham and Dorey 2006; Quinn, 2019. The second strand of the Conservative Party leadership academic literature moves beyond qualitative assessments of who wins and why, and adopts a quantitative approach. This approach involves identifying what factors may have influenced the voting behaviour of Conservative parliamentarians. Here the significance of the ideological alignment of parliamentarians to the leadership candidates has been a recurring theme in explaining outcomes, with attitudes towards European policy being identified as a key determinant in voting preference (see Cowley and Garry 1998; Heppell and Hill, 2008, 2010; Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018 on the 1990, 1997, 2001 and 2016 Conservative Party leadership elections respectively).

Our research embraces this quantitative approach and determines the importance of ideology vis-à-vis voting behaviour, but it will be aligned to the final strand of existing academic literature on leadership of the Conservative Party – i.e. on the rules governing the election and ejection of Conservative party leaders. Here, academics have focused on the democratisation of party leadership selection and the shift towards the two-stage rules post-1998, in which stage one whittled the candidates down to two via eliminative parliamentary ballots and stage two involved a membership ballot on the two final candidates (Alderman, 1999; Quinn, 2005, 2012; see also McAnulla, 2010). This body of academic literature clearly showcases how eviction rules matter. Since the creation of formal democratic rules for selecting the leader of the Conservative Party in 1965 the eviction rules have evolved. Between 1965 and 1975 there was no formal way of forcibly evicting the incumbent from the leadership. Between 1975 and 1991 an annual challenger provision was allowed, which could take place in the first four weeks of a new parliamentary session, or they were allowed within the first six months of a new Parliament. After 1991 the ease with which a challenge could be initiated was reduced to ten percent of the PCP being needed to stipulate that a leadership election should take place. The window of opportunity to initiate a challenge was shortened to the first two weeks of a new parliamentary session, and within three months of a new Parliament (Quinn, 2005, p. 810).

After the Conservatives entered opposition in 1997, they democratised leadership selection as part of a wider modernisation strategy. In terms of elections this led to the creation of the aforementioned two-stage process whilst in terms of evictions it removed the challenger provision and replaced with a confidence motion provision (Quinn, 2012, pp. 97-130). This could be initiated when fifteen percent of the PCP requested a confidence ballot, and this could be initiated at any time. If the incumbent won the confidence motion (i.e. achieved by a majority with no additional threshold specified) then no further confidence motion could be initiated for the next twelve months. If the incumbent failed to demonstrate that they retained the confidence of the PCP then the leadership was declared vacant, and the defeated leader was not permitted to stand in the forthcoming leadership election (Quinn, 2005, p. 810). Only once since its inception has the confidence motion been activated, when Duncan Smith was removed from the leadership in late 2003 (Hayton and Heppell, 2010). Just as Duncan Smith would be subjected to a confidence motion so would May. The circumstances that led to this are complex and warrant further explanation.

As the process of implementing Brexit unfolded, alongside her losing her parliamentary majority at the General Election of 2017, two means of removing May from the party leadership and thereby the premiership existed. The first means was that she could voluntarily resign if she calculated that her political position was untenable and she would be unable to secure the parliamentary passage of her withdrawal agreement due to the opposition within her own parliamentary ranks. This form of non-procedural forced exit – i.e. she resigns, against her wishes, in part due to the internal pressure to step aside within her own party – would ultimately be the way in which she was forced to step aside in the summer of 2019. The second means would be a procedural forced exit – i.e. via the use of the confidence motion procedure. Her critics turned to this method in December 2018 when it became clear to them that they would be unable to pressurise her to step aside prior to the parliamentary divisions on the withdrawal agreement. Her critics were reluctant to initiate a formal confidence motion because it was assumed that eviction rules created a form of protection for May as an incumbent Conservative Prime Minister. This assumption flowed from the concern that, if enacted properly – i.e. via eliminative parliamentary ballots and then a membership ballot – it would take two to three months, which would paralyse any government at any time, but this concern was particularly pertinent within the context of the Brexit negotiations. Alongside the time costs associated with this, there was the disunity costs to the Conservative Party of showcasing to the electorate their divisions over a two- to three-month campaigning period (Quinn, 2005). Although these time and disunity costs acted as protection against a confidence motion being activated, the best protection was to be political successful in leadership terms – i.e. to showcase governmental (policy) competence, especially in the economic sphere, and to hold a lead in the opinion polls – and this reflected the position of May between July 2016 and June 2017.

