



Report

Research Fieldwork and PhD Visit in London (March-June 2023)

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Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank my supervisor Pauline Schnapper for supporting me in the application for this scholarship and conducting of the fieldwork. I am equally grateful to Tim Bale for hosting me during the PhD visit at Queen Mary University of London and for giving me valuable advice on the interview process.

I can only wholeheartedly recommend CRECIB as an association and this scholarship as an important tool to conduct their first research undertaking. Young and early career researchers are particularly dependent on such help, which makes me even more honored to have received one.

Research project

Since his election as party leader in July 2019, Boris Johnson has continuously reshaped the Conservative Party's policies and internal dynamics. In the context of Brexit, the policy on Europe has provided a central political instrument to achieve this change in the party organisation. From the purge of pro-European MPs to the 2019 General Election victory and the subsequent hard Brexit deal, the Conservative Party under Johnson has established itself as the party for Leave voters and relied on this electorate to assert its legitimacy following the 2016 referendum. Unlike under previous Conservative leaders, the party under Johnson has undergone some fundamental ideological changes, which also impacted wider economic and social policies.

This thesis is entitled "The policy on Europe as a political instrument: the dynamics of Conservative Party statecraft under Boris Johnson's leadership" and will analyse these changes within the Conservative Party since 2019 under Johnson's leadership. It will examine the policy on Europe and understand its central use as a political instrument to achieve this change. An updated version of James Bulpitt's statecraft theory will be used to underline the impact on party management, past and future electoral strategy, political argument hegemony and governing competence. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of party change and the instrumental role of policies, as well as to provide elements to interpret the current evolution of the Conservative Party and British government in the post-Brexit context.

The research project is conducted since September 2021 at the Centre for Research on the English-Speaking World of the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris and is supervised by Pauline Schnapper. The first and second years took place in Paris, where the theoretical framework of the project have been elaborated jointly with the supervisor. As the topic focuses on the UK, the project was complemented by a PhD visit from March to June 2023 at the School of Politics and International Relations of Queen Mary University of London in the United Kingdom under the supervision of Tim Bale. The visit was partially financed by a CRECIB scholarship and a fieldwork was conducted in parallel. Both will be developed in this report. Currently, another PhD is taking place during the third year at the Centre for British Studies of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in Germany under the supervision of Paolo Chiochetti. The aim of this second PhD visit is to professionally settle in Berlin and prepare the post-doctoral phase.

The project has been pursued with an international outlook. The project and the thesis are both in English as the literature, primary sources and topic itself are focused on an Anglophone country. The project is based at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris and was completed by visits in the UK as well as Germany. The planned PhD viva will be in English with both visiting supervisors from London and Berlin invited to the jury. This allows this project to qualify for the European doctorate label that recognises the international dimension of thesis conducted in Europe.

Finally, the research project is conducted without a doctoral contract. This makes external financial help such as the one received from the CRECIB to conduct the PhD visit in London essential. Such financial help makes important research dimensions like a fieldwork or international mobility directly possible by covering a partial amount of the total costs.

Research Fieldwork and PhD Visit

As part of my second year, a 4-month fieldwork from March to June 2023 has been completed in London (United Kingdom). The thesis analyses the recent evolution of the British Conservative Party through James Bulpitt's statecraft theory and uses a mixed methodology with the primary sources being parliamentary debates and votes, electoral speeches and documents by the Conservative Party, bills and government reports, as well as interviews with Conservative Members of Parliament. The research trip in London created a geographical proximity to the House of Commons, which enabled the collection of the necessary mixed methodology data. In parallel, Tim Bale from the School of Politics and International Relations of the Queen Mary University of London functioned as temporary supervisor for the duration of the fieldwork. He is a specialist of the modern Conservative Party and guided me throughout the fieldwork.

The fieldwork and PhD visit were a defining phase of my research project. The main purpose of the stay was data collection and in particular the conducting of interviews with Members of Parliament. A selection of influential Conservative MPs has been integrated in this research project and the fieldwork in London provided the unique opportunity to approach them for interviews. The 4-months gave enough time to find an adequate meeting date for each approached MP and the contacts within Parliament of Tim Bale at Queen Mary proved decisive. The additional access to research facilities in London were a great addition to the data collection process and helped to operationalise the mixed methodology.

