

The Conservative Party Leadership Contest

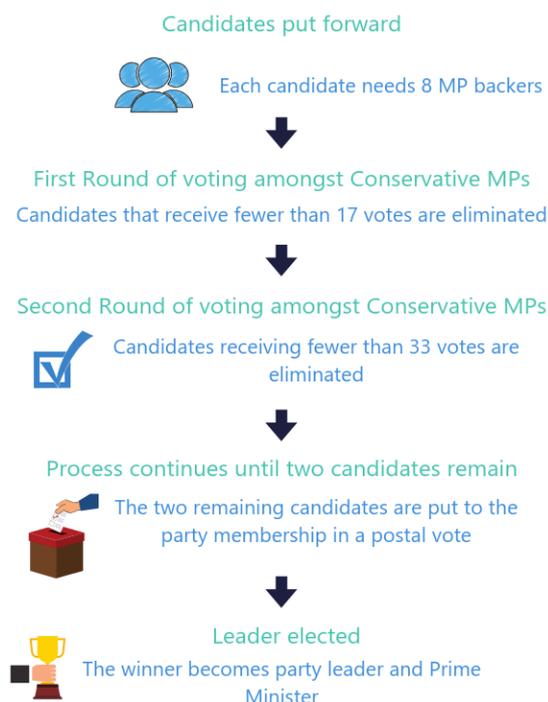
The race to be the next Prime Minister

After months of dogged resilience, Theresa May's premiership was finally undone. A cabinet, which has been in open revolt at times, struggled to back their leader and her fate was sealed after the 10-point plan for a 'new Brexit deal' failed to enthuse her own party, nor the Labour MPs it was intended to persuade.

Speaking in Downing Street, May announced that she would step aside as leader of the Conservative Party on 7th June, drawing her turbulent premiership to a premature end. Appointed without contest to deliver on the Brexit referendum result, she declared her inability to deliver Brexit a matter of deep personal regret.

Theresa May's announcement was the starting gun for a new leader and Prime Minister. Political Intelligence reviews the runners and riders of the Conservative leadership contest.

The Conservative Party Leadership contest explained



The election of a new party leader takes place in two stages. The first stage will consist of shortlisting candidates and votes by fellow MPs to whittle down the field to two. The second stage sees the party membership vote on which of the two candidates they prefer.

This time round, however, and with a huge field of candidates, the party has agreed to changes to speed up the contest for a successor. First of all, any MP who wants to stand will have to be backed by eight other Conservative MPs. Under previous rules, all candidates would have needed only two MPs supporting them.

Secondly, thresholds have been set for how many votes candidates will need from MPs to

reach the next round of the contest. Candidates will need the votes of 17 Conservative MPs – at least 5% of the parliamentary party – to stay in the first-round ballot and at least 33 – 10% of Tory MPs – to stay in the second round.

The first ballot will take place on Thursday 13 June and further rounds of voting are scheduled for 18, 19 and 20 June.

Party members will be given the chance to question the final two candidates in hustings scheduled for the week of 22 June. Finally, the entire party membership will choose the winner with a new party leader, and Prime Minister, announced in the week of 22 July.

The Leadership Candidates

The Frontrunners

Boris Johnson

Why he might win

Despite his star having fallen since the EU referendum, many Tory MPs consider him their best bet for defeating Jeremy Corbyn. He also remains a darling of the party membership, having led several ConservativeHome polls.



What could count against him

His time as Foreign Secretary was forgettable, and he is prone to the occasional gaffe. His role in the referendum campaign and regular interventions make him a divisive figure.

Brexit position

Johnson wants to remove the Irish backstop plan from the Withdrawal Agreement and believes that the UK should leave on 31 October “deal or no deal”.

Michael Gove

Why he might win

Gove has won respect as an Environment Secretary that has bought a whole raft of environmental issues up the political priorities list and is seen by many as being one of the most competent contenders. His decision to stay in cabinet and fight for May’s deal has also won some respect.



What could count against him

He is now viewed with suspicion by some Brexiteers and his decision to stand against fellow Brexiteer Boris Johnson during the last leadership contest, thereby scuppering Johnson’s campaign, has not been forgotten.

Brexit position

Gove would consider a further delay to Brexit if it meant securing a better deal. He would plan to go back to Brussels to negotiate changes to the backstop.

Jeremy Hunt

Why he might win

Hunt may be viewed as a safe pair of hands and his time as Foreign Secretary was a welcome relief for some, following Boris Johnson's stint.

**What could count against him**

Having voted to Remain but claiming to have since been reformed as a Brexiteer, Hunt's initial confusing Brexit position may put off the 'Leave' wing of the party.

Brexit position

Hunt believes there is a prospect of getting a better deal and changing the Withdrawal Agreement all before 31st October. He wants changes to the backstop and proposes sending a new negotiating team to Brussels including representatives of the European Research Group and members of the Democratic Unionist Party. He has also said that he would be prepared to leave with no deal "with a heavy heart".