May had been elected leader of the Conservative Party, and thus became Prime Minister, in July 2016. She stood for the vacant leadership of the Conservative Party in the aftermath of the in/out referendum on European Union membership in June 2016 that resulted in the resignation of David Cameron (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). Cameron followed on from Margaret Thatcher and John Major as Conservative Prime Ministers for whom the intra-party splits over European policy had either ended (Thatcher) or significantly undermined (Major) their tenures as leader of the Conservative Party[2] (Heppell, 2008; Heppell, Crines and Jeffery, 2017). The victory that May secured was convincing. Her performance in the second round of the parliamentary ballot stage of the leadership election of 2016 was so strong that the second placed candidate, Andrea Leadsom, withdrew her candidature meaning the membership stage of the leadership rules was not activated[3] (Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018). At the time it was assumed that the truncated Conservative Party leadership election had revealed all of the supposed strengths of May: i.e., she was a 'safe pair of hands' (Coulson, 2016) who exuded 'experience and competence' (Allen, 2018a, p. 108).

May then solidified her mandate, and thereby control over the Conservative Party, by initiating a brutal ministerial post-referendum reshuffle. Allen argued that her decisions - which involved significant machinery of government changes as well as changes in personnel - showed her 'ruthlessness', and 'willingness' to 'exercise' her powers (Allen, 2017, p. 634). She reconfigured government departments, the most notable of which was the forming of the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade. However, what generated the most media attention was the number of dismissals and who she dismissed (Allen, 2017, p. 634). Seven Cabinet members left the government, the most notable of which included her defeated rival, Michael Gove, and the co-architect of Cameronite modernisation, George Osborne (Allen, 2017, p. 641). Her decision to initiate the 'most extensive reshuffle of an incoming mid-term Prime Minister in post-war British history', demonstrated that she also knew how to use her Prime Ministerial powers of appointment to 'protect her power base' (Allen, 2017, p. 642). That was evident from the fact that having voted remain herself, her vulnerability would be amongst the leave wing of the PCP. However, by bringing Boris Johnson in as Foreign Secretary, and appointing David Davis as Brexit Secretary alongside Liam Fox as International Trade Secretary, the Brexit wing of the PCP might have to 'share some of the responsibility if things went wrong' (Allen, 2017, p. 642; for an overview of the first year of the May premiership, see Allen, 2018b).

[2] Attitudes towards European policy explained why the pro-European Kenneth Clarke was unsuccessful in the 1997, 2001 and 2005 Conservative Party leadership elections (Heppell, 2008).
[3] May secured 199 votes out of 331 or 60.5 percent of the PCP in the second parliamentary ballot, as compared to Leadsom on 84 votes (25.5 percent) and Michael Gove on 46 votes (14.0 percent). (Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018, p. 264).

Meanwhile, in the period between July 2016 and March 2017 the initial impression made by May was broadly positive. As Scammell notes she 'calmed the nation in the tumultuous aftermath of the Brexit referendum [and] she had united her party, while Labour fell apart' (Scammell, 2017, p. 130). To parts of the right-wing leaning press May was the Iron Lady reborn, and the comparison to Thatcher helped feed into the evolving Conservative narrative of her as a strong leader who could offer stability (Thompson and Yates, 2017, p. 131). Blessed with favourably opinion polls throughout the first eight months of her premiership, she decided to exploit the chaos within the main opposition party and the perception that Corbyn was unelectable, by holding a snap general election (Allen, 2018a, p. 109). It was widely assumed that this would result in a large parliamentary majority for the Conservatives (Prosser, 2018, p. 1226).

What made May vulnerable?

May would be made vulnerable due to (a) her flawed attempt to win a larger majority by calling an unnecessary General Election in 2017 and then (b) by her inability to construct a withdrawal agreement that was acceptable to Parliament, and more specifically to the PCP.