The CRECIB scholarship of 500€ helped to partly cover the costs linked to this stay in London. This included housing, transport and food, which is expensive in London. I am grateful to the CRECIB for providing this financial help without which the conducting of both the fieldwork and PhD visit would have been more complicated.

Fieldwork Methodology and Target Group

In anticipation of the fieldwork, a statistical list of persons of interest was created in order to prepare and conduct the planned interviews. The creation of the list was based on the parliamentary Conservative Party as elected in the 2019 General Election and followed five consecutive steps.

Step 1: determining the target group size

At the 2019 General Election, 365 Conservative Members of Parliament were elected at the 2019 General Election to the House of Commons for a total number of seats of 650. The target group needed to be both large enough to allow different voices or seniority levels within the party to express themselves and small enough to be contacted during the 3-months fieldwork that took place in London. The size of the target group was put at 25 so around 7% of the total number of Conservative MPs elected at the 2019 General Election. This size fulfilled the requirements in terms of diversification and applicability of the target group.

Step 2: selecting the sociological criteria

Three main sociological criteria have been selected for their influence the position of parliamentarians within their party, especially within the Conservative Party and the wider British political system.

The first criterion, like in other institutions, is gender. Gender is a socially differentiating aspect between the traditional sex-based male/men and female/women categories. In politics, men have long had a preferential positions and women comparatively only recently were given access to the political system through the rights to vote or to hold elected office. These relatively new rights have changed political parties and their feminisation is often considered by researchers as a sign of their changing character.

The second criterion is the year of the first election to the constituency. The first-past-the-post electoral system in place in the UK puts a strong emphasis on constituencies, which have a role in the selection of candidates. Some constituencies are considered “safe seats” for having majorities repeatedly voting for a same party and others are considered “marginal seats” for having changing majorities. As parliamentarians in the UK have a no term limit, this means that MPs can be easily reelected over a long period of time or be a new MP if their party won a marginal seat.

The third criterion is the geographic location of the seats held by MPs. The UK is composed of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Any General Election is simultaneously held in the four nations on the same day, but not all political parties contest seats in all four nations. For example, the Scottish National Party only stands for election in Scotland, while the Conservative Party and the Labour Party stand everywhere except in Northern Ireland that has its own set of local parties. As each constituency has different challenges depending on its geographic location, several constituencies from a same part of the UK directly influences the sociology and the political direction of a party. Again, the Scottish National Party produces a political message aimed at representing

Scotland as all its seats are in Scotland. More specifically, the Conservative Party traditionally prided itself in being a Unionist party representing all constitutive parts of the UK, but has been predominantly composed of English and more specifically wealthier Southern English constituencies.

For statistical purposes, the three criteria were narrowed down to better delimit them. The gender criterion includes a female and a male option. The first election year criterion combines the first election year of the longest-serving MP with the 1992 General Election, as only few MPs elected in this period still sit in Parliament, and continues with all General Elections until 2019. The geographic location criterion divides the UK in Scotland, Wales and, for England, the North of England, the Midlands and the South of England. Northern Ireland is excluded as it is not contested by UK-wide political parties. These three criteria were applied accordingly to the target group. The 25 MPs will be differentiated based on their gender, the year in which they were first elected to Parliament for their constituency and their geographic location.

Step 3: applying the criteria to the target group

365 Conservative MPs were elected in the 2019 General Election. Ahand of this cohort, it is possible to determine the percentual representation of each criterion amongst the 365 Conservative MPs. Figure 1 indicates that 76% of MPs were male and 24% female. Figure 2 shows that 4% of MPs were electing between 1975 and 1992, 5% in 1997, 3% in 2001, 10% in 2005, 25% in 2010, 16% in 2015, 7% in 2017 and 29% in 2019. Figure 3 highlights that 53% of MPs come from the South of England, 22% from the Midlands, 19% from the North of England, 4% from Wales and 2% from Scotland. These numbers overlap with other studies that showed that the Conservative Party is largely a political party of old males from the South of England.