Sajid Javid

Why he might win

As a second-generation migrant whose father was a bus driver and as an individual who had a successful career before entering politics, his success story is one that resonates well with the wider population.

**What could count against him**

Some of his decisions as Home Secretary have been criticised for being overt plays for the leadership. Despite describing himself as a 'reluctant Remainer' and embracing Brexit since, his decision to vote Remain may still count against him.

Brexit position

Javid has said he would also focus on the Withdrawal Agreement to secure changes to the backstop, suggesting a "new digitised" Irish border. He has also said he cannot envisage circumstances in which he would want another extension to the exit date and has said that the country must be ready for a no-deal Brexit.

Dominic Raab

Why he might win

Raab will likely tap into the Brexiteer vote. He also may attract votes from MPs who are keen to secure a younger leader, beyond the field of candidates who have long been touted as future Prime Ministers.



What could count against him

His relative lack of experience serving in Cabinet and his short tenure as Brexit Secretary. His recent comments about bypassing Parliament have not gone down well.

Brexit position

Raab would seek to re-open the Withdrawal Agreement to overhaul the backstop and seek alternative arrangements. He has said that leaving on WTO terms would be better than leaving with a “flawed” deal and has refused to rule out proroguing Parliament ahead of the 31 October deadline to prevent it blocking a no-deal Brexit.

The Young Pretenders

Matt Hancock



The youngest candidate in the race at 40 years old, Hancock has positioned himself as the heir to Cameron and his mentor George Osborne. He has attempted to appeal to younger and moderate/centrist Conservatives by setting out policy positions in the areas of health and tech. However, while he has set out more details on Brexit than other candidates in his ‘Brexit Delivery Plan’, his decision to rule out leaving the EU without a deal is likely to damage his standing with both Conservative MPs and members.

Rory Stewart



A former professor at Harvard, diplomat, adventurer, deputy governor of an Iraqi province, and an author and TV presenter, Stewart has grabbed headlines for his energetic campaign. The International Development Secretary’s eccentric use of social media and campaigning videos have seen him go viral on Twitter, with many seeing him as the candidate most able to reach out to Labour and Lib Dem voters. Stewart’s views on Brexit however – he has described no-deal as catastrophic and undeliverable – are likely to prevent him from gaining the support of many Tory MPs.

Sam Gyimah



The former Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, was a surprise entrant to the leadership race. Gyimah explained his decision to stand by stating that the full range of opinion on Brexit throughout the country was not being represented. Gyimah, who resigned from his Ministerial post in 2018 over Brexit, is standing on a platform of putting any final Brexit deal to a public vote. With his Brexit stance highly unpopular with amongst Tory MPs and the wider membership, it is unlikely Gyimah will make significant progress in the race.

Ones to watch

Esther McVey



Esther McVey's own experience of foster care and succeeding through hardship has earned her passionate supporters as well as detractors, who point to her defence of the controversial Universal Credit policy as Work and Pensions Secretary. She previously held a TV career presenting for GMTV and several youth programmes and ran her own business. Narrowly defeated in the 2015 general election, she returned two years later winning George Osborne's old Tatton constituency. After a spell as Deputy Chief Whip she was promoted to Work and Pensions Secretary, resigning in protest at the Withdrawal Agreement. On Brexit, McVey believes Britain needs a 'clean break' from the EU on WTO terms but would be open to a deal if the EU made a better offer.

Andrea Leadsom



The former Leader of the Commons' resignation was decisive in Theresa May's subsequent decision to resign. Leadsom had to abandon her own leadership bid in 2016 after widely criticised comments about then rival Theresa May, allowing May to be coronated as leader before party members were balloted. She has recovered her political career since then and won respect but lacks the momentum of the last campaign. Leadsom wants a 'managed exit' rather than a renegotiation. She wants the UK to leave the EU on 31 October and has proposed a three-step plan – the introduction of a bill to deal with the rights of EU citizens in the UK, ramping up preparations for leaving the EU at the end of October, including working on 'alternative arrangements' for the Irish border, and she would lead a delegation of ministers to speak to key EU leaders.

Mark Harper



The Forest of Dean MP was a Minister in the Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions during the coalition government. Harper is a former Chief Whip who backed Remain in 2016. He now wants the UK to leave with a deal but admits that leaving without one remains an option. He would like to go to Brussels to negotiate changes to the backstop and has pledged to build strong relationships with the Republic of Ireland and all parties in Northern Ireland.

Already withdrawn

James Cleverly



Cleverly was the first candidate to pull out, citing a lack of support for his campaign. The Brexit Minister and former Tory vice-chairman is regarded as one of the leading stars of the 2015 intake and is almost certainly destined for a bigger job in the next government.

Kit Malthouse



The Housing Minister became the second MP to pull out, citing party appetite for the contest “to be over quickly”. His name was given to the so-called Malthouse Compromise – a proposal drawn up by backbenchers from the Leave and Remain wings of the Tory party to implement ‘alternative arrangements’ to the backstop.

For further information on the Conservative Party leadership contest or if you would like to discuss your plans for engaging with the new Government, please get in touch:

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