The rationale for calling an earlier general election was multi-faceted. First, framing the general election campaign as the Brexit election created the potential for bringing back into the Conservative fold those socially conservative and Eurosceptic ex-Conservatives, who had defected to UKIP as a reaction to the modernisation of the Conservatives under Cameron (on the electoral appeal of UKIP, see Ford and Goodwin, 2014 and Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015; on the Conservative-UKIP dynamic, see Lynch and Whittaker, 2013; Webb and Bale, 2014). Second, for May leading the Conservatives into a general election victory would enhance her legitimacy as party leader and Prime Minister (on the history of 'takeover' Prime Ministers, see Worthy, 2016). It would negate the accusation that she was serving on a mandate secured under Cameron in 2015, under a platform and circumstances that had altered considerably due to the outcome of the European Union referendum (Allen, 2018b). Third, in the knowledge that her parliamentary party had split between remain and leave parliamentarians (see Heppell, Crines and Jeffery, 2017, Moore, 2018, Lynch and Whittaker, 2018), then seeking parliamentary approval on the Brexit negotiations would present her with significant party management difficulties when operating with a small majority (Allen, 2018a, p. 109-10). Acquiring a significantly larger parliamentary majority would ease those party management complexities – it would provide her with more breathing space with regard to obstructionist remain Conservatives now arguing (reluctantly) for a soft variant of Brexit, and the most hard-line leave Conservatives, who would be pressuring May to pursue a harder variant of Brexit (Allen, 2018a, p. 109-10). Finally, winning a larger parliamentary majority would have the benefit of strengthening the Prime Minister in advance of the negotiations with the European Union (Dorey, 2017, p. 309).

May would undermine her own political capital as a consequence of the General Election campaign and its outcome. Although the Conservative vote increased from 11,299,609 to 13,636,690 and their vote share increased from 36.9 to 42.4 percent, the scale of the Labour recovery (9,347,273 or 30.4 percent to 12,877,869 or 40.0 percent) meant that the Conservatives lost their majority, winning only 317 seats, as opposed to the 330 that they had won at the General Election of 2015 (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2018, p. 497).

The consequences of the campaign upon the dynamics of British politics were as follows. First, although they had actually lost their third successive General Election, psychologically the Labour Party seemed emboldened. Although they may have been vague on policy details, they had a clear narrative – i.e. they were anti-austerity, they believed in increasing public expenditure and they made the case for the nationalisation of key public services. Beyond that, their mantra of 'for the many, not the few' reflected their policies as they made the case for outlawing zero-hour contracts, increasing pay for those working within the National Health Service, and enhancing workers' rights (Goes, 2018). Moreover, the opposition emphasis on housing – plans for housebuilding and enhanced rights for those in the renting sector, and on higher education – the removal of tuition fees – contributed to their increasing appeal amongst younger voters. A significant aspect of their increased vote share, up from 30.4 to 40 percent, was their vote amongst those aged between 18 to 24 increased significantly. Amongst this part of their electorate they secured an increase estimated at around 15 to 20 percent, and they had a massive lead over the Conservatives – at 62 percent to 27 percent (Sloam and Henn, 2019, p. 92).

Second, in order to solidify their parliamentary position, the Conservatives constructed a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and their ten parliamentarians. When we discount the seven non-attending Sinn Fein representatives, and we exclude the speakership/deputy speakership, the Conservative arrangement with the DUP did create an effective parliamentary majority (Tonge, 2017). The DUP extracted a significant financial price for their support, securing £1 billion of extra funding for Northern Ireland (Tonge, 2017, p. 412), although concerns were expressed about how this could have implications on the peace process and on the dynamics of the Brexit negotiations (Syal and Walker, 2017). From a party-political perspective, it had the ability to re-toxify the Conservatives (see Bale and Webb, 2018, p. 50), as the DUP's hard-line, socially conservative attitudes – notably on abortion and marriage equality – contradicted the socially liberal modernisation of the Cameron era (see Evans and Tonge, 2018).