Figure 1
Gender of 2019 CP MPs

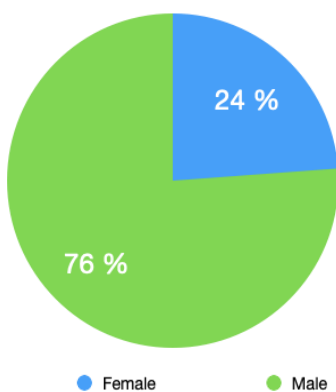


Figure 2
Election Year 2019 C MPs

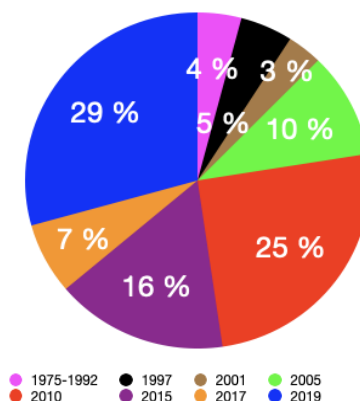
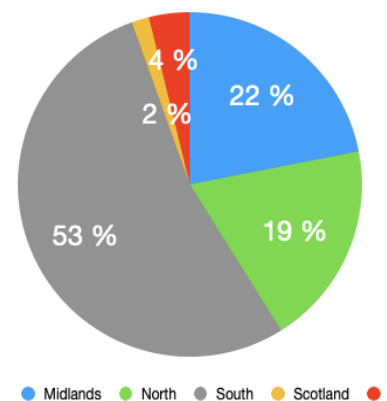


Figure 3
Region 2019 CP MPs



Each of these statistics was applied to the target group of 25 MPs. Tables 1, 2 and 3 show the numbers rounded up to the nearest hundredth for each category of each criterion and the final retained number.

	Statistical share of the 2019 Conservative MPs	Statistics applied to the target group of 25 MPs (rounded up to the nearest hundredth)	Final retained number
Female	24 %	6	6
Male	76 %	19	19
Total			25

Table 1 shows that, respecting the gender criterion, 6 female MPs and 19 male MPs are needed.

	Statistical share of the 2019 Conservative MPs	Statistics applied to the target group of 25 MPs (rounded up to the nearest hundredth)	Final retained number
1975-1992	4 %	1	1
1997	5 %	1,25	1
2001	3 %	0,75	1
2005	10 %	2,5	3
2010	25 %	6,25	6
2015	16 %	4	4
2017	7 %	1,75	2
2019	29 %	7,25	7
Total			25

Table 2 shows that, following the first election year criterion, 1 MP elected between 1975 and 1992, 1 in 1997, 1 in 2001, 3 in 2005, 6 in 2010, 4 in 2015, 2 in 2017 and 7 in 2019 are needed.

	Statistical share of the 2019 Conservative MPs	Statistics applied to the target group of 25 MPs (rounded up to the nearest hundredth)	Final retained number
South of England	53 %	13,25	13
Midlands	22 %	5,5	6
North of England	19 %	4,75	4
Wales	4 %	1	1
Scotland	2 %	0,5	1
Total			25

Table 3 shows that, respecting the geographic location criterion, 13 MPs from the South of England, 5 from the Midlands, 5 from the North of England, 1 from Wales and 1 from Scotland are needed.

Step 4: creating the statistical list

The next step required the numbers of the three criteria to be weighted together in order to create the profile of each of the 25 MPs. The result of this weighting is a statistical list for the target group with 25 specific sociological profiles based on gender, first election year and geographic location. The full statistical list is visible below:

#	Profile (gender, first election year, region)
1	Male, 1975-1992, South of England
2	Male, 1997, South of England
3	Male, 2001, South of England
4	Male, 2005, Midlands
5	Male, 2005, South of England
6	Male, 2005, South of England
7	Male, 2010, Midlands
8	Male, 2010, Midlands
9	Male, 2010, North of England
10	Female, 2010, South of England
11	Male, 2010, South of England
12	Male, 2010, South of England
13	Male, 2015, Midlands
14	Male, 2015, North of England
15	Female, 2015, South of England
16	Male, 2015, South of England
17	Male, 2017, Scotland
18	Female, 2017, South of England
19	Female, 2019, Midlands
20	Male, 2019, Midlands
21	Female, 2019, North of England
22	Male, 2019, North of England
23	Female, 2019, South of England
24	Male, 2019, South of England
25	Male, 2019, Wales

Step 5: shortlisting the matching MPs

Based on the statistical list, all 365 Conservative MPs were scanned and added to the sociological profile they matched with. MPs that defected, are currently being investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards or the police or are whipless while having held minor roles in the Parliamentary Conservative Party were excluded. In total, 293 out of 365 Conservative MPs were shortlisted based on the 25 sociological profiles. The shortlist varies with some profiles having only 4 matching MPs such as Southern English female MPs first elected in 2017 and others having up to 28 matching MPs such as Southern English male MPs first elected in 2015. The shortlist was used to

contact the 293 MPs for interviews. The MPs were contacted individually by letter, email and phone call. Interest-specific organisations linked to the Conservative Party such as the Scottish Conservatives and the Conservative Women's Organisation were also approached for a more targeted contact.

A first round took place between March and June 2023, and a second round between September and October 2023. As of November 2023, 44 replied and an interview took place with 13 of them corresponding to 13 established profiles. 31 refused with some mentioning Johnson's ongoing role in British politics, the parliamentary inquiry on Covid-19 and others their ministerial position, whip role and parliamentary commitments.

Difficulties

Access to MPs is known to be difficult. It takes most researchers a lot of time and pushing to get interviews. In the last years, the access to MPs has become more difficult, especially for Conservative MPs. This is due to the changing of nature of the Conservative Party with more figures coming from the business world and with a wider preference to talk to media over academics. The 2016 EU referendum and Covid-19 referendum also created a shift away from experts that tend to be seen by some leading Conservative figures as biased or politically motivated individuals. This climate created a first difficulty as a young PhD student from France. Even during one interview, my status as “continental European academic” was repeatedly underlined by the interviewee as a seemingly untrustworthy characteristic.

Another difficulty was the focus on Boris Johnson, who remains influential within the Conservative Party, the media and British politics. Several MPs mentioned him as a reason to refuse the interview either out of loyalty or out of fear of repercussions. One interviewee explicitly demanded anonymity for the latter reason. Some MPs also mentioned possible legal proceedings as Johnson was investigated by the Privileges Committee and currently by the UK Covid-19 Investigation.

A last difficulty were usual diary commitments by MPs in relation to work with constituents, parliamentary committees and other political or societal appointments.

Conclusion

The fieldwork and PhD visit provided both for a stimulating time in London. My research project directly benefitted by gaining in depth and maturity. The data collected and professional contacts made have greatly allowed me to pursue my work and come closer to a completion of this doctoral project.

Preliminary findings of the fieldwork were the internal ideological shift within the Conservative Party with MPs previously in the party's mainstream now finding themselves on the margins and marginal views now being represented within the leadership. All interviewed MPs recognised this shift, while holding diverging views on the potential positive or negative consequences. The interviewees also agreed that former Prime Minister Boris Johnson had enabled this transformation. His persona was the most polarizing issue with a clear split between supporters and opponents.

Some of these preliminary findings were presented during the Summer 2023 at the UACES Graduate Forum Conference 2023 (Barcelona, Spain, 8-9 June 2023), Babel International Conference (Toulon, France, 15-16 June 2023), UK in a Changing Europe Early Career Researcher Workshop (Cambridge, 20-21 June 2023), British Political Studies Association Early Career Network Annual Conference 2023 (Online, 3-7 July 2023), ECPR General Conference (Prague, Czechia, 4-8 September 2023).

The data analysis process is ongoing and will be completed within the next months. Quotes and representative statistics will be drawn from the interviews as to provide both qualitative and quantitative data that will be used in the analysis.