The third consequence was within the Conservative Party. There was a general consensus within the party that losing their parliamentary majority was down to May. Strategists made the decision to brand the Conservatives around the personality of May. The slogan on their campaign battle bus – 'Theresa May: For Britain' was replicated across the whole communications strategy, covering their website, their YouTube channel and Facebook pages (Scammell, 2017, p. 130). However, her approach to campaigning would be criticised for

being ‘uninspiring and inadequate’ (Ridge-Newman, 2019, p. 142). Her failings were both stylistic and substantive. Her programmatic way of responding to questions led to political journalists labelling her the ‘May-bot’ (Bale and Webb, 2018, p. 47) and her overuse of the ‘strong and stable’ line became a source of ridicule online, in an example of how social media-led ‘anti-Conservative citizen-initiated campaigning’ was undermining the Conservatives (Ridge-Newman, 2019, p. 147). In substantive terms she was ultimately responsible for the policy mistakes inherent within the manifesto. The Conservatives decided not to provide a clear commitment to the triple lock on pensions, winter-fuel payments. Then, on social care for the elderly, they proposed that the capital floor of assets that people should be able to keep when being means tested for social care should be raised from £23,250 to £100,000 (Bale and Webb, 2018, p. 51). Dubbed as the ‘dementia tax’ by her opponents it created such a furore that May was forced into a rapid U-turn, as she conceded that a cap would exist in terms of the maximum level that people would be expected to pay (Allen and Bara, 2019).

Although the Conservatives could argue that the General Election did produce a significant increase in their actual vote (+ 2,337,081) and their vote share (+ 5.5 percent) her failure to secure an overall majority meant that the Conservatives entered their third term in office under an implicit understanding – i.e. that she *would* be permitted to lead them through the process of exiting the European Union (i.e. through to March 2019) but she *would not* be permitted to lead them into the next General Election (Goodlad, 2019). As a consequence, a state of constant speculation existed in relation to how long May should be permitted to remain as party leader, with her prospects in the first two years of the 2017 Parliament tied to her management of the Brexit negotiations and securing an acceptable and viable deal with the European Union (Gamble, 2019).

It is not the intention of this article to offer an analysis of the Brexit negotiations of the May government. Suffice to say, the triggering of article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon (in March 2017) acted as prelude to a period of considerable turbulence within British politics. Losing their parliamentary majority in the subsequent General Election of May 2017 would increase the difficulties that the May administration would face. Thereafter, the parliamentary passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, and their attempts to secure the withdrawal agreement between the UK government and the EU alongside the associated political declaration, would showcase the complexities of leaving and would expose the dividing lines within the Conservative Party. As the process unfolded, May was also constrained by the sequencing of the negotiations with the EU. These gave her opponents a tactical advantage – i.e. determining the £39 billion divorce payment and wider withdrawal arrangements before the discussions on a future trading relationship could commence (Adam, 2020, ix).

The soundbite that May initially relied on – ‘Brexit means Brexit’ – made it sound simple. In reality, although the electorate had voted for Brexit, numerous types of Brexit could be identified. On the central question of exiting via a deal, or no deal, the position of the May administration was clear. They would seek the ‘best

possible deal' but, as the Conservative Party manifesto for the 2017 General Election stipulated, 'no deal is better than a bad deal' (The Conservative Party, 2017, pp. 35-6). In seeking a deal, the approach that the May administration adopted would be conditioned by party interests and preventing the circumstances through which the PCP could either split, or seek to remove her via a confidence motion. This explained why the idea of a cross-party and consensus seeking approach to Brexit could not be prioritised. Even before the formal negotiations had commenced May had laid down red lines – for example, ruling out continued membership of the Single Market and the Customs Union and leaving the jurisdiction of the European Courts of Justice – that ruled out a softer variant of Brexit. However, despite this, her failure to secure a larger parliamentary majority had handed greater leverage to the 90 plus strong European Research Group (ERG) on the hard-Brexit wing of the PCP, who came to be viewed as 'a party within a party' (Payne, Tilford and Stabe, 2019). Over time her initial rhetorical claim that 'no deal is better than a bad deal' appeared hollow and just as she moved towards a softer variant of Brexit than her ERG allies could accept, so they increasingly moved towards embracing no deal as an option (Goodlad, 2019).

Her ability to find consensus within the PCP was compromised by the existence of a small number of remain Conservatives, who although they might tolerate a softer variant of Brexit, were arguing for the need for a second referendum to legitimise any proposed deal (Gamble, 2019; Payne, Tilford and Stabe, 2019). This latter group may have been small in number, but when operating as a minority administration they had the ability to create significant party management difficulties for May. Sympathetic to their viewpoint was the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, whose references to a 'jobs first' Brexit and emphasis on the economy and business over controlling immigration, showed the pressure that May was under within Cabinet to keep the UK more closely aligned to the EU where feasible (Goodlad, 2019). The common rulebook aspect of the Chequers Deal of July 2018 – which outlined the negotiating position that the May administration wanted - implied a level of alignment that was unacceptable to both Johnson (as Foreign Secretary) and David Davis (Brexit Secretary) causing both to tender their resignations.

Her attempt to construct an image of a unified approach to her government's approach to the Brexit negotiations was thus unravelling in the latter part of 2018. Amidst the fog of confusion, the reality was that the central stumbling block for May was to be the issue of Northern Ireland and the insurance policy known as the backstop. This was based on the idea that if no agreement was secured during the transition period then, to avoid the imposition of hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic and to maintain a friction-free border with the Republic, Northern Ireland would remain inside of the customs union and the single market. This was deemed necessary in accordance with the commitments of the Good Friday agreement (Doyle and Connolly, 2019). Not only did the DUP oppose this, on the grounds that Northern Ireland was being treated separately to the rest of the United Kingdom, but the hard Brexit wing of the PCP regarded it as a trap – not only would it bind them to a potentially permanent customs union if the UK and EU were unable

to construct a free trade agreement, but it would also impede the UK from constructing its own free trade deals with nations from outside the EU (Goodlad, 2019).

By late 2018 May was essentially telling MPs they had only three options: first, vote for her negotiated deal; second, exit the European Union with no deal; or third, vote against her deal and risk a second referendum and the overturning of the original decision to leave, and thus no Brexit at all (Gamble, 2019). Before parliament was asked to vote on her negotiated deal with the EU, further Cabinet resignations from the Brexit right followed in November – Esther McVey (Work and Pensions) and Dominic Rabb (Davis's replacement as Brexit Secretary) – and the scale of discontent on the backbenches led her to cancel the planned meaningful vote on the Withdrawal Agreement[4]. Running parallel to these developments the number of backbenchers seeking a confidence motion escalated, eventually passing the threshold of 15 percent of the PCP (n=48) on December 11 (Murphy, 2018). An irony actually existed about the confidence motion being initiated, in that despite the difficulties that the May administration was experiencing vis-à-vis implementing Brexit the opinion polling data was not as problematic as it could have been. Having secured 42.3 percent of the vote at the General Election of 2017 (with a 2.3 percent lead over the Labour Party on 40.0 percent) the turbulent political environment was actually characterised by opinion polling stability – for example, YouGov gave the Conservatives a five point lead over Labour (40 to 35 percent) just a week before the confidence motion was initiated (YouGov, 2018). In the ensuring parliamentary ballot, held the following day, the PCP decided that they still had confidence in May – she secured a majority of 83, with 200 Conservatives backing her (63.1 percent) and 117 voting against her (36.9 percent) (Watts and Buchan, 2018).

Data Collection and Hypotheses

The methodological validity of constructing a database of the PCP, and testing this against set hypotheses, has been already been demonstrated by Cowley and Garry, 1998; Cowley and Bailey, 2000; Heppell and Hill, 2008, 2010; and Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018. Building upon their approaches, and integrating into our model variables specific to the political environment (i.e. the difficult post-referendum Brexit negotiations between the EU and the UK) we constructed a dataset based upon the following variables: gender; whether the MP first entered parliament at the 2017 General Election (i.e. under May's leadership); constituency majority; legislative loyalty/propensity to rebel; whether they held a remain or leave constituency; whether they themselves supported remain or leave; their position on the types of Brexit – i.e.

[4] The expectation was that the meaningful vote on the Withdrawal Agreement would take place on December 11th, but the May administration pulled the vote. The delayed meaningful vote took place on January 15th 2019 and was defeated by 432 to 202 votes with 196 Conservative parliamentarians voting for and 118 against. The second meaningful vote took place on March 12th and was defeated by 391 to 242 votes (235 Conservative parliamentarians voted for and 75 against). The third meaningful vote took place on 29th March and was defeated by 344 to 286 votes (277 Conservatives parliamentarians voted for and 34 against) (Lloyd, 2019).

voting for or against the negotiated deal between the UK Government and the European Union in the first meaningful vote in January 2019; – and finally, whether they were members of the ERG.

Before identifying our hypotheses, and why we selected them, this section of the paper will explain how we constructed our dataset on the PCP. At the time of the general election of 2017 a total of 317 Conservatives were elected. At the time of the confidence motion, none of those Conservative MPs elected in 2017 had resigned nor passed away, nor had the Conservatives gained any additional seats in the two by-elections held during this Parliament. Our dataset includes three Conservatives who have been suspended by the party during this Parliament, but later readmitted – Anne Marie Morris (suspended July 2017 readmitted December 2017); Charlie Elphicke (suspended November 2017 readmitted December 2018) and Andrew Griffiths (suspended August 2018 and readmitted December 2018). The fact that both Elphicke and Griffiths were both readmitted just before the confidence motion, and both voted that they had confidence in May, aroused considerable press comment/criticism (Hymas, 2018). We have not included Dame Eleanor Laing in our analysis, as she currently serves as Deputy Speaker and thus typically does not vote on legislation except when a casting vote is required, so the number of Conservatives under consideration is actually 316.

Our coding worked as follows. Gender was coded as either male or female. For whether MPs entered parliament for the first time in 2017, we coded 'no' or 'yes'. For both variables the data was taken from the House of Commons Library (2017). For marginality we used the size of each Conservative parliamentarian's majority as a continuous variable, which ranged from 0.07% to 49.71%. For this, as well as for Hanretty's referendum vote share estimates for each constituency, which we recoded as either 'leave' or 'remain', we used Norris' British General Election Constituency Results 2010-2017 database (v1.2) (Norris, 2017). With respect to legislative loyalty we exploited the full voting records for each Conservative parliamentarian, which is available from the Public Whip website (www.publicwhip.org.uk). On this, we note that Public Whip considers a rebellion to have occurred when a parliamentarian votes against the majority vote of the members of their own party, as opposed to the party whip, meaning that the data that we use embraces free votes as well as whipped votes. Our coding in our dataset had rebellion rates from zero percent to 24.0 percent, and had a mean of 1.6 percent. When coding for the European Union referendum positions, we coded either remain, leave, or unknown. We positioned each Conservative parliamentarian on their referendum vote by examining their public comments on the issue – i.e. via media interviews, campaign literature and comments made on social media, complemented by Lynch and Whitaker's dataset (2017). On the question of how to leave, we coded by using the division list on the first meaningful vote on the deal negotiated between the UK government and the European Union (HC Deb, 15 January, Vol. 652, Div. 293). Finally, membership of the ERG was taken from a list compiled from the Financial Times (Payne, Tilford and Stabe, 2019).

Of course, the viability of our research rested entirely on our ability to identify how Conservative parliamentarians voted in the confidence motion. As there is no definitive list of voting behaviour - Conservative leadership confidence votes are held by secret ballot – we complied our data via the following methods. First, we used the lists provided by the following online sources – the BBC, Guido Fawkes and Conservative Home – and we cross referenced these with our own research of the online activity of each Conservative parliamentarian (constituency webpages, Facebook and twitter feeds). Via this method we were able to identify 198 MPs as having confidence in May, 83 who did not, and 36 who we could not place. Excluding these MPs (and, as a result, we also had to discount those whose positions on the EU referendum were unclear) we were left with 278 MPs for our analysis.

Our aim was to test what factors might be motivating the voting preference of Conservative parliamentarians. Our hypotheses aimed to test personal electoral considerations (estimated constituency Brexit vote) versus diffuse ideological position (how parliamentarians had voted in the European Union referendum) versus specific opposition to the Withdrawal Agreement as well as internal party-political placement vis-à-vis membership of the ERG or not. As a consequence, we use the variables identified above, which are not included as hypotheses, as controls. The hypotheses are listed as:

H1 Conservative parliamentarians who held remain constituencies will be more likely to show loyalty to May in the confidence motion than those who held leave constituencies.

H2 Conservative parliamentarians who voted remain the 2016 European Union referendum will be more likely to show loyalty to May in the confidence motion than those who advocated Brexit.

H3 Conservative parliamentarians who subsequently voted for the meaningful vote (MV) will be more likely to have shown loyalty to May in the confidence motion than those who voted against.

H4 Conservative parliamentarians who are members of the European Research Group will be less likely to have shown loyalty to May in the confidence motion than those who were not members.

Research Findings

Our research findings present five models in the table below – one with each hypothesis variable plus controls, and one with all the hypothesis and variables included. Across all four models only the control for rebellion rate was statistically significant, but the pattern of influence of this variable is interesting and merits further investigation. Controlling for a Conservative parliamentarians' position in the EU referendum results in a decreased likelihood of having confidence in May as their level of rebelliousness increases. However, controlling for Conservative parliamentarians' position on the first meaningful vote means that those with a higher level of rebelliousness were *more* likely to have confidence in May.

How to explain this difference? If we examine the interaction effects for rebellion rate and EU referendum position (presented in Appendix 1) we can see that across all levels of rebelliousness remain-backing Conservative parliamentarians were more likely to vote for confidence in May's government, even when higher rebellion rates overall signified a greater likelihood of voting no confidence. Thus, more rebellious Remain-backing Conservative parliamentarians backed May compared to their most rebellious Leave-backing counterparts. Contrastingly there is no statistically significant relationship for the interaction effect between meaningful vote position and rebelliousness, and hence it is not surprising that controlling for a Conservative parliamentarians' meaningful vote position (support for which is highly correlated with support for May and, to a lesser extent, MP's EU referendum position) would emphasise the relationship between rebellion and having no confidence in May, given that the model is effectively controlling for those most likely to back May (i.e. Withdrawal Agreement-backing Remain-voting MPs).

Model 1 provides no evidence to support *H1* – there is no significant relationship between whether a constituency voted remain or leave and a Conservative parliamentarians' position on having confidence in the May government. Indeed, it is the only model presented which is not statistically significant (prob > chi2 = 0.630). Model 2 does provide support for H2 – those Conservative parliamentarians who voted remain did have a greater likelihood of voting confidence in May. Model 3 also provides supports for H3, showing that those who voted for the meaningful vote also had confidence in May. This model also has the highest pseudo R2 value of all the nested models (0.731 compared to 0.832 for the full model), suggesting it is the best at explaining support for May out of all the models presented bar the full model. There is also support for H4, with ERG membership linked to a much lower likelihood of having confidence in Theresa May.

The final model, Model 5, includes all of the independent variables plus controls. In this model, only Conservative parliamentarians' position in the meaningful vote and ERG membership are statistically significant, both strongly so, and the direction of effects is what is expected; backing the meaningful vote increases the likelihood of having confidence in May whilst being a member of the ERG reduces the likelihood of confidence in May. Unfortunately, due to the fact that no non-ERG member voted for the Withdrawal Agreement and also voted no confidence in May we cannot examine the interaction effect between these two variables.

INSERT TABLE ONE HERE

Two points of note stand out from this analysis. First, the above analysis shows that when it comes to Conservative parliamentarians having confidence in May's leadership, Brexit was still vitally important – even if how Brexit manifested itself as a divide within the party had moved on from the previous main dividing line of whether Conservative parliamentarians voted for leave or remain in 2016. Instead, support for May now centred on the next stage of the Brexit saga, specifically the negotiation over how the British-EU relationship would be structured after the UK leaves, and whether that relationship should reflect the plan outlined in May's Withdrawal Agreement. Those who supported May's deal were (unsurprisingly) more likely to support the Prime Minister, whilst those who were part of the more Eurosceptic ERG were much less likely to support May. Controlling for both of these positions means that the EU referendum position variable is no longer statistically significant.

Second, the fact that both Conservative parliamentarians' position on the meaningful vote *and* their membership of the ERG were both statistically significant suggests that these variables are not simply representative of the same underlying factor of a Brexit position (even if they are highly correlated – phi=0.716). Instead, the fact that the meaningful vote is still statistically significant after controlling for ERG membership suggests that there was also an important non-ERG anti-Withdrawal Agreement contingent of the party's representatives too – or, to put it another way, being anti-Withdrawal Agreement was not an exclusively ERG-held position and thus May's problem of party management was not just an ERG-shaped awkward squad, but rather concerned both the ERG and anti-WA rebels. What is also of note is that constituency positions on Brexit did not play a significant role in shaping the position of Conservative parliamentarians when it came to the question of whether to back May or not, and there seems to be no gendered effect nor a sense of loyalty towards May amongst those who first entered in 2017.

Analysis and Conclusions

The aim of this article was to identify who voted against May in the confidence motion, and to then establish what factors might explain their lack of confidence in her leadership of the Conservative Party. This was a worthwhile academic question to ask as this was the first time that the confidence motion procedure has been initiated against a Conservative Prime Minister. Our research findings help us to better understand the evolving academic debates about leadership and leadership selection in the Conservative Party in the following ways.

First, we can locate our findings in relation to the confidence motion within the context of previous academic studies on leadership selection/ejection within the Conservative Party. Previous studies have shown that attitudes towards the Europe had been identified as an influence upon voting behaviour by parliamentarians in the Conservative Party leadership elections of 1990, 1997, 2001 and 2016 (Cowley and Garry, 1998;

Heppell and Hill, 2008, 2010; Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018). Earlier studies had identified how attitudes towards Europe was not the only variable that was driving voting behaviour. Other ideological considerations, for example, those relating to economic intervention, were identified as influential when John Major defeated Michael Heseltine and Douglas Hurd in 1990, as were other political variables such as ministerial experience (Cowley and Garry, 1998). Age and parliamentary experience, alongside non-European ideological considerations were identified as influences upon voting patterns[5] when William Hague defeated Kenneth Clarke in 1997, and a similar pattern emerged in the final 2001 parliamentary ballots between Clarke, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Portillo (Heppell and Hill, 2008, 2010). In the more recent parliamentary ballots that propelled May to the leadership of the Conservative Party, voting behaviour was not driven solely by attitudes towards Europe or Brexit (remain predominantly for May and leave predominantly fracturing between Andrea Leadsom and Michael Gove), but the year of parliamentary entry and ministerial status were also identified as statistically significant (Jeffery, Heppell, Hayton and Crines, 2018).

Second, although our confidence motion ballot analysis demonstrates that attitudes towards Europe was explanatory in terms of voting preference, it is also clear that the nature of the divide had evolved from the last Conservative Party leadership contest just two years earlier. Whereas Jeffery *et al* demonstrated that May garnered her support disproportionately from the remain wing of the 2015-17 PCP and that Gove and Leadsom split the leave wing. It is also worth remembering that the remain-leave distinctions and ideological labels had become redundant by the time of the confidence motion ballot. Our findings on the confidence motion demonstrated that whether Conservative parliamentarians voted remain or leave was not statistically significant, in that all but a handful of remain Conservatives had accepted the outcome of the in-out referendum of 2016. Those who voted against May were motivated by ideological considerations, i.e. opposition to the negotiated withdrawal agreement and political declaration. That lack of confidence in her was not driven by whether Conservative parliamentarians held leave constituencies. Of even greater interest is the fact that voting behaviour – remain or leave – was not actually an indicator of how Conservatives voted in the confidence motion. The confidence motion showcased how the decision to exit the European Union had not actually solved the European divide within Conservative politics, and how the soft-hard Euroscepticism divide of the late Cameron era, and then the remain-leave divide, had morphed into a new divide based on the variant of Brexit that should be pursued. The confidence motion showcased the enduring capacity of the European divide to act as an influence upon leadership selection within the Conservative Party, with its influence even more dominant in 2018 than in previous ballots for the party leadership.

[5] The economic divide between economic dries and wets, which defined conflict within the PCP in the 1980s, was effectively won by the dries with the level of wet representation within the PCP being in single figures by the time the Conservative Party regained office in 2010 – see Heppell, 2013. This explains why a dry-wet distinction could not be assessed as a driver of the vote in the confidence motion of 2018.

INSERT APPENDIX ONE HERE

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